2019 Lenten Reflections
Each year we hear the Ash Wednesday readings. What would change if we took these words of Scripture more seriously, and not as something so familiar? What would happen if we acted toward one another the way God acts toward us?

The reading from Joel says that God is “gracious and merciful.” If we were gracious and merciful in each situation and toward every person, would people take advantage of us? Perhaps we take advantage of God's mercy all the time.

The reading goes on to say that God is “relenting in punishment.” I recently met a young man who had served three years of a ten-year prison sentence. Then, at a hearing, the judge decided that relenting in punishment would be the best way to help this young man who had taken responsibility for his actions, had been rehabilitated, and was ready to be restored to society. In a similar spirit, this Lent we can look for ways to show mercy and restore relationships.

The reading from 2 Corinthians urges us to be reconciled to God, but that is only part of the challenge. We must also be reconciled to each other.

God has shown us a two-step plan toward reconciliation with one another: Listen and Help. "In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you." We must somehow calm our egos enough to actually hear others. Over the past couple of years, experiences in restorative justice and circle process have led me to see how transformative listening can be.

A group with whom I have been meeting for several years recently spent time learning about restorative justice philosophies and principles; we began to practice circle process in our meetings. It yielded incredible benefits in facilitating deeper listening and enabling us to better help each other and our group.

The Church gives us the three Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to guide us, strengthen our resolve, and bind us to one another. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus instructs us to follow these disciplines in secret. The way of meekness and humility is not always very popular, and sometimes appears to be quite ineffective. It often seems that those who are loudest, wealthiest, or most powerful receive the attention, win the argument, and have their needs satisfied. But Jesus asks us to consider a different way—walking with the lowly, listening to others, and praying with trust in our heavenly Father who hears and sees in secret and who repays us abundantly.

Today's Scripture passages invite us into a new way of engaging with the world and with one another. By being stirred to concern, showing compassion to others, and moving out as ambassadors for Christ, we can indeed share the joy of salvation with those who have lost hope.

God pleads with us: “Return to me with your whole heart.”
In his recent 2019 Lenten message, Pope Francis reflected on how fasting, prayer and almsgiving can lead us to a profound conversion. Each of us has our favorite Lenten traditions and practices that help us examine our own personal journey towards the promise of the Resurrection. The Holy Father, in his exhortation, is simply asking us to take a closer look at how those traditions and practices can be expanded and shared.

“Fasting,” says His Holiness, “that is, learning to change our attitude towards others and all of creation, turning away from the temptation to “devour” everything to satisfy our voracity and being ready to suffer for love, which can fill the emptiness of our hearts.”

Before any miracles or healings, Jesus always establishes a relationship with those who come to him. Too often, we see people as a means to an end and do not get to know the person before us at all.

During Lent, can we fast from that temptation and instead learn the names of the people we meet? Can we make an effort to explore their fears, their anxieties and their hopes? Establishing better relationships like this will not only make us better people throughout the year, but ripple beyond our circle into the larger world.

“Prayer,” continues the Pope, “teaches us to abandon idolatry and the self-sufficiency of our ego, and to acknowledge our need of the Lord and his mercy.”

Admittedly, relating well to everyone we meet is not a simple task. Frankly, we cannot do it without some high-power assistance. But who better to turn to in asking for help than Jesus? In his ministry, our Lord and Savior must have been tired, hungry, and maybe even a little aggravated when he had to explain a parable to the Apostles one more time. His response: we find him going off to prayer, sometimes alone and sometimes communally with the Apostles. That example illustrates that prayer time is essential to refresh ourselves, to check in on our relationship with God and to share the difficulties and joys of the journey with our companions.

The fruits of our Lenten labors must be shared with others or we have completely missed the point. Only through sharing do the fruits of our Lenten efforts make a difference in the world. We will exhibit a renewed sense of community and help advance the Kingdom further in our world through solidarity, compassion and friendship. Now that, would be a truly worthwhile Lenten practice.

