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TODAY'S READINGS: *Hebrews 6:10-20; Mark 2:23-28 (312)*. "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath."

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 18
Love compels us

Are the world's people becoming more divided, the closer our technology brings us? Plenty of evidence seems to confirm this idea. But it doesn't have to be this way. The annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins today with the theme: "Reconciliation: the Love of Christ Compels Us." If divisions between Christians can be healed, peace and understanding between people of many faiths is one step closer to being possible. On a planet this tiny and interconnected, we can't afford to maintain walls and prejudices. Pray for the blessing of unity.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17; Mark 3:1-6 (313)*. "Jesus said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'"

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19
Do you want to know a secret?

If you want to get everyone's attention in a meeting, start whispering. Everybody wants to know "secret" information. Perhaps that was the purpose behind Jesus' frequent admonitions in Saint Mark's gospel to keep his identity a secret. After healing a blind man, Jesus tells him not to tell anyone—as if people wouldn't notice! And in today's gospel Jesus warns a gang of unclean spirits not to make him known. Yet the effect of the secrecy seems to leave people wondering, "Who is this Jesus?" Maybe that's the point all along—to get people's minds off the miracles and wonders and to focus, finally, on the true identity of the Son of God himself.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Hebrews 7:25—8:6; Mark 3:7-12 (314)*. "He warned them sternly not to make him known."

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20
MEMORIALS OF FABIAN, POPE, MARTYR; SEBASTIAN, MARTYR
Deliver us from evil

Casting out demons was all in a day's work for Jesus, right up there with preaching the gospel, and no wonder. Evil wears such a horrible face in our world, the only surprise is that we don't look for holy women and men to discharge the demons in our own day. Pope Fabian (d. 250) tried to do that in his short reign of tolerance, but the renewal of Christian persecutions led to his death. Sebastian (d. ca. 288), a Roman guard discovered to be a Christian, was also executed. "Deliver us from evil" remains a crucial prayer in every age.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Hebrews 8:6-13; Mark 3:13-19 (315)*. "Jesus appointed twelve to be sent out to proclaim the message and to cast out demons."

SATURDAY, JANUARY 21 **MEMORIAL OF AGNES, VIRGIN, MARTYR**
Encourage the better angels

In the past 40 years child homicides have tripled in the United States, making it the child murder capital of industrialized nations. Today, Christians celebrate the feast of Saint Agnes, who was martyred at age 12 because she refused to be married to a Roman soldier's son. What kind of God allows innocents to be slaughtered? we ask in horror. But the real question is, how can we be better witnesses to God's love and drive out the demons that lead human beings to evil acts?

TODAY'S READINGS: *Hebrews 9:2-3, 11-14; Mark 3:20-21 (316)*. "Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your Son."

SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 2017 **SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**
Sit down, eat, forgive

Jesus made a point of eating with sinners, and that upset the religious leaders of his day. They thought it was wrong to "coddle" those with moral failings. But Jesus believed that sin wasn't something to run from but rather something to heal. He assumed that the people who came to him didn't want to stay in their sins; they longed to be free of them. He showed them the way, not through shunning or punishment, but by eating a meal with them. Meals are powerful. Make the most of your family meals by joining in a prayer of gratitude before you eat. Thank God for forgiveness and the opportunity to start over.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34 (64)*. "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and remain upon him."

MONDAY, JANUARY 16
We are kindred spirits

John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus—maybe a cousin once or twice removed—but we get the sense they had not encountered each other before they met on the banks of the Jordan River. Yet John recognizes Jesus even from a distance and calls out his true identity at first glance. John doesn't say, "That's my cousin!" but rather, "That's the one whose blood will mark the homes of the saved!" This is the literal meaning of *Lamb of God*, recalling the time when the Jewish people used the blood of the Passover lamb to preserve them from the angel of death in Egypt. Those who love know each other with one look.

TODAY'S READINGS: *Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 2:18-22 (311)*. "No one pours new wine into old wineskins."

TUESDAY, JANUARY 17 **MEMORIAL OF ANTHONY, ABBOT**
Dare to dream in the desert

All holiness requires time in the desert. For some it's a figurative trek to a desolate place fraught with doubt. Others brave a literal journey to an isolated land, where they face their demons. Anthony the Great (b. 251) spent much of his life in the desert mastering and mentoring others in simple holiness. He told his monks that for those holy ones who remain undistracted from their vision, "an immediate joy, gladness, and courage arise in the soul." Such focus and courage can be seen in another great whom we honored yesterday: an Alabama preacher who had a dream "that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression," would "be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice."



Invest just five minutes a day, and your faith will deepen and grow—a day at a time.

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