SUNDAY HOMILIES

Liturgical Year Cycle A

by

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Homilies given in the year 2014
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First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2012

Jeremiah 33:14-16	The Lord our Justice
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14	To you I lift my soul
1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2	Conduct yourselves to please God
Luke 21:25-28, 34-36	Signs in the skies

We all remember the final lectures of Sister Mary Elsbernd,
her bravery and her fierce commitment to truth.
In those talks she repeatedly spoke of God's Dream,
as the constant message of Scripture, seen in its arc of promise,
despite the human blindness that often impedes the message,
with imposed barriers of class, race, or gender.

God's Dream was the vision that brought us back continually
to the Scriptures, looking to discern further
what we could now glimpse, that was hidden from us before.

Today we begin another year in the church.
And we return to the beginning of the lectionary program, to Cycle A.
And there we find on the first page of the book,
this poem from Isaiah that we heard in the first reading.

The poem is famous.
It is inscribed in front of the United Nations Building in New York.
It has given us the popular folk song—
I will lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside,
and study war no more.

It speaks of the mountain of God, Jerusalem, Mount Zion,
as becoming the place of instruction for all nations.
All nations will come streaming in to hear the word of Torah,
the word of the Lord.

And there will be no more war,
as all nations learn from each other and the barriers go down
between the members of the children of God.

I think that it is given the first page of the book of liturgical readings
far more than its meaning for today.

I think it serves as a dedication for the entire book of readings.
It points to an underlying vision that drives the biblical story,
from its beginning in the garden to its triumph in the New Jerusalem.

It claims the Scriptures in the name of God's Dream,
as Mary Elsbernd knew.

So once again we begin a new year with a word of promise.

But this year we are surprised to discover
that this is not the only word of promise that we are given.
This past week Pope Francis published his Apostolic Exhortation,
Evangelii Gaudium, which is translated, "The Joy of the Gospel."

It is Apostolic, because it concerns mission,
and "Apostle" means "one sent."
And it is an exhortation because it urges the mission upon all of us.

Furthermore, it is programmatic for this pope's tenure.
He says so himself:

> "I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here
> has a programmatic significance and important consequences.
>
> I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort
> to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion
> which cannot leave things as they presently are."

The document has been described by John Allen of NCR
as "Francis' 'I have a dream" speech."
One reason is that the pope opens with a dream:

> "I dream of a 'missionary option,
> that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything,
> so that the church's customs, ways of doing things,
> times and schedules, language and structures
> can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world.
>
> Rather than for her self-preservation."

So today we begin the season and the year with another dream,
another vision to carry us forward.
One to place alongside the poem of Isaiah,
as a way of understanding it today.

Isaiah speaks of a holy mountain
to which all nations come streaming.
Francis speaks of the open door:

> "A Church which "goes forth" is a Church whose doors are open. ...
> At times we have to be like the father of the prodigal son,
> who always keeps his door open so that when the son returns,
> he can readily pass through it. ...
>
> One concrete sign of such openness
> is that our church doors should always be open,
> so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God,
> he or she will not find a closed door."

Isaiah speaks of peoples of the world
eager to hear the word of instruction.
Francis speaks of the joyful mission that will attract them to come.
He points out that, unfortunately—

> "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter.

Meanwhile,

> "… our "technological society has succeeded
> in multiplying occasions of pleasure,
> yet has found it very difficult to engender joy."
>
> "Consequently, an evangelizer must never look like someone
> who has just come back from a funeral!

Today we enter neither Lent nor Easter, but Advent.
Advent is a season of quiet joy.
Despite the cultural temper of the times and the season,
this joy is not flamboyant, not an exercise in excess.
It is simple and authentic.

Here too we find Advent chimes with the message of Francis's Exhortation.

In an unusual departure from the usual practice in papal documents
of uttering general principles,
    Francis devoted much of the third of his five chapters
    to tips on giving homilies.

Since he has managed to gather the world's attention
with his daily homilies,
    it would seem that he has something to say.

One important reason for this is that he doesn't want the homilist
to get in the way of the joy of the Gospel.
    (Actually, much of what he says I've long agreed with.)

It suggests that perhaps a good program for this Advent
would be to consider the program of Francis
in connection with the program of the Advent Scripture readings.
    There are more than chapters in the Pope's instruction than the third.
    They also deserve some attention.

It was the Lenten season of this past year that we were wondering
what the church was going to give us by way of a new pope.
    The theme selected here was,
    "What makes this Lent different from any other Lent?"

Well, now we know what the church has given us,
and we have his program for the time to come.

    So perhaps we can wonder what makes this Advent
    different from other Advents we have known.

And spend some time exploring that question.

Second Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2013

Isaiah 11:1-10	A shoot from the stump of Jesse
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17	Justice shall flourish in his time
Romans 15:4-9	Through the Scriptures we have hope
Matthew 3:1-12	John the Baptist issues warnings

Last week Isaiah presented us with God's dream
for us, the human community.
    This week the remarkable poetry of Isaiah continues,
    sketching out the qualities of Emmanuel, the qualities of true kingship.

The Jesse tree, the family tree of David's father,
is presented to us as the tree from which the Messiah will come.
    At the time of the writing, the tree is gone, only a root remains.
    But a shoot is promised.

Meanwhile, John the Baptist foresees judgment,
in which the root of the tree means something else.
    To Isaiah's "yes" he offers his "no."
Where Isaiah promises a shoot shall spring from the root,
John sees an axe at the root of the tree, ready to reduce it to kindling.
    Where Isaiah promises a future of restoration, John sees trouble.

The portrait of the true king in Isaiah is a treatise on justice.
    Beginning with those Spirit-filled traits
    that we have come to know as the gifts of the Holy Spirit,
    here they are introduced as the qualities of true leadership.

Maybe they are summed up in "fear of the Lord"
    —not fright or terror, but a sober respect
    for God's place in the scheme of things,
        including authentic human leadership.

Then we hear about the practice of justice,
echoed in the response psalm: Justice shall flower in his days.
    Here the image of Solomon is his guide.

And then the remarkable picture of the Peaceable Kingdom,
where the lion lies down with the lamb.

The American primitive, Edward Hicks,
has provided us with an enduring image of this.

This Advent we are placing alongside the vivid vision of Isaiah
the equally remarkable vision of P. Francis.

Isaiah's fear of the Lord appears this Advent
as a new interest in things religious.
Today religion seems to be more popular than ever.
An image of religion is now available
different from the fundamentalist version of Christianity.
Even atheists are having a hard time caricaturing religion.

Isaiah's program of justice finds echoes in Evangelii Gaudium as well.
In fact, this part has perhaps garnered the most response
in the media and in our American commercial culture.
Here, in the Pope's words, the Yes of Isaiah
joins the No of John the Baptist.

Francis makes four points, here with some short quotations:

1. No to an economy of exclusion:
   "Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded."

2. No to the idolatry of money:
   "This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation.
   Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control." (56)

3. No to a financial system which rules rather than serves:
   "In effect, ethics leads to a God who calls for a committed response which is outside the categories of the marketplace.
   When these latter are absolutized, God can only be seen as uncontrollable, unmanageable, even dangerous, since he calls human beings to their full realization and to freedom from all forms of enslavement." (57)

4.No to the inequality which spawns violence:

> "When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programmes or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility.
>
> > This is not the case simply because inequality provokes a violent reaction from those excluded from the system, but because the socioeconomic system is unjust at its root. (59)

This part of the exhortation has produced
a somewhat hysterical response from some quarters.
Rush Limbaugh's remarks have gathered a lot of attention,
aligning Francis with Karl Marx, and imagining a program of socialism.
The Pope mentions by name neither capitalism nor socialism.
But the heart of each might be discerned in the roots of their names:
socialism points to society, that is, people, at its center;
capitalism points to capital, or money, as its center of interest.

Isaiah, after speaking of a program of justice,
paints the idyllic picture of the Peaceable Kingdom,
with the lion, the bear, the lamb, and the small child,
sharing a serene companionship.

Francis too, speaks of peace, and at length.
Again, he makes four points, which I will not quote this time,
but I will mention.

The four principles concerning peacemaking might be rephrased.

Time is greater than space:
In essence, establishing processes that lead to peace
is more important than insisting on (immediate) results.

Unity prevails over conflict:
The principle is love in conflict
—loving the enemy, even while in dispute.
Thomas Merton described nonviolent action
as entering into conflict without forgetting to love one's opponent.

Realities are more important than ideas:
Going beyond ideas to realities.

Walking the walk. Realities are greater than ideas.
This, says Francis, is the principle of Incarnation at work.

The whole is greater than the parts (or sum of the parts):
We think globally and act locally.
The first keeps us from banality;
the second keeps our feet on the ground.

Clearly an entire program is outlined here,
and considerably more reflection will be rewarded with results.

For the moment, a couple of reflections.

The first is an example of the Pope's teaching, I think.
This week the world is celebrating the life of Nelson Mandela
for his example of forgiveness.
After his 27 years in prison, he crafted,
along with Bishop Desmond Tutu,
the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation commission,
which attempted to combine unblinking revelation of atrocities
with amnesty and forgiveness,
balancing justice and mercy.

The insight that prevailed was that only the forgiveness
that refuses to claim righteous payback
can prevent a continuing cycle of reciprocal violence.

The second reflection is a thought experiment.
I have this daydream that Francis,
during one of his night-time phone calls, dials up Rush Limbaugh.

What is it that he discusses with Rush?
Does he listen as well as talk?
What does Rush say or do in response?
Is Rush changed?
Is Francis?

I have my own answers to these questions.
But I invite you to make yours.
I offer them as a way of making more concrete the words of Francis.

After all, one of the main differences between him and his predecessors is that of adding example to talk.

As Mark Shields, the TV commentator noted,
other popes have said as much about economic priorities,
but this one drives a Ford Focus.

Third Sunday of Advent

December 15, 2013

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10	The desert will rejoice and bloom
Psalm 146:6-10	The Lord sets captives free
James 5:7-10	The farmer waits for the fruit
Matthew 11:2-11	Tell John what you hear and see

It was not long ago that we heard John the Baptist
fiercely calling for a decision.
Just last week, in fact.

John favored the decisive imagery
of reaping crops and chopping down trees.
The axe is at the root, he told us.
The tree without fruit will be consigned to the fire.
A change is coming, and soon.
When the One Who Is To Come arrives, things will be sorted out,
and immediately.

In his imagination, John is felling forests, turning orchards into deserts.
He is the prophet of deforestation.

We come back to him today, and he is now in prison.
He wants to know if Jesus is the One Who Is To Come.
If so, why haven't things changed?
Why hasn't the judgment occurred?
Where is the axe at the root of the trees?

Jesus, who borrows some of the imagery and vision of John,
also is now taking things in a different direction.
On the one hand, as we will see in the parables this year,
he has replaced John's "immediately" with "the end of the age."
The judgment will come, but not now, not right away.

On the other hand, Jesus has added a new note,
one that John hadn't spoken about.
Healing and cures are taking place.
There is a renewal afoot,
a revival of the people from their illness to health.
Not only judgment, but also forgiveness
tells of the coming of the kingdom.

So Jesus tells the messengers from John
to send back a message about the turn of events.
And he uses language from the poet Isaiah.
Among the texts that he alludes to is the passage
that today's liturgy has chosen for its first reading.
It speaks of the eyes of the blind opened and the ears of the deaf cleared.
The lame will dance, the mute will sing.

The imagery that Isaiah uses to support this revival
is that of the desert reforested.
The dry land becomes a vast oasis.
The wilderness blooms.
Where John is turning forests into deserts,
Jesus is returning the deserts to forests again.

The people is being renewed,
and we will hear in the gospel how he brings
those ignored, disabled, or marginal in one way or another,
back into the swim of communal life.

Like the lepers, they reënter social life,
and society itself begins a renewal, no longer divided.
No longer only able to bring favor to some by denying others.

As we know, Jesus' mission to the marginal
has been reaffirmed recently by P. Francis,
in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*.
In fact, the main thrust of his message is mission,
and especially mission to the poor and outcast.

And he is taking the media by storm.
As reported with some amusement by Elizabeth Tenety,
the Catholic editor of the *Washington Post*'s "OnFaith Column,"
many in the media are gushing.

Matt Iglesias of *Slate*, the online magazine,
hailed the pope's document for its attack on libertarian economic policies.
However, he has his reservations:
"There's a lot about Jesus in his thinking that I can't really sign on to."

Tenety's response is in her title:
"Like Pope Francis? You'll love Jesus."

What is notable about the Pope's program
is its firm rooting in the biblical traditions.
For instance, his discussion of the mission to the poor
speaks of the Cry of the Poor and the plight of the vulnerable.

Recently I was asked to speak at Loras in an Ethics symposium.
My topic was the biblical perspective
on the preferential option to the poor.
Basing it especially upon Exodus 22,
about the stranger in the land, the widow and the orphan,
and the poor neighbor,
as well as the example of Naomi and Ruth,
these were the same themes that I then found to be central.
Here they appear again.

What difference does this make?
Maybe this is one example.
Those looking for change are frequently being warned
that the Pope hasn't changed anything
pertaining to church teaching.
For example, he has reaffirmed the church's teaching on abortion.

However, while this is true, it isn't the whole truth.
As a matter of fact, he has changed the abortion issue by reframing it.
Rather than using the more philosophical
(and, to my mind, somewhat incoherent)
argument based on the idea of intrinsic evils,
he grounds the teaching in the biblical concern for the vulnerable:

"Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care
with particular love and concern are unborn children,
the most defenceless and innocent among us." (213).

What does this do?
For one, it no longer views abortion as a singular, unparalleled evil,
but places it among the biblical concerns for any ethical society.

In this way it no longer serves as a single-issue touchstone or password
for identifying "true" Christians.

Not only does it locate the unborn among the vulnerable,
but it invites those committed to the welfare of the vulnerable.
Not only does it place the unborn within a community of suffering,
but it also invites more people into a wider community of concern.

And immediately following this, Francis adds:
"On the other hand, it is also true
that we have done little to adequately accompany women
in very difficult situations,
where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish,
especially when the life developing within them
is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty.
Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?"

This question begs to be answered.

In this regard we also hear that there is no clear change
in thinking about the role of women,
seen especially in the teaching against the ordination of women.
This too is true.

Joan Chittister was especially eloquent this week
on the need to seize the present moment to engage
the full humanity of women in the church's understanding.
The wisdom and experience of women must be invoked
for the health and future of the church.

And yet there may be more to say here as well.

Francis says: "I readily acknowledge
that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests,
helping to guide people, families and groups
and offering new contributions to theological reflection.
But we need to create still broader opportunities
for a more incisive female presence in the Church." (103)

But, if women are placed in major decision-making levels of the church,
how can change be avoided, including the matter of ordination?
(In fact, it is my suspicion that recognition of that possibility
is why including women is and will be opposed in certain circles.)

I am reminded of remarks of my friend, Patricia Jung,
a Catholic moral theologian who at one time taught at Wartburg Seminary.
While they ordained women, they were giving them, in her view,
the peripheral positions that the men didn't want.
Her somewhat wistful comment was that
when the Catholic Church got around to ordaining women,
maybe they would have figured out how to do it right.

I am thinking that the first step is to involve women at all levels,
and only then can we make adequate decisions on changes.

At another place, Francis says time is greater than space,
and that putting processes in place is more important
than getting immediate results.

And then there is John the Baptist,
who learns that his own desire for immediate results
is put on hold while processes of inclusion of the marginal
and restoration of the people of God are put in place.

Then, adds Isaiah, sorrow and mourning will flee.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2013

Isaiah 7:10-14	The virgin shall conceive
Psalm 24:1-6	Let the King of Glory enter
Romans 1:1-7	Paul's Gospel
Matthew 1:18-24	Joseph's Dream

We began Advent with a dream—God's dream,
as given in the second chapter of Isaiah
and interpreted by Mary Elsbernd.

We also noticed that it fit with what P. Francis called his dream,
of a missionary church with a joyful gospel.
Today we come to the last of the Advent Sundays,
with Christmas near.
And today we hear about Joseph's dream.

Inside Joseph's dream is an angel.
And the angel has a message and a passage from Isaiah.
And inside the passage is a sign, the sign of a virgin to be with child.
So we have a sign inside a dream.
And the sign anticipates a new day.

The sign speaks of a time of waking to a new day.
The dream will issue in a new waking reality.
In a sense, the time foretold is arriving,
as God takes matters into hand,
and enters history as a participating member,
through his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

What we first heard about as a dream is now a reality,
begun, and now working toward its fullness.
It is not entire, but it is moving toward a fullness.

And P. Francis' dream, which we have also been following this Advent,
is also seen in active reality,
as his actions speak louder than his writings.
Or, at least, they reach many more people.
But the message is the same,
and it speaks of moving out into the world,
and in particular, embracing the poor and the vulnerable.

In this time of the year,
when we hear the stories of the first Christmas,
that message is all the more compelling.

We need no longer speak of the media's embrace of the new pope.
Once he has arrived on the cover of TIME Magazine as Person of the Year,
that infatuation need no longer be pointed out.

Nor do we need to talk anymore
about the mixed reception the pope has received in the church.
We have heard enough stories
about the older brother of the Prodigal Son,
and how some, who were committed to an earlier vision of the church,
may now feel excluded and resentful.
It is hard to indulge in these stories without *schadenfreud*
—the unattractive practice of enjoying the discomfort of others.

And yet, maybe there is room for one more turn with this parable.
But there is a way in which I am the older brother,
called forth from my settled ways.
You may know what I mean.

For myself in particular, there are a number of things in the exhortation
that cause me to have second thoughts.
One of these is in the very part that talks about
the preaching and delivering of the gospel.
Francis speaks of many things concerning the study
and presentation of Scripture that I have already put into practice.
I detect a certain pride in having done so,
and now having it recognized.

But he doesn't stop there.
He moves on to speak of the role of popular piety.
Speaking of the church in South America, Francis says this:

"On that beloved continent,
where many Christians express their faith through popular piety,
the bishops also refer to it as "popular spirituality"
or "the people's mysticism".

It is truly "**a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly**".

Nor is it devoid of content;
rather it discovers and expresses that content more
by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning,
and in the act of faith greater accent is placed on *credere in Deum*
than on *credere Deum*."

That is, greater accent is placed on trust in God
than in believing certain truths from and about God.

I could not miss the point that for many
the Word becomes Incarnate—and this is the season of Incarnation—
in the form of pious practices.

Even though I am in sympathy with a move toward the pastoral,
I myself am more in tune with theological abstraction and theory.
Where popular piety blends the different infancy narratives together,
I keep them separate as the different authors told them.

But I am hearing that popular piety
is a form of incarnating the mystery for many
for whom such nice distinctions are not helpful.
There are many, and here is where the poor come in,
representing perhaps most people,
the faith comes alive through symbol and practices of piety.

And here I think of St. Francis himself, and the Christmas manger set.
And how it makes concrete the mystery of the season.
And I think how much in evidence these scenes are in this building.
Clearly they serve a purpose.

This is my personal statement of being the older brother of the Prodigal.
I suspect you have your own experiences
that the pope is inviting you to reconsider.
I am reminded how the older brother is called to a change
in attitude and perspective.

But, as we know, the older brother is not the only character in the story. The Prodigal himself experiences a major conversion.

And here too Francis has something to say. Or show.

One of the effects of his papacy is the great attention
that Francis is receiving, not only from the media
but from those who are not Catholics and never have been.

The unchurched Catholics, who in this country are so numerous
that it is said that if they were a denomination
they would be second largest, right after practicing Catholics
—these unchurched former Catholics are paying attention as well.

A friend of mine, for instance, said to me
that after a long time away he is thinking about going to confession.
However, he doesn't want to go to anyone he knows.
This speaks to the hurdle that returning represents for most.

But here I am going to let my own sister, a former Franciscan herself,
and an ardent feminist, represent this group.
I quote from a recent letter to me, with her permission.

"I am currently a student of the Pope's new exhortation,
the first time I have wandered into the land of Catholicism in a very long time.
While I have increasingly invested
in my own spiritual growth and maturation,
I have not found the Church a place
where that process could be affirmed and supported.
It has seemed to me that much of what the Church has focused on
was peripheral, not central,
and indeed blunted the possibility of what was central.
Perhaps because I was "trained" in Franciscan theology,
and found it congruent with who I perceived myself to be,
I have found the Church often to be the antithesis of Franciscan theology,
and hence found no purchase in its words and behaviors. …

"So I am ever so gingerly studying this document,
which required an entire cartridge of ink to print out,
and marveling that the worldview most real to me is there,
with even the warnings ones I identify with,

and with the emphasis on the way we are being
of greater import than obsessing over dogma.
I know it does not yet grapple well with women;
I think that is a tougher row to hoe than most realize.
It is hard to hear the quiet voice of the other
when there is so much fearful shouting going on."

There is this large throng of people here represented by my sister,
whose attention has been gained, who are interested,
but for whom returning means a major step,
and one that does not on the face of it seem likely.

Still, the dream of Joseph explains that miracles happen,
and that we are counting on that.
That we are celebrating one this season.

And the new day in the church is another piece of evidence of that.
Without belaboring the play on words,
this time before Christmas is a pregnant moment for many
who are reconsidering where their life journeys have taken them.
And it seems to me we are now invited to pray
that this moment of possibility for many who have left,
many who we know in our own families,
may find it possible to find their way back to the faith family.

Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Christmas Day)

December 25, 2013

Isaiah 52:7-10	The bearer of good news
Psalm 98:1-6	Sing to the Lord a new song
Hebrews 1:1-6	In times past ...
John 1:1-18	The Word became Flesh

On Christmas Eve we hear the story of the manger.
In our imaginations we travel to ancient Judea.
And we do not stop at Jerusalem, but continue on
to a nearby village, named Bethlehem.

And we do not enter the village
but rather go to an inn at the edge of town.
And we do not even enter the inn,
but rather turn to the stable in the back lot.

There we find a scene that we have imagined many times,
having seen so many versions of it.
A mother and child, named Mary and Jesus,
with a saintly Joseph standing by.
Eventually shepherds from the nearby hills come into the picture.

This event is clearly taking place out of the mainstream,
unattended to by the powers that run that ancient world.

We get a glimpse of that world
when we hear of the census that Caesar Augustus has decreed.
But that world does not know what is happening here.
God is entering history,
through the person of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

A helpless child.
But significant enough that,
unknown to those in the world of Caesar Augustus,
the calendar is about to begin again.
God has entered history, and history turns a corner.

But this is not Christmas Eve.

In the Mass of Christmas Day we turn
from the story of the manger
to the hymn of the Word Made Flesh.
    In our imaginations, we lift away from the inn at Bethlehem.
    Perhaps drawn by the bright star in the sky,
    we pull back to view a wider horizon.

"In the beginning," we hear,
and we know that we are being drawn back in time
to the moment of creation.

As in the pictures that by now we have become accustomed to,
    we see the earth from a distance,
    and the other planets in a vast circling dance around the sun.

And we see the sun in its circle around the galaxy,
    and we think about the vastness of creation,
    and its severe beauty,
        like the beauty of a clear, crisp winter morning.

And we move from the human side of the Incarnation
to the side that is Divine,
    as John tells us of the prehistory of the Word.

And we know that he is drawing on the Jewish tradition of Wisdom,
the personification of God's expansive generosity,
    God's need to share the bounty,
    to enter into relationships
    —the impulse that issued forth in creation.

And Wisdom, Sophia, was the model and the plan
for relating and communicating with another.
    And this need was made complete
    with the creation of other intelligences.

We do not know if there are other intelligent beings in the universe.
    We have been busily sending out messages
    in the form of résumés and questions.

We have interrogated the nearby worlds for earthlike planets,
and signs of what we think of as intelligence.
But so far, no sign, as yet.

But we know that the mindfulness that is ours
has given self-awareness to the universe.
Through us the world knows itself.
Sophia, Wisdom, is the emblem of that knowledge.

We know that with Philo, the feminine Sophia
became the masculine Logos, Word.

And we know that some, like Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza,
see this as the masculine usurpation of the feminine spirit.
And others, such as Elizabeth Johnson,
seeing that we are given a Son, understand John
to be interpreting him with feminine qualities of Wisdom.

Whichever way we wish to take this, we hear today of the Word,
with God since creation, now become flesh.

In addition to the human side of Incarnation,
we celebrate the divine side as well.

When we speak of God the Creator, and the Word of God Incarnate,
we cannot help but think of, and celebrate, the Holy Spirit,
and we experience the Spirit in community.

And we know that this is a new day for this community as well,
as it enters into the time of chapter and election of new leadership.
And we pray that the Creative, Wise Spirit
may be present in the new day that follows.

Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

December 29, 3013

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14
Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4
Colossians 3:12-21
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

When we celebrate this feast each year we cannot help but remember
that the Franciscans of Dubuque are dedicated to the Holy Family.
And it invites us to consider what that implies.

It seems that this feast, instituted in 1921,
was intended to counter contemporary social pressures
on the institution of the family.
The Holy Family includes Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,
as we have learned from childhood.

We have also come to know this as the nuclear family.
The nuclear family is familiar to us today
as two parents and their children,
often statistically numbered at 2.5.

However, sociologists inform us that the nuclear family
became the model in the modern times
of early industrialization and capitalism,
when it became a financially viable social unit.

Before that the model of the family was the extended family.
As it has been said, it takes a village to raise a child.

Certainly in the early Mediterranean world the village,
where often everyone was related,
was an important measure of the family.
We see this in the Gospel story we have in some years,
that tells of the twelve-year-old Jesus
missing from the caravan leaving Jerusalem,
and not having it noticed for three days.

In our world, as in other times,
the family is often fluid and changing.
    However, the nuclear family remains in our minds as the nucleus,
    the idealized center of what family means.

But there is another voice in our tradition.

It appears in the third Eucharistic Prayer, when it says,
    "Listen graciously to the prayers of this family,
    whom you have summoned before you: in your compassion,
        O merciful Father, gather to yourself
        all your children scattered throughout the world."

Who is this "family"? First of all, those gathered here.
This assembly.
    Secondly, those scattered throughout the world,
    called God's children.

How are we, and they, family?
Is this a metaphor? It seems like it is.
    The dictionary defines family as a group of blood relations,
    in the present and extending into the past.
    So it seems a metaphor.

But in saying we are God's family,
it seems to me that it is taking as its model the extended family.
    Extended in this case as far as possible;
    stretched to the very horizons.

In today's Gospel, however, we do not hear Luke's story
of the young Jesus and his family visiting the temple.
    Rather, we have Matthew's story of the flight to Egypt.

So what does it mean that the family is in flight?
    Some will see here an image
    of the beleaguered institution of the family today,
        and remind us that this feast is to be a safeguard
        against current developments.

There is a homily there that I need not deliver
since you have already sketched it out in your minds.

But there is something else to notice, as well.
And that is how the family here identifies
with the refugee families in history,
and so prominently in our own time.

The family in the Gospel is a refugee family,
escaping political turmoil.
They travel to Egypt, the site from which
their ancestors, under Moses, escaped from political turmoil.

Today refugees are so common a thing (15.4 million worldwide)
that they occasionally make the news.

Some of these are:

- Refugees from Syria, recently finding themselves unable to enter US.

  "The Syrian crisis has exploded
  from about 270,000 people a year ago
  to today's tally of more than two million
  who have fled the country." (NYT)

- Lampedusa, and refugees from Africa and Middle East.
  ("The southern door to Europe")

  John Allen:
  "On Oct. 3, a boatload packed
  with more than 500 Eritrean men, women and children
  capsized off Lampedusa and caught fire,
  with just 155 survivors and 364 dead bodies recovered.

  In itself, there was nothing unusual in the disaster,
  as more than 20,000 people are believed to have perished
  over the last decade making the 70-mile crossing.
  Given the staggering numbers of dead this time, however,
  the incident made global headlines."

P. Francis has made this a special mission of his,
in his role as Bishop of Rome, visiting it in July,
in his only trip outside Italy so far.

- Palestinian refugees: one in three, worldwide.
  6.5 million today.

In addition to refugees, we should count —

- IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons—
  persons displaced within their own country: 28.8 million)
- Asylum-Seekers (893,700+)
- Stateless People (those without a nationality—an unknown number)

As we have been reminded repeatedly in recent months,
the Gospel invites us to look at the world through the eyes of the poor,
rather than through stock ledgers
or the pages of celebrity magazines.
This turns things around for many of us.

Today that call takes a particular shape,
as it looks at the poor who find themselves
in circumstances of dislocation.
For them it means little chance of escaping
or surviving that situation.

For us, it implies a posture of advocacy.
What we can do is known only to us.

In the end, the image of the Holy Family is one of relatedness,
of our human need to depend upon and trust one another
in order to reach the fullness and maturity each is called toward.
Family is the name of what carries us forward,
and it comes in many forms.

The Octave Day of the Nativity of the Lord
Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God

January 1. 2014

Numbers 6:22-27	The blessing of Aaron
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8	Let his face shine upon us
Galatians 4:4-7	Abba! Father
Luke 2:16-21	Shepherds and Circumcision

The beginning of the year.
Circumcision.
Octave of the Nativity.
Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.
Time for New Year Resolutions.
Today is many days.

Here at the turning of the year we look backward and forward.
We look back to the year past almost obsessively in our media outlets.
And we also position ourselves for the year to come,
whatever that may be.

We begin the New Year with a blessing, the blessing of Aaron,
which stands at the beginning like an opening prayer for the year.

And we look back, as the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God,
draws a theological conclusion to the Christmas event.
The title began as a shorthand way
of affirming the divinity of Jesus the Christ.
If her human son was also divine, then Mary was the Mother of God.
Her title was an faith affirmation about her son.

In Luke's account of the Infancy events,
we find him looking backward, with John the Baptist,
and forward, with Jesus of Nazareth.
The one is the culmination of the era drawing to a close,
the latter the beginning of the new era promised by the prophets.

John makes the point by narrating the first days of each of them
in parallel accounts.

The Angel Gabriel appears to Zachariah,
and then to Mary.
John is born, and then circumcised.
And then we hear of the birth and circumcision of Jesus.

But with a difference.
John's birth is mentioned in two verses,
but his circumcision is subject to major storytelling.
You will remember the discussion
between the neighbors and Zachariah about his son's name,
and how the father's speechlessness was lifted
when he wrote the name JOHN on the tablet.

But with Jesus the emphasis is the opposite.
The birth story is greatly elaborated,
with the census, the inn, the stable, the angels, and the shepherds.
And the account of his circumcision takes only one verse.
It is the last verse of today's gospel reading.

The rest of the gospel winds up the Christmas story,
as we take leave of the shepherds.

We think of the shepherds as finding their way into the story
at the very end.
But more likely it is the other way around.
This is their territory, their home ground.
The stable is part of their world.
They have probably been there many times.
They are not the newcomers here.
It is rather the family that has appeared in the stable
—the couple from Nazareth in Galilee, with their newborn.

Which is to say that the incarnation is taken
to the least honored in the social world.
In this we see a premonition of the *kenosis*, the emptying,
that will lead eventually to the crucifixion.
For shepherds were on the lowest rung of the social ladder.
They actually were not on the ladder at all.

Like the service personnel in our world,
waitresses, check-out people, carwash attendants,
they are there to take care of our needs, and we nod, perhaps,
    but do not think of them as part of our world.
    So were the shepherds in their time.

But here is the Messiah, born among them.
The angels are careful to point that out.
    And they visited the infant lying in the manger, and were amazed.
    And then they disappear from the story.

They disappear in person, but their world does not.
    For this same Jesus will later be seen
    turning to the marginalized and outcast,
    with a mission to bring them into the shared life of the kingdom.

As a last word, we hear that after eight days
the child was circumcised and given the name Jesus.
    After this, Luke will stop calling him "the child"
    and simply call him "Jesus."
        It is the event that afterward we would call a christening.

Luke doesn't make much of the fact that Jesus was circumcised.
    However, we know that this day was for a long time
    known as the feast of the Circumcision.
But it shows the infant entering his life as a faithful Jew.
    And this adds one more note to the meaning of the Incarnation
    that is taking place in this birth.

Jesus and his family—his mother Mary, Joseph—were Jews.
    Which is to say that we are not simply celebrating
    the divine become human.

It is the divine entering the human world
in a very particular way as Jewish.
    Born of a Jewish young mother.
    It is a very specific time and place, and a specific people
    with a story of their own.
        It is a story of promise and disappointment, and new hope.

Jesus was a devout Jew.
We will shortly see him as a young boy,
traveling with his family to the temple,
as devout Jews did at different times of their lives,
circumstances permitting.

And in his religious world he was a layperson,
said to be of the family of David, though not in royal circumstances.
Not of the family of Aaron, so not a priest,
but one in whom God is entering the world in a personal way.

So now we know where to find Jesus, if we are looking.
Not, it seems, where we might expect.

God comes into our world in a very particular way,
in particular times and places,
but places and times that we do not expect.

St. Paul provides us with a last word.
In the passage about the tutor, he speaks of the turning of the ages.
"We were," he says, "under custody of the law,"
like the child that is entrusted to a tutor.
When we were not yet of age,
we were "enslaved to the elemental spirits."

"But now," he adds, we are no longer children.
The fullness of time has come.
God has sent his Son, born of Mary, born under the law.
We are now children of God, and heirs to the kingdom.
The fullness of time has come
and we have come of age.

Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

January 5, 2014

Isaiah 60:1-6	The nations come into the light
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13	Kings bring gifts
Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6	The mystery now revealed
Matthew 2:1-1	The coming of the Magi å

At Christmas we give much of our attention
to the Christmas story as Luke tells it.
Now it is time to turn to Matthew's way of telling the story.

It begins with the Magi.
In the past we have thought about the gifts,
the Solomon-like story of visitors from the east,
following the lead of the Queen of Sheba,
who visited Solomon bringing precious gifts of spices and gold.

But let's turn away from the gifts today,
and look at something else in the story.
Something that does not often get our attention,
even though Matthew seems to want to draw our attention.
I am speaking of the beginning of the story, and the ending.
The arrival of the Magi, and then, their departure.
Coming and going.

Their arrival is full of drama,
with the entire city of Jerusalem stirred up,
and Herod calling for his advisors for a reading.
In remarkable contrast, the departure is quiet and indirect.
But Matthew calls our attention to it,
for he need not have mentioned it at all.

First, the arrival.
When the Magi enter the story from outside,
beyond the horizon of the world of ancient Judea,
things start happening.
This is the message of Matthew's Christmas story.

Their arrival jumpstarts the action of Matthew's account.