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**By: Andy Rivas**

Andy is the Executive Director for the California Catholic Conference. Previously, he served as the Director of the Office of Government and Community Relations for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He worked as Executive Director for the Texas Catholic Conference and, Policy Advisor in Domestic Social Development with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.
"Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my chosen Son; listen to him.'" -Luke 9:35

To be Christian and to follow Christ is not an invitation to be passive. It is a daily challenge to lay down our own preconceived notions, our limited perceptions, our own will, and surrender ourselves to His. Because our ways are not His ways.

That challenge is no more acutely felt than when we are called by the Gospel to love both our friends and enemies alike. We should not confuse Christian love, a firm act of the will, with secular love, a transient emotion. Christian love of the person is not a call to blanket acceptance of others’ actions. Rather, it means loving someone enough to embrace their dignity as a creation of God, while likewise inviting them, by our own examples, to be more Christlike.

We let our own limitations undermine the power of that love when we trade the dignity of the human person for convenience, for profit, for retribution, or even out of fear or a misguided sense of eye-for-an-eye justice.

We are forcing a limitless Lord into the confines of our own limited understanding.

In today’s first reading, when God tells Abram to “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can,” we are reminded of the infinite reach of our Lord, beyond our comprehension. He promises Abram that his progeny will live on in numbers only rivaled by the stars he sees in the sky. That is the abundance of human potential, which can only be fully realized when we fully give ourselves to the Lord.

When we instead end a human life – whether at its beginning or before its natural end–we reject that gift, not only for one person, but for the generations who will follow and would have been affected by that person. That loss is not just felt here on earth, but eternity suffers when we place ourselves in the way of God’s will for any human soul.

In today’s Gospel, we are invited to experience with Peter, John, and James a glimpse into that eternity, as they stood in awe of Christ’s glory. And what is Peter’s first response? He wants to confine this moment to his own perceptions by building three tents for Christ, and Moses and Elijah appearing with Him. “But he did not know what he was saying.”

This moment was not about enshrining our Lord in a temple. It is about the boundless love of our Lord embodied in His only Son, who came to redeem not just some, but all of humanity.

In a simple command, the Lord directed the apostles, and us, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him.” Throughout this Lent, let us hear and embrace the challenge of that message.
Each morning it is my custom to rise early and spend time in contemplative prayer. I am fortunate to enjoy a small office in the home I share with two other sisters that overlooks the backyard. Outside the glass door, the beauty of each season awaits my presence and attention. This is my place for solitude, my place for centering my day in God.

It is in this space that I pondered the Gospel reading from Matthew for this day, the Feast of St. Joseph. I looked for a connection between the mission and work of Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) and the patron and protector of the family of the Universal Church, St. Joseph. Having recently joined CMN’s Board of Directors and attended my first board meeting in Washington, DC, the energy and passion of the board and staff I met there was fresh in my mind and heart.

In his video series, "Who Cares About the Saints?," Fr. James Martin, SJ describes Joseph’s presence in the lives of Jesus and Mary as "the hidden life." As I explore the facts about Joseph recorded in Matthew I can only agree. In fact, Joseph does not speak at all and is mentioned only three times! In each instance it is an angel of God who visits Joseph to announce his role in the story of salvation history and the lives of Mary and Jesus.

To speak of the "hidden life" of Joseph in no way implies passivity. On this Feast Day, the Gospel passage from Matthew tells us that Joseph, already engaged to Mary, is very awake, aware of and focused on Mary’s pregnancy and the law of Moses that prescribes stoning for such suspected adultery. Surely his heart was broken as treasured thoughts of marriage and a future with Mary were shattered by her news.

This action of Joseph reveals what law alone cannot bestow: mercy, the unconditional mercy of God. In response, an angel of God visits Joseph in a dream and assures him, “Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child.” When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel had directed him.

It is here, in God’s unconditional mercy, that I discover a connection between the mission and work of CMN and St. Joseph.

