

DEACON JACK RHINE HOMILIES – 2009 – 2013

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Homily 20090308 (3-8-2009)

1. 2nd Sunday of Lent Cycle B – Feast of Transfiguration

Today, as always on the Second Sunday of Lent, the church celebrates the Feast of the Transfiguration. We understand that a great mystery happened. God changed Jesus' whole appearance from what must have been dirty robes, certainly stained with road dust and other things, to a radiant, pure white. God did this in front of great long dead prophets, Moses and Elijah, from Hebrew Scripture. Jesus' disciples Peter, James and John were also present. At the transfiguration of Jesus, as at the baptism of Jesus, God's voice boomed out with the messages that Jesus was his son and God was well pleased with him.

We get a sense from this often-told story that the word transfiguration means some sort of change. If we look for words that mean the same thing as transformation in a thesaurus, some of the more relevant means are transformation and conversion.

On that mountain top, two centuries ago Jesus' appearance was changed, he was transformed and he was converted into someone who appeared much differently from his natural state. After the moment had passed, his disciples that were present wanted to preserve the event, but it was not to be physically preserved for any period of time. But, seeing God's love in the transformed body of Jesus certainly made a lasting impression on the disciples that strengthened the power of their vocations and their love of both the Father and the Son. This event must have also given Jesus more of the needed strength to continue to walk his journey towards his crucifixion.

The big question of the day is, "What does this miraculous event of the First Century call us to do in our lives?" There is a story of a little girl in a church with beautiful stained glass windows. The priest asked the little girl what a saint was. She replied, referring to the stained glass windows, "a person who lets the light through." We believe that all of us have the potential to be saints. We are in our lives, saints under construction. We are called by our God to transfigure each other.

During January and February of this year and of last year, 2008, Public Television featured a documentary called Colorblind. It is about a public elementary school social sciences teacher and how he transforms the life of his students. Have any of you seen Colorblind?

The story takes place in the inner city during the Detroit racial riots in the 1960s. The teacher, Mr. Bell, is an African American, and the majority of the students are Anglo Caucasians and many came from homes where prejudice existed. Mr. Bell had a very loving open dialogue with the members of his class. He transformed them. They fully understood concepts such as solidarity, which means that we are all members of one human family regardless of racial, cultural or other differences and that we all have responsibility for the quality of each other's lives. Mr. Bell made them understand that when confrontation is necessary,

it must be done through non-violent means. He trusted his students enough to listen to them and respond to them.

The documentary shows that he created a class of elementary school children that were able to understand concepts like solidarity that many adults do not grasp. There was true transfiguration that produced young people that could live Colorblind lives without racial and cultural prejudice. Mr. Bell, taking an active role in the transformation of his students sets the example for his students to transform others much in the way that God transformed Jesus and Jesus, in turn, transformed his disciples who continued to work to convert the hearts others until they ultimately died for their ministry. Most of us have had transformational people in our lives who have had great influence on our becoming who we are today, hopefully for the better.

We are called to have a positive influence on all we touch whether it is a result of ministry, other service, love or fellowship. We cannot give into judgment and be selective about whose life we will influence.

The U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops, in their pastoral letter, *A Century of Teaching* said, "We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic economic and ideological differences. We are our brother's and sister's keepers. In a linked and limited world, our responsibilities to one another cross national and other boundaries. Violent conflict and the denial of dignity and rights to people anywhere on the globe diminishes each of us ... This is the contemporary expression of the traditional Catholic image of the Mystical Body." In one sentence, what the bishops said is that each of us is responsible for the transformation of all.

Just as Mr. Bell had to have had some students in class that were more difficult to reach than others, Jesus had disciples who tougher nuts to crack. He frequently reprimanded Peter, the rock on which the church was built. Likewise, can we give up on and refuse to be a transformational power in the lives of people who we find to be difficult. We never know the full extent of transformational power. The driving force behind Colorblind is a former student of Mr. Bell. She said that she received many letters and emails from black people who said that because of her work, they could learn to love white people.

We are made in the image of God and are called to do his work. Jesus humbly said that he was leaving people behind who could do greater things than he. It takes a great deal of strength and energy to be an example or influence in the lives of all we encounter.

We have not been left without a gift that will give us strength to perform transformational service for others. We are given the Eucharist and the Church teaches us that this great gift is in three forms.

First, Eucharist is given to us in the Word of God. Sacred Scripture is full of encouragement and examples of ordinary people who have done extraordinary things. Scripture gives us transformational inspiration and strength. Second, Eucharist is given to us in the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. It

nourishes us and gives us the capability of transformation that makes us more Christ like. Finally, Eucharist is given to us in the form of the worshipping and serving community, the people who worship with us and come forward to the table of the Lord with us. Being in community together for a divine purpose gives us strength and support for our journeys to our own conversion.

Eucharist is more than just something that we receive, It is what we become.

We are still in the early days of Lent and have the opportunity to commit to acts of growth and service that will transform us and help us to be an instrument of change for others. May we use this holy season to the fullest to transform our own lives that we may be a positive influence on other people of God. Let us pray for our sainthood, that we will be the source of light shining through to all around us.

Homily 20090628 (6-28-2009)

2. 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle B

There is a story about a circus ringmaster who made a standing offer because he thought he was the strongest man in town. He offered a one thousand dollar reward to anyone who could squeeze the last drop out of a lemon. The ringmaster would squeeze a lemon until all of the juice ran into a glass. Then he would hand the lemon to a contender. Anyone who could squeeze out just one more drop of juice would get the thousand dollars. Many people would come up and try. There were cowboys, body builders, iron workers, baseball players, wrestlers and more. One day a short, frail looking woman who looked older than her years came up to the ringmaster and said in a thin, faint and squeaky voice, "I can squeeze your lemon."

Everyone in the place started laughing. The ringmaster said, "OK", and grabbed a lemon and without even cutting a into it, started squeezing the juice into a glass. He handed the wrinkled remains of the lemon to the tiny woman. As the hysterical laughter subsided, the woman squeezed three more drops into the glass. The surprised ringmaster handed over the thousand dollars to the woman and said, "How did you do that. Countless men have tried and couldn't get a drop out of the lemon. What do you do for a living?" She said, "Nothing to it. I am a single mother of three, work three part time minimum wage jobs and constantly have to squeeze something from nothing so my family can survive."

The first time I heard this story, the person doing the squeezing was an IRS Auditor. That version was certainly funnier, but today there are so many people today, like the single mother, who are trying to get by on next to nothing. This makes the story tragic rather than humorous.

In the Second Reading, St. Paul, in his letter to the Christian community in Corinth, was trying to gain continued financial support from them to help the Christian community in Jerusalem who were being persecuted and financially squeezed by the Jewish community. The Christians were expelled from the synagogue and ostracized socially because of their beliefs. Their businesses were boycotted, laborers lost their jobs and survival became very difficult. Survival of the Christian community of Jerusalem was dependent on the generosity of other Christians.

The reading we heard starts at verse seven of Chapter 8 of Second Corinthians. In the first verses of this chapter Paul describes the generosity of the Macedonian Christian community towards their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Paul is saying: We want you to know of the grace of God that has been given to the churches of Macedonia. Even though they were profoundly poor, because of their love for God, they gave extremely generously beyond their means and begged for the privilege of helping those in need in Jerusalem.

Not only was Paul writing to the Corinthians of the early church, he was writing to us. He makes the point that even though the Macedonians were financially strapped, they insisted upon doing their Christian duty by providing for others. They were willing to squeeze the extra drops out of the lemon because it was their calling from God. We too are called to squeeze more excess from our lives in order to answer God's call to help other members of the body of Christ.

In the second reading, Paul tries to get us to look at wealth in a different light. Wealth is more than the traditional measure of material and financial accumulation. Wealth is also a spiritual measure or an attitude directed towards the well being of others. Last month an article appeared on the website of McClatchy newspapers that spoke of the generosity of the poor. The bottom line was that the poorest 20% of Americans gave 4.3% of their incomes to charitable causes while the richest 20% of Americans gave 2.1% or slightly less than half. Which of these economic groups is truly wealthy?

Paul is associating wealth with God's grace. When that happens, the wealth of grace is much more than an accumulation of a resource. If God did nothing or gave nothing, there would be no grace. It becomes grace when it is manifested in gifts to us. Grace is much the same with us. If we accept every good gift that God gives us and do nothing to pass them on to others, then it is not grace. It's like the old cliché, "Love isn't love until you give it away."

Jesus himself is the prime example of grace as wealth. He lived in poverty, died a horrible death, and yet was so full of God's grace that he gave everything he possibly could to those in need who crossed his path.

Regardless of how little or how much we have, we are called by the example of Jesus and many others who have followed him to gracious giving not gracious living. Paul talks about creating equality among people by using one person's surplus to help others. He is not talking about equal distribution of wealth.

He is speaking of equality where all have the basic necessities of life; food, shelter, clothing and health. This kind of equality does not exist in our country or world today. Paul was trying to address this inequality among the early Christian communities. And we need to do something about it in today's world where at least half of the population of the world is living on two dollars a day or less.

Pope John the 23rd said that the litmus test of how well a society is doing is how the basic needs of the poorest of the poor are met. We Christians, of our country and of the world have a-ways to go by this test.

Poverty and unmet basic human needs are out of control. One person, even the wealthiest person in the world, Bill Gates, cannot muster enough resources to bring about the equality spoken of by Paul.

But, if there is hope, that hope only exists when Christ's whole church acts together. All of us have some part to play, different parts using different resources, our God-given gifts and passions.

We need to be aware of what the problems are and how our church calls us to create solutions. One way to see where we fit as Catholic Christian individuals is by participating in the Just Faith program that was started in our parish last year. A new group will begin meeting in the fall to study Catholic social teaching and how we might be God's instruments in our world. I participated in the first Just Faith group and for me it was a tremendous time of learning and of community with the other participants. More information on Just Faith and how to participate will be provided over the next month.

However, we choose to do it, each of us is called by God to provide support for members of the human family who are in need. If we truly understand that everything we have and everything we are comes from God, then we understand that as God has shared with us, we need to abundantly share with others. Sometimes squeezing that last drop we weren't sure was there.

May our gracious God, our example of overflowing generosity, Jesus and the Spirit of love and compassion that lives in each of us, move all of us to share all that we are and all that we have with the People of God.

Homily 20090816 (8-16-2009)

3. Ordinary Sunday 20 Cycle B -- EUCHARIST

Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you."

Statements that were attributed to Jesus, such as this one, have caused division and confusion ever since the first century. First among the Jews that the Gospel tells us argued with each other about what Jesus said. Through the years members of other faiths have questioned Christianity's belief in the substance of the Eucharist. Even today, many Christians see the Eucharist as only a memorial to the Last Supper and do not believe that Jesus is actually present in the Eucharist.

The Jews practiced animal sacrifice in the first century but did not understand that Jesus would be the supreme sacrifice. If they had understood who Jesus was and why he came to live as a human and how his life would end, they probably would have understood what he was saying because they did understand the theology that was behind animal sacrifice.

With animal sacrifice, the entire animal was usually not burned at the altar. A token part of the animal was burned. However, the entire animal was seen as a sacrifice offered to God. Part of the animal was given to the priests to eat and with the rest, the person offering the sacrifice prepared a feast in the temple precincts for friends.

God was also assumed to be a guest at the feast and it was believed that God entered into the body of the sacrificed animal. When the people at the feast left the meal, they also believed that they were filled with God.

We too are filled with God when we receive the Eucharist. The questions that we have to ask ourselves are "What does it mean to be filled with God? And "What does having God or Jesus within ourselves mean?" The Eucharist is not food for our earthly lives. If we were to attend daily Mass and receive the Eucharist and eat nothing else, we would starve to death. Eucharist is food for the heart, the soul, and the mind. It nourishes us to love with the heart of Jesus, to think with the mind of Jesus and to unite ourselves in spirit with all of our brothers and sisters.

We are successfully nourished when we receive the Eucharist and then become Eucharist, become Christ to others. Being Eucharist is what makes us truly and eternally alive.

We can't just leave Jesus as a literary figure in a book. The Jesus of Scripture is certainly an interesting Jesus, a historical Jesus, and an example of holiness. But just worshipping the Jesus of the book leaves him in the past, reduces his

relevance to our daily lives and does not ensure that he touches others. It is when we bring Jesus into ourselves and we do his work that we give him life in our time and our world. We become one with him when we are one with his purpose.

The simplest possible explanation of what the Eucharist calls us to do in our lives is that it is our call to discipleship. In the Gospel, Jesus says he is giving his flesh as bread for the life of the world. The life of the world is a powerful image that can bring many pictures to our minds. The world, as God made it, with all of its natural beauty, is a beautiful image full of majestic scenery and remarkable life. Another picture that can come to mind is one of pain, illness and wounded people living in the worst kind of poverty, victims of war, famine and worse, people that are simply indifferent to others.

It is this image of the life of the world that needs our attention. This image of the world is located in our world, right here in our country and in our neighborhoods; possibly next door to us or in our own families. It can include the poor, the sick, the discriminated against and even the lonely; all those who feel unloved.

The relationship between the Father and humanity has existed since the first human. That relationship has been manifested in Jesus and those he has healed and fed in his time. That relationship has come down through the ages to us. Caring for those who are suffering has been communicated through Scripture, through Church teachings and through the lives of many of the people of God.

We have a huge legacy of saints, many who have been martyred or have died young due to their discipleship, their being Eucharist to others.

Being Eucharist is not reserved for the saints. One does not have to be a member of an exclusive group or be ordained to be Eucharist. One does not even need to be a Christian to be Eucharist. There was an example of what being Eucharist is reported in the news this past week.

An elderly, poor woman living in New York City passed away. She was a Jewish concentration camp survivor who had been homeless, living on the streets, until a man and his wife got her into public housing and helped her financially to meet her basic needs.

She lived very frugally and repaid the couple who were her benefactors by moving their car once an hour so it didn't get ticketed. When the woman died, her benefactors were shocked not only to find a will, but that she had three hundred thousand dollars in the bank. According to the will, she left 150 thousand dollars to Hebrew University for medical research and left the remaining half of her fortune to charitable causes and to her benefactors.

This woman and the couple who befriended her are truly examples of being Eucharist. All three of them were Jewish and never had the benefit that we have of receiving the Eucharist. As Catholic Christians, it is our baptismal obligation to be Eucharist.

Receiving Communion at Mass in itself is no more than a ritual if it is an act that ends the moment we leave the church after Mass. Because we believe that we are taking Christ into our own bodies, what we have received only becomes effective when we act on it by bringing Christ to another person in a life-giving act of love. Being truly in communion with Christ is like the old cliché about love --- love isn't love until you give it away.

So, between now and when we receive the Eucharist this morning, let us recall Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Let's reflect on how we can bring our Communion with Christ out into the world to touch the lives of others this week, even if it requires some sacrifice on our part.

Homily 20090920 (9-20-2009)

4. 25th Ordinary B – Kingdom of God

In the Gospel we heard “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me,” which is expanded upon in the next chapter of Mark when Jesus says, “It is such that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” The most common interpretation is that our faith and trust in God should be modeled after young children, who by nature are trusting, open and joyful. Maintaining these childlike characteristics in our relationship with God is positive. But, the Gospel passage meant something entirely different to Jesus’ First Century audience.

Children in the First Century Mediterranean were the most vulnerable members of society. Less than half of the children born made it to adulthood. Famine and epidemics usually claimed children before any other age group. Children had no status in society or in the family. They could not own or inherit property while even slaves could. Of course, First Century parents loved and valued their children. Children were important to their parents in those days to support them when they were too old to work.

So, people knew that Jesus was using children to describe all of the most vulnerable members of society. He was telling his First Century listeners and telling us that the Kingdom of God belongs to even those who have nothing; no material goods, no power and no status. While Jesus presents the concept that we need to have compassion and care for the most helpless and needy members of society, the world tells us something very different that is portrayed by the evil voice speaking to us in the reading from the Book of Wisdom. The evil voice places individual pleasure over the common good and proclaims that “the just one” should be ignored, meaning that the strong take what they can and the weak are of no consequence.

This type of social and economic Darwinism, the survival of the fittest, seems to be the current wisdom of the world. Individual and corporate goals overshadow what is necessary for the common good. The second reading from the letter of James criticizes Christians who take an over active part in the worldly quest to accumulate resources, power and status. The comedienne and actress, Lily Tomlin once said, “Winning the rat race just makes me a prize- winning rat.” What a difference between being the prize- winning rat and inheriting the Kingdom of God!

As Catholic Christians, we live with a constant tension between what is good for us as individuals and what advances the common good. Much of the current national political debate is based on this tension. Each of us needs to apply Scripture and church teaching to come to our own decisions and opinions. Political polarization keeps common good, and often any good, from being achieved. Our gauge for what is right should not be the political, but the extent to that any action,

program or policy advances the Kingdom of God or injures the Kingdom of God. Individual gifts that use our skills, creativity and intellect should provide us with lifestyle benefits. As these gifts come from God, they also need to be used generously for the benefit of His Kingdom. We are called to sacrificial giving to advance the Kingdom. Each of us must be able to give something of our material resources, time, and always prayer for the sake of the common good.

Pope Paul the Sixth, in 1967, in his document “On Development of People,” wrote, “Let each one examine their conscience, a conscience that conveys a new message for our times. Are we prepared to support out of our pockets works and undertakings organized in favor of the most destitute? Are we ready to pay higher taxes for imported goods so that the producer can be justly rewarded? ... The superfluous wealth of the rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations and the needy of the world.” These strong words are not unusual in the teachings of the church. We are constantly called to love one another by caring for one another, especially the most vulnerable, and providing for the common good.

If we all lived for what we could do for others, rather than what we can get for ourselves, the magnitude of current economic problems would be greatly reduced. Jesus certainly lived and died this way and the Gospel calls us to the same. Jesus saw serving others as the ultimate ambition of life and through his words and deeds proclaimed that he did not come to be served but to serve others and encouraged us to do the same.

We are all familiar with the phrase, “it’s not what you know but who you know.” It is common to ensure that we are connected to those that can help us and in doing this we may overlook those we can help. Jesus uses the image of the child to describe the poor and vulnerable. Children normally are not in a position to do for others, but need others to do for them. Jesus is telling us that, rather than welcoming those who can serve us, that if we welcome the child, the poor, the ordinary, those that need something done for them, we are welcoming him and are welcoming the Father. Using our God-given gifts to enhance the common good is our highest calling.

In The Parable of the Apple, there was a man who had no food, no clothes and no home. God gave him ten apples. The man ate the first three and satisfied his hunger. He traded the second three for clothing to cover himself. He used the third three apples to get a place to live, to shelter him from the sun and rain. God meant the man to give the tenth apple to another person in need as a way for the man to thank God for helping him. The man saw that the tenth apple was bigger and seemed juicier than the other apples. The man, even though he was no longer hungry, decided that he would eat the tenth apple. So, he did and he gave the core back to God.

Each of us has a choice. We can give the leftovers from our lives to the Body of Christ, or we can give the best of ourselves, our material goods and our service, to those in need.

Homily 20091108 (11-8-2009)

5. 32nd Sunday Ordinary Cycle B – Widow of the Gospel

The Gospel contains two short stories told by Jesus that contrast how people approach the practice of their religion and also their approach to living life in general. Jesus first spoke of a group of Pharisees that misused their leadership positions. These experts in Jewish law who spent most of the time worrying about how others lived while not holding themselves to the same standard. They thought themselves better than others, expected to be treated with deference, and placed themselves in situations where they were noticed by the public and received preferential treatment. They frequently used their positions as religious leaders for personal gain. One of the ways the Pharisees did this was to take advantage of widows who no longer had their husbands to protect them.

One of their common schemes was to approach widows during the time of their extreme grief and get them to give up their homes and possessions for safekeeping. Things have not changed much since the First Century. Today we see abuse of power and expectations of preferential treatment. We live in fear of identity theft and other scams.

Jesus then speaks of the widow. In First Century society, widows were at the economic mercy of their families or in some cases, as I mentioned, they were at the mercy of those in power. Widows had no way to support themselves and sometimes became socially isolated. Any money a widow had was very precious to her. In the Gospel story, the widow had two mites, smallest of all coins that were worth very little.

She donated both of the coins, everything she had, to the temple. She gave out of her substance while most of us give out of excess. Our time, treasure and talent are all God given. As Catholic Christians, we have a moral responsibility to be wise stewards of what God has given us.

Being good stewards requires a certain amount of humility on our part. It requires us to put aside our wants, and maybe even some of our needs to put ourselves and our resources in God's service, which is not always easy to do. There is a story about a humble monk who was appointed abbot of a distant monastery. When the monk appeared at the monastery, he was not recognized and whoever was in charge had no idea that the newcomer was the new abbot. He was put to work doing manual labor and said nothing. The situation was not corrected until later when the bishop visited the monastery.

The newly appointed abbot is the opposite of the Pharisees Jesus speaks of at the beginning of the Gospel. He could be identified with the widow, because like her, he gave what he had without hesitation. The monk is an extreme example, but all of us need to move beyond our wants and needs to hear God's call and offer ourselves and our resources to be of service to God.

There are many ways and many places to serve God; in your families, in the larger community and in our parish community. The needs are great, particularly in our parish. As we know, during this month of November, we are involved in an initiative called “Grow, lead and share.”

We all continue to grow in faith through prayer, participating in Mass and attending formational programs such as Grace. It is a lifetime process. It is precisely that growth in faith that calls us to Christian action.

We are all called to lead in service. Being a leader is not always being in charge of people, projects or events, although every organization needs this kind of leadership. Christian leadership is also being a good follower, a good follower of Jesus Christ, setting a good example of Christian service. The widow spoke very loudly by what she did; in giving everything she had, she was a witness to us, who, comparatively have so much to give.

Our growth in faith also empowers us to share with love. We glorify the First Century Christian communities who made the decision to pool all their resources in the Acts of the Apostles that we read at Mass during the Easter season. They had great love and appreciation for their communities and for their church.

We are not being asked to make the commitment they did, but we are called to carefully look at how we prioritize our financial resources and our time while remembering that our abundance is a gift from God.

One of our priorities should be our parish. Like each of us, our parish is struggling with higher costs for most everything. A price cannot be put on the value of what we receive here; sacraments, community fellowship, worship where the Spirit is present, opportunities to grow in faith, and the list goes on.

In addition to financial support, our community needs everyone’s time, talent, and energy. We provide a large number of spiritual services and opportunities for growth. We have a small paid staff and depend on the gifts of all of us to serve our community.

The widow of the Gospel is an example for us to grow in faith, lead in service and share in love. She did that by giving everything she had. We have many examples at Our Lady of Grace of faith, service and love. Some are outreaches, such as the members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society who serve the wider community; the catechists who help us to grow in faith through Grace and other formation programs; the people who care for our buildings and grounds; the ministers that serve at liturgy, and more. The list of opportunities to serve is long and all our gifts are needed. We are all called to be examples, to our fellow parishioners, and to our children, especially Alexandra and Jayden-Luis who are being baptized today.

Let us pray that we can discern our calling. Creator God, life is your precious gift to us. Through baptism you invite us to share the gift of our lives in service to others.

Be with us as we choose each day to show your presence in our world. Give us the courage and generosity to joyfully respond to your love and your call.

May our parish bring the Good News to those in need. We especially pray for our young people that – with open minds and hearts – they may accept this challenge to make the world a better place. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Homily 20091208 (12-8-2009)

6. FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. In this celebration, conception does not have its normal meaning, the point when physical life starts. Instead, the definition of conception is spiritual; it's the time at which the soul is implanted within the body. So we are not celebrating the conception of Jesus with God as the father, but of Mary born without original sin. Simply put, Mary was born in the state that the rest of us achieved with baptism. Like us, Mary was not made exempt from sorrow, illness and death. Recognition of this special state of grace that Mary was born into is fairly recent in the history of the Church. Pope Pius the Ninth made an infallible statement, one of only two in the history of the Church, in 1854, on the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

There are two major themes in today's Gospel about the Annunciation. First, Mary's trusting, loving obedience to God's will, and, second; the unlimited power of God.

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, she must have been around thirteen or fourteen years old. According to Scripture she was confused about what the angel was asking. Obviously, she was old enough to understand about the birds and the bees because she said that even though she was betrothed to Joseph, she was still chaste.

Think about the situation she was being asked to put herself in. A single, pregnant woman had little place in first century society and pregnancy could have been disastrous to her relationship with Joseph.

Yet, in the end, she had enough love and trust in her relationship with God that she could be obedient to what she was being asked to do. Mary accepted God's will rather than try to change it to meet her needs. Trying to change God's will is a very human behavior that it is easy for us to fall into.

There is a story told that one day in heaven Jesus approached Peter who, acting in his role as admissions officer, was sitting at the pearly gates. Jesus complained about the quality of people that Peter was admitting into heaven, noting how many of them were of significantly questionable reputation. Peter responded, "I know Lord, but what am I to do? They come to me here and I turn them away. So they go around to the back door, talk to your mother and she lets them in."

Over the years of church history, Mary has become one of the most approachable and relatable figures of our faith. She has been proclaimed Queen of Heaven and many consider her Mother of all of us. Mary experienced enough hardships and tragedies in her life that almost every one of us can in some way identify with.

In saying yes to God, she made herself very vulnerable within her society and risked losing Joseph. She experienced the fear of most parents when she found Jesus missing on the way home from the temple. She lived in poverty. She was widowed at an early age and must have experienced great loneliness and sorrow as well as the low status associated with widowhood in the First Century. And,

most significant of all experiences that no parent desires, she witnessed the brutal death of her own son. What sorrow can we have possibly experienced that Mary did not?

We can relate to Mary through shared feelings with her in our own lives. It is a challenge for us, however, to emulate her in our lives. She was exalted by God to serve in a special way. I mentioned earlier that the Gospel is also about the unlimited power of God. He did the impossible in Mary. She had a baby without interaction with a human male. God can make the impossible possible. God did that in giving us Jesus and God has done that for us through the gifts he has given us including the gift of eternal life. Like Mary, we are called to answer God's call regardless of the hardship that it might impose on our lives. Mary saw herself as a servant. We should see her as the queen of the servants. She is there to love us and encourage us in anything we encounter in our lives. She is a model compelling us to do the same for others, even when it is difficult, inconvenient and even risky.

As we continue our celebration of the Season of Advent in anticipation of celebrating the birth of our Savior, let us pray that we can do in our lives what Mary did in hers. Let us remember her as she was when she said yes to God in Nazareth, as she was on the road to the stable in Bethlehem and as she was on Good Friday. Will we accept God's will rather than try to change it? Will we serve and love others in the image of Mary? Will we accept that God makes it possible for us to do the impossible?

Homily 20100123 (1-23-2010)

7. 3rd Sunday ordinary time Cycle A – First Disciples

In the Gospel, Jesus chooses people to be his first disciples. In choosing any group to perform a particular task, there are some criteria to use. If we were in charge of choosing the members of a basketball team, we would probably pick the tallest and most agile people among those trying out for the squad. If we were responsible for picking students to represent our school in an academic competition we would likely select the smartest, most intelligent members of the student body. If we were asked to create an in-house task force to upgrade our firm's computer system, we would look for employees with knowledge of hardware and software. We would pick people using specific criteria relevant to the task at hand.

In the Gospel, Jesus invites four fishermen; Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him as his first disciples. Obviously, there were more than just four people working that day along the Sea of Galilee. Why did Jesus invite those particular ones to come after him? He must have had some criteria in mind. He must have known that these four were open to his message; he must have believed they would be able to proclaim the Gospel and relate to others, he must have thought that like him, they too could be a light to those in darkness.

These four men were not the prominent rabbis of the day. They were not wealthy, powerful or prominent influential members of First Century society. They were ordinary people with ordinary jobs. These people who were very much like those who make up our community were people chosen by Jesus Christ.

But why did Jesus choose fishermen to be his first disciples? People in other occupations, such as shepherds, may have been at first look more relevant to the task of building the Kingdom of God. However, the metaphor of the fisherman speaks very clearly to the mechanics of kingdom building.

How many people like to fish? I remember fishing for perch with my dad in the San Francisco Bay as a kid. It was frustrating because we mostly caught bullheads and threw them back. When I got older, I used to like going to the mountains on a clear warm day with my lunch and a good book and hope that the fish didn't bother me by biting!

First, there are several ways to fish. One is by casting a line and catching a single fish. The other is to use nets that are dragged through the water with the hopes of catching numerous fish.

The Gospel calls us to be fishers of men, or in reality, fishers of people. Often we bring Christ to people and people to Christ one person at a time. But, there are also occasions when we gather with a community and bring each other closer to Christ. Mass is obviously one of these times, but there are many other times that this happens; when people gather in Christ's name for prayer, for learning, socializing and for doing service.

We are constantly evangelizing whether we speak or not. Evangelization is often not a comfortable word for us as Catholics because it is often associated with tactics that we generally don't practice such as handing out tracts on street corners or setting up revival tents. An evangelist, in the broadest definition, is someone who preaches the Gospel. The evangelist may use words, use actions, or simply show love and support by listening.

As fishers of people or evangelists, there are characteristics that we share with fishermen. First, like fishermen, we have to be patient. Fish don't bite as soon as the line goes into the water. Nor do people recognize Jesus and want to immediately give their lives to him on our say so. Development of spirituality can take a long amount of time. Fishermen know that there are times that are good for fishing and times of day or weather conditions when the fish just won't bite. The evangelist also needs to know that there are times to speak and times to just be silent and be there. The fisherman must have courage. They take risks. Sometimes they work in rough seas. The fisher of people too must have courage. Sometimes evangelists are rejected and may be ridiculed. Jesus told the disciples, when he sent them out two by two, that they may have to shake the dust of their feet and find another place where they are accepted.

Fishermen must choose the right bait. Different fish respond to different bait. While it may be crass to talk about bait and evangelization in the same breath, we know that different people respond to different approaches, We also need to have the wisdom to know our own limitations and understand when we may not be the right person for a particular situation. The fisherman must stay out of sight. Fish won't usually bite if they see the fisherman. The evangelist must also keep his or her wants and needs out of sight and only reflect the presence of Jesus.

Like Peter, Andrew, James, and John, we too have been called by Jesus Christ to follow him as members of His Church. We too have been called to be a light to those in darkness. We too have been called to be "fishers of men" who bring others to Christ. That call comes to all who are baptized, not only to the very small percentage of God's Church who happen to be ordained. The Lord chose us in the Sacrament of Baptism and he reminds us of that choice each time the Mass comes to an end and we are sent forth "to love and serve the Lord and one another."

We all have human weakness and are not immune from sin. Just like Peter, Andrew, James and John, Jesus Christ has chosen us to be part of his "team." We may not be aware of what criteria have been used by God in choosing us, but it is important for us to know that we each have gifts that God expects us to discover. We are called to use these gifts to serve God and one another. Like the first disciples who Jesus empowered to heal others and bring people to him, we are called by God to be ordinary people who do extraordinary things. With God, we have the power to find ways to do what seems to be impossible to us. As we receive the Eucharist this morning, let us pray that we are strengthened to find the patience, wisdom and courage to be the evangelists that we are called to be by our baptism.

Homily 20100205 (2-5-2010)

8. 5th Sunday Ordinary Cycle B – Free Will

Have you heard people say “If there is a God, how come there is so much misery in the world” or “How could a loving and merciful God let that innocent child suffer from a terrible disease or die at such a young age?” or simply “Why didn’t God give me what I prayed for?” Maybe at times we have asked these types of questions ourselves. Questions such as these certainly challenge our faith.

Today’s readings shed light on the answers to these questions, but the basic nature of our relationship with God also is part of the answer. God has given us free will and what we do with that individual free will impacts what happens to us and those around us. For example, if we make a decision to drive in a condition where our judgment and ability to react is impaired, an accident with potentially tragic results is possible.

Some also consider natural disasters as punishment by God or wonder how a loving God can allow loss of life and livelihood due to these events. While science understands what conditions cause earthquakes and storms to occur, it may not be clear what their purpose is in the cycle of nature. We know from our experience here in Brevard County that without forest fires, forests would die. Fires cause clearing of the forest floor by removing dead limbs and other natural waste to allow the sunlight needed for new growth.

The bottom line is that God does not generally interfere with gifts of free will or with nature. As God is the ultimate loving parent, God does not dole out horrible punishments. What good parent would? Like a good parent, God loves us no matter what we do or what difficulty we find ourselves involved in.

Sometimes it is difficult for us to find God in horrible situations. Even Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In the Gospel, when Jesus restores Peter’s mother-in-law to health, he was deluged with requests to cure people. The Gospel is clear that he cured many of the people brought to him, but nowhere does it say he cured all of them. We do not know how Jesus determined who he could or would cure, just as we don’t know how, why and when God gets involved in situations that we pray about. God certainly has a dilemma tonight with the Superbowl. Lots of people are praying for New York and lots of others, for Boston. I suspect God will sit this one out! We do know that we should not stop praying and that we may not always recognize the way in which God answers our prayers. The answers may not be what we want but what we need.

The Gospel also states that Jesus drove out demons but does not specify whether those he healed suffered from physical or emotional illness. In the First Century, illness of any type was associated with sin and driving out demons essentially removed sin. In healing people, Jesus not only gave them the gift of

restored health, but in many cases restored them to the community. In the First Century, people with major disabilities and illnesses were forced to live away from the community because they were thought to be sinners. Restoration to the community removed isolation and hopelessness from lives and returned the previously afflicted to the love of their families and friends.

There is a huge contrast between the hope filled Gospel and the first reading from Job. Job had been a wealthy man with a good life who lost everything and speaks of his misery.

We know that Job's misery was not the result of sin as he was known to be a righteous man. Although, Job was eventually restored to the comforts of his previous life and more, through the period of his misery and hopeless that he did not understand, he never blamed God or lost his faith in God. Job's steadfast belief in God and refusal to blame God for the difficulties in his life is a good model for us.

