

Fourteen Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's first and third readings shock us. At the very least we are greatly surprised. The Jews "knew" from their experience that kings came dressed in regal splendor with squadrons of chariots, countless warriors and retinue. Imagine how the Jews felt when they heard that their king would appear riding on a jackass?

A common and almost universal error many good, religious people make is that we/they identify the holy with the extraordinary, the divine with the spectacular. Stories of weeping Madonna's, bleeding crucifixes, divine fireworks attract thousands: and a media blitz. We think that being there will bring an experience of "the holy" - something may somehow rub off. Folks travel far for the mere possibility of that experience.

We heard Jesus correcting this false impression a moment ago. God's truth, the divine message, does not have to enter our lives through the amazing and the startling, but, most of the time, through the ordinary and the commonplace. As with the prophet - the lord is not to be found in the whirlwind, but in the still, small breeze of a whisper. This is probably not the way we might think to promote the good news ourselves, but the record shows that it is clearly god's way.

Therese Martin became a Carmelite nun in the last century. One day, she told her prioress that she wanted to be a saint. When the prioress scolded her for pride, she replied that she would be a quiet, secret saint. Her simplicity, her candor, and her lack of pretense were the most notable things about her. Interestingly, Jesus' words in today's gospel about god revealing himself to mere children were very special to St. Therese. Her spirituality has become known as "the little way" of the little flower.

Where did she get that idea? The Carmelite charism is prayer. They do not have a model of spirituality like Franciscans, Jesuits or Oblates. Where did she get her spirituality? Her spirituality, we are told, came from her aunt, a Visitandine nun, who taught her the way of St. Francis de Sales. Francis advised doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

Some years ago, in the midst of global tension Samantha Smith, a fifth grader, wrote to the soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, asking if he intended to wage war on the U.S. Samantha cut through to the heart of the matter; she asked simply and directly: "are you going to make war?" Andropov invited Samantha to Russia. Her visit and death two years later in a plane crash received wide publicity. Samantha's ordinariness accomplished what the "wise and learned" negotiators failed to do.

All of the above heard the words of Jesus' prayer in today's gospel: "i thank you, father, lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to mere children."

Implied in Jesus' prayer are two very important ideas. First - those he called "mere children" are more likely to be open to god's word. Being ordinary or poor may not be anything particular in themselves to recommend them, but as it works out, these people are often the ones who are open to the word of god.

Don't we learn from our experience that the learned and the clever sometimes have a hard time getting beyond their own learning and their own cleverness? Talk is cheap; slick talkers are ineffective in the long run; children see right through them.

Also implied in Jesus' words is a second important idea. Isn't it true that parents find lost children more often than the other way around? When anyone receives god's word, it is not so much that they discover the truth for themselves, as that god has revealed the truth to him or her. In other words, we do not find him; he finds us.

When Jesus refers to his disciples and followers as “mere children,” his words bring us to a fundamental truth. Our knowledge and love of God are gifts we receive rather than something we do or achieve for ourselves out of our own learning or cleverness. Why we think that we make ourselves good/ holy by ourselves and what we do or choose not to do is a mysterious aberration.

The gospel phrase “learned and clever” seems reminiscent of that more modern phrase, “the rich and famous.” The lifestyles of the rich and famous are constantly being held up to us for envy, awe -- and perhaps imitation, at some level. Jesus tells us that “the rich” and the tabloids tell us that many of the “famous” do not have a jump on being on the right track. Hollywood darlings have their troubles.

The little flower, Francis de Sales, Francis of Assisi and so many other masters of the spiritual life led lives easily overlooked by the more sophisticated: true happiness can be found in what we are rather than what we have, what we do, what we long for.

In the simple, ordinary events of life, we find our Lord -- like children, with upturned faces, expectant eyes, and open arms and hands.

Fifteen Sunday in Ordinary Time

This weekend and the next two, from Matthew 13, are a series of parables dealing with how Jesus’ message was received.

In the first reading, we heard God speaking through Isaiah, the prophet: the word that goes forth from my mouth shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.”

In the gospel, we hear from Jesus: “let anyone with ears to hear, listen.” Is there anyone in church today who does not have someone close who has been exposed to the message of Jesus, but will not accept Jesus and what he has to say? Secondly, is there anyone here who does not have to look in the mirror to see what kind of soil they are becoming?

Each of us listens to Jesus’ parable at two levels.

First, the level of the farmer - as preacher, parent, spouse, friend, we identify with Jesus in the parable of the sower. We, as well as Jesus, are sowers of seed.

Primitive Palestinian farmers did the opposite of modern farmers. They sowed on top of unturned soil, and waited to see what kind the soil was after plowing.

For Jesus, three of the four portions of seed his farmer spread either never take root or never reach maturity. Only one of four seeds produces a yield, but it is so great that it makes up for all the lost seed.

Like Palestinian farmers, no matter how hard we hope and pray and try to sow faith-ideas, we do not know what kind of soil our “seed” will fall upon until later, perhaps much later. We cannot control the soil of another. Everyone has a free will to choose the soil he/she will become -- accepting or rejecting.

You might get discouraged, unless you remember the math of the seeds. Have patience. No farmer plants and harvests in the same day. Those insights that you fear are bouncing off the hard soil of your child will one day take root and bring a harvest of wisdom and knowledge. You may not see it soon. You may not see it in your lifetime. As someone said, “children always obey the teaching of their parents, but it is seldom while the parent is still alive to enjoy it.”

We need to remember that we are only the sowers; God alone is the harvester.

Second, we need to listen to the parable at the level of the kinds of soil. [This part of the scripture was probably added by Matthew as a response to the difficulties within his community, and was not part of Jesus' original words.] We listen to the parable of the soil and identify with one of the types of soil.

Unlike the soil outside our houses which is not self-determining, we have the power to decide what kind of soil we shall become. We may need to soften the rigid [the skepticism, the unforgiveness]; we may need to crumble the rocky [the hard headedness]; we may need to clear away the thorny [the thorny persons, places or things that ensnare us and prevent our growth].

The word of god as seed will produce fruit far beyond our expectations and in spite of our disappointments.

This is Good News!

Sixteen Sunday in Ordinary Time

Did you ever wonder how parables became famous?

I heard a fascinating story about the origins. Once upon a time, there was truth. Truth remained as naked as the day he was born. He was also called "unvarnished truth" by some hardwood finishers, "bald truth" by some barbers, "unadulterated truth" by. . . Well, let's move along.

Truth was different. Truth wandered thru the city, completely naked, stripped of every embellishment - and when people got one look at him, he was shunned. Many could not face him.

One day, parable met truth and stayed long enough to ask a question: why do you look so woebegone? Truth answered that people avoided him because he was old and -- because he could not communicate, he had no sense of purpose in life. Parable disagreed and said that it was not age, that he, parable, was as old as truth, that older was more attractive. Parable felt that he got better with age.

Parable offered to tell truth a secret. The secret was this: people do not like things bare and plain; they like them dressed up. Parable then offered some of his clothes to truth and truth accepted the offer.

When truth was clothed in the clothing of parable, truth then became welcome where he was previously avoided. From that time on, truth clothed in parable has been esteemed and loved by all.

Jesus knew this, so much of what he told us is truth, clothed with the clothing of parable.

We have been hearing several of Jesus' parables in Matthew's gospel. Last week we heard the parable about the different kinds of soil that the word of god falls upon. This week, we hear the parable about wheat and weeds. We hear mini-parables in the similes about mustard seed and yeast. These are not like Aesop's fables that simply entertain; these are Jesus' parables that convey profound truth.

Each of last week's and today's parables tells us the way that the kingdom of god grows. They have come to be called the "growth parables." The simple, unclothed truth is: the kingdom of god continues to grow in the presence of those who work against it. Also, small, almost unnoticed beginnings - like the tiny mustard seed and the bit of yeast -- have wonderful, unforeseeable, and vitally important results . . . But, only later.

We can listen to these parables at two levels: the individual, personal level and the community level. As individuals, we realize that you and i are composed of both wheat and weeds. The old adage is true: "there is a little bit of bad in the best of us and there is a little bit of good in the worst of us, so, it never

behooves any of us to talk about the rest of us.” As Jesus said, “Who of you can throw the first stone?”

At the other level, the community level, the parable also speaks to us; it reminds us there is an inclination among some to go against the lesson of Jesus. Some - even “pillars of the church” [hear hierarchy] are ordained as shepherds to feed lambs and sheep and protect against wolves. Wolves are readily recognized. Shepherds are not weeders; Jesus called some followers to be shepherds, not weeders.

As Jesus points out in today’s gospel, identifying and rooting out weeds is a dangerous enterprise. First, because the chance of injuring the wheat is great; innocent people may get hurt. Secondly, it is dangerous because the one who is rooted out is all too often not a weed, but another strain of wheat unfamiliar to the one who is doing the weeding.

There is a saying: “Everyone is someone else’s weirdo.” Isn’t it true that in the larger Christian community, “Everyone is someone else’s weed?”

Weeders tend to be legalistic rule keepers, and tend to exclude with ruthless judgment and harsh condemnation. Weeding is the work of the self-righteous.

Self-righteousness is an evil that gives false security - like the Pharisees who did not see the wheat from the weeds, the Christ from the crowd.

Jesus reminds us today in parable to be patient and non-judgmental not self-righteous and arrogant with those around us who are different. We have been told on divine authority that we do not have the skill necessary to be weeders.

Jesus reminds us that our father is in charge and that we must not rush to judgment. His kingdom will continue to grow slowly, relentlessly, and . . . surprisingly.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

So often the connection between the first reading and the Gospel is one of similarity. Today, we hear contrast.

We remember David, Solomon’s father, who began his “ministry” in his youth by killing Goliath with his sling shot. The great hero, as an adult, became an embarrassment by taking the wife of Uriah, one of his soldiers, and having Uriah killed in a cover-up of his adultery.

Today we hear Solomon, the boy-king, pleasing God by asking for what God possesses: wisdom - and an understanding heart.

