First Sunday of Advent

November 28, 2010

Isaiah 2:1-5	Swords into plowshares
Psalm 122:1-9	Jerusalem built as a city
Romans 13:11-14	Time to awake
Matthew 24:37-44	Coming of the Son of Man

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks;

one nation shall not raise the sword against another,

nor shall they train for war again."

The timeless words are known around the world.
They have been mounted on banners
in nearly every peace march in the world.
They have become a byword for the dream of the end of war.
They have inspired an enduring folksong:
I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield,
Down by the riverside,
And study war no more.

And they have been inscribed in stone
in the park across from the United Nations building in Manhattan,
as an expression of the hope that that organization hopes to embody.
Its vision of peace takes the form of an end to war.
All nations gather at God's mountain, Zion, and take instruction.
There are no more borders to fight over.
No barbed wire corridors, no boundary walls.
All nations recognize their common heritage.
It is a fitting emblem for the United Nations.

And it is emblazoned as well on the first page
of the book of lessons for the Sunday liturgies,
for we are at the very beginning of a new cycle,
and this cycle is the first of the three.

Isaiah's poem stands as the entry
into the book of sacred readings, the lectionary.
We are at the beginning of Cycle A,
the beginning of a three-year span.

The vision of universal peace in Isaiah's poem
is elaborated in the response psalm, one of the "psalms of ascent"

recited on the pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem.
We hear of their excitement and wonder as they enter the city.
They rejoice as they set foot in the city streets.
They look around and comment on the beauty and symmetry
of the capital city, its "compact unity."
They move toward the temple, and pray for peace in Jerusalem,
whose name is said to mean "peace."

But praise for the city of peace
is not the only theme of the scriptures today.
We also hear from Paul, who warns about the night, now over,
and a new day beginning.

And we hear Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel
—for we are now entering the year of Matthew—
and again we are told of dangers in the night.
Metaphors abound, we hear of dangers in the days of Noah,
and no one anticipated what would be happening.
We hear of two men in the field, two women in the granary.
One lost, one left. One lost, one left.
Warnings and surprises.

In the liturgy of the church we begin the year now.
We are ahead of the rest of the world by four or five weeks.
And this year we are not only entering a new year,
we are beginning a new decade, and leaving the old.

The first ten years of the 21st century will soon be behind us.
Soon we will be hearing end of the decade reports,
reviewing the main moments of the last ten years.
I can guarantee that the reviews will not be positive.

Much happened in this time,
including two wars, and a serious recession.
But what stands at the head of all of these is, of course,
the events of September 11, 2001.
The event known as "9/11."
No one anticipated what would happen.
One lost, one left.

The rest of the decade unfolds from there.

Two sets of images are set before in the scriptures today:
the Jerusalem vision of peace;
the unsuspected break-ins of the nighttime thief.
Or, in contemporary translation,

two architectural images from the New York skyline:
the UN building with its promise of universal cooperation and peace,
and the burning towers of the Trade Center.

This stark contrast shows us two ways
of entering the future that begins today.

Following a recurrent theme of the Gospels, we might say
that we have a way of fear and a way of faith.

The way of fear recognizes the jeopardy
that accompanies our shared human life,
and responds with a certain paralysis
and a frantic though ultimately hopeless striving
to cover every eventuality of risk.

The way of faith recognizes that the human fragility
that threatens our every move is also supported by a Creator
who wishes us to survive and prevail.

This is the message of Isaiah's poem,
for the vision of peace that is given there
is said to be God's dream and hope for us,
in the city of the human family, God's own.

Second Sunday of Advent A

December 5, 2010

Isaiah 11:1-10	Jesse's Shoot
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17	Justice shall flourish
Romans 15:4-9	Praise among the Gentiles
Matthew 3:1-12	John the Baptist appears

This first week of December is a busy one.
We celebrate Founder's Day.
We commemorate the 30th Anniversary
of the four churchwomen martyred in El Salvador.
And if you listen to public radio,
you know that this also is the week of Hanukkah.
The word means Dedication,
and refers to the rededication of the Temple in 165 B.C.,
after the Maccabees defeated the Syrian Greeks
who had desecrated the Sanctuary
with the "abomination of desolation."
Among Orthodox Jews the book of Judith is recited,
as it is felt to refer to these events.

Earlier this week the public radios stations carried Hanukkah stories.
One caught my attention.
A man was telling of his Jewish boyhood,
when he and his buddies favored this feast,
since it wasn't all cakes and pastries and candles.
It also had decapitation, desecration, and double agents.
What not to like?

The story of Judith does not come into our liturgy often, if at all.
It tells the story of how the beautiful Judith
(whose name simply means female Judean, or Jewess),
ingratiated herself with Holofernes, the enemy general,
by promising to reveal Israelite secrets.
Invited to his tent at night, finding him drunk, she cut off his head.
The demoralized Syrians scattered.
She is usually depicted holding his head up in victory,
grasping it by its long curly locks.

Perhaps it is understandable that we do not often
tell this story in our liturgy.
It is distinctly violent, and features beheading.
On the other hand, we do not need Holofernes,
because we have John the Baptist, with his similar fate.

Images of cutting cluster around John.

His beheading is famous.
But today we hear him talking about the axe,
laid at the root of the tree.
He is announcing a day of reckoning.
Even his words have an edge to them. He calls for a decision.
As we know when we speak of an incision, there is cutting involved.
In the case of decision, de-cision, it is a cutting away.
I think of it as the finality of deciding.
Before I decide, I have all these lovely options before me.
I may find it hard to decide,
since that would mean leaving some behind in favor of others.

But decision means "cutting away."
Some options are cut away from future possibility,
and knowing that, I may find it hard.

We encounter John in Advent because he is the forerunner,
the one who announces the coming of the Messiah.
John brings Jesus on stage.
For that reason, John is often said to fulfill the role of Elijah,
who you will remember did not die
but rather departed in a fiery chariot, ready to return one day.
Tradition held that he would announce the Messiah.

As we enter into Advent,
we are encouraged to make some decisions,
despite the fact that they may be hard.
Or maybe because of that fact.
This is a time and season for introducing
those changes we have been putting off.
This is a season of preparation,
and perhaps those preparations involve clearing the ground.

