

HOMILIES – by Deacon JACK RHINE

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1. **MULTIPLICATION OF FISH AND LOAVES**

It seems like we hear the story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes several times a year. It is told in each of the Gospels. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that Jesus does great work, and that is true. But, the story is not just about the miracle that Jesus works, it is about the miracles that we can work when we work with Jesus.

I am going to tell a story that I heard that helps us to imagine what might have happened that day long ago. A little boy slept, waiting for morning to come. When he awoke, he jumped out of bed ready to go down by the crossroads near his village to watch the pilgrims coming south from Capernaum. They were heading for Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. He had remembered his mother's words of the night before as she prepared their food for the next day. He wasn't to eat his barley loaves and his two salted fish until later in the day for it was all he had. There was no work and she and his father were going to Tiberias to search for work in the barley fields with his uncle. However, parents and food were soon far from his thoughts as he sat by the side of the road watching the steady stream of people and listening to them talk.

Much of it was of a marvelous occurrence in Capernaum the night before where a young rabbi had commanded a crippled man to arise and walk and the man had done so, all the while praising Yahweh. Oh, how the little boy would love to see such a one, when all of a sudden, he saw a large crowd of people coming along the shore of the sea of Galilee. Being a small boy, and having the inquisitive nature of small boys everywhere, he left his spot and followed the crowd. He forgot that his mother had told him his limit was the crossroad.

As he joined the crowd, he discovered that they were following the young miracle working rabbi to see what he would do next. The rabbi and some of his men had climbed into a boat and seemed to be heading for Tiberias, so the crowd was walking along the shore hoping to find him there. Well, the little boy had been to Tiberias once to visit his uncle Philip and he knew he could get home before dark so no one would know that he had gone. All he had to do was follow the seashore home. After a long walk, the boy noticed that the leaders were turning away from the path and heading up into the

hills. Looking up, the boy could see a small group of men listening to a young man. He poked the man walking next to him and asked, "Is that the one we have come to see?" When the man nodded, the boy forgot all about how hungry and tired he was and pushed up to the front of the crowd where he looked directly into the face of....his uncle Phillip who was standing by the rabbi. He hid behind a rather large woman in time to hear his uncle say to the Rabbi, "Well it's not our fault that they followed us. If they don't have any food they can go to town and get some. It's only two miles. What did they expect when they walked all the way here without food? I'll go home and get us food like we planned but we can't feed all of them."

The little boy thought of his little packet of bread and fishes and felt very smart. He had food and these important people had none. He all of a sudden felt very hungry and looked around for some place to eat his food in private since it would be impolite to eat in front of others who had none. Just then one of the men around the Rabbi spoke to the crowd, "Does anyone here have any food?" An embarrassed hush fell over the crowd. Many of the pilgrims bound for Jerusalem fingered their pouches nervously; people began to move away from each other. The small boy heard the large woman say to the little boy with her, "there's only enough for us, Simon. He means those rich travelers who have lots of food with them for their journey to Jerusalem. Sit down, dear."

But the little boy standing behind her didn't sit down although Simon did as he was told. He, too wanted to sit down but he couldn't. He had seen the face of the Rabbi as he looked out over the crowd, waiting. And the small boy knew that the Rabbi knew. He could tell. The Rabbi had smiled at him; in fact, he had even winked. And the small boy knew that it didn't matter how hungry he would be on the trip home; he knew that nothing mattered but giving all that he had to the Rabbi even though he knew that his uncle would see him and be mad that he had strayed so far from home.

He reached into his shirt and pulled the little packet of food out, "Sir, I have some food." And he passed the five small dinner rolls and the two small fishes to the man called Andrew. The laughter started right around him and then grew in intensity. He felt stupid; his face burned. He noticed Simon clutching two large loaves while his mother unwrapped a fish as big as her arm. They moved away from him. He felt tears coming to his eyes and looked for some place to hide.

Suddenly the Rabbi stood; he wasn't laughing. He turned toward Andrew as the crowd hushed; the people sat down looking up. The Rabbi raised his hands to bless the food, then said to Andrew, "Give this gift to all the people." Andrew frowned at the Master, "Give what? This? It's not enough for..." Jesus cut him off, "Just start will you, Andrew." So Andrew, aided by Simon, began to break the little loaves, and as the little boy watched his bread and his fish, he suddenly became aware that all around him people were closer to one another; food was being passed everywhere. Everywhere there was barley bread and fish.

And the Rabbi was standing there smiling at him. He reached forward and placed his hand on the small boy's shoulder and said, "Thank you; you have empowered me to act. You gave me all you had, and as you can see your gift was enough."

The boy suddenly felt another hand on his shoulder that he was a little more familiar with. "Uh, oh," he thought, "Uncle Phillip." And it was Uncle Phillip who was strangely calm. He looked at the Master and said, "We understand now. We must do the best that we can with what we have, with no thought for ourselves. It is then that you will empower us."

And the young Rabbi smiled again at the small boy who had given all he had, who hadn't concerned himself with how much was needed, or how big the problem seemed. Then he said to Phillip, Andrew and the rest. "Would you please collect the remnants? This boy is hungry." And the small boy stood on the hillside with twelve baskets of bread and fish.

And while the people tried to make the Rabbi king, to capture his power and harness it, the small boy and his Uncle Phillip and his father and mother who showed up to help carry the baskets, the food they so desperately needed, they all knew that the power of the Rabbi was in all of them. That no problem, be it hunger, joblessness, sickness, loneliness, anxiety is too big for Jesus of Nazareth. If only we do all in our power to help, we empower the Master to bless our work and it is enough.

How many loaves and how many fishes do all of us have to bring to the hungry of our communities this week? What else is the Master asking us to bring to our neighbors this week? What problem seems too great to be solved in our lives this week? We need to bring what we have to the Master without thought of ourselves and it will be enough for him.

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2. CROWDS COME BACK FOR MORE – BREAD OF LIFE

In last week's Gospel, Jesus had multiplied the loaves and fishes and fed the multitudes. Today's Gospel has the crowds coming back for more. They are physically hungry and they want Jesus to feed them again. The people don't really know what to make of it when Jesus tells them not to work for food to satisfy their physical hunger, but that he, Jesus, is the bread of life that will take away hunger and thirst.

This is probably a difficult concept for hungry people to accept and unfortunately it is a difficult concept for us today when we hunger and thirst for the wrong things.

There is a story that was once told by a missionary:

"In the 1980's during the apartheid era in South Africa, I worked as a missionary in Zambia. My colleague, a European missionary working with me in the same mission, visited South Africa for his vacation. He came back to Zambia and was excited to tell everyone how much better South Africa was in comparison to Zambia. He told of the wonderful preaching he did in South Africa, calling on the youth to give up their anti-apartheid struggle. His reasoning was that since Zambia had black majority rule and its economy was in a shambles, and since South Africa had white minority rule and its economy was doing much better, they should give up their struggle for black majority rule unless they wanted to be poor like Zambia.

In reply I said to him, "Why don't we do this: we lock you in a prison and then give you every thing you want to eat and drink, but still keep you locked up in prison." Immediately he got the point. The hunger of the human spirit goes beyond the hunger for food and drink. We may have all the material food in the world, but if we lack such spiritual food as freedom, truth, and love, our hearts will never be satisfied." Jesus was making the same point to the crowd that was following him and he makes the same point to us this morning.

We live in a society that does not know what true material poverty is. The media keeps hyping consumerism and encouraging the latest fad possession that won't matter to us six months from now. In my own business, computers, my customers are forced to buy well beyond what they need

simply because smaller components that would serve most people fine are no longer available. Parts to repair two-year-old technology are fading from the marketplace. We go out to eat and are served large portions at high prices that most people can't finish. The fashion moguls keep changing styles and people who care about being stylish have closets full of expensive clothing that they no longer care to wear. It goes on and on. Yet are we truly happy as a society? The amount of alcoholism, drug problems and the numbers of failing marriages and suicides shout "no!" very emphatically.

The economists don't have it right measuring our success as a society in things like retail sales, gross national product and similar metrics that we associate with affluence. Suppose a different method were devised that looked at charitable contributions, numbers of hours of volunteer work, percentage of people who devote significant parts of their lives to the service of others.

Jesus gives us himself, the bread of life, the Eucharist, that satisfies all of our hunger. St. Augustine said "God is all to us: If we are hungry, he is bread; if thirsty; he is water; if darkness; he is light; if naked, he is a robe of immortality." But the Eucharist that we receive becomes most hunger satisfying and thirst quenching, when we give it to others in the form of love and caring, when we become the bread of life to others. Then we are doing the work of Jesus Christ and helping him to fulfill his promise to give life to the world.

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3. **WORSHIP SPACE**

Recently I have heard a lot of comments about our worship space. I have heard people say they can't tell it is a Catholic church because the tabernacle has been moved into the chapel, we don't have candles for people to light, there is no altar rail, and we don't have statues. Then others have said I went to St. such and such last weekend and it was so Catholic because they had altar bells, the hymns were in Latin, the choir wore robes.

Rest assured though, this is a Catholic church and there are two strong pieces of evidence. First, parishioners tend to fill seats from the back of the church forward; and second, and most important, the Eucharist is the center of our worship.

Tradition is a wonderful element of our lives and the traditions of our Church are magnificent. So much of who we are is rooted in where we came from. The Mass, church architecture, and our society as a whole have undergone much change since the Second Vatican Council in the mid-'60s. There are those who think it has gone too far and those who think it has not gone far enough. If there is a downside of tradition, it is that we do things because we have always done them and don't give enough thought to what the actions really mean.

One good example is the use of altar bells in some parishes today. The bells came about because in the large cathedrals of medieval times, only those near the front could hear and see what was happening on the altar. The bells were used at the consecration of the Eucharist so that those further back knew that something important was happening. Today, with sound systems and seating where worshippers can see, the bells might remain part of the ritual, but not for the purpose that were originally intended.

It is important that receiving the Eucharist never becomes mere tradition, we cannot lose track of why we receive the Eucharist. It cannot become something we do because we have always done it.

In today's Gospel, John quotes Jesus speaking to the crowds and Jesus tells the people five times that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life. The next verse of scripture following today's

Gospel said that Jesus made these statements while he was teaching in Capernaum, chronologically before the last supper.

The first century Jews must have had a tremendous struggle with this concept. We accept Christ's presence in the consecrated host and precious blood as a mystery of our faith. The Eucharist is one of the earliest traditions of the Church. In the first churches formed by Jews, worship was a traditional Jewish Sabbath service in the synagogue followed by a Eucharistic meal in a home or other place.

The memories of the stories of the last supper were very fresh in the minds of the early Christian communities. So, two thousand years later, we come to Mass, we receive the Eucharist and leave. Is that all there this to eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ? What does it do to make us better people? What does it do to build up the Body of Christ? Have you considered that eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ has a broader meaning than we give it?

On Holy Thursday, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, the Gospel that is proclaimed is about the washing of feet, it is about serving one another. The last sentence of that Gospel is "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." Jesus tied Eucharist and service together. They cannot be separated. When we receive Christ, we become Christ and we are called to be Christ to others. Eucharist is not just a "thing"; Eucharist is an action.

Pope John Paul II published an encyclical on the Eucharist in April of this year. Although many Catholics are left with the mistaken impression that the Eucharist is a personal thing, between the individual and God, the Pope very eloquently teaches us that the effect of each of us receiving the Eucharist reaches far beyond the individual into the entire world. He states that "the Eucharist spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us ... that this increases, rather than lessens our responsibility for the world today."

He goes on to speak of the hopelessness in the world and the urgent need to work for peace and justice for the poorest and with the least amount of hope. He said, "For this reason the Lord wanted to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and in sacrifice the promise of a

humanity renewed by his love.” He goes on to quote St. Paul from his first letter to the Corinthians saying, “It is unworthy of a Christian community to partake of the Lord’s Supper amid division and indifference to the poor.”

We have to ask ourselves, what is in our hearts and in our minds as we approach the Lord’s Table. Are we just part of the procession? Or, is there a burning desire on our part that Christ will become part of us and we part of him and that we will love others as he loves us? Do we receive the Eucharist and head back to our seats or out the door of the church unchanged? Or do we leave Mass ready to be Eucharist to others? Are we participating in a ritual of the Church because we are Catholics and that is what Catholics do, or are we receiving Christ and following Christ by taking his love out into the world and turning it into action? Are we being Eucharist?

I want to share some events of the past year of my life with you. But, what I have to share is more about you than it is about me. You see, it is about your goodness and your being Eucharist to me. About a year ago, I went to the emergency room in the middle of the night with severe abdominal pain. It was my gall bladder. But, in process of tests, they found cancer in both of my kidneys. I told few people at first; just those I thought had to know. But the word got around as it usually does.

People from this community came out in full force offering to pray for me and provide any help that they could give. People who were strangers reached out to me. Some have become very close friends that I hope to have for the rest of my life. People I did not know have offered me kidneys. One of them a seventeen-year-old girl, who barely knows me, at an age where physical appearance is almost everything, was willing to be scarred to help me.

I spent the better part of a year trying alternative medicine. I went to a lot of healing services. Yes, I wished the whole problem had gone away and yes it was scary, but I have never felt alone or sorry for myself. Many of my brothers and sisters of this community have been walking with me, both in prayer and in fellowship.

In May, I bit the bullet. I had my first surgery to remove half of my left kidney. Shands Hospital in Gainesville is a better than 300 mile round trip. A number of parishioners came to visit. One couple drove up after work one day and returned to Palm Bay that night because he had to be at work at 6:00am the next day. The cards, the flowers, the calls, the prayer chain, the love and

caring were overwhelming. I am not a member of the Knights, but our local council had a prayer vigil where a different member or couple came into church and prayed for me for an hour for the entire day of the surgery.

I got out of the hospital on Friday and had to come to Mass on Saturday. It was not because I am so holy, but it is because you, my sisters and brothers are holy. You are Eucharist to me. I needed to be with you, and worship in the midst of the body of Christ.

I had my second surgery in July to remove all of my right kidney and gall bladder. My sister, who had come to be with my wife Karen for the first surgery, could not come again. A parishioner, who knew that I was worried about Karen being alone, left Palm Bay at 2:00am and was in the waiting room at Shands when we arrived to check in.

Again, I came home on Friday and needed to worship with my community on Saturday. I did not receive Communion once during either stay in the hospital, and I hungered for it. Yet, I received so much more Eucharist from you, my brothers and my sisters. You were truly Christ's love in action in my life.

There is so much need for Christ's love to be spread through the world and we are all capable of doing it so well.

A Roman poet, Sextus Propertius, who died about fifteen years before Christ was born wrote, "Love itself is love's chief nourishment." Little did this pagan know that he was describing the Eucharist.

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4. **ALL SAINTS DAY – FEAST OF ALL SOULS**

Today is a great day for bargain hunters in the Catholic Church. You get the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, All Saints Day, a holy day of obligation, and the Feast of All Souls --- three for the price of one!

The readings from today are for the Feast of All Souls. It is interesting that all Saints and All Souls are on consecutive days and theologically are no longer that much different from each other. All Saints Day dates back to the early Church when the word saint was synonymous with martyr, those who endured torture for the sake of the Church.

In the ninth century, Pope Gregory IV moved All Saints to November 1st and the emphasis of the celebration was changed to celebrate the connection between Christians alive on earth --- saints under construction -- and those that are already with God, the Communion of Saints. The feast points to our ultimate goal, to be with God. All Souls Day also is an ancient celebration evolved to be celebrated on November 2nd.

The two themes of this feast are: first, prayer for those who have died and are in an intermediate place to prepare to come face-to-face with God. The second theme is that Christ is the hope for the living and the dead. He died to ensure our resurrection to eternal life. Again, it emphasizes the Communion of Saints.

Traditionally, the intermediate place, purgatory, has been thought of in the western church essentially as a place for punishment. The Eastern Church has seen it as a place of growth. Modern Western theologians subscribe to the view that purgatory is a place of growth, and also a process for growth where we have a chance to see all of our mistakes. Many of those who have had “near death experiences” have reported seeing their whole lives flash before them. If we believe that God created us in his image because he loves us so much and that God puts mercy before justice, it is hard then to believe that God functions as a criminal court judge!

The readings for today emphasize that God works overtime to ensure eternal life for all of us.

There is a story, written by an unknown author that speaks to our belief in the Communion of Saints. The story is about a mother, but could, with a bit of imagination apply to anyone. A young mother set her foot on the path of life. "Is the way long?" she asked. And her guide said, "Yes and the way is hard. Even if you will be old before you reach the end of it, the end will be better than the beginning."

But, the young mother was happy and she would not believe that anything could be better than these years. So she played with her children and gathered flowers for them along the way and bathed them in the clear streams; and the sun shown on them and life was good. And the young mother cried, "Nothing will ever be lovelier than this."

Then the night came, and then the storm with it. The path was dark and the children shook with fear and cold, and the mother drew them close and covered them with her coat and the children said, "O mother, we are not afraid for you are near, and no harm can come." And the mother said, "This is better than the brightness of day for I have taught my children courage."

And the morning came, and there was a hill ahead and the children climbed and grew weary, and the mother was weary, but all the time she said to her children, "a little patience and we are there." So the children climbed and when they reached the top they said, "We could not have done it without you mother." And the mother, when she lay down that night, looked up at the stars and said: "This is a better day than the last, for my children have learned fortitude in the face of hardness. Yesterday I gave them courage, today I gave them strength."

And the next day came strange clouds which darkened the earth, clouds of war and hate and evil. The children groped and stumbled and the mother said, "Look up, lift your eyes to the light." And the children looked up and saw above the clouds an Everlasting Glory. And the Glory guided them and brought them beyond the darkness. And that night the mother said, "This is the best day of all for I have shown my children God."

And the days went on, and the weeks, and the months and the years, and the mother grew old and she was little and bent. But her children were tall and strong and walked with courage. And when the way was rough, they lifted her for she was lighter than a feather; and at last they came to a hill, and beyond the hill they could see a shining road and golden gates flung

wide. And the mother said, "I have reached the end of my journey. And now I know the end is better than the beginning, for my children can walk alone and their children after them.

And the children said, "You will always walk with us, mother, even when you have gone through the gates." And they stood and watched her as she went on alone, and the gates closed after her. And they said, "We cannot see her, but she is with us still. A mother like ours is more than a memory, she is a living presence."

My sisters and brothers, like the mother, we are ordinary people, learning our sainthood day by day. Because of our promise of resurrection, death is part of life but it is not the end of life. We remain part of those who we will leave behind and they remain with us as we become new creations in eternal life, reunited with those who have gone before us according to the will of the father.

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5. **BLIND MEN & JESUS**

Blindness was a distressingly common disease in Palestine. It came partly from the glare of the eastern sun on unprotected eyes, and partly because people knew nothing of the importance of cleanliness and hygiene. The clouds of unclean flies carried infections that led to loss of sight.

The two blind men addressed Jesus by the name Son of David. This name is almost always used in Scripture by people who knew Jesus at a distance. The term Son of David describes Jesus in the popular conception of the Messiah. For centuries the Jews had awaited the promised deliverer of David's line, the leader who would not only restore their freedom, but who would lead them to power and glory and greatness. It was in that way that these blind men thought of Jesus. They saw him as the wonder-worker who would lead the people to freedom and to conquest.

They came to Jesus with a very inadequate idea of who Jesus was, and yet he healed them. Clearly he did not answer their shouts at once. Jesus wished to be quite sure that they were sincere in their desire for what he could give them. It might well have been that they had taken up a popular cry just because everyone else was shouting, and that, as soon as Jesus had passed by, they would simply forget. He wanted first of all to be sure that their request was genuine, and that their sense of need was real.

There were advantages in being an invalid or a beggar. These people did not have the responsibility of working and of making a living. There are people who do not want to be healed. The writer W. B. Yeats tells of Lionel Johnson, the scholar and poet. Johnson was an alcoholic. Johnson said of himself, "I have a craving that makes every atom of my body cry out." But, when it was suggested that he should undergo treatment to overcome this craving, his answer quite frankly was: "I do not want to be cured."