We live in a world today where there is so much misery, pain and need for healing and Jesus is no longer walking the earth to alleviate it. There is a story about Jesus' return to the Father after his life on earth. The Father said to Jesus, "You have fulfilled your plan to teach people how to love and care for each other. Do you have a Plan B in case what you have done fails?" Jesus replied, "No father, there is no Plan B. I left a group of followers to continue my mission."

By virtue of our baptism, we are part of that group of followers left behind by Jesus. It is our call to continue Jesus' healing in the world today. We are not called as individuals to heal the whole world. That is an impossible task. But, each of us, even if we cannot solve medical problems, is called to do something positive that will help another person to heal, increase their hope and relieve their isolation. With Lent coming in a few weeks, we are challenged to determine how we might give a bit more of our time, energy and love to the service of others for the forty days and as long as we are able.

In the second reading, Paul gives us a good example of how to serve others in Jesus' name. Paul tells us that he has no choice but to preach the Gospel. As Christians, we share that calling with Paul. Preaching does not always mean using words, it also means using action to serve others and set an example.

He refuses payment for his ministry. Payment might be financial for some but it may also be recognition for others. Paul also says that he must be everything to everybody. That does not mean he requires himself to make everyone happy. Certainly, Paul's letters chastising the communities he founded for sinful behavior isn't a source of happiness.

What Paul is getting at with that statement is that as a minister of Christ, he needs to be able to put himself in the position of all kinds of people in order to understand who they are and what they need so he can better serve them. The community at Corinth, as many of the other communities Paul founded, was diverse and he had to relate to and serve all kinds of people. He had to accept

people where they were and serve them as needed. We live in a diverse world and are called to do the same.

Both Paul and Job are good models for us. Paul because he saw the needs of everyone and tried to meet them as Jesus would have; and Job for his perseverance. Whether someone deserved to be served did not enter the mind of Paul or Jesus. What was important was human need and it is that need that we are called to serve. We all have days where we can relate to the way that Job felt. He shows us that it is possible to keep serving God despite our own suffering.

There is an expression that is sometimes used in the business world, “If you aren’t part of the solution, you are part of the problem.” Jesus worked hard to set an example to help all become part of the solution. When we become part of the solution, all of the questions about the existence of God become answered. Let us pray that we follow the examples of Jesus and Paul in our own lives so that the existence of God’s love and hope for all is obvious in our loving service.

Homily 20100307 (3-7-2010)

9. 3rd Sunday of Lent – Parable of Fig Tree

You may have noticed, there are two distinct parts of the Gospel. First, a discussion of the First Century Jewish theology that linked sin with suffering. And, second, the Parable of the Fig Tree that addresses forgiveness and second chances, a topic that is obviously connected to sin.

In the first part of the Gospel, Pontius Pilate rightfully decides that Jerusalem needs a new water system. When he decides to finance building the system from temple funds, a number of observant Jews are upset and they protest. Not to be obstructed, Pilate sends his troops, disguised as demonstrators, into the midst of protestors with clubs. At a predetermined signal, the troops were supposed to disperse the crowd of protestors, but instead serious fighting broke out and a number of people were killed. When construction of the aqueducts began, a tower in Siloam collapsed killing eighteen people. The Jews believed that there was a direct connection between sin and suffering. They assumed that the deaths due to the fighting and the deaths due to the tower collapse happened because of the sin of using temple money to fund the water project.

The reverend Pat Robertson proclaimed that the recent earthquake in Haiti was from the sins of the Haitians when they supposedly made a deal with the devil to gain their independence from France two hundred years ago. This is not logical from a Christian theological view of a loving and forgiving God, the ultimate loving parent.

When Jesus told the people that if they did not repent they would perish. He did not mean that they would perish at God's hand. He meant that if people did not change their lives and live by the Word of God, they would face self destruction. Jesus knew that if they continued to fight among themselves, plot against each other and involve themselves in rebellion, they were committing national suicide and that the Romans would destroy them. This is what happened in the year 70. And, Jesus gives us the same warning today that life is precious and precarious and that we need to pay attention to our relationships --- both with God and with others.

So, the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" has been demanding an answer since Cain killed Abel. We can only assume that philosophers are right when they speak of contingency, the fact that much of what happens to us is contingent on factors that are beyond our control. Some of these factors are a result of the free will of humans, some are a result of natural forces. What is important to us, is that God is always with us, even in the worst of situations.

Betsie Ten Boom, sister of the Dutch author and evangelist Corrie Ten Boom wrote of the brutality of the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she was frequently brutally beaten and finally beaten to death.

Her dying words are both simple and profound. She said, “We must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” Those words give us hope and assure us that God will be with us through the worst that could ever happen to us.

The Parable of the Fig Tree, in the second part of the Gospel, addresses hope as well as second chances, forgiveness and service to God and service to others. The fig tree was a common sight in first century Palestine. It was tenacious and grew in the poor and rocky soil that existed there. A fig tree took about three years to mature and bear fruit. The fig tree that is the subject of the parable had not produced fruit in three years, but the gardener asked the landowner to give the tree another chance, another year.

Forgiveness and willingness to give second chance, we can apply to our lives. Our God is willing to forgive us, time after time, for the mistakes that we make and we are called to do the same for others. We bear fruit by giving of ourselves. Again, the fig tree is a good example. The tree that does not bear fruit is a taker. It draws water and nutrients from the soil, but gives nothing back. The tree that bears fruit is a giver, and it gives more than it takes.

We could say the same about people. Pregnancy and birth are not easy. Ask any mother! There is risk involved to the mother who is giving birth. Although, in our day medical technology greatly reduces that risk, still, our mothers give a great deal so we might be born. We all come into the world in debt.

We are born into a world that others created and it is our responsibility to make this world better. Isn't that what Jesus called all of his disciples to do?

The self-destruction that Jesus warns of in the first part of the Gospel will occur when most people in a society take more than they are giving like the fig tree that does not produce fruit. Jesus is not warning the people who can't give back. He is warning the people that can but don't.

The parable of the fig tree also calls us to forgiveness and to give others a second chance, as the fig tree was given another year. Forgiveness is a way that we can all bear fruit and give back. God forgives each of us, and as we are called to live in God's image we are expected to forgive.

People have forgiven horrendous acts where bad things have happened to good people; often just because someone is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bud Welch's daughter, Julie, was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing. For six months, Bud was filled with rage and hate for Timothy McVeigh who planted the

bomb. He demanded the death penalty for the killer of his daughter. Then he remembered what Julie had said earlier about all of the executions in Texas. “Dad”, she said. “Those executions make me sick. All they accomplish is teaching people, particularly children, to hate. The murderers did wrong, but now the state has stooped to their level.”

Bud Welch finally recognized that another killing, that of McVeigh, would not help his healing process. He now opposes the death penalty. Bud Welch bears fruit because of his forgiveness and the way he modeled God’s love for all of us.

Abraham Lincoln said, “I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower may grow. We too are called to pluck weeds and plant flowers in our lives.

Homily 20100411 (4-11-2010)

10. **2nd Sunday of Easter Cycle C – Doubting Thomas**

In 1899, a Missouri congressman by the name of Willard Duncan Vandiver gave a speech at a naval banquet. During the speech he said, "I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me." Supposedly, Vandiver's statement begot the informal state slogan of Missouri, "the show me state."

This slogan does not mean that Missourians are slow learners. Rather, they are down to earth, practical people who do not easily take someone's word without some form of verification. People from Missouri are not unique, many of us are similar, and like Missourians, we want concrete evidence before we are willing to accept certain claims.

In the Gospel, we meet one of the most famous skeptics in history, the apostle Thomas, the man who inspired the term, "doubting Thomas." Although Thomas was not from Missouri, he too required verification of what others described; he was skeptical of the other apostles' story about Jesus' resurrection and required concrete proof. Thomas did not expect Jesus to be resurrected. He wanted to see and touch the wounds that were inflicted on Jesus.

The name Thomas comes from the Aramaic word for twin. Didymus means twin in Greek. Nowhere in Scripture does it mention that Thomas has a twin sibling. The opinion of many theologians is that Thomas is twin of all of us. We all have doubts and we all need real proof of some things. In this regard, we might consider Thomas our patron saint.

Skepticism is a good thing in many cases. Skepticism is a positive attribute when it comes to believing gossip and rumors. It is healthy to be skeptical when we hear bad things about other people and think about getting involved in get rich easy schemes and in racial and ethnic stereotypes. In much of daily life making good decisions and having good values depends on skepticism and good judgment.

The danger of skepticism is when we dig in and do not change our positions despite proof. Thomas did not dig in. As soon as he saw the physical proof of Jesus' resurrection, his enthusiastic testimony, "My Lord and my God," was a remarkable declaration in the divinity of Jesus.

Because we did not live in First Century Palestine, our faith comes to us --- not as it came to Thomas from Jesus himself, but from the words and deeds of others. We learn about our faith at home, in church, and from many examples and experiences in our daily lives. Thomas doubted the resurrection because he thought it was too good to be true. In our day and age, many who doubt their faith have an entirely different reason. They don't believe it relevant to their lives. Yet,

each time we hear God's word proclaimed and understand how it applies to here and now and each time we encounter God's love in our lives, the relevancy of our faith is affirmed.

The scripture that we hear at Mass during the Easter season is meant for the continued learning, not only of those who have just come into the church, but of all of us. The experiences of the early church that are proclaimed during Easter continue to be relevant to us over two thousand years later. No matter who and where we are in life, we are called to pass on our faith to others. Whether we are clergy or lay, young or old, well off or not so well off; regardless of what we do for a living, we have the responsibility of passing our faith on to others. Some people are given the gift of teaching. Some are called to be missionaries at home or abroad. But, each of us is capable of proclaiming Christ to others by living our daily lives in a faith-filled, compassionate and ethical manner giving generously of ourselves for the benefit of others.

Today's readings also emphasize that our faith exists and grows in community and as a result of being part of a community that is rich in faith. Much witness to faith occurs in community. Thomas was not with his community at the first post resurrection appearance of Jesus a week before when Jesus appeared to the apostles. Thomas was so upset by Jesus' death that he withdrew from his community. He likely would not have doubted their word if he had been there. He also would have had the comfort and love of his friends.

In the first reading, although Peter was a central figure, all of the apostles performed miracles within the entire community. We believe that God knows and loves us as individuals and gives us individual gifts to be used to benefit the entire community. God's concern is for all of us.

In the first century, as well as today, when a society values an exaggerated form of individualism, it lessens the impact that the Body of Christ might have for the benefit of all and clouds the message of faith that we are called to pass on to each other.

No matter what adversity we may encounter in our lives, we still are able to show Christ to others. In the second reading, John is banished to the penal colony on the Island of Patmos. Even while suffering imprisonment and separation from his community, John proclaims his faith through the letters he writes.

After the death of Jesus, the apostles divided up the world as it was known at the time. Each went to a specific region to minister, where it was intended that he would spread the Good News to the world. Thomas went to India and established the church there.

The story of how Thomas went to India is not told in Scripture. It is told in a book not included in the Bible called The Acts of Thomas where it is written that Jesus appeared to Thomas in a dream and told him to go to India. Thomas told Jesus, "Anywhere but India." When he refused, legend has it that he was tricked into going to India as was a slave and ultimately had a tremendously successful ministry establishing a church in Southern India.

Thomas could have saved himself a great deal of trouble had he just answered his calling. Like the apostles, we too are called to service and need to be attentive to our calling rather than being skeptical that we can make a difference in the lives of others. We are the present-day apostles. We have been commissioned by our baptisms and called by our faith to use our gifts to serve others.

Homily 20100507 (5-7-2010)

11. **Healing Mass – Feast of St. Peregrine**

This evening we are belatedly celebrating the feast of St. Peregrine. Peregrine is certainly a success story in the world of saints. He was a tough young man, a thug, and he hit St. Phillip Benizi when Phillip was trying to reconcile the residents of Forli, with the Pope. Peregrine must have been a very angry man, and Phillip's forgiveness healed whatever was going on within him. Peregrine was ordained a priest in the Order of the Servants of Mary. He lived simply and did penance by not sitting down for thirty years. As a result, he developed disease and ultimately suffered terribly from cancer in his foot, which was cured as a result of many hours of continuous prayer before a crucifix. Peregrine was well known as a confessor, and helped to spiritually heal others through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He is the patron saint of cancer patients, those with foot disease and other serious illnesses. We will be blessed with his relic tonight.

We often ask and here others ask why God allows Christians to suffer? That is an age old question and it is a logical one as well. The Gospel tells us that we only have to ask and we will receive. We are assured that our loving and merciful God hears our prayers and they will be answered. The Gospel speaks the truth, but there is no assurance that we will get the answers that we want. The assurance is that when we pray, God will answer.

In the reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks about the declining nature of the body. He tells us that the suffering of the body will pass and the joy of the soul is eternal; that is we live our earthly lives surrounded with illness and infirmity, our eternal life will be spent in the glory of God and his son Jesus. In the readings we have heard thus far during the season of Easter, we hear that Jesus has given his disciples the power to heal. We too are his disciples and we too are given that power. We have mostly given that power to the medical profession. We believe that God works through doctors and other professionals, but we also have to believe that God works through us and we certainly have the power to pray and to give love and comfort.

Arthur Gordon, in his book, *A Touch of Wonder*, relates a likely autobiographical story of a boy who had been stricken with polio at age three. This happened during the Great Depression and his parents, poor and overwhelmed, abandoned him at a New York City hospital. He was subsequently taken in by a foster family and was sent to stay with their relatives in Georgia when he was six. It was hoped that the warmer climate would improve his condition. Living on the relative's land in a dilapidated two room house was an elderly woman, the daughter of former slaves. She was called Maum Jean, maum being a Georgia dialect word for mama.

Maum Jean, took that 'frail, lost, lonely little boy' who could not walk without crutches into her heart. She probably did not know the word atrophy, but she knew she needed to massage his muscles to keep them in shape. She also probably did not know the word hydrotherapy, but she took him to a nearby creek where he could play in the water and exercise his body. For six years, she daily massaged his weak legs and administered her own hydrotherapy and encouraged him spiritually with her love, stories, songs, and prayers.

Gordon wrote, "Night after night Maum Jean continued the messaging and praying. Then one morning, when I was about twelve, she told me she had a surprise for me.

She led me out into the yard, placed me with my back against an oak tree; I can feel the rough bark of it to this day. She took away my crutches and braces. She moved back a dozen paces and told me that the Lord had spoken to her in a dream. He had said that the time had come for me to walk. 'So now,' said Maum Jean, 'I want you to walk over to me.'

My instant reaction was fear. I knew I couldn't walk unaided; I had tried. I shrank back against the solid support of the tree. Maum Jean continued to urge me.

I burst into tears. I begged. I pleaded. Her voice rose suddenly, no longer gentle and coaxing but full of power and command. 'You can walk, boy! The Lord has spoken! Now walk over here.' She knelt down and held out her arms. And somehow, impelled by something stronger than fear, I took a faltering step, and another, and another, until I reached Maum Jean and fell into her arms, both of us weeping.

It was two more years before I could walk normally, but I never used the crutches again ..." What joy Gordon must have experienced when he finally reached the loving arms of his Maum Jean. Undoubtedly the pain from his withered limbs must have been excruciating with every step that he took. Using muscles that simply were not stretched in such a way as to provide for supple movement, every twist of socket and slip of ligament must have amplified the pain. Yet, at the end of the walk there was a kind of joy that he had never experienced before. Through the pain he had achieved a peace that he had longed for but never had been able to achieve.

There is the worn, old expression. "No pain, no gain." There may be some truth in that, but the real truth is that when we put our suffering next to joy that we can vividly see the gifts of life that God so generously has given us. As we thank God for what we have been given, let us also live our baptismal calling, as disciples of Christ. Like Maum Jean, we are called to use the power of our love, to bring healing and comfort to others as we pray that God and others will bring healing and comfort to us.

Homily 20100508 (5-8-2010)

12. **Promise Mass – Order of Servites**

The Gospel, the love story of Jesus for his Father and his people, has an interesting twist today; it is about hate and hatred. Although hatred is not something that we desire in our lives, or something that God desires for us, hatred is indeed present around us and Jesus warns us about it in multiple places throughout the Gospels. People seem to distrust anything or anyone that is different and it is that distrust that brings on hatred.

The early Christians were different from both the Roman and Jewish society that existed in the First Century. The Jews were expecting the messiah to be a military leader like David and not someone leading a community who had new ideas that contradicted the law in all of its many details. The Romans did not like the Christians for another reason. The Roman Empire was a far-reaching conglomeration of many cultures. The commonality that held this empire together was worship of the Caesar. Jesus and his followers who would only worship God, were seen by the Romans as a threat.

The distrust of true Christianity, the Body of Christ, where all are accepted because they are creations of God; where difference in race, culture, social status, gifts and skills and all of the factors that make us unique do not separate people from each other, is still alive and well today, even among people who call themselves Christians.

The Gospel turns around commonly accepted and strong beliefs that exist among us and calls us from hatred and distrust to love. The Gospel makes true Christianity counter cultural and causes us to look at each other through God's eyes rather than our own. Things are not always as we want to see them.

There is a story that illustrates this point well. Carl was a proud estate owner who liked to ride his horse through his vast holdings and to congratulate himself on his enormous wealth. He came upon Hans, an old tenant farmer who was about to eat his lunch. Hans' head was bowed in prayer. When he looked up he saw Carl and said, 'excuse me, I didn't see you. I was giving thanks for my food.'

The rich man snorted noticing the brown peasant bread and cheese the old man was eating. He said, "If that was all I had to eat I don't think I would be giving thanks." Hans said, "My food is quite sufficient. But, it is a coincidence that you are here today because I need to tell you about a strange dream I had this morning just before I woke up." The old man said, "There was beauty and peace all around and I heard God's voice say, 'the richest man in the valley will die tonight.'"

Hans prayed for Carl as Carl rode away skeptical of Hans' dream and tried to forget it. But, yet, he could not forget about what Hans told him. He felt fine until he started thinking about the dream. He had felt fine until Hans had spoken with him. Now he was not so sure that he felt well. He got home at nightfall and decided to

send a servant to fetch the doctor, who was a friend, just in case. The doctor came right away and performed a physical on Carl.

The doctor told Carl that the dream was ridiculous and that Carl was as strong and healthy as ever. The doctor said, "Carl, there is no way you are going to die tonight. You are as strong and healthy as the horse you ride." Just as the doctor was closing his medical bag, an out of breath messenger arrived at the manor house door and cried. "Doctor, you have to come quick, its old Hans. He just died in his sleep." Again, things were not as either Carl or Hans saw them.

Possibly about the same time as Hans died, another story was taking place, this time, in Florence, Italy. Florence was a commercial city and life was fast paced. There were struggles for power both in the market place and in the church. There was partisanship that rivaled the partisanship that we see in our country today. Seven wealthy lay men decided that they had enough of the rat race and gave up their wealth and their lives of luxury to live a simple life of service and prayer under the guidance of the Blessed Mother.

The moved to another town, Caffagio, to further remove themselves from their lives. They did not want to increase the size of their group, but yet they attracted people. So they could further isolate themselves, the bishop gave them land atop Mount Senario.

Even then, while living as hermits, more people came and regardless of their church politics, which were tightly intertwined with civil politics, people were accepted by what had become the Order of the Servants of Mary. By this time, the charisms of the Order were hospitality, compassion and social justice with the Blessed Mother as their guiding light. The Servites, although they started out wanting to preserve their seven person group, began to see, not through their eyes, not through the eyes of the times, but through God's eyes.

The charisms of the order and the Servite's openness to seeing the world through God's eyes has come down through the almost eight centuries since the Seven Holy Founders set up shop in Cafagio. In a few minutes, during the rite of the Promise, we will pray the Servite Litany of the Saints.

My sisters and brothers, we are at the end of a long line of Servites who have been willing to look at our surroundings through God's eyes and live with love and compassion under the guidance of our blessed mother. There are many Servite saints who have gone before us, some recognized by the church, others just recognized by God. We too are preparing for that sainthood and today we welcome Saint Michelene of Palm Bay and Saint Don of Palm Bay to our Order.

We pray that with Don and Michelene and all of the Servites who have gone before us, that we continue the work of the Order accepting all who want to turn hate to love, indifference to compassion in the name of the Blessed Mother and the Holy Trinity. Michelene and Don, know that the prayers of the entire Order are with you today as you become known as Michelene OSSM and Don OSSM.

Homily 20100509 (5-9-2010)

13. **6th Sunday of Easter Cycle – Mother's Day**

Christmastime 1990 featured a movie called Home Alone and it was followed by three sequels released since. In these popular movies, an inattentive family goes off on vacation not noticing that they have left one of their children behind. The young boy is left alone with nothing but his ingenuity, which he uses to fend off a couple of reasonably incompetent burglars. Because it is a movie with a predictably happy ending, it does not cause us to ask ourselves the question, "What would it be like if I were left alone?"

In the Gospel, the disciples are on a bit of a roller coaster ride. They were devastated by Jesus' crucifixion. Then, they are at first fearful then overjoyed when they discover he has been resurrected. Now Jesus tells them that he is leaving and they believe that they will be left alone again.

Jesus has been there to provide guidance and an example for his disciples. He has kept at bay those who are a threat to the new and growing community. Jesus tells them that he will send an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to help continue the support and protection to the disciples that he has provided.

In the reading today from Acts, the church leaders from Antioch testified to the support that the Holy Spirit gave them at the council in Jerusalem in coming to a decision about which Jewish laws gentile converts we required to follow. It was obvious to these men that Jesus did not leave them alone to fend for themselves. They were able to derive strength and direction from the Holy Spirit working through the Church. We see the action of the Holy Spirit in the early church throughout the book of Acts.

If we look at the Church today, we see ourselves and other men and women who are limited by our own humanness. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that has kept the Church working in the right direction for over 2000 years despite errors of human thinking and behavior. It is the Holy Spirit that has transformed the people of God into the New Jerusalem described in the reading from Revelations.

In addition to the Holy Spirit, Jesus left us another gift, the gift of peace. If we look back over the past two thousand years and see all of the wars, all the fighting, all of the dissent, and even genocide, it makes us wonder what Jesus is talking about when he said he leaves us peace!

The peace that Jesus leaves us is not an external peace, it is an internal peace. It is a state of heart and a state of mind. An anonymous person said, "Our peace is not self induced, our anxiety is. Peace does not begin with us or end with us." Our peace comes from God and is meant to be passed on to others by our prayers and by our actions. This kind of peace allows us to pass through the difficulties of life without undue anxiety or negativism.

Dr. Spencer Johnson wrote a popular self help book a few years back called "Who Moved My Cheese." The book is about how to deal with inevitable change in

our lives. The cheese represents the things in life we have come to rely on. The main thrust of the book is not to spend energy on complaining about change, but instead to use the energy to adapt. Someone was quoted as saying about the book. "Let me save you twenty bucks. The book can be boiled down to five words; stuff happens, deal with it." It is the kind of peace that Jesus gave us that helps to adapt to change and helps us to live our lives with the certainty that God loves us and will care for us.

We are not much different than the First Century disciples to whom Jesus spoke in the Gospel. He gives us the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of peace today that he gave two thousand years ago. Jesus said that he was returning to God, to a state that is better than the earthly state that we live in. It is our destiny to go there as well. We ensure our destiny by allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us and by bringing the kind of peace that can only be found in Jesus to those around us.

As today is Mother's Day, it is also important for us to recognize that it was our mothers who did God's work of bringing us into life. To use the metaphor of moving our cheese, bring a new person into the family, one that will be dependent for some time is a major moving of the cheese requiring significant change on the part of mothers.

Although celebration of motherhood dates back to the ancient Greeks when part of the celebration was dedicated to Rhea, the mother of all Gods, our modern mother's day is traced back to a British celebration of Mary, the Blessed Mother of all. After the Civil War, the American patriot and social activist, Julia Ward Howe, influenced by Ann Marie Jarvis, worked to build on the British holiday to create a 'women's day for peace.

It was not until 1908 that Mother's Day became institutionalized by Jarvis' daughter Anna. Contrary to popular belief, it was not a Hallmark holiday. It became a religious holiday first celebrated in a Methodist church as was the custom to give carnations to mothers. The holiday rapidly spread from that church in West Virginia to the entire country. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson issued a proclamation designating the second Sunday of May as Mother's Day. As a result, the celebration spread throughout the world. Unfortunately, the holiday has lost much of its religious significance and become a secular holiday.

As Catholics, as we celebrate Mother's Day, we revere Mary as the mother of our Lord and the mother of all. She lived the joys and sorrows of all mothers. We celebrate our own mothers, living and deceased, who with God gave us the precious gift of life. For most of us, it was our mother who gave us the peace that the world cannot give. It was the power of the Holy Spirit that gave our mothers the ability to give us love, comfort and sometimes discipline even at times when they had nothing else to give. We are called to appreciate the gifts that Jesus gave us and the gift of our mothers by giving love and comfort to all we meet in our lives and by being open to the Holy Spirit working in us, even when it means adapting to the unexpected and making changes in our lives.

Homily 20100620 (6-2-2010)

14. 12th Sunday Cycle C – Father's Day

Father's Day is important, especially when we recognize fathers who seek to live their lives with Christ as an example.

A group of first graders was asked to draw a picture of God in their Sunday School class. Their finished products contained some interesting theology. One child depicted God in the form of a brightly colored rainbow. Another presented him as an old man coming out of the clouds. One little boy drew God with a remarkable resemblance to Superman. The best drawing came from a little girl. She said, "I didn't know what God looked like, so I just drew a picture of my daddy."

When a child sees the image of God in their father, hopefully it is not the strict, punishing God--- the "wait until your father gets home, God," Hopefully, children see the tender, loving, forgiving image of God that makes them feel wanted and secure.

It is unfortunate that doesn't always happen. Sometimes the image of a bad father spills over into one's understanding of God. That's really sad.

The second reading from Paul to the Galatians puts the emphasis on who we are in relationship to God our father. Paul writes to the church at Galatia, and says "You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ and have clothed yourselves with Christ." This scripture more easily comes alive to children if they can see the example of God's love in their father. The notion of a loving God becomes much less abstract.

Fatherhood was not a state of life that I had always yearned for. Karen and I were happy as young career minded professional people. We were in love with each other, in love with our jobs and, at the time, enlarging our family was not a priority. In fact, the idea of dealing with a helpless infant terrorized me. A pet bear would have been easier to have in my mind. Then, suppose I had a son? That thought scared me because I had no athletic interest or proficiency. And what really struck terror in my heart was the ancient maternal curse, "I hope you get a child just like you!"

After we had been married for about seven years, circumstance sent me abruptly into the lion's den. A co-worker, a single father of four, got into a serious situation where he could not raise his kids. The mother of the children was not in the area nor was she fit. We felt called to help and became foster parents for two of the children, girls 10 and 12. One was so badly disturbed that after several years of regular counseling, it became obvious to the mental health professional that the oldest child needed foster parents that were trained to deal with serious and demanding special needs. We were left with Ronnie and a real sense of failure and sadness.

People asked us if we planned to have our own children and we replied that we considered Ronnie to be ours. We were willing to adopt Ronnie early on in her stay with us. We made the offer of adoption when she was around eleven and left the decision up to her. When she was 16 she wrote a letter to us saying that she wanted to be adopted and put it on the Christmas tree. It was a wonderful gift for us.

Ronnie came to us with a great deal of baggage, but she was lovable and generally compliant. She was not used to very much structure and grew up in an environment where the adult was childlike. We offered a functional loving family. Growing up was hard for her, but in the end, grew into a fine person.

There were a lot of fatherhood stories that could be told about things that happened in our family. I will just share a few that illustrate relationship. I liked to do a lot of ethnic cooking, particularly Mexican and Indian cooking. Ronnie would ask, "what is wrong with normal food ---- why don't we just eat normal food?" When I was growing up, I was required to eat what was put on my plate I heard about the starving children in India or China but was never cheeky enough to tell my parents to pack it up and send it. I told Ronnie to take a little and try it and that if she didn't like it, she didn't have to have any more. She became a person who was not afraid of trying new things.

Ronnie was not a devious sort of kid. She did things that she wasn't supposed to do but was not sneaky enough to get away with them. Her plans were easily detected. We overheard that she was going after school with some friends to a mall in a different state about 25 miles away.

I purposely did not step in and stop her. When I came home that evening I asked her if she had a good time at the mall. She said, 'how did you know?' To this day, she thinks I have a huge network of spies. But, she makes it her business to know where her kids are, who they are with and what they are doing! Her kids probably think she has a network of spies.

I enjoyed her teen years because I was involved with the youth group and had a good rapport with her friends even though on the surface, Ronnie pretended not to agree with anything we said and looked at us like we had three heads. It was gratifying to hear her express the same opinion to her friends that she had rejected from us.

Ronnie could argue in circles. I swore I would never tell my kids, "no, because I told you so." I was not able to keep that promise to myself and she did get a couple of kids just like her in that regard. The maternal curse goes unbroken!

Then there were the driving lessons. I took her out driving one day and sat in the passenger seat with a cup of coffee. The car had a standard transmission and I had taught her to shift relatively smoothly and told her to drive and not to spill my coffee. She did pretty well but turned back into our stone wall lined driveway pretty quickly. I calmly said, "the brakes Ronnie, step on the brakes." She wasn't quick enough and the stone wall at the end of the driveway was never the same. Maintaining the God-like image of patience, kindness and forgiving was not easy!

These are more than amusing incidents. They are fatherhood. Being a father is so much more than fathering a child. Any man can father a child. Being a father means trying to project the image of a loving and forgiving and sometimes a strict God to your children.

It means giving your children the support and guidance they need to develop their gifts to be who God intended them to be.

I don't claim to be the perfect parent, but I am proud of the person that Ronnie has become. I am proud because if you ask her who her parents are, she will refer to Karen and me and not her biological parents. She is a genuinely good person and a great parent to our three grandchildren who are good kids. Do I regret not having biological children? No, not at all.

For the fathers among us who have raised their kids, thank you. For those who are still raising kids, good luck and know things will turn out OK. Happy Father's Day.

Homily 20100704 (7-4-2010)

15. **14th Sunday Cycle C – Declaration of Independence**

Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, and John Hancock have something in common. They all signed the Declaration of Independence that proclaimed the American colonies were free and independent of Great Britain. Today we celebrate the 234th anniversary of the publication of that historic document that was signed by the delegates to the Continental Congress.

But Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, and John Hancock have something else in common. They, and the 51 others who signed that Declaration, were dedicated men. They were absolutely dedicated to the concepts of freedom, liberty and equality and to a belief that human rights came from God and not from any king or government. It was that spirit of dedication that led them to act with courage and conviction.

There are also many among us who share that dedication with our founding fathers. Many of us have served in our nations military. There are those dedicated people among us who serve us occupations such as police officer, fire fighter, teacher and social worker. There are dedicated parents who raise their children to be good citizens

The Gospel is also about a spirit of dedication, not to political ideals, but to following Jesus Christ. Jesus sends out 70 disciples to the places he intends to visit, in the countries of the known world at the time. He instructs those disciples to be completely dedicated to him and to their mission. We have the same calling of dedication to service that the 70 disciples heard in the First Century.

The number 70 itself, speaks to dedication. Moses had 70 elders leading and directing the people who were wandering in the desert. 70 is also the number of members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jewish people. It may be no accident that Jesus chose 70 people to help him spread the Good News throughout the world of his time.

In the Gospel, Jesus gives his definition of what being dedicated to him means. He calls his First Century disciples and his modern disciples, too, to fix their attention on those many waiting for his message of love, hope and consolation. Jesus says that the harvest is abundant but the laborers are few. The needs of the world for his message are great, and the need for us to be dedicated to bringing his message to others, through our words and our actions is also great. Each of us is called to use our particular gifts for the service of God's kingdom.

Jesus tells us not to be distracted by concerns for our physical needs or any personal motivation such as pride or profit, but to be focused only on fulfilling our mission. He warns us about the obstacles to complete dedication such as making our lives revolve around possessions and status, as these may contribute to our own well being, but not to the building of God's kingdom.

Jesus tells us, as he told the 70, to share his peace with all we meet. If that peace is rejected, we are to move on. There is some vulnerability when we offer our service to others. Sometimes, people are not willing or ready to accept love or help, and sometimes people will take advantage of those trying to minister to them. Jesus' message to us is to not be discouraged, to not stop trying to give, but to move on to someone else who is open to God's love.

The Gospel tells us that dedicated service of the disciples bore results. The seventy disciples returned rejoicing. Hopefully, we too feel that sense of joy when we have served God well.

This July 4 reminds us that 234 years ago dedicated people set our country on the path to independence. This Gospel reminds us that dedicated disciples prepare people to accept the message of Jesus.

Today, Jesus Christ still needs dedicated men and women whose eyes and hearts are set on him and his mission. After all, it's only dedicated people who make things happen. We are those dedicated people. It is our mission.

As we celebrate our independence, we not only ask God to bless America, but America to bless God by creating a country where people love each other, serve each other and ensure a life of human dignity for all.

Homily 20100718 (7-18-2010)

16. **16th Sunday Cycle C – Mary & Martha**

What is the best gift we can give another person? There are a variety of possible answers. We might say love, friendship, food, clothing, shelter, money, employment, meaning, purpose, direction, and the list could go on. But, one of the greatest gifts that God gives us is time. Time is important to us. Once we use it, we can never get it back. We talk about time a lot. We say, "Time flies." Or, "there is never enough time." Or, "When will I find time?" How we use our time is one of the most important decisions that we make in our lives. Giving our time is a vehicle for giving love, friendship, meaning, direction and much more.

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, a trip that he knows will not turn out well, a trip that was bound to end at the cross. Jesus was probably tense about what he was facing and wanting some quality time with friends he loved and time away from demanding crowds. Therefore, he detoured to Bethany and stopped to visit with his dear friends Martha and Mary. They both love Jesus and each one wants to give him what she believes is the best gift. Martha welcomes Jesus to her home and immediately runs into the kitchen to prepare a meal. A warm greeting and an elaborate meal is what Martha believes is the best she can offer Jesus.