As a grown-up king, Solomon took seven years to build God’s lavish temple; but, he spent thirteen building his own palace, amid harsh labor and heavy taxes on his subjects. Solomon was warned. What did the wisest man do? He married 700 foreign women and took 300 concubines who provided alternate gods whose shrines arrived not long after the women. The endeavor divided the kingdom. Solomon’s “understanding heart” ended sadly. Maybe wisdom is not all it’s cracked up to be. Wisdom is not enough!

Our gospel brings to conclusion parable-packed chapter 13 with its emphasis on the mysterious presence and growth of the kingdom of God in parables from every day experience.

Jesus told the parable about a farmer discovering and hiding a treasure. What was his point? Jesus was telling his hearers and us that the kingdom is like found money! It is not earned. It is freely given by the Lord.

Jesus told the parable of the merchant, who was smart enough to see that he should sell anything to get the great pearl. The pearl, in the pre-diamond era, was the most precious 'thing' on earth. Jesus was telling his hearers and us that we - like the merchant - should "trade up," sell whatever it takes to possess the kingdom. If the merchant sold other pearls to get this one, we learn that our other pearls need to be sold off: prime attachment to knowledge, music, golf, sports, TV, even family needs to be prioritized. There is one pearl of great price.

Jesus told the parable of the fisherman and his net to teach again that the ultimate judgment of who is in the kingdom and who is not is his. [It is surely not we other fish]. This is what we heard last week in allowing the wheat and weeds to grow together. We are not to be the judges, but . . . There will be a judgment, Jesus says.

Teachers [modern scribes] need to be like the householder who takes the best of the old, the torah, and joins it to the new, the teaching of Jesus. Many think that Matthew becomes autobiographical here; they think that Matthew himself is the scribe who knows how to go into the rich storehouse of tradition and brings forth both what is new and what is old. Both are essential for correctly proclaiming the kingdom of heaven. Of course, we do not live in the past, but we do build upon it. We must claim our authentic past in order to move into our authentic future.

The decision of choosing the kingdom of god is basically the choice: will I be in charge of my own life or will i give priority in all things to the will of god. We often do not realize how self-willed and self-sufficient we try to be. Many prize their self-determination above all else. It comes as no surprise that our self-will is recognized as the basic cause of our difficulties. "Conversion" consists in sacrificing self-will to god's will.

A final point. Some of us remember the pre-Vatican ii understanding that rather arrogantly identified the Roman Catholic Church as the kingdom of god on earth. Today we are more modest; we say that the church is an instrument of the kingdom of god. The kingdom of God is bigger than the church.

Perhaps during the quiet-time during communion this morning we would do well to identify our competing pearls, examine them, and be sure that no one, no thing jeopardizes our treasure of the presence of god within us, *the* pearl of great price.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles we read of the Jerusalem community sharing what they had in common. When did they learn to do that? Perhaps, it was on this eventful day in Jesus' life.

Jesus was grieving the loss of john the baptizer. He went off by himself by boat, but the crowd found out where he was going and ran around the shoreline of the lake to meet him.

There's that phrase again: "His heart was moved with pity." Sad and weary as he was, he cured their sick.

Toward evening, his disciples suggested he dismiss the crowds so that they could buy some food. Jesus countered with: "give them something to eat yourselves." We can almost hear the disciples' reaction: "who, us?" Is he serious? They said "we have nothing here but 5 loaves and a couple of fish." [Today, corporate America might reply: "The problem is too huge; we don't have the resources."]

In fairness, this response is sometimes understandable-- but it lacks the dimension of faith. Jesus accepted what the disciple offered, looked up to heaven, blessed, broke and gave the loaves to the disciples to distribute.

There is no specific account as to just how the fish and bread were “multiplied.” Did Jesus extend his hands and there was a pile of fish beneath one and a pile of bread beneath the other?

Or . . . Did the disciples hand out a loaf and, as if by magic, another loaf appeared in their hands?

Or . . . A third possibility. We need to remember that the Jewish people were no fools; they were a tribal people who knew how to travel. This insight gives rise to yet another possible interpretation of the multiplication. What if Jesus, knowing the people’s experience with traveling, asked the disciples to distribute what the people saw that Jesus and the disciples had. The disciples began to share the few loaves and fish. What if the people were so moved by such generosity that they reached beneath their own cloaks and pulled out the food that they had stashed, and every one shared with one another? Would this have been any less a miracle? Did you ever wonder where all those baskets for leftovers came from?

Which is the historically correct version? -The traditional version or the miracle of people sharing? Who knows? It is a miracle that is also mysterious. Perhaps, each of us should choose an answer as a little spiritual meditation.

Jesus saw that the 5 loaves and a couple of fish was just a drop in the basket. But... Both then and now, we learn that it is a mistake to do nothing because we can do only a little. Put another way - if anything is worth doing it is worth doing even poorly.

It is a start. If each of us does something; something is better than nothing. We need to be creative - as the father was when he magnificently made something out of nothing.

Another really serious question: in the long history of the Christian church, could this have been the very first “pot luck” supper?

Jesus did not, even in the first interpretation, create food out of thin air; he began with what the disciples had. In ministry of every kind, god does the same. He takes what we have and fills our physical, emotional, spiritual weakness with his power. This happens more often than we realize. Too often we assume that “things just worked out really well.” Right! And the lord smiles and slowly shakes his head.

On the other hand, sometimes, when we are completely powerless, we need to “turn it over to god.” The temptation is to say this too soon. We need to make a prayerful decision.

Our celebration of Eucharist embodies the wondrous human-divine interaction in its most perfect form. We offer bread and wine. They become the body and blood of Christ, returned to us as divine, spiritual food for our journey

Today and every day we receive Jesus we can be sure he has one thing to say to us: “give them something to eat yourselves. Take me to them.”

- something loving to nourish their spirits
- something material to dispel their hunger.

We return to where we started. The earliest Christian community was held in esteem because “they held all things in common.” They learned Jesus message and it was said: “See the Christians; see how they love one another.”

They pass the challenge on to us.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

All three readings have to do with faith: faith in hard, difficult times.

I: The story of the prophet Elijah, who lived in 850 B.C. He was looking for help and reassurance from god. He had accomplished his mission from Yahweh of leading the children of Israel away from the worship of Baal. He went so far as to have the prophets of Baal put to death. He won King Ahab's favor by praying to god and ending the country's three year drought. But his wife, Jezebel, doubted the drought had ended - and wanted Elijah dead. So, he was being hunted down. . . And he expected god to back him as he had before against the false prophets of Baal.

He fled for 40 days and 40 nights and was now hiding in a cave in Mt. Horeb, Mt. Sinai, sulking because God had let him down. He is told to go outside and stand on the mountain. There were powerful winds, so strong that rocks were moved; he looks for god in the phenomenon, but there is nothing of God. An earthquake and a fire follow; God is not in the earthquake or in the fire. Only after the fire does Elijah hear a soft, whispering sound and Elijah recognizes the voice of the Lord.

The story is testimony to the ways in which God is faithful to his word in unexpected ways and shows his presence in unexpected ways. We look to hear God's word in the extraordinary; we do not expect to hear his voice in a tiny whisper.

Expectations we put on god condition our faith and help or hamper our ability to recognize God and the activity of God.

II. In the second reading we hear Paul grieving for his Jewish brothers who have not recognized the fulfillment of god's promise. Jesus did not match up to their expectation of a conquering hero. We are touched by the depth of Paul's grief who is like the parent of an ailing child, Paul would like to exchange his life to relieve the ailing child; Paul would be willing to separate himself from Christ for their sake. That is, of course, impossible; one cannot have faith for another person. Paul carries a heavy heart, even as he turns to the gentiles to help them receive what was first promised to the Jews.

How many times did we not receive god's word to us because we expected a different message? We can only wonder.

III. In the Gospel, we have a third variation of the theme. The disciples are terrified by the storm. Jesus reassures them and their faith strengthens.

There is a contrast with mark's account who stresses the crippling fear. Matthew stresses that the power to overcome their fear comes from Jesus himself; only in Matthew do we read of Jesus walking on water. Peter recovers enough to want to share in Jesus' power over the water; Jesus is willing to share his power, but Peter's trust [faith] fails; he begins to sink; Jesus once again rescues him.

In these readings we learn that faith is a partnership, a dance. Both the Lord and we have essential roles. Faith is God's gift; but it requires our freely-given response. What is highlighted in the readings is that even though we depend on God for the gift of faith, we have to be ready to play our part. That requires our trust, our openness and our being prepared to meet our god without preconditions set by us.

In the first reading, Elijah expects to find God appear in the dramatic: in wind or earthquake or fire, but he appears in the tiny whispering sound. How often have we thought that God is non-responsive; God is being an uncooperative partner: when we have not really listened for God, especially in the quiet whispers.

In the second reading, the Jews expect a different kind of God; we need to learn to let god be God. We

are made to his image and likeness; he is not made in our image and according to what we like.

In the third reading, we need to learn that we have to keep our eyes on Jesus, to receive his power in the difficult times.

The readings are like a yellow caution light, directing us to slow down and look in all directions. We may be missing opportunities to hear God speak to us in new and unexpected ways.

Terry Anderson, the American journalist who was a hostage of the Muslims in Beirut for more than five years was tortured terribly. Fr. Martin Jenco was with him and taught scripture to Terry. They could have screamed at God: where are you? Terry returned to his Catholic faith. Both men felt that their faith required them to forgive their captors. In their darkness of soul, their terrible sense of loss, they plunged into the mystery of God and heard the small, still, voice of God: "It is I, do not be afraid."

In time of peace, we prepare for war. At those impossibly difficult times in our lives when we want God to come into our lives like the cavalry to save the day, perhaps we can remember Elijah and Paul; we can remember Peter - and call out "Lord, save me!" And listen for that small, still voice.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus' encounter with the assertive, Canaanite woman seems a bit strange, even harsh until we probe more deeply.

At the very beginning, the story shows her as an outsider, an unnamed non-Jew who oddly greets Jesus as "Lord" and "Son of David." She asks for his help for her daughter. Jesus, at first, is speechless, for this outsider precisely identifies, recognizes him in his two relationships: "lord" - his vertical relationship with his father and "Son of David" - his horizontal relationship with fellow Jews.

He fell silent, perhaps open-mouthed. He seems to be stymied for the moment. His trouble is not with her; it is within himself - in his heart and mind. She asks for mercy; he counters that his ministry is to Israel. He identifies her as a dog, which was the slang word for non-Jews at that time. She asks again for help.