There are people, who deep within, do not dislike their weaknesses; and there are people, who, if they were honest, would have to say that they do not wish to lose their sins. Jesus had first of all to be sure that these men sincerely desired the healing he could give. It is interesting to note that Jesus made these people see him alone. Because he did not answer them in the streets, they had to come to him in the house.

It is the law of the spiritual life that sooner or later that we must confront Jesus alone. It is all very well to make a decision for Jesus when we are emotional at some great gathering, or in some little group which is charged with spiritual power. But after the crowd experience, we must go home and be alone; after the fellowship we must go back to the essential isolation of every human soul; and what really matters is not what we do in a crowd, but what we do when we are alone with Christ. Jesus made these men face him alone.

Jesus asked these men only one question: "Do you believe that I can do this?" The essential condition for a miracle is faith. There is nothing mysterious or theological about this. No doctor can cure a sick person who goes to him in a completely hopeless frame of mind. No medicine will do any good if we think we might as well be drinking water. The way to a miracle is to place one's life in the hands of Jesus Christ, and say, "I know that you can make me what I ought to be." I pray that we can have the faith and confidence to give our lives to Jesus.

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6. CHRISTMAS

I heard a story about a man in one of those high price shopping malls called the Galleria. He caused quite a commotion among the Christmas shoppers. He sat by a beautifully decorated fountain near the food court and talked to people relaxing on the benches next to him. His conversation was not really offensive. In fact, there was a kindness and sincerity about him that drew people to him.

But he was not good for business. He would ask people why they spent so much money for Christmas, and why they allowed themselves to become so obsessed and stressed over this holiday. He continued by saying, "Christmas is about hope and love, isn't it? The best gifts that we can give to each other are kindness and compassion. Why don't you give the gift of reconciliation with family and friends that you have lost over the years? The Spirit of the Christ Child should embrace the entire year, not just Christmas!"

Many of the people who listened to the man nodded in agreement with him. Some of the people decided to quit shopping and go home to spend time with their families. Others returned to shop for an extra toy or some clothing to give gifts to people in need. Some even left the mall and went to find a quiet place where they could pray for a few minutes.

It was not long before the store managers found out about this man who was bad for their business. They had security officers escort him out of the mall. They realized that he was not hurting anyone. But they thought he was ruining everyone's Christmas including their own.

If John the Baptist were to appear in our time and place, it is likely that he would go where people gather --- to a mall during Advent, and say the same kinds of things as the man who sat near the fountain. It is likely that John would not be a person that we would find physically pleasing. I doubt he would wear animal skins today, but would probably be dressed shabbily, have long hair and an unkempt beard and he might not have a close relationship with hygiene facilities. He would not look like a priest or a deacon or a minister or a rabbi.

John would talk about the coming of Christ and of Christ becoming human like us. He would do his best to break the Christmas routine that the secular world has fallen into. He would tell us that peace on earth and good will towards all people does not mean plying them with gifts and parties, but it comes about by reconciliation, forgiveness and fellowship. John the Baptist would look us all in the eye and say, "You Christians talk frequently about building the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven and about forgiving those who trespass against us. You do this when you say the Lord's Prayer every time you meet for worship. Do you really mean it?"

John the Baptist would have a great deal of trouble with the secular and commercial spirit of Christmas. His focus would be preparing the way for the coming of our Savior. In his mind, decorations, parties, gifts and all of the other holiday trappings we enjoy would have nothing to do with preparing the way for the Lord. It would be the ideal if we observed only Advent until Christmas Eve, but it would be difficult in our world. Unfortunately, much of our society views Christmas as more commercial and social than spiritual.

There is not much attention paid to Advent outside of the churches of a few Christian denominations. We have been bombarded with Christmas in the stores since Halloween. A number of radio stations have been playing Christmas music since before Thanksgiving. The merchants are doing their best to lure customers to spend money, and their plan seems to be working, too well. We saw on TV that a woman was nearly trampled to death outside a Wal-Mart store. A fight broke out in a crowd in front of a Toys-R-Us store waiting to get in for a giant sale.

Is this peace on earth and goodwill to anyone? Surely most of us have been invited to Christmas parties during Advent. Christmas get-togethers with people we work with or organizations we belong to are going to happen during Advent. We should enjoy the fellowship of the events, but these gatherings should not be the focus of our lives. Advent should be a beautiful and joyous time, but the focus should not be on the hoopla of the commercialized Christmas. It is a time for bringing Christ into today's world by prayer, promoting reconciliation with God and between peoples and by giving hope to people who are going through tough times.

There are many things that we can do in our homes to celebrate Advent in prayer. There is lighting the Advent wreath, reading the Christmas story by using an Advent Calendar, reading daily seasonal messages from the many

booklets available from Catholic publishing companies and increasing the time we spend in daily personal prayer.

Our own community is having posadas during the ten days prior to Christmas. Posadas commemorate Joseph and Mary trying to find shelter for the night. Posadas are an Advent tradition in many Hispanic cultures. The Advent letters sent out by this parish have the details. The posada on December 21st will be in English and Spanish.

In terms of reconciliation, we can try to reestablish relationships with people that we have had disagreements with and we can help mutual friends reconcile with each other. We can also attend the parish reconciliation service a week from Monday and reconcile with God.

The ways that we can bring hope to others are unlimited. We can visit shut-ins, fast and donate the money that we might have spent on food or unnecessary material goods to those who will have nothing for Christmas. If we have parties, we could forgo the gift exchange and bring gifts for those in need.

As a parish, we should be very proud of what we do to bring hope to others during this season. Although not technically during Advent, the parish Thanksgiving meal with the Loaves and Fishes ministry is a beautiful example of bringing Christ to others. Many parishioners, including members of the Youth Group did a wonderful job of preparing and serving the meal.

The tree of hope will provide gifts for many children who will not otherwise receive anything. Kenny Ahles, a young parishioner working to be an Eagle Scout has earned money to buy the food for 75 Christmas dinners for St. Vincent de Paul to distribute. I know that there are other efforts on the part of parishioners to help people during Advent.

There are many things that we can do to help bring Christ into the world at Christmas. Whatever we do, it is our calling in today's troubled world to live the words that the Prophet Isaiah spoke crying out in the desert so many years ago: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all shall see the salvation of God."

7. **FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT**

Today's readings are all connected by a common theme of faith. This theme is fitting for the first Sunday of Lent, a time for introspection, a time to focus on the quality of and renewal of our faith lives. The first reading recalls the faith of the Israelites when they asked God to deliver them from slavery in Egypt. The second addresses faith head on and gives us the basis of the Creed.

Paul is very blunt when he says that we must say that Jesus is Lord. He also tells us that we are called to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, which is a matter of faith. Paul goes on to say that Christian faith must be lived and communicated. He tells us that we must confess with our lips. It is not enough to simply believe, but we must live our faith in our words, and in our actions.

This was revolutionary thinking to the Jews who believed that following the letter of the law, rather than our faith, assured our salvation. Furthermore, Jews did not believe that salvation was accessible to all people. They believed that only Jews would be saved. Paul wanted nothing more than the salvation of his fellow Jews. The second reading is an appeal for the first century Jews to push aside legalism in favor of faith. The same appeal is made to us two thousand years later.

Although the theme of the Gospel is obviously temptation, it is also about faith. Jesus demonstrates a great amount of faith just by going into the desert. Located between the central plateau and the Dead Sea. This area is called Jeshimmon, Hebrew for "the devastation." Very hot and desolate, the desert was also dangerous, inhabited by large predatory wild animals and bandits.

Yet, Jesus had faith that he would be safe in this horrendous environment, that God, his father, would protect him while he reflected on his ministry. It is here that Satan tempts him. It is said that we are given the amount of temptation that we have the strength to resist.

The three temptations deal with issues of faith. In the first temptation, Satan suggests that Jesus, who is fasting and must have been hungry, turn stones into bread. Jesus responds with scripture from Deuteronomy saying that people do not live on bread alone. Jesus has faith that his father will sustain

him. He repels Satan's insinuation that he needs to bribe followers with material things to obtain their faith in him.

In the second temptation, Satan takes Jesus to a high spot where he can see most of the civilized world and tells Jesus that if he compromises with evil, he can have power over all. Again, Jesus' faith in the Father gives him the certain knowledge that there can be no compromise with evil.

In the third temptation, Satan tries to get Jesus to jump off of the temple wall into the Kidron Valley below. Jesus knew that he did not have to resort to sensationalism to make a lasting impression on the hearts of people. Faith is never a result of sensationalism.

We are called to emulate Jesus' desert experience in our lives by resisting the same temptations. We are called to avoid materialism by not making Gods out of possessions. We are called to avoid the need for power and to not let sensationalism influence our lives, especially our faith. Instead, we are called to live as people of faith, to reject the temptations of life as Jesus did in the desert, to have faith in Jesus as Lord and to witness that faith to others with our lives as Paul tells us we should.

St. Anthony of Padua said, "A person who is filled with the Holy Spirit speaks several languages." These are the various ways of witnessing to Christ, such as humility, poverty, obedience and patience, with which we speak when we practice them towards our neighbor. Language comes alive when it speaks by deeds. Enough of talking; let actions speak.

It is fitting that as people of faith, that we use our Lenten time to enter the desert as Jesus did and look at the quality of our lives as witness to others that Jesus is Lord.

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8. VIETNAM WAR - EASTER

For many of us, one of the most unforgettable images of the Vietnam War was a widely published picture. It showed a little girl, with arms outstretched, running down a road crying. She was almost naked because her clothing had been burned away by a napalm bomb. Her name was Kim and she was nine years old.

The bombing raid on her village had been organized by an American officer named John Plummer. He thought the village was only occupied by military personnel. When he saw the picture of Kim, his mind was devastated and his heart was broken. The image of the burned little girl haunted him day and night. He tried to find escape in a bottle, but that did not work. After the war he sank deeper and deeper into alcoholism. He lost his wife and family and any self-respect he had left.

When he married again, he became a Christian and in time a Methodist minister. His life slowly returned to normal but he could not get the haunting image of Kim, burned and crying, out of his mind.

Then, one day in June, 1996, the two of them met face to face. Kim was a grown woman and John Plummer a middle-aged man. The former military officer was full of shame and sobbed over and over, "I am so sorry." Kim said, "It is all right. I forgive."

Plummer said that he felt free for the first time since the bombing and it was like being let out of prison. What a beautiful story of healing. Plummer had lived with his shame for twenty-five years. It had come very close to ruining his life completely. He was imprisoned by the pain of the image of Kim suffering so badly.

His friends probably tried to help him by telling him that he was just doing his duty for his country that was at war. He did not intentionally target Kim. He did not even know she was in the village. They probably told him that it was not his fault and that he should not be blaming himself. But his well-meaning friends did not help him. Nothing helped him until Kim said, "I forgive."

Today's Gospel tells a similar story, if you read between the lines. Peter was also consumed with shame and guilt after denying friendship with Jesus, not

once, but three times prior to the crucifixion. This was a time when Jesus was most in need of a friend. There was no excuse for Peter's cowardly behavior.

When Peter realized what he had done, he went to where he could be alone and cried like a child. But all of this was changed by one conversation with Jesus over breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter was healed of his hurts as we can be healed of the things that cause pain to us.

When Jesus forgave Peter, it might have looked easy as the Gospel did not describe what was on Jesus' mind as he forgave Peter. It could not have been easy as it never is if the person who was hurt really cares. If a wife can easily brush off a husband's infidelity, she is not forgiving him. If she can say, "forget it, never mind," it is not forgiveness, it is apathy. Only one who really cares can forgive.

Jesus cared about Peter. He cared about the friendship he had built with Peter. You can be sure that it was not easy for Jesus to have breakfast with his cowardly two-faced friend and ask him quietly, "Do you love me."

It was just as difficult for Kim, the Vietnamese woman, to say, "I forgive." She was badly wounded and her body was scarred. Her two brothers were killed in the same raid. It is easy to imagine how she could have become filled with hate and rage for John Plummer. Yet, she was willing to forgive. Forgiveness did not take the scars from her body, nor did it bring her brother back. But her forgiveness did heal the hurt between a Vietnamese woman and an American pilot.

This kind of forgiveness is no small thing. In fact, it is a miracle. Sometimes when people hurt each other, they wound each other very deeply. Former friends who have hurt each other see the other as a stranger, or even as an enemy. The only thing that can bring them back into relationship is forgiveness, which is not easy. The second hardest words to say are forgive me and the hardest words to say are I forgive. Forgiveness brings about joyful feelings, but that is not all. To betray a friend and live with shame, then to be forgiven and trusted once again must be a very humbling experience.

In Peter's case, only a few days earlier, he had pledged his unfailing loyalty to Jesus. In the presence of his fellow disciples, he declared to Jesus, "All these others may deny you, but I never will."

But, when Peter felt threatened, he denied his friendship with Jesus. He didn't do this once, but three times, yet in the Gospel we just heard he is being accepted and trusted by Jesus again. That was probably not easy for Jesus, but it was also difficult for Peter. If there were anything else that Peter could have done to erase his failure, he would have done it. But the only way out for Peter was for Jesus to forgive him.

Real forgiveness will work in any relationship, between a husband and a wife, between a parent and a child, between hurting friends. It worked for John Plummer and Kim. From the bottom of his heart, John said, "I am sorry." From the bottom of Kim's heart, she said, "I forgive."

Anytime people really forgive each other, healing takes place. A great stone is rolled away.

Easter is celebrated over again!

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9. DISCIPLES MISSION – PROCLAIM REIGN OF GOD IN CHRIST

In the Gospel, we hear how Jesus sends out the 72 in pairs to places he intends to visit. Their mission is one of preparation; to proclaim the coming of the reign of God in Christ, even in communities that do not accept it.

The impact of Christ's coming is not only a spiritual event, but something that affects the lives of the entire life of the communities he visits. The disciples travel in pairs to give each other strength and support. We do not evangelize alone.

The Second Vatican Council tells us that through our Baptism, we too take on the mission of evangelization of the world around us. Our mission is to do what we can to shape society so that it is more consistent with the values of the Gospel.

As today is the 4th of July, the “birthday” of our nation, we need to understand how we can use our opportunities as citizens and our obligation as Catholic Christians to contribute to the building of a world that is more respectful of ALL human life and more committed to justice and peace.

As we come up to the national elections this fall, we need to remember what the founders of this nation sacrificed and stood up to in order to give us the freedom we have today. The U.S. Bishop's statement, Faithful Citizenship, states “that in the Catholic tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue and participation in the political process is a moral obligation.”

Unfortunately, many Catholics feel politically homeless because neither major political party has a platform that is totally consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church does not endorse any political party or particular candidate. Instead, we as Catholics are given a much more difficult job of using Catholic social teaching, weigh a number of moral issues, and come to a position based on prayer, education and much thoughtfulness. We are called not to take the selfish position of “Am I better off now than I was four years ago?” Nor should we vote support the party that we have always voted for, possibly the one our parents and their parents.

We are called to educate ourselves so that we can answer the questions such as: “How can all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable, be better off in the years to come?” “How can we promote and protect human life?” “How can we pursue greater peace and justice for all of God’s people?”

A good image that we can all relate to is a table. The table of the Lord is the center of our spiritual lives. The kitchen or dining room table is often the center of our family lives. The conference table may be the center of our business lives.

The image of the table of life begs a good number of moral questions: “Is there a place at the table for those who are not allowed to be born, for the elderly who are often ignored and neglected, for those whose lives are taken by the state?” “How can we secure a place at the table for the hungry and those who lack health care in our own country and around the world?” “Where is the place at the table for those in the world who lack the freedom to practice their faith or stand up for what they believe?” “How do we ensure that families in our inner cities and rural communities, in barrios in Latin America and villages in Africa and Asia have a place at the table where there is enough to eat, decent work and wages, education for their children, adequate health care and housing and most of all, hope for their future?”

It is also important to remember the people who are now missing from the table of life: those listed in the terror of 9/11, in the service of our nation, and in the bloody conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and Africa.

We need to ask who comes to the tables where important decisions are made and priorities are set in our communities, our nation and our world. Is it just the wealthy and powerful who look out for their own interests who sit at these tables or is there a place for the poorest and most vulnerable people and those who suffer discrimination? Do the majority of people who have no power get represented at the decision-making table?

The Bishops remind us that for Catholics, the defense of human life and dignity is not a narrow cause, but a way of life. A recent Vatican statement reminds us that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit voting for a political program or law that contradicts fundamental principles of our faith. It also reminds us that we should not isolate a particular element of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of our

Church's social teaching does not exhaust our responsibility to work towards the common good.

So, how do we come to a political position that is consistent with Catholic teaching? We can start by carefully and prayerfully answer ten questions our bishops have posed for our consideration:

1. After September 11, how can we build not only a safer world, but a better world; more just, more secure, more peaceful and more respectful of human life and dignity?
2. How will we protect the weakest in our midst; unborn and born? How will our nation resist what Pope John Paul II calls a "culture of death?" How can we keep our nation from turning to violence to solve some of its most difficult problems; abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies; the death penalty to combat crime; euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age, illness and disability; and war to address international disputes?
3. How will we address the tragic fact that more than 30,000 children die every day as a result of hunger, international debt, and lack of development around the world, as well as the fact that the younger you are, the more likely you will be poor here in the richest nation on earth.
4. How can our nation help parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, a sense of hope and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility? How can our society defend the central institution of marriage and better support families and better support families in their moral roles and responsibilities, offering them real choices and financial resources to obtain quality education and decent housing?
5. How will we address the growing number of families and individuals without affordable and accessible health care? How can health care better protect human life and human dignity?
6. How will our society combat continuing prejudices, overcome hostility towards immigrants and refugees, and heal the wounds of racism, religious bigotry and other forms of discrimination.
7. How will our nation pursue the values of justice and peace in a world where injustice is common, desperate poverty widespread, and peace is too often overwhelmed by violence?
8. What are the responsibilities and limitations of families, community organizations, markets and government? How can these elements of society work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, care for creation and overcome injustice?

9. When should our nation use, or avoid the use, of military force, for what purpose, under what authority, and at what human cost?
10. How can we join with other nations to lead the world to greater respect for human life and dignity, religious freedom and democracy, economic justice and care for God's creation?

Answering these questions and determining who to support will not be easy. We need to engage in a lot of debate and education. It is important to hear and consider and respect views different from our own, and pray.

As we approach the Table of the Lord, today and whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, let us pray that we find the direction and strength to take what we believe into the political arena and voting booths, using our voices and votes to defend all human life, advance just, pursue peace and find a place at the table for all of God's people.

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10. **MATTHEW 18 – FORGIVENESS**

In Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive seven times and Jesus says no, seventy times seventy times. Jesus goes on to tell the story of a servant who went to his master to ask him to give him more time to pay his debt. The master agreed and then the servant went out and met someone who owed him a debt and had the man thrown into debtor's prison because he could not pay.

This parable tells us that we should forgive each other as our God forgives us. Seven times 70, let's see, that is 490 times that we are to forgive someone. Well, there is one guy that I am up to 432 times and another that I am up to 475 --- only 15 more times for him.

That may make you laugh, but seriously, the point is that we should keep forgiving and forgiving over and over and not count. Forgiving a hurt can be very difficult, but not forgiving takes a much bigger toll on our lives.

The horrors of war take such a toll. For many of us, one of the most unforgettable images of the Vietnam War was a widely published picture. It showed a little girl, with arms outstretched, running down a road crying. She was almost naked because her clothing had been burned away by a napalm bomb. Her name was Kim and she was nine years old.

The bombing raid on her village had been organized by an American officer named John Plummer. He thought the village was only occupied by military personnel. When he saw the picture of Kim, his mind was devastated and his heart was broken. The image of the burned little girl haunted him day and night. He tried to find escape in a bottle, but that did not work. After the war he sank deeper and deeper into alcoholism. He lost his wife and family and any self-respect he had left.