Mary, her sister, sits down at the feet of Jesus and listens to what he has to say. Mary believes the best she can offer Jesus is her time and undivided attention in a quiet environment where no demands would be made on him. When Martha complains that Mary is not in the kitchen, Jesus replies that Mary has chosen "the better part." Mary has given Jesus what he truly values. Although Jesus surely appreciates that Martha wants to cook him a fantastic meal with all the trimmings, the loving companionship that Mary offers is what he truly needs. When Jesus said, "Only one thing is necessary," he was likely referring to his need for simplicity. Martha, filled with kindness and love, did not give Jesus what he needed.

The same remains true in our lives today where our time is so much at a premium because most of us are stretched in so many directions. Too many things to do compete for our limited amount of time. This is the case in our relationship with God and our relationship with others. The Lord desires our time and attention more than anything else. That is what we give him when we pray, when we gather for Mass, when we read his words in the Scriptures, and when we serve others with love and caring. We, like Mary in the Gospel, are called to figuratively sit at the feet of Jesus and give him our time and attention. When we do that, we allow Jesus to touch our hearts, we allow him to show us what is truly important in life.

Our undivided time and attention is the best we can give to God and also to people with whom we are in relationship. It is sad that many parents have so much to do that they don't have the time to be in touch with what their children are doing and what they need. Giving kids the latest trend in clothing, the latest high-tech devices and permission to do whatever they want should not be confused with love. Nor

are these things effective as a substitute for giving our children quality time and being involved in their lives.

The same competition for our time that exists regarding our relationship with our children and with God is true for the rest of our relationships. This is particularly true with our relationship to our parish community and the relationship or lack of relationship with those we are called to minister to. Jesus told us in the last judgment discourse that when we are in loving relationship with others, we are in loving relationship with him. Parents and Godparents, hopefully you will set an example for _____ and _____, who are about to be baptized in to our faith community, of the importance of taking the time to build relationships with God and other people.

I was once told a story by a job transition counselor who helped people that have been laid off how to find a new job or a new career. One of the exercises she had people do was to draw a pie chart that showed how they wanted to spend their time in an average week. She was surprised when she was given a pie chart that showed 15% being given for the service of God. It is a sad commentary when a person would be surprised that someone has committed time to God.

The Sabbath has been a day of rest since the dawn of creation. In our time, it has become like the other seven days of the week. Stores are open, people have to work. It has become a day to catch up on all of the tasks that we are not able to complete during the other six days. For many, it is no longer a day of relationship; relationship with God and relationship with family and friends. And it is sad, because our important relationships suffer. Taking back the Sabbath would be a big step towards assuring relationship with God and family.

In today's world, with all of our busy-ness, giving another person our undivided time and attention is a precious gift indeed! Are we up to that calling?

Homily 20100815 (8-15-2010)

17. **Feast of the Assumption (of Mary)**

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. There is some controversy among theologians as to whether she died a normal death and was assumed body and soul into heaven, or whether she was assumed into heaven without death. Whatever the case, the Church teaches that she did not wait until the last day, but went directly to heaven. The celebration of the feast goes back to the Fourth Century. Although the Assumption is not mentioned specifically in Sacred Scripture, it has been a long standing teaching of the Church. In a homily given by Pope John Paul II at Lourdes on the Feast of the Assumption in 2004, the Pope did quote John 14:3 and related the Assumption of Mary as Jesus tells his disciples, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am you may be also." He said that Mary's assumption was the fulfillment of the Scripture. The feast is a public holiday in many predominately Christian countries. In 1950, Pope Pius XII made the Assumption of Mary an infallible teaching of the church.

The Gospel is Mary's visit to Elizabeth. Also pregnant, Elizabeth recognizes Mary as the mother of God. The Gospel also contains The Magnificat, a piece of Scripture so central to the teachings of the Church that it is prayed during each Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours by those who have been ordained, those who have made vows to religious orders and lay persons who have made the Liturgy of the Hours part of their prayer life. In the Magnificat, Mary illustrates a sharp contrast between the worldly order and God's order.

Mary herself is a perfect example of this contrast. She was a young, poor, uneducated Jewish girl who had no status in the eyes of the First Century world. Yet she was the self-proclaimed lowly servant who because of her faith and obedience was selected to be the mother of Jesus. She said that God had done great things for her. Mary has risen to a stature higher than any other person in the history of the world who was born to human parents. She is the example of what the power of God can do in our own lives if we trust and respond positively to God's calling. While none of us will ever rise to anywhere near Mary's heights, there is still much room for us to grow into the people that God has created us to be. We all have the capability of being ordinary people who do extraordinary things.

The verses, spoke by Mary, "He has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the poor. He has filled the hungry the church to help remove the inequities in the world, eventually God will somehow do it for us. These are strong words, especially for a young person of Mary's social status. Even though we are going through hard economic times, we still as residents of the US are wealthier than 95% of the world. Mary is not saying that we have to give up everything that we have, but that we need to share what we can with others.

We see images of Mary, by herself, with baby Jesus but the most difficult image to imagine is Mary at the Foot of the Cross. Yet, this is the image of Mary that is the

most compelling and the most challenging. It is hard to imagine any parent watching the brutal torture and execution of their child. But, Mary was there. She was in no way a stranger to suffering. It is not likely that we have suffered any tragedy in our lives that Mary has not. The life of the poor in the First Century was anything but easy and painfree. Her presence at the foot of the cross is not limited to the crucifixion of Jesus, but to all of these who suffer tragedy and pain in the world. Church art tends to mostly show the fragile and maternal side of Mary, but it is only in the context of Our Lady of Sorrows that shows the Mother of God as someone with the toughness of the words that she spoke in the Magnificat, Mary with love and care but also the backbone to stand in solidarity with the hurting.

Our parish has a special connection with Mary besides being named in her honor. The parish was founded by friars of The Order of the Servants of Mary, also known as Servites, who consider Mary to be their founder. In the 13th century, seven lay men from Florence, Italy who made a comfortable living as merchants gathered together to pray. They were inspired by Mary to found a community to pray and to serve. Somehow, they got permission from their wives to leave to live together. I don't know how they got away with that, but they did. Under Mary's guidance, they founded St. Mary's Hospice and cared for the sick and dying. This small group who used Mary as an example to live their lives grew into an religious order. Their charisms of hospitality and social justice came directly from the example set by Mary.

In 2000, the friars left and our parish became a diocesan parish. The vitality of our community has roots in our Servite past and has continued to grow over the years. Although the friars have gone, their presence remains in the hearts of the people who knew them and in the Secular Order of the Servants of Mary. This is a community of people in our parish who have promised to live out the Servite charisms in their daily lives using Mary as their example and inspiration.

There is a story that may be familiar. One day, Jesus came to visit St. Peter at the pearly gates and reprimanded him for some of the sinners that he had let into heaven. Peter replied, Lord, I told them to go below but they go around back and your mother lets them in.

Besides being someone who was able to stand tough and speak against injustice, Mary had a tender side that showed compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love. She gives us an example of how to live our lives. Although her assumption into heaven is a matter of faith, it is also a matter of logic. We believed that she was conceived without sin and lived a life that made her a model and inspiration.

This morning _____ is going to be baptized. Parents and godparents please teach him about Mary and set an example for him by living your lives according to what she has shown us. It would benefit all of us to live our lives as Mary has lived hers so that we all will meet her in person in heaven without having to sneak around to the back door to find her.

Homily 20100829 (8-29-2010)

18. 21st Sunday Cycle C -- Humility

There is a story about the passengers on a cancelled flight at Los Angeles International Airport. Passengers from the large jet were lined up to get reticketed. Because of the large number of passengers, the process of getting new tickets was going slowly. An impatient man with some sense of self-importance went up to the front of the line and angrily said to the agent, "Do you know who I am?" The agent, without missing a beat, picked up the microphone and said, "There is a man here who doesn't know who he is. If anyone can identify him, please come up to the podium." The humiliated man returned to his place in line.

Jesus used the parable in the Gospel to illustrate a point that would have saved the self-important flyer his humiliation. It is also a lesson to us. In the First Century, everyone had their place in society.

At a meal, the most important people were seated at the table with the host. One's place in society was roughly equivalent to their distance from the head table at a banquet. The parable explains that it is better to be asked to come forward from a less prestigious spot at the banquet than to suffer the embarrassment of being asked to move to make way for a more distinguished person.

Humility is one of the characteristics of truly great people. The best example of humility is Jesus Christ. One of the readings, which is prayed by the Church during evening prayer every Saturday night, illustrates Jesus' humility. The reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians Chapter 2 includes, "Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at."

Rather, he emptied himself and took the form of a slave being born in the likeness of God. He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross."

Jesus ended his life on earth with a great act of humility, but his life was one of humility. He lived in poverty and spent his adult life among all kinds of people including those who were considered to be the dregs of society. He ministered to outcasts and sinners as well as those in power. The 18th Century political thinker, Charles de Montesquieu said, "To be truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them." This quote reflects what Jesus did and what he calls us to do. He was never arrogant and arrogance is not an attractive or holy trait in us.

Some people might mistakenly confuse humility with weakness or timidity. Humility takes great strength and conscious effort on our part. Some realizations can help us to achieve humility. No matter how much we learn in our lives, whatever we learn is still dwarfed in comparison to the body of knowledge. However much we think we accomplish in our lives, there is always more to be achieved. However important we think we are to the world, when death comes the world will go on without us.

We also can see our humility by comparing ourselves to those who are more accomplished. Regardless of how accomplished we are, there is always someone who can do better. We strive for the perfection of Jesus, but we acknowledge our human condition.

At the end of the Gospel, Jesus uses the example of the guest list at a party. When Jesus suggests that we don't invite people who are friends, relatives or people that we want to impress and instead invite the poor and suffering who cannot repay us, he is encouraging our humility.

Generosity from the heart is one sign of true humility. Giving to others ideally is not done in the spirit in which we pay our income taxes, resentful of the need to do our civic duty. Nor is giving out of self interest, expecting to get something back or are making an investment in relationships, including the relationship with God.

We might also give out of a feeling of superiority, condescendingly giving, not so much as to help the recipient but to feel good about ourselves. This kind of giving, when apparent to the recipient, can be demeaning and hurtful. It would be better not to give at all than give because of vanity and desire for power.

True giving occurs when we give because we can't help it. This kind of giving is from our humility, giving that is a spontaneous out flowing of love. This kind of generosity must be a glimpse of God's generosity when he gave because he so loved the world. We are called to give humbly and lovingly in the same way.

To invite the poor and suffering into one's lives is not some sort of far off, unattainable ideal. There are many examples starting with Jesus and many of the Saints of our Church.

There are examples among the saints of our parish. A parishioner who was working out of town for an extended period gave the use of her house to a homeless family she did not know. Another made a small group of homeless his family and opened his home to them on many occasions including cold winter nights when it was unhealthy to sleep out of doors. There are ministries in our parish involved in humble generosity. Among them, St. Vincent de Paul, Loaves and Fishes, the Sunday Hygiene Ministry that goes to Daily Bread, and the prison and jail ministries.

Humility has been part of our faith history since Abraham, is epitomized in Jesus Christ and has been an example set by many canonized and unrecognized saints through the ages. It is a quality that we are all called to and one that we can attain in our own imperfection. It is said that Benjamin Franklin made a list of all of the areas in his life in which he would like to become perfect. He achieved these perfections one by one and when he came to the last one, humility, he had become so perfect, he could not be humble.

Let us pray that we can move humility to the top of the list of characteristics we would like to achieve. If we can attain real humility, goodness and love with no limits can flow from us.

Homily 20100912 (9-12-2010)

19. **24th Sunday Cycle C – State of Being Lost**

Not only is today's Gospel a long one, it's a familiar and well-loved one too. The three parables distill the entire Good News of God's ever-present love for us and his mercy into one chapter. The same theme is present in the first reading from Exodus and in the second reading from 2nd Timothy. Also, this Gospel and these readings teach us something about ourselves, because they teach us something about sinners and how God's great love and mercy allow us to make the decision to come back into union with him.

In the first reading, we find the Israelites sinning against God through their disobedience, their lack of faith, and especially their terrible act of idolatry. In the second reading, Saint Paul tells us he is the foremost of sinners because he persecuted the Church of Jesus Christ.

From these examples, we would rightly conclude that sin is an offense against God—an attack against his justice and goodness. Sin is our effort, feeble as it is, to dethrone God and to put ourselves in his place.

But the Gospel provides us with a somewhat different picture of sin, and gives us an interesting insight into how God views the sinner.

Each of the three examples in the Gospel—the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son—stand for the sinner. These are three very different things: an inanimate object, an irrational creature and a human being. But all three have something in common: all three are lost and all three are loved deeply by the one to whom they belong.

This should teach us some important truths about sin and about us as sinners. Sin is more than just an offense against God, it is the state of being lost; of being separated from the one who loves us. When we are lost in sin, God, in his love and mercy, seeks us out. And when at last he finds us, there is rejoicing where we would expect retribution; there is redemption where we would expect anger.

The Lord was angry with his sinful people when they made the golden calf. But as soon as Moses interceded on their behalf, the Lord's anger gave way to mercy. We know that Jesus Christ made the ultimate act of intercession by giving his own life to intercede with the Father for our sins. As a result, God can no longer be angry with his people, because he has lovingly received this sacrifice from his Son.

So when a sinner returns to God in repentance, as the lost son did, the Father runs to embrace him with love and mercy. This is what happens each time we ask forgiveness and return to right relationship with God and also with people in our lives.

However, it's important to remember that that God does not force his love on any one. For those who stubbornly remain lost in their sinful ways won't return to God; they will not receive God's love. It is not that God does not want to love them, but they do not wish to receive God's love. They choose an extreme punishment of their own making, eternal separation from God and the happiness he wishes to give us.

The events of September 11th, 2001 show how far people can stray from the path of righteousness prescribed by their own faith into sinfulness. Even though it happened nine years ago, that day is burned permanently into the minds of every citizen of this country, especially those who lost their loved ones in those senseless acts of terror. That anyone could actually think God desires the destruction of innocent human life indicates a heart completely "hijacked by evil."

While we mourn the lives lost on that evil day, let's not forget the thousands of innocent lives destroyed every day in our world through neglect, through murder, through poverty, through hunger, through curable disease, and by people not having shelter that will protect them against the elements.

Each of us recognizes that we have the capacity for sin and evil that can be a result of what we say or do and also by what we don't say or do. It is important to recognize that capability in ourselves so that if we stray, we may quickly return to God's love by seeking reconciliation through changing our behavior and thoughts, by prayer and appropriate restitution and through the healing sacraments of the Church.

Our nation continues to fight a war against terrorism. And, while we might disagree with some of the methods chosen to do so, it is right for our government to bring the guilty to justice and to protect us from further attack. But at the same time, as Christian believers, let us implore God's mercy for ourselves and for our enemies. Because this is what Jesus calls us to.

There are countless examples of healing and redemption as a result of the 9/11 tragedy. One example was described in a New York Times article several days ago. This weekend, a woman named Susan Retik is scheduled to speak in a mosque in Boston; trying to recruit people to join her battle against poverty and illiteracy in Afghanistan.

There are many people trying to make a difference to the lives of people in third world countries. But, what makes her effort so different is how Ms. Retik got involved.

Susan Retik was widowed by the attack. In the aftermath, she bonded with another woman who lost her husband on 9/11, Patti Quigley. They lived near each other and were both pregnant with babies by fathers who the babies would never see.

In their own devastation, they realized that there were over a half million widows in Afghanistan and with an inevitable war, there would be more. They had a vision that the widows could be a stabilizing force in their country.

They realized that the country we were at war with sent the people who had brought so much sorrow into their own lives. But they also understood the great need for financial stability and literacy in Afghanistan.

Susan and Patti started an organization called Beyond 9/11 that has assisted more than 1,000 Afghani widows in starting small businesses and has enabled them to provide support for their families.

They are not naïve enough to believe they can change the entire country, but they are helping some of the world's poorest people and fighting back at the distrust, hate and unemployment that fuel support for the Taliban.

The author of the article said, "In times of fear and darkness we tend to suppress the better angels of our nature. Instead, these women unleashed theirs."

Just imagine. A Jewish woman and a Catholic woman who lost their husband in an attack by terrorists who happened to be Muslims dedicated their lives to serve the neediest in the country from which the attacks were launched.

These women give us a glimpse of God's mercy and forgiveness. Hopefully, their actions not only make God's love and mercy real in our lives, but help us to show the same love and mercy to others. Lord, we pray that you make us people of love and mercy who mirror the love and mercy that you show us.

Homily 20101030 (10-30-2010)

20. Rite of Admission, West Palm -- Servites

Thank Fr. Mario for making this celebration possible and welcome those who have come to witness and celebrate this first commitment to the Order of the Servants of Mary.

There is a story about the passengers on a cancelled flight at Los Angeles International Airport. Passengers from the large jet were lined up to get reticketed. Because of the large number of passengers, the process of getting new tickets was going slowly. An impatient man with some sense of self-importance went up to the front of the line and angrily said to the agent, "Do you know who I am?" The agent, without missing a beat, picked up the microphone and said, "There is a man here who doesn't know who he is. If anyone can identify him, please come up to the podium." The humiliated man returned to his place in line.

Jesus used the parable in the Gospel to illustrate a point that would have saved the self-important flyer his humiliation. It is also a lesson to us. In the First Century, everyone had their place in society.

At a meal, the most important people were seated at the table with the host. One's place in society was roughly equivalent to their distance from the head table at a banquet. The parable explains that it is better to be asked to come forward from a less prestigious spot at the banquet than to suffer the embarrassment of being asked to move to make way for a more distinguished person.

Humility is one of the characteristics of truly great people. Our Blessed Mother is a true example of humility, an example that, as Servites, we are called to emulate.

From the time that the Angel Gabriel, the messenger of God asked a betrothed young teenager to bear God's son, Mary responded with great humility. In the Magnificat, which the church prays each night during evening prayer, Mary says "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, he has looked with favor on his lowly servant."

In accepting God's will to bear his child, she takes a phenomenal risk for a young woman. She is betrothed to Joseph and puts that relationship in question. A pregnant, unwed First Century mother becomes an outcast with no means of support. Further, she would be despised if people believe she is carrying the child of a Roman occupier.

Mary starts her life as Mother of God with great humility; this willing obedience could be costly to her very existence. Her act of obedience should not be mistakenly confused with weakness or timidity nor should any other act of true

humility. Humility takes great strength and conscious effort on the part of the humble.

Mary goes through one humbling experience after another as she lives her life. She gives birth to her child in a barn among animals, she lives the life of a refugee in exile, she lives in the dire poverty common to the First Century laboring class people, she is widowed early and finally she watches her son, her flesh and blood, die an excruciating death on the cross. Living through the events of her life took Mary great deal of strength and courage.

It is our calling, not only as Catholic Christians, but as Servants of Mary to emulate Mary's humility, great strength and courage in our own lives. We are to stand at the foot of all of today's crosses such as poverty, hunger, sickness, homelessness and the list goes on and on. Sometimes all we can do is listen to another and pray for them. At others times, we can minister to today's crucified by some sort of action, whether it is contributing our money, our labor, our time or other gifts to those in need.

Loving action needs to spring from our devotion to Mary. Taking out our rosary, praying the decades, doing our reflection, and putting the rosary back in the case is well and good. Praying to God through Mary is in itself a good thing but that devotion is not fulfilled unless it leads to action that alleviates the suffering on a cross.

Perhaps the name of our Order should be thought of as being Servants Like Mary. The Rosary as we know it, for example, did not exist in the times of the Seven Holy Founders of our Order. Although they spent a great deal of time as a community in prayer, they also ran "The Hospice of Mary" and gave comfort to the sick and dying. They did the compassionate work of Mary, standing at the cross of the suffering and giving them love and comfort. We are called to the work of compassion today, just like the Seven Holy Founders of almost 800 years ago. Whatever our vocation, it requires strength and humility.

The 18th Century political thinker, Charles de Montesquieu said, "To be truly great, one has to stand with people, not above them." This quote reflects who Mary was and how our devotion to her calls us to be. She was not arrogant and arrogance is not an attractive or holy trait in us.

As humans our humility comes from the realizations that no matter how much we learn in our lives, much more information exists in the body of knowledge. However much we think we accomplish in our lives, there is always more to be achieved. However important we think we are to the world, when death comes the world will go on without us.

Much more important than knowledge and achievement is the quality of what we give to God and Mary's example helps us to learn how to do that.

At the end of the Gospel, Jesus uses the example of the guest list at a party. When Jesus suggests that we don't invite people who are friends, relatives or people that we want to impress and instead invite the poor and suffering who

cannot repay us, he is encouraging our humility, inviting our presence at the foot of the cross and inviting us to be like Mary. As Servites, that is our calling,

It is said that Benjamin Franklin made a list of all of the areas in his life in which he would like to become perfect. He achieved these perfections one by one and when he came to the last one, humility, he had become so perfect, he could not be humble.

Let us pray that we can move humility to the top of the list of characteristics we would like to achieve. If we can attain real humility, then goodness and love with no limits can flow from us. We will truly be servants in the likeness of Mary.

Homily 20101205 (12-5-2010)

21. **2nd Sunday of Advent, Cycle A – John the Baptist**

Each year, on the Second Sunday of Advent, we hear the Gospel story of John the Baptist calling us to repent and to prepare the way to meet Jesus. What John has to say is important and his message is often obscured by the frenzy of the preparation for the commercial celebration of Christmas that starts earlier and earlier each year. Traditionally, the commercial Christmas shopping season did not start until after Thanksgiving, now we are being bombarded with advertising before Halloween is over.

Unfortunately, the onus is on us as Catholic Christians to put aside the interruptions and diversions of the world around us to fully appreciate and celebrate the Advent season that the Church, in its wisdom, has given us.

We are called to avoid the distractions and focus on preparing ourselves to again commit to welcoming Jesus into our lives and into our hearts as we do when we celebrate his birth each Christmas.

John the Baptist's message of repentance is a powerful personal call to continue conversion. The First Century Jews accepted John as a prophet, speaking with the voice of God. There had not been a major prophet for 400 years. Then John appeared. He was dressed as Elijah had been in a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. The Jewish people believed the prophesy that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah from the book of Malachi; "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day when the Lord comes."

Prophets are traditionally the voices of God that make people feel uncomfortable because they call us to a change of heart. John was certainly no exception. He was quick to denounce evil when he saw it whether in individuals, in the religious establishment or in the government.

John did not just condemn evil doers, but he called them to a higher moral ground by suggesting changes in behavior that would lead to conversion of heart in preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ. John's authority did not come from within, but from God. John spent years in the desert with only God as a companion and gained his authority from those years of preparation. He was a true prophet of God, not someone who sprung up from nowhere full of judgments and advice.

The prophetic voice must always come into the presence of humanity from the presence of God. John's prophetic message is our call to look into our hearts and evaluate our own needs for conversion to become more pleasing to God. We are also called to see John as a model for our own prophetic behavior. Each of us is baptized priest, prophet and king. It is also our calling to be God's prophets in the world around us. It is not an easy thing to tell people what they don't want to hear or to cause them discomfort. But, there are times when being a prophet is exactly our calling.

There is a story about a young man, a social worker, Julio Diaz, who every night on his way home from work, took the subway the Bronx where he had dinner at his favorite diner near his home.

One night as Diaz stepped off of the train and walked towards the stairs; he was approached by a teenager with a knife and asked to hand over his money. Diaz gave him his wallet and as the boy was walking away Diaz said, “Hay wait a minute, you forgot something. If you are going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm.” The boy looked at Diaz and asked him what was going on and why he was offering his coat. Diaz replied, “If you are willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then you really need the money. All I wanted to do was go get dinner and if you want to join me you are welcome.” Diaz was thinking that this young man just needed some help.

So Diaz and the teen went into the diner and sat down in a booth. All of the employees, the manager, the dishwashers, the waiters came by to greet Diaz. The boy says to Diaz, “Do you own this place, everyone has come by to say hello to you and you are even nice to the dishwashers!” Diaz replies to the boy, “Haven’t you been taught to be nice to everyone?” The boy said, “Yeah, but I didn’t think that people actually behaved like that!”

When Diaz asked the boy what he wanted out of life, the kid just sat there with a sad face and couldn’t or didn’t want to answer the question. When the bill came, Diaz said to the boy, “I guess you are going to have to pay for our meals since you have my money and I can’t pay. But, if you give me back my wallet, I will gladly treat you.”

The boy, without taking the time to think, returned the wallet. Diaz gave the boy \$20, figuring he needed some help and asked for one thing in return, the knife. The boy gave it to him. When Diaz got home, he told his mother what had happened and she said to him, “You are the kind of person that if someone asks you for the time you will give them your watch.” Diaz said, “If you treat people right, you can only hope that they will treat you and others right. That is as simple as it gets in this complicated world.”

Diaz performed the prophetic role, but did it in a unique way without making any accusations and by just showing love. It must not have been easy or comfortable for him considering that he was the victim of a crime. Sometimes we have to be more challenging and point out undesirable behavior and suggest changes in order to be prophetic. Most importantly, as prophets, we need to set good examples by our own behavior.

John spent time in the desert with God to prepare for his role as prophet. Julio Diaz was prepared at least partially through his training as a social worker. The church in her wisdom has given us seasons of preparation, one of them is Advent. Let us pray that we can set aside the frenzy of the world around us and use the Advent season to prepare for our prophetic role in the world so that we may discover what conversion we are called to. Lord, help us to recognize Christ in others and for others to be able to see Christ in us.

Homily 20101226 (12-26-2010)

22. Feast of the Holy Family – Cycle A

For many, the celebration of Christmas ended yesterday. The Christmas music is gone from the radio, Christmas trees will soon be in the gutter awaiting the garbage man, and the retail industry is gearing up for the next great sales event -- Valentine's day. And this year, the secularization has made even deeper inroads into our celebration of Christmas. It is getting harder to find religious Christmas cards. In fact, I tried to find a religious card in one store, but I couldn't and the valentine section was already as large as the Christmas section. There was a shortage of religious themed stamps at the post office. The music on the radio gave more time to Rudolph and Santa Claus than to traditional Christmas carols.

But for us, Christmas is not over. The Church celebrates twelve days of Christmas and this year the second day is the Feast of the Holy Family. On Christmas Day, we celebrated the birth of Jesus into his holy family and today we celebrate not only the holiness of Jesus' family, but the holiness of all of our families because of the presence of Christ in our midst. Jewish theology is that there are three entities involved in the creation of a baby; the mother, the father and the spirit of God. So like Jesus, the Holy Spirit was a participant in the creation of each of us.

The readings that we heard today speak to family life. The first reading from Sirach and the second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians speak to family relationships and love while the Gospel is about the difficult times that we experience in family life.

The reading from Sirach emphasizes our call to love and care for our parents, especially when it is difficult due to their physical or mental state or because they have not been perfect parents to us.

The second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians is controversial in our day because of the relationship it describes between man and wife. In ancient times, society was patriarchal. Men had absolute ownership of their wives and children who were regarded as possessions; mere material goods. For example, men could divorce their wives at will, leaving them as social outcasts with no means of support. Men could sell their children into slavery if they so desired.

St. Paul, in his letter, was advocating that family members treat each other with love and respect even though the First Century culture said that men did not have to. He redefines the relationship between husband and wife and between parent and child as being holy. Paul also redefines family relationships as being reciprocal in spite of First Century culture. He told men to love their wives to avoid bitterness with them and not to provoke their children.

Telling wives to be subordinate defines their First Century role but may not be accepted today. I know that if I told my wife Karen that The Bible said that I was

in charge, she would probably laugh and tell me to go load the dishwasher! There are many different possible models for family decision making and lines of authority, but it is up to each family to determine what works for them.

The Scripture passage defines a traditional family of a husband, wife and children. In our times, there are many configurations of family that differ from the traditional. Unfortunately, we live in a time of high divorce rates and many family units consist of a single parent. But, whatever the makeup of a family, it is still a holy family and relationships are sacred.

In the Gospel, we hear that the Holy Family must flee their home because Jesus' life is being threatened by Herod. Different forms of the threat of Herod exist in our families today. Among them is the "economic Herod" that forces parents to work extra jobs and leaves less time for family life.

There is also the "media Herod" that provides bad examples of family life on television and in the movies where we see the likes of children trying to outsmart their parents and parents who are too busy doing their own thing to spend quality family time with their children. There are also "addiction Herods" where drugs, alcohol and other dangerous addictions take control of parents causing families to suffer. The list of "Herods" that hurt family life is unfortunately endless.

Rabbi Neil Kurshan tells a story in his book *How to Raise Your Child to Be A Messiah* about a young woman who is a medical student. She went to see a counselor to help her with the decision to continue her studies or drop out to start a family. The counselor suggested that she can do both with a little outside help. The student stated that she had vowed to never entrust her children to a housekeeper.

The counselor asked why, and the young woman explained that when she was a young child, her wealthy parents would take a vacation in Europe each summer and leave her with a nanny.

One year, when she was eleven, the housekeeper suddenly quit shortly before her parents were to leave for Europe. The parents were upset that their vacation was jeopardized, but several days before their intended departure they found a replacement. When the daughter noticed that her mother was wrapping up all of the family silverware and jewels, she asked why because they had never done that before. Her mother explained that they could not entrust the new maid with the family valuables.

The insensitive remark stabbed the little girl in the heart. Was she not a "family valuable" of more worth than the knives and forks? She never forgot the incident and as she grew up, she promised herself that she would bring up her own children.

While the point of the story is that our children are more valuable than any possession, it also illustrates the sacredness of right family relationships that need to exist in a Holy Family.

It is easy to look at all of the obstacles to family life today and become discouraged. But, if the Holy Family is our example, they suffered every hardship and problem that one could imagine, yet Jesus grew to his full potential.

Although we don't know the everyday details of their family life, from what can be pieced together from Scripture, there must have been a great deal of love, faith, respect and devotion to each other. Those attributes are what can lead our families to be holy families.

Another holy family that each of us belongs to is the parish family of Our Lady of Grace. This morning we witness the baptism of three young people, Skylar, Jonathan and Christopher and welcome them into our parish family. We pray that they will grow to their full potential in love and faith and we are all called to be their models as followers of Christ.

So, as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family this Christmas season, let it not be just an annual event in the church calendar, but a celebration of love and relationship that continues each day for the rest of our lives.

Homily 20110206 (2-6-2011)

23. **5th Sunday Ordinary Time, Cycle A – Salt of the Earth**

The first reading is set in the time that the Jewish Nation returned from exile. The people were unhappy and disillusioned spiritually, socially and politically. They were living with chaos and uncertainty. There was not enough work and people were hungry, thirsty and in need of shelter, a situation that many find themselves in today. The people prayed and offered sacrifices, hoping their situation would change for the better. The prophet Isaiah told them that the kinds of sacrifices that they were making were not the kind that God was asking for. Isaiah told them that the sacrifices that God wanted were about alleviating the suffering of their fellow humans. Isaiah was calling the people to the same actions that Jesus calls us to such as; feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, caring for the sick, all needs that exist today.

Some years, we hear this reading a Sunday or two before Ash Wednesday. Although Ash Wednesday is not until March 9th this year, it is not too early to think about how we might make the coming Lent a spiritually productive time. The words of Isaiah are still meaningful to us in 2011, they call us to consider that the sacrifices we make will help other People of God.

In the Gospel, Matthew uses two symbols that his Jewish audience could well relate to; salt and light. Jesus says. “You are the salt of the earth.” We don’t often hear people called that any more. It is an extreme compliment that addresses the dependability, integrity and value of a person. For First Century Jews, salt had three special qualities.

First, salt was connected with purity. It came from the purest of all things, sun and sea. Salt was the most primitive of offerings to God. Jewish sacrifices were offered with salt. For a Christian to be considered the salt of the earth, we are called to be examples of purity in a society that is not pure. It is important that we not withdraw from the world, but become examples in the world.

Second, salt is a preservative and in the ancient world, the major preservative. In addition to salt keeping food from going bad, it has healing powers. Salt was rubbed into wounds as an antiseptic and an agent that caused wounds to close.

Today, Israel exports many lotions and ointments made from Dead Sea salt that promote healing and beauty. As Christians, we too are called to be agents of preservation and healing; to preserve life, preserve integrity and to promote healing through live and giving. We do this by our example in the world and the actions we take to benefit others.

Finally, salt gives flavor to food. Even for those of us who do not use much salt, occasionally we encounter food that is so bland that we cannot eat it without a little salt. Although too much salt is not a good thing for our bodies, too little salt can cause serious health repercussions such as unconsciousness and failure of

certain organs. Christianity is to life what salt is to food. Christianity adds flavor or joy to life.

We need to be careful that how we practice our faith does not become oppressive and lifeless and devoid of love and joy. The great jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, once said, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers." The author, Robert Louis Stevenson, once entered in his diary, as if he was recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to church today and I am not depressed." Obviously, neither of these men has celebrated with the Catholic Community of Our Lady of Grace! The point is we are not worth our salt as Christians unless we live and spread the Good News and we can't do that effectively without being loving and joyful people.

We all know how important light is, especially living here in Florida where we might lose our lights in a storm and be without for a few days or more at a time. In ancient Israel, learned Rabbis were referred to as the light of Israel. We are very aware of the symbolism of fire and candles, and we are given the light of Christ at our baptism. That same light is given to us at the Easter Vigil and the paschal candle burns at funerals. Like salt, light is essential to our lives. Sun is vital to grow what we eat and the vegetation that is important to the environment.

Light is something to be seen. In the Holy Land in the first century, houses were very dark and generally had one small window. In the days when there were not propane lighters, matches, or similar devices, lighting the lamp could be difficult and time consuming. When people left home, they put the light under an earthen pot that was used to measure a bushel. This was to reduce the danger of an unsupervised flame, but the light could not be seen.