The woman not only persists, but one-ups him "even dogs get the scraps from the master's table." She had the final word; she persisted in her conviction that not only could Jesus help her daughter, but that Jesus would help her. This "outsider" displays more faith than many of the children of Israel.

Jesus himself appears to have a growth spurt in wisdom and knowledge and grace at this moment. Jesus expands his own view of the kingdom and of his ministry to include outsiders to the Jewish community. He thought "outside the box." He now understands his mission more clearly. He had thought and said that he came to save the lost children of the tribe of Israel. Now he realizes from seeing this woman's faith that there are no outsiders to his father's kingdom because of ethnicity.

The story ends with Jesus holding her up as an example of faith. She ends with being one of the most highly commended persons in the gospels: "O woman, great is your faith."

We can learn several lessons.

Just as life experiences changed Jesus, our life experiences and our experience of Jesus changes us, both enable us to enlarge our vision.

Living Jesus means that we must leave our comfort zones and accept Jesus' way of thinking and acting outside our box. We are constantly tempted to think inside our box, draw up lists of people who are okay

and lists of folks whom god definitely does not love as much as he loves us. The irony is that we list not god's priorities, but ours. Today, god is stretching us individually and communally to live god's generous love.

Love - to be alive and remain vital - needs freshening. Creativity, creative love, is necessary for us to move ourselves out of our box. Jesus saw faith in the Canaanite woman. He needed to respond with his father's and his love. He creatively expanded his own vision from exclusivity to inclusivity, from thinking/loving inside to outside the box. We have his example to move creatively from our current box-thinking. He extended his healing to her daughter.

Experience with "outsiders" is one, potential learning experience. We can creatively expand our horizons in experiencing people. Some are different from us and have something to teach us if we are open, not afraid and not suspicious of outsiders.

Also, this unnamed Canaanite woman, like the unnamed roman centurion, like the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well is an anonymous foreigner of the gospel who had to think outside her box and move forward. Each has profoundly influenced the course of Christianity. Each lit his / her little candle. We need to light ours.

Does this gospel not challenge us to reflect both on our life experiences and to check on our box-thinking?

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Peter's profession of faith in Jesus being both messiah and especially "Son of the living God" amounts to a double profession of faith. [Mark & Luke state only the "Christ" title, omitting the "son of the living God."] Jesus recognized this in Peter by conferring a special leadership role. Peter is given the authority to bind obligations and loose obligations in the church. "Church," a word that appears only three times in all four gospels, and all three are in Matthew. Keys are a symbol of power – as anyone 16 years or older recognizes.

Jesus clearly taught and lived that authority is exercised in service to people, "not in lording it over them" - to use Jesus' term. But, service also takes the form of providing direction, leading others on the way.

Leadership, authority, power have been very much in the news in recent times. In the arena of business, the executives of Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, have been responsible for the devastating loss to their employees' jobs and life- savings.

Credibility once involved two individuals. Now, increasingly, credibility involves the basic institutions of our society: business, politics, and yes, the religious institution, church.

Authority is a very broad topic. I would like to speak to two issues involving church authority.

First, our church continues to suffer from abuse of authority. The authority that priests have with youth and children has been abused and has damaged so many, many lives and injured credibility vis-à-vis church. It involves only one or two percent of priests, but all of us priests are tarred with the same brush. That is a cross i never anticipated.

There is the authority of bishops, archbishops, cardinals who transferred guilty priests and later covered up the evidence after 1985. 1985 was the critical year; it was the year this pathology was recognized as a mental illness, and that fact was publicized. Every bishop in the United States got a warning letter. Some hierarchs ignored it.

Scott Appleby, the church historian from the university of Notre Dame, spoke to the assembly of bishops in Dallas and called this behavior the “arrogance that comes with unchecked power.” To this day, the hierarchy has yet to take responsibility for their failure.

Humility - truth - demands that their failure not be denied, but be acknowledged and repented. Humility is at the core of the solution of the “problem.”

A second issue of authority is church directives. Popes and bishops have authority and their words need to be taken seriously. In the previous chapter in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus, condemns the Pharisees as poor leaders: “the blind leading the blind” and “this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

What are we to do if it becomes apparent that we are being misled? We need to recognize that a leader’s proclamation is only one of the tools for discerning god’s will and forming our conscience. “Conscience” is not a divine implant. Actually, it is the name for using our intelligence when it addresses a moral question.

We are also given another means to discern God’s will. Examining our life experiences in the necessary context of personal prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit, is a valid pathway to discern god’s will, we carefully weigh all the circumstances involved in a moral action and then make our “conscience-decision.”

We need the courage to stand firm after our conscience-decision. We also need humility and willingness to make mid-course corrections when we realize that we miscalculated and we are off course -- never compounding the mistake by trying to justify it.

It takes courage, a loving heart, a listening ear, and a discerning spirit to hear the voice of God.

We humbly trust in god to guide our path. Humility and trust; that is, “faith,” makes for a sure path.

Many people have power and influence over us, but only those who love can lead us in faith. Let’s put our basic, our deepest trust where it can do the most good: in Jesus and anyone who, however imperfectly, lives in his spirit.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

A curious duo of people talking back to God forms the vehicle for today’s message in this turning point of Matthew’s gospel.

Jeremiah was a young man with plans of his own; he wanted a career, a wife and family, a few good friends and some comforts. But, god called him to be a prophet. After 50 years he had so little to show for his effort: a few converts, only one disciple, and many enemies. His family thought he was nuts, and the king wanted him dead.

Jeremiah, was angry with god. Pashhur, chief officer of the Jerusalem temple had Jeremiah arrested and flogged. He was put in stocks overnight for proclaiming that the city would be destroyed for its lack of faith.

Jeremiah complains that god duped him. God’s call was somehow seductive. Jeremiah had determined to play it cool, **not** to speak the word of god. Now, he had done it and look at what it had cost him.

Centuries later, Peter was shocked at Jesus’ speaking of being killed in Jerusalem. Peter had hoped that

Jesus was to usher in the new kingdom, and that the disciples would be able to cash in on the victory -- like venture capitalists striking it rich on an investment of limited risks with their career change.

Jesus, a few moments earlier, called Peter the rock on which he would build his church. Then, Peter heard Jesus, almost in the next breath, foretell that he would die. Peter did not want to hear that.

Here is how Peter stands in God's way. He makes far too many assumptions about God's values -- one of humanity's favorite maneuvers, if you think about it. Peter doesn't like to suffer, so he can't imagine that God might make use of human suffering for divine ends.

Jesus called Peter a stumbling block. He told him to get out of his face, to get behind him -- where a disciple belongs. Following the master is not standing in front, directing him.

Jesus makes it clear that being faithful to God implies that personal plans and feelings do not count when they conflict with God's will. He spoke elsewhere of the grain of wheat that has to fall into the ground and die before it can have new life, reach its potential.

Great Catholic-Christian heroes and heroines like Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, and Oscar Romero have lived this truth publicly and courageously in the past 50 years in extraordinary ways.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of building the kingdom, in more ordinary ways. Yet, we are an essential part of the evolution of the kingdom. There is a sense of liberation in realizing that. We are Minor Prophets in the magnificent enterprise.

Paul gets the final word today. Each generation is at risk of conforming to the present age. The present age is always passing, trapped in history and limited by the nearsightedness of us finite creatures. It is fashionable, today, to be "practical," and see right and wrong identified with convenience:

- worshipping God every weekend is inconvenient;
- having a child instead of an abortion is sometimes very inconvenient.

Think of the audacity in believing that Jesus is always on our side and never on the side of others.

When the calling of God is difficult, saints do not quit. What parent of small children has not fantasized about the day the children are grown, or perhaps even considered running away from the demands of parenthood? Exhausted as one might be, one returns to the family each day: love and loyalty burn like a passionate fire in one's heart.

What worker or spouse with a difficult situation of emotional or physical illness does not consider quitting when the person he or she works so hard to heal slides back into depression or addiction or worse disease? Yet, next day you are back on the job. Why not find something / someone easier to deal with? Because yours is a calling that burns like a fire in your gut.

In the end, the world is changed only by those who answer that call: to service, to sacrifice, to deny oneself for the greater good...for the glory of God.

Jeremiah's acceptance of his mission and Jesus' acceptance of his mission are today's examples of courage for us to continue living our "yes," our acceptance of our mission: to stay the course.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

I remember reading a greeting card with Lucy, the peanuts cartoon character, announcing in bold print: "When you're down and out, lift up your head and shout." Then you open the card: "Somebody's going to pay for this!"

Today's readings provide alternative solutions to such "conflict non-resolution."

We are not dealing here with flagrant, violent or criminal wrongs such as sexual abuse or grand larceny. Such destructive behavior must be reported promptly to proper authorities.

It may be helpful to recognize that there are two extremes for us to avoid in correcting others: doing nothing and doing too much.

At one extreme, we, like Ezekiel, probably do not like confrontation. We try to avoid it, so, I may say: "I mind my own business," "It's not my problem."

Jesus calls us to get up our courage and go and see the person, one-on-one, [this maintains the person's self-respect, dignity. Failing that: see the person with a friend or two [again, maintaining the person's self-respect, avoiding humiliation before a larger group.

Love needs to be the motive, not trying to make ourselves seem wise by knowing what "You should, he should, or she should do." If we follow this Gospel, we will follow the maxim: "I won't should on you if you don't should on me: a variation of "do unto others."

Nor does love gossip, making a person's failings known without lifting a finger to help.

At the other extreme, we cannot make everyone our responsibility. Garrison Keiller, who wrote about the mythical town of Woebegone, sensed that many Catholics feel responsibility for everyone and everything. So, he names the R.C. parish Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. That, [for some good and some bad] may well be a fading reality in 2002.

As always, we need to find a balance between not correcting at all and correcting too often. We can never forget that we are all connected in this body of Christ. As healthy parts of the body help ailing parts, so it is with the mystical body.

But, this New Testament passage does present a complication. Jesus seems to say that once we have followed procedure and all fails, get rid of the person.

But, didn't Jesus say: "I have come not to condemn the world, but to save it."