It is the beginning of a chain reaction
in which the Holy Family is required to leave Bethlehem,
which is their home in this gospel,
and go as refugees to Egypt.

And when Herod dies, and they can leave Egypt,
they still find it necessary to avoid Judea,
because Herod's cruel son, Archelaus,
has taken the throne there.

And so they move on to the northern province of Galilee,
to the town of Nazareth.
Here they disappear from view until Jesus is an adult.

So Matthew's Christmas story sets the stage for Jesus public ministry,
which begins in the ancient territory of Zebulon and Naphtali,
called Galilee in Jesus' time.

And he works his way from there down to Jerusalem,
where Matthew describes what we call the Triumphal Entry.
But Matthew adds something unique to his telling:
Upon Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem, we read this:

> And when he entered Jerusalem the whole city was shaken
> and asked, “Who is this?” And the crowds replied,
> “This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

We are asked to remember that first entry into Jerusalem,
when the Magi arrived, and then too the entire city was stirred up.
And this entire sequence of cause and effect began.
Then too there were questions asked about Jesus.
And then too, there was an attempt upon his life.

But now he has returned to Jerusalem,
the city at the center of Judea,
from which he was banished when he was a child.

He has returned to claim boldly the title that is his.

But remarkably unlike other stories of the return of the wronged ruler,
stories like Hamlet, or the Odyssey,
or even modern stories like the Lion King,
there is no large-scale purge of the enemies.
The cleansing of the temple makes a statement,
but no one is actually hurt, much less slaughtered.

Jesus' return, unlike the others, is without retaliation.
At the moment of his arrest, in the Garden,
he teaches us that those who live by the sword will perish by it.

This fits well with Matthew's themes
of nonretaliation, forgiveness, turning the other cheek.
Matthew's teaching of nonviolence is to risk
answering violence with nonviolence, harm with forgiveness.

This response is not always honored.
Just this past week outraged commentators were objecting
to a father's attempt to forgive the murderer of his daughter.
What right did he have to do this? they asked.
Where is the justice?

But in the Gospel, in remarkable contrast
to the hullabaloo at the arrival of the Magi,
there is their quiet, even secretive departure.

Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they departed the country by another way.
But what do we think of this God Matthew shows us,
who has the Magi sneak out of town furtively?
Why this indirection, this lack of taking charge of matters?

I think of this as the God of the Gypsies.
I do not mean that literally, of course.
For me "gypsies" represent a class of people without standing or power,
and who need to be careful in order to survive.
They dare not cross those with actual power and standing in the world,
and so they stick to the back lots and side alleys.
They learn survival skills.

Matthew's God teaches them how to survive without much social leverage,
and in this we get a glimpse of Matthew's community,
his readers, his people.

In other words, we now move behind the story
to the conditions in which the story is being told.
Matthew's world.

In contrast to this God of indirect moves, who shows them
how to get around the power figures without getting hurt,
we have another image of God as all-powerful,
the God who takes direct action, and gets the job done.

We might often think of King Herod as godless.
But his God is all-powerful and power is his God.
If there is a problem in Bethlehem, he has no problem taking care of it,
by removing all possible threats,
in that event we call the slaughter of the innocents.

It would be impossible for Matthew's original readers
to hear this story without thinking of one particular event—
the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.
After all, Herod had the position of king
only because he made a proposal to Rome
that he would work for the Empire in return for making him king.
And they did, and he did.

And Matthew's community lived in the shadow and aftermath
of the great Roman devastation
of the holy city and holy of holies in 70 ad.
It has been described by Jewish thinkers, as "our 9/11."
It changed the world.

It was an object lesson by the empire,
saying "Your God is powerless, unlike our gods,
who can destroy your God's house."
It was a theological statement
in support of violence as a divine attribute.
Everything was different after that.

Matthew is writing some 15 to 20 years after this event.
He is writing against the grain of the culture.
Not too different from our own distance from 9/11.
And, as the current debate about the excesses
of surveillance upon citizens shows,
we also have not yet regained our balance.

Violence and inhumane methods such as torture
still recommend themselves to many of us, in the name of security.
With the necessary adjustments to account
for distances of time and culture, we might perceive
circumstances somewhat similar for Matthew's community.

So this is the world in which Matthew tells his Christmas story.
Writing for a community which in its powerlessness
takes its inspiration from the story of Jesus.
Seeing how in the face of threat he still makes his claim.
How in response to harm or the threat of harm,
he refuses to respond in kind,
asking his followers to do the same.
How preaching forgiveness, he forgives.

Upon the arrival of the Magi, forces are set into play
that try to destroy him.
They fail then.
But he returns with his message and his deliverance, and they succeed.
His nonviolence leaves his opponents in place,
and they rally to have him crucified.

But this is not the final word.
The empty tomb is a witness,
and the resurrection is a divine seal of approval
on Jesus teaching and practice.
Refusing violence is life-giving.

And we? We are invited to stand with those without social standing,
to empower those without power.
To face harmful opposition
without adopting those methods ourselves.
In short, we welcome the coming of Christ into the world.

Feast of the Baptism of The Lord

January 12, 2014

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7	The First Servant Song
Psalm 29:1-4, 3, 9-10	A Storm over Lebanon
Acts 10:34-38	Peter's Address to Cornelius
Matthew 3:13-17	The Baptist explains himself

John the Baptist is concerned about baptizing Jesus.
After all, where is the need for repentance
in the one who models the goal of repentance,
the full, living relationship with God?

So he submits a disclaimer.
"I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?"

Jesus assures his there are reasons and they will suffice.
"To fulfill all righteousness," he says.

And then, as he is baptized,
the Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove,
and a voice from heaven announces that Jesus is the Servant,
about whom we heard in the first reading today.

Matthew is showing us two sides to the baptism event of Jesus.
In another place John distinguishes them:
I baptize with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

John's baptism with water is for repentance.
That is why he is concerned today.
There is no need for repentance in this instance.

But there is another dimension to the baptism event in Jesus' case.
It is the beginning of an era,
a time blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit.
It is the beginning of the story of Jesus
in his ministry to the outcast and the alienated.

Just as the story of Jesus' public life begins with a baptism,
so does the story unfolding in the church year begin with this baptism.

And in a similar way, our own stories as Christians begin with baptism.

We begin a new life with our baptism, and today we celebrate that.
Some of us do not remember the exact date on which we were baptized,
but we have this occasion of renewal that serves, in a way,
that same purpose.

There are two ways of looking at baptism, two theories.
There are what we might call
a thin concept of baptism and a thick concept.

We grew up with a thin concept.
Baptism erased a blot on our souls.
This idea is individualistic, and fairly mechanical.

Probably the strongest proponent of a thick concept of baptism is St. Paul.
For him, the baptized formed a new creation.
While the life that derived from Adam and Eve ended with death,
those who were baptized had gained another life principle,
the Spirit-life of the Risen Christ.

By joining the Body of Christ, we share in his resurrection life.
We have a spiritual body along with our natural one.
Or better, we are part of Christ's spiritual body,
and will live on as a member.

The Christian tradition has not adopted all of Paul's ideas,
but this much shows us that a very strong notion of baptism
is part of our heritage.

In addition, it reminds us that being baptized into new life
means being baptized into a community.
It is a community of new life.

It is this realization behind much of the liturgical renewal
of the Second Vatican Council.

When I was growing up, the Mass seemed to be
an occasion for many private prayers.
All of us were saying our individual prayers,

while the priest up front was saying the sacred prayer of the Mass.

If I were to chart this on a diagram,
it would show many lines connecting the front of the church,
one with each individual member, in a kind of fan.
But there would be no lines between the churchgoers themselves.

The renewal envisioned the participants at the liturgy as a community, and it was a community that was at prayer.
Of course, the community involved many individuals,
but they were a community first and individuals second.
Something like Paul had in mind.

I personally am somewhat of a late-comer
to the appreciation of the communal aspect of our faith.
I have always been a fan of personal freedom and individual expression.
And I suppose in many ways I always will be.

But in recent times I have been impressed
by the impact the failure of communal imagination
can have on our society as well as our faith.

I have seen it in the area of scripture study,
where a private faith can be the sole purpose of reading the bible.
And it is often a private reading that involves little social commitment.
I see it in an attraction to spirituality rather than religion,
which involves other people and their inconvenient truths.

I see it in our culture where we see ourselves as survivalists,
who cannot trust our neighbors.
I see it in our fear and aversion of those who are different.

Community involves interdependence.
It involves trust.
It means picking up the slack when another cannot.
It means covering for one another when times are difficult.
In terms of our baptism, it means shared life.

In a larger way, it implies sharing in the mission of Jesus
reaching out to the world and those in it who need attention,

or help, or basic survival.

In our baptismal commitment to the body of Christ,
we are dedicated to one another, as we are to Christ.
We are committed to one another in Christ.
And we are dedicated to the work and life we find in the Gospel.

It is this that we renew when we renew our baptism.

BEHOLD! THE LAMB OF GOD!

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 19, 2014

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6	The second of the Servant Songs
Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-10	Here I am, Lord
1 Corinthians 1:1-3	The beginning of the letter
John 1:29-34	Behold the Lamb of God

When John saw Jesus coming toward him, he said:
"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

So, at least, we hear from the Gospel of John.
The different Gospels view the Baptist differently.
Luke gives us the most memorable picture,
as he presents John as the cousin of Jesus.
But in John's Gospel we hear him say, "I did not know him."

"I did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water
was that he might be made known."
I did not know him, but the one who sent me
said to watch for the Spirit coming down.

Behold, the Word was made flesh, and dwells among us.
The divine has put aside divine prerogatives to enter our world.

Where would John point today, to show us the presence of Christ,
the presence of the divine in our world?

There are those who say that it is not to be found.

If you spend any time on the Internet
you will know about the new atheism,
those who are rather aggressively making a case against religion.

They favor a mocking tone, but that is not unusual on the Web.
I am convinced that books will have a future despite the digital age,
since we need a forum
where respectful conversations can still take place,
with a concern for honest differences and reasoned arguments.

But this is not so much the case online.

And following that practice, the new atheists claim
to have grounded their convictions in the practice of reason,
mocking those whom they say are lost in superstition.
Why would anyone spend time trying to make sense
of a 2000-year-old-book, anyway?
It makes no sense to them.

Leaving aside the fact that our cultural heritage is millennia old,
both Judaic and Greek,
leaving aside the fact that Homer was a contemporary of David
and Plato of Ezra and Nehemiah,
we recognize that many believe
that anything of value can only be recent.
Since they were born. Or at least since the Enlightenment.

But the new atheism is not the only loud voice in the digital media.
On the other side of the religious question
we have the enthusiasm for Pope Francis.
This is somewhat disconcerting,
and can make a person skeptical.

I agree that a voice on behalf of the poor is an authentic witness.
There is nothing that receives greater attention in the gospels.
If John pointed to Jesus, Jesus pointed to the poor.

Yet I am surprised that so many
who have not until now in my knowledge
shown much enthusiasm for the poor
are acclaiming the new age.

"Behold the Lamb of God," they seem to be saying.

Yet, I can appreciate that some think this is a clever publicity campaign.

Do we remember Greg Burke?
He was the person from Fox News
that was hired by the Vatican to manage public relations
toward the end of Pope Benedict's tenure.
And yet if he is responsible for the new popularity,
why was the good news only with the new pope?

On the other hand, sometimes it seems
that much of the enthusiasm is from those who believe
that Francis is saying that the church
has finally come around to agreeing with their views.

Not that alone.
There is certainly something authentic going on.
But sometimes it seems out of hand.
Recently, a saying has been posted and reposted on Facebook,
quoting Pope Francis to the effect that there is no literal hell.

This seemed dubious to me, since we all know
that the Pope has not made any doctrinal statements,
except to reaffirm them.

Working back through various versions of this posting,
I came to what seemed to be the original.
It was an obvious satire.
It began by saying that we are now
in the sixth month of the Third Vatican Council,
and several prominent Cardinals have left the church.
Somewhere down the line was the statement about literal hell.

The story was being passed around
by some with little knowledge of the Catholic world.
The Internet is a vast echo chamber.
And things get repeated without ever being confirmed.

But, of course, when we hear the words,
"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,"
there is something with which we associate it immediately.
And that would be the words before communion,
when the priest holds up the host: Behold the Lamb of God.

What do we make of this statement?
Perhaps we see here a affirmation of belief in the Real Presence,
the presence of the Risen Christ in the Eucharist.
It is surely that, at the very least.

But there would seem to be more.
For instance, a person named John Garvey,
who I believe is the same John Garvey that,
with Margaret Quigley, in the city of Davenport,
started the first Catholic Worker in Iowa some 40 years ago
—this John Garvey had a piece in the Notre Dame magazine recently.
In it he talked about the Eucharist,
and how it was his source of life in the church.
It was an eloquent piece.

I think this is true for more than him,
and is another, perhaps more profound, way of saying today,
"Behold the Lamb of God."
And it is part of the meaning of those words in the liturgy.

But I think implied in all of this
is something that persons of faith know and feel
but cannot find ways of easily expressing.
The Eucharist is a sacrament, and as such is a sign,
Is it not a sign that takes us beyond this moment,
beyond this place?
Is it not a door, a portal perhaps, into mystery?

It opens up into a world beyond that we can only sense,
but it touches us and gives us a hint of what can be.
A sense of what is, far beyond our sensory abilities.

We recognize and can appreciate the arguments of the new atheists,
but are not tempted to go there,
because of this sense, this knowledge we have.

We can look with wonder upon the media romance with the new pope,
and rejoice in it, without making it the basis of our commitment.
Because we stand on firmer ground,
we know that the mystery is deeper and broader,
and this only points to it.

We hear the words of John,
and discover that they open into unsuspected mystery.

Is not our persistence in the faith
grounded in this sense of being involved in this mystery,
beyond our full awareness,
but somehow there and convincingly so?

"Behold the Lamb of God," says John,
pointing to someone that will lead us where we have not yet been.
But we know that there is where we want to be.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 26, 2014

Isaiah 8:23-9:3	Galilee, first lost, first regained
Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14	The Lord is my light and salvation
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17	Paul confronts factions in Corinth
Matthew 4:12-23	Jesus begins his ministry and calls four

Across the history of Israel, interrupting it, lay a vast chasm,
like a massive scar in the earth.
Think the Grand Canyon.
Of course, Israel did not know of the Grand Canyon,
but they had the great rift valley of the Jordan,
an immense channel from the Sea of Galilee
down to the Sinai Peninsula.

The great scar in Israel's history was the Babylonian Exile.
In the middle of the sixth century B.C.,
the people of Judah were taken into captivity for 50 years.

They left a kingdom behind, and returned a purified faith community.
But around that deep scar in their story
the words and images clustered.
Like bandages around a wound, the stories and poetry of the people
relieved the pain and searched for meaning.
They found promise of a future return
in the story of Moses and the Exodus.

The Red Sea stood for all the barriers against their return,
and yet it was overcome.
Now the great desert stood between the exiles and Jerusalem.
So maybe they could return a second time.

Collected, these writings were the foundation of what became the Bible.
It began as repentance, promise, and hope of restoration.

But this wasn't the first such trauma.
Nearly 150 years earlier, during the time of another empire, Assyria,
the northern of the two kingdoms of Israel was under threat.
The land of Amos and Hosea, Elijah and Elisha,
was targeted by the rise of Assyria.

They were able to rescue some of their literature and cultural items
and bring them south to the Jerusalem temple.
But unlike Judah later, northern Israel was thoroughly crushed.
That destruction stood as a lesson for Judah later.

But even that was not the first time.
Some 15 years before its destruction,
Israel experienced a warning, a shot across the bow.
The emperor of Assyria, learning that Israel and Damascus
were plotting resistance, moved in with his army, to teach a lesson.
To chastise them he appropriated part of Israel's territory,
namely the land of the two northernmost tribes
—Zebulon and Naphtali.
In the long history of dismantling Israel, these were the first to go.

And yet, as we heard from Isaiah in the first reading for today,
hope of their restoration survived.

For the next six centuries,
the northern territories were inhabited by other peoples.
In the time of Jesus it was known as Galilee—Galilee of the Gentiles.

Shortly before Jesus' time, during a time of Judean prosperity,
Galilee was regained.
A couple of generations before,
the parents and grandparents of Joseph and Mary,
sponsored by the Judean government in Jerusalem,
were among those who resettled in the northern land of Galilee.
In Luke we see them visiting their relatives back in Judea.
Galilee was becoming Jewish once again.

This is where matters stood when Matthew picks up the thread.
Matthew adds his own touches to the story of Jesus.
In his account, Jesus experiences his own exile.

The family lives in Bethlehem.
But when the Magi come into the picture, and alert Herod,
the family finds it necessary to leave the territory.
They are refugees, first in Egypt.
But when they find they cannot go back to Judea,

they turn north to Galilee, to a rather new town called Nazareth.

In Matthew's story they disappear into Nazareth.
And only now, in today's gospel reading,
does Jesus emerge from Nazareth, to begin his public life.

He will eventually return to Judea, and Jerusalem. But not yet.
Today we see that long return just beginning.
To mark the beginning, Matthew reaches far back into history,
and recalls Isaiah's promise about Zebulon and Naphtali.
The first land lost is now the place where the return begins.

In the liturgy today, we stand at the beginning of Jesus story,
presented to us as promise and restoration.
The fulfillment of the promise will be told in the coming months,
as the restoration unfolds, but not as expected.
The kingdom is completely re-imagined in the gospel's account.
The promise is kept, but only for those
who will be able to recognize it in its new shape,
its new appearance.

As in the gospel and the liturgical year,
we too stand in a posture of promise and hope of restoration.
It shows itself in many places of our lives.

As a world we see the hope of many peoples,
a dream of political equality expressing itself
in protests and revolts as well as peaceful movements.
This week Cairo and Kiev are experiencing the pain of the promise.
Also, the Winter Olympics are under threat.

We are experiencing weather phenomena
that sharpen our concerns for the sustainable future of the planet.
And yet the fact of our awareness is itself a sign of hope,
as well as anxiety.

As a nation we are split down the middle
with two different visions of the promise for us as a people.
Currently, the theme of economic inequality,
a primary theme of P. Francis, is getting notice,

as President Obama makes it an objective for the coming year.
And as the World Economic Forum meets in Davos, Switzerland,
the pope has sent a message encouraging their action in this area.
Some have expressed hope.

In the church, we have been experiencing a springtime of sorts.
Here too what seemed unpromising material for any change
is offering reasons for hope.

It is the practice of the church, gathered in worship,
to look to the past for instruction,
for signs of encouragement, for guidance.
We look to Matthew and Isaiah.
As Matthew looked to Isaiah,
and Isaiah looked to Moses and the other stories of the past.
We sketch a future by borrowing lessons from the past.

There we learn that the fulfillment of the promise always comes.
But it frequently arrives in disguise, in unexpected appearances.

That may be happening today.
I will let an incident be my evidence.

A friend of mine, Dustin, is from the millennial generation.
He is just 30.
He is a Catholic, but I doubt that he has been in a church
since the funeral of his father, 3 years ago.
But Dustin told me recently that the pope has an active Twitter account.
He knows because he follows it faithfully.
It turns out that the pope has over 3 million followers on Twitter.
"Almost as many as Justin Bieber," says Dustin wryly,
not wanting to appear too serious.

I am somewhat startled as well as amused to hear all this.
And I am reminded that when the promise is fulfilled,
it will not be as I had imagined it to be.

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 9, 2014

Isaiah 58:7-10	Share your bread with the hungry
Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9	A light for the upright
1 Corinthians 2:1-5	Not human wisdom, but divine power
Matthew 5:13-16	Salt of the earth, light of the world

Is it a coincidence that the image of light appears in the liturgy,
as we grow tired of the long nights and the cold,
and the sun is beginning to make its reappearance in longer days?

Images usually appear in the Sunday Scriptures,
as liturgy planners know.
But we usually are not looking for images,
but rather, truths of doctrine. Or moral prescriptions.
In any case, not usually images.

But today it is clear: images rule.
Sharing bread. Light for the world. Salt of the earth.
To represent this, we have our liturgical symbols.
Candle and bread.

Light pervades the readings.
Share your bread with the hungry and light will shine for you.
Here the light is breaking, dawning.
And then turning into midday.
You are the light.

What is it about light? It occurs to me that it has other symbolic uses besides that of vision.

Take the candles that we have in the liturgy.
They may have had a practical value at one time,
but that time is long gone.
Now they represent something else.
They are signs. But of what?

To say that they were once needed before electricity
provides an historical explanation.
But that only answers, or attempts to answer,

why they were once used.

It doesn't answer the obvious fact
that we now have electricity and candles are no longer needed.
And yet we still use them.

If we ask why they were not retired,
the answer may be that the liturgy doesn't easily let go of things.
But this again avoids the question.
To say it is a tradition seems to be saying that tradition is irrational.
Or is there more to it?

When we look at the history of the use of candles,
we are presumably attempting to find some meaning for them.
Perhaps it relates us to the community in its past.

Yesterday the Olympics began in Sochi.
The Olympic torch is a clear example
of the use of light for other purposes.
"Passing the torch" is one of our common idioms.
But what is behind it?

There seems to be some connection
with an ancient Greek torch race called Lampadedromia.
As a relay, it suggests successive responsibilities
for keeping the flame alive.
While the torch gives light,
it also needs to be maintained, guarded, cared for,
at each stage of its being handed on.

So continuity of fidelity and responsible stewardship
might turn out to be one valid meaning of the symbol.

At the Easter Vigil, we have to turn out the lights
in order to have the Easter candle light up the place.
Isn't that peculiar?
We have to turn out the lights
in order to see the light that is supposedly lighting the world?
Turning out the lights threatens to be as much of a symbol
as the light itself.

And of course the reason is that
the ability to harness electricity has changed our world,
as nighttime images from space dramatically demonstrate.
    Civilizations and their cities are outlined
    in illuminated diagrams around the darkened earth.

The energy that lights the human world today
is expressed in many forms of energy.
    In today's digital world, one of these
    is the interconnectedness of social media,
    especially the internet and its World Wide Web.
Here it performs the illuminative function of sharing information
that was dependent on light in the ancient world.
    It is, in effect, an expansion of the light.

No more persuasive example of this can be found today
    than in the world wide influence of Pope Francis,
    who is a favorite of today's digital media.

Today the passage from Isaiah
speaks of sharing your bread with the hungry,
and then opens up that image to larger dimensions.
    It is equivalent, the passage tells us, to satisfying the afflicted,
    to sheltering the oppressed and the homeless,
    to clothing the naked.
        Sharing your bread is shorthand for all of this.
        Works of mercy. Acts of charity and love.

Do this, it says, and your light will break forth like the dawn.
Expanding upon this in the Sermon on the Mount,
    Jesus adds: You are the light of the world.

It doesn't seem likely, however,
that works of mercy should be game changers.
    World wonders.

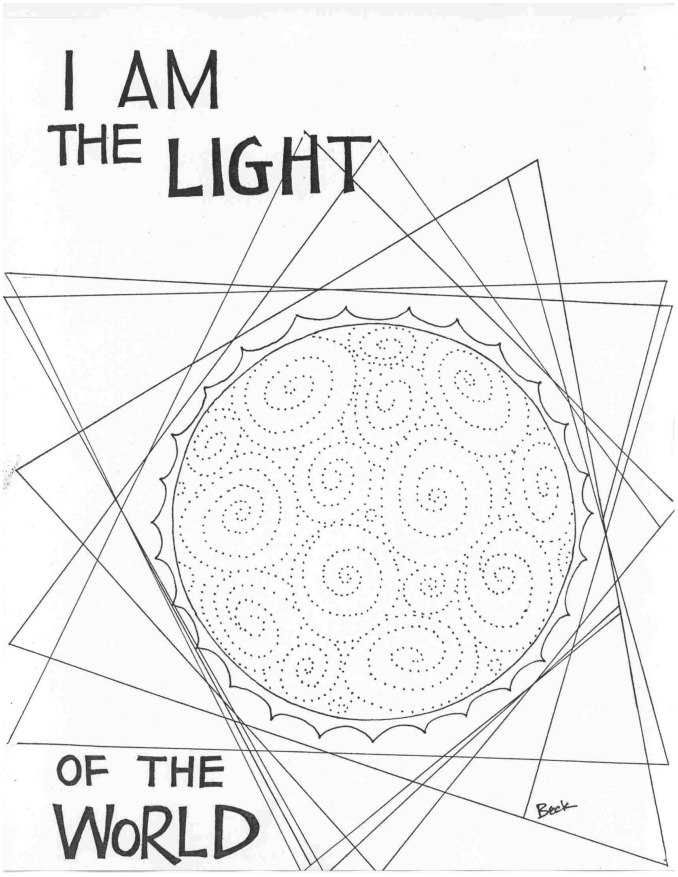
But what is P. Francis doing?
Any web search will list the representative acts:
    he embraced the disfigured man,

washed the feet of women and Muslims,
refused to judge gays.
Signs and symbols. And powerful.

Maybe surprisingly so.
Who knew that Facebook, Twitter, and the larger world
were waiting for this?
Who knew it would fill such a hunger for meaning?

The symbols of the liturgy placed on the altar table
are bread and wine, and lighted candles.
Each is a sign and a promise.
Each is a symbolic description of who we are
and what our meaning is as Christians.

It is ourselves that we celebrate,
and it is our service we promise.
Today we are reminded of that.



Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 16, 2014

Sirach 15:15-20	The commandments will save you
Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34	Blessed are they who follow the law
1 Corinthians 2:6-10	Not a wisdom of this age
Matthew 5:17-37	But I say to you...

I come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it,
Jesus tells us in today's Gospel,
entering into one of the more famous sections
of the Sermon on the Mount.

But haven't we always thought
that Christianity had left behind legalism,
that we were not law-driven, but love-inspired?
So why this sudden insistence on law,
and in the Sermon on the Mount, of all places?

Of course, as we heard, the lesson doesn't stop there,
but passes on to some examples. Famous examples.

But these today seem a random selection,
and not a systematic consideration of law and its imperatives.

So I had some questions,
and as we all do today when we have questions,
I turned to the internet for answers.
And there I found some answers—not *on* the internet,
but *in* the very existence of the internet itself.

What do I mean? Consider the words of the Sermon.

You have heard it was said, "Do not kill."
I say anyone angry with a brother or sister is liable to judgment.
Whoever calls another, "Raca," or "You fool," will be liable.

But what I found on the internet is a raucus cacophony of voices.
On Facebook, a colleague who favors the terms "idiot" and "moron"
to characterize any who disagree with his religious views.

On the media websites, comments on articles
that favor language such as “feminazi” and “democrat” with a “k.”
Not exactly RACA, but pretty close.

Jesus warns about looking with lust on another.
What did I find about the internet?
I needn’t remind you that viewing pornography
is probably the most common use of the internet.
And we know about people doing time in prison
for items discovered on their computers.
A couple of my own acquaintances are doing time right now.
Good and generous persons, but something went wrong.

Jesus tells us that using oaths to affirm
that we are speaking the truth would be an unnecessary practice,
if we always spoke the truth.
There would be no need to insist that this time
we are not exaggerating or misrepresenting.

What did I find on the internet?
It seems that what is posted there is not always true.
We all have heard of bullying that takes place there,
sometimes leading young people to desperate measures.
Wikipedia is very helpful,
but is commonly falsified by contentious contributors.
Rumors without basis in fact go “viral,” as they say.
Interesting word, “viral,” with its overtones of disease.
P. Francis, for one, is widely credited with things he never said,
but some people wish he would.

I’ve always felt that the instances in the gospel
were random selections, rather hit and miss.
But after my internet “research,”
I think I discovered a surprising consistency.
These have something in common.
They all find a home online.

There seem to be a number of reasons this is true.
A lack of consequences for one’s actions is a part of this.

Another might be the sense of power
that an unlimited audience can provide.

But I would like to think about just one:
the anonymity that is conferred, say, by an online screen name.
It leads to the others, I suspect.
When nobody is watching, I needn't worry
about the consequences of my actions.

But I think there is something else.

Somewhere along the line I have learned
to distinguish between guilt and shame.

Briefly put, guilt is the consequence of doing something wrong;
shame is the consequence of knowing
that somebody has seen me do something wrong.

It's that third party that makes the difference.
But anonymity takes the third party out of the picture.
Nobody is watching.

The Sermon on the Mount is sometimes called
the ethical teaching of Jesus.
I think there may be a clue to that ethic here.
I think it may be in our experience of freedom.
Ethical acts are free acts;
shame-driven actions, not so much.

For instance, think of the dispute
about surveillance cameras in public places.
They are felt to be a constraint on our freedom.
A third party is watching.
Our sense of shame is activated, and our freedom is impaired.

Or think of the classic childhood experience
of being told to do something
just when you had decided to do it on your own.
"You're not leaving here until you clean your room."
"Aw, Mom, I was just going to do that."

Translation: You turned my free act into something else entirely.

Much of our behavior is motivated by shame
—not wanting to be seen as doing something, well, shameful.
The internet is teaching us that, by default.

Ethical action, however, depends on doing what one ought to do,
and not on what one wants to be seen doing.

The Sermon on the Mount is a call to ethical life.
In moving beyond, or behind, the laws of the Ten Commandments,
to the impulses that cause us to adhere to the law, or not,

Jesus focuses on ethic, not shame.
We are called to be ethical persons,
in a community characterized by that.

We are called to be a community
doing the good and speaking the truth,
because that is what they are.
And not because it looks and sounds good.
And then, paradoxically enough,
we will influence the lives of others.

Then we will be the light of the world, as we heard earlier.
Then we will be the salt of the earth.

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 23, 2014

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18	Be holy as I your God am holy
Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13	The Lord is kind and merciful
1 Corinthians 3:16-23	You are the temple of God
Matthew 5:38-48	Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Thomas Merton, in his essay "Nonviolence and the Christian Conscience,"
quotes an American newsmagazine writing about Lee Harvey Oswald,
shortly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy,

The quote: "Oswald was a lone wolf whose background
showed he was inclined to nonviolence
up to a point where his mind apparently snapped."

In his essay, Merton is trying to understand
American distrust and misunderstanding of nonviolence.
He was struck by the contradictory nonsense of the magazine report.

The assassination occurred 50 years ago this past November 22.
What have we learned since? You know as well as I.

In the news this past week, among everything else,
was renewed interest in Florida's Stand Your Ground laws.

First, it was George Zimmerman killing Trevor Martin.
More recently it was the trial of Michael Dunn
who killed the teenager Jordan Davis because of loud music.
In neither case was the victim armed.
Both of these victims were young black men,
so racism and its weird fears are also part of the issue here.

And then there is also the theater killing in Tampa of Chad Oulson
by the retired police captain, Alan Hamilton,
in a dispute about texting in public.
One of the mantras of the IRA
is that the best protection from the bad guys with guns
is good guys with guns.
Where then do we place retired police captains?

Primary among the events that intervened
between Kennedy's death and our own time is, of course,
the mass killings that for us go by the name of 9/11.
    It ushered in a new age in which expectations differed,
    in which our mutual relationships of trust notably shifted.
        Our airports and national monuments still reel from the impact.

Dam 11 in Dubuque, to pick one example,
has never been fully opened to the public since.

This impressionistic sketch of our times is offered here
as one effort to appreciate Matthew's message for today.
    His portrait of Jesus advising nonretaliation and love of enemies
    was not without its disruptive cultural echoes in his own time.

Matthew used Mark's earlier work as a main source.
But much had happened since Mark wrote his gospel.
    Most significantly, Jerusalem and its temple
    had been destroyed by the Roman army, in 70 A.D.

For the Jewish world—
and Matthew and his community were distinctly Jewish
—this changed everything.
    The center of their world had been dismantled and the remnants burnt.
    The burnt place remained as a reminder and reprimand.

When I was working with Matthew's Gospel
on the way to writing "Banished Messiah,"
    I came across a quote by a contemporary Jewish authority
    who described the loss of the city and temple as "our 9/11."

I lost track of the quote,
since it was only later that it began to play upon my mind,
and I realized its implications.
    The trauma was deep and permanent.
    The climate had changed.

It is in this altered climate that Matthew writes his gospel,
including the Sermon on the Mount and the passage we heard today.
    Turn the other cheek—and do not retaliate evil done.

Love your enemies.

Matthew, I realized, was writing in a social climate similar to our own.
Violence was the order of the day.

Rome had delivered a lesson that was theological as well as punitive.
Our gods are superior to yours, it said.
Violence is the mark of the superior god, it said.
Violence is the only answer, the ultimate realism of our world.
The only thing that will protect us from armed bad guys
are well-armed good guys.

In the face of all of this, Matthew is compelled
to revive and assert Jesus' teaching about nonviolence,
about nonretaliation against harm done, about loving one's enemies.
Who is still willing to listen?

And then he adds: Be perfect, as your God is perfect.

Donald Senior, the recently retired president of the Chicago Union,
and editor of the Catholic Study Bible,
insists that this verse tells us that Matthew's vision
is one of a nonviolent God.

If so, it is a remarkable affirmation
in the face of the burnt place at the center of Judaism,
the remains of Rome's massive demonstration
that true divinity is militant and mighty.

And it would seem that Matthew himself is conflicted.
A difficult thing about this gospel,
and one that I found necessary to contend with,
is Matthew's depiction of God's stern justice.

It is Matthew who tells us about those at the crucifixion telling Pilate,
"His blood be upon us and upon our children."
This verse has occasioned much Christian anti-semitism in the past,
and even today. I can show you the Christian websites.

It is Matthew that gives us the parable about the unforgiving servant,

who will himself be forgiven only on the condition
that he forgive unconditionally.

And then there are the harsh endings of Matthew's version of the parables.
The Dominican, Barbara Reid, is among those
who have struggled with their implications.
Those disciples who do not do as Jesus requires
will be cast out into the outer darkness
where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.
This does not sound like a nonviolent God.

And yet we have today's message:
Do not retaliate. Love your enemies. Be perfect as God is perfect.

Like everyone who has written about this theme in Matthew,
I too have found it necessary to struggle with these texts.
My own provisional conclusion
regards Matthew as a person of his time.
Having absorbed the lessons of the day,
perhaps even without fully processing the implications,
he faithfully promotes the teaching of Jesus,
working it out as best he can.
Was the God who thus enforced justice also nonviolent?
Yes, and maybe no.

Here Flannery O'Connor helped me out.
This Catholic Southern writer has a novel called
"The Violent Bear It Away."
The title is based on a verse in the eleventh chapter of Matthew.
The passage concerns John the Baptist
and his place in the Christian scheme of things,
and it is a famous problem text for Matthew's vision.