When he married again, he became a believer and in time a Methodist minister. His life slowly returned to normal but he could not get the haunting image of Kim, burned and crying, out of his mind. Then, one day in June, 1996, the two of them met face to face. Kim was a grown woman and John Plummer a middle aged man.

The former military officer was full of shame and sobbed over and over, “I am so sorry.” Kim said, “It is all right. I forgive.” Plummer said that he felt free for the first time since the bombing, and it was like being let out of prison.

What a beautiful story of healing. Plummer had lived with his shame for twenty-five years. It had come very close to completely ruining his life. He was imprisoned by the pain of the image of Kim suffering so badly.

His friends probably tried to help him by telling him that he was just doing his duty for his country that was at war. He did not intentionally target Kim. He did not even know she was in the village. They probably told him that it was not his fault and that he should not be blaming himself. But his well-meaning friends did not help him. Nothing helped him until Kim said, “I forgive.”

It could not have been easy for Kim as it never is if the person who was hurt has suffered a great personal loss. If a wife can easily brush off a husband’s infidelity, she is not forgiving him. If she can say, “forget it, never mind,” it is not forgiveness, it is apathy. Only one who really cares can forgive. And the closer the people involved are, the harder it is to forgive.

It was just as difficult for Kim, the Vietnamese woman, to say, “I forgive.” She was badly wounded and her body was scarred. Her two brothers were killed in the same raid. It is easy to imagine how she could have become filled with hate and rage for John Plummer. Yet, she was willing to forgive. Forgiveness did not take the scars from her body, nor did it bring her brothers back. But her forgiveness did heal the hurt between a Vietnamese woman and an American pilot.

This kind of forgiveness is no small thing. In fact, it is a miracle. Sometimes when people hurt each other, they wound each other very deeply. Former friends who have hurt each other see each other as a stranger, or even as an enemy. The only thing that can bring them back into relationship is forgiveness, which is not easy.

The second hardest words to say are forgive me and the hardest words to say are, “I forgive.” Forgiveness brings about joyful feelings, but that is not all. To betray a friend and live with shame, then to be forgiven and trusted once again must be a very humbling experience.

There are two keys to being a forgiving person: one is compassion and the other is humor. We can begin to forgive when we understand another person's motives and behavior. Compassion is not feeling sorry for someone, but feeling along with another person. If we can just walk in their shoes and see the incident through their eyes rather than from our selfish viewpoint then we can open the door to forgiveness.

Humor is also important to forgiveness and when we can see our way to smile, we can forgive. That is why we laugh at so many "I have some good news and some bad news" jokes. The comedian, Woody Allen, in referring to the Jewish Holocaust said, "After the death camps, there are six million reasons not to laugh anymore, and at least six million reasons to try and laugh again."

Real forgiveness will work in any relationship, between a husband and a wife, between a parent and a child, between hurting friends. It worked for John Plummer and Kim. From the bottom of his heart, John said, "I am sorry." From the bottom of Kim's heart, she said, "I forgive." Anytime people really forgive each other, healing takes place.

A great stone is rolled away. There is no chasm between people that is so deep that God is not deeper still. There is no wound that is so bad that God does not invite us to healing. Compassion, humor, faith, forgiveness and justice, and God's help will heal any wound.

(Pass out ten commandments of healing)

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11. **GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – COMMANDMENT TO NOT KILL**

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus taught that when we say to someone else, “You fool,” we are in danger of the fire of hell. That’s strong language, and it may make us want to be more careful about what we call other people!

Actually, Jesus was commenting on the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” The first step toward killing is often an attitude that starts with verbal insults that can be destructive in their own right. At any rate, it may be surprising to us that God once called someone a fool. The word “fool” in the Bible means someone who has no wisdom. Wisdom is not to be confused with intelligence. Wisdom is highly prized in Scripture. It is seen as one of the most God-like of possible human characteristics.

Foolishness is wisdom’s opposite. It may just be some unwise action, but often foolishness is sin. The Book of Proverbs has much to say about wisdom, it also has a lot to say about foolishness, such as: “Fools think their own ways are right.” “The fool throws off restraint and is careless.” “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion.” “The mouths of fools are their ruin, and their lips a snare to themselves.” “Those who trust in their own wits are fools.” We have all been fools at some time when we put financial and material desires ahead of relationships.

In today’s Gospel, a large crowd is gathered around Jesus. Someone tries to get Jesus to settle a family dispute. “Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

Jesus declines, warns the people against greed, and then tells a parable about a man most of us would probably admire. The man in the parable is already wealthy, but one year he has such an exceptional harvest that he is left with a dilemma. He has such a vast surplus that there is no place to store it all. “What should I do?” he asks himself. He makes the practical, conservative choice. He decides to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. Then, with all this security, he will retire and take it easy. “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

Isn't this more or less the typical American dream? Make enough money to provide for security and comfort in your retirement years. By popular standards, this is a very wise man.

By God's standards, the rich man in the parable is a fool. "You fool!" God says, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be then?" The rich man's attempt to provide maximum security for his future ends almost immediately in utter futility.

There are two obvious points here: first, it is foolish to make decisions in the present that do not realistically consider the possibilities of the future; second, it is foolish to make material prosperity one's main purpose in life. This man has spent years amassing a fortune, and suddenly it will do him no good whatsoever. His life is over and all that he has will belong to someone else.

It is natural for us to want the security of being as prepared as possible for the future. We wisely buy insurance and hold on to warranties. We have refrigerators for food we won't need for another day or two. We put money aside for unforeseen events. This is common sense. Without question there is a certain security in possessing resources in advance of actually needing them.

This is only one kind of security. It is of such obvious and practical importance that it may gradually become our dominant, even our exclusive, concern. When this happens, we lose sight of larger realities.

In some of the most important areas of life this kind of security is not only inappropriate, but is impossible. For example, material wealth cannot secure our relationships, our health, or our sense of life's meaning. Furthermore, excessive concerns about material security easily become counter-productive. Who is more miserable than the miser?

Following the parable, Jesus talked with his disciples about not being anxious about their lives and not worrying about such things as food and clothing. He encouraged them to seek God's kingdom instead of their own security. Quit striving, he said, after those things everyone else is seeking. Your Father knows what you need. Strive after God's kingdom, and "these things will be given to you as well."

Fresh Every Morning is a book title Gerald Kennedy took from the side of a bread truck. In the book Kennedy recalls the experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness when they were without food and wishing they were back in Egypt. Moses took the crisis to God, who said, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." In the evening quail came in abundance, and in the morning there was a mysterious bread-like substance on the ground that the people called "manna." God's instruction was for the people to take as much as they needed for that day. Some, of course, were concerned about the next day and took more than one day's worth.

The next morning the extra manna had bred worms and smelled awful. In matters of faith and trust, provisions must be gathered daily. Faith and trust are relational words. There is no pre-established or permanent security in our human relationships. For example, a marriage license, rings, and vows do not guarantee the quality of the marriage. You have to work at being married every day. There are no parenting guarantees, either. The resources of love, patience, and wisdom have to be delivered "fresh every morning." It is the same with friendships and other relationships.

It is also true in our relationship with God. We have to begin every morning in prayer. It is not that God's faithfulness cannot be relied on. It is, rather, that the relationship has to be nurtured continually from our side.

The baker does a lot of baking at night, while we sleep, so we can have fresh bread in the morning. Jesus teaches us to pray for "daily bread." In doing so we are our daily, even hourly, reliance on God. If we are wise, we pray for "daily bread" knowing we cannot live by bread alone. We pray, after all, to the One who feeds our souls with the Bread of Life.

If we will live by faith and trust, and if we will strive above all things for the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, our all-wise and most-gracious God will supply all our needs.

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12. **CHRISTMAS SEASON – LIGHT**

One of the symbols of the Christmas season is light. We see them sparkling all over our neighborhoods, on Christmas trees, in store displays; in large cities the buildings are lit with the red and green of the season. Lights decorate churches and retailers use them to lure us into Christmas shopping. The season is dazzling with light.

John's Gospel says, "He was the real light, who, in his coming into the world, gives light to every man." We know how important light is and how we feel in its absence. We all have felt uneasy when we are some place where there is not adequate light to see. In Florida, we know what it is like when we lose power during a storm and scramble to find candles and flashlights.

But, John speaks of a different kind of light when he describes Jesus as the real light who has come to illumine people. Before Jesus people followed other lights. Some were flickers of the truth; some were faint glimpses of reality; some were false lights that led people out into the dark and left them there. This happens today. There are still the partial lights; and there are the false lights; and people still follow them; lights that proclaim easy wealth, that proclaim corrupt power. We find lights of selfishness, lights of commercialism and many other bogus lights that lead us the wrong way.

Jesus is the only genuine light, the real light to guide us on our way. John says that Jesus, by his coming into the world, brought the real light to men. His coming was a blaze of light, like the coming of the dawn.

A traveler tells how once in Italy he was standing on a hill overlooking the Bay of Naples. It was so dark that he could see nothing. All of a sudden there came a lightning flash and everything, in every detail, was lit up.

When Jesus came into this world, he entered like a light dissipating the darkness. His coming dissipated the shadows of doubt. Before Jesus appeared, people could only guess about God. Jews saw God as strong, vengeful and unapproachable. "It is difficult to find out about God," said one of the Greeks, "and when you have found out about him it is impossible to tell anyone else about him." To the pagan, God either dwelt in the impenetrable or in the light that no one can approach.

But when Jesus came, humanity saw fully displayed what God is like, not just strong and powerful but humble and loving. His coming dissipated the shadows of despair. Jesus came into a despairing world.

"Men," as Chief Seneca, an American Indian who converted to Christianity, said, "are conscious of their helplessness in necessary things. They long for a hand let down to help them up. They hate their sins but cannot leave them." Men despaired of ever making themselves or the world any better.

But with the coming of Jesus, a new power came to life. Jesus brought not only knowledge but power. He came not only to show us the right way but to enable us to walk it. Jesus gave us not only instruction but a presence in which all the impossible things became possible. The darkness of pessimism and despair was gone forever.

Jesus' coming dissipated the darkness of death. The ancient world feared death. At best, death was annihilation and people shuddered at the thought. But Jesus by his coming, by his life, his death, his Resurrection showed that death was only the way to a larger life. He dispelled darkness.

Robert Louis Stevenson penned a scene in a story in which he draws the picture of a young man who has almost miraculously escaped in a duel in which he was certain he would be killed. As he walks away his heart is singing: "The bitterness of death is past." Because of Jesus, the bitterness of death is past for all of us.

Finally, Jesus is the light who illuminates every person who comes into the world. The ancient world was exclusive. The Jew disliked and avoided the gentile. The prophet Isaiah saw that Israel's destiny was to be a light to the Gentile, but this was a destiny that Israel had always refused. The Greek world never dreamed that knowledge was for every person. The Roman world looked down on the barbarians, those lesser, lawless breeds. But Jesus came to be a light to every person. Only God the Father of Jesus Christ has a heart big enough to hold the entire world.

In the Gospel, John also wrote, "To all those who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God. These were born not of blood, nor of any human impulse, nor of any man's will, but their birth was of God." This theology, so central to the Gospel of John, makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus. If Jesus is the son of God as

we believe, it means that Jesus must bear close resemblance to God. When we see the kindness, love and selflessness of Jesus, we see those attributes of God. If we are truly created in God's image, those are the attributes that should be the mainstays of our personalities and behavior.

We celebrate the birth of Christ into the world and into our hearts this day. Scholars believe that December 25th was not the actual birth date of Jesus, but the date of the pagan winter solstice holiday was taken while the church was underground. This is the case because it masked the Christian celebration that the Romans had outlawed. Since everyone was celebrating, Christians could celebrate without attracting attention to themselves. It is also known that the Roman census, the reason Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, took place in the springtime at some date totally different from the commercial frenzy of gift giving and partying.

So the question is when should we really be celebrating the birth of Christ into the world and into our hearts? The answer is, we don't know the real date. The best that we can do is celebrate each day as a new day with Christ by again inviting Christ into our hearts and living in his light.

But we are asked to do more than live in the light of Christ. Since we are made in God's image and are sisters and brothers of Christ, we are also called to be the light of Christ to others. What counts is not the lights on our house and tree, not the brightly wrapped gifts that are important.

What matters is Christ's gift of love, kindness and selflessness that we give to others throughout the whole year. May each and every day of our lives be a blessed, joyous and holy birth of Christ.

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13. **ELIJAH AND ELISHA**

In the first reading from Hebrew Scripture, Elijah puts his mantle, a loose fitting sleeveless cape, around Elisha's shoulders. This action is a sign that Elisha is accepting God's call to become a prophet and to succeed the prophet Elijah, who was so well known and so admired in his time. Then Elisha, who had made his living as a farmer, burned his plow to cook the meat he was offering. This was a sign that he was abandoning his former life to live a new way, as a prophet of God.

We too are called to live a new life by virtue of our Baptism. We are called to be followers, not just admirers, of Jesus Christ. An admirer appreciates Jesus and what he has done for us and worships Jesus just as we are doing at this Mass. It is easy to be an admirer. But as the Gospel tells us, it takes commitment and dedication to be a follower of Jesus. James tells us that faith without works is empty. It is doing the work of Christ that makes us followers of Jesus. Elisha certainly made a long-term commitment to God's work. He made it very difficult to go back to his former livelihood by burning his plow. He also made a lifetime commitment, lasting 50 or more years. Most of us know that it is difficult to make a commitment for 50 days!

Jesus gives three examples of commitment in the Gospel. When the first man says, "I will follow you wherever you go," Jesus replies, "The foxes have dens, the birds of the air have places to roost, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." While it is true that Jesus was an itinerant without his own house, what he was saying to the first man, and says to us today, is that there is a cost of being a follower of Jesus. We are called to make sacrifices. We may have to leave our comfort zone of the security of our families, our possessions, our friends and all of what we hold dear to follow Jesus. The sacrifice will be different for each of us. Most of Jesus' early disciples were martyred.

Throughout history, many people have been persecuted for following Christ. Christians that were caught helping Jews escape from the Nazis were severely punished, some by loss of life. We may not be called to sacrifices so extreme, but each of us will have to make sacrifices at some point to speak out against injustice and help those in need.

In the second example, Jesus told the man to follow him. He replied, "Let me go first and bury my father." Jesus replies, "Let the dead bury the dead, but do you go tell abroad the news of the Kingdom of God." If one takes this scripture literally, it makes Jesus look cold and unfeeling, which we know he isn't. In all probability, the man's father was not dead or even dying. The man was saying that he would follow Jesus at some future time. What Jesus was telling the man, and telling us today, is when we hear God's call don't procrastinate and make excuses why we can't respond. Jesus calls us to follow him before the moment of opportunity is over. The man in the story probably felt the stirrings of Christ in his heart, but if he missed the opportunity, he would not likely take it again.

How often do we tell ourselves we need to send a get well, sympathy or congratulatory card to someone and if we don't send the card when we think about it, it doesn't get done. Psychologists tell us that it is human nature that if we don't act on well-intended thoughts when we have them, we probably won't act. Followers of Christ, once they discern God's call, act on that call. In the third example, another man said to Jesus, "Lord, I will follow you; but let me first say goodbye to the people at home." Jesus responds, "No man who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is the right kind of man for the Kingdom of God."

Again, if this scripture is taken literally, it seems like Jesus is being unfeeling, not letting the poor guy say goodbye to those he loves. But, Jesus was trying to make a different point. He was saying that his followers have to live in the present and deal with what is now rather than what was then. A farmer can't plow straight rows if he is looking backwards rather than forwards. Followers of Christ can't let nostalgia for the old days keep us from looking at where we can do Christ's work today.

A good definition of a follower of Christ comes from an anonymous source: A follower of Christ is a mind through which Christ thinks, a heart through which Christ loves, a voice through which Christ speaks and a hand through which Christ helps. We come here to worship as admirers of Christ. Let us pray that when we leave this space, the Eucharist gives us the ability to hear Christ's call and the strength to follow that call. Let us be sent forth to be followers of Christ.

14. **CHRIST THE KING CYCLE - FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING**

The feast of Christ the King is a relatively new holiday. It celebrates a concept, not an event. In 1925 Pope Pius XI, due to rising Fascism and nationalism in the world, declared the last Sunday of the church year, the last Sunday of ordinary time, a day to especially remember that Christ is sovereign above all of us. His sovereignty is above all governments.

Many people find it difficult to be inspired by the image of Christ the King. We don't have kings in America. In fact, we take a poor view of kings having become a nation by rebelling against a king and the idea of kings that are associated with domination and empire. We could not admire a Christ associated with this kind of kingship. The kingship of Christ has no relationship with the commonly held concept of royalty.

The first reading from the book of the prophet Samuel speaks of King David. Unlike Jesus, King David was a mighty warrior; he was the image of the coming messiah in the eyes of the Jews. The major similarities between Jesus and David were that both had unbendable faith in God the father and both were totally obedient to the will of God. Jesus never claimed to be a king. During his interrogation by Pontius Pilate, he refused to claim kingship. The Romans did everything they could leading up to his crucifixion to humiliate and mock Jesus. The final insult was executing him between two criminals under a sign that read "King of the Jews." Even after the execution, the Romans left Jesus hanging where he could be seen by all, a tactic to humiliate his followers into abandoning him. Obviously, this tactic didn't work.

Jesus, through all of the Gospels, shows a set of attitudes and behaviors that are associated with a different kind of kingship. He proclaims the Kingdom of God and practices what he proclaims through a public ministry that emphasizes healing, forgiveness and giving to others. The last act of his life, before he commends himself into the hands of God the Father, is to give forgiveness to a thief dying on the cross beside him.

Christ is indeed a king, but a king that is well outside of our understanding of royalty and rule. He calls us to a kingdom of love where we truly live

according to God's will in accordance with the love of God and love of neighbor that he preached and practiced during his earthly ministry.

It is this sovereignty that Pope Pius the Eleventh had in mind when he declared Christ the King to be a feast day in the Church calendar. We are all baptized into Christ as priest, prophet and king. In American culture, it is difficult for us to think of ourselves as kings! We are prophets when we stand up for what is right and condemn what is wrong. We are priests when we share in the sacrifice of the Mass. We are indeed kings when we emulate the kingship of Jesus by helping others to heal, by being people of forgiveness and by giving of ourselves for the benefit of others.

There have been a couple of news stories in the past few days that speak of aspects of Christ's kingship in real people. A mother and son were driving in Arizona when the mother lost control of a car and went over the side of a mountain. A young man, who was walking into the United States from Mexico, came upon the accident scene. He tried to get the mother out of the car and couldn't. He stayed with the son until help came fully knowing that he would be arrested and deported. He gave up an opportunity to make a living, an opportunity that he risked his own life for, to help others.

Another story was of a woman who was widowed during the war in Bosnia and left with the difficulty of supporting two children alone. When she heard that mothers of children with fathers in Iraq didn't have enough money to pay for therapeutic activities for their children like music and art lessons or participation in extracurricular sports, she set up a foundation and solicited donations. She did that so that children can take part in enjoyable activities that are healing and take their minds, at least part of the time, off of their fathers who are away and may never come back.

These are just a few current examples of regular people emulating the kingship of Christ. One example was costly in time; the other was costly in freedom. We come to this space each weekend to worship Christ the King. We fulfill an obligation but more is asked of us than to attend Mass. Mass is just the beginning. It is where we get fed from the Word and from the Eucharist. It is where we hopefully feel the love and warmth of community. It is where we get our spiritual bearings. But, it is when we are sent forth to love and serve God that our work begins.

We live the Kingship of Christ by serving others as Christ calls us to do. It can be through big sacrifices, like in the examples of the selfless caring of the undocumented man crossing from Mexico or in the time given by the Bosnian war widow to benefit others. But, it is also in the small things that we do for others each day like taking the time to listen to someone or showing that extra bit of love and concern. The smallest amounts of self-sacrifice and giving of ourselves can have a major effect on the lives of others.