Joseph’s life, though considered by many to be a hidden one, proclaimed in action the unconditional mercy of God. CMN, in its very public mission, proclaims the unconditional mercy of God as it works toward restorative justice — a way of understanding crime and wrongdoing in terms of the people and relationships impacted, rather than the law or rule that was broken. In the words of Sr. Helen Prejean, “Mercy is stronger and more God-like than vengeance.”

On this feast day of St. Joseph may we recommit ourselves to be and act out of the same God-like unconditional mercy that characterized Joseph. May we seek to build a culture of life as we engage others in restorative practices that seek to repair harm through transformative encounters that model Jesus reconciling way — the way of God’s unconditional mercy.
The opening of this Sunday’s Gospel sounds like chaos. People were dying tragically, some at the hand of the government and others in powerful and unpredictable disasters. As we read the gospels today, we might assume that instability was simply the way things were two millennia ago. Actually, social, political and religious changes had made first-century Palestine an age of high anxiety.

For nearly a century, during the period of the Hasmonean Dynasty, Palestinian Jews had governed themselves. Temple sacrifice and worship made up the rhythm of their lives together. They lived in peace, making order of the world as they saw fit. The peace appeared to be a sign of God's favor. That peace ended with the arrival of the Romans about a generation before Jesus. These new rulers were manipulative, destructive, and increasingly murderous. The order that the Jewish community had meticulously laid out, believing it was God's will, was shattered.

This reading is set among people trying to make sense of their generation's chaos. We can hear a familiar yearning for simpler days in which right was right and wrong was wrong.

The Galileans, referenced in the opening line, were killed as they practiced their religious obligation. Surely, they did something to deserve their fates. How could God allow otherwise?

The impulse to make order out of chaos is one way we are made in the image of God. It is a gift of vision that can be a beautiful, collective aspect of our humanity that involves community building, attention to the vulnerable, communication and prioritization. The order we attempt to make can give us a taste of the Kingdom of God. But it can also slide into an inappropriate certainty about God's ways in the world. Our human order will always fall short of God's scope.

The sense of unraveling that is described in the opening verse of this Sunday's Gospel may be more familiar than we first realize. Jesus' unwavering response to all that unraveled around him was mercy.

It is mercy that we receive when we finally realize we’ve neglected part of the whole that we wanted to be built. It is mercy that can lift us from the attachment to certainty. Mercy lets God's infinitely greater ways wash over the failure and discouragement, and gently release the tension in our own age of anxiety. Mercy can pull us from the attachment to the familiar, to bravely venture to see the new ways of God in our world.
In the story of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus responds to the sneering of the Pharisees: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” He begins telling the story of a man who has two sons. The youngest son asks his father to give him his share of the family estate as an anticipated inheritance. Once received, he immediately embarks on a long journey to a faraway land, and the Gospel tells us “there he squandered his property in dissolute living.”

According to the customs of the time, a son would only receive his inheritance at the time of his father's death. The fact that the younger son instigated this premature division of the family inheritance shows a rebellious indifference and pride that is disrespectful of his father, selfish, and immature. His asking shows a lack of piety, and implies he does not want to know anything about his father.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country. The son becomes so desperate that he gets a job feeding pigs, which were thought of as filthy animals that Jews were not even allowed to touch. This reveals to us that he had fallen very low. The son represents a person who lives in rebellion with God.

Finally, the young man comes to his senses, remembering his father. With humility, he recognizes his foolishness, and decides to return to his father to ask for forgiveness and mercy. The father, who had been watching and waiting, receives his son with open arms. Overjoyed, the father immediately addresses his servants and asks them to prepare a feast in celebration of his son's return.

The father is an image of the Heavenly Father, who waits patiently with loving compassion to restore us when we return to Him with a humble heart. His mercy is infinite; He offers us everything that is in His kingdom, without looking at our past.

Meanwhile, the eldest son feels the celebration is unfair. The father tries to dissuade the older brother from his jealous attack by explaining: "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours." We see that the eldest son is clearly an image of the Pharisees (but could also be us at times). In their own righteousness they have forgotten to rejoice when a sinner returns to God. The bitterness and resentment of the eldest son keeps him from forgiving his younger brother and prevents him from seeing the treasure that is a constant relationship with the father.