Jesus is calling us to be the light of the world. Our Christianity is something that is meant to be seen in the world and not hidden inside of our churches. Jesus is telling us that our lives as Christians should be visible to the world wherever we are. Jesus means for us to be a light to guide others. It is hard to navigate streets at night when there are no lights or for ships to be taken safely through channels after dark when there are no lights on channel markers. Our lives are the light that guides others through difficult times when their own vision is blurred.

There are times when we do good things anonymously. But when our actions need to be visible as an example, Jesus reminds us that what we do is not for our glory but for the glory of God.

Jesus' call for us to be the salt of the earth and light for the world is the same message that Isaiah conveys in the first reading when he says, "If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; If you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; Then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday."

Let us keep the call of Isaiah and Jesus in our minds and hearts, not only as we think about the upcoming Lenten season, but as we live each day of our lives.

Homily 20110306 (3-6-20110)

24. **9th Sunday Ordinary, Cycle A – Sincere Faith**

Today's readings are very clear that we are called to be obedient people of strong faith with our lives planted firmly on solid ground. The first reading is very much to the point: follow God's commands and we will be blessed, follow other gods and we will be cursed. The second reading calls us to faith in Jesus Christ. Both of these readings are well connected to the Gospel, which contains two parts; one calling for sincerity of faith and the other describing the foundation and manifestation of sincere faith.

Jesus is clear that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven. The Gospel's implication is that the level of sincerity in our faith is manifested by our actions. How many times growing up might we have told our mothers that we loved them and received a response of "I wish you would show it a little more in the way you behave."

We often profess to love God with our lips but deny him with our lives. Fine words are not a substitute for deeds. It is easy to profess a creed, but faith without action is a contradiction of terms.

To make the second point about building a strong faith foundation, Jesus uses the parable of houses built on sand and houses built on stone. He could very well be talking about the home construction business, but he is talking about the construction of our faith lives. In the First Century Holy Land, there was many a nice spot to build a house in a dried up creek bed in the shade of large trees. But, when winter came and the seasonal floods started, the house would disintegrate and wash away.

There is a story about a wealthy building contractor who drew up the plans for his dream house. He gave them to his long time foreman who he loved and trusted like a brother to build while he went off on a long vacation. The foreman, who did not make a lot of money, saw an opportunity to make some money for himself and he cut corners wherever he could by using cheaper materials and shoddy construction methods where it would not show, pocketing the difference. When the contractor came back, he inspected the house and handed the keys to the foreman saying, "You have served me well for many years. To reward you, I have planned this house for you. It is yours to own and live in."

The question is, "Who got cheated here?" We might want to ask ourselves some other questions such as: What do we build our lives on, solid rock or shifting sand? Do we always worship God in our lives or do we sometimes worship things that we think will make us happy? Is our faith built on solid ground and is our behavior consistent with the faith that we profess? How well do we live the great commandments to love God and love neighbor? How much do we grow in our faith as we grow in years?

The Church gives us a tremendous gift in the seasons of preparation, Lent and Advent. Lent starts next Wednesday with Ash Wednesday. As Catholics, we are called to pray, to fast and to give alms.

Several weeks ago I was visiting another parish community and noted that their deacon was giving a seminar called, "How to live a mature Lent." No details were provided but in thinking about the seminar topic I came up with some ideas.

We have been indoctrinated with the idea of giving up something for Lent. Common sacrifices are chocolate, desserts, television and movies. It is not obvious how we make the world a better place or build a solid faith foundation by giving up these things. Possibly we could donate what we would spend on what we give up to a good cause. But these types of sacrifices do not build the quality of our faith, a necessity for living a mature Lent. Perhaps the first step towards living a mature Lent is thinking about what we can give instead of what we can give up.

Michael Swan, a writer for the Canadian Catholic newspaper wrote, "We Catholics take a long time getting past childhood Lents of heroic self-denial, trying to achieve holiness and win God's approval on our own terms. Eventually we discover the sort of Lent which accepts human weakness. Rather than casting ourselves as saviors of our own souls, we learn to spend those 40 days shaping our lives, our minds and our hearts into the form of hope." We need hope for ourselves to give hope to others.

Obviously, we give material support to others, but does that really help us to grow in faith in itself? Giving of ourselves in the form of time, loving behavior and more Christ-like attitudes towards others is more likely a better road to growth in faith.

Another sign of a mature Lent is that we don't compensate for our sacrifices. There is the Fat Tuesday syndrome where we overdose on what we are giving up prior to Lent and make up for what we deny ourselves after Lent is over. Another factor to look at is the permanence of our sacrifice. If we make a change or sacrifice for Lent and revert to a previous behavior when Lent is over, what we do does not help us to grow in faith and as humans. A sign of a mature Lent is that we make changes in our lives. Each year, we are called to make a new change that will bring us closer to perfection Lenten experiences that help us grow to be more pleasing to the Father and more like the Son will put us on a rock solid spiritual foundation.

If we choose inconsequential or simple sacrifices, our growth will be stunted. If we challenge ourselves to real positive change, we will grow. What we choose to give for Lent is very personal and we may need to make very different changes. Let us pray that when we meet God face to face that we will be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Homily 20110403 (4-3-2011)

25. **4th Sunday of Lent, Cycle A – Man Born Blind**

We once again hear the story of the man born blind. In the first century, it was thought that illness and physical handicaps were the result of sin, sin on the part of the individual who was ill, or sin on the part of the parents of that individual. But, isn't this an awful way to view suffering. It is terrible to suppose that all suffering is punishment for sin. And what kind of God inflicts blindness on a newborn as a punishment for sin? Those of us who believe that God is love can't conceive that a child would be born sick or handicapped because God is punishing the child for its parent's behavior.

The man that was born blind was healed, not once but twice. One healing was physical. The man opened his eyes and he could see for the first time in his life. There was also a second healing, a healing of faith. The man saw Jesus for the first time and recognized him as the Son of God.

Let's take a look at the players in this story. First, there was the man who was born blind. He had lived his life without vision. He probably had a comfortable routine, going each day and sitting by the side of the road and being supported by the charity of others. Regaining his vision must have made drastic changes in the man's life. He would have to find a new way to earn a living. He was courageous enough to go where he had never been, to put his faith in this man Jesus who was despised by the religious authorities.

He listened to Jesus, and when Jesus put mud on his eyes and told him to go wash it off in the pool of Siloam, he didn't ask questions. His faith called him to go to the pool and wash. When the Pharisees questioned him, he stood up to them and told them the truth that they did not want to hear.

The second set of players were the blind man's parents. They denied knowledge of his healing. They were cowards. They were afraid that the Pharisees would find a reason to excommunicate them, to cut them off from their fellow humans, cut them off from their livelihood and cut them off from God.

The parents bought into the false belief that suffering came from sin, the sin of the individual or the sin of the person's parents.

These parents were indifferent to their own son. They refused to take a stand to support their own son because they wanted to protect themselves.

Finally, there were the Pharisees. Jesus threatened them because they did not understand the source of his power. They could not refute the scripturally based testimony of the man who could now see so they abused him, and accused him of being guilty of prenatal sin, and they insulted him. Finally the Pharisees bullied him, removing him from their presence by force.

Lent is a good time for us to place ourselves and our own behavior into the story of the man born blind and to honestly determine which players we resemble. It is to our benefit to understand how our behavior might resemble that of the man, his parents and the Pharisees under different circumstances in our lives.

Being human, each of us has some sort of spiritual blindness, some behavior or way of thinking that may be like that of the parents or of the Pharisees. Thomas Wilson, a sixteenth century theologian and philosopher said, "The greatest of all disorders is to think that we are whole and need no help." We all have some area for growth and improvement.

How do we act like the parents of the man born blind? Do we put ourselves first at the expense of others and avoid seeing injustice in the world around us?

Hopefully, we understand that physical impairment and illness are not the result of God's punishment for sin.

Possibly the modern version of this belief is prejudice, when we judge other people to be sinful based on their religion, ethnicity, appearance or any other criteria. In any of these cases we are buying into that First Century mentality that Jesus said was wrong. In the story, Jesus totally dismisses the idea that the blind man is being punished for some sort of prenatal sin or the sin of his parents.

Do we act like the Pharisees? Do we reject what we don't understand? We may insist that our way is the only way or that we are right when we know we are not, or use our religious beliefs to judge others because they do not live exactly the way that want them to.

The Pharisees condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Rules and regulations became so important that there was no room left for acting out of love when it might be contrary to some human made rule. Are there occasions in our lives where we bypass doing good works for the benefit of others because we are worried about breaking some self-imposed or other imposed rule?

Or do we act like the man born blind? Are we willing to listen to Jesus and do what he calls us to even if it means taking risks and doing what is uncomfortable? For example, we might just let it go by when people in our company spread malicious rumors about others or make statements that are prejudicial, ethnic stereotypes or are generally degrading to others. Are we afraid to rock the boat when the boat requires rocking? Do we have the integrity of the man born blind that allows us to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God in our words and actions?

6PM Mass ONLY. Today is a special day in the faith journey of those who are preparing for full communion with the church. As part of their preparation, the elect are celebrating the Second Scrutiny in the presence of the entire community. As community, we will pray that our sisters and brothers reject aspects of their lives that lead to the darkness of sin and live a life of light, receiving and giving God's love/

Lent is a time for all of us to look with new eyes at how we live our faith and how we can make positive permanent changes in our lives. The changes we make for Lent are not just for those 40 days but represent continuing growth into the people God calls us to be. Each time we approach the table of the Lord, as we will at this liturgy, we have an opportunity to ask the Lord for strength and grace to grow in perfection in the living of our faith and in our vision of what Christ is calling us to do in our lives.

Homily 20110514 (5-14-2011)

26. Servite Promise – Feast of St. Matthias

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of St. Matthias. In the first reading, we hear about the choice of Matthias to replace the traitor, Judas, as one of the Twelve Apostles. Potential replacements for Judas were named. Each name was written on a stone and put in a large earthen vessel. The stones were shaken up, and the first one to come out of the vessel bore the name of the new Apostle. Casting of lots might seem to be a strange way of selecting leadership. But, this was how temple officers were selected. The names that went into the lottery were suggested by community leadership, and one might say that divine intervention made the final selection from among qualified candidates.

There were indeed qualifications for being an Apostle. First, an Apostle was a witness to the resurrection. In the days of the early Christian communities, the Apostles had actually witnessed the resurrection in some manner. Second, an Apostle was someone who travelled with Jesus on a daily basis.

These qualifications are also relevant to modern day Apostles and disciples. Jesus is not just someone who was born of the Virgin Mary, died and was resurrected into heaven. He is not just someone whose life we read about and study, some figure in a book. The risen Christ is a living presence that is with us always and everywhere. So present day apostles walk with Jesus on a daily basis and witness his resurrection by the actions in their lives. Each of us is called to be one of the twelve just as Matthias was.

There is another interesting fact that appears in the first reading. There were 120 disciples at the time of the resurrection out of four million Jews living in Palestine. That is a ratio of one Christian to 40,000 Jews. There are over 100 thousand people living here in Palm Bay. That means that if the church started in Palm Bay, using the same ratio of Christians in the population, there would have been three or four Christians here. Christianity started with few people and has managed to transform the world. It goes to show the potential for good of a relatively few committed Christians.

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The Gospel describes the life of the Christian. It emphasizes several profound points. First, God chooses us, we did not choose God. The act of a mortal

human choosing God is a no-brainer. What person of faith wouldn't choose God? But, God choosing us --- that is really something --- that God would choose regular people, people like all of us, out of love. The second point is that God does not consider us to be slaves, but to be friends. There is only one thing that we have to do to profess our friendship. We are called to love one another in the same way that God loves us. As friends, we are called to be partners in the work of God, the work of Jesus Christ. We are called to be modern day disciples.

Our calling as Servites is first our baptismal calling to be disciples. Also, we are called to live the Servite charisms of hospitality, compassion and social justice. Mary is our example for living these charisms. The name of our order is Servants of Mary, but our calling is to be servants like Mary. We know that the requirements of a modern day disciple are to witness the resurrection in our daily lives and to walk with Christ in our daily lives. As Servites, we are also called to witness Mary at the foot of the cross by serving those who are crucified by injustice or inhumanity such as the lonely, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the subject of discrimination and the list unfortunately goes on. We are called to be partners with both Christ and with Mary in our daily lives.

We are gathered today to witness and celebrate the Promise that will be freely made by our three sisters, Mary Catherine, Magarita and Jan. Will they please come forward and stand facing the community.

Homily 20110515 (5-15-2011)

27. 4th Sunday Easter Cycle A – Good Shepherd

The Church celebrates Good Shepherd Sunday each year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter. The image of God as the Shepherd dates far back in Judeo-Christian history. The image is portrayed many times in Hebrew Scripture, the best known in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.”

That image of the shepherd is deeply woven into scripture. The central plateau of Judea is about thirty-five miles long and 14 to 17 miles wide. Most of the land was hard and stony. It was pastoral land more than agricultural land. The most familiar figure on this land was the shepherd.

The job of the shepherd was a difficult and constant job.

Unlike today's very large flocks managed by cowboys and dogs, the biblical era flocks were small and there was an almost family relationship between the shepherd and the sheep since the sheep were mostly kept for wool rather than meat. They wandered far to graze and, unattended, they could get lost. Besides keeping his sheep together, the shepherd had to protect them from wolves and other predatory animals as well as from humans who would steal them. Since sheep from different flocks mingled together, the shepherd knew which sheep were his, and the sheep only answered the call of their shepherd. Shepherds were willing to lay down their lives for their sheep as Jesus laid down his life for us. It was only natural that one of the most loved images of Jesus became The Good Shepherd.

In today's world, we have examples of both good shepherds and bad shepherds. Good shepherds are those who are truly motivated by God and work to benefit and care for the people that they lead. Unfortunately, we also have bad shepherds who do not care about the people they lead and exploit people for their own benefit. Hopefully, each of us knows what a good shepherd is from our own experience; from people in our lives who have treated us with love and have sacrificed for us. One only has to read the newspaper or watch television news to see evidence of bad shepherds.

The church also calls Good Shepherd Sunday Vocations Sunday. We are asked to pray always, but especially today that our Christian communities will be graced with good shepherds and pastors. In most of our minds, vocations apply to priests, deacons, and brothers and sisters. And it is true; we need more of those types of religious vocations. There was a time when most parishes had five or six priests and there were enough brothers and sisters to staff Catholic schools, hospitals and other institutions that cared for people. Those days of plenty of religious vocations are gone, but the needs of the people of God that these people filled are not.

In our society of today, so much emphasis is put on filling our own needs and doing what we want to do, do we hear God's voice calling us to our vocations? Do we even listen for God's voice? Or, do we ask ourselves questions like, “Does

God really need me?" Or, "Can't God get someone else?" Or do we tell ourselves, "Religious life isn't for me."

Most of us have careers, jobs that we have chosen to do. But, in fact, each of us also has a vocation. We are all baptized to serve God by serving the people of God, the flock of God. We all have God given gifts to share to this end.

Unless we understand that vocation is something that we are all called to, it is not likely that there will be enough people to respond to the needs of the Church and, by extension, the needs of the wider community. We cannot have a supermarket mentality where our Church is concerned.

The supermarket mentality believes Church is there to provide us with Sacraments, spiritual or religious help on demand. But there is a danger that, like supermarkets in some former Communist countries, there may soon be no goods available and, worse, no one to distribute them!

The Church needs more vocations, both in the hierarchy and in the laity. The Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of vocations among the laity by writing: "The Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is a sign of Christ among us, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name, working alongside the hierarchy, for the Gospel cannot be deeply imprinted on the mentality, life and work of any people without the active presence of the lay people."

All of us together, clergy, religious and lay people, by virtue of our baptism, are the church and we all are called to the vocation of serving the people of God.

There are many examples of ordinary people like us serving as good shepherds. Some are recognized saints of the Church, but most are not. There is a real story about people like us that shows the great power that we all have to be good shepherds by doing simple things for our brothers and sisters.

It was Holy Week at an inner-city parish in New York City. Easter had come early this particular year and it was still winter and very cold. The parish has a food kitchen that serves the large number of homeless people in the area. The food kitchen volunteers were so profoundly touched by having their feet washed at Holy Thursday Mass that they decided to wash the feet of their clients.

The majority of the clients were homeless. They mostly had one pair of socks and many of them had shoes that most of us would have thrown in the trash a long time ago. Many of their shoes had holes in them and were stuffed with cardboard or newspaper to keep the cold and wet out. We can only imagine what the feet of the people smelled like. Worse, they found people with feet deformed by frost bite and gangrene. Many people were sent to the emergency room to get their feet treated that day.

About six months later, a well-dressed, clean cut man came to the parish office and handed the pastor a check for 500 dollars. When the pastor asked him what the check was for, the man told his story. His life had fallen apart around him.

He lost his job, his family, and his home. He turned to drugs and alcohol that he obtained any way he could on the street. He told the pastor that he felt so much love from the simple act of having his feet washed. He felt the love of God and this caused him to turn himself around and reclaim his life. He wanted to donate the money to make sure that the homeless had new clean socks.

The miracle started and the foot project took on a life of its own. Not only was there money for socks, but also to provide shoes. Nurses and podiatrists offered their time to run a volunteer foot clinic. This all started from one simple act, the washing of the feet; one simple act of being the good shepherd.

Today, six young people are coming to the table of the Lord for the first time. Let us pray that they will always look for examples of good shepherds in their lives and that their families and friends will set those examples. My young friends; as you receive the Body and Blood of Christ today and from now on, may you be strengthened in your responsibility to be good shepherds to other by your own actions.

Our Christian communities can only grow and thrive when every member makes his or her contribution to the well-being of the whole. When all are giving, all will be receiving in abundance. Let us pray when we approach the table of the Lord, the Eucharist will strengthen us to be one with Christ and each other and show us how we are to serve God and the Church in our lives. Lord, help us all to become Good Shepherds.

Homily 20110710 (7-10-2011)

28. 15th Sunday Ordinary, Cycle A – Parable of the Sower

The Parable of the Sower, the Gospel we heard this evening, is often explained from the point of view of the hearer of the Word of God. We easily understand the point that we have to be fertile ground for God's Word to take root and grow within ourselves. But Jesus was also speaking to preachers of the Word. Although Father Immanuel and I preach formally at Mass, we are all preachers by virtue of our Baptisms --- priest, prophet and king. We are not preachers only based on what we say, but by our actions and also by what we fail to say or to do.

In the Parable of the Sower, the sower is not just planting seed on the fertile ground where it will take root and prosper, but on ground where it will die. The question is why would he waste seed? There were two ways of sowing seeds in the First Century. The easy way was to attach a seed bag with a hole in it to the back of a donkey and walk the animal up and down the field. The other was for the sower to use his hands and to scatter the seed into the air. Some of that seed likely was carried by the winds to the path where the birds got it and the rest fell on soil.

The parable describes three kinds of soil; fertile soil, rocky soil and thorny soil. The problem for the sower was that all three types of soil looked the same. The rocky soil was not full of rocks but there was a layer of top soil over a crust of limestone. The seeds would take hold but the plants could not send their roots down far enough to get nourishment. The thorny soil was not full of brambles, but had seeds of fast-growing weeds that would quickly choke out the plants the sower was planting. So the sower had to sow his seed and hope for the best. That is also the case for we who sow the seeds of the Word of God.

If you look around the church tonight, it would be impossible just by looking at parishioners to pick out those who were the first born in their families, or those who had graduated from a Catholic high school, or those whose cholesterol count was under 200. We need more than your eyesight to determine who among us is fertile soil that we believe is receptive to the word of God just as the sower did not know exactly which ground to seed.

I want to share a personal story. Several months ago I was greeting people outside after Mass. A person stopped and made a comment about Our Lady of Grace having a hippie deacon. I was not offended, but amused. I am sure the judgment was made based on my hair and perhaps my beard. Although I confess to having grown up in San Francisco where I lived a stone's throw from the infamous Haight Ashbury neighborhood, I was not part of the "summer of love" scene and did not have many friends who were.

In looking at the popular impression of who hippies are, I just don't measure up. I don't drink very often, I don't use drugs, I celebrate 40 years of exclusive marriage to Karen next month. I can't stand hard rock and listen instead to big bands and music from the first decade of rock and roll! I don't even like having long hair, but

am growing it so that a fellow cancer survivor somewhere who is going through chemotherapy can have a wig.

Not knowing exactly where the good ground was did not stop the sower. The same thing is true when it comes to judging what people are open and ready to hear God's word and become part of God's kingdom. That word, that invitation, needs to be proclaimed everywhere, to everyone. Even to those we think unlikely to receive it.

It just may be that a young adult covered with tattoos and body piercings, or the hedge fund manager seemingly concerned only with material success, or the person who has drifted from one intimate relationship to another, is that fertile ground now ready to receive the message of the Gospel.

Nor can we discount the people who don't look like bearers of God's word. My cousin is married to a man named John. John looks like the stereotypical Hell's Angel. He is a loving husband and father. He is like a big, gentle teddy bear with his grandchildren. John is an ordained Protestant minister and lovingly serves the homeless and street people of Denver. He preaches and lives the Word of God. The quality of his faith and deeds has nothing to do with his appearance.

Our task as followers of Jesus Christ is not to determine where the good ground may be found, but simply to hear the Word, and then share the Word, share our faith, with all we meet. Just as we cannot pick out certain kinds of people from a crowd of strangers just by looking at them, so we cannot pick out those who may be ready to listen to the Word of God.

We often have no idea where the seeds we sow are going to land. The British author, HL Gee, tells a story. He attended a funeral at his church because he was afraid no one would attend. The deceased was known as "Old Thomas" a lonely old man of many years who had no friends left living. Gee went to pay his respects to Thomas who was being taken to his final resting place.

It was a windy, wet day and when the casket reached the grave there was one other person there, a soldier. The soldier was obviously an officer, but the raincoat covered his shoulder insignia and his rank was unknown. When the burial rite was completed, the soldier saluted and he and Gee walked away together. A serious gust of wind came along and blew the raincoat in such a manner that the shoulder insignia of a brigadier general appeared.

The general said to Gee, "you must be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago when I was a wild young boy, Thomas was my Sunday school teacher. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe I am or will be to old Thomas, and today I had to come salute him in the end.

Like Old Thomas, the Gospel calls us to sow the seed and then leave the rest to God. The seed may grow immediately or it may take years. More likely than not, we may never see the results of the seed we sow. God determines the timing and bounty of the harvest. It is our calling to sow the seeds unceasingly.

29. 19th Sunday Ordinary, Cycle A – Walking on Water

The great American journalist, and humorist, Samuel Clemens --- also known as Mark Twain --- was said to have been on a trip to the Holy Land. At the Sea of Galilee, his group was approached by a man with a boat who wanted to charge an exorbitant fee to take them across the lake to Capernaum. Clemens reportedly said, “Now I can see why Jesus chose to walk across the water.”

In today’s Gospel Jesus was said to have walked across the water. Did Jesus really walk on water? An atheist would say “No, it is not scientifically possible. A human would surely sink if he or she attempted to walk on water.”

A fundamentalist would say, “Of course. If it is written in the Bible, that is exactly what happened.” A more centrist, mainstream scripture scholar would probably say, “The bible is written in more than twenty literary styles, many of them forms of symbolism. It doesn’t really matter if Jesus actually walked on water. What matters most is what God is trying to say to us in our lives today.”

In order to understand the relevance of this Gospel to us, it is helpful to insert ourselves into the story using the symbolism that Matthew provides. One way we can do that is to look at the boat as the Body of Christ.

The storm and the waves it creates represent those things that cause trauma and confusion our lives. Peter represents each of us, especially when we are dealing with hard or uncertain times. Jesus, of course, is our hope who brings comfort and salvation to us when we turn to him.

When the disciples in the boat see Jesus walking across the water, they are terrified. Peter’s reaction is not one of complete faith. He challenges Jesus to prove himself by telling Jesus to command him to walk across the water where Jesus is. And Jesus’ reaction is to say “come.” When Peter starts to walk across the water, he starts to doubt Jesus, loses his focus on Jesus and Peter sinks.

Doubt is such a human reaction to anything that we don’t really understand. Even Jesus, from the point of his humanity, expressed doubt when in Matthew’s Passion he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” In some cases doubt or skepticism is a very human reaction that serves us well. But, in the case of faith, doubt is very much a distraction.

Brian Stoffregen is an American Lutheran minister and theologian. He links doubt with fear and speaks of what it means to be a Christian caught between doubt and faith.

Stoffregen illustrates this condition with a series of statements contrasting the opposite impacts of doubt and faith.

- Doubt paralyzes, faith empowers.
- Doubt discourages, faith encourages.
- Doubt sickens, faith heals.
- Doubt makes us useless, faith makes us able to serve.

- **Doubt makes us feel hopeless, faith is full of hope.**

Peter's doubt certainly paralyzes him and he begins to sink in the Sea of Galilee.

In his panic, Peter calls on Jesus to save him. Jesus then saves Peter and chastises him for his lack of faith saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt me." In our own lives, how do we let doubt win out over faith?

This particular Gospel reveals a great deal about Peter. At first glance he appears to be an emotional, impulsive loose cannon and he certainly is that. His challenge to Jesus to enable him to walk on water was certainly an emotion-driven event. Peter gets himself into trouble by leading with his heart and not thinking through a situation and calculating the cost of what he says.

He did the same thing when he swore unswerving allegiance to Jesus and then proceeded to betray him three times before the cock crowed.

Peter's emotional approach to his outward behavior resulted in failure causing him some grief. But his failure caused him to draw closer to Jesus. Peter's actions were sometimes ill conceived, but he acted out of the love in his heart. Each of us has those "Peter moments" where we do things in a way that we wish we hadn't.

It is easy to see Peter as a failure and we also experience failures in our own lives. But, in the end Peter was not a failure. He was the rock on which the church was built, not the rock that almost sunk to the bottom of the Sea of Galilee.

Each time Peter fell, he reached out again and became closer and closer to Jesus. Peter was resilient, rising again each time he fell. We can take comfort in the fact that a saint is not a person who never fails. A saint is a person who gets up and goes on after each failure. Peter's failures resulted in a great love for Christ. In the end, those of us who, like Peter, love Christ grow closer to sainthood.

Kirk Alan Kubicek, an Episcopal priest said, "if we all had a nickel for every time Jesus said 'come' we would all be very rich. In fact, it is that Jesus says to us 'come,' that we are very rich indeed." If we, like Peter, try to go to Jesus when he calls, we then can rest assured that we are striving for sainthood.

Homily 20110911 (9-11-2011)

30. 24th Sunday Ordinary, Cycle A – Forgiveness

Today's Gospel is a continuation of what we heard last week on the theme of reconciliation and forgiveness. Last week's Gospel was focused more on confronting the person believed to have sinned; this week's Gospel is very concerned with forgiveness.

Jewish law requires that a relative be forgiven three times for a specific sin. So, Peter thought he was being extravagant when he asked Jesus if it was enough to forgive someone seven times. Jesus responded that the forgiveness should be given not seven times but 77 times. Jesus was not saying that we are to count to 77 times that we have forgiven someone and then after that we can withhold forgiveness and exact revenge. He is saying that we are to offer unlimited forgiveness as God offers it to us.

The parable of the servant and the king that follows the dialogue between Jesus and Peter strongly suggests that we must forgive others as God forgives us. The king, representing God in the parable, forgives the debt, so large that it can never be paid back, of his servant who represents all of us. But the servant is not likewise merciful with someone who owes him money and has him thrown into debtors' prison. When the king finds out about his servant's hypocrisy, the servant too is thrown into debtors' prison.

When we pray the Our Father, which we do often, we say the words "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." These words are not to be taken lightly as part of a ritualistic prayer. Jesus gave us these words to integrate into our lives.

Our God will forgive us for anything we might do, no matter how insignificant or how large the sin. We are called to do the same for others. In the last verse of the Gospel, Jesus tells what our heavenly Father will do to us, unless each of us forgives his brother or sister from the heart.

We might ask ourselves what this forgiveness looks like. Do we forget about the sin and welcome the sinner back into our lives like nothing ever happened? There is no consistent way of offering forgiveness. Take the case where one person has a history of physically abusing another; for example a wife that is regularly beaten by the husband. If the wife says, "I love my husband and will stay with him." That is not forgiveness but it is enabling if the husband takes no steps to change his behavior.

Forgiveness does not mean inviting a person who has hurt us back into our lives in a way that that they can hurt us again. Forgiveness might be not wishing harm on the other person, praying for the other person, or being open to reconciliation with someone who has taken steps to change their ways.

Back in the late 1950s in Philadelphia, a Korean student at the University of Pennsylvania was caught on the way to the post office by a street gang who beat,

robbed, and killed him. There was a great public outcry, the state called for the death penalty. Amid all of the emotional furor, a letter from the Korean student's Catholic family arrived. It read, "our family has met and have decided to request that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government who have committed this criminal action.

In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this request, we have decided to save money to start a fund for the religious, educational, vocational and social guidance of these boys when they are released. We have dared to express our hope with a spirit received from the Gospel of Jesus Christ who died for our sins." The family acted in the spirit of Jesus' admonishment to hate the sin but to love the sinner. The family showed a true example of forgiveness.

It is no coincidence that today's Gospel message is given to us on 9/11. Like the senseless murder of the Korean student in Philadelphia, but on a much larger scale, 9/11 killed 3000 people and destroyed tens of thousands lives. 9/11 inflicted a large and costly national wound, a senseless, indiscriminate and horrendous loss of many innocent lives, including the lives of 300 Muslims --- mostly Americans.

In the days following 9/11, there were a number of retaliatory murders of innocent people who looked like Muslims. In Arizona, Balbir Singh Sodhi was gunned down in front of his gas station simply because he wore a turban. The rage-filled murderer had spent several days drinking in a nearby bar threatening to kill Muslims. Mr Sodhi was a Sikh, a religion from India, which has nothing to do with the Muslim faith.

On the cross, Jesus prayed for the Roman soldiers that were his executioners. He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." It is the Christian ideal that we can pray that prayer with Jesus in regards to 9/11. We recognize that is what we should do, but as humans, it is a very heavy load to lift. Jesus said to love our enemies, but can we?

The family of the murdered Korean student was able to show compassion for the gang members while not excusing them for committing the crime.

Maybe you have heard of or have seen the moving story of two 9/11 widows portrayed in the documentary Beyond Belief. Susan Retik and Patti Quigley of the Boston area lost their husbands in 9/11, one in the Twin Towers and the other on Flight 93 when it crashed in Pennsylvania. Both were carrying children that would never see their fathers. They did not know each other before 9/11, but after the tragedy, they came together to make sure that some good came out of 9/11.

They decided to help other widows, widows in Afghanistan where the 9/11 attacks were launched. Unlike themselves, these widows had no chance at a future. They were totally dependent on their husbands' property. They could inherit no property. If they left, they could not take their children. The American widows worked tirelessly to raise money to help educate the Afghani widows and make them financially independent. The money raised went to get these women started

in various businesses or trained them as midwives in a country with the highest pre-natal death rate in the world because male doctors were not allowed to treat women.

The lives of Susan Retik and Patti Quigley were much more negatively impacted by 9/11 than most of us. Yet, they found a way to turn grief, loss and pain into something that helped others and found peace and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not only important because God calls us to forgive others as we are forgiven, but also for our own wellbeing. There was a sign on a church on Babcock St. that said, "Forgive or Relive." That is such a true statement. When we can't forgive, we tend to play the same angry tapes in our heads over and over again, distracting us from living our lives and doing what God us calling us to do.

What constitutes forgiveness may be different for each of us and may change with each situation. It is our calling to ask that our trespasses may be forgiven as we forgive those that trespass against us. Let us pray that we can truly be people of forgiveness and can reap the benefits of the peace it brings.

Homily 20110917 (9-17-2011)

31. 25th Sunday Ordinary, Cycle A – Laborers

The scene in the Gospel of workers waiting to be hired in the town square might remind us of similar scenes today such as laborers arriving early in the morning at the day labor facility on US 1 looking for a day of work, or farmworkers arriving before dawn at a town square in places like Immokalee on the west coast of Florida hoping to be hired to pick crops or the workers who report to their union hall hoping to be hired on to a job. People in the time of Jesus needed work to feed their families as do people today. As finding work was constantly on the mind of workers in the First Century Holy Land, it is so today among unemployed and underemployed Americans. In Jesus time, no work that day meant no food on the table that night. The same is true for many today. A report from census data published during the past week stated that one in six persons in the United States is living below the poverty level.

In the First Century Holy land, the summer crops were ready for harvesting in September and had to be gathered quickly as there was little time between the harvest and the rainy season and unpicked crops would be ruined. Landowners were happy to find any help that they could get and were willing to pay a whole day's wage for whoever could help them to get their harvesting done, even if they could only work a few hours.

Landowners made sure that people were employed and could afford to feed their families and the workers made sure that the crops were safely harvested. Workers that labored the entire day were fairly compensated, and those who worked part of the day experienced the generosity of the landowner.

When Jesus shares this likely true story, he is not making a point about equitable labor relations. The landowner represents our generous God. The vineyard represents God's church. Like the landowner who tried to ensure that no one was unemployed, God does not want people to be "unemployed" or left out of His Church. God's desire for us is to labor in the Kingdom where we bring mercy, forgiveness and compassion, justice, peace and, of all things, love into our troubled world of selfishness, darkness and sin.

God recognizes that we all have different gifts and we are called at different times. Some people discover their calling to serve as children where as others might not hear their calling until sometime in their adult lives. God welcomes all to work in the Vineyard regardless of how late or how early in life that we are called.