Excommunication is problematic. Why? It is so foreign to Jesus. Jesus was notorious for doing just the opposite of what Matthew's Gospel asks here and elsewhere. Throwing someone out as you would a Gentile or tax collector doesn't square with Jesus' dealing with the Gentiles: the Roman centurion, the Syro-Phoenician, and Samaritan women.

It doesn't square with Jesus and tax-collectors either. Matthew, the author of this Gospel, is a tax collector. Then, there is Zacchaeus, another tax collector with whom Jesus ate before Zacchaeus saw the light and reformed generously. Jesus sought out the lost sheep, not excommunicated them.

These harsh words of exclusion reflect what scripture scholars refer to as "early Matthew." It comes from an earlier time in Matthew's community when it was composed of strict Jewish converts who attributed to Jesus words about the narrow gate, separating the sheep and the goats, and other exclusionary sayings.

About 20-40 years later we have "final Matthew" reflecting a community that was far more inclusive as to who was "in" and who was "out."

God is love. That must be the prime interpretatory verse for interpreting other verses. All must be interpreted in the light of that.

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The immensity of the subject, forgiveness, is too much for one homily. I have given the RCIA talk on forgiveness in other parishes, and the talk has to be longer than an hour. Let me share a few thoughts about dealing with the serious hurts every one of us has suffered.

Often we react in one of two ways: either we retaliate, however violently or subtly /passive-aggressively or we retreat into silence and self-pity and wait for the offender to apologize.

Unforgiveness has a health dimension, because gnawing consequences of Unforgiveness can negatively affect the health of mind and body. It also has social consequences. It affects families and communities.

Malachy Mc Court, who grew up with his brothers in the home described in Angela's Ashes said he let go of the murderous rage he used to hold onto. "Resentment," he wisely said "is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die." Payback seems so natural, but it is not only ineffective; it is also counter-productive.

In weighty situations, forgiveness is not instantaneous; it is a process. Let's look at approaching the problem from Peter's viewpoint. He wants to know how many times he is expected to forgive. This approach simply entangles us in a numbers' game, doling out forgiveness by the spoonful. That is ineffective, useless. It misses the point: reconciliation is the goal of the process.

First of all, we need to realize our own sinfulness. You and I are not perfect people. How can we hold another to perfection? We need to bring the situation to god, to pray during the process, this may sound like simplistic piety, but we who have been there and done this know its value.

To forgive serious hurts, we need to see the situation from God's viewpoint. For God, forgiveness is total and is not measured.

Let's hear what Jesus taught, then what he modeled for us. In his first sermon in Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus: "You have heard the commandment, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' but what I say to you is forgive; he replaced this "law of talon" with the law of love.

In today's gospel, Jesus makes his point so strongly that he does something very unusual: he tells us the fearsome consequences of unforgiveness. He taught: "With the measure you measure, it will be measured to you." And in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The tragedy in today's gospel is that the unforgiving servant never really experienced in his heart the forgiveness the king had granted him. If we do not experience in our heart; that is, really appreciate God's forgiveness of us, we can not extend forgiveness to others. In our heart we receive god's mercy and offer that mercy to others. That is a heart-transforming dynamic. Forgiveness is a spiritual example of "use it [God's mercy] or lose it" God's mercy.

In the words of George Hebert [1593-1633] 'He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.'

Having heard what Jesus taught, let's listen to what Jesus modeled: From the cross, Jesus said of the Romans and Jews: "Father, forgive them they don't know what they do."

After the Resurrection: He entered the upper room saying “peace.” Instead of raging against the disciples for deserting him, denying him, he simply forgave them, reassuring them of right relationship: peace /shalom.

We need to acquire the habit of forgiveness, get to the place where it becomes a knee jerk reaction to forgive instead of a knee jerk reaction to lash out.

If we were to dedicate the same amount of time we spend nursing our injuries on giving thanks for god’s mercy to us, the forgiveness habit would overtake us.

We practice for big forgivenesses by putting aside the small hurts and irritations that constantly come our way.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“It’s not fair” a parent hears after dividing the cookie, or the space in the back seat. “It’s not fair” the professor hears from the best students when he generously puts the marks on a curve to benefit those who didn’t do well.

“It’s not fair” the flight attendant says when she hears from her supervisor that a complaint was lodged by a first class passenger after the attendant moved a coach passenger to an empty seat in first class.

How often have we heard it? How often have we said it? Someone tries to be generous / compassionate and they hear it from those who feel they earned what was generously donated to another.

Worldly logic says that those who work more should get more. The rules say that it is priority for those who worked in the sun all day. With human wisdom, this employer’s behavior makes little sense to the workers.

We may argue which is the most popular parable of Jesus, but most would agree that today’s parable is a top contender for the most unpopular. We need to look more closely.

What can we learn from Jesus’ parable? First, as unpleasant as it may be to hear, we are all dependent. We may have the corner office, get tenure, get promoted with a raise, but we are more like the day-hires in the parable than unlike them. None of us is self-sufficient. Let’s face it, nearly everything we have is gift; our personal contributions pale by comparison.

The word “dependent” comes from a Latin word meaning “to hang from.” Like a chandelier, we may be Waterford and sparkling, but we are still utterly dependent on that which holds us aloft. The good news is that the one who holds us can be trusted. When we keep one eye on our dependence, we are less likely to resent god’s provision to another person suspended next to us.

Second, our sense of fairness and justice is very subjective. Those first-hired did not feel cheated when they were hired. They would receive a denarius, a day’s wage. It would provide their “daily bread.”

We often do not think of a gift given to us as generosity, but as entitlement. For example, have you ever heard someone holding four aces call for a new shuffle? Do they feel unworthy?

Trouble comes when we judge our bounty with a comparative glance at our neighbors’ hands. If their hands are better, envy may rush in and we quickly forget the hand we were dealt.

Comparison involves our ego. Ego-involvement means spiritual trouble. Here is a sure-fire formula for misery: decide you are happy only if no one receives more blessing in life than you. There will always be

some one richer, more talented, or better looking than you and me. We never find happiness by comparing our lot in life with others who are better off. Comparison happened with the workers in Jesus' parable. Isn't that what has happened to professional baseball, basketball, and football players' salaries? We shake our heads at that foolishness, but we realize that that can happen to you and me at another level?

We need to be simply grateful to our lord for what we have: our work in the vineyard, our joy in this creative work with our lord in the further growth of the vineyard, and equality in the kingdom of god. Our inheritance is the same for all.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

"It is not the tongue in your mouth that tells the most truth about you, but the tongue in your shoe." The saying poses the challenge sometimes heard from African American pulpits: "you talk the talk, but you don't walk the walk."

Isn't it true that many who confess the creeds and follow the rituals with their mouth-tongues have hearts and shoe-tongues that contradict the words from their mouths? Many do not act upon the faith they profess with their mouth tongues with real, personal responsibility.

Today's readings are about conversion; that is, metanoia, changing ones mind/ heart. We are sometimes inclined to avoid taking responsibility for what we say we will do. Ezekiel in the first reading insists that the Jewish people take responsibility.

The Gospel parable - a tale of two brothers, a parable found only in Matthew - relates one of the last encounters Jesus had with the Jewish leaders. It occurred just the week before he was killed.

The chief priests and the elders worked very closely with the roman officials to maintain peace and the status quo. This status quo mentality worked against their accepting the words of John the baptizer and Jesus. Both the chief priests and the elders prided themselves on their commitment - words - but they did not follow through with action and do what the commitment demanded. They did not change their minds; there was no metanoia.

In the parable, the son who spoke the words of disobedience was wrong, but he did repent. He changed his mind, and became the darling of the parable. The tax collectors and prostitutes who enter the kingdom of God ahead of the chief priests and elders enter because they repent; they changed their minds, their hearts as this first son did.

Jesus proposed this question to the chief priests and elders. They picked the first son as the one who did repent and did the will of the father, but in so doing they condemned themselves for they lived as the second son who said: he would "do," but he did not. Both John the Baptizer and Jesus called the Jewish leadership to a change of mind/heart, a "metanoia," but they were stuck in their ways, "thinking only in their box."

Do we make claims, make promises, pledges . . . But not follow through? Do we talk a better life than we live? What we do is important. Listening, accepting responsibility may be our greatest burden, but it is also our greatest gift. It is what is making us grow up, mature as human beings and as fully human Christians. God takes us seriously and calls us to take ourselves seriously.

Closer to home, one of the great criticisms of the American bishops' document, "charter for the protection of children and young people," is that the bishops hold the priest- offenders responsible [which is appropriate], but fail to hold themselves responsible for the cover-up. They have refused to take responsibility. What they fail to do is contrary to what they say about responsibility.

We all have a kind of school calendar ingrained in our psyches. In September, we know that summer is over and it is time to “serious up.”

It is no small thing to be co-responsible with our God in the building of the kingdom - and ourselves in the process.

Our readings call us to look at how we accept our responsibilities, to do, not simply talk.

It is not the tongue in our mouth that tells the most truth about us, but the tongue in our shoe.

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

We have often heard about the lethal fault in spiritual life; self- sufficiency. The pride that resides in each of us moves us from a healthy sense of independence toward the unhealthy extreme sense of self-sufficiency. When we think that we are sufficient unto ourselves, we do not need God. God becomes irrelevant. The traditional sources of self-sufficiency are wealth and intelligence. Very comfortable wealth tends to put us in a spiritual place where we tend not to pray for the things of this world; we just buy them. Being very intelligent or thinking we are, we tend to behave as though we know with the knowledge of God.

Gratitude tends to put us in right relationship with god: dependent, reverence toward one deserving of reverence. If we are stuck on ourselves, either through wealth or learning, we do not need to thank god. With hard work and further learning, who needs him?

“Eucharist” means thanksgiving. Gratitude to God is not held to be necessary each Sunday. We dispense ourselves.

Upon reflection, I would like to add a third source of self-sufficiency that seems to characterize many living in our age. It qualifies because it has the same basic ingredient as wealth and intelligence in diminishing our gratitude to God. The third source is: a sense of entitlement. It is spawned in and by our society. How often do we see indignant, fiery eyed faces, vein-bulging necks, on television, angry in being “deprived” of having something they “deserve” – something that others have worked for long and hard, but they patently deserve to be given at no cost to them.