The tree that John is anxious to have cut down
is not the only tree in today's liturgy.
In the reading from Isaiah we hear about the root of Jesse,
the stump of Jesse.
You will recall the Advent traditions around the tree of Jesse.
Since Jesse was king David's father,
the tree of Jesse refers to the family tree of the king.
It is the royal dynasty that is being discussed.

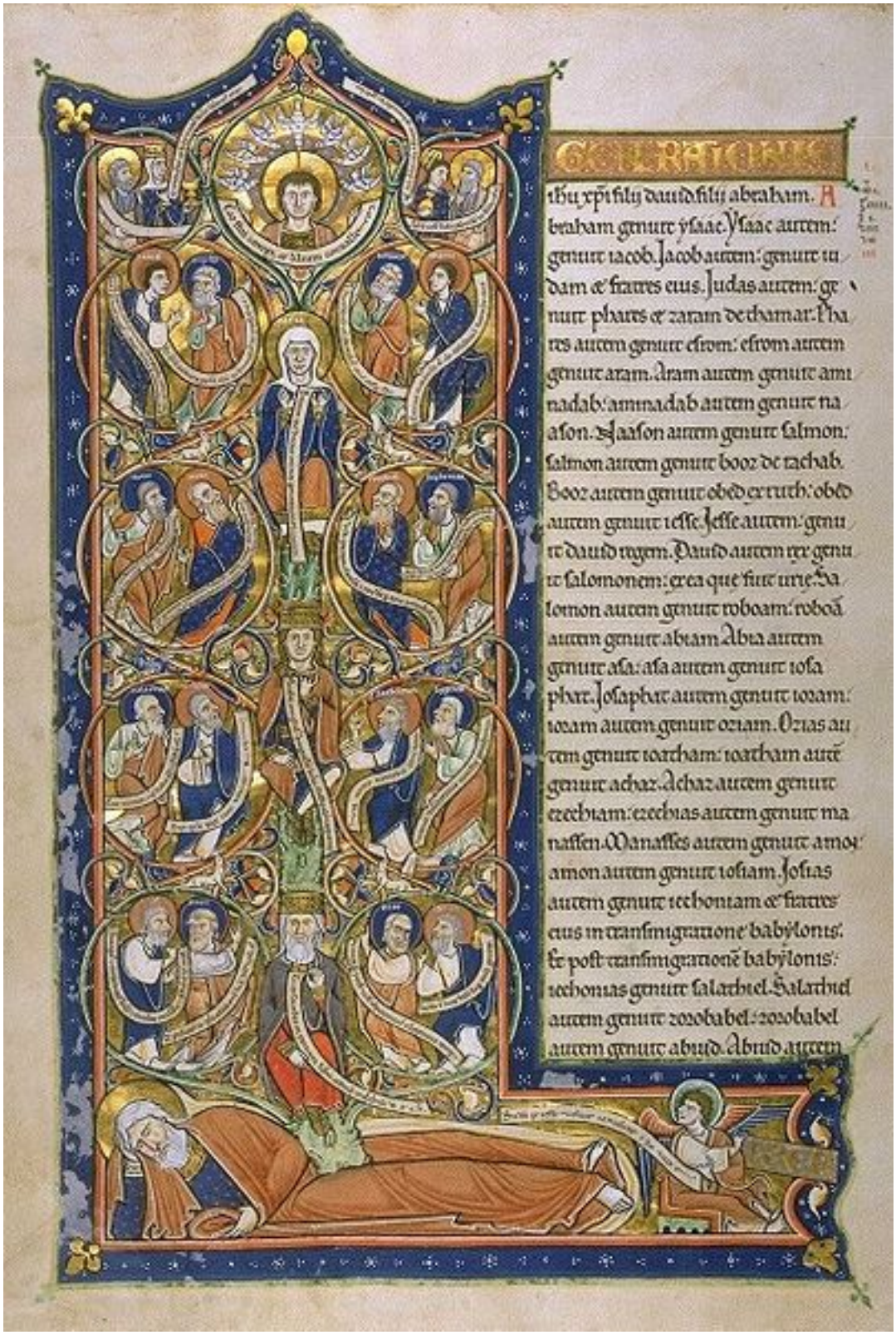
But apparently the tree is only a stump
at the time of this writing.
Apparently the axe has already been laid at the root.
Which is to say, in plain language and not figurative speech,

that the kingdom has been lost and the land is under foreign rule.
But the prophecy promises that this condition will not last forever,
for a shoot will sprout from the truncated tree, a new branch.
That is, a new king.
For many this was the expected Messiah.
And Matthew is saying that the Messiah has come,
and his name is Jesus of Nazareth.

The passage from Isaiah sets out the qualities
of the coming king's manner of rule.
It is a picture of the ideal king, the perfectly judicious ruler.
It would seem to have Solomon in mind as a prototype.
The spirit of the Lord will be upon him.
We recognize here what has come to be known as the gifts of the Spirit.
Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude,
Knowledge, Piety, Fear of the Lord.
Here they describe what the good ruler, or manager, will need.

Later we hear the passage
that inspired the American primitive painter, Edward Hicks,
in his famous painting, the Peaceable Kingdom.
The lion and the lamb, the wolf and the ox,
the leopard and the human child.
The relaxing of the laws of nature, red in tooth and claw,
provides a metaphor for peace in the land,
the human society of justice and compassion.