*The message of today’s Gospel agrees with a theme repeated throughout this Lenten season: we have a merciful Father who forgives our mistakes and malice.*

The well-known parable of the prodigal son reveals the impudence and sin of the beloved son, who only decided to return to the father when He reached the extreme of indigence. Nevertheless, the father waited for him every day, welcomed him with a hug and a feast without even letting him say his speech of repentance, because the gesture of returning was clear enough. It is always time to return. The best thing we can do this Lent... is to return and stay.
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” - John 8:7

A woman stands alone. She lives in a time that saw women as subordinate to men, and because she is perceived to hold less value than the privileged members of society, she was used as a pawn in a much larger scheme to ensnare Jesus in an effort to bring an end to his revolutionary and emancipatory ministry. For his mission to liberate humanity was a threat to the very foundation of the structures, powers, and privilege within society.

A woman stands alone. She is forced to stand before “the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, who brought her to Jesus to be judged because she was caught in adultery” (John 8:2). The men who surrounded her, who represented threatening, and violent institutionalized supremacy, began presenting their case against her to Christ, but making their accusations against the woman who stood alone as a part of their larger scheme “to have a basis for accusing Jesus.” The men in essence accused the woman to accuse Christ in order subordinate him as they had already subordinated her.

A woman stands alone. Jesus bends down and begins writing in the dirt with his finger, to which some have suggested that Jesus was writing the 10 commandments to remind the experts of the law that all “fall short of the glory of God.” While this may be the case, there seems to be more to Jesus’ writing than a mere citation of Scripture declaring "Thou Shalt Not," because the experts of the law could easily use this against Jesus. For they were already using Mosaic Law to entrap him.

Which suggests that Jesus was writing something much more impactful, possibly even personal. Could it be that the Savior’s writing in the dirt was a detailing of the accusers' transgressions? Could it be that Jesus was exposing the plank in the eye of the accusers who were pointing to the splinter in the eye of the woman who stands alone? Could it be that Jesus was pushing back against the law and order rhetoric of those who held power and privilege, and demonstrating to the men who were prepared to throw stones that they needed repentance just as much, if not more, than the woman who stands alone?

A woman stands alone. For thousands of years the most vulnerable members of our society have been targeted by men who hold stones of power as they promote their own selfish gain to preserve their privilege. But if Jesus were to write down and expose the litany of transgressions committed over the course of history, their stones would likely be released. For it is not until those who’ve had the privilege of being oblivious to their sins come face to face with them, that they become open to recusing themselves from their seats of power and judgment. Only when those who have power divest of their privilege, will society begin marching down the road of liberation, restoration, and reconciliation.

A woman stands alone. She stands among us today. She stands in hostile spaces of abuse. A child stands alone. He stands among us today separated from his parents in detention centers at the border. A man stands alone. He stands among us today in dehumanizing jail cells awaiting execution. A mother stands alone. She stands among us today as her child was murdered by gun violence. A grandfather stands alone. He stands among us today, sick with cancer and without insurance.

Thus during this season of reflection and repentance, the question becomes, what will WE do? Will we stand with stones of judgment, and blame those who are most vulnerable? Or will we stand with those who are alone as friends and neighbors by dropping our stones of judgment, and begin holding one another’s hands in love?

By: Rev. Scott Adams
Scott serves the community of Loyola University Maryland as Assistant Director of Interfaith and Ecumenical Ministries. He holds two Master's Degrees in Theology and previously served as the director of a non-profit restorative justice program in Durham, NC.
On Palm Sunday, Jesus rides into Jerusalem to eventually face his execution after being accused of believing there is much more to love and faithfulness to His Father, than putting his trust in the religious institution and the empire. For the past 6 years, I have driven to the state capitol in Pierre, South Dakota with the hope that our work will at some point stop the execution of this same Christ in disguise, as a person convicted of murder and living on death row.