In today’s Gospel, we hear about, not observe – so the passion is less strident - a group of tenant farmers. In the parable, God is the owner of the vineyard. The vineyard is Israel itself. The vineyard workers are those who plot to become the owners of the vineyard. The owner, we are told, did the basic work; he planted the vineyard, put a protective hedge around it, installed a wine press for producing wine, and built a tower for spotting would-be thieves.

The parable is clear: the tenants were the Jewish leaders. They did not see themselves as interdependent partners with the landowner, God. In their working in the vineyard, the people of Israel. Rather, they saw themselves as authorities over the people of Israel. They take on a sense of entitlement.

Jesus refers to them as the murderers of the prophets who would kill even the son of the landowner, Jesus himself in order to maintain the authority that they enjoyed.

The image changes in the next parable from the image of a vineyard to the image of the building trade. As Jesus was rejected as a mason would reject a stone in building a structure. He was, in the new image, the building’s corner stone. What was rejected by the Jewish leaders will be selected as the cornerstone of a new “structure.” He was rejected by the old, he will be key to the new.

The temptation of supervisors who give direction to the project remains the same: acting like owners of the enterprise of God's plan.

Jesus calls us to faith. He calls us to love. Why would any "supervisor" propound any devotional practices that they guarantee would assure entitlement to eternal life?

Jesus asks us to put our trust, our faith, in him. We love the father, his son, the holy spirit in a prayerful, grateful way – best expressed in Eucharist – and carry this love of "all of the above" to our neighbor.

We know that it is by grace, gift without semblance of entitlement that we stand humbly before our God.

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The time of this parable was the week of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and before his arrest. Hearing the time of the parable helps us to understand the forcefulness of it. Jesus is so frustrated with those to whom his father sent him!

- the a-list guests refuse the invitation
- the invitees kill those bearing the invitation
- the king then destroys the murderers and burns their city
- the king next invites everyone to the wedding banquet
- one of the recent invitees is ejected for not being properly dressed.

Matthew's Gospel was written after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70, so that is probably the reason for the segment about the destructive and vindictive king.

Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a banquet, an image difficult to perceive for Jewish leadership who saw the protection of tradition as their job. We understand the kingdom of God as banquet or, more abstractly, as a sphere of existence or a state of consciousness with required, consequent action.

We who accept the invitation are surprised upon entering the banquet. We discover as we mature that the unnamed partner of Jesus is you and me --- if we choose to wear the proper garment – enthusiasm to be with Jesus.

As we mature from infancy to childhood to adulthood, we do so by taking responsibility, a word better understood if we take the time to say it slowly and reflect upon it: "Response-ability."

Using our ability to respond.

As infants and for a while after, we have almost no responsibility at all to the worldly attentions given us. At best, we offer a smile of contentment before the next outcry for the satisfaction of a need.

As young children we are taught to say "thank you" when something is done for us by our relatives, friends --- and eventually God. We are taught to share what we have been given.

With the passing of the years towards adulthood we mature in our response-ability or we may think we are independent of God, and, as the poet Francis Thompson wrote, we avoid him - in one way or another. Thompson describes this: "I fled him down the nights and down the days. I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him in the labyrinthine ways of my own mind, and in the midst of tears I hid from him, and under ruining laughter."

I wonder if anyone of us is totally free of avoidance of God, of avoiding openness to our lord who

renews his invitation each day. The invitation - always initiated by our god - is ongoing as we mature, as we grow in the spiritual life.

One guest in today's gospel was evicted because his response was inappropriate. More was expected of him than simply showing up at the banquet. Jesus is telling us here that god expects an open response from us. Not any response will do. The response must be ongoing and fitting for our stage in life.

When we look at life in terms of response, we also get a good understanding of what it means to sin. Sin is failing to make the right response. It is failing to accept our "response-ability." It is both a personal failure and an offense against the one who invites us to share the table with him.

In the light of today's Gospel, let us once more accept "response-ability" for life at the banquet.

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of the current religious issues is also an ancient one: what is the proper relationship between god and Caesar?

Jesus cleverly avoided the trap of the Pharisees and Herodians. Giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's is not a direct answer to the question asked, but is a starting point for discussion. The discussion involves the mystery of who god really is. Two examples:

In some Muslim countries, the law of the land is the Koran, and the civil rulers are also the religious leaders. For them, God and Caesar are one and the same. A theocracy.

Currently, in the United States, the religious, far-right would like an evangelical-Christian president and government establishing their image of God and Caesar, as one and the same. On the other hand some could posit that liberal, secular humanism would have government take the place of God altogether. Other theocracies?

Where are we in this? I suggest a reflection arising from two questions -- and two proposed answers for your thoughtful consideration. The questions:

Are we to accept non-Christians' right to other belief systems or do we recognize only our own?

What practical lessons can we draw from Jesus' answer to the Gospel question?

In regard to belief systems: the first and third readings are curiously linked. The prophet Isaiah was the first to go on record in declaring the god of Israel. Yahweh, as the one legitimate authority who is behind every power. In spite of the fact that Cyrus was in service to the God, Bel-Marduc, Isaiah saw Cyrus as being used by Yahweh, the god of Israel and our god, to achieve the deliverance of Israel.

Much later, the magi, who probably adhered to Zoroastrianism, would be given places of honor in the Christian tradition. They were never maligned for their worship.

In accepting Isaiah's understanding, we can broaden our notion of the one god and view the Judeo-Christian tradition as underlying other traditions and see that god can use folks who worship a different deity to his own purpose. That is progress in god-talk.

In regard to lessons drawn from today's gospel, the Herodians and the Pharisees hated each other but joined forces this day against their mutual enemy, Jesus. The Herodians were Jewish collaborators with Rome, sympathetic to King Herod [hence, "Herodians"].

Their trap: if Jesus says “pay the taxes,” he will lose the support of his Jewish followers; if he says, “don’t pay,” he will be a treasonous rebel against Rome. It seemed like an airtight scheme, a win-win situation for Jesus’ enemies.

External politics is not a “kingdom issue” for Jesus. “The kingdom within hearts” is what concerns Jesus that authority reigns only by personal relationship. You and I need to open the door and welcome the king of glory. We give God our hearts. We make God our first priority - above friends, above family, above country, even above a spouse.

Another lesson that we can draw from today’s gospel is that the Caesar / God issue is not either / or – Caesar or God, but both / and. Jesus recognizes that where we live under a system of government that provides public services, economic stability, and the protection of the law, we have the obligation and need to be supportive of a government whose protections and benefits we accept, even if we are working to change / improve the system.

A final lesson is that Jesus said “. . . Render to God the things that are God’s;” he did not say as the second half of “render to Caesar . . .” Render to the church what is the Church’s. The church had not been formed when he spoke, this is not to say that the church has no role in “rendering,” but is a reminder to us all that Jesus did not proclaim this. And it needs to be said lest we allow our minds to morph church into God.

Americans have long seen the wisdom in separating the realms of church and state. The turf governed by both God and government sometimes overlap, causing ongoing problems for those who see competing values within our citizenry -- issues like euthanasia, capital punishment, stem-cell research, abortion, war, services to the disadvantaged, help for the poor.

We may and should give Caesar our money for the common good; we must not give Caesar the authority to determine our conscience. Our God renders to us the power and freedom to discern this choice and all our personal choices.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus had just silenced the Sadducees in their attempt to test and trap him on the issue of the resurrection of the body [Mt 22:34f]. In today’s reading, a scribe: that is, a Pharisee with a degree in canon law, “steps up” to take his shot at Jesus with a question. Which of the 10 commandments plus the 613 rules [the Deuteronomy laws] which rabbis believed God orally gave Moses was the most important of all?

Some rabbis thought all were equally important -- a kind of early example of “the seamless garment” notion. Most others used to dispute which was the greatest.

Jesus’ response is an acceptable one, quoting Dt: 6:5 stressing that the love of God must involve the total person: heart, soul, and mind. Then, Jesus goes on to quote Lv 19:18 which stresses that one should love one’s neighbor as oneself.

Jesus combines these two commandments and declares that they are the foundation of God’s entire revelation; that is, the whole law and the prophets. Combining these two may not be unique to Jesus, but it clearly shows his position on these essentials of the Torah.

We have the saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. When one part fails, the entirety fails. This applies to love, too, in regard to the three link chain of love: For ourselves, for our neighbor, for our God.

I think that love of self is the trickiest one. Today, let us look at that in more detail.

On the one hand, we sometimes revert to infantile behavior - life is all about me. We have trouble learning that i am not the center of the universe -- as a young child believes. If we fail to learn to admit that we are sinners, we are in for trouble. We all admit we are not perfect, but many have trouble admitting being wrong in any specific instance. We do anything to avoid admitting failure.

On the other hand, some may have been love-starved or abused when young, or authority figures may have put us down so heavily that our self-image is badly damaged. We have real trouble with loving ourselves

The Romans said it well: *in medio stat virtus* - in the middle --between the extremes -- stands virtue. A healthy self-image stands in the middle: I am neither a doormat - nor is life all about me.

Perhaps we all need to check for need for balance on this first step in the progression from love for self, to love for our neighbor, to love for our god. If we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, how do we love ourselves?

For those who are in the extreme mode of “life is all about me” there is not much another can do for one in that extreme place.

But, for those whose self-image has been injured, a helpful hint is to remember that a big part of faith growth for Christians is acting as if something were true. This neatly dovetails with one of those wonderful insights of the Alcoholics Anonymous program: “Fake it ‘till you make it.” “Fake” in the sense that you assume the attitude that you are lovable. Act as if you are a loveable person. Try to do something at least once daily that a person with a healthy sense of self-respect and self-worth would do.

A second and more spiritual effort that we can make during the same time is to internalize the truth from St. John’s letter: “god is love.” Love is who God is. Love is what God is. We come to the realization that we can love because god has loved us first. We are all lovable for that basic reason.

Then, act as if you feel loving toward a troublesome neighbor. At least once a day try exercising patience and understanding toward the other for behavior that would normally upset you.

Finally, we are able to bring love into our relation-ship with god. We come to recognize god as the “initiator” of love.

We are created to love ourselves our neighbors, our God. That is what Jesus did. That is our call: Live Jesus.