In other words, John's axe calls for a new growth,
a coming kingdom of true justice and widespread peace.
We are invited to approach this season of Advent
with resolve to change what needs to be changed,
in order to further that divine program.
We are invited into the reign of the Messiah's God.



ihu xpi filij dauid filij abraham. A
braham genuit ysaac. Ysaac autem
genuit iacob. Jacob autem genuit iu
dam & fratres eius. Judas autem ge
nuit phares & zaram de thamar. Pha
res autem genuit esrom. esrom autem
genuit aram. Aram autem genuit ami
nadab. aminadab autem genuit na
asson. Naasson autem genuit salmon.
salmon autem genuit booz de rachab.
Booz autem genuit obed ex ruth. obed
autem genuit iesse. Jesse autem genu
it dauid regem. Dauid autem rex genu
it salomonem. ex ea que fuit urie. Sa
lomon autem genuit roboam. roboā
autem genuit abiam. Abia autem
genuit asa. asa autem genuit iosa
phat. Josaphat autem genuit ioram.
ioram autem genuit oziam. Ozias au
tem genuit ioatham. ioatham autē
genuit achaz. Achaz autem genuit
ezechiam. ezechias autem genuit ma
nassen. Manasses autem genuit amon.
amon autem genuit iosiam. Josias
autem genuit iechoniam & fratres
eius in transmigratione babylonis.
Et post transmigrationē babylonis.
iechonias genuit salathiel. Salathiel
autem genuit zorobabel. Zorobabel
autem genuit abiud. Abiud autem

Third Sunday of Advent A

December 12, 2010

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10	The deaf hear
Psalm 146:6-10	The blind see
James 5:7-10	The earth blooms
Matthew 11:2-11	The dead are raised

Amid the snow of December we enter into the third week of Advent.
The cold is deepening and the wind whistling.
Winter is getting more serious, and we tend to stay inside
and look outside once in awhile.

In the Advent readings John the Baptist
has already made an appearance.
Last week he warned of the impending judgment.
The axe was at the root of the tree; the winnowing fan was ready.

Today he returns to the liturgy, but remains off stage,
since in the meantime he has been arrested.
He sends a message to Jesus, asking a question.
Are you the one who is to come? The one we are waiting for?

John seems puzzled. Is this carpenter from Nazareth
the one bringing the judgment into Israel's history?
If so, where is his axe?
John wonders if he is too soft, whether he can hold his own.
Where is the sense of confrontation?
How can this be the prophet of fire and retribution?

As if to confirm John's apprehensions,
Jesus' answer speaks of nothing but healings.
Nothing of condemnations.
However, this much is clear.
He is still speaking of renewal and restoration,
just as much as did John.
But the tone and the practice of Jesus' work
remains radically different from John's announcements.

Jesus' answer takes the form of paraphrasing famous scripture passages.
Realizing this, the lectionary chooses one of those passages
for the first reading.
The poem of Isaiah 35 adopts strategies of speaking
common to poetry of every culture and time
—the language of imagery and metaphor.
Two images dominate the passage
—healings and gardens in the desert.

The blind regain their sight, the deaf hear,
the dumb sing, the lame turn to dancing.

And the desert blooms:
the forests of Carmel and the cedars of Lebanon will be rooted there.
This image of reforestation is the opposite of John's vision of the axe.
Just as healings are the converse of retribution.

It is an irony that this week the great forest
that is the glory of Mt Carmel in northern Israel
burned down, victim of a campfire near a Druze village
along with a serious drought, reminiscent of the days of Elijah.
Elijah was the prophet who called down fire
upon the sacrifices on Mount Carmel,
in competition with the priests of Baal.

He is also the precursor of John the Baptist, interestingly enough.

The further irony is that this past week the enemies of Israel
pitched in to help combat the blaze,
possibly improving the chances of making peace.

Fires in the forests of Israel were not the only newsmakers this week.
Healings were also in the news,
at least in terms of reconciliation and healing of a people.
A congressional standoff on Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell
revealed a division in the general population of this country.
Likewise, the Dream Act threatens to be stalled in the Senate,
without some calls placing pressure upon some reluctant senators.

As you know, the Dream Act concerns the children of illegal immigrants
who were born elsewhere but came to this country before the age of 16.
It would allow them to become citizens,
if they enter the armed forces
or attend college for at least two years.
Otherwise they are to be deported to the country
from which their parents came, but of which they have no memory,
having grown up as Americans.

In another irony, in this season of the birth of Christ,
in a family away from home, seeking shelter,
the Dream Act is unpopular with some.

Many arguments are offered,
including that passage of the bill will help the Democrats,
that it is just an emotional idea,

that this will have illegals competing against Americans
for as chance at higher education.

But the main issue that is brought forward
is that amnesty is not a good thing,
and given here it will only lead to more of it.

There is another passage from the book of Isaiah
that is prominently featured in the words of Jesus today.
It is the passage that is quoted in Luke's account
of Jesus' opening statement in the synagogue of Nazareth.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;

He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly,
to heal the brokenhearted,

To proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,

To announce a year of favor from the LORD

and a day of vindication by our God.

Jesus doesn't include the note of amnesty in his quote from Isaiah,
though one imagines that John, in prison,
would welcome that idea.
However, it is part of the passage that he sees fulfilled in his day.

Healings represent the restoration of a people,
case by case, illness by illness.
Hopelessness to hope.

This Advent, this Christmas, comes at a time of serious recession,
and of our longest war,
and we need the Christmas stories of pure gift-giving.
O Henry's "Gift of the Magi" comes to mind.

There seem to be two responses to hard times.
One is generous and one is begrudging.
The first born of a sense of shared humanity;
the second from a belief that each must fend for himself.
The fear can only be resolved by trust.
And trust only takes hold, only has meaning,
when it is most needed.

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The first born of a sense of shared humanity;
the second from a belief that each must fend for himself.
The fear can only be resolved by trust.
And trust only takes hold, only has meaning,
when it is most needed.

Christmas Eve (midnight)

Isaiah 9:1-6	A child is born
Psalm 96	Sing a new song
Titus 2:11-14	we await the blessed hope
Luke 2 :1-14	Christmas story

Here are words from a (somewhat churchy) weblog about the biblical Anawim.

Anawim (pronounced ann-a-weem) is a Hebrew word from the Old Testament which describes the "poor ones" who remained faithful to God in times of difficulty. These humble people became known as the anawim or the "faithful remnant."

The great **Marian canticle** (Luke 1:46-50) "reveals in filigree," as Pope Benedict XVI so beautifully teaches, "the spirituality of the biblical 'anawim,' that is, of those faithful who not only recognize themselves as 'poor' in the detachment from all idolatry of riches and power, but also in the profound humility of a heart emptied of the temptation to pride and open to the bursting in of the divine saving grace."