Flannery O'Connor's novel shows the protagonist, young Tarwater,
returning to his home to burn it down, in an act of retributive justice.
Those of us who are shocked and find this unchristian
will be surprised to find in O'Connor's letters
that she does not share our views.

We are among those whom she wishes

to shock out of our complacent existence.
She wants us to realize the transcendent reality of God,
beyond all human categories.
Her use of violence is an effective tool for reconstructing
the disorienting effect of encountering the transcendent divine reality.
It is the shock of the Other, the distinctly and thoroughgoing Other.

And yet I think Matthew is taking it one better.
Using violence to describe something beyond our conventional reality
delivers an ambiguous message.
Our conventions, after all, are quite comfortable with violence.
We praise it, we defend it.
Violence is a page from our culture.

For Matthew, however, the shock of the Other
is represented rather by nonviolence and nonretaliation.
In this case, there interposes no comforting, or confusing,
endorsement of the cultural norms.
There is only surprise and shock.
Nonviolence is an unthinkable norm; it is unrealistic.

And yet, Matthew presents it as a requirement for the disciple.
Be perfect as your God is perfect.

First Sunday of Lent

March 9, 2014

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7	Adam and Eve, and the Serpent
Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17	Wipe out my offense
Romans 5:12-19	The First Adam and the Second
Matthew 4:1-11	The Desert Temptation

Pope Francis has a dilemma.
He is frustrated by the heroic treatment he is given.
In Italy it is known as *Francescomania*,
and most conspicuously manifested by a downtown mural
depicting him as a superhero, cape and all.
It is a parable of his reception in the wider world.

He insists he is a normal human being.
"The pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps calmly
and has friends like everyone else. Normal person."
But here is his frustration:
The more normal he shows himself,
the more he becomes a celebrity.

It seems to me that the messianic temptations in today's gospel
relate rather directly to this kind of religious dilemma.
One way to see this is to relate the three temptations
to the three offerings representing the injunctions of Ash Wednesday—
when you give alms, or fast, or pray, do so in secret
where your gift is not displayed for all to see.

First, of all turning stones to bread is explicitly connected to fasting.
"He fasted for forty days and forty nights,
and afterwards he was hungry."

Fasting can be an exercise in self-denial.
Turning stones to bread frustrates this objective.
Self-denial would be more than earning something by suffering,
as if suffering were a good in itself,
or that it would create a debt in which God owed me something.

Rather, it would be about refusing to place my own needs first.

Fasting is a sign of humility
and a recognition of my frailty and vulnerability.
It puts aside my customary pretense of being entirely self-sufficient.
It is Pope Francis insisting he is a normal person.
And, as he said in another place, a sinner.

Almsgiving is how religion is directed towards helping others.
Jumping from the temple parapet
is a questionable mode of religious fervor,
a strange way to demonstrate faith as trust in God.
The entire episode raises the question
of what are the best practices in worship.

It raises the question of the role of display
as a means of religious expression.
Jesus says to do so in secret.
Francis objects to images of himself flying through the air
like Superman, cape flying.
There has to be more to it than this.

Jesus advises us to pray in secret.
As the spirit of imperial conquest,
Satan makes Jesus a related but contrasting offer.
Worship me and I will give you the nations of the world.

The question of true worship is surely about where we place our values.
Worship to gain power over the nations,
whatever we understand by that prize, is to make a trade-off.
I will give you my soul, if you give me my desire.
But prayer in secret makes no public case, no claims to power.
It converses in private, and tells the truth.

In general, the desert temptations
present an image of false messiahship,
and false discipleship in the name of the Messiah.
It is not about making a display,
but rather about re-ordering my self-understanding.
It is less about my approval by others
than it is about my relationship with God.
It is not about personal vanity,

but rather allowing oneself to engage
with the true issues of our lives and our world.

In terms of Francis's dilemma,
it is not allowing frivolous spectacle to crowd out what is serious.

I am going to make bold to use as an example
a dream I had recently, the night of Ash Wednesday.
While dreams are scattered and random from the perspective of logic,
they are very clear in their emotional messages.
So it was with this one.

At one point, I, and perhaps some others,
were watching short trains of a couple cars, or maybe buses, thunder by.
It was night, and we were in something of a station,
but they were in a hurry and didn't stop.

As they passed through, I heard a meaningless chant, of 1-2-3-4.
But it seemed cheerful, and the feeling was that
of a mob of fans heading toward the state tournament
to support their basketball team.

But this changed.
I began to hear voices I knew, calling from the train,
to tell me to watch out, that they would be coming for me too.

And then the chant, 1-2-3-4, turned into something else entirely,
something deeply menacing.
It was the chant of a hostile and deadly ideology
that opposed all that I believed in,
and I understood that I too was targeted
and I must flee or pay the consequences.
I woke up with my heart doing something of a tapdance.

What I realized on waking was that I was just given
a glimpse into what life felt like for those who lived in hostile societies,
under tyrannical governments, around this world.
It was as if the dream was telling me
that there were matters of much more importance
than those with which I typically troubled myself.

And here I again thought of Pope Francis,
disturbed at what they are making of him.
I thought about his history of being in a position of authority,
in a society that felt like my dream.

We cheer for him and love his unassuming humility,
his plain humanness.

But we do not know in any real way his experience
of being head of the Jesuits in Argentina,
when innocent people, some of them his personal friends,
were "disappeared," as they say,
suddenly arrested in the middle of the night,
to be lifted out to sea in a helicopter
and dumped into the ocean to perish.

I thought, no wonder he is frustrated.
He wants to draw attention to those of the world
who live in desperate, life-threatening conditions.
Some because of deadening poverty,
some because of ruthless regimes.
And what he gets is graffiti murals depicting him as a superhero.
Not what he is after.

And with this, I think, we have a sense of Jesus' desert temptations.
He is beginning his mission,
and Satan sets out for him a possible messianic program.
However, it contrasts dramatically with what he is going to do.

Lent, which begins with this story of trial in the desert,
concludes in Holy Week with the trial in the garden of Gethsemane.
Once again Jesus undergoes a trial,
and once again affirms a mission contrary
to the one Satan proposes, despite the costs.

And I suspect that Matthew repeated this story
of Jesus' trials in the desert
because they had something to say to the disciples of the Messiah,
who attempted to out the program that Jesus envisioned.

These temptations are our own, and we are reminded of that as we enter this season of self-review and renewal.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 16, 2014

Genesis 12:1-4	Call and Covenant of Abraham
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22	Let your mercy be upon us.
2 Timothy 1:8-10	He called us to a holy life.
Matthew 17:1-9	The Transfiguration of Jesus

Have you ever noticed
that there is no report of the Apostles being baptized?
We have a record of Jesus receiving baptism at the hands of John.
And for that matter, your baptism and mine are on record.
Where do we hear about the Apostles' baptism?

Maybe today's Gospel is as close as it gets.
Let me explain.
It begins with the baptism of Jesus.
The gospel tells of a voice from heaven that says,
"This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

That announcement consists of bible quotations.
The two main quotes are from Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1.
As no doubt you have heard me say many times,
the first of these is a passage about the coming Messiah.
It frames that expectation of the coming king
in bold terms of power politics.
The Messiah will be ruthless and unforgiving.

But the second quote modifies this, almost beyond recognition,
in citing the suffering Servant of Isaiah.
The combination is paradoxical,
putting together king and servant,
causing suffering and enduring it.
What are we to make of it?
The unfolding story of the Gospel will tell us.

Immediately after this, Jesus calls his first apostles,
Peter and Andrew, James and John,
without any mention of a baptism.
But there is clear emphasis on their willingness to follow.
They left everything and followed.

As the story unfolds, about halfway through,
Peter understands part of the message—Jesus is Messiah.
    But, following the prevailing expectation, he thinks of power,
    and not patience. Not enduring suffering of the Servant.

When, at that point, Jesus announces his plan to go to Jerusalem,
Peter is not surprised, since that is the proper place for the Messiah.
    But when Jesus adds a preview
    of the suffering and death he will receive there,
    Peter objects strenuously.

Jesus answers in kind. Get behind me, Satan.
Your ways are of the human, and not the divine.
    Not present at Jesus' baptism, Peter knows only of Messiah,
    not of Servant.
    But now he will hear about it.

And then we have today's reading about the Transfiguration.
The Voice from Heaven makes a return visit,
repeating the message to Jesus,
    but now speaking to the others on the mountain
    —Peter, James and John.

They learn that Jesus is both Messiah, and Servant.
And they are invited to renew their commitment to follow.
    Now it is not simply, Come follow me, but more:
    Deny yourself, take up your cross, and come follow me.

There is no water, no immersion,
but the apostles do participate in the baptism experience of Jesus.
    And, in a sense, they are immersed.
    They are drenched in a mystery beyond their previous experience.

They have just begun the journey to Jerusalem
that will take them to the final week of Jesus' life.
    Along the way they will learn about following the Servant Messiah.
    They will learn new meanings
        about Power,
        about Authority,
        and about the Meaning of Success.

As soon as they descend the mountain of Transfiguration,
they encounter a father with a pitiful son, possessed by a demon,
in danger of falling into fire, and water.
The father is desperate.
He has brought his son to Jesus' disciples,
but they were unable to help him.
After helping the boy and his father,
Jesus explains to the disciples:
This kind can be driven out only by prayer.

The power is not their own, but that of God, working through them.
Power is not what they think it is.
We sometimes understand power as the ability
to force the actions and lives of others.
Not here.

Later, James and John
seek right and left-hand seats in the coming kingdom.
And then they learn about authority in the Kingdom.
It will not be like the Gentiles, who lord it over one another.

The Servant came not be served, but to serve.
Would this make sense to them,
when they were accustomed for royalty to have servants?
Something seems upside-down.

Along the way, they encounter a rich man who wishes to be a disciple.
He could be said to have made a success of his life.
But he did not think so.
Jesus invites him to leave behind his fortune
and, "Come, follow me," as he said to the first disciples by the lake.
He cannot.

In our world, success is almost synonymous
with certain social signals that announce personal wealth.
The large car and expensive house are two of these.
And, of course, the expensive wardrobe.

Having redefined power, authority, and success,
Jesus arrives with his disciples at Jerusalem,
and they enter Passion Week.

As we travel through Lent toward Holy Week,
we are invited to work out our own redefinitions of these things.

And this year we have some help
in the current Vicar of Christ, P. Francis.
Last week I spoke of his dilemma,
namely, in insisting that he was not a superman, but only normal,
he was embraced for this, and treated all the more as a celebrity.
But now maybe we can see it as an image
of the paradox of Servant Messiahship.

Paradoxically, Francis becomes powerful
by putting aside the instruments of power.
His power is found in his humility and disdain
for controlling the destinies of others.

In his first Holy Week as pope,
Francis washed the feet of prisoners, women, Muslims.
This sign is still cited as indicative of his personal authority,
and the authority of his office.

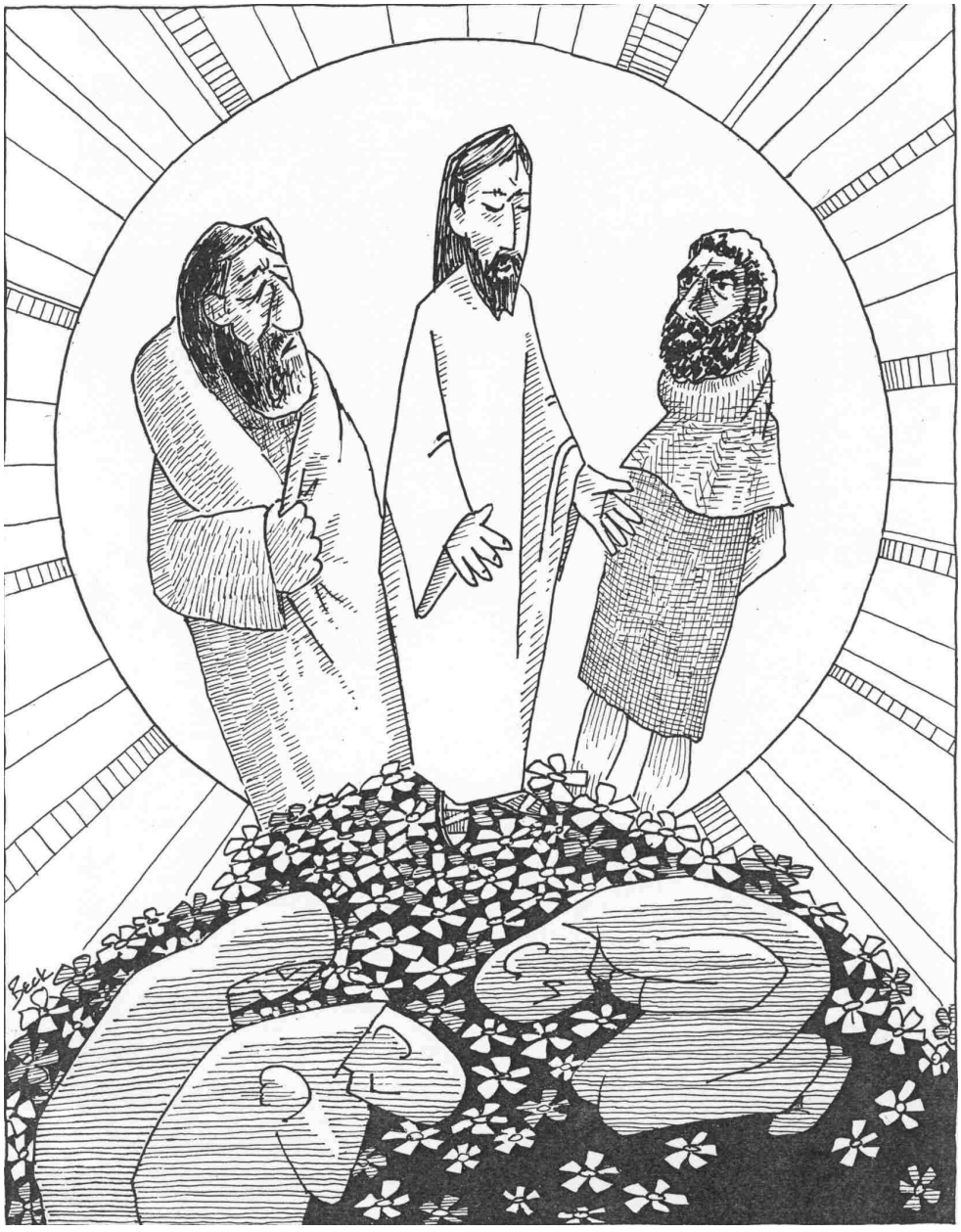
In blatant contradiction
to the signals of success that we depend on in our world,
Francis requires no large car,
no impressive residence,
and little in the way of wardrobe.
And this is paradoxically seen as his success.
Not to mention being named Best Dressed Man of the Year
by one magazine.

On the way to Jerusalem,
Jesus taught his disciples what Servant Discipleship meant.
He illustrated it with his life.

In our day, we have a pope who shows us
what it means in the world as we know it.

And he also shows us that it accomplishes its objectives.
That is, this power turns out to be true power;
this authority is authentic authority;
and this success is certainly more than one would expect.

And more than suits P. Francis's comfort, it would seem.



Third Sunday of Lent

March 23, 2014

Exodus 17:3-7	Water from the rock
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9	If today you hear his voice...
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8	While we were sinners, God loved us
John 4:5-42	The Woman at the Well

After his first visit to Jerusalem, in John's Gospel,
Jesus stops on the way back to Galilee
at a well in the territory of Samaria.
It gives us the first of three significant dramatic readings
for the Sundays of Lent this year.

After he makes arrangements for his disciples
to go into the town to purchase supplies, and they depart,
he encounters a woman of the place who has come to draw water.
At his behest, they begin a conversation.

Fr. Raymond Brown, whose commentary
has set the standard for reading this Gospel,
informs us that Jesus has a two-fold agenda in this conversation.
As Jesus announces at the beginning,
"If you knew who it was who is speaking with you,
you would ask for living water."
In the course of the conversation she does both of these things.

Fr. Brown was writing before our consciousness was raised
on matters of discrimination by sex,
and so perhaps he can be forgiven for not noticing
that the woman also brought two agenda items
to the table, or the well, that is.

Why is he speaking with her who is
(a) a Samaritan, and (b) a woman.

It would appear that Jesus addresses both of her concerns.
When he invites her to fetch her husband,
he is obviously acceding to her anxiety
about his speaking to her, a woman.
But she is not willing to end her conversation.

And before they get too far into the exchanges,
he is talking about Samaritan matters.
    In the days to come, neither this mountain nor Jerusalem
    will be the temple of God's presence, he tells her.

Possibly the more disturbing of the two issues
is his conversing with a woman.
    At least, that is what draws the attention of the disciples
    when they return from the merchants of the town, with provisions.

"At that moment his disciples returned,
and were amazed that he was talking with a woman,
    but still no one said, 'What are you looking for?'"

In addition to their surprise at Jesus
entering into conversation with a woman,
there is something else that attracts our attention with the disciples.
    Jesus enters another conversation, this time with them.
    And this time he starts talking about harvests.
        This being John's Gospel, we all know
        that there are theological depths of meaning to this dialogue.

However, there is also the surface meaning as well.
    He says to them: "I tell you, look up and see
    the fields ripe for the harvest."

He also says, "One sows and another reaps."
    And, "I sent you to reap what you have not worked for;
    others have done the work,
    and you are sharing the fruits of their work."

Can we be forgiven for thinking
that he is pointing out that they went into town,
where there was an entire population ripe for conversion,
    but all they brought back were the groceries?

Meanwhile, an unnamed woman, with the help of Jesus,
is at this very moment busily converting the entire town.
    What they missed, she is accomplishing.

She, it turns out, is the actual apostle in the story.

One thinks of a couple of things.
One of these is an event that took place nearly a year ago,
but is still mentioned regularly.
I am talking about the Holy Thursday ritual of footwashing,
which in the case of the Vatican ceremony
included prisoners, Muslims, and some young women.

The reaction to this symbolic action,
which as I mentioned is still talked about,
brought me to understand something I had not previously known.

On the bulletin board in the hallway of our department at Loras
there is a poster inviting young men
to think about vocations to the priesthood.
It shows Jesus washing the feet of Peter.

Why is this an invitation to priesthood?, I kept wondering.
Is the idea that Jesus will wash our feet?
Or is it that we will wash the feet of Peter, the first pope?
I didn't get it.

But when P. Francis washed the feet of women,
the outcry clarified things for me.
It seems that this event was the traditional biblical passage
that many have pointed to for the origin
of the sacrament of priestly ordination.

You understand, if you cannot accept
that many of the sacraments were instituted
by the Church in Christ's name,
but were personally founded by Jesus of Nazareth before he died,
then you are obliged to find occasions in the gospels
that might correspond to such a moment.

It appears that the footwashing in John's Gospel
was traditionally identified as the moment the priesthood was instituted.
I confess I did not know this.

In any case, so it was that many were astonished and alarmed
when P. Francis washed the feet of some young women.
Surely, they thought, it must mean that he intends to ordain women.
    As one anguished young theologian put it,
    "If the footwashing doesn't symbolize priesthood,
    what else could it possibly mean?"

I, and maybe you, thought it was clear enough as a symbol.
And it did not represent ordination, but rather, service.
    This interpretation has been confirmed by the wider world,
    who has not missed the implications of service.

    Nor have I missed the implications of the dismay in certain circles
    about involving women in the rite.

Which brings up a second reflection.
And that concerns the issue of ordination itself,

and the likelihood that the fears of those
worried about including women might actually be realized.
    I doubt that you or I will ever see the ordination of women.
    But I expect it will be coming.
    Of course, I have been wrong about many things.

Still, the argument that no women were present at the Last Supper
    seems to me to be an argument on a par
    with identifying the footwashing with ordination.

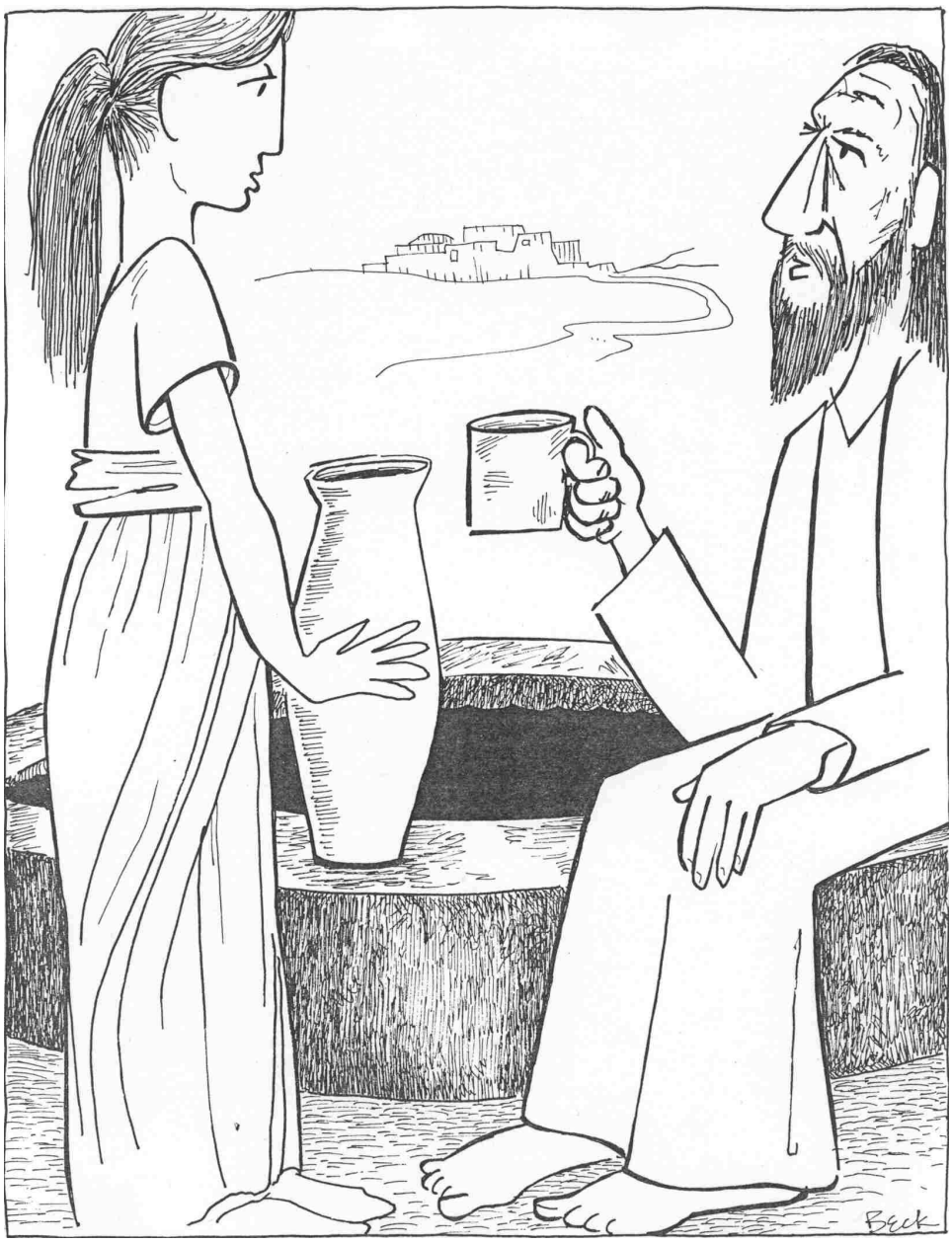
As my friend Karla asked,
upon hearing this quasi-theological support for male ordination,
    who do they think prepared the supper? The men?
    Of course not.

But then, are we to say that the women serve and the men eat?
That doesn't seem to make sense.
    Not in view of the footwashing, in any case.
    To many P. Francis's gesture was larger than he knew.

The prejudice against women in ministry
would deny church ministry an entire range of human sensibility.

Not surprisingly, we might discover that celibate males
do not exhaust the possibilities of human empathy and compassion.

Certainly that is the lesson of the ministry of the Samaritan Woman.
Or, to quote an unnamed disciple and cleric,
"What else could it mean?"



Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 30, 2014

1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13	The shepherd at Jesse's place
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my shepherd
Ephesians 5:8-14	Children of light
John 9:1-41	A man born blind

Last week we saw Jesus visit with a woman at the well in Samaria,
on his return from his first trip to Jerusalem.
In his second visit to Jerusalem he heals a man born blind.
The story we just heard is almost a treatise
on the different kinds of blindness.
There is the man's physical blindness, with which he was born,
and which caused him to be the object of moral accusation
as well as physical difficulty.

Then there are the different kinds of spiritual blindness that we see here.
There is the man's ignorance of Jesus,
which lessens as the story increases.
And there is the Pharisees' growing blindness,
increasing as the threat to their fixed convictions grows.
Notably, it is in the debate between the man and the Pharisees
that changes both of them.
Did you notice how Jesus appears only at the beginning and at the end?

As the story ends, Jesus is at deadly odds with the Pharisees.
It will not be long before we come to the final week.

Last week, the Woman of Samaria prompted a reflection familiar to us:
the neglect of an entire population
in the traditional reading of the New Testament,
namely, women of faith.

Today another population, likely not as prominent on our radar,
comes to the fore.

When we hear stories like this from the New Testament,
we almost automatically place the Pharisees
in the category of enemies of God.

We have done this, as Christians, for 19 centuries.
And it was not until the 1930s that we began to understand
how deadly this conviction was,
as six million Jews were systematically murdered
in the name of racial purity.

And then the Christian churches found themselves
without the theological resources to make a clear protest.

A few weeks ago, *Commonweal Magazine*,
the Catholic lay-edited journal now close to 90 years in existence,
published a set of articles on the Jewish question in Catholic thought.
It was written in response to a book by John Connelly,
called from *Enemy to Brother:*
The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965.

That is, from the rise of the Third Reich, to the Second Vatican Council,
and its document, *Nostra Aetate, In Our Times*.
Connelly traces the story of change.

I am not quite finished with the book,
but I would like to share with you some reflections it has started with me.

First of all, in those 32 years, Catholic teaching, after 19 centuries,
reversed itself, making a 180 degree turn.
So much for unchanging doctrine.

In 1933, as earlier, the Jews were accused of deicide, God-killing.
And because of that were cursed forever.
They were seen as a race, one that in some cases
was understood to be genetically determined in their obstinacy.
This was supported by supposed science.

I remember reading as a boy scientific books about the different races,
their bones structure, skull shapes and so forth.
And if we believed this was nature,
it is not far from saying racial differences are part of natural law.
And next in line are thoughts of maintaining racial purity.

The most liberal responses to this disastrous theology

were the voices calling for conversion of the Jews.
Opposing them were those who thought that was not possible.

Three of the main issues needing to be faced
in any change in teaching, were:
the charge of deicide,
the idea of the curse on the Jewish race,
and the call for conversion as a requirement for redeeming the Jews.

Connelly traces the account of the struggle during the years he covers.
It took the firm insistence of P. John XXIII
to put the Jewish issue on the table in the Council.
The final statement is in the fourth chapter of *Nostra Aetate*.

It is, as Connelly says, revolutionary.
Instead of listing objections,
it celebrates the Christian grounding in the Jewish tradition,
citing Paul's letter to the Romans 9-11,
where he says that Israel is the tree,
and we Gentiles are wild branches grafted on it.

The Council document refuses to support any
of the three theological obstacles to relations with the Jews.
It doesn't speak of mere tolerance, but actual parity with Christianity.
Not even the need for conversion.
In fact, the latter point was reinforced later by P John Paul II,
who insisted that God's Covenant with the Jews
was valid and irrevocable, sufficient unto itself.

Part of the point of the *Commonweal* articles
was the suspicion that the Catholic Church is backing off of the gains
made in its Council teaching.
Maybe the change happened too quickly.
For one thing, P. Benedict returned to a call for conversion of the Jews.
And in general, Catholic thought is mixed,
even within the same thinkers.

So why should this be a problem? We are not in New York,
where we might encounter Jewish persons as a constant practice.
But maybe this is a part of the problem.

The Shoah, the Holocaust, should itself be a signal.
What is it telling us?

I would just point to one part of the picture:
Our sense of our own Christianity.
We have erased all sense of its Jewish grounding.
Yet, the biblical writers were Jewish.
Those in the bible are Jewish.
Mary was a Jewish mother.
Her Magnificat is an excellent example of Jewish prayer.
And, of course, Jesus was a Jew.
Do we ever picture him with a Yarmulka, the skullcap Jews wear?

When I see images, as just this morning,
of cars with holy pictures on the doors,
which look like the old holy cards,
do I see a Jew? Not much.
Instead, we have purged all Jewishness from the sacred iconography.

But purging is a mindset that finds itself in its more brutal form
in what we have come to call ethnic cleansing.
Of course, that is not what we are doing, at least not in fact.
Only in imagination.

In denying our own roots, are we not literally in denial?
Is this not a form of schizophrenia?
Are we not like the cartoon character
who is pictured cutting off the branch one sits upon?

And when we read the Bible, do we rid it of Jewishness,
except to picture those opposed to Jesus as Jews?
As if everyone in the story was not Jewish
—Pharisees, neighbors, blind man and his parents, and Jesus himself?
After all, the story is continued in the next chapter,
where the issue is bad leadership.

Which brings us back to the Pharisees, and their blindness.
Isn't it terribly convenient to think of them as Jews
in opposition to the movement of God in the world?
But how much of this is our own blindness?

Is not the story about those who find it convenient to accuse,
without finding it necessary to have any other reason?
To work out my understanding of myself,
by saying “I am not like that”?

And that brings us to the fear
that if we take too seriously our roots in Judaism,
we might wonder if we ourselves are not in some way Jewish.
We might begin to wonder why we are Christians,
and what difference it makes,
and that way, we fear, is chaos.

But that is the risk of all dialogue.
I may be required to think things through in a new way,
including my own self-understanding.
And that is the risk of seeking, and living, the truth.
We hold on tight with one hand, and reach out with the other.
But without risk, there is no life.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 6, 2014

Ezekiel 37:12-14	Israel rises from the grave
Psalm 130:1-8	Out of the depths I cry
Romans 8:8-11	He will give life to your bodies
John 11:1-45	The raising of Lazarus

In his third visit to Jerusalem,
Jesus is hounded by those who want his life.
It prompts him to leave the Jerusalem area.
He departs with his disciples to an undisclosed location,
identified only as being where John first baptized.

While he is there, he receives word from the sisters of Lazarus
that his friend is dying.
He delays, and then returns to the Jerusalem vicinity,
to the town of Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus
make their home.

The story we have just heard is marked by a deep dividedness,
a division at the very center,
a struggle between two basic realities.

Upon receiving the message from Martha and Mary,
Jesus utters some mysterious words, presumably for a return message.
He says: "This illness is not to end in death."

And yet it does, before Jesus manages to return.

But, on the other hand, the story does not end in death,
since before it is over Lazarus returns to life.

So one thing we can see here is a primal struggle between death and life.
Which will win the day?
Which will conclude the winner?

This is already visible at the very beginning of the story,
since Jesus is away from the territory
because of attempts to stone him to death.
The disciples remind him of that, in case he has forgotten.

And when he decides to return,
Thomas announces that they should go back to die with him.

For it is clear, that if he returns to help his friend,
he is putting his own life in danger.

This is the clearest indication in the gospel
of Jesus laying down his life for his friend,
as he speaks of later at the supper.

For if he goes back, he will trade his life for that of Lazarus.

But the struggle between life and death
is right in front of us in the middle of the story,
when Jesus reaches the edge of the village of Bethany.

First Martha comes to meet him, with the words,
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."
Jesus reassures her: "I am the resurrection and the life; …
Do you believe this?"

After Martha, in this difficult moment, affirms her faith,
she returns to the village to fetch her sister.
When Mary comes to see Jesus, she greets him with the same words:
"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

This time we hear the words, "Jesus wept."
"Perturbed and deeply troubled," as it says,
he enters the place of her sorrow, and shares it.

We can be assured that his sorrow is true and genuine.
And yet, has he forgotten that he is the Resurrection and the Life?
Clearly not.
But in him the struggle between life and death
take hold, and are at work.

It is clear here that Resurrection life
does not eliminate death, with its troubles.
Resurrection is not the denial of death,
but rather its victory over death. It overcomes it.

But it is reached through it, and not by making a run around it.
The route to victory is through the difficulty, not through avoiding it.
Resurrection does not avoid the scandal of death, it overcomes it.

In the struggle between life and death, life wins,
but it is death that appears to do so.

At the end of the story is where that changes.
For a second time, Jesus is deeply disturbed,
as he arrives at the tomb of Lazarus.
It is when we come to the loss of a friend
that death confronts us in ways which, in most days, we can ignore.

And so it is with Jesus, it would seem.
Not only is he encountering the reality of death that we must all face,
but we know that he experiences here more than that,
and not only the general condition of mortality.
For what he is about to do will guarantee his own death.
It is personal for him.

When Jesus brings Lazarus to life,
despite all the evidence that he is indeed quite dead,
the struggle between life and death turns a corner.

The claim that death is the last word, the final stop, is thrown over.
If that were true, from where then would Lazarus have returned?
It cannot be the last stop.
In this way, the death's claim to win in the end is shown to be a lie.

In a way, death is called out,
it is embarrassed to have been caught in a lie.
And for this, it will strike back.
Jesus will earn its reprisals, its retribution.

But it is too late, for now the truth is out.
And we understand what Jesus meant
when he said, "This illness is not to end in death."

In the story that immediately follows,
though not in today's gospel selection,

Caiaphas and the rest of the Sanhedrin decide
that Jesus should be stopped before matters go any further.

In Caiaphas' famous words,
"Do you not know that it is better that one man should die,
so that the whole nation may not perish."

In the past couple of weeks we have looked
at how entire dimensions of our world tend to be left out
of our reading of the gospel.
With the Woman of Samaria, we considered the role of women
as it is portrayed in our reading,
or not.

With the blind man we considered our blindness
to the roots of our faith in the Jewish tradition,
which has provided us with its themes, language, and basic promise.

Today perhaps we can add to that another question,
the forgotten cross.

In bypassing the death of Jesus,
understanding Resurrection as avoiding death,
rather than moving through it, we nicely dispose of the cross.
Without the full affirmation, the promise doesn't reach the full reality,
Easter is not good news we might think it to be.

At the first level, this is our tendency
to turn the gospel into a story about good works and kind deeds,
limiting it to the early part when Jesus is in Galilee,
and not noticing that it moves onto the Passion story.
And especially not noticing that one leads to the other.