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today’s gospel sounds a bit strange: phylacteries, tassels, don’t call anyone teacher or father. . . It comes from Matthew’s gospel, so we need to put on our Jewish ears to understand, for it was written for a Jewish audience.

The Jews were well aware of the continuity of their faith: God had revealed the law to Moses, who handed it on to Joshua, who handed it on to the elders, who handed it on to the scribes and Pharisees. [In football language, the scribes and Pharisees missed the hand-off; they fumbled the tradition.]

What Jesus was saying equivalently is: “Insofar as the scribes and Pharisees have taught you the great principles of the law which Moses received from god, you must obey them.”

What were the great principles? Think about it; you know them as well as I do. The first three

commandments . . . Regard reverence for God; the last seven . . . Regard respect for our fellow humans. The Ten Commandments are about two things: reverence for God and respect for others. Sounds like last Sunday's gospel: the primacy of loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves was Jesus summary of the law and the prophets.

The religion of the scribes and Pharisees became a religion of showiness because they took the ten commandments and spelled them out and out until they had 613 rules which were - in their words - fences around the commandments. For example, keep holy the Sabbath was a commandment, but the fences around it to make sure that no one "trespassed" included highly specified handling of food, footsteps allowed, etc. etc. The love of God and neighbor became side-tracked with the "things of religion."

We heard today some strange words that may be puzzling: phylacteries & tassels. In the book of Exodus, we read: [the commandments] "shall be to you as a sign on your hand and a memorial between your eyes." The idea, of course, was to pay attention to the commandments ready at hand, in the forefront of your consciousness. The scribes and Pharisees wore at prayer - and still do - except on the Sabbath and special holy days - small leather boxes strapped to their wrists and forehead, called phylacteries. They each contain four important passages of the Hebrew bible. The Scribes and Pharisees even increased the size of these to draw attention to themselves.

They wore tassels to remind them of God's commandments; these are still worn today at the corners of the Jewish prayer shawl. They were enlarged to draw attention to themselves not to experience the will of God.

The design of the scribes and Pharisees was to draw attention to themselves. The design of Jesus was/is not to pay most attention to oneself.

"He who loses himself finds himself."

"The greatest among you shall be the one who serves the rest."

What are the lessons for us? Each of us has to examine our own situation. There are as many lessons as there are people in church this morning. I would suggest two questions for our consideration:

First, how do we focus too heavily on the things of religion and miss the reverence for God and the respect for our neighbor? It is easy to do. My reflection on this led to an insight. "Things" for me at this point in my journey are prayers "said" not prayed. Distractions during the prayer of the mass can lead to mass becoming a thing. The effort toward praying the mass invites and involves relationship with our community and with our lord.

Second, how do we draw attention to ourselves? Do we want to be the star, the center of attention? Football again provides an example about drawing attention. Who do we hear about? The key players! The starters. The coaches. Even the strong bench. The fans - "the 12th man." Who does not get mentioned? The team servants! The squirters of Gatorade, the towel carriers. They are off-camera. Almost invisible. Nobody mentions them.

Doesn't that remind us of Jesus' words about the greatest being the servant? Doesn't that remind us of Jesus' actions? Taking a towel. Washing with water his disciples' feet at the last supper.

Who is more Jesus-like in this Eucharist? I who preside and preach or the bread baker, the servers or the sacristan? Each plays a role in the celebration. This is community.

This sermon will be finished by us. I ask you to ask yourselves:

- How do I lose sight of the great principles of reverence and respect and substitute practices that are not relational?
- How do I - no finger pointing - draw attention to myself in the practice of religion?

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

As the church year begins to draw to a close, the liturgy appropriately draws us to two basic spiritual realities: wisdom and the kingdom of God.

I like the homey definition of wisdom: “Wisdom is what you have left when you forgot all that you learned in school.” Wisdom is rightfully given a place of honor in the first reading. Wisdom does not impose herself, is gracious to all who desire her and reaches out to those who want her. Wisdom is not a gift to old sages but a gift to everyone who cares.

The Gospel reading is from Matthew 25, the fifth and final sermon of Jesus, “the final things.”

Jesus taught in his first discourse in chapter five, “the sermon on the mount, “ that our light should shine so others might see the goodness of our acts (5:16). Here, there is a second image which joins chapter twenty-five with chapter five: oil, which burns to make the light, indicates the same thing as light. Goodness cannot be irresponsibly ignored; it cannot be borrowed.

Praise of wisdom is a perfect introduction to address an understanding of the kingdom of god. The kingdom of god, i think, is best described by John Shea: “the kingdom of god is a state of inner consciousness and outer action that Jesus embodies and offers to his disciples. However, receiving this offering entails strenuous effort. The disciples must transform their own conventional consciousness into the consciousness of Jesus and have the courage and the creativity to act in accord with this new vision: “this is metanoia – change of mind – of heart. Shea clearly articulates “Living Jesus,” the name St. Francis de sales used for becoming “a new person in Christ.” The Gospel tells us that we need to be alert to meet the call when we do not expect it. The parable of the virgins stresses the failure to develop this mind-set, heart-set.

No criticism is made of the women’s need for sleep or for the lack of sharing the oil. Two criticisms are made by Jesus; first, the thought-less and care-less attitude of part of the group; they have come without engaging in the process of preparation and expect the cooperation and sacrifice of those who have come to the festivities properly prepared.

Second, Jesus is telling us of the impossibility of borrowing spiritual riches from others. Do you ever hear: “My wife / mother does the praying / church-going in my house.” I surely have. Jesus is clear in saying that each of us, individually, is to take responsibility.

The foolish imagine that Jesus will open the door for them. They don’t understand that the kingdom has already been passed on to them. What opens the door is their having the lamp of their consciousness burning with the oil of their dedicated lives. Lacking this, they will hear, “i never knew you” in spite of their claims that they knew about him and somehow value him. They have failed to appreciate, to value themselves as the new bearers of his inner consciousness and outer actions.

Responsibility is our greatest burden; it is also our greatest gift. Jesus is telling us that he takes us seriously and wants us to take ourselves seriously. It is no small responsibility to be co-responsible with

god in the forming of the kingdom of God.

Later in this chapter 25, Jesus will speak of sheep that will be separated from goats on the basis of working on our inner consciousness and outer actions that flow from our inner consciousness.

The days are growing shorter. The cold weather is beginning. The church year is drawing to a close. That is the mood for today's readings: darkness descending on Jesus and coldness of hearts on those who do not listen to his call.

Not exactly a warm parable for a chilled heart, but surely a warm invitation to a warm, bright banquet hall for a listening disciple.

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

At this time of the church year, we hear Jesus' stories about the end of time. [last week we heard of the wise and foolish virgins,] today, we hear about a giver of talents, who is about to become an absentee landlord.

The parable employs "the format of three." We are familiar with it in jokes and in stories: "there was the Catholic, the Protestant and the Jew." "There was the German, the Irishman, and the Italian" . . . Almost always, the first two set up the third for the punch line or the lesson line. It ends on a good note. But, today's parable reverses the format; the first two are good news; the third is bad news, but it is still a good lesson.

A "talent", we are told was originally an amount equal to fifteen years' wages for a laborer. Today, it means "giftedness." The English word "talent" originated from this parable, as in "time, talent, and treasure".

In the story, the first two imaged the master positively. They accepted the confidence the master had in them and doubled the talents.

Then, there was the third man. He was the fearful servant who calls his master "a hard man" and focuses on that negative label. Fear enters and does what fear does whether it be peter walking on the water or a deer in your headlights: fear paralyzes. The man tried to "play it safe - be cool" -- so he thinks. He used the safety deposit box of his time: he buried it

"Hard man" is not an appropriate title for Jesus, but has value in that we come to acknowledge that we will have to account for our stewardship of our talents. Not using our talents renders us "worthless servants."

Some, like the fearful servant, focus on "prevent." Their "prevent defense" is at work most of their lives.

Matthew's Gospel is famous for its fearsome stories about those who do not respond appropriately to Jesus' invitation to follow him: being tied hand and foot and thrown outside into darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, or handed over to torturers until they pay off the entire debt, or they can be put to the sword, or can burn with unquenchable fire.

Does this sound like the god of unconditional love? How do we come to terms with god's unconditional love and a state of fear of punishment?

We have read: "Fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom." Note the emphasis: just the beginning. And we also hear Paul say: "Perfect love drives out all fear."

I surely have struggled with love vs. fear. I got some good help from a book entitled God First loved Us by Antony f. Campbell, SJ. I'd like to share some of his thoughts mixed with mine.

Campbell says that the "widely held approach" is the "level playing field" theory. The images for God as fearsome judge on one side and God as unconditional lover on the other side are given equal value, but, they actually cancel each other out, resulting in indifference about god. How can you deeply love another whom you deeply fear? The tension forms a mystery. Mystery is not "chickening out;" it is facing fact. Let's do what we always do when we face mystery: try to somewhat penetrate the mystery, remembering that it is mystery.

The "tilted playing field" gives priority to God as unconditional lover. Fear is subordinated. A loving God invites personal relationship and involvement. I firmly believe that and think it appropriate to take on much more in life than keeping my eyes on the rules. Hopefully, most of the time, our loving God's will as we understand it and the rules that we follow are identical. I will constantly look to our Lord rather than rules. What matters more is how much we love, not what the rules dictate.

Does the unconditional lover image adequately reflect the Judeo-Christian tradition? I want to say it doesn't. The teaching church, as far as i can see, does nothing to address this issue of love v fear at the institutional, teaching level. It leaves us with a conflicted, level playing field. In the tilted playing field, as I view the situation, if there is a little more fearing than loving or a little more loving than fearing, I see no big problem. People's consciences and priorities are theirs, not mine. It is mystery. If there is a lot of fearing and little loving in someone, we have someone in the same boat as the fearful man in today's gospel. But, if there is a lot of loving and very little fearing in someone, I find a kindred spirit.

As our relationship with god grows toward mutual unconditional love, I hope that the god-the-judge image may disappear altogether. When unconditional love is the context for our living, we can be sure that appropriate behavior will be its hallmark.