The website cites another Pope as well. In a GENERAL AUDIENCE on Wednesday 23 May 2001, John Paul II reflected on Psalm 29:

5. There is a ... term which we use to define those who pray in the Psalm: they are the anawim, "the poor and lowly ones" (v. 4). The expression turns up often in the Psalter. It indicates not just the oppressed, the miserable, the persecuted for justice, but also those who, with fidelity to the moral teaching of the Alliance with God, are marginalized by those who prefer to use violence, riches and power. In this light one understands that the category of the "poor" is not just a social category but a spiritual choice. It is what the famous first Beatitude means: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5,3). The prophet Zephaniah spoke to the anawim as special persons: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of wrath of the Lord" (Zep 2,3).

...
With such confidence the "~~sons~~ (children) of Zion" (v. 2), the hasidim and anawim, the faithful and the poor, go on to live their witness in the world and in history. Mary's canticle in the Gospel of Luke, the **Magnificat**, is the echo of the best sentiments of the "~~sons~~ (children) of Zion ": glorious praise of God her Saviour, thanksgiving for the great things done by the Mighty One, the battle against the forces of evil, solidarity with the poor and fidelity to the God of the Covenant (cf Lk 1,46-55).

The repeated reference to the Magnificat, Mary's canticle, is not a coincidence. Nor is the reference to the Beatitudes. Matthew's Beatitudes

are clearly influenced by the words of the prophet Zephaniah, from who the theme of the Anawim derived.

And the portrait of the Anawim in action is found in the Christmas story of Luke, in which we find the Magnificat, among the songs sung there.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, and for that matter, John and Jesus, are all examples of the biblical Anawim. They carry on their lives faithfully in spite of the brutal forces controlling their world.

It has long struck me that there are two stories unfolding in these scenes, one near, one far. A simple main plot and a backstory. In the foreground, the Anawim carry on the somewhat startling tasks they are asked to perform. In the background, the empire carries on its business.

Among the Anawim we hear of angels and divine messages, canticles and songs. Not only the Magnificat, but also the Benedictus of Zachariah and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon. Not to mention the angels' song of Glory to God in the Highest.

Meanwhile, we sense the Roman Empire in the background, with its emperor, Caesar Augustus, enforcing the census. The census was needed for taxation, military conscription, and the corvée of forced labor. The trip to Bethlehem illustrates the empire's control over their lives.

And yet they persist, and resist that influence.

Most notably, in that contrast of songs and census, of canticles and counting, something is happening, but it is happening among the Anawim. Unknown to the Empire, the calendar that we still use, is beginning. Unknown to the world at large, an ear is beginning, but not on the terms of empire. Instead it is occurring among the simOple though difficult lives of the supposedly small unimportant people in the foreground.

It is with those people that we have chosen to align ourselves. More accurately, we have been chosen, since the name was conferred upon us, and only reluctantly accepted. But, in any case, if we wondered where we fit into the story, there it is.

Christmas Day

Readings:

Isaiah 52:7-10	Glad tidings
Psalm 98:1-6	Sing a new song
Hebrews 1:1-8	In times past, God spoke
John 1:1-18	In the beginning

After all the stories of the shepherds and the infant in the stable,
we come to John's solemn hymn.
In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

It is as if the star that led us
to where the child and his mother were staying
had suddenly grown large,
as if the star twirled and spun like a pinwheel,
growing larger to mesmerize us
and completely command our attention,
only to draw us forward into a vision
of an infinite field of stars and galaxies
surrounding us like hosts of angels.

As if then a voice was heard to say,
all of this is now different,
all of this is at stake, and is now different.

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

In the beginning...

John draws us all the way back to the very beginning,
and shows us where the plan that led to Christmas began.

And the God that fashioned the world
now enters it as an historical person,
now a baby born in Bethlehem,
soon to be known as Jesus of Nazareth.
God has entered history, giving it dignity, giving it purpose.
Time no longer spins its wheels in the cycles of myth
but instead gets down to business,
moving its line of argument forward,
its story of newness and unanticipated surprise.

The God who creates
now creates the unexpected moment in time,
when the world turns on a moment in a new direction,
into something unexpected, something new.

By making his move in ordinary human time,
God has changed time,
and made it an arena where profound difference can be made.

And one side of the Incarnation
is that all of us immersed in human time can also make a difference,
that our efforts count,
and our successes challenge the way it has always been,
and even our difficult but failed efforts
are not without significance.

Within the horizon of our purview,
our works seem small and of slight effect.
Our human actions seem slight, like graffiti on a vast wall,
almost beneath notice.
But because of Christmas, because of the Incarnation,
because of God's entry into the human story of time and history,
our actions take on consequence.
They do actually produce change,
even when we do not perceive it.

But our God enters into the human story
in the say every single human does,
as a small, helpless, vulnerable infant. A baby.
Is this weakness a ruse,
or does God share the human condition in all its risk?

We are accustomed to thinking about God
as Almighty, All-Powerful,
and so our first inclination is to see in the crib scene
a helplessness that is the outer presentation and mask
of what is actually the hidden power of God.

The Infant of Prague statue seems to represent this visually:
An infant who stands erect,
robed in the royal garments and trappings of power.

The American Catholic philosopher, John Caputo,
suggests something else, in his book, The Weakness of God:

"I prefer to say, not that God
is a transcendence super-essential hyper-being
towering over other beings,
    but that God's transcendence is that of a call, of an address
    that, while arising from the hinter regions below being,
    lays us low. ...

God's transcendence means that we are laid low
by a call arising from on high,
    but whose heights are eventful, provocative,
    and arise form someone who,
        lacking the wherewithal to lay down his head,
        pitches his tent among the lowly bodies and nobodies below
            [in the bodily bowels of hypo-being].

The transcendence of God is not that of a fist that smashes,
    but of a Spirit who breathes, who inspires,
    and whose gentle breath urges us on."

Or, we might say,
not only are the lowly exalted,
    but it is precisely in their lowliness
    that God has situated value, dignity, and the power for change.

The divine infant's power is in his vulnerability,
the power to love and call forth love,
    and not a hidden strength beneath
    and masked by the appearance of helplessness.

The Word became Flesh,
and tented among us.