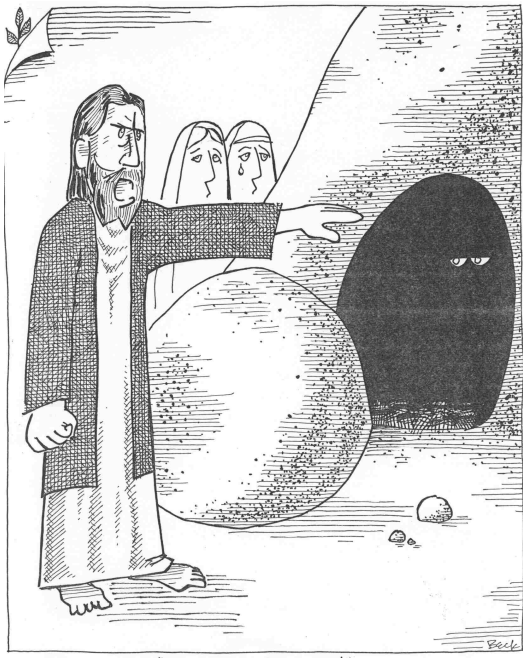
And it is also our conversion of the crucifix
from a depiction of execution, as capital punishment,
to a harmless image, a sign of our allegiance, decorating our walls.
Not often does this image suggest the reality that it represents,
and when it does it is usually high art, as with Gauguin or El Greco.

And then there is the cross
as the cost of the work of attending to the lost and disregarded.
By refusing to leave them behind, by making a cause of them,
Jesus paid a price.
His ministry led directly to his passion.
And this example is something that we sometimes
would prefer not to notice.

In terms of John's story of Lazarus,
we see Jesus living his life for others,
and laying it down for his friends.
As he will say in just a few days from now, in this gospel:
"This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.
No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends."

When St Paul always turned his theology back to the cross,
he was saying that sometimes our experience is hard,
often almost too hard to bear,
and the good news must include this in its transformation
if it is to be the good news.
It is this belief that kept him committed to his work.

It is here that we find our own commitment,
and our own good news.



Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

April 13, 2014

Matthew 21:1-11	Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem
Isaiah 50:4-7	The Third Servant Song
Philippians 2:6-11	The Kenosis Hymn of Emptying
Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24	Why have you forsaken me?
Matthew 26:14-27:66	Matthew's Passion Account

In his Gospel, Matthew in his own way
tells about the final hours of Jesus.

Only in Matthew do we hear about the 30 pieces of silver given Judas,
his attempt to return them, and the violent death of Judas.
    Only in Matthew do we hear about Pilate's wife
    and her message to her husband,
    which results in his washing his hands of the affair.

More than that, the two vignettes of Judas and Pilate go together.
They have much in common,
    especially in their presentation of the death of Jesus
    as the spilling of "innocent blood."

Judas, concerned that he has betrayed innocent blood,
attempts to return the money,
and not succeeding, casts it back into the treasury.
    Pilate attempts to wash his hands of the stain of innocent blood.

For Judas, things began to turn around at Jesus' arrest,
    when he hears Jesus say
    that those who live by the sword by the sword will perish.

This is one of the ways in which violent narratives come to a conclusion.
It is sometimes called retribution, or simply, Payback.
    As a method of resolving international disputes
    it has given us Just War.

But it contains a lie, insofar as attempting to pay back a wrong done
inevitably stimulates the sense on the other side
of having been unduly wronged.
    And the series of reprisals finds a new life, to continue on.

The danger of this approach has been immortally satirized
by Shakespeare's Hamlet, whose hero has the task
of retribution for his wronged father,
only to have the stage littered with bodies at the end of the play.

In a parody of the futility of that solution,
Judas attempts to return the money, literally, pay it back.
However, it does not work. The money is not received.
And the wrong that he has done is not undone.
His responsibility remains, despite his attempts to escape it.

For Pilate, it is the message from his wife,
heard from only here in Matthew, that begins the changes.
And with Pilate we come to the other method
that violent narratives attempt to resolve their difficulties.
And that is to cleanse the world of the story from all corrupting influences.

This is sometimes called purgation, or simply, Purge.
It imagines evil as a pollution that infects the air of the social world.
Hamlet again provides a clear example,
when his friend Marcellus remarks
that there is something rotten in the state of Denmark.
As a method of cleansing violence it has given us Holy War,
or more simply, Ethnic Cleansing.

It too contains a lie, in that it promises
that removal of all that disagree with us
will make the world a better place.
But we discover there are always
new opponents emerging to trouble us.
And without a mature approach to resolution of difficulties
we find there is no end to the cleansing.

When Pilate washes his hands of the deed about to be done,
once again the lie is revealed,
as he remains responsible for the crucifixion.
In fact, he is the only one who could order such an execution.
Here again Matthew offers a parody
of conventional false methods of resolving conflicts.

Matthew offers its own preferences for resolving conflict.
Throughout his Gospel he focuses on the second moment,
the moment after being hurt,
when one has the inclination and opportunity to respond.

Matthew shows Jesus recommending methods other than vengeance.
Sometimes he says, “Turn the other cheek.”
Sometimes he says “Forgive seventy times seven.”

This is what Judas doesn't hear, as in his anguish
he despairs of the possibility of forgiveness.
But forgiveness swallows the hurt and doesn't pay it back.
It accepts it and absorbs it,
and another strain of retribution dies with it.

All of the opponents of Jesus in Matthew's Passion
refuse responsibility for the action.
When Judas does so, by throwing back the money,
the priests refuse to accept it,
and with that refuse any responsibility for the results.

When Pilate washes his hands, he pretends he is not responsible.
And yet he, like the others, are indeed responsible.

It is in response to his actions that the people of Jerusalem say,
“His blood be upon us and upon our children.”
This has been taken by a distorted Christian tradition
as the curse upon the Jews.
More likely, it shows the only members of the story
willing to take responsibility.

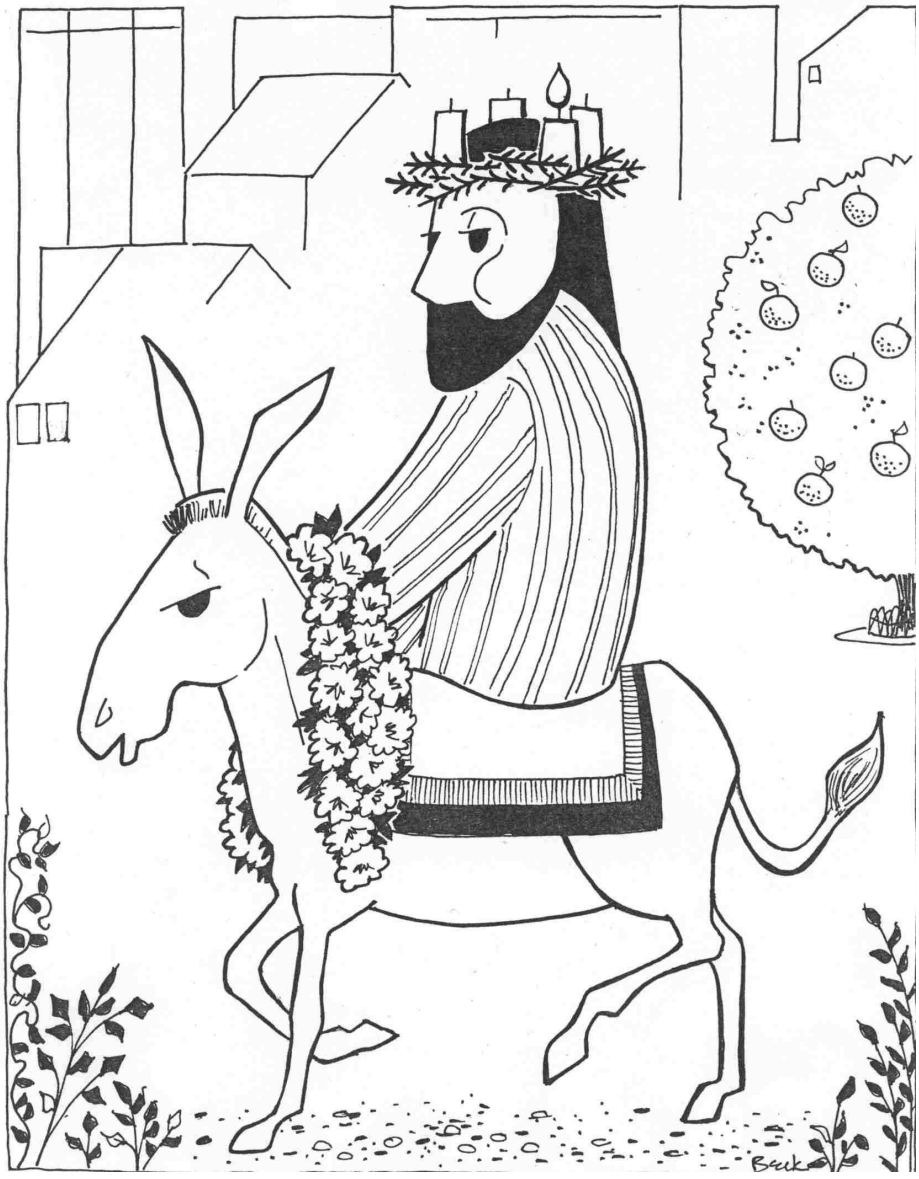
The 21st chapter of Deuteronomy spells out a procedure
for cases in which innocent blood is spilled,
and the one responsible is not known.
This law applies to villages.

But there is another sin ritual for the people as a whole,
and that is the Scapegoat.

The guilt is placed on the scapegoat, who absorbs it,
and takes it out into the wilderness, away from the people.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is the scapegoat
who absorbs the evil without returning it.
His action is forgiving, refusing a violent response in kind.

He redeems the second moment
by accepting neither Payback nor Purge.
And in his forgiveness, he forgives us,
and shows us how to follow him.



Holy Thursday

April 17, 2014

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14	The Passover Ritual
Psalm 116:12-13, 15-18	God Who Saves From Death
1 Corinthians 11:23-26	The Bread and the Cup
John 13:1-15	Jesus Washing Their Feet

One year ago this liturgical ritual received more attention and notoriety than it
ever has in my experience,
    as Pope Francis washed the feet of poor people,
    some of whom were prisoners, some of whom were Muslims,
    and some of whom were women.
The last of these especially cause consternation,
since among certain circles the meaning of this action
was connected to the ordination of priests.
    As a result, the meaning was thrown open to debate,
    though it seemed clear enough to the wider world.

It seems to me that the meaning of the Gospel story
comes clearest when we look at in its analogues, like a set of mirrors.
    I can think of three of these.

The first is in the previous chapter of John,
where Mary anoints the feet of Jesus and dries them with her tears.
    The second occurred last year when Francis
    washed the feet of those mentioned,
    and the controversy that it engendered.
The third is what this supper meant in the other Gospels,
as Jesus shared the bread and cup.

When Mary anointed the feet of Jesus,
the message was one of the cost, I think.
    First of all there is the obvious language
    of how much money could be saved to give to the poor.
So the language of the cost is already in the air.
But there is more, since Jesus affirms
that she has anointed his body beforehand for his burial.
    Here the cost is clear—it is his life that he gives,
    and the service it represents costs dearly.

For Jesus his death was a reflection of a lifetime of service.
So the cost was a life given.

When Francis washed the feet
of the poor and the prisoners, the Muslims and the women,
the world recognized it as an act of service.
    Its meaning was quite clear.
    And in so doing, he positioned the church,
    its leaders, and its members,
    in a place of service.
It put aside claims of worthiness, claims of honor and dignity,
in order to make an offer of serving others.

The issue here is the unquestioning of the service.
    It is not given to those who are deserving, as they say,
    but rather to those who are in need.
    This is the meaning of compassion.
The doling out of service to those who are deserving is something else.
Not compassion. Maybe reward, or instruction.
    Or even coercion, since, who gets to decide what is deserving?

The third mirror is the Last Supper as presented by the other Gospels,
with the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.
    This brings into the liturgical and sacramental reality
    the meanings that Mary and Francis have shown us.
It makes service the meaning of the Eucharistic meal.
It shows us the cost and the compassion.

If the first mirror is the gospel reading, in context,
and the second mirror is the ritual of foot washing we do here,
but in context of what P. Francis has made of it,
    then the third mirror is the Supper, and the Eucharistic Meal
    we share in this gathering time.

We break the bread and share the cup
in remembrance of Jesus the Christ.
    We remember that he told us that.
    And we remember that when he washed the feet of his disciples
        he told that what he has done,
        we should also do.

Second Sunday of Easter

April 27, 2014

Acts 2:42-47	The early faith community
Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24	His love is everlasting
1 Peter 1:3-9	New birth to a living hope
John 20:19-31	Thomas believes

Today is not only the Second Sunday of Easter,
it is Divine Mercy Sunday.
And for that reason, it would appear, it was also chosen
as the date for the big event of the day,
the canonization of two popes, John XXIII and John Paul II.
Roncalli and Wojtyla.

Much has been written about the Vatican event.
Some have expressed dismay at the canonization of John Paul II,
considering more recent revelations
about the child abuse scandals left unaddressed in his day.
Someone suggested that if John Paul had not abolished
the role of Devil's Advocate in the sainthood process,
he would be subject to that very scrutiny in this regard.

Others have wondered why John XXIII is included,
since it diminishes the glory of what should be John Paul's day.
This sentiment is especially strong in Poland.

A recent article in Commonweal Magazine, entitled, "The Odd Couple,"
made the balanced judgment that, "Both popes brought about revolutions,
John XXIII in the church, John Paul II in the world."
Also, it noted that each
was popularly acclaimed saints upon their deaths.

Some have noted that John XXIII did not muster
the required second miracle for proper canonization.
This, however, overlooks the most profound miracle of all,
the Council itself. And the revolution that it engendered.
And while John's revolution was within the church,
he was not without accomplishment in the world.

Recently it has been disclosed that he was instrumental

in settling the Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba,
shortly after the convening of the council.
And when the assembled bishops saw this,
they realized that he was a person of consequence,
and maybe this council should be taken seriously.

John Paul is credited with a strong hand in the liberation of Poland,
if not the entire eastern bloc of Soviet states.
And it is well to remember that among his accomplishments are:
the strong affirmation of nonviolent conflict resolution,
as in the communist states,
an unprecedented papal condemnation of capital punishment,
a biting criticism of capitalism.
And, unknown to me until just recently,
an affirmation of the Council's teaching
on the validity of the Jews' faith and covenant.

At the same time, the Council's move toward collegiality,
favored by John XXIII, was reversed by John Paul II.
It has been pointed out that John Paul was appalled
at the openness to democratic and collegial possibilities in the church.
His Polish background taught him
that effective opposition to hostile governments
demanded a disciplined church that fell in step behind their leader.
A strong centralized church was what he required,
and he was strong enough to bring it about.
The church during his tenure was more centralized
than ever in its history.

Among other things, he forbad anyone in religious life
to participate in government.
There would be no Jesuits following Robert Drinan's seat in Congress.
And no mayors of Dubuque
to follow in the footsteps of Carolyn Farrell, BVM.
I recall the pope saying that he, as the head,
was the one who could express the politics of the church.

To the consternation of liturgists,
he also favored certain popular devotions.
His revision of the rosary

has outmoded the stained glass of this Franciscan chapel.
And yet, we remember that P. Francis
devoted a considerable part of his exhortation to popular devotions,
as the best access to the faith life of the poor.

But of course the most difficult of John Paul's revisions
would be Divine Mercy Sunday.
It is the legacy of the Polish saint and mystic, Faustina,
from the 1930s, prior to the Council.
A reproduction of her image is seen on billboards in town.
Jesus says, "I desire the salvation of souls."
I say to myself, that doesn't sound like the biblical Jesus.
The New Testament is not about salvation of souls,
but the resurrection of bodies—that is, the full person.
Witness Thomas, today, with his resounding testimony
to the bodily Risen Christ, wounds and all.

Not biblical—and yet the phrase "salvation of souls"
does appear once in the New Testament, once only,
and that is in the second reading today, from I Peter.
Is this a coincidence? Probably not.

The official public worship of the church is primary.
It is communal, while private devotions are individualist.
And of course, the central mystery
and high holy days of the liturgical year are Holy Week and Easter.
It is painful to have these covered over by a private devotion,
with a novena that begins on Good Friday,
running up to this Sunday.

One of the great accomplishments of the Council
was the retrieval of the liturgy
from private devotions that had covered it.
In my mind it is like a great masterpiece
restored from its encrusted layers over time,
removed to reveal the grand artwork beneath it.
And now it seemed we were painting over it again.

Today we hear not only from Peter, but also Thomas.
Every year, no matter what the liturgical cycle, this gospel is featured.

No doubt the reason is that this includes the only passage
that is set on the week after Easter,
when Thomas, this time, is with the gathered disciples
when the Risen Lord appears.

Why does John include this scene?
Isn't the appearance on Easter night sufficient?

When we think of Thomas,
we might have an answer to this question.
Thomas is a skeptic.
He will not accept anything that he cannot verify.
This makes his testimony especially strong.
In a way, for John it answers the other skeptics,
much as the episode of the guards at the tomb does for Matthew.

In a way, Thomas's flaw, his resistance to the opinions of his companions,
turns out to be his strength, as a witness to the resurrection.

And Peter, though he was a sinner, was also a saint.
Today we hear that God, in his great mercy,
gave us a new birth to a living hope.

And for his successors, John and John Paul, also mixed reports.
Was John a sinner? I tend not to think so,
but of course, he would disagree with me.
As would many who believe that he opened the church to chaos.
Was he a saint? Apparently so.

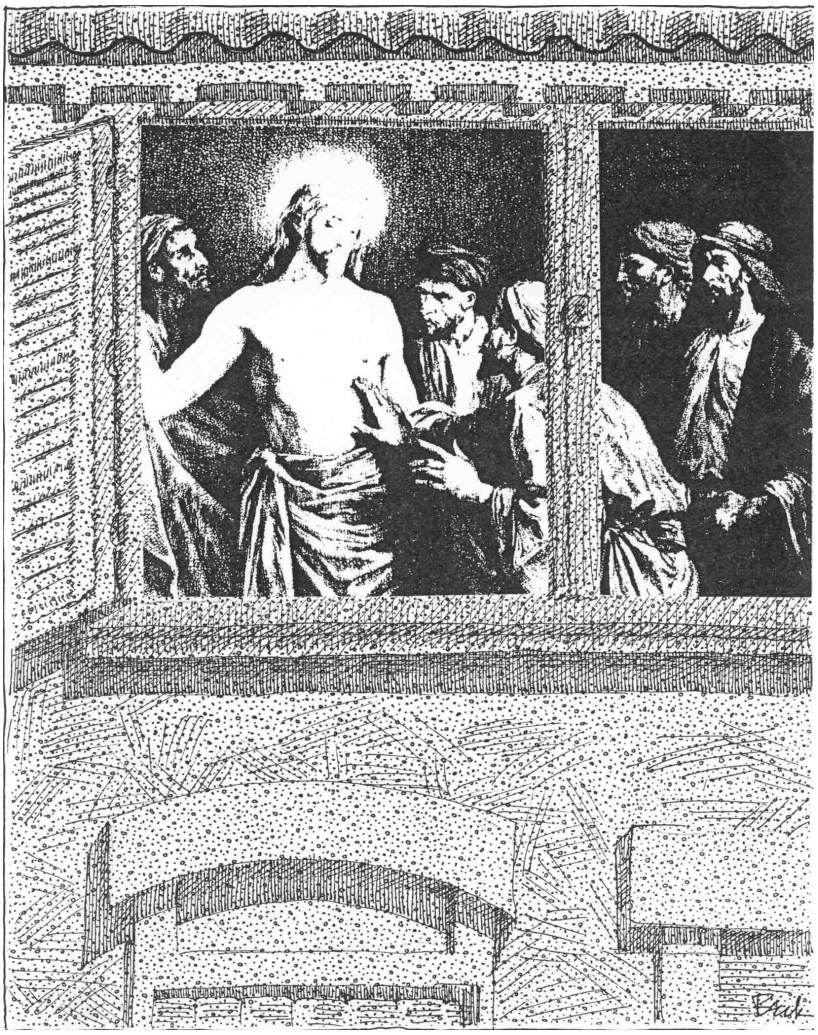
John Paul? A sinner?
Many insist that he was negligent, at least.
A saint? Clearly so.

And the third pope, Francis,
the one who is refusing to favor either side
by canonizing them both on the same day? Is he a sinner?
That is how he has described himself.
A saint? Many think so. I, for one.

And the fourth, Benedict, who is invited to the celebration
to ensure no voice is left unheard and no vision unseen,
    will he be the only pope present in this gathering of four
    left out of the roster of official saints?
Already there has been voiced consternation
that the papacy is becoming an assembly line for canonization,
as it should not be. Time will tell.

If one pope opened the windows to change,
and another closed the door to perceived chaos,
    the challenge of Francis is to close the breach
    between factions in our church.

Today, two new saints make that affirmation.



Third Sunday of Easter

May 4, 2014

Acts 2:14, 22-33	Peter's Pentecost Sermon
Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-11	In you I take refuge
1 Peter 1:17-21	Your faith and hope are in God
Luke 24:13-35	On the road to Emmaus

A feature of our time, perhaps different from other times,
is the rise of the New Atheism.
Atheism itself is not new, of course.
But what is different is the evangelical fervor
of the missionaries of atheims, such as Richard Dawkins,
and the late Christopher Hitchens.

It is as if they were injured by religion in some way in the past,
and they cannot get revenge enough, satisfaction enough.
In any case, they brandish the banner of rationality and science
which they set over against religion.

Of course, the religion that they campaign against
is that of biblical literalism.
And certainly the literalists strike back.
This has come to be such a prominent part of the contemporary scene
that not only has atheism co-opted science,
but literalism has co-opted the public face of religion.

One of the advantages of the Catholic tradition
is that it does not have a dog in this fight.
That is, we are on neither side of this heated argument.
But, on the other hand, we have allowed others
to take command of the discussion.

One effect of the public dispute, both good and bad,
is that we are thrown back on our own grounding in faith.
It is seldom comfortable, but always useful,
to think about the reasons we have committed ourselves
to believe what we believe,
and to gather here on Sunday, for instance.
It seems that today we are invited to reflect on just that.

The arguments we encounter in the public debate

center around math and myth,
rationality and symbolism,
science and poetry.
Believers are charged with grossly violating
their faculty of reason.
There is a long Catholic tradition,
not represented in the present debate,
that enlists the resources of reason
to understand the meaning of belief.
Part of this body of thought is that we call apologetics,
which is not so much making apologies
as it is employing reason to defend the faith.

All that is good and it is useful.
But I suspect that it is secondary.
I suspect that the arguments from reason
are not the primary motivations for belief.

The account of the journey to Emmaus
is a popular story, rich and layered, inviting reflection.
But there are two phrases that might with some justice
be selected to give it focus.

The first is this:
"Were not our hearts burning within us
while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?"

This is the second:
"… he was made known to them in the breaking of bread."
It seems to me that these point to our reasons for believing.

"Were not our hearts burning within us
while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?"
For many Christians,
and I would include myself and many of my friends,
this is central to our believing.
It is not necessarily true of every believer, I think.
But for those for whom poetry is a significant language,
for whom language itself is a treasure house of mystery,
the word of Scripture is the key to a gate.

Opening the Scriptures is a lifetime journey.
In interrogating the written word, a strange thing happens.
And that is how the Word interrogates me, the reader.
As I search the text, the text searches me.
I am invited to review my own grasp on life
and my relationship to God and to others.
As in any form of prayer, I discover there is no place to hide,
there is no one to fool.
And in this discovery, I find myself in a place
that reason alone cannot reach.

"He was made known to them in the breaking of bread."
For many, this line says much more
than they can put into any other words.
We can perhaps see here in the testimony of the bread,
Luke's own experience of the Risen Christ,
as well as that of his community.
The resurrection experience is most focused and acute
in the liturgy of the bread and cup.

When we believe in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist,
we are not speaking, of course, of the historical Jesus
as he talked and walked the hills of Galilee.
We are speaking of the Risen Christ, who died and rose,
whose location and identity is always
somewhat mysterious in the Gospels.
Unearthly, and yet present; spiritual,
appearing despite locked doors,
and yet unquestionably bodily in form:
This is the Christ of the Real Presence.

They recognized him in the breaking of the bread.
Not in the bread, but in the breaking of the bread.
In part, it may be due
to a characteristic personal style of the bread breaker.

But it is probably more than that.
In the breaking of the bread is implied its sharing.

And implied in the sharing of the bread
is the commitment to feed the hungry.
And in the feeding of the hungry
is the impulse that drives the Eucharist
—just as God cares for us, so we are to care for those
whose need is known to us.
In sharing the bread, we share the divine impulse
to open one's self to others whose need calls to us.

For just as he opened the Scriptures,
he also opened the bread.

Many years ago, when I used to write songs,
I produced one that enjoyed a fine career,
lasting many years before it faded from view.
It was in the same collection that included the Lord's Prayer,
though in this case it hasn't lasted as long.
The piece was intended as an opening hymn for a liturgy,
and it was appropriately called, "Openings."

Levering the development of its theme
on the four elements of classical science—not modern science—
it used that tradition to speak of Jesus' actions in the Gospel.

By turns, it took them up.
He walked on the water, and opened the sky,
and it came down like rain.
He came to bring a fire, and opened the sky,
and it came down like tongues.
He quieted the windstorm, and he opened the sky,
and it came like the wind.
He prayed on the mountain, and opened the sky,
and it trembled like faith.

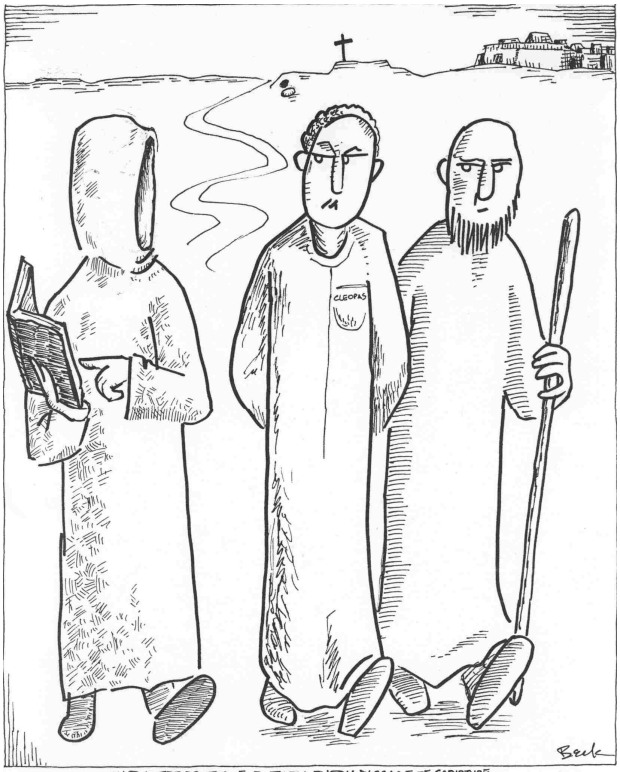
In the refrain, however, each of these was brought to the table,
with the words,
"and he opened the bread,
and there was love inside."

"And he opened the bread, and there was love inside."

For just as he opened the Scriptures,
he also opened the bread.

I think it is accurate to say that our faith
does not derive from rational arguments,
though it can be defended by them.

No, I think it begins with an experience that takes us beyond ourselves.
I think it is the testimony of the travelers to Emmaus
that more closely identifies the foundations of our belief.
And it is in the unfolding of the Scriptures
and the breaking of the bread
that it continues until now.



"HE INTERPRETED FOR THEM EVERY PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE WHICH REFERRED TO HIM."

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 11, 2014

Acts 2:14, 36-41	Response to Peter's Pentecost sermon
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
1 Peter 2:20-25	You have returned to the shepherd
John 10:1-10	I am the gate to the sheepfold

Reality is rich, nuanced, and complex.
But in homilies we like to reduce matters to two choices,
stark contrasts, in firm opposition.

For instance, some Christians claim to take their cues from St. Augustine and view human nature as deeply flawed and human progress an illusion.
Others profess to follow St. Thomas Aquinas,
and see positive value in human effort,
and see a human participation in building the kingdom,
which is still, admittedly, of God.

Or, in this week's version of the struggle,
we can oppose two German Cardinals,
one named Müller and one named Kaspar.

Gerhard Müller is head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.
He has recently criticized the LCWR, as you know,
for not abiding by the reform agenda given them by the Vatican.

He also expressed concern about ignoring procedures for selecting speakers for their annual conferences,
implying the accomplished theologian, S. Elizabeth Johnson,
though not actually naming her.

You will remember that Elizabeth Johnson's work was criticized
by the committee that did not speak with her,
and apparently had not read the book being criticized.
Of course, this theme interests this community,
since we know that S. Nancy Schreck OSF
is one of the main speakers this year.

Cardinal Müller also faulted the leadership council
for paying too much attention to the thinking of Barbara Marx Hubbard

and the theme of "Conscious Evolution."

Hubbard is not a Christian, and her work isn't either.
So there is something to be said about
suggesting that she represents Christian thought.

But on the other hand, she is pointing to
a massive area of contemporary experience
largely unaddressed by theological reflection:
the expanding knowledge of our expanding universe.

It's as if we are instructed not to think about this.
Shades of Galileo.

Phyllis Zagano, in the *National Catholic Reporter*,
points to what "Facebook, Instagram and Twitter
as well as newspapers, magazines and television" see in this.

In her words: "It is men attacking women.
It is 'Roman' men attacking American women.
It is bureaucrats attacking the very women religious
who taught them how to read."
This assessment of the media may be unfair,
but again it is the world in which we live.

Walter Kaspar is a widely admired theologian
with a credible claim to being a successor to Karl Rahner.
He now is also known as Pope Francis's theologian,
since Francis has praised his work,
and selected him to open the recent Vatican summit on the family,
setting the groundwork.

He is in the States currently for the launching
of the English translation of his book on God's Mercy,
which Francis has cited as a primary inspiration for him.

Müller, however, has warned against it, concerned about heresies.

Interviewed by a reporter from *Commonweal*,
Kaspar noted that dogmatic theology, which is his own specialty,

arrives at an ontological understanding of God, which is not wrong,
but not as deep and personal as the biblical view of God.

He also said that theology without a pastoral dimension
becomes an abstract ideology.
But on the other hand, pastoral work without a certain doctrinal basis
becomes arbitrary or just good-natured behavior.
That is, they need each other.

He talked about his experience as a bishop.
He appointed a woman to the bishop's advisory council
and it changed the whole atmosphere of their dialogue.
He also noted,
"Today we have many women who are professors of theology.
Why not include their voices?
Something must be done about this.
It would change a certain clericalistic atmosphere."

And he spoke to the issue of change, saying,
"Of course to change is not easy.
The curia is the oldest continuously existing institution in Europe.
Such an old institution has its ways of doing things,
so it's not easy to change from one day to another. …
And when you change something there's always a debate,
pro and contra, which is happening at the Vatican. …

He added: "But I have the impression that Pope Francis
is determined to make some changes. …
He wants the church to have a more synodical structure. …
[He] cannot do everything by himself;
he thinks in categories of process.
He wants to initiate a process that continues beyond him."

So there you are.
Two views, in nice sharp contrast.
And then we come to the Scriptures for today,
and what do we find?

This is Good Shepherd Sunday.
It comes at this time every year.

And every year we have a different selection from chapter 10,
the Good Shepherd chapter from John's Gospel.

Except in this year's passage
Jesus does not say, "I am the Good Shepherd."
Instead he starts talking about the gate.
Only the shepherd enters by the gate.
The others, thieves and robbers, find other ways of entering the fold.

The gatekeeper opens for the shepherd. Who is the gatekeeper?
I think there are many
who want to preserve the integrity of the church's teaching
who see themselves as gatekeepers.
The key to the gate, they would say, is proper teaching,
spoken like a password.

And then there is the shepherd,
who calls his sheep by name.
Picture a common fold in which
many shepherds kept their flocks overnight.
In the morning the shepherd would select his own by calling them.
They recognize him.
There is a relationship between them.

The word pastoral comes from the Latin word for shepherd.
The sense of the pastoral takes its emphasis
from the qualities of the shepherd who knows the sheep by name.
It is personal, not abstract.

In context, the discussion we hear in the Gospel
is a continuation of Jesus' debate with the Pharisees
concerning the blind man.
The Pharisees do not like what he is doing.
He is suggesting that they are not authentic shepherds.
But our narrator tells us that the Pharisees did not realize
what Jesus was trying to tell them.

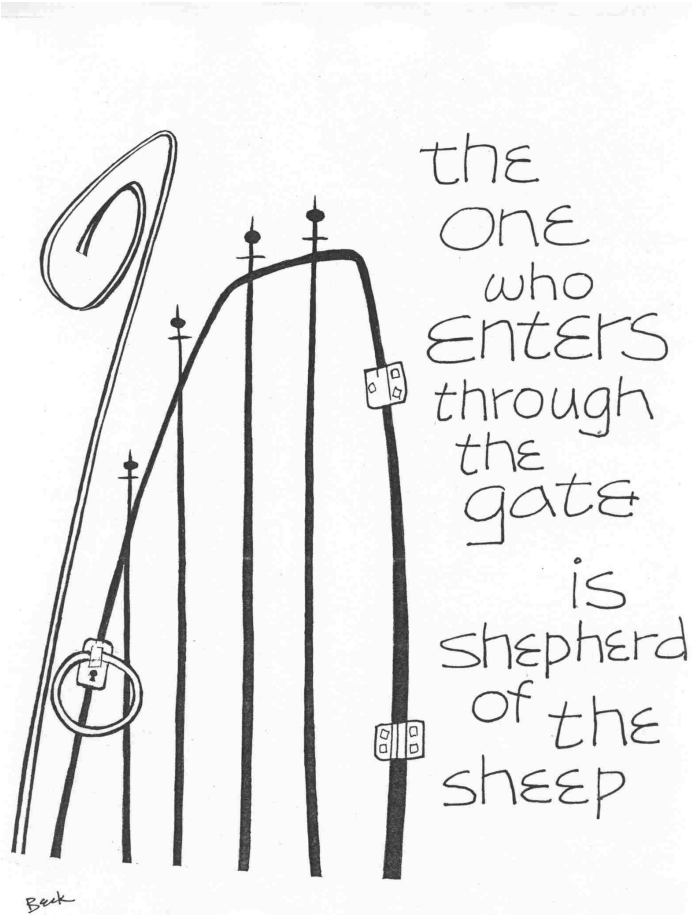
There is a gatekeeper and a shepherd.
In case there was any confusion,
in case there was a tendency

to emphasize gatekeeping over shepherding,
Jesus says, "I (the shepherd) am the gate."