In South Dakota, we have many Evangelical Christians who hold legislative positions and claim to be pro-life. These good people (and I do believe they are good) will tell you how much they are against abortion, but definitely do not want to stop capital punishment. They often will quote, “an eye for an eye” from the Old Testament, or otherwise Romans 13: 1-5: “Obey governing authorities. All government comes from God, so civil authorities are appointed by God. Therefore, those of you who rebel against authority are rebelling against God’s decision. For this you are liable to be punished…”

What is never quoted by these same folks is Romans 13:8-9: “Owe no debt to anyone, except the debt that binds us to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you have fulfilled the Law. The commandments—no committing adultery, no killing, no stealing, no coveting, and all the others—are summed up in this one: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love never wrongs anyone, hence love is the fulfillment of the Law.”

I recently read an article about a state legislator in Iowa who, more than 50 years after the death penalty was repealed in his state, wants to bring it back into the state's codified law. This is what Rep. Skyler Wheeler said:

“Iowa needs to seriously consider reinstating the death penalty [...] The purposes are of course first and foremost, justice for the victims and their families. Secondly, it gives prosecutors another tool to use when dealing with first degree murder cases. Lastly, it sends a message that as a state we will not tolerate the shedding of innocent blood and if someone does this, they are subject to the highest punishment one can receive on the earth." Wheeler has said that a person can be pro-life and pro-death penalty.

I am convinced that love and forgiveness, not fear, are the only paths to healing of all religious institutions, as well as the empire.

That hope is the only thing that keeps me going. Jesus said: “The hour is coming when anyone who kills you will claim to be serving God.” (Jn. 16:2)

Jesus was very clear, God wants life. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to give us life here and now!
HOLY THURSDAY

"He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet." -John 13:5

Writing a reflection for Holy Thursday feels like a daunting task; this day in our Catholic tradition is so multi-faceted.

Abundant in symbolism and sacred tradition, Holy Thursday celebrates the institution of the Eucharist as Jesus’ body and blood. It is on this day that the Chrism oil used in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and anointing of the sick is blessed. It also marks the end of Lent's almsgiving, fasting, and prayer, and the beginning of the Easter Triduum, when we contemplate Jesus' dying and rising for our sins and God's plan of redemption for the world.

Indeed, Holy Thursday is one of our holiest days. Yet on this day, I feel most drawn to ponder God's gift of undeserved, unconditional, and unifying love.

During the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrates this love. The Gospel says he rises from the table, takes a towel, and ties it around his waist (Jn 13:4). He then begins to wash the feet of his disciples, one by one. We know that Jesus humbled himself to share in our humanity, but in the washing of the feet — a task typically reserved for slaves — Jesus acts more intimate and self-humbling than ever before; an act far more significant than a simple show of kindness.

Contemplating the foot washing scene is not complete without also considering its backdrop. Jesus knows Judas will betray him and that, in the coming hours, each one of his closest friends will fail him. And so, Jesus is not surprised when Peter first refuses to have his feet washed. Peter is bewildered, unprepared to receive this generous act of love.

The disciples feel unworthy of Jesus unconditional love, but it is not theirs to deserve. Despite their shortfalls and inadequacies, Jesus freely gives them the gift of his love.

It is at this supper, in the presence of his closest companions, that Jesus offers himself as the Passover sacrifice. "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:24-25). Jesus gives his greatest gift in the sacrament of the Eucharist, a gift that makes us sharers in his body and blood, unified to form one single body.

The grace of Holy Thursday is knowing that God embraces us despite our weaknesses and imperfections. This is a lesson I need to learn in a personal way, but the reminder is a constant consolation in this work to end the death penalty. God meets our frailty with love, without judgement or exclusion. God’s love is given to us without distinction. “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do (Jn 13:15)."

On this first day of the Triduum, we recognize God's unfailing gift of undeserved, unconditional, and unifying love for us. This love has the power to embolden every human heart and calls us to do the same. Let us ask for the grace to respond to God's call to love one another accordingly.
On Good Friday, 2010, I found myself at the Leon County Jail, waiting to visit the man who had shot my daughter—her boyfriend, Conor. Through God’s grace, I had come to forgive him, even though after my visit with him, I would return to the hospital to spend the final hours of Ann’s life with her.