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14	Honor your father and mother
Psalm 128:1-5	The pious family
Colossians 3:12-21	Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23	The Flight to Egypt

We know that this feast has special importance for this community.
And so, in the spirit of the holy (Franciscan) tradition
of recycling Christmas cards,
I am going to repeat some of the things I said
in the column I wrote for this Sunday.
I do not have fresh insights often enough
that I can afford to squander them.

Perhaps it is because of the fact that
among the flurry of progressive legislation
passed in the past week or two,
the only thing that failed to be moved into law was the Dream Act,
the safest, most innocuous piece of immigration reform conceivable.

For what is there to argue against allowing citizenship
to the children of illegal immigrants who came here with their parents,
grew up as Americans with no link to their ancestral country,
and are willing to spend two years in the armed services or college?
It is almost impossible to become a naturalized citizen
if you not rich, talented, or have the foresight to be born here.

Perhaps it is because of this startling exception
to the good news coming out of Congress that
I took particular notice of the Gospel for today.
I was struck by the fact that the Gospel
for the feast of the Holy Family chose to show them on the road,
in the flight to Egypt.

In the column I wrote:

[But] in the liturgy for the Holy Family
only the flight and the return are selected for our reflection.
So our picture of the Holy Family today is not
a comfortable domestic scene, with Joseph working in the shop,
Mary in the kitchen, and Jesus adding a helping hand.
Instead, we have a picture of the family in flight,

escaping for their lives.

It is a picture of a refugee family,
a family displaced from home and its security.
We might prefer the domestic scene
as something with which we can more easily identify.
But that is not what we get.
And so we might give some thought to the question of who
might identify more easily with the scenario depicted here.

In Luke we have the familiar story of the census
and the required trip to Bethlehem.
The marginal and uprooted status of the family
is shown in the difficulty in finding sleeping quarters for the family.
No room in the inn.
So the stable becomes the next best option.

But in Matthew, this note of estrangement and risk
is sounded in the story of the flight to Egypt.
And then later, they do not return to where they came from,
but rather move to Nazareth,
where the successor to Herod, his son Archelaus,
cannot reach them.
They are still far from home, which Matthew is Bethlehem in Judea.
Only when Jesus arrives at adulthood, and begins his mission,
will he return to Jerusalem and his territory of origin.
But at that point the Passion will begin.

The Holy Family is shown,
in both Luke's account as well as Matthew's,
to be displaced by the forces of imperial political power.
Luke mentions Caesar Augustus.
Matthew focuses on Herod, the Roman Empire's tool as its client king.
Whichever is telling the story, it is clear
that the family is among those who are buffeted about
by policies beyond their control.
We are inevitably reminded of those families in today's world,
displaced, refugee, or immigrant,
who know intimately the ache of being distant from home.

Whenever we encounter the Holy Family together,
whether in Matthew's account of the Flight,
or Luke's account of the Census,
or, for that matter, any of the Gospels chosen for this feast,
whether the Presentation with Simeon's warning

or the twelve-year-old Jesus teaching in the Temple,

whenever we encounter the Family together
they are away from home and struggling to make do
in unfamiliar surroundings.

We can easily make the connection between these difficulties
and the usual difficulties that every family must face.
It is a struggle and an accomplishment to raise a family.

But today these readings point to something more.
We call to mind, and into our circle of concern,
those families at risk, struggling to remain whole,
facing forces outside their control.
But especially we think of refugees and immigrant families
divided between countries and conflicting authorities.

And we are reminded of yet another dimension
to the meaning of being dedicated to the Holy Family.

The Octave Day of Christmas

Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God

January 1, 2011

Numbers 6:22-27	Blessing of Aaron
Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8	May his face shine upon us
Galatians 4:4-7	In the fullness of time
Luke 2:16-20	Shepherds in the night

As we begin the New Year, we have a message from Paul.
It is about the turning of the age.

The blessing of Aaron and the story of the shepherds are familiar to us.
The blessing leads off the New Year
and places it under the protection of a benevolent God.
The story of the shepherds is similar
in that it brings into the Nativity story the message of the angels,
who bless the new child and proclaim an era of peace.

But it is Paul, in his letter to the Galatians,
who announces the inner meaning of what is happening.

Today's selection from Galatians four verses of a larger passage.
Paul is explaining why faith has rendered the law of Moses
no longer necessary.
Not that it is wrong, but that we no longer need it
to follow its recommendations.

He uses the figure of what has come to be known as the Tutor.
What he is talking about is the instructor
that the head of the estate has assigned to the preparation
of his heir and successor, his oldest son.
This person, in the Roman world, was likely a Greek slave.
Paul's point is that the slave has temporary authority
over the future head of the estate,
but that once the son comes of age, the tutor is no longer needed.

Paul's message has the format of three stages:

The first stage is marked by the phrase, 'We were,'
and speaks to a time that is now past.
The second stage is announced by the phrase, 'but now,'
and marks the turning of the age.
The third stage is marked by the phrase, 'If ... then,'
and speaks to the new reality that has come about.

Paul's three-fold message actually comes by twice.

The first time, at the end of chapter 3,
Paul tells the Jewish Christians of Galatia
that 'we' (he and they) were at one time in custody of the law.
'But now' faith has come, and so the law is no longer needed.
And so there is no longer Jew nor Greek,
slave nor free, male nor female,
but all are one in Christ, and if so, then children of God.
Not only children, but heirs.

Once Paul has run through the story as it applied to Jewish Christians,
he does so again, this time as regards the Gentile Christians,
those about whom he is primarily concerned in this epistle.

This time he says 'you were' slaves to the elemental spirits.
Here we might understand that he is talking about pagan gods.
'But now,' he says, the fullness of time has come,
and God has sent his Son, born of a woman.
And now we are in the reading for today.

God has sent his son, that we might receive adoption as God's children.
God has sent the Spirit into our hearts,
so that we might cry out, 'Abba, Father'
and be received as children
(Paul says 'sons,' thinking of the heir to the estate),
and if so, then we too are heirs.

This remarkable movement
from 'we were' to 'but now' to 'if so, then'
is Paul's schematic of the movement of salvation history.
It is so important that, in my view, he used it
as a frame for his monumental letter to the Romans.