The two are not separate.
But the purposes of the shepherd determine the rule and practice.
The gatekeeper helps the shepherd, not the other way around.

Change is not easy,
but a process is being put into place
that will continue beyond the present pope and the present day.

Today is Mother's Day.
Another way to say all this is simply,
"What would our mothers say?"



Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 18, 2014

Acts 6:1-7	Hebrews and Hellenists
Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19	Praise with the 10-stringed lyre
1 Peter 2:4-9	The stone rejected is the cornerstone
John 14:1-12	Many dwelling places

Something that you need to know
is that these homilies are not just one-way deliveries.
We can call it the education of the homilist.
This is particularly true with an informed and inquiring congregation.
Probably all congregations can be placed in that category.
But it certainly is true of this one.
In that sense, you stretch me.

For instance, not too long ago,
on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, to be precise,
the Sunday that features the blind man in the gospel,
you heard me talk about the changing relationship
between Catholics and Jews.

Not long before that there had been
an issue of *Commonweal Magazine* devoted to that topic.
Things had changed dramatically,
with relations completely turned around to mutual acceptance.

The essayists in *Commonweal* thought
we were largely lingering in the old days.
While the new situation had dramatically altered biblical studies,
there was the sense that it hadn't reached
the general Catholic consciousness.

There is a way in which we have grounded our faith
on Jewish scriptures, Jewish beliefs,
Jewish narratives and images, Jewish history,
and yet denied the Jews.
It seems to represent a major contradiction in our faith life.

This was, I thought, an area in which we were blind.
It needed to be talked about on the day we considered the blind man,

and the blind opponents of Jesus.

There is never a time to stop learning what it means to be a disciple.
And for me, that often comes in the way of trying to meet
the obligations of the homilist.

Or more recently, last Sunday in fact, Good Shepherd Sunday,
the prominent occasion was the recent declaration
by Card. Müller concerning the LCWR.

He was explicit about his feelings
that speakers at the national conference were not cleared first.
And the next speaker was sitting in this congregation.
So the homilist has to ask,
"How does the biblical passage about the shepherd
speak to this situation?"

Thanks to those circumstances,
I looked at the passage with fresh eyes.
And I saw something I had not seen before.

I must admit that this new vision was enabled
by a long period of considering the narrative struggle
at the heart of the Gospel of John.
Most of the language is about Jesus' authority
as the unique representative of God,
whom he insisted on calling his Father.

What was this revelation, to be seen in what he calls his "works"?
Certainly, I began to think, it must be
his works of healing and reconciliation.
These, he is saying, best represent the will and nature of God, his Father.

Then, last week, under the demand of the occasion,
what appeared in the shepherd passage?
There was the gatekeeper, and there was the shepherd.
And the gatekeeper served the shepherd, not the other way around.

We are used to the way doctrine is presented as the gatekeeping,
with the pastoral effort as a way of modifying it

under actual conditions of ministry.

But this seemed to be saying the opposite.
The shepherd is the norm, with the gatekeeper secondary.
And then, to drive the point home,
when the Pharisees still did not understand,
Jesus says, "I am the gate."

That is, the pastoral shepherd is the true gate.
So maybe we can say that the way of service
is the shepherd principle of discipleship.

For many people, one of the problems with John's Gospel
is Jesus' repeated claim to exclusiveness.
But what if that claim is made in the name of service,
and not adherence to a set of propositions?
What if the pastoral is the criterion, and the checklist is not?

Is this not what our pope is trying to tell us these days?

And so we come to today's passage from John's Gospel.
The occasion is Jesus' last supper with his disciples.
It is the occasion for a long discourse,
which now begins, with these words.

He is leaving them, and they are wondering how they will continue.
Will he now be history?
And how will his work continue?
What are they to do?

He promises them a place with him in the future.
And then he promises to be with them in the meantime as well.
In response to Thomas's question,
Jesus affirms, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life."

In line with what I was saying earlier
about the place of Judaism in our heritage and present faith life,
I find myself including among the sources for my reflection
the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*.

Produced by a committee of Jewish New Testament scholars,
it provides fresh light on that set of documents
we call the New Testament, but written by Jews,
albeit Jews who believed in Jesus as Messiah.

The *Jewish Annotated* tells us
that Jesus' line about the Way, Truth, and Life
is a summary of the theology of John's gospel.

The Way is an early name among the Jewish Jesus followers
for the community of disciples.
The Truth and Life tell us that what is involved here
is more than intellectual knowledge,
but involves personal relationship.

Suddenly I am thinking about the shepherd and the gatekeeper.

The rest of that line in the gospel is,
"No one comes to the Father except through me."
The *Jewish Annotated* identifies this as the basis
for exclusive claims in later Christian history.

The commentary is polite enough to refrain from pointing out
that the Jewish community was a primary victim of these claims.
At least until Vatican II, followed by John Paul II,
declared the Moses covenant sufficient for the Jewish community.

But again, what if these claims
more properly relate to service, following the shepherd principle,
rather than to doctrinal purity?

Right before this farewell speech of Jesus begins,
we have John's account of the action at the supper.
Not the bread and cup, but the foot washing.

At that time Jesus said, "I have given you a model to follow,
so that as I have done for you, you should also do."
And having done that, and dealing with Judas and Peter,
he begins his discourse, as today.

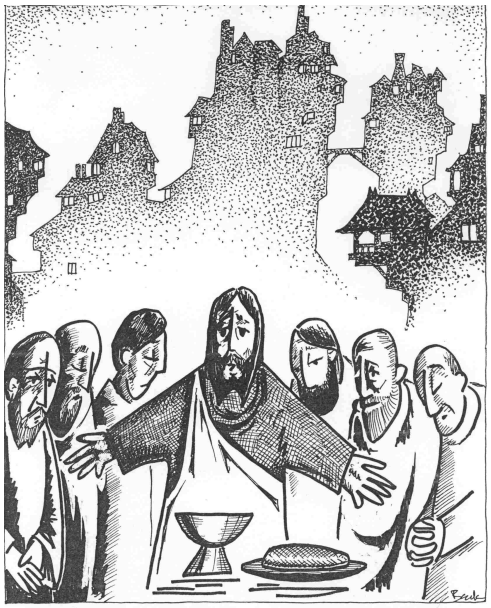
We usually consider the foot-washing at the supper in isolation,
contemplated by itself.
But it is the introduction to the long supper discourse.
More than intellectual knowledge, it shows a personal relationship.

Jesus says, "I am in the Father."
That is, his relationship to the Father is authentic.
His way of being is a reflection of the will and purpose of God.

Jesus then says, "and the Father is in me."
And that part is for the disciples.
If they wish to find God's will, direction, purpose
—or Truth and Life, if you will—they will find it in Jesus.

And what they find there is the service criterion of the pastoral shepherd.
Healer, consoler, and friend.

At the end of this week, P. Francis will be visiting Israel.
This visit neatly brings together the themes explored here.
The pastoral as primary.
The renewed relationship with Judaism.
We, along with the entire world, are watching.



Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 25, 2014

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17	Philip in Samaria
Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20	Let all the earth cry out
1 Peter 3:15-18	Explain with gentleness and reverence
John 14:15-21	Another Advocate

In his words of farewell to his disciples,
Jesus promises to send another Advocate.
He is about to leave them, and now he is giving words of reassurance.
Part of the reassurance is that he will be available to them.
Another part is that they will continue to do what he has done.
This is summed up in places with the words,
Love one another as I have loved you.

He has been their Advocate.
And now he is sending another to be with them,
the Spirit of Truth.

What is an advocate?

I am thinking about a couple who are friends of mine.
They are advocates.
They are working with that initiative in Dubuque called "Circles."
This is an attempt to bring people out of the cycle of poverty,
which can continue for generations
due to lack of certain kinds of knowledge, certain cultural clues.

In Circles, successful people partner with those with few resources
in order to equip them with the necessary tools
to succeed in our society.

We all know of other initiatives in this town that do similar things,
from language lessons for immigrants
to legal services for those who are without the ability to pay.
The common thread is personal contact
and representation with a commitment and often a cost.
It brings a fund of experience to those who lack it.

You can make your own list.

Prison ministries.
Ministry in city slums and backwoods villages.
Advocacy brings one's own abilities and confidence into areas
where entire communities have surrendered hope,
concluding that the dream isn't for them.

James C. Scott, the social anthropologist,
has published a number of important studies.
One of his first, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*,
investigated the conundrum of the peasant revolution.
His interest began with the revolution in Vietnam,
for he is of that generation.

His problem was that typically peasant societies
have little to gain from attempts to change their conditions of life.
They live so close to the edge that they have little margin for risk,
and they know it.
So it is better to keep quiet, stay out of sight, if possible,
and hope for the best.
And cope for the rest.

Scott found that in cases of uprising against intolerable conditions,
there was always a third party involved, a catalyst,
typically someone coming from a better level of society,
in which this person derived a sense of confidence and possibility,
allowing for risk.

This person has come to notice and regret
the conditions of the oppressed community,
and devoted his or her resources to assist those people.
In other words, they were advocates.
They bring their knowledge and confidence to places where it is needed.

Published first in Portuguese in 1968, and then in English in 1970,
Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
revolutionized social intervention, not only in Latin America,
but in places of social diminishment throughout the world.
Coming from a middle class family,
Freire made it a mission to teach literacy to the uneducated poor.

One effect was to make his students eligible to vote,
since literacy was a requirement for voting.
His practice of critical education was seen as subversive.
His life was one of advocacy, bringing the benefits of his own upbringing
to those without the advantages of such.

Currently, P. Francis is in Israel and the territories.
He is working there to give equal attention to those
on both sides of the divide, visiting Jordan first, and then Israel.
He is voicing concern for the Palestinians as well as supporting Israel.
And he is using the moment to return attention
to the bloodbath in Syria and criticizing arms suppliers.
And true to the role of the Advocate,
he is calling attention to the underreported plight
of the Christians in the area,
who are not partisan to the dispute,
but suffering from both sides.

Francis is an advocate, using his position
to shine light in places accustomed to the dark.
One of these is the desperate situation of the African refugees,
who are crowding leaky boats in order to reach Italy.
In his repeated pleas for their situation,
he has focused attention on the sorry situation in Africa.

We have come to pay attention.
The shock of learning about the kidnapped girls
from the school in Nigeria has helped to focus our attention.
And recently an editorial in the New York Times
has called for assistance to Italy,
who is shouldering the cost of caring for the immigrants without help.

In his farewell to the disciples, Jesus assures them.
He promises an Advocate who will be with them.
He speaks of a future, after he is gone,
in which they will have life and even be able to do what he has done
and more.

He repeats, Love one another as I have loved you.
And much of this promise of love and loving
is captured in the work of the Advocate.
And the sign of the Advocate is the advocacy of the disciples.

There is a strain in American culture and politics
that bristles at the thought of mutual dependence.
We are individualists, and proud of it.
We do not depend on anyone else.
Or so we tell ourselves.

Currently election messages are flooding television commercials.
A common theme, and one can almost predict
at what point it will be mentioned in the message,
is that of "hard work."
Leaving aside any discussion of the subliminal messages given here,
we can at least note that it sounds the themes of self-sufficiency.

Recently, we have heard from certain circles
that assistances such as welfare or food stamps
create a culture of dependency.
There is little awareness among those politicians who make this claim,
some of Irish ancestry,
that it was first used by Victorian England
against the Irish in the midst of their famine,
as an excuse to avoid helping them.

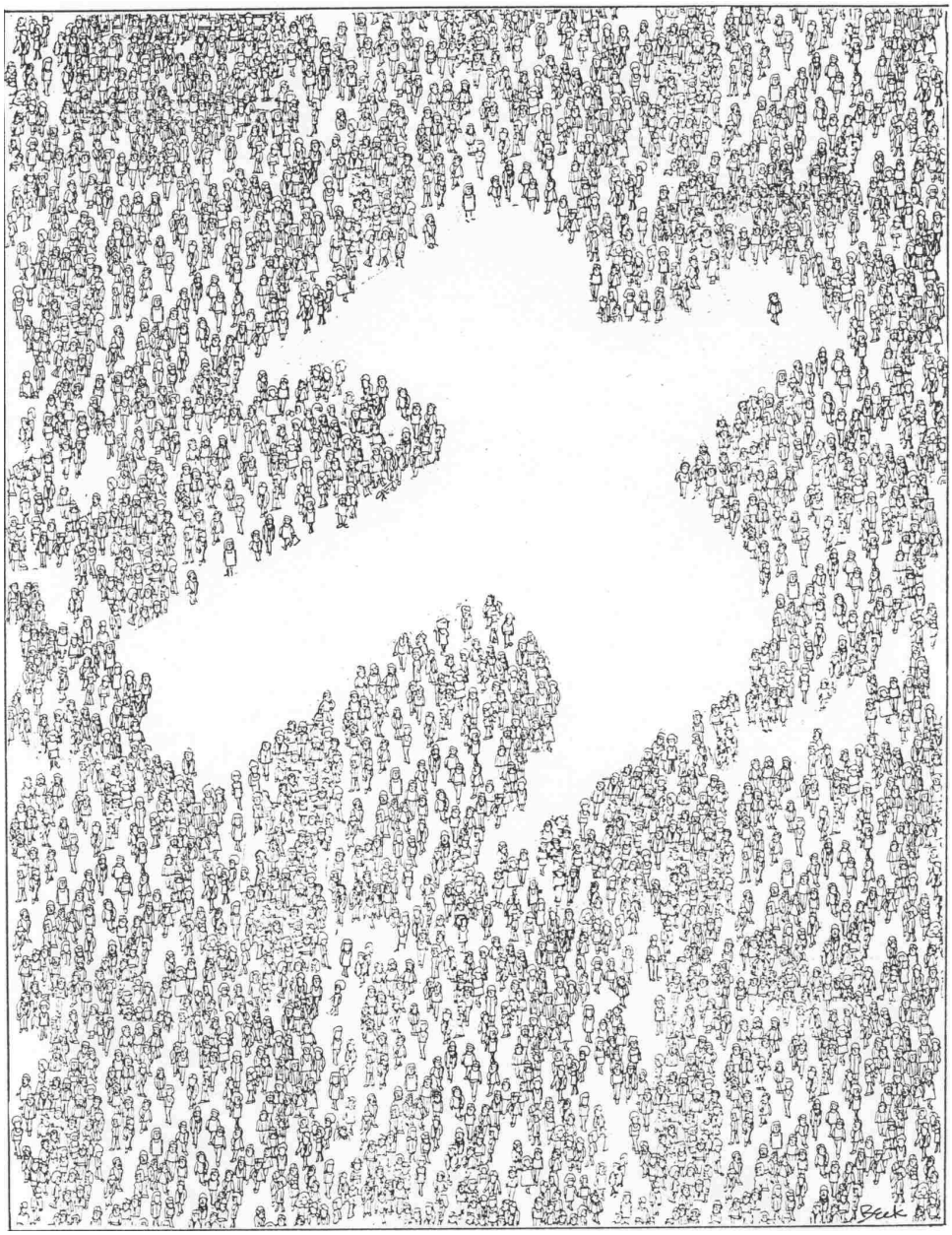
We want to divide the world between those who are independent
and those caught in a culture of dependency.
But it is neither rugged individualism nor a culture of dependency
that the Gospel projects in its social vision.
It is rather, one might say, a culture of interdependency.
A culture of interdependency.

We are interconnected,
and we owe one another much that legal standards cannot define.
We cannot exist together without mutual trust.

Advocacy recognizes this.
In welcoming the coming of the Advocate we learn of our own need.

In continuing the work of the Advocate,
we learn of our place in a web of mutual need.

Or, we remember the words,
"Love one another as I have loved you."



The Ascension Of The Lord

June 1, 2014

Acts 1:1-11	On the Mount of Ascension
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9	God mounts his throne
Ephesians 1:17-23	At the right hand of God
Matthew 28:16-20	The Final Commission

The Apostles have an important question to ask Jesus:
"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"
After all, it appears that they will not have many more opportunities to get the question in. One last chance.
But why should they ask something that seems, to us, so inappropriate, at this crucial moment?
Why do they think this is important?

It makes better sense if we remember that upon their return from exile,
the children of Abraham had confirmed the promise to Abraham that they would inherit the land.

But there was another promise that was left hanging,
and that was the promise made to David,
that his family would rule the land forever.
Though they were back in the land,
they were not in charge—Persia was.
And then, after Alexander the Great came through, Greece.
And now, as the Apostles speak, it was Rome.

The common belief was that the return from exile
would not be complete until the family of David returned to the throne.
This coming royal son would be the Messiah the people was looking for.

In effect, they were asking,
"Are you finally going to fulfill the messianic hope for Israel?"
And maybe behind this was another question, unspoken,
but still secretly nagging: "Are you really the Messiah?"

What do we make of their question?
It is perhaps unfair to see here simple national interest,
though that is part of it.
The political freedom of self-determination is important for any people.

Here too.

In Israel, the Zionist movement is considered by some
to fulfill the messianic hope, for the very reasons just mentioned.
At long last they are in charge of their own land
and their own destiny.
In American we speak of "exceptionalism."
We are exceptional we believe.
This week, for instance, Pres. Obama laid out
his foreign policy of moderation in a speech at West Point.
It received harsh treatment in the editorials of the liberal press
of the Washington Post and the NYT.
It would seem that the taste for empire is hard to put aside.

In the Ascension vignette, we have three parties speaking.
The first we have just heard—the question of the Apostles.
Jesus will answer them.
And then two persons in white, presumably angels,
will have a question of their own.

Jesus' answer was probably not satisfying.
"It is not for you to know the times or seasons
that the Father has established by his own authority."
This is confusing.
Jesus is saying that God is holding that information in reserve.
But what about the promise, and the kingdom of the Messiah?
It would appear that their hope is put on hold,
if not denied altogether.

But Jesus goes on to add:
"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth."

First of all, this itinerary
turns out to be the program for the book of Acts,
which we are just beginning here.
And so, in a sense, the narrative of Acts
is an answer to the Apostles' question.

Somehow, moving out from this place, this land, to the wider world
is the inauguration of the kingdom.
This seems to turn the meaning of kingdom,
and the promise of the kingdom, on its head.

It is as if one small spot of land is not enough.
The world is the goal.

Here we find where the Gospel for today, from the end of Matthew,
fits into the picture.

It is almost as if we are set on world conquest,
and not just national sovereignty.
In this direction lies the temptation of empire.

But secondly, this answer also turns the question back upon the Apostles.
No longer is it what "you"—that is, Jesus—will do.
Now it is a matter of what "they"—the Apostles—will do.

However, they will not do it on their own.
The gift of the Spirit will be theirs,
to assist them in carrying out the project.
It is a project of witnessing, and it will require fortitude, it appears,
but they will be supported.
It sounds like it will be dangerous, but they are not to be fearful.

So these are Jesus' last words,
and Luke tells us that he is lifted from their sight.

Recently the scholarly literature has made much of the fact
that Luke is here imitating the accounts
of the apotheosis of Caesar Augustus,
who upon his death is said to have been lifted up in a similar way,
to become Son of God and Savior of the people.
According to the Roman mythology.

What this means for Luke is possibly
that the coming of the kingdom eclipses empire as well.
Just as nationalism is thrown out, so are imperial ambitions.

We do not know how long Luke will have them staring up into the heavens.
But at a certain point, the third party to the proceedings
enters the scene, with the words,
"Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?"

Apparently, Christianity involves more than contemplating the heavens,
although this is part of it.
Apparently, worship is to take shape in action.
And there is work to be done.
For one, we have to get the narrative of Acts of the Apostles in motion.
But, of course, in the larger sense, there is a ministry to a world in need.

Later, Peter, and John, and Philip, and Paul, and others in Acts,
will witness by healing the sick, confronting false spirits,
and preaching the enduring life of resurrection.

Their efforts will take the shape of transforming the world they encounter.
They will establish hope where previously there was making do.
The kingdom that they bring is one that produces what kingdoms promise.
This kingdom is not political like the others,
but it often finds itself in political confrontation
on behalf of those without advocates.

In his Ascension story,
Luke is providing us with a program for working in the kingdom.
It is a program that at times means moving about
among the edges and hidden pockets of society,
bringing hope and power of the Spirit to those who have given up.
It means hearing the story from their side, and giving it credence.

At other times, it means moving at the other social extreme,
where the decisions are made and the uses of power are unmistakable.
But this is a move that brings the forgotten along with you,
to bring their story to places where it needs to be heard.
And where the necessary decisions can be reached.

There are so many examples.
For one, there is Jesus, at the beginning of the gospel
working among the marginal villages of Galilee,

and then, in the rest of the story, taking their case to Jerusalem.

But I am going to mention P. Francis,
who in this past week visited Israel, the Zionist project,
and Palestine, the people displaced to make room for it.

As in other cases, he made a number of unscheduled gestures.
One that stays with me is his stop at the wall of separation
that surrounds the West Bank, often cutting deep into its territory.
The picture of him praying, with his head against the wall,
is unforgettable.

I have it juxtaposed in my mind, with the picture
of him at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.
Both walls have come to represent
a sense of historical trauma for the peoples involved,
peoples now in deep opposition with one another.

His gesture of appeal for each,
and the prayer that the unforgettable harm that each wall represents
can somehow be overcome, and move to forgiveness,
is, for me, an important implication
of the Ascension story we heard today,
of kingdom transcended and witness given.

Pentecost Sunday: Mass during the Day

June 8, 2014

Acts 2:1-11	The First Pentecost
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34	Renew the face of the earth
1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13	Many gifts but one Spirit
John 20:19-23	"Receive the Holy Spirit"

What is the mark of Pentecost?
For Pentecostals, the most obvious sign of the Spirit is the gift of tongues.
And isn't that what we think of when we hear these scripture passages?
I certainly do.

Not only is there the drama of the first Pentecost in Jerusalem,
but the reading from I Corinthians
is the beginning of Paul's treatment of exactly that—
the gift of tongues in the community.

Of course, he is interested in not having it be a source of competition
in a community that is already too inclined toward divisions.
As we know, he insists that this gift, as dramatic as it is,
needs to be placed in the context of other gifts,
including that of interpretation of tongues.
His general principle is that what builds community is the norm.

But this is worth another look.
After all, the selection from I Corinthians does not treat this issue.
We only have the introduction of this theme.
And what we have here is the opening plea for unity.
The spiritual gifts work together
toward enlivening the one community.
Just as different members of the body work together
for the good of the whole.

But surely the Pentecost story from Acts of the Apostles
intends us to think about tongues.
After all, that is nearly all that it talks about.
But an interesting aspect to this story
is its connection to the Old Testament.
The episode in question is the story of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis.

For Luke, who was writing to synagogue-attending Gentiles,
admirers of the Jews and their singular theology,
and who may even have been one of these himself,

the Old Testament was not the Hebrew original,
but rather the Greek translation
that was favored by Jews in the wider world beyond Judea.
This was the Septuagint,
and frequently Luke imitates its Greek style
in both his Gospel and Acts.
So it is in the case of the story of the Tower.

But something interesting appears
when we look at the Septuagint version of the story.
There the Tower is not called "Babel,"
but rather the "Tower of Confusion."

It makes sense. For after all,
the consequence of the division into many languages
meant that the unity of the human race was broken,
and they were thrown into confusion.

This in turn sheds light on Luke's story,
when he says that the many onlookers were confused,
when they heard the disciples speaking in their own language.

They are in confusion and ask the key question:
Why do each of us hear the speech in our own language?

We can put aside questions such as, "How do they know?
How were they able to compare notes?"
or, "Why do we never hear about the content
of the speech that they heard?"
since these are not Luke's concerns.

Rather, he wants his readers to think of the Tower of Confusion.

In the story of the Tower, confusion results
from the division into many languages.

In the Pentecost story the confusion results
from their ability to understand despite the many languages.
Their confusion results from the way that understanding
overcomes the division of languages.

They find the phenomenon,
which cuts against their experience, confusing,
since it doesn't meet that experience.
Something different is happening here.

They are confused because their division is being overcome.
That is, where once people were thrown into a confusion
of frustrated understanding, because of language barriers,
now these are confused, that is, bewildered,
by an event contrary to experience,
namely, that they can understand, despite the barriers of language.
It is not the confusion of barriers to understanding;
it is the confusion of not understanding how the barriers are lifted.

The lesson is unity,
and the unity is the unfathomable gift of the Spirit.

Language can be both the agent of unity
and the source of division.

An example comes to mind.
On my Facebook page there are a few with whom I am linked
that feel a strong compulsion to convert the world from its errant ways.
Of course, Facebook is ideal for this kind of mission.

But their cases could be made much more effectively
if, apart from making briefer entries,
they would eliminate certain terms from their discourse,
—terms such as “idiot,” “moron,” and “stupid”—
when referring to those with whom they disagreed.
It is language designed to divide, and prevent unity.

At the other extreme, I have a social worker friend
who shares the basic premise for working with disturbed young people.

Even with the most intransigent of cases
she asks about their personal history,
how they came to be in the place they are.

Not: What is wrong with you?,
but: How did you get to where you are?

It invites an understanding of the world from where they stand.
It is language to unify and connect.
It affirms those with whom we disagree
by trying to understand their position from their point of view.

If I might be permitted to use the example of Pope Francis once again,
we might notice that he has taken an approach
that is attempting to bridge the differences of disunity
by affirming both sides.

When he canonized the Popes John and John Paul,
he addressed the differences in visions for the church.
It brought together in one move two sides.
It invited each to see the vision of those on the other side,
in their own terms.
It asked, "How did you get to where you are?"

When he went to Palestine and Israel,
he prayed at two walls.
He visited two peoples, and affirmed both,
to the possible discomfiture of each.

It is as if he asked each wall, "How did you get where you are?"
And in asking the wall, he asked the people themselves.

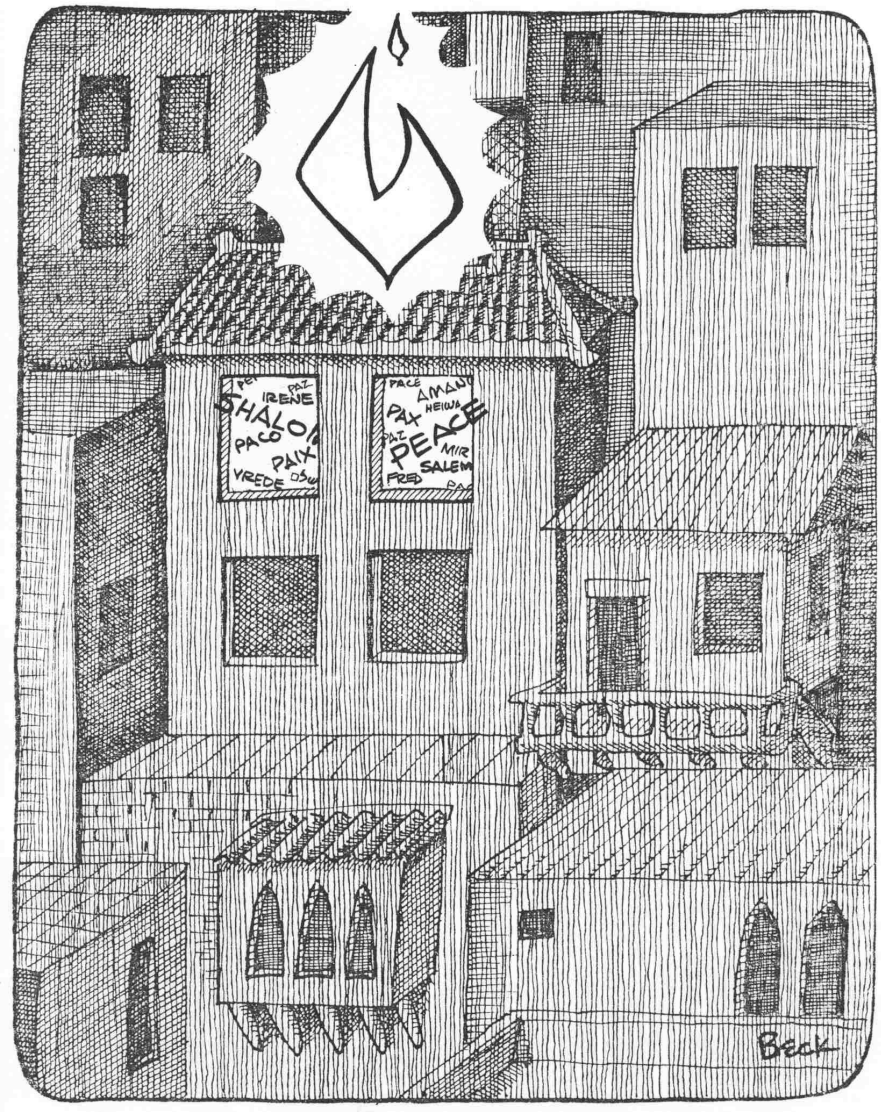
Today, on the afternoon of this Pentecost, Pope Francis is meeting
with Abu Mazen, the president of West Bank Palestine,
and Peres, the president and Israel.

They plan to pray together, and try to recover the lost hope.
It has been announced that this is simply a time to draw back,
review where they have been,
and rekindle the vision of working toward peace.

It is not an attempt to broker a new agreement.
It is simply a time for prayer and reflection.

But, who knows what will happen?

After all, Pentecost is a time of miracles,
renewals, fresh beginnings, conferral of the Spirit,
v as well as bringing Truth out of Confusion.



The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

June 15, 2014

Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9	Moses on the Mountain
Response: Daniel 3:52-56	Blessed are you, above all forever
2 Corinthians 13:11-13	Jesus, God, and Holy Spirit
John 3:16-18	God so loved the world...

We all know about St. Patrick using the trefoil, the shamrock,
to teach the pagan Irish about the three Persons in one God.

Of course, in our secular age,
instead of a three-leaved shamrock,
the marketing of St. Paddy's Day
is just as likely to feature a four-leaf clover,
perhaps thinking to celebrate the luck of the Irish.

But I would like to turn to something closer to home,
something that is ours, but also universal.
My comparisons will be somewhat arbitrary,
but I will do my best to make them work.

This Father's Day weekend the Field of Dreams in Dyersville
is celebrating its 25th anniversary.
The film has given the language and the culture three phrases
that live on, with no hint of fading away.

The first is this: "Build it, and they will come."
Actually, this is from the novel, Shoeless Joe, by W. P. Kinsella,
but the movie made it famous.

It speaks to the power of the creative mind to change the world.
I would like to compare it to the image of God as Creator.
God relates to us in different ways,
and it is as the First Person, God the Father,
that we usually think of when we consider God as Creator.

I should point out that our belief in God as Creator
is not something that we assign to the first moment only.
Creation continues, with God keeping things in existence.

God is not a being, nor even being, but the ground of being.
The philosophers ask why there is something and not nothing.
That is, what keeps things in existence.
We say, God the Creator.

A second phrase that the movie Field of Dreams has made world famous
is also very local.
It is a question and answer: "Is this heaven? No, it is Iowa."
Heaven is immense, Iowa is relatively small.
Iowa is local and particular.
As a political entity it is not much older
than this Dubuque Franciscan community.

I would like to connect this saying
with the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son.
If the Father represents God relating to us as Creator,
in the Son God relates to us as personally entering human history.

There is something in biblical theology
called the scandal of particularity.
The scandal is that something universal
locates itself in a time and place
—a distant time, and a tiny backwater of a place.

The incarnation of God in Jesus occurred at a particular time,
and in a particular place.
The land of Israel is even smaller than Iowa,
being about the size of the eastern third of our state.

God's entry into history was written about
in a particular language, not our own,
and took the shape of a particular culture, also not our own.
And yet it is somehow universal, and relates to all of us.

History was changed by this event, and we mark it
by dividing the calendar into before and after Christ.

This event has changed our lives, and we date our lives by it.
We measure our human success by its story.
We proclaim it as an article for faith in our creeds.

There is a third phrase deriving from the movie,
and that is the title itself: "Field of Dreams."

I recall when they announced the name of the movie.
I was disappointed.
    I thought it should be called "Shoeless Joe,"
    like the book it was based upon.

I thought the title "Field of Dreams" was vague and general.
Nothing could be more generic than the world "Field."
We speak of a field as the area
in which a career or concept is placed.
    And the word Dreams could not be less specific.
    It is vague, imprecise, and—what else but dreamy?
        This title, I thought, would never work.
        I couldn't have been more wrong.

The phrase "Field of Dreams" pops up everywhere,
applied to almost anything.
    It is a favorite for advertisers, for project designers,
    for tourist programs.

I would like to connect it to
the Third Person of the Trinity, the Spirit.
    The Spirit names God's presence to us in community and church.
    It is God among us.
        It is, in a phrase, the field of God's dream for us.

And here I would appeal to what has happened
to the ball field in Dyersville, which is, after all, only a movie set.

But it has become a magnet for persons
reconnecting with their lost childhood,
or with their past plans for themselves.
    It has become a place where fathers relate to their young sons,
    where families gather and dream.

I have a friend, a classmate
and neighbor when I was growing up in Waterloo,

who moved to Wisconsin after college,
first Racine, and now Washington Island.

In all that time, he has come back to Iowa very few times.
One of those was to see the movie site at Dyersville.
It was not his hometown, but it served that purpose even better.
It was an important moment for him.
And I also think it was his final farewell to Iowa.

The strange thing about the Field of Dreams
is that it has actually become just that, a field of dreams,
dreams of forgotten possibility,
of one-time visions for one's family,
of hope for a next generation.
It can stand in for community very well, I think,
at least for the duration of this homily.

It is the community-creating Spirit that is alive in the church
and continues to provide our hope.

I will stop making comparisons here.
I will not claim there is a similarity
between Moses' experience on the mountain
and the mysterious appearances of the players in the cornfield.

I will not detect a similarity between Paul's message
of mutual encouragement, agreement, and living in peace,
with the spell of shared humanity
that affects visitors to the ball field in Dyersville.

I will not compare the sight of fathers
taking time to play catch with their sons,
softening the usual lines of authority with tenderness
and a sense of common destiny,
I will not compare this to the Father-Son images of life in the Trinity.

