Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



Migrants, whose boats sank in the sea and who were rescued by the Libyan Coast Guards at the Mediterranean Sea, arrive on a boat at the port in Garaboli, Libya, June 8. (OSV News/Reuters/Ayman al-Sahili)



by Sr. Carol J. Dempsey

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When we peruse the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter narratives and poems describing the many hardships, struggles and injustices of biblical times. Nations and kingdoms rival one another. Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires rise and fall. Monarchs, princes, wealthy landlords and dishonest merchants enforce corrupt laws to enrich themselves — leaving many people, especially small farmers, disenfranchised. Wars pollute the land, destroying human and non-human life as women and children become widowed and fatherless, respectively. Political and social oppression leads to forced migration, exile and landlessness.

Biblical times were not so different from contemporary times. Countries are at war with one another as U.S. leaders work to maintain the nation's empire status. China, Russia and North Korea form new alliances in their quest for power. The Israeli and Palestinian conflict rages on. Oligarchs control the global economic system. Corporate agribusinesses gobble up small family farms. Landlords raise rents as lenders increase mortgage rates, making it difficult for middle income and low wage earners to either stay in their rentals or buy homes and property. The power brokers of the Global North continue to self-enrich at the expense of the Global South.

Ironically, in 2023, economic statistics show that poverty has increased in the U.S., the land of plenty. Economic data also indicates that the recent global pandemic created many new billionaires among the western technology and pharmaceutical companies, making their CEOs and presidents our new global bio-techno-feudal lords.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Oct. 29, 2023

Exodus 22:20-26
Psalm 18
1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10
Matthew 22:34-40

We live in a changed world with more changes on the horizon. Now is the time to become more economically, socially and politically astute, as we try to navigate the new terrain upon which we have yet to gain our footing.

Reading and interpreting this Sunday's biblical texts from the perspective of the world in front of the text and in dialogue with contemporary experiences, we discover that both the first reading from the book of Exodus and the Gospel reading from the book of Matthew are clarion calls to right relationship. Despite all our advancement on so many levels throughout three millennia, human beings have yet to be able to live peacefully and justly with one another.

In the Exodus reading, focus is on those who are "other," harshly translated as "aliens" as if they were not part of humanity. In this narrative, the Israelites are reminded not to oppress the "other" among them because as Israelites, they were once a people living in a land not their own, migrants seeking asylum from severe famines and massive starvation.

For many countries today, immigration and fair and just treatment of immigrants continue to be a major challenge, especially in the United States where immigration reform has yet to happen as people of different ethnicities, cultures and races seek asylum from horrific political and social oppression. How do we non-Native American U.S. citizens whose ancestors were immigrants"others" themselves — treat today's immigrants? Sadly, some of us who are descendants of immigrants have forgotten who we are, and some of us continue our history of colonization, disenfranchisement and oppression.

It's time for history to stop repeating itself by "othering." It's time to work for political, social, economic and environmental justice ever more arduously to abolish sexism, racism, ableism, colorism, ethnocentrism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, sexual orientation discrimination and the many more forms of discrimination that keep the “other” disenfranchised and on the margins.

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The Holy One is part of the margins, lives on the margins, is embodied in the margins, is actively listening to and working for the margins with active divine compassion. The litmus test for people of any faith and spirituality today is the

measure of how deep their active compassion is for the "other" among them which also includes non-human life, the new migrants of climate change. Active compassion entails changing oppressive structures, systems and ways of thinking.

The Gospel reading from the book of Matthew complements the first reading from Exodus. Increasingly, nations' governments are moving toward authoritarianism even among democracies. Fundamentalism and literalism are on the rise as people search for absolutes, law and order and certainty among sacred texts, constitutions and religious systems of thought. In some countries, political, social and economic laws are now shaped by culturally conditioned religious laws and culturally conditioned religious attitudes, making the separation between church and state an experience of the past. The United States is no exception.

Yet, the Gospel is clear. Law is not the means to the deep transformation needed in our world today; relationships create the pathways. For believers, the deeper the relationship one has with the Divine, the greater the flow of positive energy into self, an energy felt as love, that enlarges hearts and minds, compelling all to do the hard work of all-embracing justice without which no right relationship or transformation is possible.

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