This is the last Sunday of the Church calendar. Next weekend we begin the new Church calendar year with the season of Advent, a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. This is a good time for us to challenge ourselves not to be captivated by the king of consumerism. It is a time instead, to focus on what we will give and how we will share the kingship of Christ with others through acts of healing, forgiveness and self-sacrifice.

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King in our liturgy. Let us pray that we can live our baptism into Christ the King each day of our lives.

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15. **5TH SUNDAY LENT CYCLE**

One theme runs through all of the readings today; the theme of hope. In the first reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, God promises to open graves and bring people back to life in the land of Israel. In the second reading, Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, that like Jesus, we will be raised from the dead. Finally in the Gospel, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and shows us that we too can be raised.

Hope is one of the three great gifts that we have been given. It is hope that gives us the will to go on every day, even during times of great sadness and challenge. Hope is tied directly to the other great gifts, faith and love. We need faith to bolster our hope and the understanding beyond a doubt that God loves us.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is more than a witness to a miracle. There was no doubt in the minds of Mary and Martha that Jesus would come to Bethany upon hearing that Lazarus was seriously ill. They were in despair but they did not neglect to ask Jesus for help. How often do we get so bogged down in despair, sadness and self-pity that we forget to pray to God for help in our times of need? When Jesus heard the news that Lazarus was very sick, he did not go to Bethany immediately. He timed his arrival so that Lazarus would be dead for four days. The first century Jews believed that after death, the deceased spirit would stay close to the body for four days.

After four days the spirit would leave because the body would have started to decompose and would not be available for the spirit to return to. Jesus wanted to make sure that Lazarus was good and dead in order to make a real impact demonstrating God's power of resurrection.

The theologian, William Barclay, said, "The final proof of Christianity is what Jesus Christ can do. Words may fail to convince, but there is no argument against God in action." Throughout his ministry, Jesus brought God's miracles to bear again and again. The raising of Lazarus is but one of Christ's miracles. Not only was this resurrection miraculous, but coming to Bethany was dangerous for Jesus.

He knew that being in Bethany, just three miles from Jerusalem, would mark the imminent beginning of his journey to the cross, and once begun, he could not turn back.

During the past several Sundays of Lent and at many other times in the three year cycle of readings, we have seen many examples of how Jesus healed others, often ignoring his personal safety. But, what does that mean for us? Are we just meant to be recipients of Christ's miracles? Are we just expected to become hopeful people that sit around and hope for our futures? That certainly is not what Jesus had in mind! Over and over again in Scripture, we are called to do what Jesus did.

There is a true story of how a simple gesture had a tremendous impact on a man who most would write off as unredeemable. Tokichi Ishii had an almost unparalleled criminal record. He had murdered men, women and children in the most brutal way. Anyone who stood in his way was pitilessly eliminated. Now he was in prison awaiting his execution. Visited by two women who tried to talk to him through the bars, he only glowered at them like a caged animal. In the end they abandoned the attempt; but they gave him a Bible, hoping that it might succeed where they had failed. He began to read it, and could not stop. He read until he came to the story of the Crucifixion.

He came to the words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." and these words broke him. "I stopped," he said. "I was stabbed to the heart, as if pierced by a five-inch nail. Shall I call it the love of Christ? Shall I call it his compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that I believed, and my hardness of heart was changed." Later, when the condemned man went to his execution, he was no longer the hardened, surly brute he once had been, but a smiling radiant man. The murderer had been born again; Christ had brought Tokichi Ishii back to life.

The impact that we can have on people does not need to be as dramatic as the story of Tokichi Ishii. People can become so selfish that they are dead to the needs of others. People can become so insensitive that they are dead to the feelings of others. People can become so involved in the dishonesties and the petty disloyalties of life, that they are dead to honor. People can become so hopeless that they are filled with inertia, which is spiritual death. Jesus Christ can resurrect these people. The witness of history is that he has resurrected millions and millions of people like them and his touch has not lost its ancient power.

These resurrections have been facilitated by people like us who in Jesus' name give of ourselves. Like Jesus, we can bring hope to others. Lent is almost behind us for this year. We might do well to spend the remainder of Lent thinking about how we can change ourselves to be more hopeful people and to bring that hope to others.

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16 BAPTISM OF THE LORD – FIRST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord and the first Sunday of Ordinary Time. Although the Christmas season just has ended for the Church, although most of the world considered December 26th to be the end of Christmas. While the next commercialized holiday is Valentine's Day, the Church enters Ordinary Time. Although the name in the church calendar is Ordinary Time, there is nothing ordinary about it. The name of the time is derived from the word ordinal, which in this case means counting; the 1st Sunday, the 2nd Sunday and so forth.

The Word of God that is proclaimed during Ordinary Time is anything but ordinary as we have heard today. Since Jesus was both God and human, his baptism seems almost extraordinary. He was born without sin so the obvious question is why did Jesus need to be baptized if he is both human and divine?

There are two reasons. The first reason lies In Jewish tradition. Ceremonial baths, or the mikvah, were frequently used to mark important events in the lives of people. To this day, converts to Judaism visit the mikvah prior to conversion. Brides and grooms visit the mikvah prior to their weddings in observant families. Historically, there were mikvahs at the entrance to the temple and to synagogues for use before worship. Almost any religious deed, such as writing a new Torah scroll was preceded by the mikvah. Jesus' baptism began his entrance to public ministry; a very fitting act for an observant Jew starting his mission.

The second reason for Jesus to be baptized is leadership, providing an example to those who follow him. During his three years of public ministry, Jesus did everything that the Gospels call us to do in his name starting with his own baptism by John. In fact, Jesus went far beyond actions he calls us to, even dying for our sins. After Jesus was baptized, the appearance of God as a dove and the voice booming from the sky, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased," reinforces Jesus commitment to begin his mission, his public ministry.

What of our own baptisms? What do they mean? Our baptism was not our admission to the Body of Christ. Our birth as creations of God admitted us to the Body of Christ. Our baptisms do much more. Baptism commits us to our missions to minister to the Body of Christ just as Jesus did.

Admittedly, the helpless babies that we baptize are in no way capable of embarking on a mission of any type. However, in order for infant baptism to be more than one of many graduation rites that we experience in our lives, a major responsibility of the adult baptized is to teach our children and set an example for our children to live out their baptismal mission when they are mature enough.

Unlike Jesus' baptism, the gift of our own Baptism washes away original sin. The responsibility that goes with this gift is to bring the love of Christ to others through everything we do, and in some cases what we don't do. Unfortunately, the decision to baptize children is frequently based on superstition. An innocent baby or young child who died prematurely could have never been sent to limbo, by a loving and merciful God, to a place invented by theologians with too much time on their hands.

Baptism does make us part of a community, the community of those committed to living their lives according to the example of Jesus Christ, a community of those with a mission.

There is a story that has been told by different clergy in this parish. It is about Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of New York City in the 1930s. I am not going to tell the story with all of its detail as many of you have heard it. In summary, LaGuardia was a hands-on mayor, who periodically performed different city functions himself. One night he showed up in night court and sent the regular judge home. One of the cases before him was a grandmother who stole food to feed her grandchildren. LaGuardia fined her ten dollars and paid the fine himself. Then he fined each person in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a grandmother was forced to steal food and gave the money to the shocked woman.

This is a 20th Century gospel story. People who were bystanders to injustice and did nothing were required to pay a penalty for doing nothing. When we were each baptized, we were given the responsibility to be people of action, not to merely be people who watch and do nothing.

Jesus chose to love the thief, the self-righteous, the average person in the crowd. He also did his best to teach them and witness with his own life no matter the risk. LaGuardia did that by respecting and enforcing the law, but also by helping the grandmother and by instilling in the entire courtroom the need to care about and actively support the disadvantaged.

He, like Jesus, made it clear that it was everyone's responsibility to create a community where no one has to suffer.

Jesus was baptized so that we might also be baptized into his mission, the building of the Kingdom of God. We do not have to carry our own crosses to Calvary and suffer crucifixion the way that he did. We do have to help others carry their crosses, at least during part of their journeys.

Let us pray that we can all look forward to the day when God will say to each of us "you are my beloved children and with you I am well pleased."

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17. CYCLE B SUNDAY – 2012 – LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Can you imagine the reaction to Jesus of the First Century Jews when he made statements to the effect of “eat my body and drink my blood and I will raise you up on the last day?” Words such as astounding, unbelievable, ridiculous, and crazy might have been uttered within hearing range of Jesus. They were amazed that this man who they thought to be mortal would make a claim that he could raise people up. They likely thought Jesus to be delusional.

To those who were not used to Eucharistic language, eating someone’s body sounds cannibalistic and drinking any blood, especially human blood was seen as an insult to God, to say the least, kosher meat has all of its blood drained from it before consumption.

Literal thinking about the Body and Blood of Christ may be shared today by non-Christians. Even Christians of denominations that are not centered in the Eucharist, that do not believe in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, may be thinking that Catholics literally eat human flesh and drink human blood. As Catholics, we know that the words “body” and “blood” refer to the real presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine. But, do we truly understand the full meaning of the Eucharist? Today’s readings work together to increase our understanding of Eucharist in our own lives.

The first reading from Proverbs can’t help but bring Eucharist to mind with the invitation to bread and wine. The person speaking in many of the Proverbs is Wisdom, the wisdom of God, or in other words, the Holy Spirit. Wisdom calls the simple, those who lack understanding, to her feast. What does she mean by simple? Is it the unintelligent, the childish or less mature? Does she mean God’s precious anawim --- the poor? Are we not all “the simple” in comparison to God? Do we understand the great Mysteries of our faith? Wisdom is showing us that we are all equal before God and equally welcome at the Table of the Lord.

The Gospel continues a series of Eucharistic teachings by Jesus that have stretched out over the past month. In many pagan religions that included animal sacrifice, when participants in the ritual ate the sacrificed animals, they believed they were filled with their gods. But they did not necessarily believe that their ritual feast would help to result in their salvation. They did

not necessarily believe that they were fueled to take on the behavior of their gods. The flesh of Jesus, the body of Christ, represents his complete humanity. Jesus is God, born in our midst to live like a human from birth to death, from childhood to adulthood. He is God, struggling with all of the troubles of life that we experience. He is God battling human temptations. He is God, working out human relationships.

Through Jesus, God enters into our everyday lives and his presence in our lives makes us holy. Therefore, if we eat his body in the form of the real presence in the Eucharistic bread, we will gain some of his strength, wisdom and perfection that will move us along the journey to salvation. Jesus says we must drink his blood. In Jewish thought, blood belonged to God. When a person or an animal loses too much blood, they die. Blood is the life that God gives us. That is why when an animal is slaughtered to be kosher, the jugular is cut and the blood is drained. When Jesus tells us that we must drink his blood, he is telling us that we must take his blood, take his life, into the very core of our being.

During the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the deacon --- or if there is no deacon -- - the priest, pours a few drops of water into the unconsecrated wine saying the words, usually to himself, "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

The wonder of the Eucharist is not only that Jesus walked among us working miracles and doing wondrous works, but that he is with us 2000 years later because he invites us to let him enter our own beings. There is the old saying, "you are what you eat." St. Augustine puts it another way, you become the Sacrament you receive. These sayings direct us to the full potential of the Eucharist in our lives.

We are called to be Eucharist, to be Eucharist to the creations of God; to other people, to God's creatures and to nature. It is our vocation to care for all of God's creation in our daily lives and to show the face of God to others by our words and by our actions, always and everywhere.

The second reading from the Letter of Paul to the Christian community at Ephesus gives us some guidelines for being Eucharist. He tells us in no uncertain terms to stay away from evil influences, which in his day were drinking parties that resulted in bad behavior and idolatry. Today we have

many more evils to overcome in order to be Eucharist. Excessive drinking, use of addicting recreational drugs, and modern-day idolatry such as dwelling on possessions and other objects of status defined by the world around us.

The theologian A. C. Welch said something to the effect of: "People have to be filled with something and it should be the Holy Spirit, not addictions or the negative aspects of life."

In the Early Church, people honored each other. St. Paul tells us that this is because they had reverence for Christ and they saw each other not in the light of their professions or social standing. They saw each other in the Light of Christ, and as Eucharist. Paul also points out that the early Church was a singing church. The psalms and hymns that they sang in community filled them with happiness and the Holy Spirit as they gave thanks to God, and became Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. We too, as we sing at Mass, are giving praise to God and are being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Mass is not a solitary communion with God, but a great community celebration of unity with each other and unity with God. We are called to be active participants in the Mass. We are active listeners during the prayers and readings and active participants when singing God's praises in our responses to prayers and in song. Mass is the source and summit of the power of God within. We come to reinvigorate ourselves with the Eucharist that our Church teaches is in the Word of God, in our worshipping community, and in the body and blood of Christ that we receive. Being active in the celebration of the liturgy including receiving the Eucharist, rather than passively sitting in the pews going through the motions, is what gives us the power to be Eucharist to others until we return to Mass again.

Today, we will celebrate the 40th wedding anniversary of Deacon Bill and Rhonda Wanca when they renew their vows. This is significant because they have been Eucharist to each other for 40 years.

As we stand in the Communion line today, let us reflect on the great gift we are being given. The gift to receive the sacrament we become; the gift that gives us the power to do the work of God and to show God to others, through our words and actions, until we again return to Mass. Let us pray that we are given the inspiration and strength to be Eucharist.

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18. PALM SUNDAY CYCLE C

It is amazing how quickly the crowds went from shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord, Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" to shouting "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!"

It is hard to understand, at first glance, how the welcome of an enthusiastic crowd lining the streets turned into the aggressive anger of a lynch mob just a few days later. The people lining the route that Jesus took into Jerusalem were oppressed people; oppressed by poverty and the destitution inflicted on them by Roman rule. They were ready to shout their "hosannas" and lay their coats in the road before him. He was their hope, their freedom from their lives of financial enslavement. They were looking for a mighty savior in the image of King David.

They forgot about the words we heard today from Isaiah, "I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting."

The Second Reading goes further to say that Jesus never exalted himself; never tried to seek equality with God. He fully accepted and embraced his earthly life as an ordinary human being causing people of the time to misunderstand who he really was. The total change of heart towards Jesus of the crowds in Jerusalem seems hard to understand in hindsight. But are those first century crowds so much different than people today?

Unfortunately, the basic nature of people has not changed much in over 2000 years.

There many reasons why people are fickle. People may easily reject what they know in their hearts to be right or may change allegiance for other reasons. In the case of their change of heart towards Jesus, it was most likely because Jesus did not meet their expectations as a savior. They expected and wanted a powerful king. Also, people threw their support to the strong when it became very obvious that Jesus was going to be executed. Many like to be on the side of the perceived winner.

There are many other reasons people may be fickle. Change of mind might be due to peer pressure, self-interest or greed. It could be because people want to go along with the crowd. It could also be because people do not have confidence in their ability to lead, so they follow.

Or it may simply be that in these days of broadcast pundits and mass emailing that stokes hatred and fear and causes people to want to believe what simply is not true.

At this time when Lent is nearing an end, when we can see the Palm Sunday story turning into Passion Sunday in the total change of heart of a crowd of people, it is a good time to look into ourselves. We need to ask the question: how are we fickle? What thoughts or behaviors do we need to change in ourselves to be consistent with the calling of our God? Let us pray that we can be faithful to God's call in our lives.

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19. STORY OF A MAN'S PRAYER (to switch places)

I recently heard a story about a man who was sick and tired of going to work every day while his wife stayed home. He wanted her to see what he went through so he prayed: "Dear Lord, I go to work every day and put in 8 hours while my wife just stays home. I want her to know what I go through, so please allow her body to switch with mine for a day. Amen."

God, in His infinite wisdom, granted the man's wish.

The next morning, sure enough, the man awoke as a woman. He arose, cooked breakfast for his mate, awakened the kids, set out their school clothes, fed them breakfast, packed their lunches, drove them to school, came home and picked up the dry cleaning, took it to the cleaners and stopped at the bank to make a deposit, went grocery shopping, then drove home to put away the groceries, pay the bills and balance the check book. He cleaned the cat's litter box and bathed the dog. Then it was already 1:00 p.m. and he hurried to make the beds, do the laundry, vacuum, dust, and sweep and mop the kitchen floor. Ran to the school to pick up the kids and got into an argument with them on the way home. Set out cookies and milk and got the kids organized to do their homework, then set up the ironing board and watched TV while he did the ironing.

At 4:30 p.m. he began peeling potatoes and washing vegetables for salad, breaded the pork chops and snapped fresh beans for supper. After supper he cleaned the kitchen, ran the dishwasher, folded laundry, bathed the kids, and put them to bed. At 9:00 p.m. he was exhausted and, though his daily chores weren't finished, he went to bed where he was expected to make love which he managed to get through without complaint.

The next morning, he awoke and immediately knelt by the bed and said, "Lord, I don't know what I was thinking. I was so wrong to envy my wife's being able to stay home all day. Please, oh please, let us trade back."

The Lord, in His infinite wisdom, replied, "My son, I think you have learned your lesson and I will be happy to change things back to the way they were. You'll just have to wait nine months, though. You got pregnant last night."

This story serves two purposes for me: it reinforces just how much mothers do and it makes me think that each one of you is more qualified than I to give a homily on motherhood. It is said that all men need a mother, and that when a man gets married his wife takes over the job. My mother and my wife Karen would undoubtedly agree. I don't see myself as qualified to be a mother, but I have an appreciation of the holiness and importance of motherhood.

In this morning's Gospel, a woman is so emotional listening to Jesus that she cries out, "Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed." Jesus replies, "Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it." Mary did indeed hear God's word and agreed to be the mother of Jesus.

My sisters, you are not that different from Mary. You hear God's word every day and love and raise the children that he has entrusted to you.

In the reading from The Prophet, we heard clearly that our children have been entrusted to us by God and that the parenting that we do is clearly holy work that we do in God's name. It is often difficult to see our children, not as extensions of ourselves, but as God's children who we are to nurture into being all that God has given them to be.

As mothers, you are so important to the Church. The prophet tells us that our children are meant to live in the future. In fact, they are the future, the future of the Church, the future of the world. Their future can only be ensured by their learning to love themselves, to love others and to love God. Modeling these three things is the holiest work any one can do. As it is usually the mother that spends most of the time with children in our society, you are the primary models. What more important work can you do for God than that?

Sometimes our children frustrate us. It doesn't seem that we are getting through to them. But we do. They always look at what we do, which can be more powerful than what we say. Our own holiness is what teaches our children to be holy.

I'd like to read something by an anonymous author:

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator, and I wanted to paint another one.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you feed a stray cat, and I thought it was good to be kind to animals.

When you thought I wasn't looking I saw you make my favorite cake for me, and I knew that little things are special things.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I heard you say a prayer, and I believed that there is a God I could always talk to.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I felt you kiss me good night and I felt loved.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw tears come from your eyes, and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it's all right to cry.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw that you cared, and I wanted to be everything I could be.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I looked ... and wanted to say thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn't looking.

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20. STORY OF SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

There is a story about a school principal who called the house of one of his teachers to find out why he was not in school.

He was greeted with a child's whisper, "Hello?"

"Is your Daddy home?" asked the principal.

"Yes," whispered the small voice.

"May I talk with him?" the man asked.

"No," replied the small voice.

"Is your Mommy there?" he asked.

"Yes," came the answer.

"May I talk with her?"

Again the small voice whispered, "No."

"All right," said the principal, "Is there any one there besides you?"

"Yes," whispered the child, "A policeman."

"A policeman? Now, may I speak with the policeman?"

"No, he's busy," whispered the child.

"Busy doing what?" asked the principal.

"Talking to Daddy and Mommy and the fireman," came the whispered answer.

"The fireman? Has there been a fire in the house or something?" asked the worried principal.

"No," whispered the child.

"Then what are the police and fireman doing there?"

Still whispering, the young voice replied with a soft giggle, "They are looking for me."

It would be pretty hard for the "rescuers" to find the child as long as the child keeps hiding from them.

In today's gospel we see John the Baptist in the desert calling out to the people of Judea to come out into the open desert and let God find them. You can liken it to the fireman calling out to the "lost" child. The child has to leave his hiding place to come out into the open and be found by the fireman.