There are many examples of the best workers in God's vineyard. Some we know as family and friends while others we have heard about through the media or in books, or Scripture. Perhaps the best example is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

On Thursday, the Church celebrated the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, one of the Marian Feasts in the Church calendar. Our Lady of Sorrows has been venerated in the Church since the early 13th Century. The Feast Day was given by

Rome to the Order of the Servants of Mary in 1667 on the third Sunday in September. In 1814 Pope Pius VII extended the celebration of Our Lady of Sorrows to the entire Latin Church and in 1913 Pope Pius X moved the celebration to September 15th.

We are recognizing Our Lady of Sorrows today because it is important to the tradition of Our Lady of Grace. Our parish was named for Mary and is under her protection. Our Lady of Grace was founded by the Friars of the Servants of Mary who staffed the parish until Fr. Leo came in 2000. Although people have come and gone, the great sense of community that has been here since the beginning is still alive and well.

Beyond the sense of community at Our Lady of Grace, there is still a Servite presence here in the form of the Secular Order of the Servants of Mary. (Have them stand and face the community.)

Many of our members, including myself, are active in multiple parish ministries. I am sure that you recognize these people. We are not an exclusive group, but are regular parishioners. We are called to live out the obligations of our own Baptism and appreciate what Mary has given for us and try to model our lives on her example.

The Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows is one of the major feasts in the Servite calendar. It is the celebration of all that Mary endured and our knowledge that no matter what we might suffer in our lives, we can look to Mary as someone who shared any pain we can imagine in our own lives.

We have been given Jesus as a model, but he can be somewhat intimidating as a model because he was divine as well as human. Mary makes a less intimidating model that is easier to identify with because she is fully human.

Mary was not sheltered from tragedy in her life and she knew plenty of sadness. Ultimately she faced her human death as do all of us at some time.

Mary endured hardship from the time she was visited by the angel Gabriel. Although she was a young teenager, she must have known a bit about the birds and the bees because when the angel asks her to bear a child, she knew where babies came from. She said that she had never known a man. This was the case even though she had been betrothed to Joseph. By becoming pregnant outside of marriage, she opened her self to all kinds of rejection by society and by Joseph. Her chances of marriage to Joseph at that time were in grave danger until God intervened with Joseph in a dream.

Even with the potential of disaster in her life, she said yes to God because of her great love for him.

After saying yes to God, Mary's life was one difficulty after another, one challenge after another. We know about some of the difficult events in Mary's life

from Scripture. We can fill in a lot of blanks about her hard life of poverty that was common among the poor of the First Century.

We know that Mary made a hard journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census and gave birth to Jesus in a barn among animals.

Refugees can identify with Mary and her immediate family who went to Egypt to live far from her wider family and all she was familiar with to avoid the danger of Herod's jealous wrath. Parents who have lost track of their children in the mall or have had their children run away can identify with the panic Mary must have felt in the caravan on the way home from Jerusalem when she discovered that Jesus was missing.

Widows and widowers can identify with the loss of her husband Joseph at an all too early age. Very few parents have had to stand at the foot of the cross and see their child brutally tortured and executed. Mary is relatable in some way to every single human being who has ever suffered anything.

As Servites, or Servants Like Mary, we try to model our lives on Mary by standing at the foot of the crosses of those being crucified in their lives today; because they are ill, have no food or shelter, or feel lonely and rejected. All of us are called to respond with love, compassion, forgiveness and hospitality as are all of us who are called to work in God's vineyard.

Homily 20111009 (10-09-2011)

32. 28th Sunday, Cycle A – Invitation

Given the weather today, it is unfortunate that the reading from Hebrew Scripture is not being proclaimed. The Gospel is about invitation and it is wonderful that you accepted God's invitation to worship today in spite of the pouring rain.

Imagine that any of us received an invitation for Thanksgiving dinner at the White House, would we accept? Or suppose that any of us received an invitation from the bishop to go to Rome and meet the Pope, would we accept? Or suppose we were offered an invitation from the president of a cruise line for a free cruise to a romantic destination?

Most of us would gladly accept these invitations. We would be honored to receive them and thrilled to tell our friends and relatives about them. These invitations would mean that we were held in high regard by important people and would certainly make us feel special.

After all, presidents, popes and business leaders do not invite just anyone into their lives.

In the Gospel, the king invites those people that are important to him to the wedding feast. This was done in the traditional manner of the first century. When the feast was in the planning stages, invitations were sent by messenger to those invited. When the party was ready to start, a messenger was again sent to tell the invitees that it was time to come. Not to attend was to show great disrespect to the host. The insult to the host gets compounded when the invitees kill the messengers that come to remind them of the wedding feast.

The king will not be deterred in having the wedding feast for his son. So, he sends his servants out to the main road to abduct any one they find and bring them to the wedding feast.

In telling this story, Jesus is inviting all of us into relationship with God to enable us to attend the great feast, the eternal banquet in the Kingdom of God. The story is loaded with symbolism. The messengers delivering the first invitations to the feast symbolize God's invitation to relationship as was made through the prophets of Hebrew Scripture. The second invitations symbolize the invitation from Jesus himself.

Sending of servants to the crossroads to gather anyone they find symbolizes the universality of the invitation from God. All are welcome into relationship and into the Kingdom of God, both Jews and Gentiles and sinners who want to change and saints.

The story also represents us all at different times in our lives. In the Gospel we hear "Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business." These were not bad people, but people so caught up in their work

and lives that they would not take the time for a relationship with God.” Aren’t there times in our lives when we are so preoccupied with the details of our daily lives that we don’t think to turn to God, even when we badly need God’s help?

Director and actor Woody Allen said that showing up is 90% of success in life. Although it is true that we are called to show up to worship with our community and partake in the Eucharistic celebration each weekend, that does not alone put us in right relationship with God. G.K. Chesterton, the British Catholic theologian and writer said, “Being in church does not make me a Christian any more than standing in my garage makes me a car.”

In the second part of the Gospel, the king has the man who doesn’t wear wedding clothing thrown out of the celebration and severely punished. It is hard to conceive of God caring about people’s clothing, and the punishment is too severe for a dress code violation.

The king, who represents God, is not really concerned about the man’s external clothing, but is concerned about what is in his heart. The poor man represents those who just show up but are not willing to properly dress one’s heart and soul. They don’t amend their lives to behave appropriately as befits one in right relationship with God. In Colossians, Paul clearly states the requirements for a well clothed heart and soul. It is written, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against each other, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were called into one body. And, be thankful.” We don’t take on the Christian attributes described by Paul just by showing up at Mass. Once we accept the invitation to be in relationship with God, it is expected that we change our lives in response to God’s gracious love. We accept God’s invitation each time we come to Mass by receiving the grace, strength and understanding of what God is calling us for as we hear God’s word and receive his body and blood.

We are also called to be open to accepting God’s invitation at moments we encounter in our lives, such as when there is an opportunity to love and honor him in the poor, the suffering the lonely and the hurting that he sends our way, whether we feel like it or not. Even in the times that we know we have not accepted God’s invitation, we have another opportunity each day when we wake up in the morning or at those special moments when God’s invitation comes to us again.

It is our call to put on Christ, to dress ourselves in the garments of righteousness and to bring to the Kingdom of God the best we have to offer --- not because we have to, but because we want to. Because we realize that God, in Christ, has given us everything; we cannot do other than to offer God all that we have and all that we are.

Our question to answer for today and for the rest of our lives is “What am I going to wear?”

Homily 20111106 (11-6-2011)

33. **32nd Sunday, Cycle A – Parable of Wedding Feast**

Jesus often uses parables that relate to everyday life to get his ideas across. If we look at this parable about a wedding feast, ten virgins and lamp oil, it makes little sense to us because it is not a story that is in any way culturally relatable. But, the story is about a familiar event to Jews living in a First Century village in the Holy Land and the same scenario could be played out in an Israeli village today.

A wedding was a great occasion for the entire village. Everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, turned out to accompany the bridal party newlyweds to the couple's new home. The procession took the longest possible route in order to include the most well-wishers.

Even the religious scholars were given time away from their studies to share in the joy of the wedding feast, which consisted of the ceremony and a week of celebration in the couple's new house. The foolish virgins missed out on the ceremony because they were unprepared.

It was the tradition that the bride would be kept company by ten virgins prior to the wedding until the groom arrived. The arrival of the groom was not pre-planned for a specific time. Preparations could go on for a number of days or weeks. It was considered to be great sport to catch the bridal party sleeping while they were waiting for the arrival of the groom.

The groom could come unexpectedly any time, day or night. He was required by tradition to send a man through the streets shouting, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming." At the sound of that announcement, the bridal party was required to go out into the streets to meet him. It was also required that anyone who went out at night carry a lamp, in the time of Jesus, it was an oil lamp. Once the groom arrived, the door to the house was closed and locked and no more celebrants were allowed in.

So, like the other parables of Jesus, this one had a specific meaning to First Century society and a meaning for today's followers of Christ. The immediate meaning for the Jews of Jesus' time was that they were, for the most part, unprepared for his coming, the coming of the messiah, the Son of God.

The parable has two warnings. The first is that we don't know the day and time when we will meet God and be required to account for our lives. Preparation takes a lifetime and we can't wait until the last minute to prepare to meet our God. Second, our relationship with God is not something that can be borrowed. Our spirituality cannot be attained for us by someone else. We have to work at it ourselves. Development of our spirituality also takes a lifetime as it is a never-ending journey. The oil for the lamps has been said to represent wisdom, an innate presence of the Holy Spirit that directs our thoughts and actions towards what we are called by God to be and do. Like the oil in the parable, wisdom cannot be

borrowed but each individual must find their own wisdom. There is some similarity between waiting for the bridegroom and searching for wisdom.

The first reading says that if we actively look for wisdom, we will find wisdom. Wisdom actively seeks those out who wait for it. Isn't that also the case with Jesus? When we are gathered in His name, He says He will be there.

The Second Reading also relates to the Gospel. It tells us that those who die in Christ will rise first with Christ. The reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians ends with the words, "Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words." The similarity between waiting for wisdom, the waiting for the bridegroom, and waiting for Jesus also suggests that Jesus is wisdom. To greet Jesus when he comes again is to have the highest kind of wisdom. If wisdom is required to wait for Jesus, it is also that for which we wait. Jesus is wisdom incarnate.

So we have been warned to be ready to meet our God. The question is, "When do we have to be ready?" The end of the world has been predicted many times in our lifetime. In 2006 alone, there were fifteen dates predicted. Harold Camping, a religious broadcaster, predicted the world would end on May 21st of this year. On May 22nd, we were still here. He said he miscalculated and the date for the end of the year was really October 21, 2011, which has come and gone and we are still here. Harold Camping has announced his retirement!

Perhaps we are being called to look at when we encounter God in a different, more down to earth, immediate manner. Matthew chapter 25 is very clear that we find Jesus, in the sick, in the poor, in the hungry, in the thirsty, in the homeless and certainly we can add sad, lonely, depressed, fearful and a number of other human conditions. In other words, Jesus is not calling us to be ready for some cataclysmic end time, but to be ready to meet him, to meet God, in all those that we encounter. He is calling us to be ready by the righteous life we lead.

We often make a quick choice: "I'm late for an appointment; I don't have time to say a few kind words now." Yet the five women in the gospel who didn't take the time to ensure they had enough oil for their lamps discovered their choice had unforeseen ramifications. So when we ignore opportunities to serve, dismiss small kindnesses and indulge ourselves in little forms of selfishness, we do not understand how large the implications of our thoughtlessness might be.

We also have no way to foresee the effects of our positive actions. A kind word, an hour spent listening, the extra effort perfecting a work: all these can have incalculable impact that could include a ripple effect touching many others. Some spiritual writers who know the importance of the seemingly insignificant call it "the sacrament of the present moment." God is with us in all moments of our lives and also in the people we encounter. It is in each moment of our life that we need to be ready to hear and act on the call of God. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to be ready to serve God in our present moments and that our lamps always have oil to shine brightly with God's love. If we serve God well by serving God's people, the door will never be closed to us.

Homily 20111211 (12-11-2011)

34. **3rd Sunday of Advent, Cycle B -- John the Baptist**

Last week and again this week, the Gospel reintroduces us to John the Baptist. Last week we got an idea of who John the Baptist was from a physical and lifestyle point of view. John was a homeless man who lived in the Judean wasteland between Jerusalem and the Jordan River. It is a desolate land with no water. One could imagine that John did not bathe frequently and probably smelled badly. Add to that his camel hair robe. This is not the kind of camel hair attire that one would purchase in an upscale clothing store, but the shabby hide of a smelly beast. The Gospel said that he survived by eating insects and honey that he must have gotten by raiding the hives of wild bees. Can you imagine what would happen if this man wandered into Melbourne Square Mall and offered to baptize people?

Security would likely be summoned very quickly and he would probably have been taken to Circles of Care for observation.

In today's Gospel we learn more about the person John was and his mission. John is given a higher place in the grand scheme of things by his contemporaries than he claims for himself. The priests and Levites were sent to question John and try to find out what he was up to because he was drawing significant numbers of people to be baptized. The priests came because John was a descendent of Aaron and a priest himself because of his lineage, the qualification for priesthood. The priests came out of curiosity.

The other group that wanted to check out John was the Levites, the temple class, who were likely sent by the Sanhedrin to see if John was behaving in a manner counter to the orthodoxy of the day.

John really confused the religious leaders. During their questioning, he said that he was not the messiah. The Jews thought that before the messiah came, Elijah would return to settle all disputes and make the population ready for the messiah. John said he was not Elijah, They ask John if he was a prophet because it was believed that Isaiah and Jeremiah would appear when the messiah came. The leaders were really confused because John was baptizing Jews, when only gentiles converting to Judaism were baptized in a ritual bath.

John responded to his questioners by saying that he was no one and not worthy to unloose the sandals of the one coming after him. In the First Century it was slaves that took sandals off of the feet of their masters. At that time, roads were dusty when it was dry, and muddy when it was wet. It was impossible to keep feet clean so slaves were relegated to removing their masters' sandals.

John, a humble, homeless, seemingly eccentric man was highly influential in his day. People were flocking to him. He was an example of a holy man of God doing the will of God. He inspired people. If there were media in those days, John would have been sought after to be a guest on talk shows and would have been

prominently featured in the news. in his humility, John would likely have refused the attention.

If we look at the people in the news today, for the most part they are not examples to look up to. There are politicians on all sides that do not conduct their lives ethically and morally. There are athletic figures who are arrested for crimes of violence, often against women. The news is filled with celebrities who have gotten into trouble with the law because of hedonistic behavior. A lot of media attention is given to a talentless socialite who had a multi-million dollar wedding and a marriage that lasted three months. Little attention is given to ordinary people who model God's love in their daily lives.

Fortunately, the Church has given us a number of saints and blessed to model our lives on. Many, like John, have lived simple lives of poverty and have found their wealth in God's love. There are also countless others that have not been canonized by the Church who have touched our lives with unselfish love. There are examples of everyday, living saints in our parish --- some of our parishioners who are constantly working in the background asking nothing in return. These parishioners are examples to all of us, who with the saints, canonized and not canonized, point to Jesus.

Of all of the saints given to us as examples by the Church, the most venerated is Mary, our Blessed Mother. Over the years, Mary has appeared to people with her message of love. Some of these appearances have been authenticated by the Church. One of the authenticated appearances was in the Seventeenth Century in Mexico and we celebrate that event this evening.

The story is told of how Juan Diego, a peasant boy, was walking from his village to Mexico City early on the morning of December 9, 1531, the day of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in the Spanish Empire. Juan saw a vision of a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, surrounded by light, on the slopes of the Hill of Tepeyac. Speaking in the local language, Nahuatl, the Lady asked for a church to be built at that site in her honor. From her words Juan Diego recognized her as the Virgin Mary.

Diego told his story to the Spanish Archbishop, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, who instructed him to return and ask the Lady for a miraculous sign to prove her claim. The Virgin told Juan Diego to gather some flowers from the top of Tepeyac Hill. It was winter and very late in the season for any flowers to bloom, but on the hilltop that was usually barren, Diego found Castillian roses, and the Virgin herself arranged them in his peasant cloak. When Juan Diego opened the cloak before Zumárraga on December 12, the flowers fell to the floor, and in their place was the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, miraculously imprinted on the fabric.

In 1754, Pope Benedict the Fourteenth declared Our Lady of Guadalupe the patron saint of what was called New Spain. Over time, papal declaration made Our Lady of Guadalupe the patron saint of all of the Americas.

The story of Juan Diego and the Blessed Mother gives us two examples to follow. In the case of Juan, we are given the example faith and obedience In the case of Mary, she is our example of love and the knowledge that with God, anything is possible. Mary's whole life gives us an example of how a human can say yes to God and gracefully endure any hardships that come our way.

Let us pray that we turn to the saints of the Church, those canonized like John the Baptist and Mary as well as the everyday saints that we have encountered in our lives so that we may pattern our lives on their lives. Let us call upon the protection of Mary as we together say "Hail Mary "

Homily 20120101 (1-1-2012)

35. Solemnity of the Mother of God

Today the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. The solemnity was celebrated on different dates during the history of the Church. In 1974, Pope Paul VI moved the solemnity to January 1st. He said, "In the revised arrangement of the Christmas season, we should all turn with one mind to the restored solemnity of the Mother of God. The purpose of the celebration is to honor the role of Mary and to sing the praises of the dignity of the Holy Mother...through whom we have been given the gift of God, Jesus. This same solemnity also offers an excellent opportunity to renew the adoration rightfully to be shown to the newborn Prince of Peace, as we once again pray to God, through the intercession of the Queen of Peace, for the priceless gift of peace. Because of these considerations and the fact that the octave of Christmas coincides with a day of hope, New Year's Day, we have assigned to it the observance of the World Day of Peace"

We are called to be people of peace and to show the attributes and behaviors of a true person of peace. These attributes are apparent in the lives of Mary and Jesus starting with the annunciation and ending with Mary watching Jesus die willingly die on the cross. The very fact that God chose an innocent, inexperienced, faith-filled young woman to be the mother of Jesus, shows us the Mother of Peace who is humble, accepting and love filled --- just a few of her qualities.

The Jewish community was expecting a Messiah, a powerful and great military commander and ruler like King David. Yet, the Prince of Peace was born into poverty, was a refugee in a foreign land, did manual labor, was obedient to God, accepted all kinds of people, and was willing to give his life to save others.

The readings this weekend help us to understand what makes a person of peace. It is interesting that shepherds were chosen to announce the birth of the messiah, shepherds who were despised by the Pharisees. Although the shepherds did the valuable service of caring for the sheep to be sacrificed at the temple, they were considered lowlife because their job prevented them from participating in all the meticulous ritual hand washings done many times a day by the observant Jews. Yet, these shepherds were the first non-family members to come into the presence of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and announce his birth to all.

A quick peek at the Gospel next Sunday for Epiphany shows the three wise men or three kings that come to pay homage to Jesus are not only foreigners, but pagan non-Jews. Like the shepherds, the three would have not been well regarded by the religious establishment.

In the second reading, the letter from Saint Paul to the Galatians, Paul speaks of a special kind of maturity. This maturity is not chronological. The maturity that Paul is speaking of is a spiritual maturity. Paul's maturity releases people from

being slaves to the many small details of the law. We are made free to be peacemakers, loving God and to loving one another as sisters and brothers of Christ and therefore adopted children of God.

The First Century world was just as turbulent as the world of today. There was political division, cultural and ethnic division, massive poverty and violence. The same need for peacemakers that existed then exists now. Today, families are hurting due to estrangement and domestic violence. Our nation is divided in many ways. Serious disagreements between nations caused or could cause war. The same attributes that made Mary, Jesus and other people of peace, also define peacemakers today. Perhaps the most important attribute of a person of peace is acceptance of God's will and acceptance of other people. Acceptance of others does not mean that we have to agree with or even like them.

Acceptance means we have to respect the fact that they are created in God's image just as we are. Acceptance also means putting aside our prejudices and accepting people for who they are, not their race, appearance, religion, political affiliation and all what seems to divide us today. Acceptance requires us to be open to dialog and to seriously consider others' opinions, cultures and beliefs.

Bringing about peace and practicing acceptance also requires a certain amount of activism. In his remarks on World Peace Day, January 1st, 1972, Pope Paul VI said, "If you want peace, work for justice." Although the pope was calling for economic justice, cultural justice, legal justice and other types of justice that are difficult to procure, we are also called to justice in our own lives, in our dealings with the people around us.

To be activists, it is not necessary to make a sign and go to a demonstration. It is not necessary to attend "sit ins" or chain ourselves to fences. Both Mary and Jesus were examples of the kind of activism that that we are called to. Mary took great risk saying yes to God and carrying Jesus to birth. Her activism was quiet and in the background. For example, she ensured that there was enough wine at the wedding feast at Cana and she was present to Jesus when he died on the cross. Jesus associated with and ministered to all kinds of people, whether they were in favor or not. He did what was right and said what was right regardless of the consequences. He was obedient to God even if it meant suffering and death.

As we begin a new year, let us resolve to be people of peace and people of acceptance following the example of Mary the Queen of Peace and Jesus the Prince of Peace. We pray that we can be in just relationship with those closest to us and do what we can to build a more peaceful world. The first reading from the Book of Numbers contains what is known as a traditional Jewish priestly blessing, once bestowed upon the people by priests. Today it is used by both clergy and lay people and I would like to bestow that blessing on all of us in hopes for a year of peace, acceptance and justice. Please stand.

"May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord look kindly upon you and give you peace. Amen"

Homily 20120226 (2-26-2012)

36. **1st Sunday Lent, Cycle B – Kingdom of God**

“The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.” When we received ashes on Wednesday, we heard **“Repent and believe in the Gospel.”** If we truly believe in the Gospel, authenticity requires that we live the message in our lives. The words of the Gospel are not so different in meaning and in calling from words we frequently pray **“thy kingdom come they will be done on earth as it is in heaven** Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Repentance and forgiveness are an integral and important condition of the Kingdom of God.

Repentance involves sorrow, but it is not sorrow for having to live with the consequences of sin, but sorrow for the sin itself. Most criminals are not terribly bothered by the crimes they commit; they are more concerned with getting caught and paying the price of punishment. We are called to be sorry for the sin itself, regardless of the consequences.

Our sinfulness is not necessarily a result of committing an actual sin, but could be a sin of omission, a sin of not forgiving, a sin of doing nothing to relieve the suffering of others or to keep others from sinful behavior. Repentance is not just a matter of being sorry for the sin. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means personal growth or change in behavior. So repentance is a sorrow for our sin that demands a change in our life that causes us to avoid the same sin in the future.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus went into the desert for forty days to be tempted by Satan. The Aramaic/Hebrew meaning of the Satan is adversary. Jesus spent forty days fighting the seduction of sin that was encouraged by his adversary.

In our human life, fighting the temptation of adversarial behavior and attitudes is a daily challenge, especially when our adversary is within ourselves. Like Jesus was sent into the desert for forty days, we too are given the forty day season of Lent to look at our own behavior and take the action needed to change our lives.

Last year, I visited another parish and noted that their deacon was giving a seminar called, **“How to live a mature Lent.”** No details were provided but in thinking about the seminar topic I came up with some ideas.

We have been indoctrinated with the idea of giving up something for Lent. Common sacrifices are chocolate, desserts, television and movies. It is not obvious how we make the world a better place or build a solid faith foundation by giving up these things.

Possibly we could donate what we would spend on what we give up to a good cause or use the resulting free time in our lives to benefit others. But these types of sacrifices do not build the quality of our faith, a necessity for living a

mature Lent. Perhaps the first step towards living a mature Lent is thinking about what we can give instead of what we can give up.

Michael Swan, a writer for the Canadian Catholic newspaper wrote, “We Catholics take a long time getting past childhood Lents of heroic self-denial, trying to achieve holiness and win God’s approval on our own terms. Eventually we discover the sort of Lent which accepts human weakness. Rather than casting ourselves as saviors of our own souls, we learn to spend those 40 days shaping our lives, our minds and our hearts into the form of hope.” We need hope for ourselves to give hope to others.

We can give material support to others, but does that really help us to grow in faith in itself? For some, writing a check is easy. Giving of ourselves in the form of time, energy, loving behavior and more Christ-like attitudes towards others is more challenging and likely a better road to growth in faith.

Another sign of a mature Lent is that we don’t compensate for our sacrifices. There is the Fat Tuesday syndrome where we overdose on what we are giving up prior to Lent and make up for what we deny ourselves after Lent is over. Another factor to look at is the permanence of our sacrifice. If we make a change or sacrifice for Lent and revert to a previous behavior when Lent is over, this does not help us to grow in faith and as humans. A sign of a mature Lent is that we make changes in our lives. Each year, we are called to make a new change that will bring us closer to human perfection.

Lenten experiences that help us grow to be more pleasing to the Father and more like the Son will put us on a rock solid spiritual foundation. If we choose inconsequential or simple sacrifices, our growth will be stunted. If we challenge ourselves to real positive change, we will grow.

Those who are involved in “Why Catholic?” may recognize a quote, relevant to Lent, from Sr. Thea Bowman, a theologian, liturgist and motivational speaker who continued her ministry while she was suffering from cancer. She said, “Let us stretch ourselves, going beyond the comfort zones to unite ourselves with Christ’s redemptive work. We unite ourselves with Christ’s redemptive work when we make peace, when we can share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God’s healing, God’s forgiveness and God’s unconditional love.”

Living up to Sister Thea’s words is a tall order. We might enter Lent with too much ambition and a long list of what we will do in order to facilitate huge personal change over a relatively short period of time. The church has given us Lent each year for a very good reason. We don’t have to make huge changes all at once but can make reasonable and doable changes over the years of our lives. If we try to do too much during one Lent, we set ourselves up for failure. What we choose to give for Lent is very personal and each of us needs to make very different changes.

As part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we pray the Act of Contrition. It can also be prayed as part of our regular prayer life, and it is especially meaningful

during Lent. As we pray the Act of Contrition now and always, we ask God's grace to fulfill what we need to do for our Lent. Let us also pray for hope that when we meet God face to face that we will be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let us pray together, "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of Heaven, and the pains of Hell; but most of all because I love You, my God, Who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen."

Homily 20120304 (3-4-2012)

37. **2nd Sunday Lent, Cycle B – Transfiguration**

Today, as always on the Second Sunday of Lent, we hear the story of the Transfiguration. We understand that a great mystery occurred. At a supernatural event on the mountain top, God changed Jesus' whole appearance from what must have been dirty robes, certainly stained by road dust and other things, to the most radiant, purest white, that one could imagine.

When God performed this miraculous act, he did it in the presence of the long dead Moses and Elijah. Moses was the supreme lawgiver and Elijah was the first and major prophet of Hebrew Scripture who brought the voice of God to humanity. It was believed that Elijah would appear to endorse the coming of the Messiah. The meeting of Jesus with these great figures was symbolically showing the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people, the Messiah who was both the supreme lawgiver and greatest prophet.

God appears, speaking from a cloud as he did at Jesus' baptism saying, "This is my son, hear him." In Jewish thought, God was connected with a cloud. It was in a cloud that Moses met God to give him the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. It was in a cloud that God hovered over the tabernacle on the journey to the Promised Land. A cloud signified God's presence when Solomon dedicated the Temple. It was Jewish thought that when the Messiah came, God would appear in a cloud. This belief too was fulfilled at the Transfiguration.

The disciples, Peter, James and John were also present at the Transfiguration of Jesus so that they could give testimony when the time came for them to do so. We, the modern day disciples, when hearing this often told story understand that the word transfiguration implies some sort of change. If you look up transfiguration as you'll find that it means transformation or conversion.

On that mountain top, over two centuries ago, Jesus' appearance was changed. He was transformed and converted into someone who appeared much differently than his natural state. After the moment passed, his disciples wanted to preserve the event, but it was not to be physically preserved over time. But, seeing God's love in the transfigured body of Jesus certainly must have made a lasting impression on the disciples. It must have strengthened their love of God and made them see the power of their vocations. The event must have also given Jesus strength and conviction that allowed him to continue his journey towards the cross.

This Gospel evokes in us the big question, "What does this miraculous event of the First Century call us to do in our lives?" There is a story of a little girl in a church with beautiful stained glass windows. The priest asked the girl what she thought a saint was. She replied, referring to the stained glass windows, "a person who lets the light shine through." All of us have the capacity to be saints. We are in our lives, saints under construction. It is our call from God to transfigure one another, by letting God's love shine through us to illuminate others.

We can't doubt our ability to transfigure others. One only has to look at the glowing faces of two people in love, the delighted face of a child who has been made to feel loved and special, the look of gratitude on the face of someone who has been done a kindness. These are just some of the human situations where transfiguration occurs. Most of us have had transformational people in our lives who have had great influence on us becoming the people we are today.

Human involvement in transfiguration will not likely produce a glorious moment like the one that happened on the mountaintop and is still spoken about 2000 years later. But, we can, by sharing of God's love, produce a glorious moment in time for another human being; a moment when they feel loved and cared about, a moment that may or may not become a memory, but a moment that will affect their life and their ability to transform others.

There are people in our lives who are difficult, who don't seem to "get it," who keep making the same mistakes. For Jesus, Peter was a tough nut to crack. Jesus rebuked him, Jesus admonished him, and Jesus never gave up. He declared Peter the rock on which he built his Church. For Jesus, giving up was not an option, nor is it for us. In a difficult situation, we need to bide our time and understand when to, when not to, and how to approach others. We are called to have a positive influence on all we touch, whether it is a result of ministry, service in our jobs, love or fellowship. It is also important not to assume that others do not have the capability of transforming others. There are many stories about people we would might consider to be unlikely to transform others. One especially powerful true story comes to mind.

A year or so ago, a homeless, undocumented man from Guatemala, who might be written off by many people, saw a woman being threatened with violence by a man with a knife. He intervened. The woman got away and certainly her life was transformed in that moment. The man who tried to save her was fatally stabbed and left to bleed to death on the sidewalk. No less than twenty people passed by. This sad story illustrates the power of transformation by someone we would not suspect to be a hero and the tragic results of passers by not being concerned enough to try to save a man's life.

In his 2012 Lenten Message, Pope Benedict quotes a verse from the Letter to the Hebrews, saying "Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works." Being concerned is a prerequisite to being transformational. Benedict calls us to be attentive to the needs of others so that we can transform them by showing them God's love. His message is certainly appropriate for Lent and challenges us to determine if our Lenten Sacrifices involve concern and transformational love for others. His message challenges us to give instead of to give up. We are each called during Lent to make a permanent change in our lives that will benefit others. We are only ten days into Lent so there is no reason why can't fine tune our Lenten commitments for our growth and the betterment of others. Hopefully, Lent will help us in our striving for sainthood and better enable us to be beacons of God's love as we let our light shine upon others.

Homily 20120408 (4-8-2012)

38. **Easter**

It is a human tendency to categorize most everything. Categorization is often done for the purposes of productivity. In a mail room of a large company, there are row upon row of boxes where mail is put waiting to be picked up. A box is assigned to each person in the firm. In a post office, there is a section filled with hundreds of metal boxes rented by individuals and businesses.

In today's digital world, messages are placed into electronic "inboxes" waiting to be read. There are even computer programs that will sort email into various "boxes" depending upon the subject line or the presence of key words in the text.

But mail is not the only thing we put into boxes. Humans also tend to categorize and label people, not into physical or digital boxes, but we put people into mental boxes in order to help us make sense of the world we live in, and we rarely let them out of the box where we have put them.

We have a mental box for the people we consider friends and another for those we think of as enemies, obnoxious, or just people that we do not enjoy being around.

We have a mental box for people who are outgoing and popular, and another for the shy and nerdy among us. We have a mental box for Republicans, another for Democrats, and a third for Independents, and perhaps new boxes for Tea Party people and Occupy Wall Street folks.

Humans have boxed other people in and categorized them for centuries. Certainly Jesus was boxed in and categorized. To the people of Nazareth, he was just a home town boy. To the Jewish high priests, he was a thorn in their side. To the Roman authorities, he was another Jewish trouble maker. To his relatives, he was too wrapped up in his preaching, and perhaps out of his mind according to Mark Chapter 3, Verse 21. To the Jews of Jerusalem, he was the political messiah who would free them from Rome. To his disciples, he was their rabbi and teacher. To those who conspired against him, he was a threat to be eliminated. Each group had boxed Jesus in.

Those who had put Jesus into their negative boxes had their way with him when they crucified him, put his body into a tomb, and rolled the stone across its entrance. They put Jesus into the ultimate mental and physical box. He was dead and gone, and would soon be forgotten.

But as the Resurrection proclaims, Jesus could not be boxed in, not even by death. As we read in the Gospel, when the women came to the tomb that first Easter "they saw the stone had been rolled away...on entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side. He said to them 'Do not be amazed! He has been raised; he is not here.'"

Jesus could not be boxed in. That is why we can feel his presence when we gather for Mass. That is why we can hear him speak to us in the scriptures. That is why we can stretch out our hands to receive him in Holy Communion. That is why we can speak of having a personal relationship with him. And that is why we gather to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Risen One, could not be boxed in, not even by death.

Homily 20120415 (4-15-2012)

39. **2nd Sunday of Easter, Cycle B – Early Christians**

The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles paints an idyllic picture of the First Century Christian Community in Jerusalem; a group of people who were of one heart and one mind and shared what they had. This community came together after a period of disillusion and doubt following the brutal execution of Jesus, despite threats from religious and civil authorities. These unschooled and ordinary early Christians understood what Jesus was about, and boldly proclaimed his message. Converts quickly came to this Christian community and their number increased by about 5000 people quickly.

The fact that the believers were united in spirit lived understanding that everything they had was from God, attracted people to their community. They lived a life of generosity and took care of those in need.

There was not a mass pooling of resources, but from time to time when there was great need in the community, someone would sell property and put the proceeds to the benefit of their brothers and sisters. The social generosity of these early Christians made their community even stronger and more close knit, while their financial generosity expressed their compassion.

Because the community truly lived as Jesus taught, the first Christians broke down social barriers between Jews and Gentiles and threw away the religious taboos that separated the ritually clean from those who weren't, and the respectable from the unrespectable. These Christians created a society where people were truly equal under God.