As I walked down the long cement-block corridor, I thought of Jesus, and how on this day, he too had spent the night in prison. What was that night like for him? Had he been allowed to have visitors? How could I even be thinking this? Was I comparing Jesus’s arrest to Conor’s? But I couldn’t help myself. I thought about how the men, his disciples, had run and hidden. Would the women, perhaps invisible in their social status, have been able to attend him?

In 2017, my husband and I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We were at Caiaphas’s house, in the very place where Jesus spent the night after his arrest. It was no more than a pit carved out of the stone hillside. I sat on the cold floor and wept, realizing that no one could have come to see him that night. No one was there to console him. He faced those dark hours utterly alone.

St. Paul tells us that we have a high priest in Jesus who has “been tested in every way.” A Savior who chose to experience a death few of us could imagine. Jesus chose to die under a death penalty, hanging on a cross between two other condemned men, his suffering exposed to all.

Yet, even in that moment of intense suffering, he could pray for those who caused his suffering: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

By his example, Jesus calls us to forgive, even in those times when we think forgiveness is impossible. For our family, forgiveness meant pursuing restorative justice in our daughter’s case, so that Conor could serve a meaningful sentence, not merely a punitive one. Ultimately, our conditions of probation, including anger management classes and speaking about teen dating violence, were incorporated into his sentence.

By extending mercy to him, Conor was able to experience God’s love and commit his life to repairing, to the extent possible, the harm he caused. He has already begun to meet those conditions by completing anger management classes and creating public service announcements on teen dating violence. He ministers to other inmates, bringing them the hope that the promise of forgiveness provides.

“So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” Even on this darkest day, Good Friday, St. Paul reminds us that we are not alone. Jesus will always be there for us to provide the grace needed to do what may seem impossible and in doing so, spread his message of love and mercy to the world.

By: Kate Grosmaire
Kate is the author of Forgiving My Daughter’s Killer – A True Story of Loss, Faith, and Unexpected Grace. She and her husband, Deacon Andy Grosmaire, founded the Ann Grosmaire Be the Change Fund to promote education on forgiveness and restorative justice practices.
EASTER SUNDAY

“They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him!” - John 20:2

He’s alive! They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and granted that he be visible. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And his mercy endures forever. Alleluia!

As we celebrate the most important event in human history, let's keep in mind that we are called to embody Christ's resurrection, daily. As Luke tells us today, everyone who believes in Him will receive forgiveness of sins through His name. If we believe we are redeemed in the resurrection of the Lord, we must think, speak, and act like redeemed people. We must love and serve God and neighbor.

To be redeemed is not only a spiritual matter; it's core to our humanity. For to be human is to fall and rise, again and again. To deny anyone the opportunity to be redeemed is to negate an inherently human capacity.

Currently, more than 2,500 of God's children in the U.S. are languishing in cages awaiting execution. Another 53,000 have been condemned to America's other death penalty—life without parole. Add in the other 152,000 serving life with parole and sentences that exceed life expectancy, and we have a criminal legal system that has deemed 1 in 7 incarcerated people irredeemable. This is not only anti-human, but anti-Gospel.

We are the body of Christ, the resurrected body. What affects one affects all. What is denied one is denied all. Today let's ask ourselves and each other: What kind of body do we want to be? Do we want a body that routinely and systematically deals with its social sins by vilifying, dehumanizing, caging, and killing its most disadvantaged members?

Peter and the other disciple did not yet understand the Scriptures that Jesus had to rise from the dead—the greatest paradox. He had to die so we can live. He was sentenced to death and defeated death. For us.

Jesus is alive! The Word became flesh, dwelt among us, was executed, and rose on the third day. Let's rejoice—and act.

The Cornerstone has redeemed us and deemed each stone essential to the kingdom of God. None are to be thrown away. We crumble or rise together.

Let's gather. Let's build. Let's rise.