Christ the King

On this last Sunday of the liturgical year, the church uses kingship as a metaphor to celebrate Christ's universal lordship - a more elegant way of saying God must be absolutely our number one, overarching, priority - with no equal on earth.

What can we know about that final moment of judgment before God? This parable of sheep and goats sheds some light. I would like to make three points.

First, Jesus tells us that our decisions in life do matter. We have responsibility, and this parable warns us to accept it. Some think that all people will be eternally reconciled with god, that god's love will overpower any human resistance. Wishful thinking in the light of today's Gospel!

If God's love is non-coercive, and it is, then we cannot be sure that some will not resist that love after a lifetime of rejecting god's offer of love.

The scriptures teach that it is not God's desire that anyone should perish. Today's gospel makes clear that our daily decisions have lasting consequences.

Experience has shown us that our decisions in this life both unite and separate us from each another. The sum total of our decisions effectively unites or separates us from God.

Second, the criterion for judgment is set by God, not by us. Jesus suggests that when the sun sets on human history, God will separate us on the basis of our hearts. He gave us two commandments. We did not hear that his judgment will be based on the Ten Commandments on which so many folks base their

sacramental confessions, but on the extent to which we listen to Jesus' articulation of the love of god / neighbor spelled-out in today's Gospel.

He looks to both our decisions and the motivations for our decisions in our care for the least powerful in society with whom he identifies himself. Doing or failing to do for them is doing or failing to do for him. If we have been motivated by personal recognition, we heard in another place, "they have already received their reward." The one required motive is love.

It is significant that both the sheep and the goats were surprised at the criterion for judgment. Whether the sheep fed and clothed the poor, or the goats ignored them, they acted or failed to act from their loving or unloving hearts. Jesus is advocating genuine selflessness here. The "goats" ignored the poor, the "sheep" cared for the poor, not knowing that they would receive any reward for their service. It was that attitude of loving concern that God rewarded.

Third, Jesus, like those who preceded him, offers this parable to help prevent a sad judgment. We heard in the first reading from Ezekiel: "I myself will look after you and tend my sheep." Our responsorial was a prayer praising the tenderness of the divine shepherd toward us.

Examples abound.

Through Moses, God warned pharaoh of the coming plagues - trying to help Pharaoh avoid those plagues. Through Jonah, God threatened judgment on the wicked city of Nineveh - as a last effort to help the city avoid destruction. Through Jesus' teaching on sheep and goats he tries to help us comprehend the consequences of our heart's attitude.

Today's Gospel is as if God is offering us a copy of the final exam early. He does this because it is his will that we should be with him for ever.

If God gives us even the example of Jesus to model the way, how can any of us refuse to listen?

We do like closure, don't we? We have all left a movie or finished a book with a sense of frustration because it did not end adequately. Perhaps, it just stopped without really ending, or left some scenes hanging. Scripture agrees with our frustration. It tells us that as surely as god called human history into being, God will bring it to conclusion. Time ends at the feet of Christ the king of our hearts.

1st Sunday of Advent

Mark, within a brief five verses uses the injunction, "watch" three times. Watch means that we are called to be alert, to wake up . . . and smell the incense.

Remember Jesus' words: "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." [Mt 24:42] Remember Jesus' words when he took Peter, James, and John to Gethsemane on the night before he died? "Remain here and watch with me." Remember Jesus' words to Peter when he returned from that prayer? "Could you not watch for even an hour?"

Today I would like to reflect on how to watch. I am going to talk about a topic rarely mentioned: hope-as in faith, hope and love.

I find that Christian hope is best defined: "Being open to surprise," a definition provided by the Benedictine brother, David Steindlraast. Hope is a virtue that can exist only when supported like a hammock at its two ends: faith in Abba at the one end and Abba's unconditional love for us at the other. If you trust God and bask in God's love, you can be open to surprise in life: hope.

We can be open to surprises that will come our way. Hope is not optimism sprinkled with holy water, as some would have it.

Hope is often misunderstood and mistaken for hopes - with an "s." A proportion with faith may be helpful. Faith is to the beliefs that we hold as hope is to hopes that we have. That is, just as saving-faith, trust, is the important underpinning to creedal-faith / beliefs ["I believe in one god, etc.] so, hope, openness to surprise, is the important underpinning for hopes we have. Both beliefs and hopes are distracting look-alikes for faith and hope.

Examples of hopes would be: that our team will win, that everyone will be healthy, that everyone in the family will get along. Hopes are always the direct object of a sentence that begins: "I hope that . . ." The common denominator for hopes is something I can imagine. Hope is far more profound than hopes

So, what is the relationship of hope to hopes? Question: when our hopes are shattered, what is left? Answer: hope! If a person has hopes without hope underpinning his hopes - and then has his hopes shattered, the person is shattered. Hope is the seedbed of hopes; when one's hopes are shattered, a new crop of hopes will spring up overnight, expressed, for example, by disappointed sports fans expression: "Wait 'till next year."

Dag Hammarskjöld said it so well about two important virtues, gratitude and hope: "For all that has been, thanks, Lord, thanks [gratitude]; for all that will be, yes, Lord, yes." [hope – openness to surprise]

Advent is the season for becoming more aware of hope and practicing hope, a season to arouse our watchfulness for the surprises that we experience daily, so that hope becomes an active attitude, like faith (trust), and unconditional love. Hope, with practice, can become as natural as breathing. How do we "practice"? Faith in God or in another is deepened by trusting, isn't it? Love for God or for another is deepened by loving, isn't it?

Hope in God or in another is deepened by being open . . . to surprise.

Hope provides a wonderful, god-given coping dynamic: in practical terms: we say "Yes, lord, yes" before we say, "Oh, no." This is key!

Remember, hope can happen only when supported by faith and by love. It does not stand on its own. It has the needed support of faith and love.

We can learn something about hope from its opposite; the opposite of hope is not hopelessness, for hope thrives on hopelessness; the opposite of hope is despair - being shattered. Despair comes from giving God or another ultimatum: "I've got it all figured out; there is no other solution than mine." No possibilities for surprise.

We believe the lord Jesus has already come; the kingdom of God is already in our midst! We also believe that the lord will come again. There is tension in this notion of the "already, and the not yet." In the now, the in-between time, god's enduring grace and unending presence is always with us.

Advent reminds us that we need to be aware of this and to be open to the God of unimaginable surprises - in hope.

2nd Sunday of Advent

For some - to a tragic degree - and for most - to some degree, there is a let down when Christmas finally arrives.

There is a psychological explanation for this. Most of us, consciously or unconsciously, have the image of Christmas as a Norman Rockwell painting: a happy family surrounded by loving friends trimming a flawless tree, eating cookies and drinking our favorite beverage; a roaring fire in the hearth with snow seen through the window falling gently and piling in the corners of the window panes.

Well, the reality for most - there is more than the snow that is missing.

Spiritually, Christmas is also frequently a let-down. We hear the advent imperatives urging us. We remember past Christmases and may recall little spiritual progress during our advents.

But, there is light at the end of this tunnel. Our readings this morning suggest some ways of being in the world. Advent is often long on the doing, but short on the being. That leads to the inevitable frustration. Of spiritually empty spirits on Christmas morning,

Perhaps this advent we might concentrate on why John the baptizer is chosen for this time of year. Isaiah, in the first reading, cries out to prepare the way of the lord. John the baptizer proclaims and lives the truth that preparing the way is not in doing, but in being, not in filling, but emptying our lives. He seems to tell us that the desert is the only place bare enough and quiet enough to mirror our lives, our motives, and our disguises.

We need quiet time in advent, in the beginning of the church year. To get quiet time, we need to reschedule, to reprioritize, and to enable us to get inside ourselves for being with our lord. That desert, quiet time gives us the opportunity for getting insight in our hearts. John got the insight to “decrease,” to allow Jesus to “increase” in his life. John got the insight to point to Jesus, not to himself. John got the insight to free himself from the system besides getting free from himself.

John called the Jews to the desert wilderness where God could find them. The desert is the perfect place to prepare. In desert isolation, we have no distractions of job, parenting, grand-parenting, even mindless religious practices that maintain our usual routine. When our minds are full of “stuff,” not even God himself can break in to us. John, in his stark lifestyle always had one foot in the desert.

To make this quiet time real for us [it is real without us!] it helps some to picture Jesus, present, in front of us or present within our heart of hearts, while we use deep-breathing exercises to settle themselves.

We need to be with him . . . And pause to listen to what he has to say to us - what thoughts he plants in our minds.

This even helps us to discover God’s presence in the people and events around us. We can see in others that presence/ manifestation of the holy. We can see their underlying goodness

Wonder of wonders!! The more attentive we are to God’s presence, the more we become God’s presence for others.

Finally, when we bask in the presence of God, we feel a quiet joy. We do not have to wait for Christmas there is already a residual joy within us.

What a relief. We do not have to be in a Norman Rockwell painting; we just smile at all that. All we need to do is live in the meantime - cultivating his presence.

We do not have to come to the night before Christmas and try to look like a perfect person who is perfectly ready to greet the Lord when he comes. He has already arrived. Our God loves us as we are - and comes to us in our opening the door when he knocks.

Oh . . . Did I mention that Norman Rockwell was married three times?

3rd Sunday in Advent

Rejoice is the high frequency word in today's Mass. Today is Gaudete Sunday; the pink candle of our Advent wreaths is lit. By God's grace we do not have pink vestments which I prefer not to wear - for reasons that have nothing to do with liturgy.

We hear "rejoice" in church, but when we walk in the mall, we see few smiling faces. Shoppers seem to be intent and tense.

As William Sloane Coffin remarked, "So why are Christians so often joyless?" It is, I think, because too often Christians have only enough religion to make themselves miserable. Guilt, they know, but not forgiveness. Nietzsche correctly noted, "Christians should look more redeemed."

Perhaps we are experiencing increased stress, painful family memories, broken relationships, shattered dreams, unrealistic expectations - to name a few experiences that impact us in this season.

Does it not seem inappropriate, incongruous to hear about rejoicing? Not at all!! The reason for rejoicing is not finding the perfect gift for someone you really love or finding the adequate gift for someone you really don't. The reason for rejoicing is not a shallow, temporary change from emotional "business as usual."