I will only say that God comes to us in many ways,
reaching every part of our lives.
And it is this comprehensive love that we celebrate
on the feast of the Trinity.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 6, 2014

Zechariah 9:9-10	Meek and riding a donkey
Psalm 145:1-2, 8-11, 13-14	My king and my God
Romans 8:9, 11-13	Spirit and flesh
Matthew 11:25-30	I am meek and humble of heart

"I am meek and humble of heart."
That assertion of Jesus in Matthew's gospel certainly stands
at the heart of today's liturgical readings.
However, that word, "meek," may give us pause.
What does it say about Jesus?

The word appears only three times in the New Testament,
and three of them are in this gospel.
So it seems that Matthew is making a case here,
and we might want to give it some attention.

Bible dictionaries are not satisfied with the translation
of the Greek word by the English word "meek."
It comes close, but they say it leaves something out.
It means gentleness, but it also implies
a firmness behind the gentleness.
Power, but without harshness.

To my mind, it brings attention to one of this community's themes,
and that is the theme of nonviolence.
Here too, in the notion of nonviolence,
we find firmness coupled with gentleness.

Some examples come to mind.
Thomas Merton raises the question
of how to enter into conflict as a Christian.
How do we love while disagreeing?
For him, nonviolent action combines these two.
It is apparent that so often we favor one or the other.
Either love, or conflict.

Elizabeth McAlister brought this out for me one time.
She speaks of combining love and truth.

And by this she is talking about hard truths.
It is difficult, because with friends we tend to emphasize the love
and skip over the truth.
And with those we consider enemies,
we favor the truth and put less emphasis on the love.

When we think of nonviolent resistance, we can position it
in between nonresistance, that is, pacifism, and violent resistance.
Nonviolent resistance has both the firmness to resist
and the refusal to involve violence in that action.

Gerald Schlabach is a theologian at St Thomas in St Paul.
He is part of a seminar consisting of Catholics and Mennonites,
exploring what they might have to learn from each other
in the area of peace studies.

They bring together two traditions,
just war theory on the Catholic side,
and pacifism on the Mennonite side.
What they are saying is that there is a third way,
neither just war nor pacifism.

Gandhi is the main figure representing this third way.
Unlike the pacifists, he enters into conflict.
He takes an active and principled stand, without backing down.
But unlike the just war theorists,
he refuses any kind of war that involves violence.
This is not simply nonviolence, then, it is nonviolent action.

And it takes many forms. Gene Sharp lists 198 strategies
that he calls nonviolent action.

But, keeping in mind the guiding idea of combining love and truth,
entering into conflict without abandoning love as a guiding principle,
I think we can look to another example,
in the practice of S. Pat Farrell,
in her negotiations with those who were criticizing the LCWR.

In her meetings with the bishops she never lost sight of the fact
that these were her Christian brothers,

no matter how much they disagreed,
no matter how much their worlds differed.

This, I think, is an example of meekness as gentle firmness.

Here I think of the Transactional Analysis movement,
of which, for some years in the mid-70s, my father was an advocate.
This movement taught its adherents
to analyze social transactions, such as conversations,
in an effort to learn how to avoid hurting one another.

What I remember is very little, but I think it relates to the theme.

It is this: Sometimes someone comes onto you
in the style of an accusing parent.
When this happens, you instinctively, without thinking,
adopt the role of the accused child.
The result is not helpful.
TA taught that once you recognize this,
you are free to respond in another way, namely, as adult to adult,
and this can alter the exchange in a helpful manner.

I see a parallel with the kind of patient, considerate, yet firm
style of disagreeing that Pat and her cohorts maintained
during difficult times.
This, I think, is close to biblical meekness,
as the bible dictionary would have us understand it.

Earlier I mentioned that the word appears three times in Matthew's gospel.
I think we are invited to pay attention to this,
since one of those instances, along with the gospel reading today,
makes a disguised appearance.

What I am saying is that today's reading from Zechariah 9:9-10
is quoted by Matthew as Jesus enters Jerusalem,
and that is one of the three instances in the gospel.
In effect, we have two of those instances in today's liturgy.

I think you probably thought about the Triumphal Entry
when you heard the first reading for today.

I think we are expected to think about that.
It tells us more about what Jesus means,
when he says, "I am meek and humble of heart."

It shows that quality in action, in dramatic fashion,
as he returns to confront the opponents in Jerusalem that rejected him.
He immediately moves to the Temple,
where he performs that action we usually call the Temple Cleansing.

Often people consider this to be violent. But it is not.
No one is hurt, nothing is actually destroyed.
But it is, indeed, forceful.

It makes its point in the manner of the biblical prophets,
who confronted injustices
with nothing on their side but forceful words.
Often at the threat of their own lives.
And so it is with Jesus.
His opponents regroup, and that takes us into the Passion account.

And yet, we who believe in Christian nonviolence
know that this is not the last chapter in his story.
With the resurrection,
we know that God is endorsing Jesus' approach,
and that meekness wins the day, in the long run.

Which brings us to the third instance of the word in this Gospel.
We heard it just this past July 4th,
when we had the beatitudes for the gospel reading.
In the third of Matthew's beatitudes, we hear:
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land."

So it is not simply a quality of Jesus
in his dealings with those he invites and those he confronts,
it is also a quality of the disciple whom he calls.
It is a mark of the Christian,
and not an extra added on for special merit.

And it is right there with another beatitude:
"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 13, 2014

Isaiah 55:10-11	Just as the rain and snow come down
Psalm 65:10-14	The seed that falls to the ground
Romans 8:18-23	All creation groaning in labor
Matthew 13:1-23	The parable of the Sower and the Seeds

When our study group looked over the readings for today,
we were captivated by the poetry of the first reading.

We began by noticing that the entire piece is divided into two parts
by the phrases, JUST AS / SO SHALL.
The entire poem consists of a single comparison,
between an image (the rain) and a concept (the word),
which is what we call, in a general sense, a metaphor.
(Here an aside to all the former English teachers in attendance,
who are distracted by the rule that a simile is different from a
metaphor. We're grouping them together here.)

Then we noticed
that it wasn't just the rain and the word that are compared, but the two actions they are performing.
The rain comes down; the word goes forth.

Then Peter pointed out that it doesn't stop there.
Each of these actions is continued on, in a separate clause.
The rain comes down, and doesn't return until it has watered the earth.
And it doesn't stop there, since that gives the seed,
and that in turn gives bread to the hungry.
It takes us all the way from the falling rain to the table.

Meanwhile, the word goes forth all the way, too.
And doesn't return till it has accomplished all it set out to do.

The entire reading is a single metaphor offering assurance.
Its metaphor introduces the parables of Matthew,
which begin today and will continue for a few weeks.

A common distinction is made
between different kinds of metaphorical comparisons.

Some are illustrations, used to help people understand a concept.

Once the concept is grasped, the illustration can be discarded.
John Dominic Crossan called this an interpretive cocoon
—an image I like because it does what it says.

The other kind of metaphor is so bound up in the idea it expresses
that the two cannot be separated, as in much great poetry.
Larry suggested it was like a koan, as in Zen Buddhism.
I welcomed this idea, because it allows me to compare
the two kinds of metaphor as the Cocoon and the Koan.

It seems that the parables of Jesus
were more like the Koan than the Cocoon.
In their original form, they were somewhat unsettling.

But unsettling parables makes us uncomfortable.
And so the tension needs to be reduced.
The parable studies pointed out that the Gospels,
following the practice of the early church,
tamed Jesus' parables by giving them lessons at the end,
and turning them into example stories.
That is, from Koans to Cocoons.

Today we begin Matthew's section on parables,
and the first is the parable of the Sower.
Or, as some say, the parable of the different soils.

In response, the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke in parables.
It did not seem a logical approach to instructing people.
Would it not be much better to speak plainly
and deliver clear instructions and definite laws?

But the early church found the parables unsettling.
So they added an allegorical explanation of the Sower parable.
The seed is the word, the bad soils are listeners distracted
by the world, the flesh, and the devil,
and the good soils are receptive listeners.

And with this nice allegorical explanation,

the tension of Jesus' parable is dissipated,
and everyone is comfortable again with a clear set of meanings.

But all this is undercut when Jesus is asked why he spoke in parables.
The answer is less than satisfying.
Knowledge of the mysteries has been given to you, but not to them.
This doesn't answer the question as much as repeat it in different words.
Why has it not been given to them?

Actually, the problem of the parables
is a problem of the Scriptures in general.
We like to have things definite. The Scripture is not so definite.
There are 47 books in the Old Testament, amounting to 1074 chapters.
But we want to reduce it to one chapter: the Ten Commandments.
After all, they are crisp and clear.

The Bible is a collection of different kinds of writing.
Histories, verse, proverbs, poetry, prophecies, letters, and more.
This is unlike the Koran, which consists of one kind of writing:
instructions to the prophet, Mohammed.
We keep trying to turn the Bible into the Koran,
so it is clear and tells us what to do.

In addition to the Bible, in our Catholic tradition,
we have our clear-cut and definitive writings.
Canon law is one. Another is the Catechism.

When I started teaching Scripture,
it was a popular subject among students.
However, when the New Catechism was published,
I noticed a rather dramatic drop in interest in Scripture.
One of the students explained it to me this way.
Why study Scripture when the Catechism spells it out in black and white?

Why live with the tensions, when it can be resolved,
and authoritatively so?

Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God in parables,
and they remain mysterious.
About the only image that he doesn't use for comparison

is an actual kingdom. It doesn't seem to be like that.

So it is with understanding God.
We can only approach the task with images,
and then they are always partial.
And so it is, apparently, with the social renewal of Jesus,
which he calls the kingdom of God.

In the book of Job, the voice from the whirlwind finally addresses Job,
who has been busy questioning God's justice.
The voice names a number of creatures
that have no purpose in Job's world.
The ibis, the lion, the mountain goat, the wild ass, the wild ox
—all get their moment.
It tells Job that if he created the world, none of these would exist,
since they serve no purpose for him.
And the world would be greatly diminished.

The world we build for ourselves can box us in,
and there is a deep sadness in that.
But the parable, the koan, the tensions of the metaphor,
can open it up again.
From the world of our own creation, it opens us to the world outside.

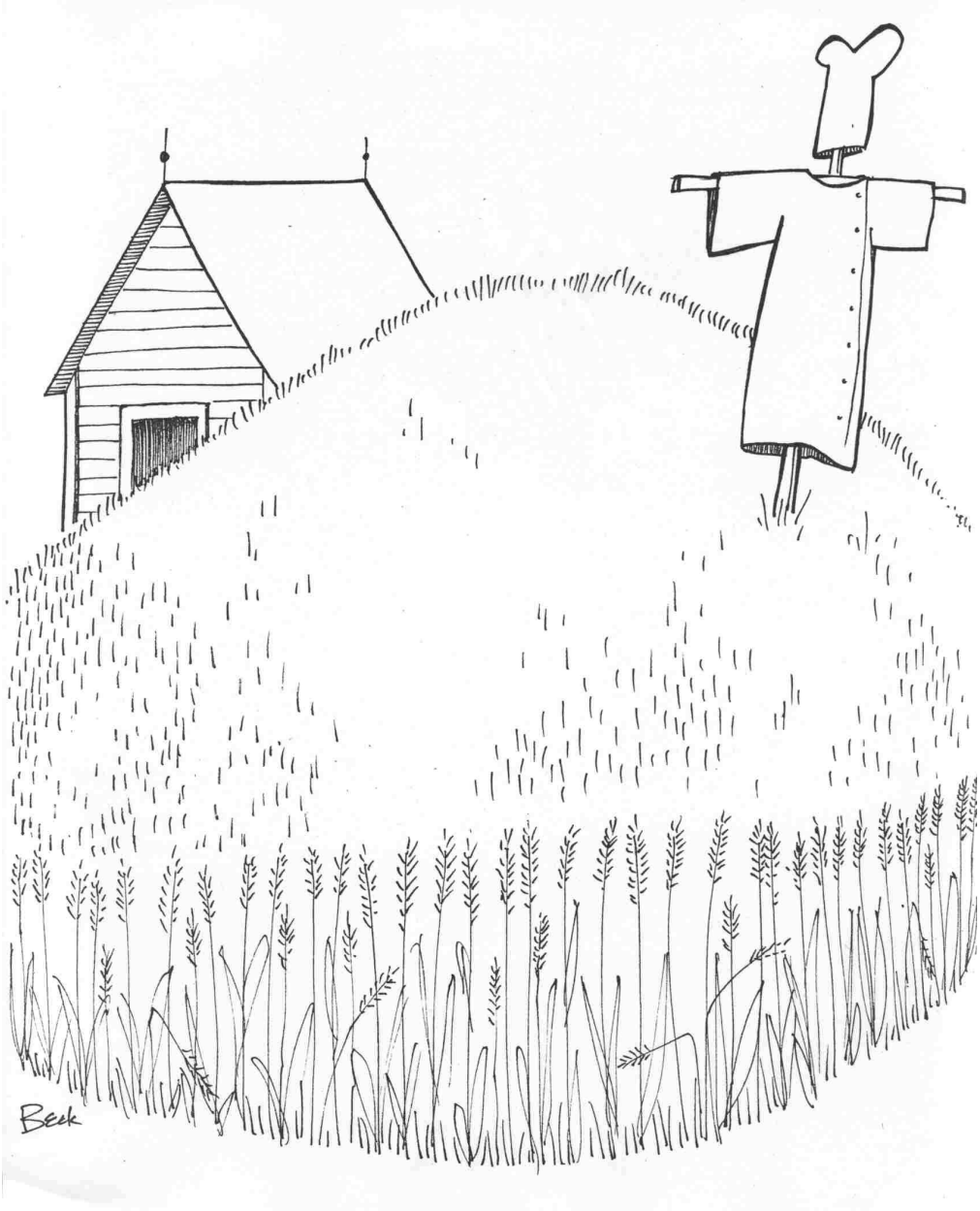
In somewhat this way, P. Francis is a gift of parable to the church.
He takes us to places we have not been before.
Or have forgotten.

This past week he was in the news
for meeting with victims of clergy abuse.
What will stick in my mind forever
is a blog report of one of the British victims.

It seems it was the personality of the pope, more than the apology,
that reached him.
He said that when they were in the cafeteria line,
and there was the pope.
I can just see them nudging one another, and saying,
“That’s the pope in line behind us!”

So perhaps we can return to the metaphor of Second-Isaiah.
The word of God is a living word that cannot be contained.
It comes and accomplishes its work,
like the rain that waters the earth,
grows the seed,
and puts bread on the table for the hungry.

Or, sometimes, on the cafeteria line.



Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 20, 2014

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19	No God besides you
Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16	You are a God merciful
Romans While 8:26-27	The Spirit intercedes for us
Matthew 13:24-43	Weeds and Wheat, Mustard Seed, Yeast

"Who am I to judge?"
This has been cited as the most powerful quote in 2013.
It was an informal reply to a question on an airplane interview,
with P. Francis conversing with reporters.
The full quote, as you know, is:
"If someone is gay, who searches for the Lord and has goodwill,
who am I to judge?"

While it has a specific reference,
it has been quoted widely for a number of contexts.
So, why is it so powerful?
Certainly it is because it is a pope who says it.
After all, it is a common phrase. "Who am I to judge?"

But this is not what we ordinarily expect to hear from popes.
In fact, it would seem that just the opposite is what we expect of popes. After all,
isn't that their job?

One thing that it suggests is that in today's world,
this is the most effective way to witness.
It points to an approach for evangelization among today's unchurched.
There has been enough of hardline demands,
and some humility seems in order.
If only to avoid hypocrisy.

In today's gospel we hear the familiar parables about weeds and seeds,
stories of wheat and of yeast.
They seem to recommend a less assertive stance
for the kingdom that Jesus announces.

Weeds and seeds.
The parable of the mustard seed, as an image of the kingdom,
would be somewhat controversial for Jesus' audience.

The conventional image for mighty kingdoms
comes from the mighty trees of the forest.
In Israel, it was the mighty cedar of Lebanon.

And after all, the mustard plant is a weed,
the bane of farmers world wide.
If nothing else, this is a much more low-key approach
to the matter of understanding the reign of God.

The parable of the leaven, or yeast, is equally startling.
Everywhere else in the bible yeast is a symbol of corruption,
because of its sneaky way of working.
That is why one part of the preparation for the Passover Seder meal
is to clear the house of all yeast.
It is a symbolic move.

The commentators say that in the case of this parable it is different.
But what if Jesus was saying that the kingdom
works quietly to transform society.
What if it subverts the loud and demanding uses of authority
that are so common in society?
What if he is saying that the kingdom is not like a kingdom,
or at least not as we know them.

But the main story in today's collection of parables
is that of the weeds and the wheat.

Here Matthew shows Jesus making some changes
in the program that John the Baptist announced.

According to Matthew, John came on the scene
announcing an imminent reckoning.
The axe is at the root, he announces.
The winnowing fan is at the ready, and the harvest is due.
John liked nature images,
but they tended to portend the end of nature cycles.

When Jesus begins, in this gospel,
his first words are exactly the same as those of John:
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

And Jesus borrows much of John's imagery.
But then he begins to change it.

First of all, the reckoning is not going to be right away.
It turns out it is deferred to the end of the age.
That must have been a disappointment for John.
Later on, he will send messengers from where he is in prison
to ask if Jesus is the one who is to come, or did he get it wrong?

In addition, in the story of the weeds and the wheat,
the farmer tells his workers not to pull up the weeds,
since some of the wheat might be pulled up as well.
If the weeds were of the kind that many commentators speak of,
the problem is that the weeds were similar to the wheat.
In other words, they might not be able to tell the difference.

No. They are not to take upon themselves
the task of clearing away the weeds.
That will be done at the harvest, at the end of the growing season.
That is, the disciples are not to make that judgment,
but are to allow God to perform that task.
After all, the disciples may not be able to tell the good from the bad.
Or they might get them mixed up,
should their own judgment be flawed.
Better to let God do the work of God.

Whenever we talk in this way, some people get nervous.
If we are always nonjudgmental, if we always forgive,
if we try to be merciful, as the book of Wisdom
spoke about in the first reading today,
what is to keep things from falling apart?

How are the wicked prevented from having their way?
Who is to guarantee the triumph of virtue,
if not those who make it their business to be virtuous?

In other words, if God is always merciful,
and we are to be merciful like God, where is the justice?
That too is necessary.

This past week, in the rather tumultuous events
in the international news cycle,
these voices made their alarm known.
In the Gaza strip, advocates of justice were defending the Palestinians.
Other advocates of justice were defending the Israeli invasion.

In the other primary conflict area, Ukraine,
certain US senators put forth the opinion
that the measured approach of the current administration
is responsible for the outbreak of violence,
since a more punitive policy would have prevented
the things we are seeing.

In effect, the president is the cause of the carnage
of the downed Malaysian airline plane.
But behind this sentiment is an outcry for justice.
Along with the opinion that a hard line is the best way to achieve it.

And yet, there is another kind of power,
shown in a simple statement on another airplane.
Why does the phrase, "Who am I to judge?", prove to be so powerful?
It is the very denial of power, in a sense.

It would seem that there are two sides of the situation.
There is the nonjudgmental statement.
And there is the pope who is uttering it.
And behind that is the authority that he brings to the moment.

In the first reading today,
we heard the author of the book of Wisdom
offering the opinion that because God is powerful,
God can be merciful.
Perhaps this is similar to the notion
that those who are confident of themselves
need not act out of that insecurity that often overcompensates
with extreme behavior.
Instead, from strength comes mercy.

We in turn need not worry about the wicked gaining an advantage,
but leave that up to God.

For us, it is enough to do the best we can
in providing witness of forgiveness, mercy, nonviolence, compassion.
And let the results take care of themselves.
These humble actions may be more powerful than we suspect.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 27, 2014

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12	Solomon had a dream
Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-130	Wonderful are your decrees
Romans 8:28-30	Called according to his purpose
Matthew 13:44-52	Treasure, Pearl, Net

"We have a treasure not made of gold." So the song goes.
Today the parables of the treasure and the pearl remind us of that.
These parables have much in common, but they differ as well.
One thing the parable of the pearl merchant includes is a search.
Not so with the treasure finder. He or she was not hunting.

What they have in common, however,
is once they come across the prize, not matter how that occurs,
they give everything else away for the sake of the kingdom.

Everything points to the response, rather than the search.
This is what we find elsewhere in Matthew.
He emphasizes the response.

In other places it has to do with violence.
Do not return evil for evil.
If someone slaps you, turn the other cheek.
Not an eye for an eye—do not retaliate against the one causing harm.
If you are wronged forgive. Forgive unconditionally.

All of these have to do with the response to harm.
But today we have for our consideration the response to the gift.
The gift of the kingdom of God.
Here too it is unconditional.

And yet it causes one to wonder.
What good will it do the pearl merchant
to sell everything for the one pearl?
What would happen to his business?
And so it is with the treasure finder.

Maybe we are wrong, however, to think of the treasure and the pearl
as solely for the benefit of the finder or the seeker.

Perhaps the treasure is larger than self-interest and its satisfactions.
Perhaps the treasure of the kingdom is found in its being shared.

With that in mind, I've been thinking about the kingdom—
Christianity, or the Church, however you wish to think of it
—in a post-Christian age.
As church attendance declines,
and the number of those unchurched grows,
what it is the future?

What will be the face of the church to the world,
when it is no longer in a position of social dominance?
When it no longer has the power to control events through command?
When, in other words, it is fully a servant church?

Of course, there is no way to know this.
But I have some images of the servant church.

My friend Jessica Howell, who for a couple of years
ran Hope House Catholic Worker here in Dubuque,
has been working in Gaza for a few years for Catholic Relief Services.
She is now in East Jerusalem,
as her people have been evacuated during the current crisis.
She is sending out pleas for help and support.
She is placing herself where witness is as strong as force.

The American Bishops,
following the lead of Cardinal O'Malley of Boston,
who visited the border wall between the US and Mexico,
have come out in unanimous support
of the refugees from Central America.
And they speak with one voice.

Pope Francis has led the way, having visited Lampedusa,
the island south of Italy where the refugees from Africa
stop on their way to Europe.
It is on their way there that more than one boat has capsized,
drowning all aboard.

He has emphasized the role of mercy in our understanding of the faith.
He has also demonstrated it.

This week the Pope welcomed Mariam Ibrahim of Sudan,
who converted from Islam to Catholic Christianity,
despite the fact that the penalty for this was the death sentence.
She escaped after experiencing torture,
and puts a face on some of the refugees.

Another friend, a member of one of the book clubs,
a person who is not affiliated with any church,
and was not raised religious,
noticed some of us talking about unconditional forgiveness,
which came up in our discussion.
She was appalled. It was dangerous and foolish.
Her concern, I think, was the need for justice.
I heard her say quietly to herself, "It must be a Christian thing."

I think it is a Christian thing.
And I also think it appalls and troubles many
who look on it from the outside.
It is foolish and irresponsible,
and fails to bring justice to situations where it is so absent.

The Church of the future,
the Servant Church, stripped of its power
and without the sanctions that enforce compliance of the many,
will take on a new face and a new presence.

As I imagine it, it is something like the Mennonite presence,
but perhaps more vividly present to world events.

It will present to world events
something like the UN peacekeeping forces,
but without the weaponry, symbolic though it is even for them.

It takes the beatitudes seriously,
and tries to bring them to the places where hurt is happening.
It responds to violence with the refusal to retaliate,
and in fact, the audacity of forgiveness.

But not the forgiveness that is used as an insult,
as when I say I forgive you and leave you to figure out
what I think you did to me.
No, this is authentic and it is a witness.

A Servant Church of the Second Moment.
That is, the second moment of Matthew's gospel,
the moment of response.

The refusal to retaliate, the impulse to forgive,
these are the signs of putting aside
the instruments of power and coercion,
and allowing the power of healing to emerge.
The power of healing, the power of keeping a vigil for peace,
the power of standing with the victims who have no other recourse.

This has always been a part of the Church, and we know it.
In fact, one of the attractions of the faith community
is the way some things possible here,
are not seen very often elsewhere.

But it is often overwhelmed by other stories and images.
In the future, this will be the clear witness.

This is the treasure that is worth selling everything.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 10, 2014

1 Kings 19:9, 11-13	Elijah in the cave
Psalm 85:9-14	I will hear what God proclaims
Romans 9:1-5	Paul proclaims his Jewishness
Matthew 14:22-33	Jesus, and Peter, on the water

Like many online journals, that of the *National Catholic Reporter*
features a rotating series of panels with the latest news.

They always have four of these.
This week the big news was the upcoming meeting of the *LCWR*,
and two of the four pages were devoted to that event.
One was a preview of the meeting, by the editor, Tom Fox.
The other was a book review by Ken Briggs,
who has been here on occasion.

The two faces chosen to represent the particular articles were familiar.
One was S. Pat Farrell. The other was S. Nancy Schreck.

In other words, as far as the *NCR* is concerned,
these are the faces of the current crisis.

The book reviewed is a collection of keynote speeches
delivered by new presidents of the *LCWR*.
One of these is by Nancy; another, the final one, by Pat.
But among the ten selected is another
by Mary Ann Zollmann, of the BVMs.
And Helen Garvey, also a BVM, provides the introduction.

We know these people.
They are the names and faces of the changes in the church today.
Nancy, as you know, will be giving two talks at the gathering.

The featured speaker, of course, is Elizabeth Johnson.

I have been reading her book on evolution and theology,
Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love.

Her review of the theory of evolution, in the first part of the book,

is recommended reading for anyone who wants
a rather painless and authoritative introduction to these ideas.
Her writing is graceful
and she has the teacher's instinct for the telling example.

But it is in the theological part,
which I am just coming to in my reading,
which promises to be the innovative and needed
contribution of the book.

I am going to select on example, which I think is illustrative
of the changes that we are going through.

One of Johnson's most effective moves is to emphasize the difference
between pre-Darwin and post-Darwin views
of the catalogue of natural species.
The traditional idea was that every species of flora and fauna
were fixed and permanent.
Each species was created uniquely, just as it is.

Darwin's vision changed all that.
Now the tree of life was seen as a genealogy, a family tree,
rather than a catalogue of types.
And the tree is still growing.

Which is to say, species are not fixed, but always shifting and changing,
opening up new possibilities.
Rather than a set of fixed types, never changing, always the same,
we have a moving and shifting platform of changing types.
More like a river than a rock garden.

The traditional view of nature was reflected in our theology.
Classical theology also saw the world in terms of fixed, eternal types.
Everything had an essence, which was its signature nature,
and was permanent.
In classical theology, the essence was the ground,
and change was an accident (in that language).
That is, change was on the surface, but not important.
In fact, in the perfect world it was eliminated as much as possible.

Change was bad.

But in the vision that we have inherited from Darwin,
change is at the ground level.
Change is the reality, and permanence is an artifact,
an impression we have because it happens so slowly,
and we get only a brief look.

And there you have it.
While this is not the entire crisis
through which the church is traveling today,
it is at the center of it.

This week's *Commonweal* magazine
adopts the theme of the "Francis Effect,"
considering what this pope's legacy will be
and his influence on the church today.

Massimo Faggioli, the young Italian professor at St. Thomas in St. Paul
and expert on Vatican II,
who also was one of the speakers last year
in the series sponsored by the regional congregations of religious women,
has an article called "The Italian Job."

He is considering what success P. Francis
will have in reforming the Curia,
"Whether he is able to rouse the church from its institutional coma,"
in his words.
Francis has an active opposition,
and another pope on the premises,
behind whom they are hoping to rally.

While this doesn't say why we haven't heard from Francis
on the issue of American Religious Women,
it does show that he currently has his hands full.

Faggioli offers some key lines:
"Tensions between Francis and the old guard
will linger because the bureaucratic culture of the Catholic Church
is resistant to change."

And they worry about
"a disavowal of centuries of moral theology on family and marriage."

"Centuries of moral theology."
Change is seen as dangerous and unnecessary,
and a betrayal of theology.
The tradition reflects an essentialist view of a world
in which change is peripheral to life, not central
—a flaw that needs to be eradicated.

At risk in all of this is the vision of the world and the church,
as well, of course, as personal investment in life careers.

With all that, it is interesting to see
what the liturgy has selected for our reflection today.

Elijah has retreated to Mt. Horeb,
the holy mountain known in other traditions as Sinai.
Elijah is known for his uncompromising style.
He is famous for confronting persons of power.
He takes no prisoners.

But he has been less than successful
with the face-off with the priests of Baal on Mt Carmel.
While he defeated them, Jezebel the Queen of Israel
has turned his victory into defeat, and he is running for his life.

At the sacred mountain he has an encounter with the transcendent God,
in what scholars call a Theophany.
But this one is different.
No thunder, no lightning, only a small whisper.
Perhaps God works in other ways.
In addition, Elijah is told to name a successor for himself.
It seems his time is done.

The Gospel of Matthew also features a theophany today,
as Jesus stills a storm.
Jesus also walks on the water.
But that doesn't seem to be what we are supposed to be noticing,
since Peter also attempts to walk on the water.

This is where our attention is drawn.

My late friend, Victor Sprengelmeier,
was concerned that the Gospels lacked a sense of humor.
But maybe it is there and we just fail to notice it.
It is my inclination to think the Gospels
treat Peter with gentle humor.

In today's story about his less than successful attempt to master the water, we forget that his real name was Simon, and Peter was his nickname.
It means Rock, as they knew, and we forget.
Rocks seldom float.

In any case, while Peter is recognized as having authority
—after all he is the one who leaves the boat, not the others—
this is treated with gentle qualifications.
His authority is not taken on his own;
it is in his relationship to Christ,
for whom he is an image, but a partial one,
depending on faith and support from the one he represents.

Peter stands upon a shifting, changeable medium.
It is not a fixed, immutable world.

He is the Rock, but still he learns to stand upon a place of fluid change.
More of a dance than a stance, it seems.

It turns things around.
This is not a sturdy rock
against which turbulent waters roll, without effect.
Instead, the Rock stands on the water,
upon the changing world as we now know it to be.

Elijah and Peter give us a lesson about the changing world and church.
We are not to flee from the world to a safe place,
but to bring the message to a world, often in crisis and flux,
with the risks that it most certainly will entail.

This is the witness given, each in their own way,
by the LCWR, and the papacy of Francis.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 17, 2014

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7	The inclusive Temple
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8	Let all the nations praise you!
Romans 11:13-15, 29-32	The Gift to the Gentiles
Matthew 15:21-28	A Canaanite Woman, and her daughter

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
This claim is found only in Matthew, and it appears more than once.
It is his twist on the message.
And the woman, in her own way,
recognizes the inadequacy of this proclamation.

And so it is, when we arrive at the conclusion of Matthew's gospel,
he shows us Jesus standing on the mountain
sending his disciples forth to all nations,
with the promise that he will be with them till the end of the ages.

Because it appears only in Matthew,
we can be confident that by making this little change
he is addressing issues of his time and place, his community.

He and his Jewish community of followers of Jesus
lived in a time of crisis.
The temple had been leveled
and its remnants burnt by the Roman army,
in a violent demonstration of what they conceived
as the superior power of their gods.

Judaism was in disarray, its center gone,
many of its communities—temple priests, Levites, Essenes,
even the Zealots on Masada—eliminated.
Where was the future of Judaism?

The Jewish historian Josephus, accepting the lesson of the destruction,
said that God had gone over to the Romans.
The new-born rabbinic movement, successors of the Pharisees,
proposed that the new temple was the holy book.
The future they envisioned came to be
in what we call today rabbinic Judaism.

But Matthew had a message for Judaism:
The future lay in the faith community
that proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah.
And he shows Jesus making that claim explicitly:
"I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The Canaanite Woman was not Jewish.
We see here an early concession
that the movement would turn beyond Israel to the Gentiles.

In the reading from Romans,
we conclude a section that we began last week—Romans 9-11.
Paul is concerned about the lack of response of his fellow Jews,
who have not joined the following of Jesus as he anticipated.

In this section of the letter he is agonizing over the shift to the Gentiles,
and proposes a solution
—just as the previous failure of the Gentiles
allowed the election of the Jews,
so now the absence of the Jews
allowed the Gentiles to become believers.
But in the future both will join together in one believing family of Israel.

It is symptomatic of traditional Christian outlooks
that the liturgy skips this section of Romans almost entirely.
And there is a story here.
Until recently, it was seen as a kind of an extra addition to the letter.
The real business of the letter was in the first eight chapters.

But in our lifetimes this has changed dramatically.
It was part of a larger reassessment.
Scholars have come to the opinion that this section
is the real meat of the letter, as its climactic position would suggest.

The common term to describe what happened is "Supercessionism."
Supercessionism is the problematic doctrine
that Christianity replaced Judaism.
To put it in context, it is one of the themes
that Mary Elsbernd was pursuing with Raimund Beiringer.

For our entire religious system is grounded in Judaism.
Our liturgy looks back to the synagogue service of the Word,
and the Passover Meal of Jesus and the disciples.
Our ethical sense of Justice builds upon the insights of the Prophets,
and continually returns to them.

Our theological understanding of God,
creating and operating in human history, is Jewish.
Our faith language, our themes, our religious symbolism,
our way of understanding the story of salvation
—all are legacies of our Jewish ancestors.
And yet we found it possible to take all this from them,
and turn them out, as cursed and persecuted.

In its document on other religions, "Nostra Aetate,"
Vatican II devoted a special section
to the relationship between Christians and Jews.
It based its argument almost entirely on Romans 9-11.

The historian, John Connelly, wrote a book
about the changes in Jewish relations introduced by the Council,
called *From Enemy to Brother:*
The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965.

As the title shows, the change began with the pogrom of the German Jews,
and reached its mature expression in the Council teaching.

In a recent article in *Commonweal* Magazine
Connelly returned to the theme.
Here are a couple of quotes, if you might allow me.

"The issue may seem esoteric to Catholics
who listen to Scripture readings Sunday after Sunday
and may hardly notice any anti-Judaism.
To get an inkling of the power of this anti-Judaic legacy,
I recommend reading a gospel in one sitting.

Or better yet, watch the 2003 film The Gospel of John with a Jewish friend.
At times, you will both cringe as Jesus denigrates Jewish authorities

and outdoes—indeed, seems to supersede—their teaching. …

"Perhaps even [some of the concerned critics do]
not fully appreciate the revolution unleashed by Nostra Aetate.
Its section on the Jews is not about "parity"
and not even about tolerance;
to tolerate, after all, means to endure, to "put up with."

Far more than putting up with Judaism,
Nostra Aetate celebrates the church's origins in Judaism,
and asserts that God holds the Jews "most dear."
The church says such a thing about no other religion or people.
Nostra Aetate does not preach supersessionism. …

Pluralism means understanding and respecting the other's viewpoint,
not sharing it."