And its implications are as remarkable.
His metaphor of the Tutor is telling.
Paul is saying that as a human family we have come of age.
We are no longer infants,
no longer children to be guided by strict instructions.
We are adults.

In my view, this has implications for the church today.
We can see in this age of lay ministry,
in a church increasingly run by educated lay Catholics
who have a sophisticated knowledge of their faith,
share its anguishes and hopes,
and who are able to draw their own conclusions.
This will certainly help to shape the church of the future.

We see it in an educated group
of non-clerical theologians and Catholic teachers,
who are concerned to bring an alternative, hitherto unrecognized
fund of experience to fuller reflection in the life of the Church,
a body of reflection that will change the way we understand Church.

We see it in the leadership provided by American religious women,
who have an educated, emancipated position within the body of Christ,
able to bring to national issues a clear, informed judgment,
along with the ability and courage to act upon that discernment.

There are other examples that you can add, I am sure.
But what Paul is telling us
is that, as we celebrate the turning of the year,
we place it in the perspective of the ongoing life of the Church
and the ongoing realization of what it means to be adult Christians.

It carries with it risks,
and the need to bear courageously the consequences of our convictions.
It means following a mature, cultivated conscience.

But then, we understand,
this is the life of an adult.

Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

January 2, 2011

Isaiah 60:1-6	Camels with gold, frankincense
Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13	Kings shall bring gifts
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6	The mystery now make known
Matthew 2:1-12	The Coming of the Magi

The coming of the Magi has perpetually fired the imaginations of poets.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS imagined them as stiff, ancient kings, right out of a painted tapestry:

> Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
> In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
> Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky
> With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
> And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
> And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
> Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
> The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

The mystery on the bestial floor that they are trying hopefully to recover is, of course, the manger in the stable, home of the beasts, the ox and ass.

T. S. ELIOT'S famous poem, "The Journey of the Magi," imagines the Magi remembering the journey, and the difficulty of it.

> 'A cold coming we had of it,
> Just the worst time of the year
> For a journey, and such a journey:
> The ways deep and the weather sharp,
> The very dead of winter.'
> And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
> Lying down in the melting snow.

But here too we have a wondering reflection at what they found:

> All this was a long time ago, I remember,
> And I would do it again, but set down
> This set down
> This: were we led all that way for
> Birth or Death? … this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
> We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
> But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.
W. H. Auden, in his oratorio, "For the Time Being,"
also imagines a difficult journey:

The weather has been awful,
The countryside is dreary,
Marsh, jungle, rock; and echoes mock,
Calling our hope unlawful; …

Here too they wonder what they have come upon, and what it means for them:

At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners, …
But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are,
To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow the star.

All this attention on the coming of the Magi is understandable.
After all, they appear from somewhere
outside the horizon of the Gospel story.
They are exotic, they bring gifts
from some unknown treasury in some unknown land.
In the past I have talked about the gifts
and the ancient Spice Road from the south,
traveled by the Queen of Sheba long before the Magi.

But today I am not thinking about the coming of the Magi.
I am thinking of their departure.
I vividly remember sitting at a convention next to Benedict Viviano,
the Dominican NT scholar with whom I used to teach at Aquinas.
At one point he responded to the panel,
and in the course of his remarks he pointed out
the strange character of this final verse,
this final mention of the Magi.

For me that sparked a series of reflections
that led to an unexpected perspective on the Gospel of Matthew
and the people for whom it was intended.
That understanding found its way into the book, Banished Messiah,
which was published—now—last year!
I hope you will forgive one more quote, this time from my own writing.
(I expect I will borrow more this year, since the book
represents a sustained consideration of the Gospel of Matthew,
which happens to be featured this year.)

Here are my recorded thoughts on the leave-taking of the Magi:

At the end of the Magi story, as they are about the take their departure, something unexpected happens:

> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
> they departed for their country by another route (Mt 2:12).

We are accustomed to this story, so nothing particularly remarkable seems at play here. The dream motif is likewise familiar, being a staple of the incidents in Matthew's Christmas story …

But who is this God, advising them to sneak out by the back route? Who is this God who does not take charge? This is not the God of the establishment, the God of the empire. That God, who takes control of events and adjusts them to fit his program, is glimpsed in the slaughter of the Bethlehem innocents. There we see the take-charge approach that characterizes the God who is in control. This shows us the God of the Empire—or, in this case, the emperor's surrogate, Herod.

No, the God who advises the Magi in a dream is another God entirely, whom we recognize as the God of the gypsies, if you will, who enables them to skirt authority, avoid direct confrontation with power figures, and live life in the corners, if not the shadows. The fact that [this verse] may have been adjusted to fit the rest of the narrative simply highlights the fact that the entire infancy account adopts this social outlook, and colors the subsequent narrative. The dreams of Joseph, the flight and the delayed return, all contribute to the picture of a peasant people required by circumstances to keep watch for those in power, and work around them, staying out of their way.

There is some consolation in realizing that the social location of the Gospel,
the world in which it was set and the world for which it was intended,
> is not the managers in the corridors of major political influence,
> but rather the unnoticed people carrying on their lives
> > at the edges and in the margins.

For, as in Luke's Christmas story, where Mary and Joseph,
Zachary and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna carry on their lives
as Caesar Augustus and the empire operate in the background,
> so in the Gospel of Matthew the Christmas story
> of Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and even the Magi,
> are found in the place where newness has entered the world.
> > And it is not where Herod is making his desperate claims.

It is testimony that real newness is a possibility where we live,
> at the edges and in the margins,
> where God, as Emmanuel, makes his presence felt.

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 9, 2011

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7	First Servant Song
Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10	Voice over the waters
Acts 10:34-38	Peter's kerygma speech
Matthew 3:13-17	The Baptist defers

Today we put the twelve days of Christmas behind us
and turn to the Ordinary Time of the Church Year,
the time of year that takes us through
the story of Jesus and his ministry, as told in the Gospel.
This year it is the Gospel of Matthew.
And like other years, with other Gospels,
the year begins with the Baptism of Jesus.

So the Church Year is like the Gospel story,
which itself, apart from the Christmas stories, begins with the Baptism.
And with the Baptism, we hear the voice from heaven.