In scripture, the desert is a symbol for the place where people encounter God and God encounters people. It was in the desert that the Israelites learned

about God and what God was calling them to do. It was in the desert that they became God's people and they recognized the Lord as their God. Before Jesus began his public ministry, he spent forty days and nights in the desert. It was a time of discovering and deepening his personal relationship with God.

By calling the people into the desert John was calling them to let go of their false hopes and securities and learn to hope and trust in God alone. Two thousand years later, John's call continues to echo in our ears.

When we go into the desert, we don't catch a flight to Nevada or Utah or other deserts of our country. We leave behind those things in life that tend to distract us from God, from building the Kingdom of God. We leave behind desire for status, for wealth, for power, for image and instead we look for the coming of Jesus Christ into our hearts. We shift our hope and trust from things that are temporary to things that are permanent, we shift our hope and trust from the things that are meaningless at the end of time, to the things that will last eternally.

Advent is a time of emptying our hearts and minds of desires and attitudes that keep Jesus Christ out, so that when Christmas comes, Christ will once again be reborn within us.

Our society has made preparation for Christmas a time of the year when the temptation is great to value the wrong things and to rush around so preoccupied that we barely have the mental energy to acknowledge what the upcoming Christmas season is really about.

Our Advent desert gives our lives the simplicity, the clarity and the focus where we can once again make room in our hearts and welcome Christ. As we decorate our homes, is the emphasis on getting our decorations out and placed before we have completely digested our Thanksgiving dinners? Or is it to lovingly place the ornaments and other decorations while thinking about the memories of people and events, the gifts of God in our lives that they evoke.

Do we give gifts because we want to receive something equal back or because we want to show how prosperous we are and how much we can afford to give? Or, do we give to our friends and relatives to show them how much we love them? Do we make the effort to give to those who have nothing so that they can see the love of God that is supposed to live in each of God's people?

Do we start listening to Christmas music before Advent even starts and stop on the second day of Christmas like the world around us? Do we put our trees on the street to be picked up by the garbage collectors on the first possible collection day after Christmas Day without waiting for the season to be over?

These are questions we need to ask ourselves because the answers tell us whether or not we are really prepared for the rebirth of Jesus Christ in our lives. If we rush through Advent without taking time out to renew ourselves and our view of the meaning of Christmas, then how can Christmas be meaningful?

John Betjeman, an English Poet who lived during the first three quarters of the 20th century echoed the call of John the Baptist when he wrote about Christmas:

For some it means
An interchange of hunting scenes,
On coloured cards. And I remember
Last year I sent out twenty yards,
Laid end to end of Christmas cards
To people that I scarcely know.
They'd send a card to me and so
I had to send one back. Oh dear!
Is this a form of Christmas cheer?
Some ways indeed are very odd
by which we hail the birth of God
We raise the price of things in shops,
We give plain boxes fancy tops,
And lines which traders cannot sell
Thus parcelled go extremely well
We dole out bribes we call a present
To those to whom we must be pleasant.

My sisters and brothers, I pray that all of us will answer the call of John the Baptist and use our Advent experience to empty our hearts of the distracting and unimportant so that we may welcome Christ in all of his goodness and love so that we will have a holy and blessed celebration of Christmas.

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21. Dr. J. Alexander Findlay, a Protestant theologian and writer

In the mid twentieth century, Dr. J. Alexander Findlay, a Protestant theologian and writer, was driving through the Galilean country side when he came to a small village.

He wrote, "I caught sight of ten maidens gaily clad, playing some sort of a musical instrument as they danced along the road in front of our car. When I asked my driver what they were doing, he told me that they were going to keep the bride company until the bridegroom arrived. When I asked the driver if I could go see the wedding, he shook his head and said, 'You never know when the wedding will be, it might be today or tonight or tomorrow or in two weeks. No one knows for certain.'"

The element of surprise about when the wedding takes place has not changed much since the first century in modern village life.

The Gospel writer has Jesus in a very rich real life situation, one that still exists today, to make several important theological points about our encounter with God when we pass from life into eternal life. As Catholics, we do not pay as much attention to the end times as do the fundamentalist Christians. The end of the world dominates their weekly services. A series of ten novels in the Left Behind series by Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins have been best sellers as a result of a massive marketing campaign by the publisher. These books are based on the Rapture, an evangelical Protestant teaching about when Jesus returns to take the true believers into heaven. The people left behind do battle with the forces of evil and will be judged later on. These novels are driven by fear and give a distorted view of the Book of Revelations.

Unfortunately, many Christians see these novels as a Bible study. Catholics should take time to think about the end times, but our view should not be based on fear, but on love, the love that we give and receive during our earthly lives. Our view should be based on faith, faith in the promises of a God of love, mercy and forgiveness who gives us every opportunity to live our lives in a Christ-like manner.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins urges us to live our lives in preparation for the heavenly kingdom by helping to build the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. The first century Jews could understand the parable in terms of their real lives because of Jewish wedding traditions. Jewish weddings were not just for the family, but were a community affair. The bride traditionally gathered with her closest unmarried friends and waited for the bridegroom to call for her. The bridegroom would come for the bride only after he had negotiated the dowry with the bride's family and his arrival could be anytime night or day. When the bridegroom came, a grand procession would begin that would take the bridal party through the streets of the town so that they could greet as many people as possible. If the procession was at night, it was required by law to carry oil lamps. When the wedding party arrived at the place of the wedding and reception, all of the doors were closed and the festivities began. Late comers were not admitted.

The first century Jews of Matthew's Christian community, who believed that Christ's return was not far off, could see the parallels between the parable and the end times. Like the bridal party who did not know when the bridegroom would arrive, the early Christian community understood that life was fragile and could be snatched away without notice and that the end times could come suddenly and understood that they had to be ready. Readiness consisted of two things; being in good relationship with God and being in good relationship with community.

Oil was a valuable commodity in the first century and represents strength, healing, nourishment and beauty. In the parable, oil represents our character, our faith and our relationship with God. The dimensions of our lives that oil represents have to be developed over time. They cannot be bought or acquired at the last minute. These aspects of who we are must be a natural part of our day to day lives. The wedding procession itself represents our walk with community. It has been said that we cannot be saved alone. Salvation comes in community and because of our relationship with community.

Finally, the doors that close when the wedding festivities begin represent our personal end time. If we haven't lived according to the Gospel calling, the doors may be closed to us. In anticipation of our personal end time, which will come, we need not only have faith, but to live our faith. Our faith cannot be borrowed or lived by someone else, we each have to live it actively. Faith comes alive both by what we say and what we do. James tells us that faith

without action is empty. This is God's way of telling us to "put our money where our mouth is!"

In the parable, the wise virgins are self-righteous when the foolish virgins ask them to borrow oil. The wise virgins, so to speak, create two groups; we and they. We are church, we are one, we are there to help each other and pick each other up. Since we do not know when our time will come, we are compelled to live each day like it is the last one. We can't grow tired of doing good or become complacent because of the world around us. God calls us to show love and mercy for others, to share with those in need, to care for the earth, and to work for peace and justice. These are not one-time actions to check things off of a list, this is the way we are to live our everyday lives.

There is a story about a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend. He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end. He noted that first came the date of her birth and then he spoke of the following date with tears. But he said what mattered most of all, though was the dash between those years. For that dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth... and now only those who loved her, and God, know what that little line is worth. For it matters not, how much we own; the cars...the house...the cash. What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard... are there things you'd like to change? For you never know how much time is left. You could be at "dash mid-range." If we could only just slow down enough to consider what's true and real, and always try to understand the way other people feel. And be less quick to anger, and show appreciation more and love the people in our lives like we've never loved before.

If we could treat each other with respect, and more often wear a smile... remembering that this special dash might only last a little while.

When your eulogy's being read with your life's actions to rehash...would you be proud of the things they say about how you spent your dash?

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22. TEMPLE OF JERUSALEM – COLLECTION BOXES

In the Temple in Jerusalem, there were collection boxes known as the trumpets. They were shaped like trumpets with the narrow part at the top and the wider part at the foot. Each was assigned to offerings for a different purpose--for the wood that was used to burn the sacrifice, for the incense that was burned on the altar, for the upkeep of the golden vessels, and so on.

It was near the Trumpets that Jesus was sitting. After strenuous debates with the Sanhedrin and the Sadducees, he was tired and his head drooped between his hands. He looked up and he saw many people flinging their offerings into the Trumpets; and then came a poor widow. All she had in the world was two lepta. A lepton was the smallest of all coins; its name means "the thin one." It was worth one fortieth of a new penny; and, therefore, the offering of the widow woman was only one-twentieth of a new penny. But Jesus said that it far out valued all the other offerings, because it was everything she had.

Two things determine the value of any gift. First, there is the spirit in which it is given. A gift that is unwillingly extracted, a gift that is given with a grudge, a gift that is given out of guilt, a gift that is given for the sake of prestige or of self-display loses its value. The only real gift is one that is the outflow of the loving heart, given because the giver cannot help it.

Second, there is the sacrifice that the gift involves. A gift that is a mere trifle to one person may be a vast sum to another. The gifts of the rich, as they flung their offerings into the Trumpets, did not cost them much; but the two lepta of the widow woman cost her everything she had. The rich no doubt gave having calculated how much they could afford; the widow gave with reckless generosity that could give no more.

Giving does not begin to be real giving until it involves sacrifice. A gift shows our love only when we have had to do without something or have had to work harder in order to give it. How many of us give to God like that? Giving does not only pertain to money, but to our energy that we put into caring for others. How often do we give surplus money because it is more convenient than giving our time and our talent? There are times when personal involvement

is needed more than our money. Can each of us think of a talent that God has given us that can be used to help the Church or to help another person even if it makes us push out of our comfort zones? How many of us have discovered that the most meaningful gifts that we have received have stemmed from our unselfish giving?

When we receive the Eucharist this morning we will have received the best that God can possibly give us. What can we give in return?

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23. JOHN THE BAPTIST

People flocked to the wilderness to hear John's message and be baptized by him. John was baptizing for the forgiveness of sin. The Jewish community was well aware that there had not been a prophet in their midst for over 300 years. Here was a man who resembled a prophet out of the Hebrew Scriptures. It was obvious to the people that John lived his message. He dressed simply wearing a camel hair garment held together by a belt around his waist. He was said to eat locusts and wild honey, which may have been the insect and the honey of wild bees or perhaps it was the carob nut and tree sap. In either case these were the foods of the poorest of the poor.

John's message was also effective because he preached what was already in the hearts of the people. The Jews had a saying, "If Israel would only keep the law of God perfectly for one day, the Kingdom of God would come." People were waiting for someone to stir their souls towards righteousness and John did that. The community also appreciated his humility. He claimed he was not fit to undo the sandal strap of the man who would follow him. Feet got very dirty, especially in the wilderness. It was the duty of a slave to remove his master's sandals, the job of the lowest of the low. John placed himself lower than the lowest of the low, the servant of a slave.

This is the same mentality of Jesus washing his disciple's feet at the Last Supper. The question that this scripture raises is "if baptism is for the remission of sin, why did Jesus need to be baptized?" Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry and our baptism is our call to ministry. We are connected to Jesus through our baptism and therefore all of the baptized are connected.

It is unfortunate that baptism has become a thing to do for many people rather than the impetus for living a Christian lifestyle. In my own family, my daughter and her husband, unfortunately, do not practice the faith. Her husband's family demanded that the grandchildren be baptized, because God forbid, if they weren't baptized and something happened, they would go to limbo! The poor theology of limbo, probably the result of theologians with too much time on their hands, went out with the Second Vatican Council.

But, can you imagine a loving and merciful God ever allowing a pure and dependent little baby to be cast adrift in a place like limbo?

My son-in-law called me prior to the baptism of my first grandchild and stated, "I don't really believe, but I am superstitious enough to cover all of the bases."

How sad it is that a sacrament becomes reduced from an act of faith to an act of superstition. How often do parents present a child for baptism and never return to church until it is time for the next sacrament? Sacraments are a sign of how we are supposed to be living, not a graduation ritual. How often are godparents chosen because of family relationship or close friendship rather than because of their qualifications to take responsibility for the child's spiritual development should something ever happen to the parents? Do the parents and godparents live their baptismal responsibilities?

The bigger question is how many of us live our baptismal responsibilities? Are we involved in emulating the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, or do we simply come to Mass on Sunday to get the required check mark to get enough "hell-avoidance" points? There are four things that describe Jesus' baptism and they also apply to our lives.

First, it was a time of decision for Jesus. He must have seen a sign in John's ministry that it was time for him to begin his own public ministry. We are challenged to decide to devote an appropriate amount of our time to the service of others.

Second, it was the time of identification for Jesus. Although he did not need to be cleansed from sin, it was a moment for him to identify himself with the poor, the downtrodden, the ill-housed, the underpaid, the abused and all others who could not live lives in dignity. We are challenged to identify with and serve people who are notable to attain a decent standard of life and dignity.

Third, it was a time of approval for Jesus. He knew that he was embarking on God's work and that God approved. We are challenged to discern if the ministry we do is what God is really calling us to or just something that is comfortable for us.

Finally, it was the time of empowerment for Jesus. The Holy Spirit came down upon him in the manner of a dove, a symbol of peace and love.

Jesus ministered in the spirit of peace and love. We too are challenged to be ambassadors of peace and love in the ministry of our daily lives.

Sometimes it is easy to identify what we are called to do to serve the people of God. Sometimes we find that what we think we want to do is not what God is calling us to. Sometimes we are dragged into ministry kicking and screaming.

There is a story by an unknown author called the Lord Said Go.

And the Lord said GO

And I said Who me?

And he said Yes, you

And I said:

But I am not ready yet,

And there is company coming

And I can't leave my family.

You know that there is no one to take my place.

And he said Your stalling.

And the Lord said GO

I said But I don't want to

And he said I didn't ask if you wanted to

And I said:

Listen I'm not that kind of person

To get involved in arguments.

Besides my family won't like it.

And what will the neighbors say

And the Lord said Baloney

And a third time the Lord said GO

And I said Do I have to

And he said Do you love me

And I said:

Look I'm scared

People are going to hate me

And cut me into little pieces

And I can't take it all by myself

And he said Where do you think I'll be?

And the Lord said GO

And I sighed

Here I am ... send me.

This story is about all of us. By virtue of our baptism, we are called to serve. In the end, we do not chose how we serve, God chooses us to serve as we are needed. God gives us the gifts that we need to serve when we are called. We only need to say yes as Jesus did.

At Jesus' baptism, he heard his Father's voice saying to him. "You are my beloved son and I am well pleased with you." When we are living our baptismal call, we know that God is looking down upon us and saying; "You are my beloved son or daughter and I am well pleased with you."

As we approach the Lord's Table this morning, let us pray for wisdom in discerning what God calls us to and strength and courage to accept God's call.

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24. DAY OF ATONEMENT (YOM KIPPUR)

The letter to the Hebrews that we heard this morning defines the God of the new covenant as a God that we have access to, rather than a God that is a distant, powerful ruler. The access to God in the days of the Temple was only by the high priest, once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when, to make a ritual sacrifice, he visited the holy of holies where God was said to live.

Jesus made God approachable. What could make God more personal than to send his only child to live among us and then die for us so that we could be saved? The God of the New Covenant is a far cry from the God who was thought to live in a secluded area of the temple that only one person could access one day out of each year.

Christ did not enter into a man-made Holy Place; he entered into the presence of God. As Christians, we are not just a church community in the sense of the Jewish Temple community, but we, through Christ, are in intimate fellowship with God. This is because Christ entered into the presence of God not only for his own sake, but also for ours. It was to open the way for us and plead our cause with the Father.

The sacrifice of Christ was a one-time event that never needs to be made again. Year after year the ritual of the Day of Atonement had to go on. People were always sinners and always will be but that does not mean that Christ must go on offering himself again and again. The road to God is open, despite the fact we sin, once and for all. Nothing can keep us from the salvation that Christ promised.

Our intimate relationship with our loving God can be seen in a story about a boy who was consistently coming home late from school. There was no reason for his tardiness and no amount of discussion seemed to help. Finally, in desperation the boy's father sat him down and said, "the next time you come home late from school you are going to be given bread and water for your supper --- and nothing else. Is that clear, son?" The boy looked straight into his father's eyes and nodded. He understood perfectly.

A few days later the boy came home even later than usual. His mother met him at the door, but she didn't say anything. His father met him in the living room, but he didn't say anything either. That night, however, when they sat down together at table, the boy's heart sank down to his feet. His father's plate was filled with food. His mother's plate was filled with food. But his own plate contained only a single slice of bread. Next to his plate was a lonely glass of water. The boy's eyes stared first at the bread, then at the glass of water. To make it worse, tonight he was absolutely starving.

The father waited for the full impact to sink in, then quietly took the boy's plate and placed it in front of himself. He took his own plate and put it in front of the boy. The boy understood what his father was doing. His father was taking upon himself the punishment that he, the boy, had brought upon himself by his own delinquent behavior. Years later, that same boy recalled the incident and said, "All my life I've known what God is like by what my father did that night."

What the father did for his son is what Jesus did for all of us. He suffered and died that we might live. God also did the same as the father in the story. God watched his only child suffer and die for the salvation of all of us. So, we have a loving God who wants an intimate relationship with us. What do we do about it? There is nothing that we can give God that God does not already have. How do we repay God for giving us his son? God only wants us to love one another. God only wants us to treat each other like the father in the story treated his son.

As we approach God's table, may we remember that we are one human family and we are called to love each other unconditionally as we are loved. We are called to be Eucharist to each other.

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25. PRESENTATION OF JESUS AT THE TEMPLE

The presentation of Jesus at the temple hardly occurred with the pomp and ceremony that one would expect to occur with the child of a king. Even though Jesus is the son of God, the King of Kings, his presentation was very low key. The high priest and temple elders were conspicuously absent. Instead, there was an old man, Simeon, and an old woman, Anna.

The Gospel today describes three ancient ceremonies that the Holy Family was required by Jewish law to undergo. First, Jesus was circumcised, a requirement for all Jewish males. This was such a sacred ritual that it could even be done on the Sabbath when all other non-essential work was banned. On this day, the child received his name.

The second ceremony was the redemption of the first born. Every first born male, both human and cattle, had to be bought back from God. This may have been a relic of the days when children were sacrificed but it became a recognition of God's gracious power.

The third ceremony was the ritual purification of the mother. The mother of a child was required to bring a young pigeon and a lamb for the ritual of sacrifice. A poor woman could bring an additional pigeon instead of a lamb, which was called the offering of the poor. Mary brought the offering of the poor. It can be seen that Jesus was born into a poor home where family members knew all about the difficulty in making a living and the insecurity of life. It is obvious that, right from the beginning, Jesus grew up in a family that had a difficult life.

So, one of the people present at the presentation of Jesus was Simeon, an old man who was awaiting his own death, but only after he had seen the Messiah. Simeon knew that Jesus would not face an easy life. Simeon told Mary that her son Jesus would be the center of a great deal of conflict in Israel, which would result in much pain for her.

Anna, who was 84 years old and a widow, was also there to greet Jesus. She had known much sorrow in her life having lost her husband and living as a homeless person in the Temple. She did not let her sorrow make her

hard and bitter, but instead, she was hope filled and prayed unceasingly. She was in constant touch with God who was her source of strength and hope.

Jesus was met at his presentation by two people who were poor, vulnerable, and had considerable strength and faith in God. These were people that were symbolic of the life that Jesus was to live. These were the people who lived what Jesus would live. These were people who knew what Jesus would know during his life.

The second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews gives us a good sense of why Jesus was born into poverty and into a difficult life. The life of the son of God had more similarity with Anna and Simeon and didn't have Jesus living as a member of a royal family born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Four US presidential elections ago, I was discussing the candidates with a friend. She said that she could not vote for one of the candidates who had not had to drive his own car in the past twenty years. She said that there was no way that she thought that this man could identify with the common person.