Surely some would view the early Christian community as communists, but neither Jesus nor his early followers supported a particular economic or political system as we see many Christians doing today. The First Century World was not so different from today's world. There were rich and poor, oppressed and oppressors, social and political unrest. The early Christians in a lifestyle that they believed they were called to as Christians. Through the years, there have been groups of Christians that modeled their lifestyle on that of the Christian Community of Jerusalem.

Although there are many examples of Christian communities of lay people since the First Century, a well known American example was established by Dorothy Day and Paul Maurin in 1933. The Catholic Workers Movement was, and still is, dedicated to a lifestyle of nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry and forsaken. There currently exist about 185 Catholic Worker houses today in the United States and they work to end injustice, war, racism and violence of all kinds.

Very few lay people in the developed world live in Christian community today and realistically, it is unfortunately not likely that the Christian world will move in that direction anytime soon. We are challenged to do something much more difficult; to be of one heart and one mind in a world where people live very independently, mostly according to individual desires.

Our culture stresses individuality and often places individual freedom above the common good.

The second reading gives us some help understanding what is expected of us when we hear, “In this way we know we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments.” In other words, we can’t claim to love God if we don’t love one another. Simple words; big challenge. The Gospel is also very direct, “as the Father has sent me, so I have sent you. It cannot be stated any more clearly that we all are called to serve the people of God.

It seems like a daunting task to bring back the kind of love and compassion that existed among the First Century Christians, but that is exactly what we are called to do as followers of Jesus Christ. We live in a world torn by war, distrust and division. There is even great division among people claiming to be Christians; and that division is often over theological disagreements that we allow to interfere with the great commandment to love one another.

It is easy to see ourselves as powerless. What can we do to solve conflicts in far off places like Afghanistan or Sudan or even in our own country? As individuals we don’t have control over the huge issues of our times. But that is not a reason to sit back and do nothing, or even worse, become part of problems that divide people.

Although we can feel powerless in the face of the major troubles of the world, we can be incredibly powerful in serving the people around us. This includes family members, parishioners, fellow workers or even strangers that we encounter. Most of us have sung the words of a popular song, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

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I want to share an experience I had several weeks ago. My walking partner and I were on our morning walk and we saw an elderly, gray haired, small woman standing by a very big GMC Suburban van with the hood up.

We stopped and asked her what was wrong and if we could help. She thought that the battery was dead. We asked if she called anyone. She said she did not have a phone. I took mine out of my pocket and handed it to her so she could call her mechanic. She got a recording and we tried a bit later with the same results.

She said that if she could get to her mechanic, she would be taken care of. The mechanic was more or less on the way to where we sometimes go for breakfast after our walk. Although most of us are cautious about inviting strangers into our cars and homes, I offered to take her to her mechanic.

We started talking in the car, she said everyone called her Granny. I said to her, "Granny, what were you going to do when your car broke down? You didn't have a phone." She replied, "I did what I always do when I need help. I ask Jesus."

I have to say I was blown away. I didn't think driving a couple of blocks out of my way was a big deal. But, it was a big deal to Granny. Even in the smallest thing, we can be of one heart and one mind with people we don't even know.

As Catholic Christians, we are not meant to be isolated people. At baptism, we become a part of Christ and therefore a part of others. When we receive the Eucharist, we again become a part of Christ, we go to the Lord's Table as community and we become joined to others.

Those that we become joined to are not necessarily people that we would agree with about major issues or even people that we like. However, they are among the people of God, the people for whom we are called to have compassion; and the people that we are called to serve. Let us pray that God gives us the grace to share what we have and who we are with those we encounter in our lives.

Homily 20120520 (5-20-2012)

40. Ascension Cycle B – Feast of the Ascension

Today, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus, his return to his Father in heaven after his death and resurrection. Ascension is a very major feast of the church because it celebrates the conclusion of Jesus' earthly life and the beginning of the Church's continuation of his mission until the end of time. It should be a holiday that we celebrate like Easter and Christmas to celebrate our calling to be partners in Christ's work. The Ascension is so key to our faith we speak to it whenever we pray the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed; "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father"

Ascension occurs forty days after Easter, which was this past Thursday. At the option of the diocese, it can be moved to the Seventh Sunday of Easter, which has been done here in the Diocese of Orlando.

The first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, chronicles the most familiar account of Jesus' ascension. We hear that Jesus appeared to his apostles during a forty-day period after his resurrection, offering them convincing proof that he was alive and teaching them about the Kingdom of God. Just before his ascension, the apostles asked Jesus, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responded that it was not for them to know the times or seasons established by God. Jesus again promised that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

They are instructed to proclaim to all that Jesus has risen and that God has kept his promise to save the people of Israel and all the nations of the world. The fulfillment of this promise will be complete when Jesus comes again from heaven where he has now ascended.

Prior to the Ascension, the only people that had seen or heard Jesus were those who lived in a very small area of the Middle East, mostly in the small villages in the Galilee. When Jesus ascended into heaven, his area of influence made a giant leap, not only to the whole earth, but to the entire creation of God. Jesus was no longer constrained to the time of the First Century, but became relevant to all time and space including us today.

The reading from Mark's Gospel describes Jesus' ascension in similar terms to those we heard in the first reading. During a final appearance to his eleven apostles after his resurrection, Jesus commissioned them to evangelize the world. "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." Then Jesus was taken up into heaven and sat down at God's right hand. The eleven went out and preached everywhere. The Lord worked with them and confirmed their word through miraculous signs.

We might be led to think that the Church carries on the mission of Jesus after his ascension simply because Jesus is no longer here to do it himself.

However, the reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians reveals a deeper connection between Jesus' ascension and the mission of the Church.

This reading underscores Jesus' ascension as the fulfillment of Psalm 68 which it quotes, "He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to men." When Jesus ascended, he gave his followers gifts. These are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which include being apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These are gifts that equip the followers of Jesus for ministry. These different gifts must all be used together to form the body of Christ. For this reason the reading begins with a calling to Christians to "preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace." We followers of Jesus must harmoniously combine the different gifts we have received in order to continue and complete his mission in the world around us.

While the reading from Acts put the ascension of Jesus in a historical context and commissioned the disciples to service, the letter of Paul and the Gospel are very clear about our calling as Christians, today's disciples. The Gospel describes Jesus' image of all of us, working in partnership with him, as church.

All of us, whether we are mothers, fathers, doctors, nurses, retail sales, or in any other occupation or even if we are retired, we serve as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers in the church of Christ. We are called to support the two major tasks of the church. The first of those is teaching --- teaching people about the love and saving power of Jesus. We do that both in what we say and what our actions speak. The second task of the church is healing. Again, we promote physical, emotional, social and spiritual healing by what we do and what we say.

In turn, the church gives us two things to help us. The Gospel speaks to handling poison snakes and drinking poison with no harm. Although some Christian sects in the mountains of Appalachia take this passage literally and are known to suffer snake bite fatalities that is not the point of this passage. Sisters and brothers, don't try this at home! What we are being given is the power and extra strength of the church to support us in our ministry when it is not easy to do Christ's work. The second support from the church is the knowledge that we still have a partner in Jesus who is working with us. Although the disciples, at the time of the Ascension, would not receive the Holy Spirit for another ten days, we know that we have the wisdom and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to support us in our work.

For sure, our calling doesn't involve just participating in ministries sponsored by the church and in organizations that help people. We are on call 24 - 7. Every person we meet is a person we can minister to. Often, we as both a society and individuals, forget that we have the responsibility to be Christ to those we are with. We are still reeling from the Port St. John tragedy where a mother shot her four kids and then took her own life. Perhaps, if someone had befriended and offered hope to the mother, she would not have this tragedy. Or, if someone had recognized that the mother needed help and took the appropriate steps, the outcome could have been very different. We will never know what could have

happened. Sadly, this was not an isolated case. Similar acts occur frequently but people keep their distance even when they might help avert tragedy.

We can't as individuals solve all the problems of the world. As Mother Theresa was fond of saying, "Treat the person you are helping at the time as if they are Jesus." We can be effective as followers of Christ if we heed St. Paul's call to use all of our gifts together in harmony.

Jesus told his disciples right before his Ascension that only the Father knows when he will return. Spending time speculating about when the end time is coming is time wasted. We know that we can't be complacent about all of the work that still needs to be done in our world. The second coming could be tomorrow or centuries away. The big question is, "What are we going to do between now and the time that Jesus returns?"

Homily 20120618 (6-18-2012)

41. **11th Sunday Ordinary, Cycle B – Father's Day**

We live in a society that seems to value big things. In most restaurants, portions are huge compared to elsewhere in the world. Then there is the super-size option in fast food restaurants. We seem obsessed with big famous names. Every day in the media there is mention of the Kardashians who are socialites that contribute no talent to the entertainment scene while setting a poor example for our young people. An example is Kim Kardashian's ten million dollar wedding resulting in a failed marriage in just seventy days. We have major sports figures that frequently end up in trouble with the law. Many want the latest and greatest big-name consumer goods, and they want them now. The list of big things that many people value goes on and on to wanting the big money prize of the lottery.

Today we celebrate St. Emily de Vialar. She was born in France in 1797. While her wealthy father wanted to find her a suitable husband. She had heard a call from God to care for the sick and the poor. Emily and her father were at odds for 15 years until he passed away and left her a great fortune ending the dispute. She used her inheritance to found the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition who serve the sick and poor of the world. The church today gives us a good example of how someone's wealth can serve many people through small acts of compassion and kindness.

The first reading and Gospel today speak to the importance of small acts, the opposite of where we are as a society today. In the first reading from the prophet Ezekiel, God speaks saying that he will take a small shoot from the top of a cedar tree and plant it.

That small shoot planted on a high mountain will become a large tree that will shelter birds. The tree that shelters birds is a biblical image of the Kingdom of God. It also is a promise to restore the people of Israel under a messianic king from the line of David. We know this king today as Jesus.

The Gospel speaks of the mustard seed, a symbol in the First Century Middle Eastern world for an object that is very small. From this small seed came a large plant that covered the land. It can be considered to be like kudzu in the Southeastern United States, sprawling everywhere. Like the cedar tree in the reading from Ezekiel, the mustard plant, which also sheltered birds, is symbolic of the Kingdom of God.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed has several important lessons for us today. It tells us to not be discouraged by small beginnings in our life endeavors and that even a small amount of faith can be very powerful. It often takes time, patience and a lot of small steps to achieve our goals. Think of a large glass container of water and a bottle of color dye with an eyedropper. The first few drops, added one at a time, may not appear to change the color of water at all. But as more and more drops are added the color will change until the water reaches the desired color.

Today, we celebrate Father's Day and the Gospel certainly applies to being a father. Most any man can father a child but it takes so much more to be a father. Children are not born with the knowledge, spirituality and capabilities of an adult.

Like in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, parenting occurs in very small increments and takes patience and perseverance. Parenting also takes a certain amount of risk and experimentation. An instruction manual is not delivered with the baby. Each child is unique, ask any parent who has had more than one child.

The last two verses of the Gospel say a great deal about teaching, which is a big part of being a father, or a mother for that matter. The Gospel says, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private."

Jesus used parables to teach people who were at a spiritual level that required analogies related to their life experience. His disciples had a greater spiritual awareness so he taught them in a more straight forward fashion. His teaching methods were aimed at where the learners were spiritually and communicated with them accordingly.

As a father, it is easy to set expectations for our children based on our life experience and knowledge instead of theirs. We have all seen parents who expect their young children to act as miniature adults when they don't have that capability. Like Jesus, we need to communicate with our children where they are at.

Rabbi Hillel, a great spiritual leader of the Jews around the First Century, stressed patience. He said, "An irritable man can't teach." He insisted that having an even temper is the foremost quality of a teacher and it certainly is the foremost quality of a father. Customarily, a Jewish teacher patiently explained things over and over until the student understood what the teacher tried to convey. A favorite parental expression is, "How many times do I have to tell you that?" Jesus would like have answered, "Until you find the explanation that the child understands." If one pays attention to the Gospels, it is obvious that Jesus is often saying the same thing to us over and over again. How many times and in how many different ways does he explain the Kingdom of God? Or, how many times does he tell us about how we should love one another? Adults don't get it the first time. Why do we expect our children to get it the first time?

Jewish law stressed kindness in teaching. Excessive punishment, particularly involving humiliation was forbidden. Like a teacher, a parent is called to encourage --- not discourage. Anna Buchan, daughter of a clergyman and novelist who lived in the first half of the 20th century had a favorite expression, "Never daunt on youth." What she meant is that when an adult uses overly sharp and sarcastic words with a child, it is easy to discourage learning of concepts and behaviors.

In the real world, there are all kinds of fathers. There are those that are abusive, there are those that are never there, there are fathers that try but don't

understand how to communicate, there are great fathers and fathers that fall everywhere in between. There are those who assume the role of father figures.

There is a story about a teenaged boy who chronically came home late from school. Out of desperation, the father told his son that the next time he came home late; he would get bread and water for dinner. A few days later he arrived home at an unusually late hour. His parents said nothing. When they went into the kitchen for dinner, the father's plate was piled high with food as was the mother's. On his plate was a single slice of bread and next to it a glass of water.

When the boy saw the plate his heart sank, he was absolutely starving. After a minute or two, when the full impact of the situation set in, the father exchanged his plate with his sons and took the son's punishment upon himself. Years later, the son recalled the incident and said, "All my life, I have known what God is like by what my father did that night."

The father was an excellent parent and teacher of the highest order. Buying expensive things for his children does not make a good father. Being a part of his children's life and setting a proper example are required. It is regular acts of kindness and compassion that a parent does on a day-to-day basis, like St. Emily did in her ministry to the sick and poor that make a difference. Every little expression of patience and caring can leave a lasting impression. Let us pray this Father's Day that we can reflect God's love to our children and adult children by the way that we treat them.

Homily 20120922 (9-22-2012)

42. West Palm Rite of Admission

We are gathered today for a very special event, to welcome Edith and Suze into the year of probation, the next step on their journey to becoming Secular Servites. It is a special day for them and a special day for all of us including me so I thank Gloria and the entire Mother of Divine Mercy Community for the honor of presiding over the Rite of Admission. I would also like to thank Fr. Mario for making the day even more beautiful by allowing this special time to happen at Mass.

The readings of the day are very appropriate to our lives as Servites. The letter of Paul to the Corinthians speaks to the physical and spiritual nature of humans. Like Adam, we all have the capability to sin. Like Jesus, however, we are meant to be spiritual, can attain high levels of spirituality and grow towards spiritual perfection.

Like in the Gospel, Paul uses the analogy of a seed, but in a different manner to speak of resurrection. Many plants have to die to produce seeds. The seed itself contains a dead shell with a kernel of life inside. When it grows, it produces a new creation, a strong, healthy and beautiful vine.

Like the seed, we start with a corruptible body. As with Adam, we have the capability to sin due to desires, passion, and other aspects of our humanity. As we develop spiritually, we grow more towards the perfection of Jesus. Our very fragile physical bodies, which are subject to fail, due to lack of water, food or disease, become invincible as spiritual beings at our resurrections.

During our earthly lives, we are called to plant the seeds that are required to make the world a better place for life. Looking at our Servite history, we can see that happening.

An example, without going into a great deal of historical detail, is by Mary's profound impact on the lives of the Seven Holy Founders of our Order. In her death and assumption into heaven, she was available to the seven men to protect them and guide them. She is still available to protect and guide us along with the Seven Holy Founders and all of the Servite saints and blessed. Each generation plants the seeds that protect and guide the next. Being the sowers of the seeds that Paul describes is our calling and destiny as Christians and as Servites. We have a legacy of those like Mary and the Servite saints and blessed who have approached spiritual perfection and a destiny to become one like them.

The Parable of the Sower in the Gospel is often explained from the point of view of the hearer of the Word of God. We easily understand the point that we have to be fertile ground for God's Word to take root and grow within ourselves. But Jesus was also speaking to preachers of the Word. Although not everyone preaches formally, we Christians are preachers by virtue of our Baptisms --- priest, prophet and king. We are preachers based on what we say, by our actions and by what we fail to say or to do.

In the Parable of the Sower, the sower is not just planting seed on the fertile ground where it will take root and prosper, but on the ground where it will die. The question is why would he waste seed? There were two ways of sowing seeds in the First Century.

The easy way was to attach a seed bag with a hole in it to the back of a donkey and walk the animal up and down the field. The other was for the sower to use his hands and to scatter the seed into the air. Some of that seed likely was carried by the winds to the path where the birds got it and the rest fell on soil.

The parable describes three kinds of soil; fertile soil, rocky soil and thorny soil. The problem for the sower was that all three types of soil looked the same. The rocky soil was not full of rocks as there was a layer of top soil over a crust of limestone. The seeds would take hold but the plants could not send their roots down far enough to get nourishment. The thorny soil was not full of brambles, but had seeds of fast-growing weeds that would quickly choke out the plants the sower was planting.

So the sower had to sow his seed and hope for the best. That is also the case for we who sow the seeds of the Word of God.

Not knowing exactly where the good ground was did not stop the sower. The same thing is true when it comes to us judging which people are open and ready to hear God's word and become part of God's kingdom. That word, that invitation, needs to be proclaimed everywhere, to everyone, especially to those we think unlikely to receive it.

Our task as followers of Jesus Christ and as Servites is not to determine where the good ground may be found, but simply to hear the Word, and then share the Word, share our faith, with all we meet. Hearing the Word is especially important to us as Servites. Suze and Edith, you will be starting your year of initial formation.

Ongoing formation is important to our community meetings, where we hear the Word as we do when we gather with other Servites; when we attend events of different communities or national events such as the National Conference last year and the UNIFAS Congress coming up next month. Our formation never ends because we are people of the Word.

We often have no idea where the seeds we sow are going to land. The British author, HL Gee, tells a story. He attended a funeral at his church because he was afraid no one would attend. The deceased was known as "Old Thomas" a lonely old man of many years who had no friends left living. Gee went to pay his respects to Thomas who was being taken to his final resting place.

It was a windy, wet day and when the casket reached the grave there was one other person there, a soldier. The soldier was obviously an officer, but the raincoat covered his shoulder insignia and his rank was unknown. When the burial rite was completed, the soldier saluted and he and Gee walked away together. A serious gust of wind came along and blew the raincoat in such a manner that the shoulder insignia of a brigadier general appeared.

The general said to Gee, “you must be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago when I was a wild young boy, Thomas was my Sunday school teacher. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe all that I am or will be to old Thomas, and today I came salute him in the end.

Like Old Thomas, the Gospel calls us to sow the seed and then leave the rest to God. The seed may grow immediately or it may take years. It is likely we may never see the results of the seed we sow.

God determines the timing and bounty of the harvest. It is our calling as Servites and as Christians to sow the seeds unceasingly. The impact on us of Mary, the Seven Holy Founders and all of the Servite saints and blessed is living proof for today’s Servites of the Parable of the Sower.

Homily 20121125 (11-25-2012)

43. Christ the King, Cycle B – Feast of Christ the King

Today, we celebrate The Feast of Christ the King. A relatively new celebration within the Church, Christ the King was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius the Eleventh to counter the anti-theological, secular thinking of Communism, Nazism, and Fascism. This day does not mark any specific event in salvation history, but honors Christ's sovereignty over all, peoples, families, nations and the universe.

The two readings this weekend speak to the heavenly enthronement of Christ the King. The first reading from Daniel describes the Son of Man arriving in heaven on the clouds, being glorified by God and given eternal dominion over all. Jesus later takes the name, the Son of Man.

In the second reading from Revelation, the risen Christ also comes to heaven amid the clouds as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last of all things.

These heavenly images have little to do with royal rule as it has played out on the earth over the ages. Christ's enthronement in heaven recalls elements of an ancient Middle Eastern myth of creation. In it, the warrior-god defeated the monster of evil and chaos and restored the universe to order. For this he was enthroned in a heavenly palace to rule over creation.

Ancient Israel reshaped this myth making God the victorious king. The Christian interpretation is a significantly different variation on the same theme. Jesus did overcome the powers of evil and chaos, but not as a great warrior.

He did it through obedience to the father, by promoting love and being the servant to all. He changed the whole meaning of kingship, where royal powers were created by conquest, privilege and marriage.

Jesus' kingship is a sharp contrast from royal monarchy. Kings are usually born in a palace; Jesus was born in a barn. Kings amass great wealth; Jesus owned nothing. Kings have servants that do everything for them; Jesus chose to be a servant to all. Kings keep company with other royalty and those who will do them good; Jesus hung out with all kinds of people including criminals and laborers. Kings had great armies; Jesus was armed only with love. There are many more comparisons such as these that can be made.

We heard part of the Passion according to John, where Pontius Pilate questions Jesus about his kingship. The Romans thought that Jesus had proclaimed himself a king in competition with the Roman Empire, which was far from the case. Jesus' kingship is above politics, above empire and is not about power in the sense of government. Jesus' kingship is about truth, about love and about serving others.

When Jesus said his Kingship is not of this world, he did not mean that his Kingship was only in heaven, but that his Kingship also exists on earth, in the here

and now, regardless of any political institution. We recognize Jesus' kingship each time we pray the Our Father saying, "Thy Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven."

We recognize Jesus' kingship in two ways. First, as the Messiah, our Savior, who gave his life to redeem our lives two thousand years ago; Second, is our ongoing insistence that Jesus is sovereign in our lives from our birth to our death and resurrection and particularly in the "now," each moment of our lives, as we try to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Attending church does not automatically place us in the Kingdom of God. The Church is not the same thing as the Kingdom. The church is there to assist us in building the Kingdom, and to help us draw others into the Kingdom. The church as a whole and we as individuals cannot build the Kingdom unless we recognize Jesus as sovereign and imitate his life by how we live ours.

Truly accepting Jesus as sovereign is not as easy as saying, "I accept Jesus in my heart." In fact it can be a real challenge to our loyalties, goals, ambitions and beliefs. Jesus' authority has to come before our government, those we work for, and those things that we want for ourselves, to mention just a few of our challenges and distractions.

Although monarchy is not part of the American political system and is precluded by our Constitution, our society is preoccupied with royalty; powerful government leaders, sports figures, entertainers, models, even the royal families in other countries. A 2006 movie, *The Queen*, chronicles how the British royal family publicly dealt with the death of Princess Diana in 1997.

The family appears stone cold and void of any emotion. You have to wonder how Jesus would have handled the situation. Certainly, he would have handled it with warmth, love and compassion.

Contrast the modern "royals" with Jesus and you will get a good picture of what Jesus meant by being not of the world. Jesus is the true servant king. He gave everything he had during his ministry. In the end, he gave his life, to serve all of the people of the world.

He expected no one to serve him, but called us to serve each other. Jesus did not live a secluded life separated from the people, unlike the modern royals. He lived among the people; teaching them, eating with them, healing them --- he was like them in all things except sin.

We too are called to live among the people. Most every one of us is called to a specific ministry in service of others. Those who cannot get around so well can pray. A great deal of service and prayer is needed. We live in a world where country fights country, religion fights religion and culture fights culture. Many are dying because their basic needs for food, shelter, cleanliness and basic health care are not being met.

Even in our wealthy country, somewhere close to a third of our people, especially children and the elderly, survive under the poverty level. Our king, Jesus, calls us to serve those people and to sacrifice our time and resources to do it. Can you imagine the difference we could make if each person did what they could to build the Kingdom?

In his book, *The Canadians*, Andrew Malcolm shares a story about Cecille Bechard. She is a Canadian who visits the United States several times a day to go to her refrigerator, her back door, or to cook a meal for example. She reads and sleeps in Canada and also eats in Canada when she sits at the north end of her kitchen table. Ms. Bechard's home is partly in Maine and partly in Quebec as her house was built long ago before the international border was drawn.

Like Ms. Bechard, as Christians, we also often live in two different kingdoms, two different worlds. Sometimes we live in the Kingdom of God and at other times we live only in the world.

We are baptized priest, prophet and king. It is our calling to be servants like Jesus as members of the common priesthood, to be prophets like Jesus speaking out against evil and for good and to be kings like Jesus in humility and love.

Pope Pius the Eleventh had good reason to choose the last Sunday of Ordinary Time as the Solemnity of Christ the King. Next weekend, the Advent Season begins and it will give us a chance to prepare again for Christ coming into our world, into our lives. The celebration of Christ the King is like the New Year's Eve of the church calendar. We have the opportunity to enter the new liturgical year next weekend by resolving to live our baptismal obligation as priest, prophet and king by discerning how we can better always proclaim Christ as our King through our thoughts and actions.

Homily 20121202 (12-2-2012)

44. 1st Sunday of Advent – Beginning of Church's Liturgical Year

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the Church's liturgical year. The word Advent means come. Today's readings suggest much more than the coming of a new liturgical year. The readings we heard weave together a call to be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ and the vision of hope for a world that lives in peace and harmony.

This call, and the season of Advent itself, easily get lost in the preparation for Christmas. Some stores put up their Christmas decorations before Halloween. Christmas music started on some radio stations before Thanksgiving. We are caught up in the shopping frenzy earlier and earlier. This year, many retail employees went to work on Thanksgiving and couldn't choose to spend the whole day with their families.

We are inundated with exhortations to be prepared for the celebration of Christmas, not the coming of Christ. We are consumed with decorating, gift buying, gift receiving, attending parties and other social events. But, where does the season of Advent figure into our lives?

On December 26th, the Christmas music will mostly be gone; trees will start finding their way to the curb or to the attic depending on if they are real and artificial. Our home décor will go back to normal. The stores will start displaying Valentine's Day cards and gifts. For many, December 26th does not mark the Second day of Christmas, but the end of the Christmas season even though there are significant Christmas feasts left to celebrate.

There are Holy Family, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord. There might be a few nice Christmas memories and some gifts that we will appreciate for some time to come, but it will mostly be over.

Advent calls us to prepare for something eternal, something permanent. Advent calls us to remember the birth of Jesus Christ AND to prepare ourselves for the second coming of Jesus Christ. During Advent, we certainly celebrate the past and hope for the future, but we are also called to look at how we live in the present to build our relationship with our God to ensure a future of eternal life.

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah speaks to a promise of the Jewish desire for a ruler like David to save the Jewish nation from captivity. A desire that a ruler will emerge that will give Jerusalem a good name and bring safety and peace to Israel. Safety has eluded the land during the 2600 years since the time of Jeremiah despite periodic efforts to bring about peace. Jeremiah ministered to the Jewish Nation when they were under the brutal rule of the Babylonians. This peace and safety, although seemingly impossible, continues to be a hope and dream of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian inhabitants of the area. Today, we are called to look at this reading as inspiration for hope in situations that appear hopeless.

While the first reading from Jeremiah calls us to remain hopeful and trust in God in things that seem impossible and uncontrollable, the second reading tells us how God expects us to behave. Paul calls the Thessalonians and today, calls us to turn to God in everything, not to wait until events in our lives reach crisis proportions. God wants to be present to us all of the time, not just when our need for divine intervention is greatest. It is only when we keep God ever present that we can continue to grow in love in our relationships and all things in life. We are assured that if we truly practice love in our lives, we will be ready for the return of Jesus Christ.

Luke's Gospel has three important messages for us that connect with the readings from Jeremiah and the Letter to the Thessalonians. The first message warns us to be prepared for judgment at the end of time. The second message is that in preparation for judgment, we need to avoid sin and behavior that will detract us from loving God and others. Finally, Luke tells us that we might have some fairly scary moments, but to trust God, live in hope, not to worry and not to give up.

Advent is a time to focus on hope and preparation. Not only preparation for the coming of Christ on the final day, but preparation for the birth of Christ at Christmas and preparation for all of the events in our lives when Christ comes to us through other people or experiences. Judgment Day is not something that we should dread as long as we work on love relationships every day.

The world that we live in today is hardly one of peace and safety promised in the first reading. War and violence are all around us. There is war between nations, war between religions, violence in our streets and violence in families and other relationships. It is becoming more and more obvious that peace can't be won by armies. It can only be won by people respecting each other, accepting each other, and caring about each other. It is easy to despise people we don't know, but hate becomes much more difficult when we get to know people; when we understand that all are created by the same God and that although we have differences, we are all more alike than different.

To think about bringing peace to the world we live in seems overwhelming. But the key comes from Mother Theresa. She was once asked how she hoped to help the multitudes suffering in India. She responded that she loves the person she is with at the time. We too can build peace, love, and understanding, one person at a time and it starts with those around us.

There is a story about a young boy walking home through a park after attending a religious education class. He could not stop thinking about the lesson for that day on Jesus' parable of the last judgment and when his teacher said, "When you give something to another person, you are really giving it to Jesus."

He noticed an elderly woman sitting on a park bench. She looked lonely and hungry. So he sat down next to her and took from his pocket a chocolate bar and offered her some. She accepted with a smile. He liked her smile so much that he gave her more. This time they exchanged smiles and, for a while, they sat together in the silence, just smiling at each other.

Finally, the boy got up to leave. As he began to walk away, he turned, ran back to the bench, and gave the woman a big hug. She gave him her very best smile. When he arrived home, his mother saw a big smile on his face and asked, "What made you so happy today." He said, "I shared my chocolate bar with Jesus and she has a great smile."

Meanwhile, the elderly woman returned to her little apartment that she shared with her sister. "You're all smiles," said the sister. "What made you so happy today?" To which she replied, "I was sitting in the park eating a chocolate bar with Jesus. And, you know, he looks a lot younger than I expected."

We too can be Jesus to others and let others be Jesus to us. We can replace difficult relationships with smiles and love. We can be healers.

We each face situations in our lives every day when we can be Jesus to those around us. Loving creates a ripple effect and when we show it to one who shows it to another and to another.

As the First Sunday of Advent is New Years Day in the calendar of the church, it is an appropriate time for all of us to make a resolution to let Jesus be present in our lives and to be Christ to all we encounter. Mother Theresa said, "At the end of our lives, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was homeless and you took me in.'" We can truly be messengers of the hope that only Jesus can give.

Homily 20121216 (12-16-2012)

45. **3rd Sunday of Advent Cycle C -- Rejoice Sunday**

Today, on the third Sunday of Advent, the church celebrates Gaudete, or rejoice Sunday. The focus of the season of Advent has shifted over the years. Originally, Advent was a penitential season, complete with fasting, to prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas. Gaudete Sunday was a break in the somber season to take time to be joyful. During the time that Gaudete Sunday was celebrated, the liturgical color switched from penitential purple to rose, symbolic of the joy in the rose-colored sunrise that often greets the new day. The rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath, lit on the third Sunday, is a reminder of bygone days in the church, but is also a sign of the joy that God wants for each one of us in our lives. We are given the choice to joyfully look at the world around us through rose-colored glasses, to be positive and grateful for what we have been given by God.

Today's readings center, in great part around joy, the joy of being loved and saved by a merciful and generous God; a God who loved us so much that he gave his only son, his beloved son, for our salvation and as an example of the potential that we all have within us to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

The first reading from Zephaniah starts with the exhortations shout with joy, sing joyfully and exalt with all your heart. The reading goes on to tell us that God is in our midst, rejoicing and full of joy because of his great love for us. Zephaniah tells us not to be discouraged, but to embrace life and live in God's love and forgiveness.

The responsorial psalm today is unique because it is not from the Book of Psalms but from the prophet Isaiah. It is a song of joy; it admonishes us to be strong and confident because God is in our midst and to give God thanks, praise God's works to others and to celebrate his love by shouting with exultation.

In the second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, joy and trust in God are the theme. A man who is in prison awaiting execution says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice" and he reiterates his trust in God's loving kindness. He is not thoroughly preoccupied with his fate as most of us might be, but is more concerned with morale and love of God and trust in God by the Christian community at Philippi.

There is a story told of two buckets, which were kept at a well. Of the two, one was always sad and gloomy, while the other was always happy and joyful. The happy one said to the sad one - "What's the matter with you? I see that you are always unhappy, sad and gloomy!" The sad one said - "Oh! It is my life. When I think of it I feel very bad and become so sad." "What do you think of your life?" asked the first. The second replied - "Oh! When I look at my life - it is ever empty. See, however many times I come out of the well full, I always go to it empty and this emptiness makes me very sad and gloomy." "Oh!" said the first, "but I do not look at my life that way." "How do you look at your life then?" inquired the second. The first replied - "Oh! I find my life always full. See, however many times I go into

the well empty, I always come out full, and this fullness fills me with happiness & joy."

It is true that God gives us everything we need, but we have to make a conscious decision to take it. All that we need to be joyful is there waiting for us. We just have to accept the joy in our lives. St. Paul could do that while he was awaiting execution. Being joyful is a decision that each of us has to make.

John the Baptist also preaches joy, the good news of Jesus Christ our savior who is coming to bring a life of peace and justice to all peoples of the world. The Gospel presents us with another decision to make, the decision to live a holy, Christian life.

Two men, Charlie and Roger, got together and opened a butcher shop. The business did quite well and they prospered. One day a preacher came to town, and Charlie gave his life to Christ.

He tried to persuade Roger to accept Christ also, but to no avail. "Why won't you, Roger?" asked the newly baptized Charlie. "Listen, Charlie," Roger said. "If I get religion too, who's going to weigh the meat?"

Roger has this going for him, that he understands that believing in Christ implies a radical change in personal and professional behavior. Many people who identify themselves as Christians do not seem to get it. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 1987 in the USA, there is little difference in moral behavior between people who go to church and people who don't. The study showed that there is as much sin among church members as among non-members.

There seems to be a widespread misconception among Christians that we can add Christ to our lives without subtracting sin. Accepting Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior is seen as a matter of changing one's belief and not much to do with changing one's behavior. How many times have you heard street or television preachers say, "Only believe, and you will be saved?"

The Letter of James tells us that faith without works or to put it another way, belief without behavior is empty. It is our behavior, or works, that attest to the quality and truth of our faith. In the Gospel, various groups of people wanted to know what they have to do to lead a holy life. John the Baptist gives us the same answers to the still important questions today.