In fact, I must admit that I hear voices from all sides this Sunday.
The voice from heaven finds an echo
in the voice over the waters in the response psalm.

Also, John is famously called the Voice in the desert,
crying out: Prepare the way.
But this is a line borrowed from the author of our first reading,
the prophet we call 2nd-Isaiah.

But those lines are given earlier in the gospel,
when John first makes an appearance.
Today we have a different moment, the baptism itself,
and a different quotation from 2nd-Isaiah,
both in the first reading and in its echo in the Gospel account,
quoted by the Voice from heaven.

When the Voice says,
"You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased,"
it is quoting from Psalm 2 (v.):
I will proclaim the decree of the LORD, who said to me,
"You are my son; today I am your father."

This line from the psalm was understood
to refer to the coming Messiah.
Here it is envisioned as a powerful just king
who will restore the fortunes of Israel.

But the Voice is also quoting the opening line

of today's reading from 2nd-Isaiah,
which is why it was chosen for today.
The reading begins with: "Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am pleased,..."
But this line refers to the suffering Servant,
the communal image that depicts exiled Israel's suffering
under imperial domination.

The announcement of the Voice is that
Jesus is that the Messiah, first of all,
but also, and this is the second and more difficult thing,
he is also the Servant.
Somehow, the ministry of Jesus is to be worked out
by joining these two images, these two programs.

So when Jesus announces the kingdom, as he will do shortly,
it will be a kingdom with a king who is also a suffering servant.
This is not politics as usual.

In today's Gospel we have an incident that only appears in Matthew,
following the lectionary plan of avoiding duplication
among the different Gospels.
Only in Matthew do we have the little dialogue between John and Jesus
about whether John is worthy to baptize Jesus.
This deference is captured elsewhere in the famous line:
I am not worthy to undo the strap of his sandal.

While this little vignette is usually explained by exegetes
as a slice of apologetics, explaining away
the appearance that Jesus needed baptism,
I think that it takes on special meaning when we think of the baptism
as presenting a program for Jesus in the days ahead,
as he proclaims the coming Kingdom.

It is worth noticing that there is another voice in the desert,
beside that of John.
This would be the voice of Satan, in the story of the desert temptation,
a story that begins in the very next verse after today's reading.
Here too we have a program for the Kingdom,
and how Jesus should manage it.

I am thinking in particular about the contrast
between John's attitude of deference,
and Satan's demand that Jesus bow down and worship him,
if he is to be given the nations of the earth,

which Satan claims it is within his power to confer.

Satan, in this Gospel, is spokesperson for the theology of violence,
especially in the name of imperial domination.
He claims the authority that allowed the Roman Empire
to subdue through violence the nations of the world.

We might remember that it is not only
the Gospel and the Church Year that begin with baptism.
So does the life of the Christian.
And with our baptism, we too begin a story,
the story of our life as a version of what it means to be Christian,
a disciple of the Messiah.

Furthermore, we live our lives in a country
that has temptations to empire.
And here the meaning of baptism, as indicated in
the baptism stories of the Gospel, can be of help.
For it allows us to notice tendencies (symptoms, perhaps)
that run counter to Baptism and its story,
as well as against American self-interest in the long run.
And it suggests a program of witness.

We Americans are a people who consider it a right
to place our military forces in other countries,
without a clear sense of the humiliation it produces there.
Meanwhile, in a kind of blind contradiction,
we not only cannot imagine the same happening to us,
but we even cringe at the notion of peaceful civilian foreigners
present among us.

A sense of radical individualism,
often associated with the name of the novelist Ayn Rand,
allows us the romantic notion of the individual against the world,
the Lone Ranger. Or better, Superman,
as the ultimate icon of the single self needing no one else,
the source of all power.
No need for community, for you are on your own.
You are at odds with the rest of the world,
where others are competing for your treasure.

A news article this week, for instance, discussed
the rise of the rude American in the last couple of decades.

Violence is the obvious resort in this world.

And so gun laws are being changed, in the belief
that the only way to safety is to arm everyone.
The internal contradictions seem to escape us.

And so this past week,
now that the state law was changed to "issue on demand,"
there was a massive run on gun sales in Dubuque,
enough to become a news story.
The consistent rationale given was "to protect my family."

And, of course, in ratcheting up the rhetoric and the fear,
we have results such as yesterday's attempted assassination
of a US Representative in Tucson,
along with the murder of a federal judge and five others,
and a number of wounded.

We are disposed to insist that this is an isolated case,
that it has no relevance with our national scale of values,
that it is the result of a crazed individual, a lone operator,
without noticing that individualism and lone rangers
are the ideals we offer ourselves.

But, as mentioned, this situation also
provides an opportunity to witness.
And that is a witness to our baptism,
our allegiance to the program of the Messiah,
in opposition to that of the false voice in the desert.

One clear example is the commitment of this community
to the idea and practice of nonviolence.
It is an explicit pledge of this community
as a dimension of your vows as a religious community.

But what today's liturgy tells us
is that it is a commitment of our baptism, first of all.
And from that, expressing it in a focused, particular way,
a theme of vowed religious life.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 16, 2011

Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6	From the Second Servant Song
Psalm 40: 2, 4, 7-10	Here I am, Lord
I Corinthians 1:1-3	Greetings to the Corinthians
John 1:29-34	The Second Day

In each of the readings today the speaker tells of a call.
Meanwhile, the psalm provides a response: Here I am, Lord.

In the second of the Suffering Servant Songs, the Servant,
whom we may take to represent the faithful remnant of Israel,
reports a call once given, now revised.
    It is not enough for you to be a witness to Israel and Judah,
    but now I am calling you to witness to the nations of the world.
        We may hear here an explanation, or maybe justification,
        for the trauma of exile.
You, faithful Israel have been dragged
from your home and familiar surroundings
    in order to witness to a new people,
    the nations beyond your borders.

In the opening lines of his first letter to the Corinthians,
Paul tells them he has been called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.
    The apostle to the Gentiles, he too
    has taken the witness beyond the borders of Judea, beyond Galilee,
    to the nations of the world.
        Corinth is today's representation of that mission.

Today in John's Gospel, the Baptist tells us
    that the one who sent him to baptize with water
    has prepared him to witness to the one
    upon whom the Spirit rests.
        John too is called.