But Jesus can identify with all of us rich and poor. He can sympathize with all of us because he, too, suffered during his life on earth when he lived as a human being. God sent a human being to save human beings. As Christians, we believe in a God who is intimately involved with us, who identifies with us, whereas the Greek and Roman Gods of the time of Jesus were detached. Jesus can identify with all of our pain and suffering whether it is as a result of incidents that we look back on as being minor or petty or major incidents such as yesterday's tragic loss of the Columbia.

[Note: On Saturday February 1, 2003, Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated as it reentered the atmosphere over Texas and Louisiana, killing all seven astronauts on board. It was the second Space Shuttle mission to end in disaster, after the loss of Challenger and crew in 1986.]

It is almost impossible for us to understand another person's sorrows and sufferings unless we have experienced sorrows and suffering of our own. A person with no trace of nerves has no conception of the tortures of nervousness. A person who is perfectly physically fit has no conception of the weariness of the person who is easily tired or the person who is never free from pain. A person who learns easily often cannot understand why someone who is slow finds things so difficult. A person who has never felt sorrow cannot understand the pain of a person whose heart is filled with grief.

A person who has never loved can never understand the glorious feelings that love brings nor the ache of loneliness when a love is lost.

Before we can truly have sympathy, we must go through some of the same things as the other person has experienced. That is precisely what Jesus did from his birth, through his life and his suffering leading to death. Because Jesus has experienced our pain, he can sympathize, help, and be present to us. He has felt our sorrows and pain; he has lived through our temptations. As a result, he knows exactly what we need and he can give it to us. Paul Claudel, the French poet, playwright and diplomat said, "Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with his presence."

As we follow Jesus in our own lives, we need to be conscious of his presence and caring for us. We also need to model our own lives after his so that we can experience ourselves what others have gone through. When we accept and work through our own pain and suffering, we can be there for others. Sometimes, there are significant events that help us to have empathy for others.

In the 1980s, Mary Brenner was a forty-eight-year-old divorced mother of seven children. She worked in Beverly Hills, California and owned a carbon paper manufacturing company. She dealt with all the movie stars. She went to their parties. She was friends with celebrities, the kind of people whose faces leer out at us from People Magazine. She had what most considered to be a wonderful and full life. One day she came across a famous photograph that was taken during the holocaust. It was a picture of many people lined up. A little boy, eight or nine years of age, is standing with his hands up, and a Nazi is pointing a rifle at the kid whose little eyes show deep fear and bewilderment.

Mary Brenner looked at that photograph and realized that life would never be the same for her. She felt an enormous compassion for all those who were victims of other people's brutality, for those who were the most marginalized. With this new realization, Mary went to the bishop of San Diego and said, "I would like to have some sort of a religious order her and I would like to dedicate myself to those people nobody wants. Who are the most deprived?"

She wound up being called Sister Antonio and works with the inmates of the women's prison in Tijuana, Mexico. These women are among the most

hopeless, forlorn, and neglected segment of humanity. She is their friend, companion, mother and grandmother, all wrapped in one.

As we come to the Eucharist this morning, we pray that we will always know that Jesus is present to us in our need, and may we be nourished to have the strength, courage and desire to be present to our sisters and brothers in their need.

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26. WAR – KILLING OF INNOCENT CHILDREN

Imagine picking up your newspaper and reading this story: A minister's wife in the small town of Blye, Oregon had taken five young children on a picnic. They chose a tree for a shady spot. A balloon was caught up in the tree. One young boy climbed up and brought the balloon down. The bomb that was attached exploded and killed them all including the baby that the minister's wife was carrying.

How would hearing this story about the loss of lives of innocent children and a young wife and expectant mother make you feel? This story is little known, but true. It happened during the Second World War. The Japanese released as many as 20,000 bombs attached to balloons into air currents and they were carried as far as Michigan. It was a crazy scheme, but it killed people. War is like that. War does not discriminate between military and civilian targets; between soldiers and children; between combatants and innocents.

War escalated from the Japanese attack on military targets at Pearl Harbor to fierce battles in the South Pacific to the grand finale of nuclear explosions in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which claimed the lives of one hundred thousand innocents and injured the same number. This horrendous power, unleashed by man, ended the war with Japan.

The Church recognizes that there are times when war has to be fought to create peace. The "just war" teaching of the church started with St. Augustine in the fourth century and has been developed by theologians and church leaders over the past century and a half. In a nutshell, the church teaches that lasting peace is the only objective of a just war. War is not for vengeance, punishment or to put leaders we like into power. Civilian casualties and non-military property damage should be avoided. And, war should be fought in a mournful frame of mind. Cheerleading and hawkish patriotism have no place.

American troops are currently deployed in a former Yugoslavia and in Afghanistan. We are on the brink of invading Iraq. North Korea is a scary and unpredictable unknown. Is there a better way?

In the Gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God." Jesus sees peace in its full Hebrew and scriptural meaning. Shalom doesn't ever mean only the absence of trouble; it also always means everything that makes for a person's highest good. Jesus is not saying that peace lovers are blessed. It is easy to love peace. The beatitude is about blessing peace makers. Sometimes we think we have to maintain peace at any price. How often have you heard not to rock the boat? Jesus rocked a lot of boats. He spent his entire ministry standing up to injustice and sin.

Peace does not just happen. If we ignore sinful or unjust situations around us, they will escalate into harmful conflict. We are called to actively face sin and injustice, even when we struggle and risk making peace. Since shalom means everything that makes for humanity's highest good, this beatitude could read: Blessed are those who make this world a better place for all to live in. To do this, Jesus is calling us to make relationships right between people.

There are those who spread trouble, bitterness and strife. Unfortunately, these people live in every society and belong to every Church. Trouble makers are doing the devil's work. On the other hand, there are people in whose presence bitterness cannot live, people who bridge gulfs, heal pains, and sweeten bitterness. These people are doing God's work. It is the great purpose of God to bring peace between humanity and himself, and to bring peace between people. The person who unites people does God's work.

Another way to state this beatitude is: blessed are those who encourage right relationships between people, for they are doing God's work!

As we come to the Lord's Table today, may we be nourished to follow the example of Jesus, the peace maker.

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27. TEMPTATION OF JESUS IN THE DESERT

In today's Gospel Jesus is being tempted in the desert by Satan before he starts his ministry in the Galilee. Probably all of us have been to a desert, learned about deserts in school, or seen specials on The Discovery Channel.

The Judean Wilderness is a particularly harsh desert. It starts on the shores of the salty Dead Sea, which sustains no life, and extends into the Judean Hills. The landscape is barren and stark. There is little vegetation, and it is dry, hot and oppressive during most of the year.

The animal life that inhabits the desert has had to adapt to the harsh conditions. Many of the animals are predators. Only the fittest survive. The same could be said of the people who have inhabited the Judean Wilderness through the ages. This desert is the ideal place to go for solitude and soul searching.

In so many ways, for so many people, the world has taken on the characteristics of the desert. Many people have a hard and barren life, fall victim to human predators, and feel lonely and isolated.

Jesus went into the desert for prayer and introspection. He withstood the temptations of the devil and emerged to do his ministry. We too are called to a desert experience each year during the season of Lent. We are called to resist the temptation of the values of the world around us. We are also called to discern how we might apply the Lenten actions of prayer, alms giving and fasting to making our world a less hostile and more loving place.

We should look more closely at what we pray for during Lent. It is routine to pray for the people and the needs that are close to home and close to our hearts. Why don't we make an effort this year to read the newspaper or watch the news and learn where suffering and injustices are occurring? We could pick several stories each day that strike us as tragic, really try to put ourselves in the shoes of the victims to feel their pain and pray for them.

Alms giving is not necessarily limited to money. Alms giving includes sharing our time and energy. When we give from an excess of money, time or energy, what we give or do might be useful, but when we do without in order to give

to someone else, we are giving from our substance. Our giving becomes a gift of ourselves in the truest sense of the word.

Finally, there is another way to look at fasting. Yes, the church calls us to fasting and abstinence. But, to give up meat, I can easily eat lobster instead of steak each Friday. I can give up some excess food on fast days without a great deal of sacrifice. But we might also consider looking at fasting and feasting in conjunction with our attitudes and behavior.

An unknown author wrote: "Lent: A Season for Fasting, A Season for Feasting." I am going to read this series of statements. I am sure that we can all find some that apply to us.

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FAST from judging others; FEAST on Christ living within them.

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FAST from harsh words; FEAST on words that build others up.

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FAST from discontent; FEAST on gratitude.

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FAST from anger; FEAST on patience.

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FAST from pessimism; FEAST on optimism.

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FAST from worry; FEAST on God's care.

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FAST from complaining; FEAST on appreciation.

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FAST from bitterness; FEAST on forgiveness

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FAST from self-concern; FEAST on compassion for others.

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FAST from discouragement; FEAST on hope.

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FAST from depressing facts; FEAST on uplifting facts.

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FAST from suspicion; FEAST on truth.

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FAST from weakening thoughts; FEAST on inspiring promises.

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FAST from idle gossip; FEAST on purposeful silence.

If we use Lent well this year, perhaps we can help to change the face of our troubled world. Perhaps we can create spring in the Judean Wildernesses of our planet. Even the Judean Wilderness blooms briefly each year after being nourished the first spring rains. Totally carpeted by tiny wild flowers, for a short time, the desert takes on a soft, colorful, and an inviting appearance.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus began his ministry after he left the desert. If we can use the desert time of Lent to bring the water of our baptisms out into the world, perhaps it too will bloom with the beauty of love, hope and peace.

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28. WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY

In this morning's Gospel, the Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus. Adultery was a serious crime under Jewish law and the Pharisees brought a woman, who was caught in the act, to Jesus in order to entrap him. Jesus was caught between a rock and a hard place. If he found the woman guilty, she would be executed by stoning and Jesus would not have shown the mercy that he was preaching. But, if he let the woman go free, the Pharisees would have been able to find Jesus in contempt of Jewish law.

Jesus' judgment was a stroke of genius. By saying to the crowd, "let you who are without sin cast the first stone," and knowing the members of the crowd were not free from sin, he was able to outflank the trap that the Pharisees had laid for him. But, Jesus was not letting the adulterous woman off the hook completely. When he told her to go and sin no more, he did not tell her that she was forgiven. But, Jesus did show her mercy and gave her a second chance. Jesus knew that the woman had the potential to clean up her act and wanted to give her the opportunity to live up to her potential for goodness.

The beatitude "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" is more than a trite proverb. When Jesus sidestepped passing judgment on the adulterous woman, he was also sidestepping passing judgment on the sinners in the crowd and they knew it. He was setting an example for them to show mercy and to allow others a second chance to live up to their potential for goodness.

There is a story about two old enemies. In April 1986, two gray-haired men greeted each other warmly in Tokyo's International Airport. Both men had tears in their eyes. One man was an American named Ponich; the other was a Japanese named Ishibashi. The last time the two men met was forty years before, as enemies, in a cave in Okinawa. At that time the American, then Sargent Ponich, was holding a five-year-old Japanese boy in his arms. The child had been shot through both legs. Ishibashi was one of two Japanese snipers hiding in a dark corner of the same cave. Suddenly, Ishibashi and his comrade leaped from their hiding place, aimed their rifles at Ponich, and prepared to fire point blank. There wasn't a thing Ponich could do. He simply

put the five-year-old on the ground, took out his canteen, and began to wash the child's wounds. If he had to die, he thought, what better way to die than performing an act of mercy?

The two snipers watched in amazement. Then, slowly, they lowered their rifles. Minutes later, Ponich did something Ishibashi never forgot. He took the child in his arms, stood up, bowed in gratitude to the two Japanese, and took the child to an American field hospital.

How did the two men happen to meet again after all those years? In 1985, Ponich wrote a letter to a Tokyo newspaper thanking the Japanese people for the two Japanese soldiers who had spared his life forty years before in that cave in Okinawa. Ishibashi saw the letter and contacted the newspaper who set up the meeting. The meeting was long and affectionate.

It is amazing that enemies at war with each other could show so much mercy. Yet, we often have problems showing any kind of mercy and non-judgmental behavior towards those that we are close to. The Japanese soldiers were not likely Christians.

Can we, who have been exposed to the teaching of Jesus Christ show this kind of mercy to at least those we are not at war with, and even those we don't care for?

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29. FEAST OF ST. ATHANASIUS

Today the church celebrates the feast of St. Athanasius, who was one of the eight original doctors of the Church. The doctors were eminent teachers of the faith. Athanasius was a deacon who led the battle against Arianism, a heresy in the early church that questioned the divinity of Jesus Christ.

One of Athanasius' most famous sayings is: "Christ became one of us that he might make us what he is." In other words, Christ became human that we could become Christ-like. These words of Athanasius take us beyond participating in a mundane religion of following rules and fulfilling duties to avoid personal sin. Athanasius calls us to something much more profound and beautiful. He calls us not to "pray, pay and obey", but to be Christ, to be the best we can be, to be the best that ever was and ever will be.

Today's Gospel vividly illustrates human response to the call to be Christ-like in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Contemporary scripture scholarship does not see Jesus waving his hands over a few pieces of fish and bread telling them to clone themselves. While God could undoubtedly do that kind of magical deed, something greater happened on that day so long ago. The people in the crowd were traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. They had to have food. Jesus called people to be like him, to be the best that they could be and each of them shared the food that they brought for themselves. By pooling their resources for the benefit of all, everyone had enough to eat and there was food left over.

The first donor of food was a little boy. He gave five loaves of barley bread and a few fishes. Barley bread was the cheapest bread one could obtain. It was the bread of the poor. The fishes were undoubtedly small and pickled as fresh fish was a luxury. Jesus took little from a little boy and produced much, calling out the best from the people in the crowd.

It is difficult to know for sure what really happened on that grassy spot near Bethsaida nearly two thousand years ago. But perhaps the miracle was one greater than changing the loaves and fishes into enough for all to

eat. Perhaps Jesus changed the hearts of selfish people who would have hoarded food for themselves, perhaps he changed their hearts to want to share with all.

Could it be that the story that scripture tells us is a story of Eucharist? Could it be that Jesus took the simple bread of one little boy and changed it into something that helped to change the hearts of many? Just as Jesus needed the offering of the little boy, he needs what we bring him. He needs for us to bring him ourselves. He doesn't need much to work with as he didn't need much to work with at Bethsaida. If only we bring ourselves to the altar of service in the name of Jesus, there is no limit to what he can do for us, with us and through us.

Eucharist is action as well as a substance. The crowd that day was Eucharist because of their sharing. We too become Eucharist because of what we do in Christ's name. (talk about how each person present is Eucharist).

When we come to the table of the Lord tonight and always, we receive a small piece of bread and a sip of wine, a gift that is small in size but is large in what it enables us to do. It is what gives us the ability to do what Christ does and be who Christ is. Perhaps the dismissal at the end of Mass should be "Our celebration is complete. Go out into the world and be Christ to others."

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30. DISCIPLES ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Two disciples were walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the afternoon of the third day. They left Jerusalem to get away from the circus-like atmosphere of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. As they walked the road, they did what we probably would have done. They recounted the stories of all of the things that had just happened, trying to make sense of all of it. They talked about Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, they remembered in detail the horrible death of Jesus at the hands of the Roman soldiers they thought that he had come to vanquish.

Retelling these stories shook their faith terribly. They did not see how the man they thought came to redeem Israel could really be their savior. They could not get their minds off of what they had witnessed and kept talking about it. Can you imagine the sort of mood they must have been in as they headed for an unknown future in Emmaus? They were in shock, they were very sad; they were deeply depressed all at the same time. One might have said to the other, "We had hoped he would be the one, but it looks like we have been let down badly this time." Just as all of their hope had been lost, Jesus came into their midst but they did not recognize him. And once again, in their discouragement, they recounted the details of the last few days.

But the stranger, who was Jesus, brought the two disciples out of their deep despair by making sure that they understood that Christ had to die in order to truly live and give hope, healing and life to others. With their hope restored, they invited the stranger that was with them to share in their hospitality. This act allowed them to fully recognize the Christ who had risen in their midst.

The disciples were set on fire with new hope, with new zeal. They could not wait to run all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others that Jesus truly was the Messiah, that he had risen. They knew beyond a doubt that Christ had risen and was among them.

But, what of us? The road of our faith journey is paved with many challenges to our faith. Our journey may be littered with crushed dreams, with best-laid plans that have gone wrong. But, as with the disciples on their journey to Emmaus, Jesus is walking that road with us. Jesus is present to us each time

we hear the Word proclaimed. Jesus is present to us when we receive him at the table of the Lord. Jesus is also present to us in the people in our lives. We know some of the people that are Christ to us, but he also comes to us in the form of strangers, people that we would never guess could be Christ to us.

Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we need to recognize the risen Christ in our lives. But, are we open to seeing Christ when he stands before us in the form of a person who does not fit our image of what our Savior should be?

St. Symeon the Younger, a sixth century Syrian ascetic, clearly tells us who Christ is: "We are members of Christ, and Christ is our member. And my hand, the hand of one who is the poorest of the poor, is the hand of Christ and the foot of Christ. I move my hand, and Christ moves, who is my hand. For you must know that divinity is undivided. I move my foot and my foot shines as he shines. Do not say this is blasphemy, but confirm this, and adore Christ who has made you in this way. For you also, if such is your desire, will become one of his members.

And so all the members of each one of us will become the members of Christ, and Christ our member, and he will make all that is ugly and ill-shapen, beautiful and well-shaped, in that he adores it with the spender and majesty of his Godhead. And we shall all become gods and intimately united with God, and our bodies will seem to us immaculate, and since we have partaken of the semblance of the whole body of Christ, each one of us shall possess all of Christ. For the one who has become many remains the one undivided, but each part is all of Christ."

My sisters and brothers, will we recognize Christ when we encounter him on the road of our life journey? The even more important question is: Will we be Christ to others who we encounter in our lives. How wonderful our lives would be if each person saw Christ in every other person and treated that person accordingly. We could then truly live as people of peace and hope.

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31. **HINDU WHO READS THE SCRIPTURES**

There is a story about a Hindu seeker who decided to read Christian Scripture. He did this on his own and sought no help to interpret what he was reading. He was so fascinated by the story of Jesus Christ, his works and his suffering, in the Gospels that he continued reading the Book of Acts with real excitement and belief. He was impressed with Acts, the book we just heard the beginning of, because of what the disciples thought and taught. The Hindu recognized that these early Christians, the Church, took over where Jesus Christ left off when he ascended into heaven. The Hindu is said to have gone to the bishop of the area in India where he lived and said, "I must belong to the Church that carries on the life of Christ."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all could share the enthusiasm of the Hindu about carrying on the work that Jesus Christ started? The first sentence of the Book of Acts begins with "My Dear Theophilus." Theophilus is Greek, meaning, lover of God. Luke may have been writing to a specific person named Theophilus, but it is more likely that he is addressing all lovers of God; the early Christians, the Hindu, and future generations of Christians including us.

Prior to his ascension into heaven, Jesus tells the disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, they will be his witnesses to all of the ends of the earth. In different ways, the first reading, second reading and the Gospel address what Jesus calls us to do after his earthly departure, the continuation of the work that he started. Jesus addresses, not only his followers in the early church, but he addresses his followers in every age including ours. He is addressing his Church that lives to carry on his work.

In the second reading, the letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us of our baptismal responsibility and suggests that there are a number of different jobs in Christ's church. Each of us is being called to one or more of these jobs with an ultimate goal of building the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Paul's calling remains ever so critical in our own time.

I was reminded of this by an article in the last Florida Catholic describing the commissioning of pastoral ministers last weekend at the cathedral in Orlando. The director of the program was quoted as saying that there needs

to be much more lay involvement due to the shortage of priests. This was really off the mark. Whether we are ordained clergy or not, we are called to do the work of Jesus Christ ---- period, end of story. Some of us do it in the church, some of us in our workplace, neighborhood, in our family and in our world or in any or all of these places.