There are lessons here.
Though the struggle is long and difficult, the change can occur.
Furthermore, it can change overnight, or at least in one generation.
Third, changes that occur in the culture
can be learned and adopted in the church.

To return to Matthew's story,
I have not forgotten that the supplicant in spirited dialogue with him,
is a woman as well as a Gentile.

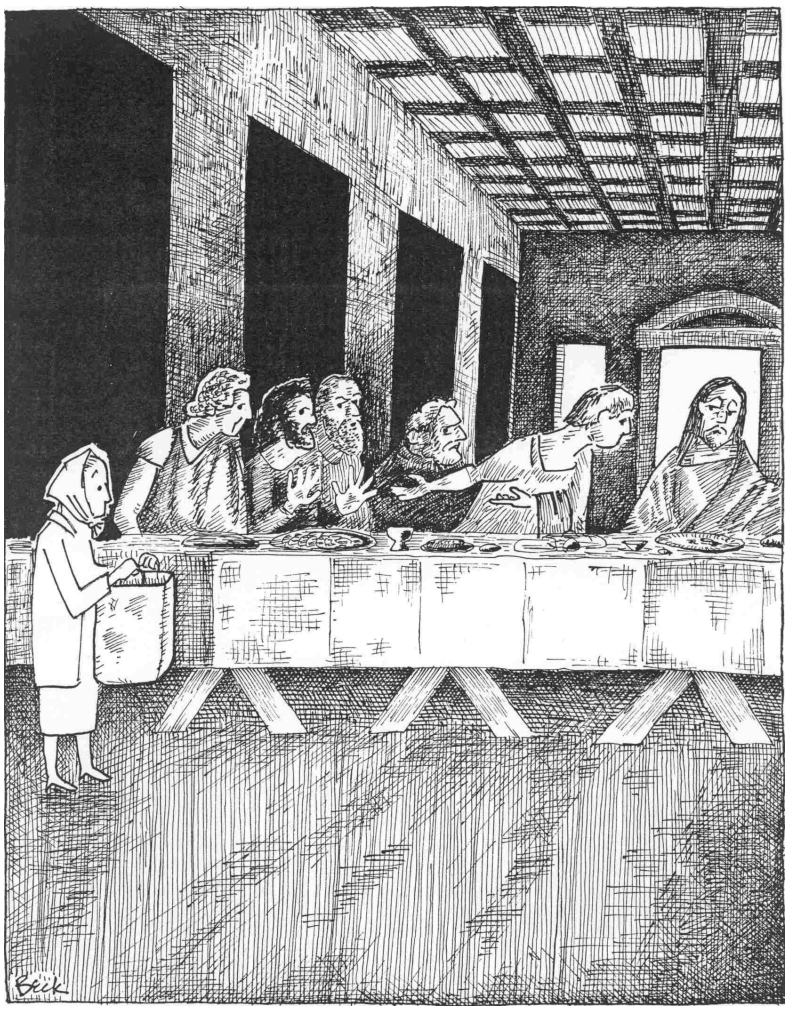
The problem is already in the text.
The Gentile problem is addressed;
the gender issue is not acknowledged.

And yet that is still part of the story too,
as the woman holds her own in the exchange.
She does not give up.
She responds, quip for quip, line for line.

Though the struggle is long and difficult, the change can occur.
Change can occur overnight.
And changes in the culture can be adopted in the church.

And Jesus' response to the woman's persistence, her wit,
her overriding concern for her daughter,
her refusal to accept his decision as the last word,
her negotiation of the minefield of this issue, is memorable:

"O woman, great is your faith!
Let it be done for you as you wish."



Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 24, 2014

Isaiah 22:19-23	O Key of David's House
Psalm 138:1-3, 6, 8	I will sing your praise
Romans 11:33-36	The deep wisdom of God
Matthew 16:13-20	You are Peter

It is possible that when you heard the first reading,
there was a moment, when it spoke of the key
which when opened no one shuts, and when closed no one opens,
that you thought about a passage concerning Peter.

And then when the Gospel arrived,
you heard that very passage about Peter that you were reminded of.
It would seem that the one is deliberately connected to the other.

Or maybe you thought of the O Antiphon of Advent:
"O key of David and scepter of Israel,
what you open no one else can close again;
what you close no one can open.

You will not be surprised to learn that this is a Messianic motif
based on today's passage from Isaiah.

Shebna and Eliakim do not appear in the liturgy very often,
and I suppose it would be best to make some explanation
as to why they showed up today.
Who were they? And why are we hearing about them?

The short version is that they were officials in the kingdom of Judah,
during the reign of Hezekiah.
Today Shebna, who had been Chief Steward
—a position something like Prime Minister—
was to be replaced by Eliakim.

Hezekiah was a good king,
but he faced almost insurmountable obstacles.
The main obstacle was the rising power
of Assyria and its king Sennacherib.
Fortunately, Hezekiah also had another advisor

in the person of Isaiah the prophet.
Isaiah did not hesitate to offer his opinions
on national and international policy,
and support that with the further notice
that he was speaking in the name and interests
of the Lord Yahweh himself. So it is today.

The occasion, described in later chapters of Isaiah
and in the book of 2 Kings, is the invasion of Assyria
during a time of revolt of the Judea and other lands in the area.
Isaiah supported the revolt, and apparently Shebna did not.
Isaiah promises the replacement of the Chief Steward.

The investiture of Eliakim in his new position is described
in all the pomp and circumstance of a royal coronation.
Maybe this is why it has been called a Messianic passage.
But, if so, it is different from all the other such passages.

The passages in the Old Testament that promise the coming of the Messiah
originally concerned the king of the day, the descendant of David.
Typically, it was a hymn for the coronation of a king.
Hezekiah had a couple that are found in Isaiah,
and also used for Advent.

When the kingdom collapsed, and was never revived,
these passages were given a new life, with a new message.
Cut loose from their moorings in the actual life of the kingdom,
they were seen as looking forward to a time
when the kingdom would be revived, once for all.
And the king to come, the Anointed One
—in Hebrew, Messiah; in Greek, Christ—
this king would bring in the final reign of God.

So it usually goes. But today it is different.
For Eliakim is not a king, but a Chief Steward of the king.
Not the Messiah, but the Messiah's Prime Minister.

So it is very interesting that Peter
should be identified as the holder of the keys.
He is not the Messiah,

but the one who just identified Jesus as the Messiah.
And now he is named the Chief Officer, the Prime Minister,
the Right Hand Man of the Messiah.
So it is a messianic message with a difference.
Not the Messiah, but his Lieutenant.

But there is another difference we need to notice as well.
This is a difference in the Kingdom itself.
In the passage from Isaiah,
we are in the midst of international tensions and power politics.
This is the world with which we are so familiar.

But in Matthew's account, the Kingdom announced by Jesus
is something quite different.
Of course, we cannot forget that the Roman Empire
recently crushed Jerusalem and its Temple,
and Matthew was writing in the aftermath of this disaster.
The smoke was still figuratively rising
from the ashes of the former altar.

As Matthew describes it, the Kingdom of God
—or Kingdom of Heaven, as he names it,
being reluctant to name God, according to Jewish tradition—
this Kingdom was not like the empires of the world.
Instead of power politics,
this Jesus speaks of loving your enemies,
of turning the other cheek.

When visited by Satan in the desert,
he rejects the offer of controlling the nations of the world,
as the imperial power famously does.

And if Jesus sees the Kingdom different from others in the world,
he apparently expects his Chief Officer and Prime Minister
to make the same changes.

As a matter of fact, Jesus will rather abruptly
speak of his mission to Jerusalem,
which will involve suffering and dying.
We will hear this next week.

This is not the kind of conquest of the city
that Peter and others expected of a Messianic King.

Peter, in fact, will object. And Jesus will answer him.
Peter will hear these words:
"Get behind me Satan, your ways are human ways, not God's."
That is, Peter is thinking, like Satan in the desert,
about controlling the nations of the world.
But that is not what Jesus is about.

And, of course, since Peter is figured here
as the Rock upon which the church is founded,
and since we trace the office of the papacy back to Peter,
all of this has distinct implications for what it means to be church,
and church leaders.

And it seems to me that the simplest way to show that
is with an example.
And my example is the current holder of that office, P. Francis,
and his interpretation of his role.

One of the surprises he gave us
was the way he talks about that role, as well as the way he lives it.
Traditionally, the pope is the Bishop of Rome,
as well as the head of the Catholic Church.

As head of the Church, the Pope is seen as occupying the throne
of the longest continuing monarchy in the world.
It is a kingdom in the model of other kingdoms,
even as the world changes away from that model.

During the last papal election, I was interested to learn
that the College of Cardinals was a closed system
because that was as close as they could get to a royal dynasty,
given the fact that offspring did not figure into the picture.
It was a way of keeping it in the family.

But when P. Francis arrived, there was a change in language
as well as imagery.
For him, the role that defines what he is doing is Bishop of Rome.

He speaks of being a bishop.
He never speaks of being an absolute ruler,
a monarch in the old school.

He translates the work of the Pope
as that of a bishop rather than a ruler.
Of course, there are tasks that require his attention
as an international figure,
or as the head of an international organization.
But the model for carrying out these tasks is that of a pastor.
A bishop.

This, I suspect, is the clearest expression available to us today
of the Kingdom of God,
as Jesus has revised its meaning.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 31, 2014

Jeremiah 20:7-9	You duped me, Lord
Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9	My soul is thirsting
Romans 12:1-2	Your bodies as a living sacrifice
Matthew 16:21-27	Get behind me, Satan

Why did Jeremiah stay the course? Why did he stay?
He says that the Lord duped him,
seduced him into a life of prophecy.
He is referring to the experience we read about in his first chapter.

The first words he hears are these:
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I dedicated you,
a prophet to the nations I appointed you."

Recognizing the implications, Jeremiah protested:
"Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak, I am too young."
But the Lord assured him: "I am with you to deliver you."

But now Jeremiah is saying that did not happen.
The Lord did not deliver him when it counted.
Jeremiah suffered, and so he complains in bitter language.
"Whenever I speak, violence and outrage is my message.
It has brought me derision and reproach all the day."

But he cannot stop. He cannot quit the task.
"When I say to myself I will speak his name no more,
it becomes like a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones.
I cannot hold it in."

Why is this happening?
Others cut their losses and quit. Why can't Jeremiah?

Today Peter is at the receiving end of some harsh words.
He has just been called the Rock.
And now, a few verses later, he is called "Satan."

Things have changed for him.

Back at the beginning, he was open and generous in his response.
"Come follow me," he heard.
    And he left his fishing enterprise, his entire way of life,
    and followed.
During the time they spent in Galilee,
he had come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.
    And finally, when asked, he made his confession of faith.
    "You are the Messiah."

Everyone knew what the Messiah was to be.
Finally the kingdom would be restored to Israel.
    Finally the chosen people would be recognized on the world stage
    for the favorites that they were.
        Finally they would no longer be among the marginal and defeated,
        but under the conqueror king would come into their own.

So Peter was elated, and dreaming of the day.

But now Jesus spoke of going to Jerusalem.
That was good; that was where the Messiah had to go,
to take over the reign.
    But Jesus also speaks of suffering and dying.
    This was not part of the program
    as it was handed down in memory and promise.

This needed to be corrected.
With a certain degree of alarm, Peter confronted Jesus.
    This idea of suffering and dying is not positive thinking,
    the kind of thinking we need to carry through the coming program.
        Peter, we can imagine, is thinking that
        the excitement of following the Messiah is rapidly disappearing,
            the charisma is fading.
            This is not a motivational speech.

Furthermore, there is the danger
that Jesus might still be wanting them to follow,
    now that things have taken this darker turn.

Sure enough, the original call by the lake is renegotiated:
"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself,
take up his cross, and follow me."

No more is it simply, "Come, follow me."
Now we hear, "Deny yourself, take up your cross,
then come follow me."

Lest we miss the deeper meaning of this message for Peter,
think about that moment later in the gospel story,
when Peter is outside, in the high priest's courtyard,
while Jesus is inside.
Peter denies, but not himself.
He denies he knows the one inside, taking up the cross.

Why did Peter stay?
When things changed, and changed completely,
why did he not go elsewhere?
What he saw now had very little to do
with what he responded to in the beginning.
Now was the time to try for greener pastures.
Now was the turning point, and if he is going to leave,
now is the time to do it.
Why doesn't he?

John's Gospel speaks to this,
at the end of the Bread of Life discourse, in chapter 6.

As a result of this, many [of] his disciples
returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.
Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?"
Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life."

We have been there ourselves.
Why do we stay?

Some have left, no longer in religious life.
And we do not begrudge them that decision.

Others have left the church. The numbers are astounding.
As we hear so often, the second largest
religious self-identifying group in the US are "Ex-Catholics."
We can understand what motivates
many of our friends who have done this.
And yet we have continued on.
Why? Have we not been paying adequate attention?

Well, I will grant that there are a multitude of reasons,
and each of us can probably name a different one.
Sometimes we are hard on ourselves, and other times not so much.
But I would like to offer one possibility,
and you can decide how well it fits.

It comes from Michael Crosby's book, Spirituality of the Beatitudes.
But he is reporting on another:
The Liberation of Theology, by Jon Sobrino.

It concerns the cycles of interpretation and commitment
that have traditionally been known as the hermeneutic circle
—the rhythm of circling back and forth
in understanding the word of God and our response to it.

Finally, this is my version of it.
It all begins when I have an experience that jars my worldview.
Perhaps working in a ghetto, or in some way experiencing
a world of suffering outside my own ghetto of privilege.
This does not fit my comfortable faith categories up till now,
and I begin to question that faith.
How could I have been so wrong?
Why have I not been told about this?

It is at this point that my hold on the faith is most fragile.
I can go one of two ways.
I can move on, abandoning a faith that seems to me to be inadequate,
if not a failed program.
This is an option that many have taken.

Or, I can return to the sources, to the word of God,

to the principles of faith, and take another look.
In this turn, bringing my new, unnerving experiences with me,
I discover something there I never noticed before.
It turns out the Gospel talks about the poor.
It addresses the marginal.

It speaks to the violation of justice, which outraged Jeremiah.
It criticizes the abuses of power,
to the chagrin and education of Peter.

Seeing this, I abandon my former understanding of faith,
and move to a new, and more demanding, even somewhat alarming,
vision of what it means to be a believer.

Chastened, more sober, less certain of my ability to carry it through,
I now take my stand in a new place,
seeing things as if for the first time.

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 7, 2014

Ezekiel 33:7-9	The Watchman
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9	Harden not your hearts
Romans 13:8-10	Paul and the Love Commandment
Matthew 18:15-20	Brotherly (and Sisterly) Correction

In her writings, Dorothy Day names
some of the principles of the Catholic Worker Movement,
which she and Peter Maurin founded.
One of these is Personalism.

In my understanding of this idea,
it means taking personal responsibility
for what happens in your life and world.

Instead of relying upon abstract institutions and structures
to solve your problems for you,
instead of relying upon someone else to intercede for you
against someone who disturbs you,
you deal with them, face to face, nonviolently.

Instead of passing a law, you have a conversation.
And in this we see that nonviolence is in partnership with personalism.

I cannot help but read today's Scriptures
through the lens of the Catholic Worker.
When I do so, here is what I see.

We have reached that part of Paul's letter to the Romans
in which he dispenses advice. Today he is very general.
"Love your neighbor as yourself."

I am taken by these words:
"Love does no evil to the neighbor;
hence, love is the fulfillment of the law."

Love, as fulfillment of the law is what personalism tries to make real.
Love that does no evil to the neighbor
is what nonviolent interaction tries to bring about.

These are the two elements that run through today's readings:
love as personalism;
love as nonviolence.

The account Ezekiel gives us is a detailed assignment of responsibilities.
It sounds like the distinctions a lawyer might make.
And, in fact, he is speaking in the name of the law, the Law of Moses.

The theme of his reading is the responsibility of the prophet.
In short, if the prophet warns them, whether they listen or not,
the prophet is clear.
If the prophet fails to warn them,
then he shares in responsibility of the injustice that may result.

I do not think that we are invited to listen to this passage
in order to become more educated
about the role of sixth century BC prophets.
I think it has an application to us today.

In terms of Catholic Worker Personalism,
it means that the Church, and its members, have a prophetic dimension.

For some, this means public activism, often expressing itself
in nonviolent confrontation and civil disobedience.
If you want a name to make this more vivid,
just think of S. Dorothy Marie Hennessey, long time peace advocate,
as well as Catholic Worker in Cedar Rapids, IA, for many years.

Having spent 6 months in prison, along with her sister Gwen,
she began it in Pekin, Illinois,
but finished it down at the detention center on Elm St.
She remarked about the irony—
at one time she was on the board of that same detention center.

The objective of the personalist prophet
is not to force a change from the top down,
but to witness to a truth that is not present,
to make public an injustice long ignored.

Not to do so, or enable others to do so,
is to share in the responsibility for the ongoing injustice.
To know, and not to act, is what Ezekiel was speaking about today.

But personalism and nonviolence extend
beyond our relations in the public arena.
They also dictate the quality of our personal relationships,
in the Catholic Worker ideal.

We treat one another as adults;
we deal with issues face to face,
and do not work the angles behind the scenes, behind one's back.

Matthew's Gospel has something to say to us for personalist dealings
in personal relationships and community dealings.

For one thing, the gospel passage
moves beyond the prophet's lesson of assignment of guilt,
to the need for reconciliation.

It provides a process, similar to the passage from Ezekiel
in its deliberate articulation of successive steps.
But these move toward repairing a relationship.

The process recognizes that reconciliation comes from both sides.
First, Jesus says, meet with your opponent alone.
In other words, face to face.

Why do this? It is what we used to call Fraternal Correction, I think,
though it doesn't need to be restricted to brothers.
Sisters could also be included.

Clearly the possibility of reconciliation is offered here.
This is not suggested as a way of blaming or irritating the other.
It is not a platform for self-righteous attack.
It is a move toward reconciliation.

Then, in the familiar steps, if that doesn't work,
invite two or three others in on the issue.
Here too the offer of reconciliation is the hope.

When we hear shortly after that where
"two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them,"
we are given an indication of the character of this meeting
with two or three others.
It is a prayerful move toward resolving differences.

And, then, if that doesn't produce results,
take the matter to the entire community.

And at this point, I see a risk that was there from the beginning,
but is now becoming much more clear.

It is this:
In all of this I have to be pretty confident that I am in the right.
Of course, I am convinced of this
when I first take my case to the other, face to face.

But I am rather blind to my own contribution to the dispute.
I will be thinking about that side much more clearly
when I decide to involve one or two others.
What if they do not agree with me about the issue?

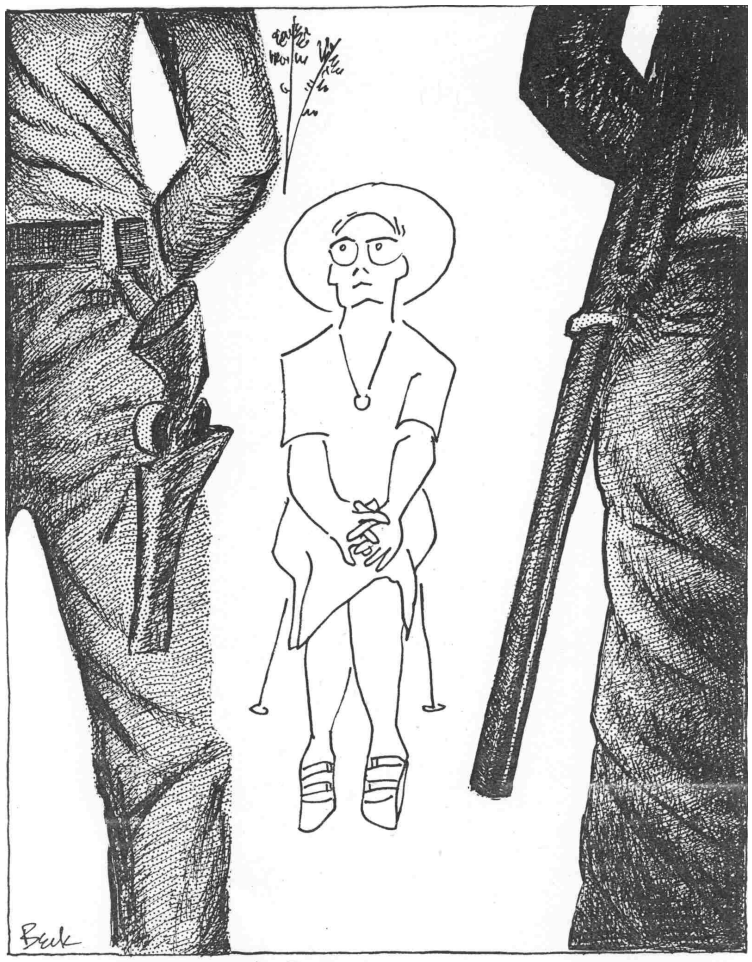
What if they begin to point out my own part in keeping the conflict alive?
Now I am invited to think about that,
before I even take it to the next level.

And of course, this is even more the case
when I take it to the full community.
I think there is the possibility that there are some in that larger group
who are not strong advocates for my cause.
Am I willing to risk that?
Or will I take another long look at my complaint,
and come with greater humility to an agreement?

One side of nonviolent conflict resolution
is to treat the other as a fully human
    —deserving of all the respect that implies—
and not just as my enemy.

It is love that does no harm,
in today's words from Paul's letter to the Romans.
    Another side is that it invites me to consider
    my own involvement in unjust behavior,
    and come to terms with that, maybe even involving repentance.
        Wouldn't that be remarkable?

Catholic Worker Personalism and Nonviolence
are not the only lenses with which to read
the scripture passages for today.
    But I think they are useful ones, worth our attention.



DOROTHY DAY

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

September 14, 2014

Numbers 21:4-9	Bronze serpents in the desert
Psalm 78:1-2, 34-38	Do not forget the works of the Lord
Philippians 2:6-11	Emptying: The Kenosis Hymn
John 3:13-17	Lifted up like the Bronze Serpent

Christians have succeeded in turning the cross,
originally a demonstration of defeat, into a sign of triumph.
We have our various ways of expressing this triumph,
from the San Damiano Cross to the Icons of Orthodox Christianity.

This is one meaning of the Exaltation of the Cross.

The feast was instituted to commemorate certain historical events.
One is the finding of the True Cross by St. Helena,
the mother of Constantine.

Another is the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher,
also at the insistence of St Helena,
and the support of Constantine.

Today we associate relics of the Cross
more with Rome than with Jerusalem.
And much of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher remains standing.
It contains the site of the crucifixion and the burial of Jesus.

Helena, having located Mt. Calvary to her satisfaction,
leveled the hill and built a large church
with a balcony at about the same height as the original hill.

Currently, the building is divided among five Christian churches,
each of which guards a separate part of the Passion Story.
Because of their history of not cooperating with each other,
the key to the church has been held by the Muslims,
ever since Saladin governed the city.

Pilgrims to the site are often treated to something like antiphonal chant,
as different churches seem to be trying
to drown each other out with competitive prayers.

It is not a satisfying experience for the typical pilgrim.
Which is one of the reasons that Reformation Christians
proposed a second location in 1867, the Garden Tomb.
It looks a lot more like what one would hope to see.

When I was going to school at the Ecole Biblique
I would often be visited by someone who knew someone who knew me,
and was told to stop by.
I did not know any of them.

However, I do remember the time someone arrived
after having just visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.
Her words have always stuck with me:
"It just makes you sick."

The pilgrim was expecting something else, I think.

I am offering this picture as a counter
to a certain kind of exaltation of the cross,
that would replace it with a romantic vision, without cost.

In this way, the Holy Sepulcher is an authentic memorial to the cross.
It doesn't allow a romantic dream of the events of the gospel.
It doesn't give us so much an image of the true cross,
as it does a true image of the cross.

Here are three connected thoughts about that.

My first thought concerns the Cross as Reality Principle.
This is what we find in the Jerusalem shrine of the Holy Sepulchre.
The reality is the struggle.

In the theology of St. Paul we find an emphasis on the cross
as a necessary grounding in the life and work of the faith.
In the Gospel of Mark we find an emphasis that commentators
tend to call a theology of the suffering Messiah.
The point is that Mark insists on
the suffering side of the gospel story.

In both cases, that of Paul and of Mark,
it would seem that they found it necessary to respond
to what seemed an all too swift move toward exaltation of the cross,
a premature move toward glory,
that failed to take into account the cost.

In the cross as reality principle, we find an insistence that,
while death is overcome, it is not eliminated.
The new life is not in lieu of death, but through it to the other side.
The reality principle says the glory is always
through the difficulty to the other side,
and not around it, avoiding it.

In the poetry of today's scripture readings,
the burning bites of the serpents in the desert
find a remedy in the fiery bronze serpent on a pole.
In the cross, death has overcome death.
But only real death can to this.

A second thought about the Cross, is Political
for lack of a better word for it.
It would avoid dismissing the political implications of this symbol.

The poetry of the feast would typically remind us
that this feast celebrates the Cross as the instrument of torture,
designed to degrade the worst of criminals,
and yet becomes the tree of life.

But historically, the Roman Empire embraced crucifixion
because it offered a deterrent,
especially for those who had nothing to lose.
It degraded, but as a threat and a way of controlling a population.
It was, in other words, a form of oppression,
and its social message is an integral part of the meaning of the Cross.

I remember some lines that have stayed with me in this regard.
One scholar pointed out that when Jesus invited his disciples to
"Take up your cross and follow me,"
he was challenging them to join in
the politically dangerous route that he was pursuing,

with full awareness of the probable consequences.

And here too the meaning has been turned upside down.
As N. T. Wright has pointed out,
the cross had a clear meaning for the Roman Empire.

"It meant; we Romans run this place, and if you get in our way
we'll obliterate you—and pretty nastily, too.
Crucifixion meant that the kingdom hadn't come, not that it had.
Crucifixion of a would-be Messiah meant that he wasn't the Messiah,
not that he was.
When Jesus was crucified, every single disciple knew what it meant:
we back the wrong horse. The game is over."

Which is why the resurrection was a complete surprise,
and not a case of wish-fulfillment by the disciples.
Among other things, now the Cross as a symbol
took on an entirely new, and opposite, meaning.

My third thought is theological,
and concerns the Task that God has set Jesus upon,
and the Risk it involved.
My understanding comes from its place in the gospel story,
and not from the development of sacrificial theology.

In the gospels it is clear, and here I am especially thinking of Mark,
the gospel that set the pattern for the others.
Jesus is given a task.
It involves liberating those who are marginalized and dehumanized
by taking up their cause and, eventually,
bringing to the center of their social world,
the temple in Jerusalem.

In other words, Jesus is given a task by God,
and this task involves a risk.
It is not a case, in the gospels, of God sending Jesus
to die an atoning death,
to satisfy some divine balance of debt and guilt.

No, it involves a mission of release and salvation,

but a mission that will be resisted and have its dangers.

It is in the terms of this story
that the gospels present Jesus as saying, "Come, follow me."
This is your story, too.

In all of this, the theology of the cross
is not something that applies to Jesus alone,
and is set apart from us as something to admire and celebrate.

Rather, it is something that applies to us as well,
and is an invitation to the disciple.
And in the story, we know that the disciples were disconcerted
when they heard, "If you would be my follower,
take up your cross, and come follow me."

And yet they did. And we do.

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 24, 2014

Isaiah 55:6-9	My ways are not your ways
Psalm 145:2-3,8-9,17-18	The Lord is near to all who call
Philippians 1:20-24, 27	Paul's life or death quandary
Matthew 20: 1-16	Parable of the Vineyard Workers

As summer ends and the harvest season begins,
we return to the harvest parables in Matthew's Gospel.
So it is today.

And today we have the Gospel, the good news,
in a story that never fails to irritate many of us.
The parable of the Vineyard Workers
hired during different times of the day, but paid the same,
raises all kinds of questions for us.
What does it mean? How is this a story of the Kingdom?
What kind of an image of God is it presenting?

One has the impression that those who compiled the Sunday readings
chose the passage from Isaiah because of the words,
"My thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD."

In other words, I see them making a big shrug,
as if to say, Figure it out yourself.

One way we ask the question has to do with God's justice.
This has been memorably stated as
"Why do bad things happen to good people?"
That is the question repeated, in effect,
for 40 chapters in the book of Job.
How can this God of ours be called a just God?

When we approach the parable of the vineyard workers
with justice as our concern, an interesting thing happens.
It turns out there are different kinds of justice.

On the one hand, there is commutative justice,
which governs the fairness of contract agreements, for instance.
And then there is distributive justice, which concerns itself
with the equitable distribution of goods in a society.
And in a strange way,
both of these are met in the parable.

Contract justice wants to make sure that agreements are met.
Mutually agreed upon contracts need to be honored.
When I sign a contract, I have to live with it.

Of course, conditions change with time.
But that is why we sign contracts.
They are intended to carry us into a future that is secured
by promises that we guarantee with legal force. Contracts.
In the parable all contracts are honored.

But then there is distributive justice.
That would ensure that everyone, despite circcumstances,
receives a living wage.
This seems to be indicated in the parable by the term 'daily wage.'
And if so, then each worker is given a just wage for the day,
even those who did not work the full day,
but still have to eat.

It would seem that the terms of justice are met.
And yet we are still bothered.

For that reason, we sometimes frame the problem
in terms of justice and mercy, rather than justice alone.

And here we find ourselves in a situation not unlike
that of the parable of the Prodigal Son.
But we discover to our consternation that we are identifying
with the side of the Older Son, rather than that of the Prodigal.
The Older Son is in a position something like that
of the Workers that spent the entire day in the Vineyard,
pulling grapes from the vine.

But the question of God's Mercy
is different from that of God's Justice.
If the justice question is "Why do bad things happen to Good People?",
the mercy question puts it the other way:
"Why do Good things happen to Bad people?"

What did they do to deserve it?
In other words, it is about the resentment we feel
when someone seems to get by without paying the cost,
the kind who cut in line successfully,
who are always the lucky ones and do not need it anymore.
What about deathbed conversions?
How is that fair?

Myself, I tend to think of John Wayne,
who is said to be one of these.
And yet he left behind a body of work, a collection of films,
proclaiming a set of values that I, for one,
do not consider especially Christian
in their promotion of violent solutions to interpersonal problems.

And then there is Wallace Stevens, the poet.
Similar story.

So … Why do good things happen to people
who are not noticeably virtuous?

Let me change the question.
Let's put it this way: Why does it bother me?
Is it not a good thing that people come to the light?
Is not their conversion an indication
that what I believe in is the ultimate truth, and they recognize that?
Shouldn't I celebrate good fortune,
or grace, entering the lives of any of God's people?
Isn't this what Christian love is about?

So why does it bother me?
Is it because I am competitive,
and I do not want someone to come from behind
and win the game at the last moment.

Especially when it is someone else?

Or is it something deeper than that?
Maybe it is because I feel that I wasted my life being good,
when instead I could be having fun.
And here is someone who did both, and it isn't fair.

Let's put aside the suspicion
that having fun is the opposite of being good.
Let's say that is possible,
but probably more of a suspicion than the truth.

There is something else worth looking at,
and that is the feeling that I have earned something
by being diligent and a good person.
Or at least as far as anyone else can tell.

I have maintained this posture all my life,
and it has not been easy at times.
So I am ready to cash in.
I am ready to receive the reward I get
for being so diligent, so darned faithful.

And yet here is someone who has made no attempt to be virtuous
and yet who receives a reward without earning it.
It is enough to throw it all over and forget about the energy spent,
maybe a life's worth, being virtuous.
Time for breaking loose, and going the other direction,
at least for a while.

Or maybe just thinking about it, and not doing it.
After all, I have a pretty good record so far,
and I do not want to throw that away.
That wouldn't be smart.
And so, deeply annoyed, I continue to behave.

OK, I think I am exaggerating,
but there is a grain of truth here.

But there is something wrong with this picture.

Why am I resentful? Maybe I have my assumptions wrong.
Maybe I am confusing virtue with forced labor.
Isn't faithfulness and goodness valuable in themselves, worth celebrating?
Do I need to make them something that I feel obliged to do
in order to receive a reward?

Is it love if I only do it if I'm paid?
Isn't love its own reward?
And isn't it the same if we put the word "Christian" in front of "love,"
and talk about Christian love?
Can I celebrate the gifts received by others?
Of course, I can. I just have to remind myself of that, once in a while.

I do not earn grace. Grace literally means gift.
I do not earn mercy, nor does anyone else.
That is why it is mercy, a gift and not a reward.

After all this you may be thinking
that I still haven't explained the parable, and you are probably right.
But the good thing about parables
is that they allow you to remind yourself of certain truths,
whether or not you explain them fully.
They are always there, with new surprises.
And we can always use reminders.

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 28, 2014

Ezekiel 18:25-28	Is the Lord's way fair?
Psalm 25:4-5, 8-10, 14	Teach me your paths
Philippians 2:1-11	An attitude of humility
Matthew 21:28-32	A man had two sons...

There is an ancient moral principle that says, "Do good, and avoid evil." Well, of course, you might think.
What does that tell us that we do not already know?
Nonetheless, it is good to put those basic principles in place.

One might think the same thing upon hearing today's scripture readings.
Ezekiel tells us that the virtuous will live and the wicked will not.
The parable of the Two Sons (or Offspring?) tells us
that the one who does his Father's will is the good one,
and the one who does not, is not.

So what does that say that we did not already know?
And yet, a second look shows us something.
In both of these readings something more happens.
Both feature change.

Ezekiel speaks of those who turn from bad to good, and from good to bad.
The parable speaks of the one who intended to go out to the vineyard,
but had a change of mind, and didn't.
And another who did not intend to go,
but also had a change of mind, and went.

Even the reading from the letter to the Philippians features a turn-around.
The famous hymn of kenosis, or emptying,
which we last heard a few Sundays ago on the feast of the Cross,
makes a major turn of direction.
After the complete self-emptying of the Christ,
even unto death, and that death on a cross,
he is exalted and lifted up to sit at the right hand of the Father.

There is a real way, then, that today's message
is not so much about being this or that,
but rather finding it possible to change.

Ezekiel is denying that those swept up in the Babylonian Exile,
where he himself is writing,
were simply paying for the sins of their ancestors.
He is reminding them that they are their own moral agents.
They make their own decisions.
What they decide, seen in how they change direction,
is what makes the difference.

Matthew's parable shows Jesus emphasizing action over mere talk.
But its application points to two groups of people
who found themselves in different places
when it came to responding to the call for repentance.

