

## Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 19, 2020

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance, OSB

IS 49:3, 5-6; 1 COR 1:1-3; JN 1:29-34

Did you know that it's the third day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity? Did you know that this week is celebrated between January 18 and 25 every year between feasts of Peter and Paul? Did you know that the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have together been promulgating materials for this week since 1968? Did you know that there's an annual theme, based on a biblical text, for Christians around the world to reflect on and pray about together? Yeah, me neither.

This year's theme is Acts 28:2: "They showed us unusual kindness." That verse comes from the end of a long story in Acts about Paul and his fellow prisoners being herded aboard a ship bound for Rome. There is a storm, and most of Acts 27 deals with what happens to and among the approximately 300 people on the ship. Eventually, and somewhat miraculously, the ship comes aground on the island of Malta where the local people come out to see who these strangers are. They build a fire and provide food for the prisoners, soldiers, and sailors alike. Hence: "they showed us unusual kindness."

I'm struck by the word "unusual." Most of us, I think, probably consider ourselves pretty kind on any given day. But this text calls us to more: unusual kindness. Not just garden-variety kindness that our parents taught, or the kind that keeps civil society plugging along in parking lots and grocery stores, but unusual kindness that goes above and beyond, that requires sacrifice, that might make someone stop, take notice, and say, "What's up with that?"

Religious leaders from around the globe have noted this theme's relevance given the huge numbers of migrants in our world today. The World Council of Churches writes:

Today many people are facing the same terrors on the same seas [as Paul and his companions.]

The very same places named in the reading (27:1, 28:1) also factor in the stories of modern-day migrants. In other parts of the world many others are making equally dangerous journeys by land and sea to escape natural disasters, warfare, and poverty. Their lives, too, are at the mercy of immense and coldly indifferent forces – not only natural, but political, economic, and human.

This human indifference takes various forms: the indifference of those who sell places on unworthy sea vessels to desperate people; the indifference of the decision not to send rescue boats; and the indifference of turning migrant ships away. This names only a few instances.

(Parenthetically, I daresay we could name some other examples in our own country.) As Christians together facing this crisis of migration this story challenges us: do we collude with the cold forces of indifference or do we show 'unusual kindness' and become witnesses of God's loving providence to all people? . . . .

The document goes on to say, "Hospitality is a much needed virtue in our search for Christian unity."

So maybe we, with our Benedictine legacy of welcoming the stranger as Christ, are uniquely positioned to contribute to this effort: in the dining room, in the shopping mall, on the streets of our city, and with our political and economic privilege. Maybe we can make a particular case for the need for hospitality. Maybe we can show "unusual kindness."

In a lovely choice the materials for this week were prepared by an ecumenical gathering of Christians in Malta, the very place written about in Acts 27 and 28. They are exceptionally well-done; I've printed a set out, and they are in a folder in the monastery library if you'd like to take a look.

There are several events to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity around the Archdiocese. On Thursday night at 7:00 there's a prayer service at St. Mary's in Evanston. I'm going to go after work. Want to join me? I'll put up a reminder note on the bulletin board. Whether you can go or whether you can't, all of us can pray and work for harmony among those who profess faith in Jesus.

As we anticipate the liturgy of the Eucharist, I'll conclude with one of the prayers suggested for the week:

Loving God,  
your son Jesus Christ broke bread  
and shared the cup with his friends on the even of his passion.  
May we [your Christian churches] grow together in closer communion.  
Following the example of Paul and the early Christians,  
give us strength to build bridges of compassion,  
solidarity, and harmony.  
In the power of the Holy Spirit  
we ask this in the name of your Son,  
who gives his life that we might live. Amen.

All quotations from *"They Showed Us Unusual Kindness": Resources for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* (<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/week-of-prayer/week-of-prayer>)