In the early Church, the qualifications for being an apostle were to have known Jesus Christ and to have witnessed his resurrection. It is obvious that within a generation there could be no more apostles. Yet, we are the apostles of today when we have seen Christ at work in our lives and we have, ourselves, experienced the power of the risen Christ. We can only teach about Christ when he has been at work in us. We are evangelists who tell the story of Christ by how we live our lives. We are prophets when we stand up against injustice and evil in our world. We are pastors or shepherds when we lead others to Christ.

Each of us is called to ministry and all of our work is needed for the health of the body of Christ and to build the Kingdom of God. While Paul's letter looks at ministry by specific title, the Gospel calls us to more functional ministry. The church has a preaching task. Each of us is compelled to tell the story of the good news of Jesus Christ through word and through action. We are called to be healers, healers of body and healers of mind. We are called to be people who can cope with whatever life has to offer because of our belief that Christ will heal us.

The best news of the Gospel is that we are never alone. We are Church. Although Christ has risen, he is still present, working through us and in us so that we may build the Kingdom of God on earth and, like himself, enter the Kingdom of God in heaven. In a story about Jesus Christ's return to the Father, he entered heaven, and an angel said, "Lord Jesus, did you accomplish the work of the Father on Earth?" Jesus replied, "I got a start but I left a number of dedicated women and men to finish the work for me." The angel said "Do you have an alternative plan just in case?" Jesus replied "I have no other plan."

My sisters and brothers, let us pray that we can have the enthusiasm and belief in the work of Christ, of the Hindu seeker and the understanding that each of us is necessary to build of the Kingdom of God.

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32. FEAST OF PENTECOST

Today, the Church celebrates the feast of Pentecost, which was a Jewish harvest festival for several thousand years before Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples. Pentecost, like Passover, was a holiday when observant Jews came to Jerusalem to celebrate God's goodness.

The Jewish Pentecost also celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Pentecost was not a new holiday, just as the Holy Spirit was not a new deity presented for the first time by Jesus. The Spirit of God is mentioned seven times in Hebrew scripture starting in the book of Genesis.

In Jewish tradition, the Spirit of Yahweh is the life-giving energy of God that comes upon people to give them the strength and wisdom to live according to God's will in their everyday lives. The spirit was present when the angel Gabriel asked Mary to bear the son of God. The Spirit was present and descended in the form of a dove when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River.

We believe in a triune God. It is easy to believe in the Father, the creator as there is creation all around us. It is easy to believe in the Son, Jesus Christ, the redeemer. Hebrew Scripture proclaims his coming. Christian Scripture tells his story. It is simple to grasp the significance of Christmas --- the birth of Jesus, and of Easter --- his resurrection.

However, it is much harder to really understand where the Spirit, the sanctifier, fits into our understanding of who God is. Similarly, many find it easier to see Pentecost only as the birthday of the Church. That can be explained simply. It is hard to tell exactly what happened on that first Christian Pentecost.

Luke describes the event in the first reading from Acts, but he was not an eye witness. He tells the story as if the disciples suddenly were able to speak in all kinds of foreign languages. That seems unlikely because those in Jerusalem at the time spoke Aramaic or Greek. It is more likely that they were speaking in tongues, not a foreign language but a language of

unintelligible sounds that some throughout time have been gifted with speaking.

It is more likely that on this first Christian Pentecost that the presence of the Holy Spirit allowed the Word of God to penetrate the hearts of each person present. They then could receive a simple message of God's love that penetrated every heart and continues to hopefully penetrate our hearts today.

In the second reading, Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirit such as wisdom, faith, healing, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues and others. The gifts of the spirit are not limited to just the ones that Paul speaks about. Every single gift we have comes from God. It is the Spirit working inside the artist, musician or surgeon that brings their talent to fruition.

Paul also compares the Body of Christ to the parts of the human body. Each part, no matter how lowly, is critical to the function of the entire body. It is so with our individual talents and gifts. Every once in a while, for example there is an article about the garbage collectors going on strike and how it paralyzes a city. That tells the importance of the job of the garbage collector.

Our society tends to look up to those who have higher profile, higher paying jobs while we often don't give a second thought to those who have low paying jobs. Parents often try to push children into following the family in professions that they have no aptitude or passion for. People often show little respect for those doing what we consider to be menial jobs.

There is a story about an elderly man who approaches Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the famous nineteenth century poet and artist. The old guy had some sketches and drawings he had done recently that he wanted Rossetti to take a look at and tell him if they were any good. Rossetti looked them over carefully and told the old man as gently as possible that they showed little talent. Rossetti felt bad but would not lie to the man. The man was disappointed but seemed to expect Rossetti's judgment. He then apologized for taking the artist's time but asked him if we would mind taking a look at a few more sketches done by a young art student. Rossetti agreed to look at them and became enthusiastic about the talent they revealed. "These," he said, "are good. The young student has great talent and must be given every help and encouragement in his career. He has a great future if he will work hard and stick to it." Rossetti could see that the old fellow was deeply moved

and asked "Who is this fine young artist, your son?" "No," said the old man sadly. "It was me forty years ago. If only I had heard your praise then! For you see, I got discouraged and gave up too soon without developing my talent."

God has given each person born into the world a talent. It is the Holy Spirit that inspires us to follow our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit that brings God's creative power to life in us, the life that is important to all of the Body of Christ. The Jews have celebrated Pentecost for centuries to thank God for the fruits of the Spirit. We celebrate Pentecost to celebrate the fruits of the Spirit that resides in each of us.

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33. BEATITUDE—BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED (SUFFERING)

A common thread runs between the first reading and the Beatitude in the Gospel, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you because of me.”

This common thread is suffering. Suffering is an integral part of every Christian’s life; probably one cannot be human without suffering. If you watch the TV program Biography, after a few episodes, it becomes obvious that most of the people who you think must have storybook lives have experienced much suffering.

In the early Church, becoming a member could only bring suffering, be it emotional, social, financial and physical. When one family member became a Christian, he or she was shunned by the rest of the family. A Christian could hardly have table fellowship with pagan friends because each meal began with pagan ritual in one form or another. Christians working in various trades could suffer financially if they refused to be part of constructing buildings for pagan worship or crafting items or clothing that would be used in pagan ritual. Finally, the Roman government put men and women to death in brutal, horrendous, and unthinkable ways simply for being Christian.

Very few of us get through life without suffering in one way or another. Most of you are aware that I had surgery four weeks ago to remove a malignant mass from the upper half of my left kidney and in about another four weeks I will have my right kidney removed. The worry and fear before the surgery was much worse than the pain and inconvenience of the recovery. I know deep within that this was meant to be a sort of a learning experience for me. I know I learned to let go. I was in a situation where I had no control and could only have faith that God would bring me through somehow. I learned what it was like to be dependent on others during the time it was difficult for me to get out of bed on my own and to depend on others when I couldn’t drive. I think that when I start visiting the hospital again, my relationship with those I visit will be more than ministry; there will be a kinship because I have been there myself. I know that God will reveal the purpose of my illness so that I can use my experience for the benefit of others.

The first reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians tells us that as God comforts us in our suffering, he is equipping us with what it takes to comfort others. When we suffer, we are sharing in the suffering of Christ. When we comfort others in their suffering, we are sharing in the work of Christ. The purpose of comforting others is not to take away their suffering, but to help to give the other the necessary courage to cope with what life brings. It is said that without the cross, there is no Christianity. It can also be said that without experiencing suffering and without comforting others who suffer, life has not been lived.

There is a Hindu proverb; "He who has come through the fire will not fade in the sun", which tells us how essential suffering is to becoming who God calls us to be.

The Boulder Dam was built in a huge project that was meant to transform a dust bowl into fertile land. Many people died during construction. Their names were included on a plaque with the inscription "These died that the desert might rejoice and blossom like the rose."

In his letter to the Hebrews, Paul said "Because he himself has gone through it, he is able to help others who are going through it." My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us accept experience of the suffering and sorrow that comes our way so that our experience will enable us to be Christ to others.

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34. MEALS – JESUS AT LAZARUS HOUSE

Imagine a big rambling two-story house, built for a large family many years ago. The kitchen is huge, with plenty of room to prepare meals for a large extended family. The room echoes with the clatter of pots and pans and the sound of conversation, people joking with each other, everyone having a great time enjoying each other as they go about the tasks of preparing a festive holiday dinner.

Then imagine the entire crowd gathered around a huge dining room table. There were many chairs. It seems that they never knew how many people there would be. Many members of the large family were expected as well as friends who dropped by or strangers invited by one of the adult children or other family members. All were greeted joyously and made to feel like members of the family. There was always plenty of food to share.

The meal was never hurried. Nobody seemed to be in a rush. Conversation was relaxed and interesting. No one interrupted the person speaking, but everyone really listened. People shared themselves. The conversation seemed to go on forever. No one rushed off when the meal ended. The group of people gathered, some close-knit family, some friends, and some who never knew each other before, reluctantly began to leave in the wee hours of the morning after helping to clean up after the meal.

Perhaps you can't recall a meal or other social gathering in your life when people were so reluctant to break up. But it is likely that you had a hard time tearing yourself away from a celebration of a holiday, a birthday, an anniversary of some other special event celebration that was a special connection to one or more of the people you love.

The community of friends, family and strangers who become friends, around that great table in the big house is a good image of what church should be. It is an image that we should be able to easily associate with the scriptural Jesus. Reading or hearing scripture, it is easy to get the impression that Jesus bummed meals off his friends frequently. "Yo, Zacchaeus, I want to eat at your house tonight." Then he was invited to eat by Martha and Mary.

Hospitality was an integral part of Middle-Eastern life. We remember that the disciples encountered a stranger on the road to Emmaus and the stranger joined them. When they stopped for a meal they came to recognize the Risen Christ as they ate and talked. It is intentional, not coincidental, that Jesus frequently deals with people over food. Meals are not simply for fueling the body, but for bringing people together to find a meeting of their minds and mingling of their spirits. It is a time of community, of common unity.

In his book, With Burning Hearts, Henry Nouwen observes that when Jesus enters the home of his disciples, it becomes his own house. When Jesus is invited for a meal, the guest becomes the host. Jesus saw a meal in a very simplistic manner. What else can you do with friends at a meal but take the food and bless it, break it and give it.

The table is life's greatest symbol of hospitality. We make room at the table for our guests, serve them generous portions, and invite them to have more. Jesus said that we don't live by bread alone, but we also cannot live without bread. Jesus is the host to all and when we come to his table, or for that matter our own tables, we should never come without the poor in mind. We should remind ourselves that the poor and hungry of the world need to be invited to tables of real food. In our lives, can we make room at our tables for all?

It is particularly relevant on the Feast of the Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, that we ask ourselves whether we build walls or tables. Do we build tables for all to gather around or walls of prejudice, judgementalness and exclusivity? It is hard to believe that in recent history, particularly here in the South, that non-whites were not only excluded from equality at the Lord's Table, but from equality in the church itself. They had reserved seats in the very back rows or in the balcony. They had to wait until the white people received the bread of life before they could receive the sacrament of unity. Even though we are all one in baptism, we could not come to the table together. Thankfully, these days of institutional segregation are over.

But, what do we do as individuals? Do we welcome all to the table? Do we come to the table bringing with us the needs of others? Do we welcome strangers in our midst and make friends of them? Do we accept the challenges of multi-culturalism and accept inclusive liturgy and community social events?

In the Gospel today, Mark speaks of a very special meal, the celebration of the Jewish Passover. It is much more than a traditional Jewish celebration when it is viewed in the Christian context. Jesus once again became the host. He took the bread and wine, common things on a first century table and common things on our table today. He took these common things and lifted them up into a new meaning. He made them sign and symbol of himself, which has become the central symbol of worship in all mainline Christian churches.

It is in the Eucharist that we find God in our lives through the presence of Christ. It is in the act of receiving the Eucharist that our lives are united with the life of Christ and we become the living Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, we go into the world to continue his work.

When we come to the table to meet Christ, we come desiring to be like him. That means we feed ourselves to follow him wherever he leads to build the Kingdom of God. We call others to table rather than to build walls. Communion creates community because God is living in us. We are given the ability to see God alive in our fellow human beings and welcome them to a table where there is always community, there is always love, there is always acceptance and there is always room for all.

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35. JESUS ON NOT BEING JUDGEMENTAL

In today's Gospel, Jesus commands us not to be judgmental. Probably Jesus is the only person who has never been guilty of misjudgment and each of us has probably suffered from someone else's judgmentalness. Yet, none of Jesus' commandments are probably broken or neglected as often as this one.

When Jesus spoke against being judgmental, he was using words that were familiar to most Jews. The rabbis warned people about judging others by saying, "those who judge their neighbor favorably will be judged favorably by God." Jewish belief said that six great works brought people credit in this world and profit in the world to come. These works are study, visiting the sick, hospitality, devotion in prayer, education of children in the Law, and thinking the best of others. The Jews knew that being kind in judging others is nothing less than a sacred duty.

Yet, history, as well as our daily lives, are full of negative judgments that we shouldn't be making. Collie Knox, a British World combat pilot who was badly injured in an accident while flying on a combat mission, tells that story about he had attend the decoration ceremony for gallantry, of another flier at Buckingham Palace. The two of them changed from the military uniforms into civilian clothes and were having lunch together in a famous London restaurant. A young woman, assuming that they were draft dodgers, came up to them and gave them white feathers, the badge of cowardice.

There are three important reasons why we should not judge others. First, we do not know the circumstances of the person we are judging. The novelist, Mark Rutherford, wrote a story about a man who married a woman who had a daughter in her teens. The man could find nothing he liked about his new daughter. She was sullen and he judged her to lack any kind of attractiveness. When his wife became seriously ill, the daughter took over her care. Nursing her mother gave this young woman purpose and self-esteem. She began to feel so good about herself that she glowed with beauty.

The second reason not to judge is that it is impossible for us to be completely impartial. We bring our own experiences, preferences and beliefs to bear when we judge others. It is said that when the Greeks held a particularly important trial, it was held in darkness. This way the judge and jury could only form opinions based on the facts they heard and not anything else. Only an impartial person has the right to judge. Can we be perfectly impartial?

Jesus gave us the third and most important reason why we should not judge others. He tells us that only God can judge others because only God is completely faultless. If someone were to draw a cartoon of a person with a wooden plank in his eye trying to remove a small sliver from another person's eye, it would probably drive Jesus' point home with a bit of humor. The energy we each put into judging others would probably be better spent on improving ourselves. Although we have often heard this commandment of Jesus, because we are human, we will probably continue to judge.

We are taught from an early age to be critical, and sometimes wary of others. We are not likely to stop this way of thinking, but we need to learn to keep it in check. Judgmentalness leads to criticism. When criticism is constant and unloving, it can reduce the recipient's self-esteem to nothing.

A child of God, rather than living to their highest potential can be cruelly made to feel worthless. In contrast, think for a moment what kind of world we could live in if every person put their judgments aside? If every person encouraged each other person to use their gifts?

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36. GOD'S LAW TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Today's readings have a common theme; that religion should be based on the laws of God and that man-made rules, tradition, and ritual can come and go, but the laws of God are unchangeable. The core of God's law is to love God and love one another.

There is discontent among many Catholics who grew up in the pre-Vatican II church. The way Mass was celebrated for 450 years changed dramatically. But, the core beliefs of the church have not changed. The same core of God's law and our belief in who Jesus Christ was and what he was about have not changed one bit. Yet there are those who believe that the pre-Vatican II Tridentine Mass appeared the day the Christ was crucified and did not change until the mid-60s. Our liturgy and ritual have changed and will continue to change for the life of the church.

Often the discontented proclaim proudly, "I am a traditional Catholic." Yet, the church is striving to go back to its true roots and traditions from the times described in the Acts of the Apostles; a time when individualism was secondary to the good of the community. These days were far different from the church of the Council of Trent. Worship was in the language of the local people. Liturgy was adapted to the culture and mentality of the people. But far more important, people took the "love one another stuff" very seriously. Church communities were not stamped out using the same cookie cutter.

In his remarks at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John the 23rd said, "that the task of the Council must be to find ways which the Church can present itself to the world today and reach into the hearts of men and women." This is precisely what the first century church did. This is what Jesus called us to do.

In the first reading Moses reminds the Hebrews that they need to follow God's law and must not add to or subtract from that law. He was telling them that God's law is unchangeable; that the commandments must be followed. Between the time of the Ten Commandments, which really boil down to two, love God and love one another, the Jewish elders came up with hundreds of sayings and practices that over time became laws that were given the same importance as God's commandments.

When Jesus spoke the words that we heard in the Gospel, he was telling the people that all of these rules do not matter, it is following the two great commandments of love that we are called to. For example, following the dietary laws and putting forbidden foods into our mouths that were considered illegal then did not displease God. But, when we speak words of hate, envy, inconsideration, and hurt, then we are violating God's commandments.

The use of the example of washing of hands before eating is symbolically very important. The Pharisees that Jesus was speaking to made a great show of acting out all of the trappings of being holy where everyone could see them. Jesus was chiding them and really saying that the front they were putting up is not what is important, but it is the cleanliness of heart, the purity of their love for God and neighbor that mattered. The discussion of the essence of what Jesus said came up over and over in the early church. Keeping Jewish ritual would have hindered the growth of the Church as most gentile would be converts would not have become members of the Body of Christ if they had to accept the hundreds of Jewish laws.

In the second reading from the letter of James we hear that God cares more about our actions than our following of rituals. James very clearly says that we must do works like take care of the needs of widows and orphans and not indulge ourselves in things that society tells us we must have or have to do. If we are not seen doing the actions that Christ called of his followers, but merely going through the motions of the rituals of the Church, we are no better than the Pharisees whose hearts Jesus was trying to convert.

There is a story about a cat at an ashram. When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshippers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died, the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the guru's scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is being performed.

My brothers and sisters, we need to look at the cats we tie up, the unnecessary rituals of our lives, so that we can cut the ropes and have more capacity to love God and love one another.

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37. BOOK OF WISDOM – SELFISH AMBITION

All three readings today challenge us to live a lifestyle that is far different from what the world around us calls us to live. The first reading from the Book of Wisdom not only prophesizes the death of the Son of God, but warns us that we need to be on guard against societal forces that keep us from growing in holiness and relationship with God.

In the second reading, St. James starts by condemning selfish ambition and jealousy; passions that cause us to aggressively pursue what we really don't need and in some case, what is not rightfully ours.

In the Gospel, we see that the disciples are more concerned with who will be in charge when Jesus is gone. They are more concerned about their power and influence than they are about the death that Jesus is facing. Jesus states that the greatest person is the one who puts themselves last and serves others.

Sadly, we have not learned much in 2000 years. Society still influences us to chase the wrong things. Wealth, power and the latest style still seem to prevail over peace, mercy, gentleness and justice. The very institutions that came into being for the healing or enjoyment of God's people have become big business or otherwise corrupt. Medicine has become a huge business and healing is secondary. Professional sports, once entertainment for all, should be an example of good sportsmanship. Instead, it has become big business and tickets are priced out of reach for most working people. Many of the star athletes who should be good examples for our youth are committing criminal acts.

Our church is caught up in horrendous scandal because of the acts of a few. Why? Because the Holy Trinity many worship today is not Father, Son and Spirit, but me, myself and I.

Thousands of years ago, in the Book of Wisdom, we were warned about letting society cause us to stray from God's ways. Two thousand years ago, James gave the same warning and tried to guide us in the right direction with the eight attributes he used to describe God inspired wisdom. The first attribute James uses is pure, which at one time meant going through the

physical ritual cleansings. But it also means that people with true wisdom have minds that think holy thoughts that are cleansed of all ulterior motives.

The second attribute is peaceable. True wisdom can only exist when there are right relationships between people. It contrasts with arrogant wisdom where clever and cutting words are used to make one person appear superior over another.

The third attribute can't really be described in one word. The wise person does not judge by the strict word of the law, but by compliance to the spirit of the law. The truly wise person extends kindly consideration when judging others' behavior.

The fourth attribute is the ability to hear God's call and to obey. It is a willingness to put aside rigidity and yield when it is the right thing to do.