The tax collectors and sinners had no trouble
understanding the need to make a change.
After all, their entire society was telling them that.

On the other hand, the chief priests and elders,
those who only heard from their society
that they were the successful ones and the envy of all,
they did not see so clearly how any change was demanded of them.
And so the parable comes to its stringent and surprising ending.

Or it would be surprising if we hadn't heard the story so many times.
And because we have, we tend to have a firm idea what it is telling us.
We tend to think that the tax collectors and prostitutes
were secretly virtuous, with hearts of gold,
while the chief priests and elders were secretly wicked,
and only now shown for what they actually were.

That sounds good, until we remember that change is the theme,
and this nice picture would not include any actual change.

Change is not easy.
Not only are we personally adverse to it,
but on top of that our social structures
enforce our resistance to change.

This past Wednesday night Liz McAlister,

co-founder of Jonah House Faith and Resistance community,
with her late husband, Phil Berrigan,
and sister-in-law of Daniel Berrigan,
spoke at Loras College for Peace and Justice Week,
just now concluding.

Her theme was the 70-year history of nuclear weapons
and its effect on us and our society.
It is something we do not hear much about these days.
One of the most startling aspects of this history
is the enduring presence of nuclear arms.
They are as deadly today as in the height of the Cold War.
After the agreement between Reagan and Gorbachev,
which brought the Cold War to an end,
we had a golden moment in which disarmament would be possible.
But the moment passed, without change.
It seems that no one wants to let go of such powerful weapons,
even when it seems the sane thing to do.

And then, after the events of 9/11,
nuclear armaments found a new cause,
and were revived for a new day.
Meanwhile, other nations, sensing the way things were going,
struggle to join the nuclear club.

One of the new realizations for me in hearing Liz's talk,
was how the new situation is actually deadlier than the first,
when so many of us were mobilized against nuclear war.

Those were the days of nuclear deterrence.
The idea was that if each side, meaning the US and the USSR,
knew what the other was capable of doing,
each would be reluctant to use the power at their disposal.
To do so would be Mutually Assured Destruction. MAD.
The key was making it known what you had.
It signaled that you did not want to use it.

However, since the events of 9/11,
the US has been building its nuclear capabilities in secret.
This is not deterrence.

This is not saying, "I'm showing you what I have
so you can help me not use it."
No, this is not deterrence, but determination to use the weapons,
if we have the need to do so.

While this is a fearsome reality of our time, one that deserves attention,
it is also a parable for today.
It shows how the unwillingness to change
can even degenerate into something worse.

And we cannot forget that atomic weaponry
has been used on human populations only twice,
and we are the ones who have done that.
Liz mentioned how there was a plan to do a demonstration explosion
for the benefit of international onlookers,
like the Japanese, to persuade them to surrender.
But instead, we decided to use them first
on actual people in actual cities.
That would certainly send the world a signal.

Of course, we never think about that.
There is a way then that we are blasé about our own record.
It is similar to the history of slavery in our history,
and how that affects present-day attitudes,
though we tend not to recognize it.

Or the way that our gun culture derives from our history
of taming a wilderness, the Wild West,
and the individualism myth of the Lone Ranger.
And we are still living that myth and spinning off new versions,
to the detriment of the common good.

But we are good people, we say.
And we ask, "Why do they hate us?"
And we find it incomprehensible.

St Paul had some great insights into this problem of ours,
since it is not a new one.
He saw around him what has been called by some "inauthentic society."
He saw how patterns of dehumanization reinforced themselves,

and could see no deliverance from them in their own right.
It is what he called Sin (with a capital "S"),
and what we sometimes think of as Original Sin.
He saw it structured in society.

But he perceived that in the Christ event
of incarnation, cross, and resurrection, a new possibility had arrived,
as an unearned grace.
It was a possibility that he believed existed in that counter-society,
the authentic community founded in the image of Christ.
It was there that a new possibility of life was promised.
And in Christian love we assisted one another toward that authentic life.

And it was this that drove him to spend so much time
reinforcing those communities, repeatedly visiting them,
and when he couldn't, writing letters.

Today, in quoting the kenosis hymn, he is recommending humility,
and using the self-emptying of Christ as a model.
Humility as self-emptying includes letting-go
of artificial or false props for self-importance.
And in letting go, allowing the authentic to claim our lives.

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 5, 2014

Isaiah 5:1-7	Isaiah's Vineyard Song
Psalm 80:9, 12-16, 19-20	Israel, the Lord's Vineyard
Philippians 4:6-9	The peace of God; the God of peace
Matthew 21:33-43	The Parable of the Vineyard Tenants

Psalm 80, today's response psalm, remembers
Israel's journey out of Egypt and settlement in the Promised Land
under the image of a transplanted vineyard.

Today's version of that response
is a setting of Psalm 80 by S. Pat Farrell,
remembering the founding of this Franciscan Community
as a vine transplanted from Germany.
As the community celebrates
the 150th anniversary of its founding this weekend,
while also celebrating the feast of St Francis of Assisi,
the image of the vineyard takes on special meaning.

The Scripture Readings for today run this image by us
in a number of ways.
Three ways to think of these is in terms of
the vine, the vineyard hedge, and the vineyard tenants.

"You brought a vine out of Egypt," sings the psalm.
It reminded the Israelites of the promises of a land of milk and honey,
the Promised Land.
It was foremost in their awareness as a gift, a gift given,
but also received and deserving of care.

The gift called for a response, a summons out of the land
that they knew to one unfamiliar and reportedly somewhat wild.
The call was to be answered, and the answer required deep trust.

This trust to go forward to a land unknown,
but with a promise of fruitfulness,
is the story of the origins of this community,
which we are celebrating this weekend.

The trust is total, whether the desert to cross is a barren wasteland,
or a wide and uncertain ocean.
The summons was a call into risk,
and the risk demanded the greatest trust.

There is a second thing.
Both the psalm, and Isaiah's Vineyard Song
speak of a hedge around the vineyard, now breached.
Wild animals, wild grapes are now in possession of the vineyard.

Vines are not easily restored, and need to be protected.
It was not long ago that we learned that here in Dubuque,
where we call them Wineries, not Vineyards.
Stone Cliff Winery was vandalized, with the vines cut off at the roots.
It has taken years to recover.

It is not hard to imagine the lesson that will be drawn in many quarters
concerning the need for a strong hedge,
a firm wall, around the vineyard.
For many it will be a call to withdraw from the world
and put up a wall against it.

But here we might look at another example.
For in addition to celebrating 150 years for this community,
we are also celebrating the Feast of St Francis this weekend.
And he might offer a lesson for us.

Francis, like Dominic, started the mendicant orders.
In a shocking manner, they went outside
the protective walls of the monastery,
the prevailing custom until then.
They risked the world.
And in that risk they found their security.

There is a story I've told, but not recently,
so I might be able to do so again.
When I was at Catholic University in Washington D.C.,
I stayed during the first year
at the Missionhurst Fathers seminary in the neighborhood.

It was a rough neighborhood.

But the Missionhurst house was open to the neighbors.
Kids came in and played pool.

The black pastor of the Baptist church came and went.
The Little Sisters of the Poor,
who made elephant blankets for the circus to support themselves,
were frequent visitors at meals.

But the Missionhurst community, whose work was in Latin America, decided it was more honest of them to have their seminary in Mexico City,
and so they moved there the second year.
And they sold the house to another community
who closed the doors and kept them closed.

And then the graffiti and damage began, scrawled across the walls.
It was a rough neighborhood.
And I discovered the true security
was to be open to the neighborhood, rather than walled away.

The true security of this community
has also been in accepting the risk and following the mission.
It is a paradoxical security that involves embracing the uncertain future.
Again, the summons was a call into risk,
and the risk demanded the greatest trust.
And it was given.

And besides the vine and the hedge, there is a third thing
—the parable of the tenants who rented the vineyard,
and were replaced.

I can imagine someone drawing a lesson along the lines of a warning
that as the numbers of religious women decline,
something similar is happening.
I do not find it hard to suspect
that some find this an accusation about poor stewardship.
Who see the parable of the tenants as an indictment against those who,
like the religious women of America,

have searched out new avenues of discipleship.

As Elizabeth Johnson has pointed out,
it would be the religious women who have led the way pointed out
by the Second Vatican Council,
and whose fidelity to that impulse of the Spirit still leads,
in my opinion, others in the church.

Here I would like to invoke another Francis,
the one who is currently pope,
who without precedent chose this name,
and who also is celebrating a feast day this weekend.
Also, he is in the news again, as the Synod on the Family begins in Rome.
One of the issues is the complexity of the modern family,
with particular attention to the role of divorce and communion.

Opponents of change often cite canon law,
or a philosophy of natural law,
or in other cases, liturgical traditions as forbidding change.
But none of these are the scriptural word, and cannot replace it.
And yet, as we heard in the parable, replacements occur.

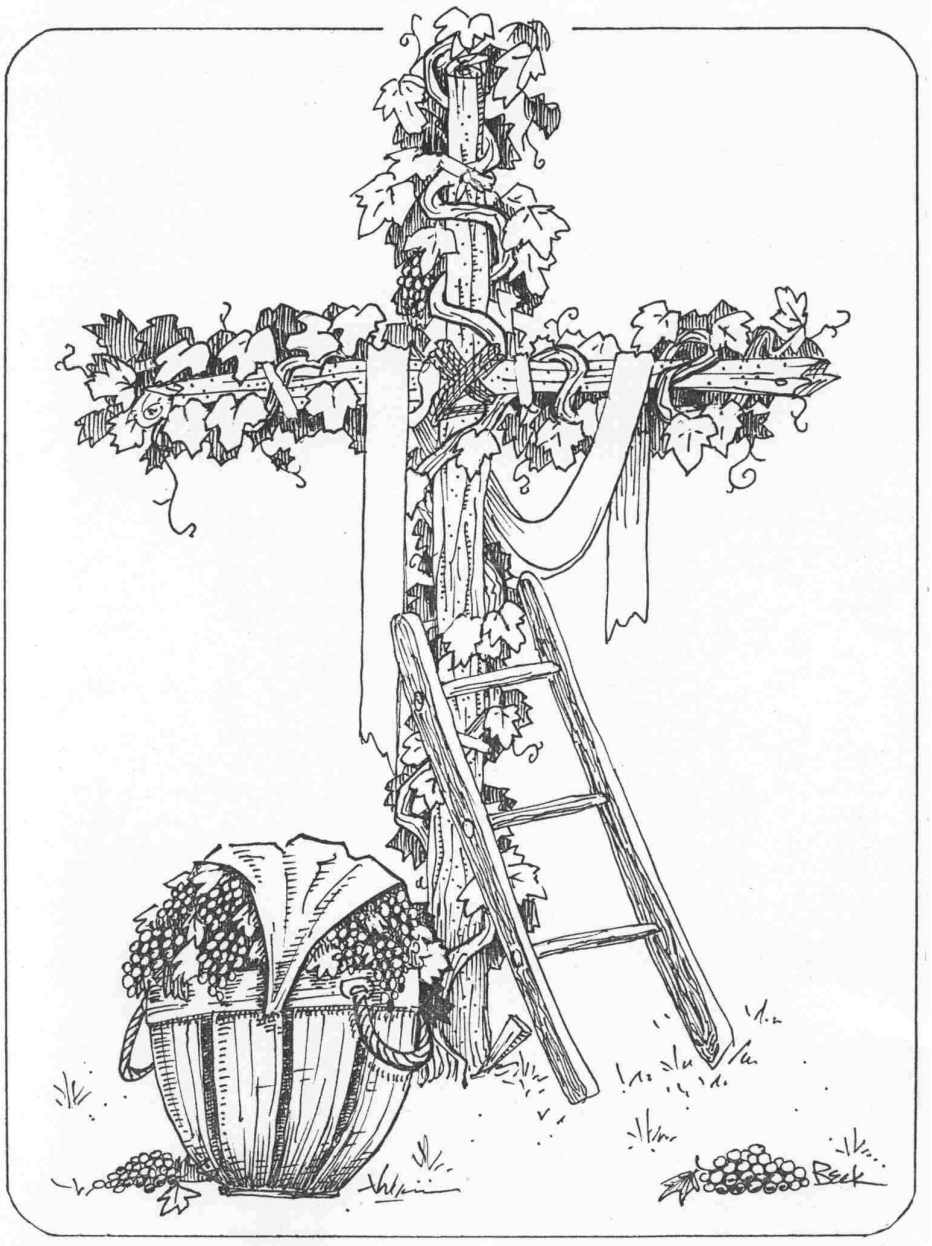
Just as security doesn't come from hedges and walls,
so apparently it doesn't come from avoiding change either.
Instead it comes from answering a call,
and the call arises from those in need.
And the risk of answering in turn summons the trust
that provides our true security.

There is one side of the vineyard image that we haven't considered.
Of course, Israel did not cultivate vineyards,
and choose that image for itself,
because they had a great affection for grapes.
No, much of the produce was used for making wine,
and wine was used for celebrations.
And today we celebrate anniversaries and feasts.

And our liturgy reflects this,
as the presence of the risen Christ comes to us

under the signs of bread and wine.
Both sustenance and celebration.

Celebration of call, and risk, and trust,
all by way of a gift given.



Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 19, 2014

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6	Cyrus, the Lord's Anointed
Psalm 96:1, 3-10	Tell his glory among the nations
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5	Greetings to the Thessalonians
Matthew 22:15-21	Caesar's Coin

Today, on Mission Sunday, you might remember the awakening
of the American Catholic Church in the 1980s.
Liberation theology was coming out of Latin America,
and Orbis Press was established by the Maryknolls,
to make that set of insights available
to the English speakers of North America.

And during those years we were hearing one story about Latin America
from our government, supporting traditional regimes,
and another by way of our colleagues in the missions.
Some of you were there;
some of us were standing vigil in Washington Park.
It was then we learned about the ways of empire.

And we learned that we are part of the empire.

About this time, emerging in academic circles
was a new discipline called Postcolonial Criticism.
Following upon the collapse of European colonial domination
entering into nearly every corner of the globe,
a new generation of former colonies
was using the language and categories of western civilization
to critique it from the vantage point of the colonial experience.

Certain themes emerged: Recovery of national pride.
The problem of a lost cultural identity.
Authenticity: the problem of discovering or creating
an authentic new identity.
And hybridity: a name given to the realization
that any new identity was bound to be a blend
of native and imperial influences.

Irish examples work best for me.

The caricature we now call the Stage Irish was imposed from the outside,
by those who conquered and needed an excuse for doing what they did.
Caricatures of the Irish, with long upper lips and small skulls,
were clearly dehumanizing.

But after colonization, what actually represented Irish culture?
It was a troubling matter, and heated debate.

Coming into contact with this strain of thought,
Biblical Scholars experienced an "AHA!" moment.
They realized role of the bible was connected to this.
On the one hand, the Bible was enlisted
in support of imperial movement into other native lands.
But in addition to that, it also was written,
both the Old Testament and the New,
under similar conditions of colonial domination.

And what is more, the same themes appeared.
Something called Empire Studies was born.

Today's liturgy features two emperors, Cyrus and Caesar.
Each is crucial to the emergence of one of the two Testaments.

Cyrus for the Old Testament.
He ended the Babylonian captivity and sent the exiles home.
He and his successors supporting efforts to rebuild
and collect the local communal memories.
The Bible, the Old Testament, began.

But the Judeans that returned were not permitted political independence.
Many felt that their return from exile was frustrated, incomplete.
Under these ambivalent conditions of both pride and resentment
the Old Testament was written and compiled.

They awaited a Messiah, a king of their own,
who would restore the family of David to the throne,
in a period without foreign empires.
It was not to be. In 63 BC, Pompey the Great captured Jerusalem,
and the Roman era began.

Caesar Augustus was the first to be literally called an “emperor.”
Avoiding previous political titles, to describe his new approach to ruling,
he borrowed the term Imperator from the military.
It was a term for Commander.

In Judea, from 63 BC,
all the way to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD,
resentment festered under the Roman rule.
The Gospels were written about this time,
in the shadow of the Roman destruction.

This is echoed in the gospel story for today,
in which the trap intended for Jesus
consists of angering either the people,
who resented the imperial presence,
or Rome, who did not take kindly to resistance.

Empire Studies traced an undercurrent of resistance in the Gospels.
Titles originally applied to Caesar Augustus,
Savior of the World, Son of God, etc.,
were transferred to Jesus of Nazareth, in a bold act of criticism.

Giving to God what is God's, not Caesar's.
The Gospel turned Empire upside down, and those who were honored
were the marginal, the poor,
and those at the edge of the "civilized" world.
Not the imperial elite.

But there was a risk in this strategy.
The imperial terms adopted in irony and criticism
might come to be understood literally.
And by the time of Constantine,
as Christianity became the established state religion,
the irony was gone, and the church took on the trappings of empire,
reversing the original intent.

Even today, monarchical, or more accurately, imperial styles are around.
For instance, the Vatican is said to be the oldest continuous monarchy.
Or, the language of the liturgy often evokes the imperial throne room.
On occasion it adopts overtones that suggest an image

of subjects flattering a royal presence,
as if God could be fooled by flattery.

But something is happening today.
The heritage of Liberation Theology has returned
in the form of a pope from the margins,
from the edge of Western Civilization.

And this week there is a Synod in Rome, in which the pope
hopes to restore the conciliar style of church governance,
moving away from the centralized system of the imperator.

He is not imposing an alternative agenda,
No, in returning the Synod structure to authentic representation,
something deeper, more radical, is happening:
structuring possibility into the system.
The rest will follow.
In the meantime, we are reminded
about which side of imperial power we stand,
and where the Gospel stands, as well.

Not to mention the pope.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 26, 2014

Exodus 22:20-26	The Cry of the Poor
Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51	My rock, my fortress, my strength
1 Thessalonians 1:5-10	Greetings to the Thessalonians
Matthew 22:34-40	The Greatest Commandment

Just in time for the elections, the Sunday Scriptures weigh in
with some policy recommendations.

You may have noticed there is an election coming up.
You may even have stopped watching TV
in order to avoid the attack ads.

In close elections, especially those with national implications,
those who manage such things appear to believe
that personal attacks work better.
If you are interested in the candidates' policies and positions,
you will have to do some research.

Here to help you in your research
are some helpful principles from both the Old and New Testaments.

The famous story of Jesus and his opponents,
in their debate concerning the Greatest Commandment,
actually involves joining together two different passages
from two different law codes in the Hebrew Bible.

The first is the daily prayer of the pious Jew,
found in the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!
Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,
with your whole heart, and with your whole being,
and with your whole strength.

It is called the Shema,
after the first words of the prayer, in Hebrew.

Many people believe that worship of God, in this manner,

sums up the content and obligations of religious observance.
Do this and you will live.

However, Jesus adds another passage from the Bible
to explain the first part: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The full verse from Leviticus 19 reads:
Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

The implication is clear:
for Jesus, love of God is expressed in love of neighbor.
And you will remember how in Luke's Gospel,
the person asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

And then Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.
The neighbor is not always the one you expect.
So there is a first principle. Love of neighbor
is an expression of adherence to the will of God.

We have heard from the law codes of Deuteronomy and Leviticus,
as they are joined together by Jesus to bring out their fuller meaning.
In the first reading today we hear a passage
from the law code of Exodus.

We should remember that these law codes are not just religious law,
but civil law as well.
And today we hear about the Covenant Code's concept of social justice.
We can call this passage the Cry of the Poor.

Bear with me a bit here, as I look more closely at this passage,
since it does deal with the cry of the poor.
Furthermore, it spells out what conditions exist
in the successful society, the just community.

It begins by naming the stranger in the land,
who is away from his or her social safety net of family and friends.
Then it adds the widow and the orphan,
existing at the mercy of the members of society.

Both the stranger and the widow and orphan are notable
for their stark vulnerability.
So the law says
Do Not Molest these vulnerable members of your society.
If they cry out to me—the cry of the poor—I will hear them.

And then we hear about God's wrath, here directed toward those who take advantage of vulnerability in order to take advantage, and molest.

But the passage doesn't stop here.
It moves on to add the poor neighbor.
Another example of vulnerability.
It imagines a particular example of exploitation,
abusing the weak through the legal right
of withholding the pledge of a cloak.
But here humane concerns overrule legal rights.

And then we end
with God adding to the earlier statement about wrath,
by saying, I am a God of compassion.
But where the wrath was directed toward the abuser,
the compassion is given to the victim.

So this is the second set of policy principles
for the biblically endorsed society.
The stranger in the land, the widow and the orphan, the poor person
—how are they doing?

The prophets repeatedly bring up their case to determine
how successfully Israel is following their covenant with God,
how well they are loving God through loving their neighbor.

And so it is today.

Who are the vulnerable? And how are they protected?

Identifying the stranger in the land today does not require much work.
What are our chosen policies for immigrants?
And do we think of them as our neighbors?

Do we have the contempt that many in Jesus' day felt toward Samaritans?
Or do we share the Samaritan's concern for the man in the ditch?

Who is the widow today?
Is it presumptuous to think about the single mothers
who face complicated daily lives,
balancing jobs with child care, schooling, and more.
And when they are poor, how much more difficult.

Who is the orphan?
Here we cannot forget the truly vulnerable, the unborn.
And we remember there are different ways to address this issue.

One approach is to work to change the law.
Another is to reduce the number of abortions
by effective welfare assistance.
Something that might help both widow and orphan.

And what about the poor person?
Do we see them as neighbors?
Do we understand the difficult conditions under which they live?
And do our policies reflect that understanding?
Or do we dismiss them as not as industrious as we ourselves?
We who, according to the TV ads, have worked hard all our lives?

As we close in on the elections we will hear much
about Christian values and Biblical ideals.
Today I would just like to offer these passages
as rather clear testimony from the Scriptures themselves.

If the Bible be our guidebook, this is what it says.

The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls)

November 2, 2014

Wisdom 3:1-9	The souls of the just
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
Romans 5:5-11	When we were enemies God loved us
John 6:37-40	I will reject no one

Some of us remember the old days of scrupulosity.
We were deathly afraid of getting our prayers wrong.
Some of us would return to the confessional repeatedly,
fearful that we did not say our penance prayers correctly,
and that as a result the sacrament did not take hold,
and our sins were never forgiven.

There were priests who were so afflicted
that they could not get through the prayers of consecration at Mass,
and kept repeating the lines,
afraid they might be getting something wrong,
repeating, repeating, like a stuck record.

And before that, Catholics were so convinced of their unworthiness
that no one went to communion,
and it took P. Pius X to insist that we receive communion
at least annually. We felt unworthy.

Those days seem long gone.
And yet we still have trouble believing that God loves us.
It is as if we are thinking that if God really knew what we were like,
he would be repelled.

But, of course, it is no surprise to discover
that God already knows what we are like.
After all, God made us, and knows all our strengths and weaknesses,
better than we do ourselves.
Knowing those things is part of being God.

And yet, we want to hide from God, as if we could,
like Adam and Eve in the Garden after their fall from grace.

It is this spirit of shame and doubt

that today's scripture readings address.

In his letter to the Romans Paul puts it at the most general level.
When we, as a human family, had distanced ourselves,
God crossed the distance by sending his Son, to bring us back.

Paul is desperate to convince us.
He repeats the message like a refrain:
while we were helpless ... (v. 6),
while we were still sinners ... (v. 8),
while we were enemies ... (v. 10), God reached out to us.

Not only that, his Son died for our sake.
Paul says, think about that.
Most people will not risk their lives for friends.
But we were enemies when Jesus died for us.

The translation: God really does love us,
even when we are not very lovable.
And God knows that is often enough.

We feel we are not worthy, but God cuts across all that
and says, Come here.
You are part of the family. Stop moping.

Today we are celebrating that family.
And sometimes we worry about those who have gone before us.
Especially some who cause us extra worry.
We worry that God will not understand.
But the fact that we worry is a sign of love.
And God is love, lest, once again, we forget.

The books of Wisdom reassures us:
"The souls of the just are in the hands of God,
and no torment shall touch them."

The Just are those who have made it a concern
to live their lives as they should.
Wisdom is telling us there is nothing to worry about.
Of course, only those who are trying to do their best

would be subject to worry.
The rest don't care.

But for the just, their souls are in the hands of God.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is assuring us
that he has made a point of honor,
as doing the will of the one who sent him,
that nothing be lost,
that none of the believers will be rejected,
but will be raised up on the last day.

When I think about this, as some of you know,
I often think about Phil.
Phil is my grandfather.
My sister, Phyllis, is named after him.
Phil was a man of strong opinions,
and he didn't care who was bothered by it.
He knew what was right, and if people disagreed with him, too bad.
He didn't suffer fools gladly, as the saying has it.
He made enemies easily, and he didn't care.

When Phil died, there was a visible movement within the family
to have me, as a family member, give the funeral homily,
and not some outsider.
It seemed they were saying
that even if others could not understand this,
it was true that we loved him.
And there seemed also to be a hint of doubt
as to whether God would understand, either.

It was my job, I thought, to remind us
that if we can love this person, we who are so limited
in the way we distribute our concern and care to others,
then we should know that God can manage this love.
God loves more than we can imagine.
Despite the fact that God knows us better than we can manage.

And so today we gather
to remember, pray for, and celebrate our beloved dead.

They are beloved because we love them.
But they are even more beloved because God loves them.
And we know that, because we are gathered here.
Our gathering speaks of our love.
But God loves better and more completely than we do.

As we gather in this house of prayer, at this liturgy of the Eucharist,
we are affirming this truth.

And in this we are entering a circle of God's larger family,
those here in this room,
those of the Franciscan community who are gathered
at the edges of this circle, or in the balcony, or in the vestibule,
or watching on closed circuit television.
And all of us within the circle of God's family, saints and angels,
gathered like a cloud around us.
And it is as in a family reunion
that we pray the prayer of God's Church.

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 16, 2014

Proverbs 31:10-13,19-20,30-31	The worthy wife ...
Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5	... is like a fruitful vine.
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6	Concerning times and seasons
Matthew 25:14-30	Parable of the Talents

According to the dictionary, a "talent" is
"a special ability that allows someone to do something well."
Like playing the piano.
But it came to mean that only after a long career in the language.

It began as a measure of volume, the amount
that a large stone jar of the ancient world, an amphora, could hold.
From volume it went to weight.
It meant the equivalent in weight of that amount of water,
an amphora-full. Approximately 130 pounds.
It was the largest unit of weight at the time.

After a time, it then became a measure of value,
the equivalent of that weight in precious metals, most likely silver.
In exceptional cases, gold.
It was, in effect, the heaviest measurable amount
of the most precious metal.
That is, it was the largest sum they had available to them.

And that is what it means in the parable.

How did it get to talk of piano-playing?
By way of sermons, which typically would interpret the parable
in terms of God-given abilities that one should make the most of.
That was your talent, and you ought not bury it.
And from there it made it into the dictionary.

And so it turns out you already know the homily for the day,
and we could stop right here.
Nothing new here.

But let's take a closer look.

Take piano playing.
I regularly listen to Iowa Public Radio Classical, and a frequent feature
is a short bio of a musician we are about to hear perform.
    It is common to hear that they showed early promise,
    and their family got them in touch with a famous teacher,
    who brought out the latent talent, to coin a phrase.

This invariably leads me to speculate
how many people with promise went nowhere
    because their families lacked the means or even the knowledge
    to put them in touch with famous teachers.

How many promising young musicians
didn't even know that they had promise,
    since they were never in the circumstances
    that would allow them to discover it?
    It doesn't seem fair.

I think of kids born into poverty and hopeless ghettos.
What chance do they have?

In the parable, different servants are given different amounts.
This seems true to life.
Each of us enters life in a particular set of circumstances, as well we know.
    We have terms for it.
    The hand of cards we are dealt.
    Our personal playing field.

The parable takes notice of that. It begins there.
It doesn't ask why some are given more than others;
it takes that for granted.
    It understands that we arrive in the world in different places,
    on different sides of the street,
    with different kinds of possibility before us.

It begins there, and asks the next question:
    What have we done with what is given us?
    How have we left the world a different place than when we entered it?

Thinking back to the person handicapped by being born in the ghetto,

I think of the role of African American musicians.
    Not many make it into the roster of classical musicians,
    though there are opera singers like Leotine Price,
    and instrumentalists like Wynton Marsalis.

But the limitations facing black musicians
forced their energies into new forms,
    giving this country and the world a vast number of musical genres,
    which can only be suggested by naming a few such as Mississippi blues,
        jazz, ragtime, rock music, rap,
        Chicago blues, Dixieland.

For today, exhibit number one, as it were,
is the woman in the reading from Proverbs.
    She is often called the Worthy Wife.
    Her portrait is drawn in the tradition
    of the Wisdom figures of the Old Testament.

With our modern sensibility,
we might be particularly sensitive to aspects
    such as her worth being determined
    by her value to a man, her husband.

In this sense, we can easily focus on her status as a woman
and the limited possibilities that were hers,
    even though in Hebrew society these were greater
    than in neighboring cultures.

But the passage from Proverbs knows that.
    It begins there, and then looks at what she has done.
        We heard about her skill with making cloth,
        and her attention to the poor.

But this is just a selection.
The fuller reading mentions her ability to turn a profit,
the way she procures goods from distant places,
    her purchase of a field and planting a vineyard,
    how she manages her household efficiently.

She is a many-sided personality.
She is praised at the city gates, the social center of public life.
That is, she receives awards, or their equivalent.

Having embraced the place and conditions of her life,
she has made the most of them.
As a result, those who touch her life are blessed
and their own lives enhanced.

Today Paul's letter to the Thessalonians reminds us
that we are in the final days of the church year,
and this is the time to be thinking about end times.
We are to be vigilant, awake.

And we realize that the Parable itself participates in this concern,
since it appears in Matthew's gospel
among the last instructions that Jesus gives his disciples
before he enters the Passion of his final days.

As parting words, it is a version of the advice to be vigilant, stay awake.
It urges them to fill the time now given them with enterprise, even risk.
It is not a time for waiting for things to unfold,
but rather to enter into the process of unfolding them,
bringing them to life.

The Gospel does not dream of the lost past,
but of the future that is to come.
It looks forward, not back.
And it engages each of us in that future.

Each of us in his or her distinctive way, in the place given them,
trading upon the gift entrusted,
weaving the fabric of that future with distaff and spindle.

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

November 23, 2014

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17	The True Shepherd
Psalm 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28	First among the Risen
Matthew 25:31-46	Parable of the Sheep and Goats

With the feast of Christ the King
we leave behind the ordinary church year
and prepare for the special seasons
that will occupy us for the next six months.

And with the farewell to the ordinary church year
we hear the last words of Jesus' farewell to his disciples
before he enters his Passion.
In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats,
the king separates those on his left and his right.

And with these last words we are reminded
of the first public words of Jesus in this gospel:
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
And now we end where we began,
with thoughts of the kingdom of God.

So what is this kingdom of God that Matthew insists upon?
We know that in an earlier time, say the 1950s, Christ the King
meant triumphalist statements about the Catholic Church,
sometimes expressed by impressive churches.

We also know that more recent sensibilities
about the inclusiveness of the kingdom
suggested that we replace the image of kingdom
with something less assertively masculine.
Such as "reign of God."

Or, perhaps a little too cleverly, the "kin-dom" of God.

But what is this kingdom that Matthew shows Jesus announcing?
We might select three clues from the many the gospel gives us,
since that will be enough, I think.

Matthew opens the teaching of Jesus with the Sermon on the Mount.
It reads like a manifesto.

We know its themes: The Beatitudes. Turn the other cheek.
Love your enemies. Do not worry about what you are to eat, or wear.
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
And so much more.

All of this turns conventional thinking about kingdoms upside down.
So maybe the kingdom of God is not a kingdom as we think of them.

A second clue might be the sermon in chapter 18,
when takes as its primary theme Forgiveness.
Most notably, Jesus advises Peter
that he should forgive 70 times 7 times.

Here, adding to the instruction that we should love our enemies,
we hear that we should forgive those who wrong us
with unconditional forgiveness.
Amnesty is another unexpected mark of the kingdom.

A third clue can be found in today's parable of the sheep and the goats.
Here the note of judgment is so much stronger,
so much closer to what we think of in terms of earthly kingdoms.

Rather than love of enemies we hear about strict justice.
Rather than forgiveness we learn of harsh consequences
for those who fail to meet the standards of the kingdom.

And yet there are some things to notice here.

First of all, if we think the parable is about obedience
and following the demands of the law, we have a problem.
A major point of the parable is that
those who do attend to the needs of the king,
just as those who do not,
are unaware that this is what they are doing.

They have no idea that attending to the least of these
is attending to the needs of the king as well.
And this is repeated four times,
as if we need to hear it over and over
if we are to grasp what is being said.

The parable takes great pains to make the point.
So if they have no idea about it,
how can it be a matter of obedience?

Instead of obeying a command, then, they are doing something else.
And that something else is simply to respond to the needs in front of them.
It is not the demands of the king that prompted their moves,
but the demands of compassion.
The demand is in the need itself.

So if Jesus is teaching a standard for the kingdom of God,
it would seem to be a matter of being attuned
to those around us in circumstances of need,
and not so much paying attention to rules for good behavior.

We know this list of good deeds as the corporal works of mercy.
These are often matched up with the spiritual works of mercy.
But I want to suggest that this matching up of lists
could have the effect of diminishing the words of the parable.

In the first place, the list of spiritual works
does not come from the bible,
but was worked up later, and provided biblical proof texts
to give it a biblical pedigree.
But the corporal works come from the bible, from today's parable.

There is a reason for this state of affairs.
The separation of corporal and spiritual implies
a division between body and soul that is not biblical.
This way of looking at the human person is later.
For instance, we do not encounter immortal souls in the bible,
but rather resurrected bodies.
The body signifies the whole human person.

So the parable is not talking about attending to bodily ailments,
but rather human needs.
It is not concerned with merely physical problems,
but matters essential to the fully human person.

We know that hunger and thirst are essential human needs,
and so in the Sermon on the Mount we are told not to worry
about what we are to eat and drink, but we are to trust.
We are told not to be anxious about what we are to wear,
and we realize that clothing the naked is also a basic need.

Being ill, or in prison, are not bodily concerns alone,
but matters of the spirit.
And being a stranger without a welcome
is deeply wounding to the human spirit.
One that directly affects the immigration issue that faces America today.

Talk of sheep and shepherds puts one in mind of
the First Shepherd in the our church, Pope Francis,
and what he had to say about the matter.
One of his most quoted sayings is the one that says
that the real shepherd carries the smell of the sheep.

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