When the people in general asked, "What then should we do? To the crowds or the masses his answer was: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise". Accepting the gospel demands a change in one's personal behavior. The Gospel calls us to become people who love to share, rather than people who love to accumulate. I recently saw an anonymous quote that at one time or another applies to all of us, "Sometimes I would like to ask God why He allows poverty, suffering, and injustice when He could do something about it. But I'm afraid He would ask me the same question."

Many of the tax collectors of the time were unskilled people who made a living charging people more than the official tax. When the tax collectors asked John what they needed to do, he replied, "Collect no more than the amount proscribed for you."

Many of the soldiers of the time used their authority to extort money from the citizens. When the soldiers asked the same question, John answered, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages"

To both the tax collectors and soldiers, John called for honesty and fairness in their business dealings and professional conduct. The gospel is a leaven that affects every aspect of our personal, business and social life.

To repent is to turn from evil and do good. To only believe and expect that we will be saved is at best only half of living a holy Christian life.

The best way to commemorate the birth of Christ is not to buy gifts, send cards and decorate our houses. These actions will not guarantee entry into heaven when Jesus comes again. It is only living the holy lives that we are called to by the Gospel, being forthright, fair and generous and choosing to do these things joyfully rather than begrudgingly, that we will truly build the Kingdom of God, properly commemorate the birth of Jesus, and find our way to eternal life. The season of Advent is a gift from our church that helps us to succeed in the aspects of life that bring us eternal life. Hopefully this Christmas, we can look back and see that this Advent was a fruitful part of our journey towards salvation.

Homily 20121223 (12-23-2012)

46. **4th Sunday of Advent, Cycle C – Season of Hope**

Today the Church celebrates the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the season of hope, although you wouldn't know being at the malls. Today's readings really seem to emphasize hope; especially the greatest hope that comes from very small seeds.

Hope sometimes seems difficult to justify in today's world. In the past year we have had mass shootings, even of innocent little children, outbreaks of violence all over the world, wars including civil wars, human trafficking and abuse, death caused by abject poverty and preventable disease, the list goes on. Yet, no matter what, Advent is a season of preparation, of hopeful anticipation. We are reminded that we have hope because of our faith. Today's readings are a source of hope.

The first reading from the prophet Micah is one of hopeful anticipation. Micah lived 10,000 years ago when corruption ran rampant in the institutions of the time.

The Holy Land was a microcosm of today's world; disillusionment with sinful kings, corruption of the judicial system, idolatry, arrogance and greed, and inauthentic worship. Micah gave the people hope, with the promise of the birth of the messiah in the small, quiet, backwater village of Bethlehem. A small child from this insignificant place, he said, would save the world and lead it to peace and harmony. The Christian community, from its earliest days until now, recognizes Jesus as the hope promised by Micah.

Psalms 80 is a prayer on behalf of the Jewish nation crying out in hope for God to restore peace and justice to the people of Israel by turning them away from sin and freeing them from the captivity of foreign powers occupying their lands.

The Second Reading from the Letters to the Hebrews is also hopeful since it makes clear that our salvation is ensured simply because Jesus died that we might live. The First Century Jewish belief in how to avoid sin was anything but simple. The direct and easy to understand Ten Commandments were extended to many, many commandments from the obvious, ten to hundreds of small rules, complemented by a series of sacrifices and offerings --- some significant and some esoteric --- but meant to be followed to the "T" and strictly monitored by the self-righteous. Jesus greatly simplified the rules when he became the sacrifice for the sake of all. Rather than offering burnt sacrifices at the temple, Jesus calls all of us to the personal responsibility of giving of ourselves by loving God and loving one another.

The Gospel is very rich theologically. We don't know much about the day to day life of Mary. The scriptural writings regarding Mary describe her role in salvation history, primarily her role in the mission of Jesus. The theologian and scripture scholar, Reginald Fuller, said, "The Mariology of scripture is grounded in Christology." In the Gospels, she interacts with others. In this case, it is with her cousin, Elizabeth.

The Gospel opens by saying that Mary set out in haste for a town in Judah in the hill country. The walk from Nazareth to Ein Kerem, where Zacharias and Elizabeth lived was arduous. It is a distance of about 50 miles through very hilly country. My wife Karen and I visited Ein Kerem, the home of Elizabeth, 20 years ago on a pilgrimage. It was at the end of the trip and we were tired and not feeling well. The flu was running rampant through our group.

The bus parked in a lot at the base of a high steep hill where the Church of the Visitation was built on the traditional site of the house of Elizabeth and Zacharias. Not having the energy to climb the hill, we sat it out in a pastry shop at the foot of the hill. Although Israeli pastry is to die over, as I have matured in faith, I have regretted not making the effort to visit this spiritually rich site. Having seen the challenge of the final part of Mary's long and tiring journey, I can only imagine what strength and determination it took her to get to the top of that hill.

When Mary entered the home of Elizabeth, the baby, to be born John the Baptist, leapt in her womb. The Holy Spirit gave Elizabeth the spiritual wisdom to understand that Mary was carrying Jesus, the son of God.

Three times in the comparatively short Gospel, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed; blessed among women, blessed because of the fruit of her womb, and blessed because she believed what God had promised; that she would give birth to the Son of God.

Again, we see the theme of hope from small sources that runs through today's readings. What could be smaller than a recently conceived baby but as great of one born into the world to be the fulfillment of our hope for salvation? Along the same lines, we also meet John the Baptist as an unborn baby, miraculously created in a previously barren woman, Elizabeth, who was well past her child bearing age. She will give birth to the man who will herald the coming of the Son of God, our source of hope.

It is easy to focus on Mary as the center of this passage since she is the bearer of God's son. Yet, Elizabeth's role is also one that is important as well. The Gospel tells us that Mary went in haste to visit Elizabeth, but we are not told specifically why. However, we do know some facts about the life of Jewish people at the time of Mary's pregnancy.

Women who were pregnant outside of marriage were not accepted in that culture. They were even more despised if there was any suspicion that the pregnancy was a result of a union with a Roman soldier, even though soldiers were known to force local women to do their will. It would be safe to assume that Mary did not have an easy time. We know that she was not immune to suffering. She suffered what no woman would ever want to endure, witnessing the brutal death of her son. It is easy to believe that Elizabeth was a mature, older woman that Mary could turn to for support.

The Gospel says nothing about Elizabeth passing judgment on Mary's condition. Quite the contrary, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed and in this Gospel also

shows Elizabeth open to the Holy Spirit. We know we are called to see Mary as a role model for faith, obedience and love. It becomes clear that Elizabeth is also a role model for acceptance, faith, listening and love. Our world needs far more holy people, like Elizabeth, to see the redeeming hand of God at work around us, and to put acceptance above judgment in proclaiming their faith in both word and action.

The season of Advent ends with the celebration of Christmas Eve tomorrow. But, that does not mean that our Advent journey has to end. We are called to the Advent themes of preparation, hope, peace, joy and love every day of our lives.

It is when we live Advent that we are prepared to welcome Jesus Christ into our hearts, that we are prepared to be Jesus in the lives of others and we are prepared for the great gift of eternal life. We have the option of sitting in the comfort of the pastry shop of life, enjoying the moment and letting opportunities to give life to ourselves and others pass us by. Or, we can choose to be like Mary and Elizabeth, rising to the challenge, welcoming Christ into the world and nurturing Jesus in others. As we ready ourselves to celebrate Christmas? Let us pray that we are all blessed among women and men because we believe and live our belief's every day.

Homily 20121230 (12-30-2012)

47. **Holy Family, Cycle C – Feast of the Holy Family**

For many, the celebration of Christmas ended after Tuesday. The Christmas music is mostly gone from the radio, Christmas trees will soon be in the gutter awaiting the garbage man, and the retail industry is gearing up for the next great sales event, Valentine's day. And this year, the secularization has made even deeper inroads into our celebration of Christmas. It is getting harder to find religious Christmas cards. In fact, I tried to find a religious card in one store, but I couldn't and the valentine section was already as large as the Christmas section. The music on the radio gave more time to Rudolph and Santa Claus than to traditional Christmas carols. Christmas still exists at our house, where we will be lucky to have the tree down by Valentines Day!

For Catholics, Christmas is not over. The Church celebrates twelve days of Christmas and this year the sixth day is the Feast of the Holy Family. On Christmas Day, we celebrated the birth of Jesus into his holy family and today we celebrate not only the holiness of Jesus' family, but the holiness of all of our families because of the presence of Christ in our midst.

The Feast of the Holy Family, in honor of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, is a relatively new feast day implemented by Pope Leo the 13th in 1892. The holyday was created to counteract the breakdown of the family due to the industrial revolution and movement of people from the farmlands to the city. It is not likely that Pope Leo had any premonition of today's state of family life.

In our Judeo-Christian tradition, there are three entities involved in the creation of a baby; the mother, the father and the spirit of God. So like Jesus, the Holy Spirit was a participant in the creation of each of us and our lives are sacred.

The readings that we heard today speak to family life. The first reading from Sirach and the second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians speak to family relationships and love while the Gospel is mostly about the difficult times that we experience in family life.

The reading from Sirach emphasizes our call to love and care for our parents, especially when it is difficult due to their physical or mental state or because they have not been perfect parents to us.

The second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians is controversial in our day because of the relationship it describes between man and wife. In ancient times, society was patriarchal. Men had absolute ownership of their wives and children who were regarded as possessions; mere material goods.

For example, men could divorce their wives at will, leaving them as social outcasts with no means of support. Men could sell their children into slavery if they so desired. St. Paul, in his letter, was advocating that family members treat each other with love and respect even though the First Century culture said that men did not have to. He redefines the relationship between husband and wife and between

parent and child as being holy. Paul also redefines family relationships as being reciprocal in spite of First Century culture.

He told men to love their wives to avoid bitterness with them and not to provoke their children.

Telling wives to be subordinate defines their First Century role but may not be accepted today. I know that if I told my wife Karen that The Bible said that I was in charge, she would probably laugh and tell me to go load the dishwasher!

The Gospel passage defines a traditional family as a husband, wife and children, or Jesus and his parents. In our times, there are many configurations of family that differ from the traditional. Unfortunately, we live in a time of high divorce rates and many family units consist of a single parent. But, whatever the makeup of a family, even if family in the broadest context consists of people who are not biologically or legally related, it is still a holy family and relationships are sacred.

In the Gospel, we hear about the Holy returning home to Nazareth from the Passover celebration when they discover that Jesus is not in the caravan. We can only imagine the distress they felt that Jesus was not with them and the relief they felt when they found him in the temple. We continue to lose our children today for many reasons. Among them is the loss due to economics that forces parents to work extra jobs leaving less time for family life. Also, many women are single parents and economically responsible for their families. It is an injustice that women make about 70% of what men earn for the same job in many cases and causes single mothers to work more than one job to make ends meet. Children end up with no supervision or being supervised by older children.

We also lose children to bad behavior inspired by the media that that provides bad examples of family life on television and in the movies where we see children trying to outsmart their parents and parents who are too busy doing their own thing to spend quality family time with their children.

We lose our children to addictions where drugs, alcohol and other dangerous addictions take control of parents and children causing families to suffer.

In today's society, we frequently lose children to violence. It exists in extreme form in movies, on television, in computer games and unfortunately too many homes where there is physical abuse. The violence that our children encounter in all of these ways is dangerous because it becomes a normal part of their lives instead of an exceptional incident. What is meant to be fantasy becomes reality. We can only imagine the pain of the loss of our children due to mass shootings such as at Sandy Hook Elementary or the shootings that occur on the streets of our most dangerous cities.

When I was growing up, I was not allowed to have toy guns. That rule was not because my parents were anti-gun, but because they wanted me to understand that weapons used for violence are not toys, but are dangerous and what they can

do needs to be respected. The list of factors that cause loss of our children is unfortunately endless.

Rabbi Neil Kurshan tells a story in his book *How to Raise Your Child to Be A Messiah* about a young woman who is a medical student. She went to see a counselor to help her with the decision to continue her studies or drop out to start a family. The counselor suggested that she can do both with a little outside help. The student stated that she had vowed to never entrust her children to a housekeeper.

The counselor asked why, and the young woman explained that when she was a young child, her wealthy parents would take a vacation in Europe each summer and leave her with a nanny.

One year, when she was eleven, the housekeeper suddenly quit shortly before her parents were to leave for Europe. The parents were upset that their vacation was jeopardized, but several days before their intended departure they found a replacement. When the daughter noticed that her mother was wrapping up all of the family silverware and jewels, she asked why because they had never done that before. Her mother explained that they could not entrust the new maid with the family valuables.

The insensitive remark stabbed the little girl in the heart. Was she not a “family valuable” of more worth than the knives and forks? She never forgot this specific incident and as she grew up, she promised herself that she would bring up her own children to value themselves.

While the point of the story is that our children are more valuable than any possession, it also illustrates the sacredness of right family relationships that need to exist in a Holy Family. It is easy to look at all of the obstacles to family life today and become discouraged. But, if the Holy Family is our example, they suffered every hardship and problem that one could imagine, yet Jesus grew to his full potential. Perhaps the Gospel story gives us an indication of why.

When Joseph and Mary had to return to Jerusalem to find Jesus in the temple, they did not freak out and punish him by grounding him or making him clean up after the camels for a week or two. Instead, they accepted his reason for doing what he had to do. This incident in the life of the Holy Family might get us thinking that we need to respect and encourage our children’s ideas and let them explore what they are called to in life as long as it is not dangerous to them.

Although we don’t know the everyday details of their family life, from what can be pieced together from Scripture, there must have been a great deal of love, faith, respect and devotion in the Holy Family. Those attributes are what can lead our families to be holy families.

So, as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family this Christmas season, let it not be just an annual event in the church calendar, but a celebration of love and relationship that continues each day for the rest of our lives.

Homily 20130213 (2-13-2013)

48. **Ash Wednesday, Cycle C – Season of Lent**

Today, we again begin the season of Lent. Lent is seen by many as a sad time of sacrifice but although Lent involves sacrifice, it is not a sad time. It is a blessed time that the church has given us to bring ourselves closer to God and to be more like his son. Although we try to do this all through the year, the spiritual activities of Lent help us to accelerate the process of being all we can be.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel that we are called to prayer, fasting and almsgiving during Lent and that we do these things privately, out of the spotlight, we do them for God and not for recognition by others.

In early biblical days, people had a tradition of showing their repentance by rending or tearing their clothing. In the first reading from the prophet Joel we heard, “rend your hearts and not your garments and return to the Lord.” Joel backs up Jesus’ assertion that our Lenten sacrifices are to be between ourselves and God. Additionally, Joel supports the notion that what we do for Lent is to bring about changes in heart that make us holier in the eyes of God.

In the second reading from the Letter of Paul to the Christian community in Corinth, Paul calls the Corinthians of the day, and all Christians of today, to their vocation as ambassadors for Christ. Ambassadors, as we know them today, speak for their countries. We are called to speak for our beliefs, to speak for Jesus Christ since he is no longer on earth.

We obviously speak by what we say, and perhaps speak more loudly by what we do. My sisters and brothers, Lent gives us a good opportunity to look at what kind of ambassadors we are and how we can grow in that role.

A few years ago, I was visiting another parish and saw a poster for a talk being presented by their deacon on living a mature Lent. Since that time, I have been trying to determine the details of living a mature Lent. I have spoken on this topic during Lent for the past couple of years. Each year I continue to discover new meaning.

We have been indoctrinated into giving up something for Lent like chocolate, desserts, television and movies. It is not clear how these inconsequential sacrifices make us grow in holiness and faith or make the world a better place.

Possibly, money spent on these types of things can be put aside to benefit others, or time spent can be used for quality family time or serving others. But in these sacrifices, there is no rending of the heart.

A question that might be answered is how do we make prayer, fasting and almsgiving lead us to a mature Lent that causes us to grow? One obvious answer

is that whatever we do is most effective when it leads to permanent change. Otherwise, there is no growth.

Living a mature Lent calls us not to compensate for our sacrifices. Many of us practice the “Fat Tuesday syndrome,” the practice of filling ourselves with the pleasure that we are giving up for Lent. And, after the 40 days are over, we resume. Where does that practice get us in terms of growth?

Most likely it gets us nowhere. Ideally, we use Lent to make some sort of a permanent change that causes us to grow and during the next Lent, we add another beneficial change.

We are called to prayer. There are many ways in which we can pray and each one of us is different in how we pray. The question to ask ourselves is, how can we improve the quality of our prayer life, both individually and in community. Has our prayer life become mechanical? Are there different ways to praying that we have not considered? Are listening to God when we pray? Different forms of prayer work better for different people. The important thing is not how we pray, but how we grow in prayer. Lent is a good opportunity to grow in our prayer lives.

Lent is a good time to improve our health, so that we have more energy to do God’s work. We can change the way we eat, get more exercise and do whatever we need to improve our state. Most of us have addictions and I don’t just mean substance use, but also activities that suck up much of our time.

The church calls us, from ages 14 to 56, to fast on Ash Wednesday and Fridays during Lent. For those of us who are 60 and older, we can still fast if we wish. Fasting means eating two small meals that don’t add up to a full meal and one full meal. With fasting we can be in solidarity with those who have nothing to eat and can make us thankful for our food.

The church also calls all of us to abstinence Catholic are not eating meat or poultry on Ash Wednesday and Fridays during Lent.

However, fasting applies to more than food. Fasting also includes giving up our behaviors and attitudes that are detrimental to creating the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven that we pray for each time we pray the Our Father. Finally, there is almsgiving. Traditionally this is about money, but perhaps we should change the word to just giving. What can we give to God, to our parish, to our community, to the building of the Kingdom of God? The church and the world need our time, treasure and talent. Sacrificial giving helps us to live a more mature Lent.

Finally, God does not expect us to truly overextend ourselves with our Lenten commitment. We need to pick changes that are doable and will not lead to failure. Changes that we want to make that are too much for this Lent, can be made next year.

Sr. Thea Bowman , a theologian and liturgist who continued her ministry while suffering from cancer said, “Let us stretch ourselves, going beyond comfort zones to unite ourselves with Christ’s redemptive work. We do this when we make

peace, when we can share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God's healing, God's forgiveness and God's unconditional love."

Let us pray that we all have a Lent filled with spiritual growth, blessings and closeness to God.

Homily 20130224 (2-24-2013)

49. **2nd Sunday Lent, Cycle C – Springtime**

Have you ever wondered how the Season of Lent got its name? The names of Christmas, Easter, The Triduum, Advent and Ordinary Time are obvious or easy to explain. Advent is the beginning of something, in the Christian sense, the beginning of new life in Jesus Christ. Ordinary time is ordinal time, first week, second week and so forth. But, the word lent in common usage has nothing to do with the season.

The word Lent goes back to Old English where it means springtime. For those of us who have lived in an area with four seasons it is easy to draw a parallel between springtime and Lent. At the beginning of spring, snow is still on the ground and most likely is dirty, the trees are barren and it is cold. The environment is rather gloomy.

Suddenly, one day, the snow is melted, the trees begin to bloom and then it seems that all at once the snow is gone, and the trees are leafy and green and there are even blooms on the trees. Before our eyes, we see a great transformation occur.

Lent is much the same. It is a desert experience where we work to transform ourselves by growing closer to God and increasing our spirituality. If we take Lent seriously, we see little signs of personal growth starting to happen and suddenly, we experience the joy of Easter and see in ourselves some sort of transformation.

The readings this weekend speak to transformation. In the first reading from Genesis, Abraham's faith was transformational. Because of his faith he was given title to the promises of God.

In the second reading from the Letter of Paul to the Philippians, we are told that if we are not counted among the enemies of Christ, we will be transformed by Him in heaven.

The Gospel, as always on the Second Sunday of Lent, is the story of the transfiguration. In this mysterious and supernatural event on the mountain top, God transformed Jesus' appearance. He must have been wearing robes that were dust stained from the road which turned the most radiant, purest white that one could imagine. God performed this miraculous act in the presence of the long dead Moses and Elijah --- the supreme lawgiver and the first major prophet who brought the voice of God to humanity. It was believed that Elijah would appear again to endorse the coming of the Messiah in fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people.

The Messiah was to come as the supreme law giver and greatest prophet. When God appeared in the cloud, the Jewish belief that God would appear in a cloud at the coming of the Messiah was fulfilled at the Transfiguration.

Some real miracles happened on that mountain top over two thousand years ago. Besides the transfiguration of the physical appearance of Jesus and the appearance of the long dead Moses and Elijah, a third miracle occurred that is especially relevant to us today; it was the effect of the whole event on Peter, James and John. They were so taken with what they saw, they wanted to preserve the moment in time and build structures for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. This was not to be, but the transfiguration had to have made a lasting impression on the three followers of Jesus.

Their reaction can be easily explained. During his pontificate, Pope Benedict has many times written and spoken that God is love, which he again emphasizes in his Lenten message this year. God's great love was very visible to them in the transfiguration event; it strengthened their love for God and making them see the power of their vocations. It stands to reason that this event also gave Jesus the strength and conviction that allowed him to continue his journey towards the cross.

So, the Gospel presents us with the big question, "What does this miraculous event call us to do in our lives?" There is a story about a young girl in church who is absolutely taken with the scenes of the saints in the stained glass windows. The pastor sees her and asked her what she thought a saint was. She replied, "a person who is like these windows, a person who lets the light shine through them."

All of us have the capacity to be saints. We don't have to go through the church's process to achieve sainthood. It is our calling from God to transfigure one another, by letting God's light shine through us.

Although human participation in transfiguration is not likely to produce an event as dramatic as what God did in the First Century, by sharing God's love with others, we can create a moment in time that will affect others. We can't doubt our ability to transfigure others. We only have to look at the faces of people in love, the look on the face of a child who has been made to feel loved, or the look of gratitude on the face of someone who has been done a kindness.

We are called by our faith to be attentive to the needs of others so we can transform them by showing them God's love. Lent gives us an opportunity to look at the quality of the love that we show to our brothers and sisters. There used to be a tradition of spring housekeeping that we don't seem to hear much about any more. Lent gives us a time for spiritual spring house cleaning. During Lent we are called to determine what kind of permanent changes we can make to our lives that will enable us to draw closer to God and show God's love to others. We are only ten days into Lent and there is no reason why we can't fine tune our Lenten commitments and grow in ways to better love one another. After all, we are created in God's image and God is love. Hopefully, what we do during Lent will help each of us to be like the saints and shine forth as beacons of God's love as we let our light shine upon others.

Homily 20130428 (4-28-2013)

50. 5th Sunday of Easter, Cycle C

There is a story about a country woman who had a brother who was considered one of the most awful human beings ever created by God. He was mean to his wife, ignored his children, avoided honest work, drank constantly and was known to all as the biggest liar around.

One day she and one of her grand-daughters were sitting on the front porch; rocking and shelling peas while gossiping about the man. The granddaughter maintained that her uncle was beyond hope and a serious embarrassment to herself and every other member of the family. She filled her Grandma in on his latest episode.

Grandma just rocked and shelled and nodded and listened and finally she said, "I'm sure everything you say is true. Still, Jesus loves your Uncle."

The granddaughter said, "Grandma, I doubt that, I don't think even Jesus could love him." "Yes child," Grandma said, "Jesus loves everybody and Jesus loves your uncle too."

Then she stopped rocking and shelling and sat perfectly still, while she stared off across the hills. "Of course", she said, almost to herself, "that could be 'cause Jesus don't know your Uncle as good as we do". Grandma was wrong and we will come back to her.

In today's Gospel, Jesus commands us to love one another. But Grandma has put her finger on our problem with that commandment; some people are genuinely hard to like. How in the world are we to be expected to love them? How can Jesus order us to do something so difficult? After all in Matthew 5:44 and in Luke 6:27, Jesus tells us to love our enemies. That seems to many of us an insurmountable task.

Part of the problem is that we confuse like with love. We think love is just like taken to the highest degree. In the English language, there is only one word for love, while in Greek, one of the languages that Scripture was written in, there are seven words for different types of love. This is because in our culture, love is almost always associated with romantic love, which in Greek is designated by the word eros. So to love is to have intense feelings of affection for, which cannot be commanded. We fall in love, we feel what we feel.

Or, we associate the word love with friendship, the Greek philea, again, this is a natural thing; we like some people and others we don't. We get along with some people, with others we don't.

Marriage is usually a combination of eros and philea, as well it should be. Friends we make along life's way, people we just like being around, this is mostly philea, affinity and affection. This is natural and cannot be commanded.

But Jesus calls us to another type of love, agape, which is self-sacrificial love. This is love that has to do with how we act toward one another, not how we feel about each other.

Feelings and tastes are mostly uncontrollable. You can't help liking some people more than others, just as we like some foods and dislike others. In my case, I love spinach and can't tolerate green lima beans!

But, the Gospel calls us to move beyond our likes and dislikes, beyond our feelings, so that we may behave in a loving manner to all people. Parents illustrate agape love. Who has been told by their parents, or has told their children, "I don't like you right now but I love you." I was a handful and heard this frequently!

In the first reading from Revelation, John looks to the future for the New Jerusalem, or the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven that we pray for. The Scripture summarizes the hope that the Jewish nation had because of their covenant with God and the Kingdom is also the hope of the new and everlasting covenant of Jesus Christ. Suffice it to say, we still are not there. It takes true self-sacrificing agape love to ensure the kingdom. It is agape love that calls us to act with justice and mercy. But, much of humanity is stuck in the rut of loving the lovable, not loving all those created by God and that hinders the creation of the Kingdom.

The same point is made in a different way all through Acts. An observant Jew didn't eat certain foods and didn't associate or eat with uncircumcised people who ate unclean food. Again, it is a case of the willingness only to love the lovable. Yet, the early apostles and disciples ministered to people where they were, outside of the observant Jewish mainstream.

God wanted evangelists in the early church and wanted us to understand that all people are God's people, that all races and colors and types of humanity are God's humanity and are to be included in God's community of faith. The feelings of the evangelists did not matter to God. God was only concerned with how men and women acted toward those they were called to minister to.

And, that's what matters to God about us. God is calling us to love one another. God is calling us to act with love toward all those around us. Like those of the First Century, we are being called to move beyond our comfort zones in terms of whom we relate to, and how we act toward them.

Love comes first, feelings follow. This is why the grandmother was wrong about Jesus and her brother. Jesus did love him; but not because he didn't know him very well, but because he knew him completely and totally, and cared about him despite what he knew.

Jesus loved the uncle because God's love, is not determined by the worthiness of each of his people, but by the character and intentionality of the one who loves.

It is God's nature, the very core of God's being, to love. Love is what compelled God to create us in the first place. Love is what makes God sustain us. Love is what brought Jesus to this earth. Love is what Jesus taught and lived every day of his earthly life. Love is what took Jesus to the cross and love is the command that Jesus left behind to make the body of Christ one.

It is our mission as children of God and followers of Jesus Christ to love one another. This evening Matthew will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation. This gift from God strengthens his ability to witness God's love by loving others.

As Matthew's community, it is the responsibility of all of us to set the example of being good witnesses of God's love. Let us pray that we are up to the mission of loving one another.

None of us deserves God's love any more than the-uncle did. But all of us have received it, and all of us are called to share it, pass it on, spread it around; we are to love one another, just as Jesus has first loved us.

Homily 20130505 (5-5-2013)

51. **6th Sunday of Easter, Cycle C – Feast of St. Peregrine**

Today's Gospel begins with last week's theme of love. Again, the love we are being called to is not romantic or brotherly love, but the self-sacrificing agape love. Jesus makes the point that we show our love to the Father through our obedience to His word. The kind of love and obedience that we are being called requires self-sacrifice and is not easy. The call we heard last week to love one another, to love people that we don't like, is a real challenge for most of us. It is a challenge that requires strength and resolve.

Jesus tells the disciples that he is going away, but the Holy Spirit is being sent to them and will teach them everything and remind them of all that he has taught them during his short earthly ministry. It is easy to imagine how distraught they felt that Jesus, who had been their teacher and their friend, was leaving.

But, knowing that he would continue to be with them, in the form of the Holy Spirit, must have been a great consolation.

The First Reading from Acts and the Second Reading from Revelation shed some light on exactly who the Holy Spirit was being sent to. In the first reading, the early communities were debating who should be allowed into the Church. Some said that only those who followed Jewish law were eligible, which would have made Christianity a sect of Judaism. Others thought that anyone who believed in and followed the teachings of Jesus could become members of the Church.

To solve this dispute, Paul and Barnabas and others went to Jerusalem where a council was held with the elders of all of the early communities. It was decided that all who did not worship idols and live sinful lifestyles were welcome in the Church. That welcome extends to all of us today.

The reading from Revelation is filled with symbolism that would take a great deal of time to explain, if it is even explainable. But the reading does address the wide variety of people that are church, the people who make up the Holy City. The gates --- three gates facing in each of the four directions, speak to that wide variety of people. It is specifically mentioned that there is no temple, indicating that the Church is the people and finally, there is no illumination by sun or moon because the people of the church are the light.

So, the Holy Spirit was sent for all peoples, not for a single group, in a specific place and in a specific time. The Holy Spirit was sent for us, today, in Palm Bay and for all people everywhere. We need only be aware of the Spirit's indwelling.

Returning to the Gospel, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you, my peace give to you." We tend to define peace as a lack of war or a lack of stress and problems in our life. Although this kind of peace is beneficial, the peace the Jesus gives us is different. It is not the lack of negative things in our life, but the gift of surety that God loves us and that we will someday be with him eternally in paradise.

Finally, Jesus says that he is going to God and promises that he will come back.

We believe that he will return at the end of time, but he has already kept that promise because we have been sent the Holy Spirit who is one with the Father and the Son. He comes back to us each time we receive the Eucharist. So the bottom line of the Gospel is that he lives in each one of us, calling and enabling us to be agents of his love and his peace.

Today, the Church celebrates the Feast of St. Peregrine. Peregrine was a member of the Servants of Mary; the same Servite Order that founded our parish. Peregrine's story shows how the Holy Spirit works within each of us and how we can be Christ to others.

The early 13th Century was the time of the Papal Wars. This was a time when the Church was divided. Some people, families and entire cities supported either the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor and went to battle to fight for their side. The Pope excommunicated those who took the Emperor's side.

Another Servite, St. Phillip Benizi, the prior general of the order, was trying to promote reconciliation in the town of Forli which supported the emperor. He was physically attacked by an eighteen-year-old thug old named Peregrine Laziosi. When Peregrine did this violent deed, he was struck by the Holy Spirit and felt repentance and an overwhelming call to the Servants of Mary. He asked for and received St. Phillip's forgiveness.

After his ordination, Peregrine returned to Forli as a parish priest and minister especially to the poor. He never forgot his attack on Phillip and as penance; he tried never to sit down, supporting himself on a convenient object. When overcome by sleep, Peregrine slept on the ground instead of in a bed. Over time, the standing caused varicose veins and then he got cancer in his right leg.

His doctor decided that leg needed to be amputated. The night before the surgery, Peregrine dragged himself to the monastery chapter room to pray before the crucifix. He fell asleep and dreamed that Jesus came off the cross and healed him. The next morning when he woke up, there was no sign of disease in his right leg. He continued his ministry and died of a fever when he was 80.

St. Peregrine is venerated as the patron saint of those with cancer, foot and leg disease and other serious illnesses. Many people have attributed their healing to the intercession of St. Peregrine. Both St. Peregrine and St. Phillip are examples of how we are called to be agents of God's love and the peace that Jesus gave us.

Before receiving communion, we offer a sign of Christ's peace to each other. The handshake or hug we give each other is more than a perfunctory exchange of greetings. It is an extension of God's love and sincere offer of Jesus' peace, the peace that the world cannot give, to each other. Let us pray that we can live up to our calling of loving God and loving others as Peregrine did.

Homily 20130511 (5-11-2013)

52. OSSM Promise – Promise of Mary

As we gather for the Promise of Mary Catherine Sheets there are two coincidences. One of them is the first reading from Acts of the Apostles. St. Paul was on one of his missionary journeys when he decided to make the Nazarite vow due to God's goodness to him. The vow, taken by men or women, is an ancient Jewish tradition that is described in Chapter 6 of the book of Numbers. It involved having one's head shorn and staying away from meat, grapes and all grape products for thirty days. Additionally, it was a time of retreat, in isolation. At the end of that time, the shorn hair was burnt at an altar along with other sacrifices. This symbolizes the importance of a vow to God. Don't worry Mary Catherine; you don't have to have your head shaved! But your Promise is important and exists for the rest of your life.

In the Gospel, Jesus told the people that he had been speaking in parables and was now going to speak plainly. He said that God loves us and because of that love, we can communicate directly with the Father. Jesus is saying that he does not have to carry our prayers to God for us. Our Trinitarian beliefs tell us that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, so when we pray to one of them, in reality we pray to all of them.

Other Christians are critical of us for praying to Mary. But, that is not what we do as people who have a devotion to our Blessed Mother. In prayer, we are asking Mary to intercede with our God for us. We believe that she has a special place in heaven and is willing to intercede and that God will listen to her intercessions on our behalf.

So we pray directly to God. Mary and the saints do intercede for us as we will ask them to do in a few minutes when we pray the Litany of the Saints.

The other coincidence is that today we celebrate the feast day of a Servite, Blessed Benincasa Montepulciano. He was born around 1375 and became a Servite as an adolescent. When he was 25, he withdrew to a grotto near Siena. He spent his days in prayer and solitude, often living on bread and water and earning whatever else he needed by labor. His life of sacrifice, prayer and penance is meant to inspire us to follow where God calls us without hesitation. It is a call that Mary Catherine is answering today.

People have been called to the ideals of the Servants of Mary since seven laymen gave up comfortable lives as businessmen; the Seven Holy Founders, came together to be servants like Mary in the mid-Thirteenth Century. People have dedicated their lives ever since to living with the Blessed Mother as the example and being servants like her. Blessed Benincasa is just one of many.