Where is joy to be found? Today's Scripture readings teach us our source of rejoicing. Isaiah, in the first reading, speaks to the children of Israel who suffered so much for so long: "Rejoice in the Lord." In the responsorial psalm, we answered: "My soul rejoices in my God."

Paul was shipwrecked, flogged to within an inch of his life several times, publicly mocked, run out of town. He said to those who were waiting for the second coming of Christ: "Rejoice always, render constant thanks." This was surely more than urging a positive attitude toward life, more than a first-century, pop-psychology of positive thinking.

Paul also says, "Render constant thanks for the forgiveness Jesus brought." He deeply believes that real joy abides in the soul of the one who has absorbed this and has entrusted himself totally to the hands of God. It is anchored in something more stable than the shifting sands of life's fortunes. It is rooted in God himself.

Joy is a resilient choice no matter what happens to us. Joy arises out of a contented heart where the contentment is based on the lasting presence of God.

Joy is a fundamental stance of the heart: a conviction, a gift of God. It is rooted in our enduring relationship with god, remembered during advent as we recall the coming of Jesus who made our relationship a reality.

Joy is a constant glimpse of eternity. It is a whisper in the night of difficulties that will become a resounding chorus of the full presence of God.

Jesus' gift of joy is recalled in the holy card that portrays him in the scene described in the book of revelation: standing outside a door knocking. The door has no handle on his side; it has to be opened by you, by me on our side.

In the morning, preferably, before the day begins to roll like a snowball downhill, gathering chaos, we

take the time to enter within ourselves. We picture our Lord vividly before us. We look at the expression in his eyes. We “waste” time with him - first in total silence -- just looking at him with his loving eyes that encompasses forgiveness, acceptance, and value.

I acknowledge my total reliance on him.

The experience that follows is joy.

4th Sunday of Advent

The connection between the first reading and the Gospel is a question for every Sunday. The answer reveals the theme for the mass. In today’s readings, the church has put David, the shepherd-king, and Mary, Jesus’ mother together. Why? Let’s look.

In the scene of the first reading we see David, alone and musing. He has conquered Jerusalem, built a safe wall around the city, built for himself a house of cedar - an upscale building material in Palestine. Now he thinks of the box that holds the tablets of stone, the Ten Commandments. Jews held the arc and stone tablets to be the place of the presence of god. David wishes to build a magnificent temple for God’s presence.

The prophet Nathan encouraged him in this. But, that night, god corrected Nathan [it is rare to have god correct a prophet]. Nathan returned to David and reminded him of blessings past: the victory over goliath and many enemy armies, his becoming king . . . And a future blessing: god will establish a “house” for David. This works in English; we have the house of Dior, the house of Windsor. House denotes dynasty; here, the dynasty of David.

God pointedly asks: “Do you build me a house.” In other words, “You have a lot to learn.” Remember, you were the runt of the litter of your brothers. I made you the shepherd-king. Whose choice determines where I live - yours or mine? “

God, not humans has the last word. It is wisely said: “man proposes, but god disposes. David heard god and understood; he would later write in his Ps 65 v 5. “Happy the man you choose and bring to dwell in your courts.” David “got” it - finally. David wanted control; God did not allow that to happen.

Remember, this gospel episode took place nine months before the nativity, Christmas. It is related today to make a point. The angel announced that Mary was God’s chosen one for a temporary dwelling place on earth. The angel told Mary that the reign of king David would likewise run right through her body in the conception of a child whose kingdom would have no end. Mary let God be God. She remained open - open to surprise -- and here she is called “blessed” among women: unlike David who tried to control.

In john’s gospel, when Andrew met Jesus, he asked “Where do you live?” Jesus answered: “come and see.” Andrew went and learned that the “Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” No address. Andrew would come to understand that Jesus’ dwelling place was within the hearts of his followers.

Also in john’s gospel, the Samaritan woman says that god is worshipped by the Samaritans on Mt. Gerizem while Jews worship on mt. Sinai. Jesus replies that neither mountain will be the place for future worship. Worship will take place in one’s heart. The heart is where Jesus is found -- in “a house not built by human hands.”

The point? The theme? Jesus dwells within us. David and Mary are presented to us here as persons who said “yes” to Jesus’ call: David, with a detour; Mary, directly. She stands on the ledge of jeopardy and courageously leaps. Each came independently to deeper understanding about god. David tried to control, but eventually came to accept. Mary simply listened, accepted, committed.

St. Augustine thought that Mary conceived through her ear. This powerful image emphasizes the word that came through the ear, enters her heart and grows in her belly.

If we accept God into our hearts, God becomes incorporated within us, we then become more than someone with a personal life and a social life. We have a third dimension and share in the divine life. Theology has a name for this spiritual phenomenon “sanctifying grace.” We are also thereby equipped for a life of eternity -- a reality that begins now, not later.

In the still busy days between now and Christmas, let’s make the time to quiet ourselves and acknowledge that Emmanuel, God with us, is actually God within us - and listen and talk to him in an ongoing conversation that begins here and now and goes on forever. We may need to remind ourselves that eternity is already in place. A forever kingdom in God’s presence is much richer than merely the promise of a future time when we meet God face to face.

Christmas

Verbal communication may be our most precious gift. We have all been successful with it. We have all failed miserably with it. Sometimes, we are inspired; other times we put our foot in our mouths up to our knee: spouse to spouse, friend to friend, parent to children, children to parent. All, at times, become exasperated – and that is only within the circle of those closest to us. Imagine God’s problem in communicating with many diverse people in many, diverse cultures!

Communication depends upon the common experience of the two involved. Our God wanted to communicate with all of us so much more deeply than through Jewish prophets. Christmas celebrates a divine breakthrough in communication through a universal, common experience. Everyone loves a newborn baby. God, in his infinite genius, employed childbirth, a universal, celebratory experience to touch every one of us, to speak to every heart.

Today, we celebrate this miracle of Emmanuel God-with-Us. Our Father’s Son came to us. God became one of us. Our God inspired the writer John to call Jesus “the word.” The word became flesh. Both God and we know that words are mere tools to communicate, to express ideas. Some word-tools have temporary use. Some last or change meaning. But, our greatest words achieve clarity and permanence when they are embodied in persons.

The word “justice,” when it is embodied, takes on flesh in a Moses who stood up to Pharaoh in Egypt. Justice, when it is embodied, takes on flesh in a Lincoln when he published his emancipation proclamation. Justice, when it is embodied, takes on flesh in a Martin Luther King when he delivered his “I have a dream” speech and marched in Montgomery. In those instances, the word “justice” took on flesh in the persons who embodied justice.

When a wise wordsmith was asked to define “prudence,” he paused thoughtfully and gave a definitive answer: “prudence is what the prudent man does.” The important words take on flesh and live in persons..

Love is surely a “many splendored” word. It has many meanings in the mouths of many, diverse people. John the evangelist told us in one of his letters, “God is love.” God’s love is the highest form of love. God/love is concerned totally with the other. It is completely unselfish. It is unconditional; God loves us no matter what we do. God’s love cannot be earned; it is freely given to us. Love took on flesh in the person who embodied love.

In John’s Gospel, we hear: “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God... The word became flesh and lived among us.” Love took on flesh, became incarnated when love

became enfleshed in Jesus. Jesus lived a life that always modeled, enfleshed love.

Today we celebrate the one we have been given by our God. His generosity moves us to give gifts from our hearts as tokens of the love we have for him and for one another in a wonderful ripple effect of love of our neighbor,

In the same passage, John goes on to write the sad words, “He came to his own and his own did not receive him.” May each of us have the courage to accept Jesus in our hearts and follow the way of love he modeled for us.

May Jesus’ love be enfleshed in us. May we live Jesus this and every day of our lives with joy and gratitude.

Holy Family

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family.

I recall when I was a very young priest, preaching that the holy family was the model family. Now that I am not so young, I have to smile recalling some of those homilies. The mother of the family is a virgin wife and mother, full of grace. The father is one who does not seem to have a problem with that. Ah, that would be after he had a miraculous dream – as all fathers many not have. A son who is 100% God and 100% human -- at the same time. It may be called a model family, but, it is not the family next door?

Christian models are supposed to be imitated, replicated somehow. Yet, it is impossible to replicate the holy family. Is that to say that there is nothing to be learned on this feast of the holy family?

Ours is an era when we hear much negativity: stories of children out of control, spouse abuse, child abuse, children calling 911 after being appropriately disciplined, destructive relationships, drug-afflicted families, disputes resolved by violence.

Today’s feast says that the Holy Family does have something to say to us in the readings we just heard. Our reading from Sirach teaches us that every marriage and family requires a basic respect by *each* member for all the others. Respect comes from the Latin verb *respicio*, meaning “to look again” – not simply “look,” “but look a second time. Lack of respect makes the atmosphere both unhealthy and unhappy – and, ultimately, destructive.

From Paul we learn that we need to cultivate all the virtues characteristic of a Christian, but above all: love. Life in the Christian family is rooted in compassionate love.

The Gospel teaches that no matter who we are - even Jesus – obedience must be a part of life. “Obedience,” we know comes from the Latin verb *obaudire*, meaning “to listen carefully. “ There is military obedience which calls for following orders without question – tending toward blind obedience. Christian obedience is, on the other hand, is closer to the Latin; it means to listen attentively. [There are two continuing education credits in classical language for listening to this homily.]

We all - children and parents - need to listen attentively. When we are compassionately loved and respected, we listen more easily to the other. Love and respect are the foundation of authentic obedience, real listening.

Jesus freely chose to submit himself in obedience to his parents. Jesus’ respect, love, and obedience are based on his respect, love, and obedience toward his father in heaven which he showed throughout his life.

We hear so much about dysfunctional families these days. But, really, how many cleaver families have we ever known? No one, nothing is perfect. Every family is somehow dysfunctional, and concentrating on negatives depresses us.

Today, let's look at the bright side. Let's look at all the good things that happened on Christmas: the laughing, the caring, the helping, the generosity, the being there for one another. Let's concentrate on the positives as we celebrate the feast of the holy family.

As Christians, we have something very important to offer the present family situation in America. The example and message of Jesus and the values expressed in today's readings: respect [looking again] - compassionate love – obedience [listening attentively]. All are light that we can bring to a world that desperately needs light.