The fifth attribute is willingness to show mercy towards anyone who is in trouble regardless of whether their trouble is from their own doing or not. Mercy yields good fruit when practical solutions are offered to those in trouble. Christian mercy is action as well as emotion.

The sixth attribute is being undivided or constant in doing the right thing, the Christian certainties of following the great commandments of loving God and loving one another.

The seventh attribute of true wisdom is to be without hypocrisy. This is never to pretend to be what one is not or to act a part to achieve personal ambitions.

Finally, true wisdom always tries to reap the harvest of righteousness through the sowing of good seeds. James says that peace can only be achieved when right relationships exist between people. Therefore, righteousness can only be had when people spend their lives working for right relationships. The person who causes harm to personal relationships, who is responsible for strife and bitterness can never receive the reward of those who live their lives in God's ways.

James is clear that wars and all forms of conflict in the world come from people putting aside true wisdom to try to achieve selfish personal goals. When people strive for wealth, power, possessions and prestige, life

becomes a competitive arena where people will resort to negative behavior to win their personal goals. Competitive behavior shuts down prayer and communication with God when one is willing to do anything to get ahead rather than to listen and do the will of God.

We see this behavior in the Gospel when the disciples ignore Jesus and the pain that he will have to endure on the cross in order to haggle over who is the greatest. Jesus summarizes the eight attributes that James gives in one sentence when he tells the disciples that the greatest is one who has no selfish ambition, who puts themselves last and others first.

At the end of the Gospel, Jesus uses the example of the little child as an analogy. The little child represents the helpless, the poor, and the person who needs. Jesus says that if we are to serve him, these are the people that we must serve. We should not be cultivating the friendship of people because they can help us achieve our ambitious goals, but we should cultivate the friendship of Christ by serving the least of his people.

Today's Scripture gives us a great deal to think about regarding our motives and behavior. A true story from South Africa during the apartheid era brings to mind Christ's teaching on who should serve who. It was common at this time for whites to tell black people, even those that did not work for them, to do menial tasks. A black man was standing outside of a post office, when a white man, a judge, approached him and told him to go into the post office to buy some stamps. The black man refused this order. "Do you know who I am?" asked the judge whose face was turning red with anger. The black man responded, "No, I do not know who you are. It is not necessary to know who you are because I know what you are."

My brothers and sisters, do we know who we are? Does Christ know us as true followers?

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38. REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT

Today's Gospel speaks to rewards and punishment. It tells us that any kindness shown or help given to any person of Christ will be rewarded. This begs the question, who is a person of Christ. The answer is that any person, whether they believe what we believe or not is a person of Christ.

The reason for helping anyone is that each of us, no matter who we are, is important to Jesus Christ. Jesus reached out to everyone, saint or sinner, healthy or sick, rich or poor, powerful or outcast.

We, too, are called to be present to the needs of all of God's people. All of us can't do great things, but we can do the simple things that any person can, such as give the cup of water to the person who is thirsty.

A missionary teacher tells a story about how she taught a group of primary school girls about Jesus calling us to give the thirsty a cup of water in his name. She was sitting on the verandah of her house when into the city square came a group of native bearers. They had heavy packs. They were tired and thirsty when they sat down to rest men of a different tribe from another area. If they had asked a non-Christian native for water, they would have been told to go find it themselves because of the dislike and distrust between the tribes.

But as the weary men sat there resting, the teacher saw a line of tiny girls emerge from the school. On their heads they had pitchers of water. Shyly and fearfully, they approached the tired bearers, knelt and offered their pitchers of water. The bearers were surprised but took the pitchers, drank the water and handed the pitchers back to the little girls who ran back to the teacher and said, "We have given thirsty men a drink in the name of Jesus."

The little girls clearly understood the simple kindnesses that Jesus calls us all to give to one another. Showing kindness towards others sets an example that draws people towards Christ.

As there are rewards for answering the call of Jesus that brings people to Christ, there are punishments for those who lead people away from Christ into sin. In the first century, one of the methods of execution was to tie a

criminal to a large millstone, a millstone so large and heavy that it took a beast of burden to turn it, and criminal and millstone were thrown into the water. There was no escape.

The following story illustrates that God is not hard on the sinner, but he will be stern to the person who makes it easier for another to sin, and whose behavior, either through thoughtlessness or deliberately, puts obstacles in the paths of a weaker brother or sister that result in their learning to sin.

The playwright, O. Henry, wrote a story about a little girl whose mother was dead. Her father used to come home from work and sit down and take off his jacket and open his paper and light his pipe and put his feet up on a footstool. The little girl would come in and ask him to play with her a little bit because she was lonely. He told her he was tired, to let him be at peace. He told her to go out on the street and play. She played on the streets. The inevitable happened; she took to the streets. The years passed on and she died.

Her soul arrived in heaven. Peter saw her and said to Jesus, "Master, here's a girl who was a bad lot. I suppose we send her straight to hell?" "No," said Jesus gently, "let her in. Let her in." And then his eyes grew stern. "But look for the man who refused to play with his little girl and sent her out to the streets. Send him to hell."

Only the most evil people deliberately lead others into sin. People like Fagan, the adult who controls a band of thieving children in the musical *Oliver*, are few and far between. It is more likely that we are inadvertently like the father who is indifferent to how our actions impact the lives of those around us.

We are part of a society that is heavily influenced by the media, especially television and movies, which glorify a lifestyle that most people can never obtain through honest work. Wealth and possessions are made more important than love and integrity. Some who can't possibly attain "things" by working for them, get them through dishonest means. Violence is made into entertainment. Children learn to be violent rather than to be kind and loving. Or children are left to their own devices because parents put work first in order to obtain things.

Relationship also takes a back seat to having a good time. The game of musical beds among celebrities catches everyone's interests and little admiration is shown for the couple who grows old together. Why do we hear

more about Ben and J Lo breaking up than about those who serve the poor? Bad news and tragedy sells newspapers, most people don't buy newspapers to read about heart-warming events.

It would be possible to spend the rest of the year and then some talking about the many ways that society pulls us away from Christ. But the bottom line is that we need to be vigilant in our lives to truly love those who are loved by Jesus and put aside selfish desires.

Think of how the world would be if we all lived like the little African school girls rather than like the indifferent father. Mohammad was quoted as saying "Putting a lost man on the right road, giving a thirsty man a drink of water, smiling in your brother's face --- that too is charity." We know those simple kindnesses are much more than charity; they are the bread of life.

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39. STORY OF THE RICH YOUNG MAN

In today's Gospel, we heard the story of the rich young man. Probably this young man is typical of most of us Americans. We may not consider ourselves to be rich, but by the standards of most of the world, we are extremely wealthy.

We are like the rich young man in so many ways. He kept the Ten Commandments. We keep these commandments as well. We don't lie, steal, kill, and commit adultery just as the rich young man didn't. But, what about the things that we do in our lives? Do we love?

The Jews of the first century, like many fundamental Christians today, saw wealth as a reward for being good. Possessions were considered to be signs of Goodness. Yet, Jesus was being very counter cultural when he told the young man that he had to give up everything he had if he wanted to become a follower of Christ. Is this what is expected of all of us? After all, it is possible to walk away from everyone and everything and follow Jesus. The disciples did that very thing.

The story of the rich young man appears in three of the Gospels. It does not appear in the Gospel of John. This is an indication that this encounter between Jesus and the man did indeed happen and was not a story that was inserted by a Gospel writer. So what was Jesus really asking of the rich young man and what is Jesus asking of us today? If the ideal is that everyone in the world follows Jesus, and if everyone in the world divests themselves of every possession, there would be no economy.

First, the young man came to Jesus in a great show of piety and emotion and threw himself at Jesus' feet. There are times in our faith journeys when we are emotional, but our commitment to following Christ should be made at a very rational, non-emotional time in order for it to be sincere and well-conceived. Although I was overcome by emotion at my ordination, my discernment was serious and rational.

Second, the young man did follow the commandments but Christianity is a faith of action not a faith of just abstinence from sin and simple personal morality. Christian action calls us to be constantly open to what God calls us to and to proactively do the work of Christ. Are we content to sit back and behave ourselves by not bothering anyone else, or do we give of ourselves to touch the lives of others?

Finally, Jesus saw the danger of prosperity and materialism. Protecting what we have and the quest to acquire more forces us into choosing priorities not consistent with loving God and loving our neighbor. We think more about building our own kingdom on earth rather than building the Kingdom of God. There are things in life that are priceless, that money can't buy. Prosperity and materialism cause us to put ourselves above others. It is a real challenge to use prosperity for the good of the people of God when the natural effect of prosperity is to make humans arrogant, proud, self-satisfied and worldly.

The Christian goal in life is not financial prosperity, but salvation. There are wealthy self-made men and women, but spiritual prosperity cannot be earned by humans, it is a gift from God.

The story of the rich young man is not calling us to sell everything we have and live in poverty. It is not telling us that we cannot enjoy comforts in life and that we cannot have possessions. The story is arguing against raising comforts, possessions, wealth or power over others to a level where these things become God in our lives. The two great commandments are to Love God and Love Neighbor. There is no commandment to love wealth or love power.

I would like to end with the story of Yussif the Choker, a championship wrestler in Europe several generations ago. After winning the European Championship, he came to the US to wrestle our champ, Strangler Lewis. The Strangler was a little guy, he weighed 200 pounds compared to the 350 pound Choker. The strangler got his name from how he defeated much larger opponents. He would get his arm around the larger man's neck and cut off his oxygen. Many opponents passed out in the ring with Strangler Lewis. The Strangler had a major problem when he wrestled Yussif the Choker. You see, the Choker did not have a neck. His head sat directly on top of his massive shoulders. Strangler Lewis could not get his arm around the huge head of the Choker. Soon, the Choker had flipped Lewis to the mat and pinned him down.

After winning the championship, Yussif demanded the five thousand dollars in gold. He wrapped the championship belt around his vast waist and stuffed the gold inside of it. He boarded the next ship back to Europe. He was a real success. He had captured America, her glory and her gold. Half way across the Atlantic, a storm struck and the SS Bourgogne began to sink. Yussif went over the side, the belt full of gold still strapped around his body. Before they could get Yussif into a life boat, he started to sink like an anchor. The weight of the gold was too much. He was never seen again.

It is easy for us to hear this story and think “What a fool! He should have had more sense than that.” But the truth of the matter is that we all tend to grab on to things of the world, even while we are sinking. We really need to ask ourselves if what we strive for is in the end consistent with how God calls us to live.

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40. ON THE JERICO ROAD

The Gospel we just heard has Jesus on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover, passing through Jericho. As is the custom, Jesus is teaching his disciples as they walk along the road. The road is lined on both sides with people on the street to catch a glimpse of the radical teacher from Galilee who has been teaching that to love God and to love one another are the greatest commandments.

Bartimaeus was sitting at the northern city gate when he heard the approaching crowd. When he asked what was going on, he was told that Jesus was approaching on the road. Bartimaeus began yelling out to Jesus. The crowd Jesus was teaching was offended and tried to silence Bartimaeus, who kept yelling even louder. Jesus asked that Bartimaeus be brought to him and the beggar jumped up and, threw off his cloak that contained the coins he received from begging so he could more easily run to Jesus.

This story of Bartimaeus' blindness is not only physical blindness but is a metaphor for the spiritual blindness that we all suffer in different ways at different times. Although physically blind, Bartimaeus was spiritually sighted. He knew full well who Jesus was, addressing him as Son of David. He had full faith that Jesus would cure him. He was persistent in his calling out to Jesus. When Jesus called him, Bartimaeus did not say, "I'm busy begging, or I will come after lunch." Jesus called, Bartimaeus responded immediately.

When Jesus gives Bartimaeus his sight, it was more than a gift of physical sight. Obviously, Bartimaeus received spiritual insight also because he didn't just say, "see you later Jesus." He showed his gratitude by becoming a follower of Christ himself. Bartimaeus starts with need, goes on to gratitude and finishes with loyalty. That is a perfect summary of the stages of discipleship.

This little story is anything but simple. It leaves us with significant questions to answer about ourselves. Who do we identify with? How are we like the disciples who proclaimed to be followers of Christ, but tried to keep the blind beggar --- the epitome of who Jesus calls us to reach out to --- at arms length? Do we see Christianity as an exclusive club of members who just talk

about doing good? Do we go to church to pray to a homeless man on Sunday but show disdain for the homeless and make no effort to help them during the rest of the week?

In 2001, Larry Davies, a Christian writer, published some statistics collected from a survey of church-going Christians. 70% of this group never or rarely encouraged someone to believe in God. 45% never or rarely talked about their faith. 64% rarely prayed. And, 77% rarely read Scripture. Yet, these were people who considered themselves to be active Christians as much as the disciples who tried to push Bartimaeus away considered themselves to be followers of Christ. Are we, then, like Bartimaeus who had such a strong faith that he was willing to do anything to personally ask Jesus for health. Are we persistent, vocal, undeterred and unyielding in our faith? Probably most of us fall somewhere in between the disciples and Bartimeaus.

The story ends with two miracles not just one. The obvious miracle is the restoration of the blind man's sight. The second miracle is the fact that Bartmaeus, when his sight was restored, didn't just go out into the world to make his fortune. He followed Christ on the road to Jerusalem, on the road to the cross.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe in the sun that has risen. Not only because I see it, but because I see everything by it." Lewis accurately named the spiritual insight that Jesus gave to Bartimaeus. Do we see our entire lives through the teachings of Christ?

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41. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

When we think of the extraordinary things Jesus had been doing, we cannot be surprised that the Jewish authorities asked him what right he had to do them. At that moment Jesus was not prepared to give them the direct answer, that his authority came from the fact that he was the Son of God. To do so would have been to hasten his demise. There was more work and more teaching to be done.

It sometimes takes more courage to bide one's time and to wait for the right moment, than it does to throw oneself on the enemy and invite the end. For Jesus, everything had to be done in God's time; and the time for the crucifixion had not yet come.

So, using a very Jewish technique, he countered the question of the Jewish authorities with a question of his own, one that placed them in a dilemma. He asked them whether John's ministry came from heaven or from men, whether it was divine or human. Were those who went out to be baptized at the Jordan responding to a human impulse? Or, were they in fact answering a divine calling?

The dilemma of the Jewish authorities was this. If they said that the ministry of John was from God, then they had to admit that Jesus was the Messiah. If they denied that John's ministry came from God, then they would have to bear the anger of the people, who were convinced that John was the messenger of God.

For a moment the Jewish chief priests and elders were silent. Then they gave the lamest of all lame answers. They said, "We do not know." They condemned themselves because it was part of the duty of the Sanhedrin, of which they were members, to distinguish between true and false prophets. By claiming ignorance, they were saying that they were unable to do their job. Their dilemma drove them into a shameful self-humiliation.

There is a serious warning here. There is such a thing as the deliberately assumed ignorance of cowardice. If we look for the easy way out rather than an answer that is true --- Not "What is the truth?" but, "What is it safe to say?"

We are driven to a cowardly silence where lamely say, "I do not know the answer," when we do know the answer, but are afraid to give it. The true question we must always answer is not: "What is it safe to say?" but, "What is it right to say?"

There are many times in our lives when we could avoid difficult situations by pretending ignorance and remaining silent. But, we only honor God and ourselves when we speak out in difficult situations. When we speak the truth, God will help us to prevail in the long run.

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42. MARY'S JOURNEY TO ELIZABETH - ADVENT

In the Gospel, we heard about Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth. As Catholic Christians, we are people of journey. Unlike some, we do not believe that we are saved for once and for all at one life defining moment. We believe that each moment of life is part of a faith journey. Although we are always on the journey, the Church blesses us with two very special time periods each year, Advent and Lent.

One aspect of our journey may be a trip to visit loved ones. This often is the case during the holidays or at other important times in our lives as Mary made the trip to visit her cousin Elizabeth while she was carrying Jesus.

Journeys can be difficult. In 1991 my wife Karen and I went on a Holy Land pilgrimage with a group of other Catholics. We went in February when the prices were good because not many people want to put up with the cold; and it can be cold at the higher elevations such as in Jerusalem. We visited many interesting places, often churches built on the traditional sites of biblical happenings. Sites where it is believed, but not known for sure, where the events we read about in Scripture were thought to have happened. It is hard to imagine the difficulty of anyone making the walk from Nazareth where Mary lived to a mountain village outside of Jerusalem, Ein Karem, where Elizabeth lived.

I can imagine the walk from the main road into Ein Karem to the Church of the Visitation. It's built at the traditional site of where Elizabeth was thought to have lived and where John the Baptist was thought to have been born. It was up a very steep hill and must have been a very difficult walk for a pregnant woman. We stopped in Ein Karem at the end of our trip, everyone was tired, and the flu was running rampant on our tour bus. The elderly, the sick, the tired and the lazy, and I count myself somewhere between tired and lazy, stayed at the Ein Karem pastry shop at the bottom of the hill.

The pastry and coffee were great on that cold day, but I always have regretted not making the journey to the top. I doubt it makes a difference in the grand scheme of life whether I visited the Church of the Visitation, but there are some journeys that all of us, for one reason or another, we choose

to avoid; journeys that would be beneficial to our human and spiritual development.

How many of you have seen the movie "About Schmidt?" It was an interesting movie and full of the unexpected starting with the fact that Jack Nicholson played the sanest person in the movie rather than the craziest or most bizarre as he usually does. About Schmidt is truly a story of Advent, as Schmidt took journey to salvation. In fact, each of us, in our own way, has journeyed in the same way that Schmidt did. For that matter, there are similarities between the journeys of Warren Schmidt and Mary, the mother of God.

Schmidt is an assistant vice president in an insurance company. When he retires, he realizes that he has been in a rut for a long time and his life has not amounted to much. He sees an infomercial on television and decides to help a six-year-old orphan in Tanzania by the name of Ngudu. When his wife of 42 years dies, his life routines fall apart and he begins to write to Ngudu. His letters are like his journal. He expresses his joys, anger and shortcomings and a lot of other things that one normally wouldn't say to a six-year-old. This includes his reaction to an infidelity he read about in some letters left by his wife. He does a lot of self-searching in spite of his anger at the man, a good friend of his, and he realizes that his own failures contributed to the situation.

Schmidt begins a trip to Denver for his daughter's wedding. When he was to arrive too early, his daughter, with whom he has not had a good relationship, asks him to delay his arrival. So, he decides to revisit places from his past. This gives him a lot of time to process his life and realize his mistakes. He explains much of this in his letters of Ngudu, including his forgiveness of the friend involved with his wife.

When he finally gets to Denver for his daughter's wedding, which he is not happy about, besides the fact that he doesn't like his future waterbed selling, crazy son in law, he finds that his daughter is marrying into a bizarre family of unique, eccentric people. Although Schmidt was mortified at what he found in Denver, he came to the realization that he couldn't change his daughter and had to accept her situation if he wanted to maintain any kind of a relationship with her.

After Schmidt returns home, he finds a letter from a missionary sister in Tanzania saying that Ngudu didn't know how to read yet, but she reads the letters to Ngudu, I assume leaving out large parts of what was written. With the sister's letter was a picture drawn by Ngudu of a man walking hand in hand with a little boy. Schmidt realizes for the first time in his life that he has really helped another person and in return, he has received salvation, through a child, and he feels good about himself.

Schmidt was at a crossroad in his life when he retired and his wife died. He could have chosen other directions that would have had different results. Mary, too, was at a crossroad when God asked her to bear his son who is our salvation. This is what Advent is about. It is always a time when we are at a crossroad.

Do we choose the right direction to bring Christ into our lives in a deeper way thus bringing Christ into the world? Do we surrender to God's will as Mary did? Do we follow the paths that Schmidt did --- the paths of forgiveness, reconciliation, accepting others as they are? Do we decide to make a difference in the lives of others? What other types of journeys do we have to make for our own good. Or, are we content with sitting in the pastry shop instead of making the difficult journey of life?

My sisters and brothers, our Blessed Mother Mary and Warren Schmidt lived their Advents to the fullest. The world changed for the better because they did. What are we doing to live Advent in our lives?

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