There are many Servite saints who have gone before us, those recognized by the church, and those not recognized. These are friars, sisters and seculars who have lived the charism of the order: community, hospitality and compassion leading to

social justice. We too, by virtue of our baptismal promises, are called to do the same.

We are called, in our daily lives, to be partners with Jesus and Mary by serving those who are being crucified today by illness, loneliness, poverty, homelessness, injustice, prejudice and more. It is in this way that we stand at the foot of the cross with Mary.

Today, we have the pleasure of witnessing the Promise of the future St. Mary Catherine of Palm Bay. During her year of formation, we have seen that Mary Catherine is a tireless servant for St. Vincent de Paul. We pray that she will continue that work, also the work of the Servite order, turning hate to love and indifference to compassion.

Know that the prayers of the Order are with you today as in a few minutes you will become Mary Catherine Sheets OSSM.

Homily 20130630 (6-30-2013)

53. 13th Sunday Ordinary Cycle C - Discipleship

Picture a football coach telling a junior in high school that if he wants to play on the varsity team in the fall he will need to gain 10 pounds over the summer (wish I had that problem), run the 40 yard dash in under 5 seconds, work out at the gym at least four times a week, and informally practice with the team on a regular basis until official practices start in mid-August. Those demands might sound excessive, but the teenager will do whatever the coach requires, and even more, in order to make the football team.

We are called to be followers of Jesus Christ, which means we are his disciples. Discipleship means determination and actions, like that of the teen wanting to play football, action that we are reluctant to embrace. The readings for this Sunday call us to discipleship and address what we are called to do to be good disciples.

In the Book of Kings, in the text prior to the first reading, Elijah is frustrated trying to minister to the people of Israel who are not living according to their covenant with God. His frustration was very human. We are often prone to become frustrated with the people to which we minister or deal with in our lives and sometimes flee from them. Elijah flees to the desert to escape his frustrations and encounters God; God tells Elijah to anoint Elisha, which Elijah does in the First Reading.

Elijah encounters Elisha in the fields where he is plowing with 12 yoke of oxen, which means he was likely to be a wealthy man. Elijah threw his cloak over Elisha, the sign of anointing and calling Elisha to follow him. Elisha asks if he can say goodbye to his family before leaving to follow Elijah. Elisha then slaughtered and cooked two oxen and fed his people, symbolically made a clean cut with his old life and followed Elijah.

In the Second Reading, Paul calls the Galatians to freedom, the freedom that Christ has given us. Like the Galatians, we too are called to throw off the yoke of slavery. In Elisha's story, the yoke is used to hold two oxen together so they can work effectively. In the human analogy, the yoke holds us to the slavery of those things that keep us from following Jesus. Paul usually preaches theology, but this letter shifts the theme to ethics. In doing so, he is clear about Jesus' call to love one another and to put aside possessions, attitudes, and self-centeredness for the benefit of the community.

We are called to love all of God's creatures and not to denigrate those who are different from us in appearance, belief and customs. This does not mean that we can't disagree with others. In the First Reading, Elisha demonstrates the freedom of his calling by severing ties with his previous life.

In the Gospel we hear Jesus make demands of those who would be his disciples, saying that his followers "will have nowhere to rest their head." They will

be required to follow him without delay and not say, "Let me go first and bury my father." They will need to move forward with him and not look back, not even bidding "farewell to their family at home."

Jesus' statements, which are exaggerated for effect, tell us that following him, being part of the Church, and living as a disciple, requires a complete re-ordering of our priorities in life. It does not really mean that we cut off relationships with those we love. If we wish to follow Jesus, like him, we need to make God's will the guide for our life.

Jesus' demands to his disciples sound harsh and excessive to us, just as Elijah's call must have sounded to Elisha. In the Gospel, there is a vivid example of Jesus' determination to answer God's call to go to Jerusalem where he knows that he will die. When he needs a place to stop for the night and encounters Samaritan resistance, he does not allow his disciples to seek retribution on the villagers, but moves on without acting against the Samaritans.

He is determined to get to Jerusalem, but continues to live up to his command to love one another. Jesus' example is an important one for us. We should not wish harm on those who stand in our way in life. Jesus calls us to follow him, not to admire him. There are many who admire Jesus, which is not difficult. A Catholic admirer just attends Mass on Sunday, if it fits into their schedule; put something in the collection, if there is extra; and is nice to people when it is easy

It is interesting that, like the teenager who wants to make the football team, we will do whatever is required, even if it seems demanding, to reach some personal goal. Yet when it comes to following Jesus, Jesus was determined to reach Jerusalem and face his fate. That same resolution and commitment is what Jesus expects of those who follow him. It is easy to be an admirer. To be a follower, like Elijah and Elisha, we must answer God's call, even when it is difficult. Like Elisha, we may need to give up possessions and relationships. The Gospel requires us to look at ourselves and determine if we are just admirers or true followers. If our self-examination is honest, we all probably have work to do to call ourselves followers of Jesus. The Church provides us with a lot of help in our quest, be true followers like the lives of the saints, both the canonized saints and the saintliness that we recognize in others.

We also have the Eucharist. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we worship Jesus to show our admiration. But the reception of the Body and Blood is not just an act of admiration, but the act of bringing him into ourselves, physically, emotionally and spiritually to give us the energy and determination to answer God's call; to be Eucharist in the world around us. Every day we should answer two questions. First, are we admirers of Christ or followers of Christ? Then most of us need to answer the second question: what attitudes do we need to change and what actions do we need to take to be true followers of Christ? Let us pray that we become true followers; we could make the world a much better place and be well on our way to building the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Homily 20130630 (6-30-2013)

54. **St. Clelia Barbieri – Order of the Servants of Mary**

Paul glories in the fact that the early church was composed mainly of simple and humble people. He is clear with the community in Corinth, where many but not all members were slaves, that Christians boast not about who they are or what they have, but about God. Christianity made even the poorest and those with the least status spiritual royalty by proclaiming them the sons and daughters of God.

Celsus, a Greek philosopher and opponent of Christianity wrote of Christians, “We see them in their own houses, as wool dressers, cobblers and bleachers of cloth, the most uneducated and vulgar persons --- like swarms of bats or ants creeping out of their nests, a symposium of frogs or worms at a convention.” His uncomplimentary view of Christianity was shared by many, but not all, of the intelligencia of the time.

Paul tells the community at Corinth and us in our time, that even if we are not wealthy and part of the power structure, that God, through Jesus Christ has not only given us power to do his work, but dignity as Christians and status as his sons and daughters.

The Gospel speaks in a similar vein. The intellectuals and the powerful rejected Jesus and his message of love while he was embraced by the humble and the poor. Jesus never condemns the intellectuals, but only their pride. William Plummer, a nineteenth century theologian said, “The heart not the head is the home of the Gospel.”

Jesus gives an invitation to those who are humble, simple people who are weary from hard physical work, those who are troubled, and those outside of the system, to come to him.” He says to take his yoke, his burden is light. As scripture tells us, Jesus was a carpenter. In his day, carpenters made wooden yokes worn around the neck of the oxen that carried loads and pulled plows in the fields. Yokes were custom made for each animal and designed to harness it to its load. They were specifically made to be comfortable for the animal and not to hurt its neck while allowing it to do very heavy work. Jesus is telling us that if we labor building his Kingdom, our load will never be too heavy for us, even if we are not part of the intellectual and powerful establishment in our time. Like Paul is telling the Corinthians in the first reading, we are God’s children, and it is he who will make it possible to do his work, even if it is counter cultural to our time.

It is the same empowerment that God has given his sons and daughters through the ages that made it possible for St. Clelia Barbieri while a young woman, to rise from extreme poverty to do the work of God that propelled her to sainthood.

Clelia Barbieri was born on February 13, 1847 in La Budrie, a small village of wool workers in the Diocese of Balonga, Italy. Her father was very poor, a wool worker, an occupation that the Greek philosopher Celsus called out in his derogatory description of Christians. Clelia’s mother was a relatively educated

woman who came from a well to do family who was shunned by her family when she married a wool worker and became one herself. Illness was a major problem in La Budrie at the time and when Clelia was eight, her father died of cholera leaving the family in even more dire poverty. Clelia went to work in the wool industry with her mother.

She had a sweet, gentle and loving temperament. Not only did she learn from her mother to weave wool, she also learned to live a religious life. Her mother must have also taught her to read.

Clelia went to church on a regular basis and set aside time each day for prayer. She constantly asked her mother questions about God and what she might do to become Holy. She studied the Catechism regularly. She read books about spirituality. She received her First Communion when she was eleven, which was very early in the mid-nineteenth century. As a teenager, she felt a growing desire to serve God. Clelia left home to become a member of the Christian Catechism Workers, a small group of mostly men that taught the Catechism to rural agricultural workers who fell through the cracks of the parishes in the area. She started out as an assistant and quickly became the heart and soul of the movement.

She became the leader of a small group of girls and women that continued the teaching work. She was a beautiful girl, but was not interested in marriage although that likely would have improved the economic condition of her and her family. Instead, Clelia with several other young women began to work for the care and education of the poor. They decided to start their own religious order since they believed that they were so poor that none of the established orders would accept them.

On May 1, 1864 the young women moved into a small house where they established a quiet place, that they called "The Retreat of La Budrie." They founded the Congregation of the Minims of Our Lady of Sorrows. Minim is another word for mendicant. A mendicant is a religious order that basically worked or begged for their support. The Servants of Mary, from its beginning were a mendicant order along with the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites.

The sisters had been influenced by the Servite Friars working in their area and chose Our Lady of Sorrows to be their patron and made their primary concern the religious education and domestic skills training of girls who received no help from their parents.

Clelia became ill and was bed ridden for seven months and on July 13, 1870, at the age of 23, she died of tuberculosis. Her last words were, "Be of good cheer! I'm going to paradise, but I'll always be with you and never desert you." On the one year anniversary of her death, the other sisters heard what they said was Clelia's voice responding to their prayers.

The Congregation of the Minims of Our Lady of Sorrows can today be found working in Italy, India and Tanzania. In 1951, the congregation requested to be aggregated to the Order of the Servants of Mary, and that request was granted

making them Servites although they function as their own entity. Clelia was canonized by Pope John Paul II on April 19th, 1989.

The life of St. Clelia Barbieri is a fulfillment of the Scripture of today. She is with the Father and knows the Father because she knew Jesus and did his work in her short life and Jesus revealed the Father to her as the Gospel said Jesus would do. Let us pray that we can be like St. Clelia and strive for holiness and serve God's people using the example of Our Lady of Sorrows. Amen. Our Lady of Sorrows pray for us.

Homily 20130721 (7-21-2013)

55. 16th Sunday Cycle C – Hospitality

Today's Gospel and first reading have to do with hospitality. Both hospitality in the traditional sense of being welcoming and serving food and caring for the other needs of people, but also in the sense of welcoming God into our lives, minds and hearts.

The Gospel describes both kinds of hospitality. Jesus is continuing his journey that ends with his crucifixion in Jerusalem, and stops at the home of his friends in Bethany, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It is likely that he wanted to spend some quiet time with friends before he continues his journey.

When Jesus arrives, Martha is very busy preparing a huge feast, when a simple meal might have been more of what Jesus was looking for. Hospitality was and still is an important part of Middle Eastern culture and Martha is trying to do her best.

Mary on the other hand is sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to what he has to say. Martha is upset at having to do all of the cooking and cleaning without help from Mary. At that moment, when Jesus is facing a difficult road, he needs what Mary is giving him; a caring and listening ear, empathy, support and most likely, prayer. Mary is doing what God commanded in Mark chapter 9 Verse 7; "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him"

There are some people who are contemplation oriented and there are others who are action oriented. The Martha and Mary story bears out the tension between the two. Since most of us have a combination of the two orientations, we might have tension within us. That is OK and we need to be contemplative sometimes and action people at other times.

Ecclesiastes verse 3 chapter 1 tells us that there is an appointed time for everything and a time for every affair under heaven."

The Martha and Mary story includes both Mary's "hospitality of heart" and Martha's hospitality of service. In the first reading, Abraham sees some strangers coming and he rushes out to meet them, invites them in, picks his best crops and slaughters his best livestock to feed them. According to the tradition of Middle Eastern hospitality, he serves these strangers as if they are God, and it turns out that they are from God. We know this because one of the strangers knows that Abraham and Sarah have been trying to have a child for some time, and he tells them that Sarah will have a baby boy. We too are called to show hospitality and caring to strangers in need. The psalm response is very clear, "Those who do justice will live in the presence of God."

In the second reading St. Paul makes the case that we are reconciled due to Jesus' death on the cross and that it is up to us to help reconcile the world. One

way that we can help to reconcile the world is by standing at the figurative crosses of those who are suffering and showing them hospitality by serving them in their suffering.

The Gospel calls us to serve God through prayer and listening to him while the first and second readings call us to serve God actively by serving the people of God. Doing both is necessary.

There is a story about Agnes, a very devout woman who goes to Mass every day, prays the rosary twice daily, and also prays every devotional known to humanity. One night in her dream, Jesus comes to her and says that he will be visiting her the next day.

Agnes wakes up in the morning and rushes around scrubbing everything to make sure her house is clean enough for Jesus. When she is satisfied, she sits down and waits. Then there is a knock at the door and she rushes to open it and sees a shabbily dressed beggar standing there. She was disappointed and tells the beggar to go away quickly because she was expecting an important guest. A bit later there was another knock and there was a familiar old man who needed help. Agnes said she was not free to help in and slammed the door in his face. Sometime later there was another knock and she was sure that it must be Jesus. She excitedly ran to the door to see a beggar asking for bread and angrily sent him away.

With a heavy heart, she went to bed. When Jesus came to her in a dream and she complained about how hard she worked to prepare for his coming and his not showing up. Jesus responded that he came three times and she refused to let him enter.

Today, we at Our Lady of Grace show hospitality to Oni Mercado who is being baptized and Winston Wilson who is being received into our church from another faith. May we set an example for both of them with our lives by living our call to serve God and the people of God and we pray that in their lives they do the same.

Homily 20130728 (7-28-2013)

56. 17th Sunday Cycle C - Prayer

We live in a world of bureaucracy where it can often be difficult to communicate. Getting a meeting with a politician is not easy. One has to go through secretaries to possibly get on a calendar. The higher up in government, the harder it usually is. For an ordinary citizen, to meet with a governor or the President of the United States is virtually impossible. It is similar in the church. To get an appointment with the pastor, it has to be scheduled on his calendar. To get an appointment with the Pope is probably virtually impossible. And the same is true in any large corporation or institution. Yet, with the highest power in the universe, God, we have a direct line. We can speak with God any time we want about anything we want. It is just a matter of engaging in prayer.

Scripture for today is about our relationship with God, which we have in two ways; our prayer life and our treatment of God's creations with justice and mercy. In the first reading

Abraham has a conversation with God. God is concerned about the sin in Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophet Ezekiel in chapter 16 verses 49 and 50 describes Sodom's sin as giving no help to the poor and needy as well as other abominable crimes. The people of these cities are content to live in a state of evil.

Abraham asks God if he will destroy the innocent with the guilty. When God tells Abraham he will spare the cities if there are fifty innocent people. Abraham continues to question God who said he will not destroy the cities if there are ten good people there.

The point of this discussion is not to show that Abraham is a good negotiator, but that God puts mercy above justice and is willing to protect the innocent before punishing the guilty.

The second reading from the Letter to the Colossians brings Gods love and mercy from the time of Abraham into the time of the early Church. This letter goes a step further and grants God's love, mercy and forgiveness to those who have sinned and want to change their ways and live according to Jesus' teachings. God extends the same love, mercy and forgiveness to us today and expects us to be loving and merciful to others.

This past week, in Rio, Pope Francis affirmed God's mercy and our call to be people of mercy saying, "We need a church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy, we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of 'wounded' persons in need of understanding, forgiveness and love."

The Gospel is about another very important aspect of our relationship with God, prayer. There are many forms of prayers; they are all good prayers as long as it is not to satisfy our own desire for possessions or power. There is a story about

little Johnny. Johnny wanted a new bicycle more than anything else in the world. He prayed to Jesus fervently for about a week and nothing happened. Although he was a little boy, Johnny knew that this type of prayer would not be answered, but he wanted the bike so badly he would resort to anything.

He took the statue of the Blessed Mother off of the fireplace mantle, wrapped it in a T-shirt, put it in the back of his dresser drawer and prayed to Jesus, "If you ever want to see your mother again, bring me that bike."

Unlike Johnny, in our prayer life, we are called to make prayers of thanksgiving for all that we have been given, prayers for our own development as people of mercy and forgiveness, and prayers for the benefit of others.

In the Gospel, Jesus teaches us how to pray well. One of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus responds with a version of what is to become the Our Father. We pray the Our Father often, but has it become words we say mechanically? The old timers in our parish might remember Fr. Carl and his very slow and meaningful recitation of this prayer.

In teaching a Bible study, he spent the better part of the first hour on "our." The Our Father has much deeper meaning than it might seem on the surface. If there was only one prayer available to us, the Our Father would be the one because it contains the very core of our beliefs and calls us to live those beliefs.

We can call God "our Father" because God has chosen to have a personal relationship with us. God is not just the hallowed one who has infinite power, but is the Father who is always ready to listen to, us, his children. We call upon the same God who showed Abraham that he was the God of mercy, the same God that, through Paul's letter, invited the Colossians to turn away from their evil ways and towards forgiveness.

"Give us this day our daily bread" is not a petition to satisfy our immediate needs as it might seem on the surface. It not only refers to the present, but also to the future at the heavenly Eucharistic banquet when His Kingdom comes. It not only refers to physical sustenance, but our spiritual sustenance. Throughout the Gospels, bread is symbolic of the Eucharist. It is also a reminder to us that Eucharist is a verb as well as a noun; we are called to be Eucharist in our attitudes and actions towards our neighbor.

Forgiveness of our sins as we forgive those who are in debt to us calls us to model our acceptance of others in their humanity with all of their imperfections and quirks as God accepts us in the same way. In Matthew chapter 11 verse 25 tells his followers, past and current, "When you pray, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in will also forgive you your trespasses."

In the closing of Luke's Our Father we hear, "Do not subject us to the final test." Test or trial always means evil when Luke uses those words. We are reminded in multiple places in Scripture that God always protects us from evil.

Jesus also calls us to be persistent in our prayer. We are to keep knocking, seeking, and asking. God always listens to our prayers and answers them according to His will and not always in the present but with eternal life in mind.

Let us pray the Our Father today and always with a real understanding what it means and with real conviction, remembering that we always have direct access to God every day, 24 hours a day.

Homily 20130815 (8-15-2013)

57. Feast of the Assumption of Mary

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. There is some controversy among theologians as to whether she died a normal death and was assumed body and soul into heaven, or whether she was directly assumed into heaven without death. The celebration of the feast goes back to the Fourth Century. Although the Assumption is not mentioned specifically in Sacred Scripture, it has been a long standing teaching of the Church. In a homily given by Pope John Paul II at Lourdes on the Feast of the Assumption in 2004, the Pope quoted John 14:3 and related the Assumption of Mary as Jesus tells his disciples, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am you may be also." He said that Mary's assumption was the fulfillment of the Scripture. The feast is a public holiday in many Christian countries. In 1950, Pope Pius XII made the Assumption of Mary an infallible teaching of the church.

Today's Gospel is Mary's visit to Elizabeth. Also pregnant, Elizabeth recognizes Mary as the mother of God. The Gospel also contains The Magnificat, a piece of Scripture so central to the teachings of the Church that it is prayed during each Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours by those who have been ordained, those who have made vows to religious orders and lay persons who have made the Liturgy of the Hours part of their prayer life. In the Magnificat, Mary illustrates a sharp contrast between the worldly order and God's order.

Mary herself is a perfect example of this contrast. She was a young, poor, uneducated Jewish girl with no status in the eyes of the First Century world. Yet she was the self proclaimed lowly servant who because of her faith and obedience was selected to be the mother of Jesus. She said that God had done great things for her. Mary has risen to a stature higher than any other person in the history of the world who was born to human parents. She is the example of what the power of God can do in our own lives if we trust and respond positively to God's calling. While none of us will ever rise to Mary's heights, we may still grow into the people that God has created us to be. We are ordinary people called to do extraordinary things.

The verses, spoken by Mary, "He has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the poor. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty" are a stark warning to us that if we don't follow the teachings of the church to help remove the inequities in the world, eventually God will somehow do it for us. These are strong words, especially for a young person of Mary's social status. Even though we are going through hard economic times, as residents of the US we are wealthier than 95% of the world. Mary is not saying that we have to give up everything that we have, but that we need to share what we can with others.

We see images of Mary, by herself, with baby Jesus but the most difficult image to imagine is Mary at the Foot of the Cross. Yet, this is the image of Mary that is most compelling and most challenging. It is hard to imagine any parent watching the brutal torture and execution of their child. But, Mary was there. She was in no way a stranger to suffering. It is not likely that we have suffered any tragedy in our lives that Mary has not. The life of the poor in the First Century was anything but easy and pain free. Her presence at the foot of the cross is not limited to the crucifixion of Jesus, but to all of these who suffer tragedy and pain in the world. Church art tends to mostly show the fragile and maternal side of Mary, but Mary at the foot of the cross shows her as someone with the toughness of the words that she spoke in the Magnificat. Mary who was full of love and caring had the backbone to stand in solidarity with the suffering.

Our parish has a special connection with Mary besides being named in her honor. The parish was founded by friars of The Order of the Servants of Mary, also known as Servites, who consider Mary to be their founder. In the 13th century, seven lay men from Florence, Italy who made a comfortable living as merchants gathered together to pray. They were inspired by Mary to found a community to pray and to serve. Under Mary's guidance, they founded St. Mary's Hospice and cared for the sick and dying. This small group who used Mary as a life example grew into a religious order. Their charism of hospitality, compassion and social justice is the example set by Mary.

In 2000, the friars left and our parish became a diocesan parish. The vitality of our community has roots in our Servite past and has continued to grow over the years. Although the friars have gone, their presence remains in the hearts of the people who knew them and in the Secular Order of the Servants of Mary; a community of people in our parish who have promised to live the Servite charism in our daily lives using Mary as an example and inspiration.

This story might be familiar. One day, Jesus came to visit St. Peter at the pearly gates and reprimanded him for some of the sinners that he had let into heaven. Peter replied, Lord, I told them to go below but they go around back and your mother lets them in.

Besides being someone who could stand tough and speak against injustice, Mary had a tender side that showed compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love. She gives us an example of how to live our lives. Although her assumption into heaven is a matter of faith, it is also a matter of logic. We believe that she lived a life that made her our model and inspiration.

It would benefit all of us to live our lives as Mary lived hers, with great strength of character and at the same time with love for all. Hopefully, if we can do this, we all will meet her in person in heaven without having to sneak around to the back door to find her.

Homily 20130901 (9-1-2013)

58. 22nd Sunday Cycle C - Humility

If we had to describe the theme of the Scripture we heard today in one word, that word is humility. There is a story about a famous person and humility that is worth hearing, even if we have heard it before.

Booker T. Washington was walking in an exclusive section of Tuskegee, Alabama. He was approached by a wealthy white woman who did not recognize who he was. She asked him if he would like to make some extra money chopping wood for her. He had no pressing obligations so he said yes. He smiled, rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to do the humble work she requested. When he was done, he carried the wood into the house and stacked it neatly by the fire place.

When he left, the woman's daughter asked her, "Don't you know who he is?" The woman replied in the negative. The daughter told her that he was Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute. Mortified, she went to his office the next day and apologized profusely. Washington said, "It's alright mam, I like to get a chance to do a bit of manual labor." He gave her a warm smile and continued, "I am always delighted to do something for a friend."

The woman was so moved that she shook his hand, and told him that his gracious attitude endeared him to her. As a result of this miraculous encounter in a segregated south, the woman convinced her friends to give thousands of dollars to Tuskegee Institute. She was so impressed by the humility of an accomplished man who was willing to do work that many of his status would have thought to be below them. This story, in its way, explains the readings in a very practical fashion.

The first reading today is from Sirach, a book that holds a collection of teachings about how we are called to live. Sirach places great emphasis on humility and shows great sympathy towards the poor and oppressed. The beginning of the reading especially stresses humility. "The greater you are the more you must humble yourself; so you will find favor in the sight of God." Next to God, no human being is important. Sirach says that if we are to be good people, we have to work harder to make ourselves lower, or more humble.

God rewards the lowly unspoiled people. The Beatitudes, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke make the same point even more strongly than Sirach. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth speaks volumes about humility. The last two verses of Sirach encourage us to listen to those who are wise, such as Jesus, and to be generous to the poor.

Today's second reading is the third of four consecutive readings from Hebrews. We heard the description of the City of God in heaven. This description parallels the Kingdom of God that Jesus calls us to on earth. We believe that life in heaven is a continuation of life on earth. The reading speaks of the spirits of the just made perfect in this city where God is the Judge and Jesus is the mediator.

The spirits of the just are those who were humble and cared about the poor in their earthly life, people like Booker T. Washington.

The Gospel has Jesus making the most out of a good teaching moment. Good teachers take advantage of what is happening in the lives of their students and in the world around them. For example, on February 11, 2013, the lesson plan of a teacher in a Catholic high school might have been on the nearing season of Lent. However February 11 was the day when Pope Benedict announced he would resign his papacy at the end of the month. A good teacher would have changed the lesson plan for that day to speak about the papacy and the historic significance of the resignation. A good teacher takes advantage of teachable moments whenever they occur.

In the Gospel, Jesus is a good teacher and took advantage of a teachable moment. Jesus had gone to dine at the house of a leading Pharisee. He noticed how those present were choosing the places of honor at the table. So Jesus, the teacher, used the opportunity to speak about humility. Jesus told his First Century listeners and tells us today not to judge ourselves as more important than others saying, "Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place." If someone is to have a place of honor that determination is to be made by the host and not by any guest.

Jesus' teaching is still appropriate for our day. We live in a society where people strive to put themselves in places of honor. Not in the first place at an actual banquet table, though people do that, but in places of honor and celebrity in the media, in business, politics, and society. Consider the efforts that people make in order to be seen on television, to be talked about in the digital world, to be found in the right places with the right people, to be considered popular and successful, to make the list of the most powerful and influential. Like those in the Gospel reading, they make every effort to get to the head of the table.

Rather than striving for places of honor, Jesus advises us to make a place at the "table" of our care and concern for those who cannot help us in any way. Jesus says, "Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." In the end, there is only one table that matters and one host who determines who sits in its places of honor. Jesus, the ultimate host, tells us, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Booker T. Washington is a good example of a man who had no problem humbling himself and what he has done for others, particularly those who would not have become educated without his efforts, causes him to be exalted. As we approach Labor Day, let us think about those who humble themselves to do jobs we can't do or jobs that we don't want to do. Those who do these jobs are as important to God as we are and it is our call to see their importance. We come to the table of the Lord today, in humility. There is no difference between any of us as we receive the Eucharist. May we leave after mass filled with humility and a desire to serve others as did Booker T. Washington and as Jesus calls us.

Homily 20130922 (9-22-2013)

59. 25th Sunday, Cycle C – Universality of the Gospel

During the past few months, we have learned a great deal about where Pope Francis wants to lead the church and about his vision of how he believes Catholic Christians need to regard all of humanity. He has not changed any of the rules of the Church, but has asked us to reprioritize our thinking. His message is that at the very core of our beliefs is that we were all created by God out of love and that Jesus died out of love to redeem each of us. Francis brings us back to John 15, Jesus' call to the great commandment to love one another. His position is that we need to dwell on love and mercy above our concern for the sins that others commit; in other words, to be Christ like in our attitudes and actions.

In the Second Reading from the First Letter to Timothy, we hear Francis' vision echoed. The major theme is the universality of the Gospel. Living the Gospel is central to all of our lives, no matter our stations in life. The Gospel makes no class distinctions.

The Gospel reaches out to all, the saintly and the sinner. The Church is not as social club for saints, but a hospital for sinners. If we were all perfect, we would not need the institutional church. The church of course edifies the saints, but it also helps us to live along the path to sainthood.

The Gospel is not just for the Christian, but for all. Saint Paul wrote the Letter to Timothy at a time when the Romans in authority were pagans and, for the most part, hostile to the Church.

Yet, in Matthew 5:24, Jesus calls us to love our enemies and Paul calls us to take that love for our enemies to the next level with the ideal that we should pray for those we consider to be enemies of our beliefs. There is so much anger in partisan politics today; anger on both sides. Can you imagine how different the tone of disagreement might be if we were to pray for the people that we disagree with? For the fully Christian person, there is no one that we don't love as a creation of God, there is no one that is outside of the love of Christ and there is no one outside side of God's desire for the salvation of each person.

It is a specific case of the universal love of the Gospel that we heard about in the First Reading from The Book of Amos and the Gospel this morning and which has been emphasized by Pope Francis. That specific love is the love for the poor.

Along with the call to love the poor, we are, in no uncertain terms, warned against personal greed.

The prophet, Amos, is very direct. He denounces the wealthy that can't wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they could resume business as usual, making as much profit as possible and cheating and exploiting the poor in the process. Amos threatens the greedy with divine judgment.

The Gospel parable is difficult to interpret because the main characters are all less than honest. The steward, when faced with loss of his job and no way to make a living, figured out how to make his life more comfortable. He ingratiated himself with the debtors by reducing the amount they owed to the landlord figuring that they would help him when he became jobless and possibly set himself up for later blackmail.

The debtors were also dishonest as they were happy to falsify the papers that said how much they owed. The landlord also bought into the dishonesty by praising the steward for his shrewdness in his dishonest ingenuity. Even though the parable features this collection of shady characters, Luke uses this Gospel passage to make four important points about our lives.

First, he says that the sons of the world are wiser than the sons of the light. He means that if we put the effort into being good Christians that we put into acquiring wealth, possessions, social status or other types of power, we would be a much better society. His second point is that if we used our money and possessions for the benefit of others, rather than for selfish purposes, we would be a better people. Possessions and wealth are not bad in themselves, but become sinful when they become our Gods.

His third point is that if we are not trustworthy in the small things, we are not likely to be trustworthy in the big things. We are only stewards of what we acquire on earth and we can't take our possessions with us when we die. Therefore, being good stewards of God's gifts on earth, using these gifts on earth to live the Gospel, will bring us greater pleasure in heaven.

Finally, Luke says that we cannot serve two masters. Today it is possible for us to work for two or more bosses, but in biblical days, the master owned 100% of the labor of a slave. The slave could not work for more than one master. What Luke is telling us today is that all of our energy needs to be put into serving God. Living the Gospel is not a part time job, but takes every ounce of our being. We are called for the Gospel to own us fully.

In the Magnificat, or the Canticle of Mary, which the Church prays every day as part of Evening Prayer, Luke in Chapter 1 verses 46 to 65 uses Mary's tough words to emphasize God's sense of justice for our lives in eternity. Mary says, "He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty."

Those are tough words indeed and we all need to take them to heart. No one is perfect; sinfulness is part of the human condition. Pope Frances acknowledged this fact on a number of recent occasions. Each of us is called to look at our own lives and make any changes that we need to in order to live the Gospel more fully and build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. A good place to start is asking ourselves if we are truly good stewards of our God-given gifts.

Homily 20131027 (10-27-2013)

60. 30th Sunday Cycle C – Parable of the Pharisee

A new parishioner introduces himself to the pastor saying, "Father, I am a good Catholic. I go to Mass every Sunday and most weekdays. I donate 10% of my salary to the Church and even 10% of the interest and dividends that I receive. I don't eat meat on Fridays and fast each day of Lent. I pray the Rosary every night. I do my best to keep the commandments and faithfully follow the guidance of the Church." Any pastor who heard a new parishioner describe themselves that way would be impressed. But, he might also wonder how he could get that new person involved in serving the parish and serving other people.

In the Gospel Jesus tells a parable that might describe the Jewish version of the new parishioner. A Pharisee goes to the Temple and there in his prayer before God he recounts all the good and pious things he is doing. He prays regularly. He fasts twice a week, not just once a year as required.

He donates 10% of every bit of his income. He is generous, honest and faithful in his marriage. All that the Pharisee says about himself is true. The Pharisee certainly was a better "parishioner" than the tax collector who was also in the Temple.

Yet Jesus says that the Pharisee did not leave the Temple right with God. The problem was not with the good things the Pharisee was doing. The problem was with his attitude. The Pharisee felt he was in good with God; he justified himself by his pious deeds and his faithful observance of Jewish ritual and law. He was self-serving and self-righteous but neglected to look outside of himself.

In the first reading from Sirach, we heard that God cares about those suffering using the widows and orphans as an example of his caring for all of the oppressed. The Psalm response today is "The Lord hears the cry of the poor ..."

He calls us to do this in addition to being devout observers of the rituals of our religion. In fact, claiming to be Christians without caring and acting on that caring for the oppressed makes that claim false. Many in the public eye claim to be Christians for their own purposes, but do not show Christian love for those who God calls us to love. Others claim to be Christians but don't behave like Christians. There are a couple of quick examples. A friend felt safe hiring a plumber because he had the fish symbol on his van. The plumber took money and never came back to finish the job. My sister worked for an entertainment lawyer who did work for a composer and singer of Christian music. The singer never paid the agreed upon bill.

Going back to the Gospel, the tax collector, who was also in the Temple, did not try to make himself look good or call attention to himself. What could he say? He knew he was a sinner - collaborating with the hated Romans, extorting money

from his own people. "The tax collector would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" He knew that God's mercy was all that could save him from his sins.

In that parable Jesus teaches us that those who recognize their need for mercy and forgiveness are in a better position before God than those who think that they scrupulously follow religious rules. As Jesus puts it, "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

There is no better way to humble ourselves than by putting ourselves in the service of God by serving others. We don't save ourselves by scrupulously and perfectly following the rules of our religion. It is God who saves us because of our faith and calls us to live that faith in the service of others.