And today he fulfills his calling, with his announcement,
Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

The Servant, the Baptist, and the Apostle to the Gentiles
represent a tradition of witness through time and the ages.
    The witness continues today.

Recently I saw a photograph of the statues
in the Gallery of 20th Century Martyrs in Westminster Abbey.
    It includes Mother Elizabeth of Russia,
    Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer of WWII Germany,
        Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador,

and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., of Atlanta, GA.

Yesterday was Dr. King's birthday,
and tomorrow is the day that we celebrate it.
Here we find a particularly contemporary and pertinent
witness to Americans in the present age.
Here we find an image of a call, and a total response.

In 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference
was founded in Birmingham, Alabama,
with Martin Luther King as its first president,
an office he was to hold until he died.
He was selected because of his youth and lack of history in the area.
He was expendable and young enough to move on,
in case the effort failed.

The SCLC was founded to combat racism in Alabama and in the USA.
Tomorrow's celebration will focus on the Civil Rights movement
to combat racist discrimination against African Americans.
There will be statements on the state of progress of the movement.
Some will point out that great strides have been taken,
since we now have a President with African ancestry.
Others will point out that we have much more to do yet.

There is no denying that the civil rights of black Americans
was the great cause that MLK espoused,
and that his efforts were decisive in shaping
the changes that have occurred since.

But for me Martin Luther King represents more than his objectives,
for he is equally remarkable for the methods he chose to effect those goals.

I have in mind the illustration
for the month of January 2011, in the Franciscan calendar.
It is a picture of Dr. King with a quote
that selects for remembrance his methods, with these words:
"It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence in this world;
it's non-violence or non-existence."

In 1959 Dr. King went to India,
where he embraced the nonviolent conflict methods of Mohandas Gandhi.
Assisted by students of Gandhian nonviolence, such as Bayard Rustin,
he adapted those methods to the American setting.
American methods of nonviolent protest
owe much to Dr. King's precedents.

But in my view he did more than bring Gandhi to America.
He brought Gandhi to American Christianity.
He found Gandhi in the Gospel story.
In a hermeneutic of praxis—or to put it in plain English:
walking the walk as well as talking the talk of the Gospel
—he found a nonviolent message at the heart of the Gospel.

For me, this has generated a search into the Word,
which has produced at least two books,
one on Mark's Gospel, Nonviolent Story,
and another on Matthew's, Banished Messiah.
But behind both lies Dr. King's discovery of the nonviolent Gospel.

In later years Dr. King shifted his objectives
to opposing the Vietnam War and fighting the ravages of poverty.
Some find this to be a loss of focus,
a distraction from his true mission.
However, it seems to me that this resistance
to the ravages of war and poverty
is a logical consequence of his commitment to nonviolence.

He had not strayed,
but rather had followed his convictions to their consequences.

We find ourselves in a tradition of witness.
We do what we can, whether it is by a book or a calendar,
or by confronting a line at a place like Fort Benning.
What we do is protest the brutalization of our age.
Every move counts.

As our state moves to make "issue on demand" guns laws,
as the tragic murders and assassination attempts a week ago in Arizona
find apologies from those who would maintain the status quo,
we take our own stand on the Gospel as we read it.
With the help of MLK
and—who would have guessed?—Mahatma Gandhi.

As the Suffering Servant knew,
the witness of patient, forgiving love will win over many,
while violent hostility simply freezes the lines of opposition.
As the Servant knew, and Jesus showed,
God is love, and only love conquers all.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 23, 2011

Isaiah 8:23–9:1-3	A child is given us
Psalm 27: 1, 4, 13-14	My light and salvation
I Corinthians 1:10-13, 17	Corinthians rivalries
Matthew 4:12-13	Zebulon and Naphtali

This week the Catholic news media
are tuned into the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Rev. Richard McBrien does a retrospective
on the progress of ecumenism in the US over the last 40 years
during which he has annually taken the temperature of the movement.
He is of the opinion that once again this year
we will give the occasion lip service, as we move onto other business.

He notes there has been little official progress
since the Second Vatican Council.
At that time, he wrote, concerning intercommunion:
"From a theological point of view,
perfect doctrinal or structural unity is not required
before Christians can celebrate the sacraments together."

What little progress has been made, he suggests,
has occurred at the grass roots level.

On the other hand, in the same journal Fr. Thomas Ryan,
who directs the Paulist office of ecumenism,
argues that the celebration this year is not an exercise in futility.
He points to the progress that has been made
between the Catholic and Orthodox churches.
After 950 years of division,
and more recently 45 years of shared discussion,
what is new is, in his words,
"that they have reached the stage
where they are imagining in concrete terms
what it would look like to be in full communion with one another."

This is probably not as noticeable to us,
since it is taking place on the eastern edge of European Catholicism,
while we spend our time on the western edge.
Furthermore, the guiding insights of Orthodox Christianity
tend to turn more on matters of liturgy than on issues of justice,
or so it would seem to me.
We justice-oriented Christians might be missing
some of the importance of the gains being made here.

When we come to today's Scriptures
during this Octave of Christian Unity,
what do we find that may guide us?
Where is a message for the ecumenical moment?
Where is the great light for a people who walk in our relative darkness?

If you look in the Old Testament section
of the maps in the back of your Bible
you will notice that Zebulon and Naphtali
were the northernmost territories
among the twelve tribal holdings in ancient Israel.
If you compare this with the maps in the New Testament section,
you will notice that this same territory was then called Galilee.
In its day it was called Galilee of the Gentiles, of the Nations.

You might also notice that
in between the time of the tribes and that of the Gospel story,
there is little attention given to that area.
This would be for a very good reason,
since the northern territories were lost to Israel in the 8th century B.C.,
and were only resettled in the last generations before the birth of Christ.
In between they were "of the Gentiles"—inhabited by foreign nations.

Nor will you see much evidence of Nazareth in the early maps,
since it did not exist.
It was a recent settlement in the time
when Mary and Joseph, and then Jesus, lived there.
It was a very small suburb near the city of Sepphoris in Galilee.
More like Key West than Asbury. But a bit further from town.

When Isaiah wrote the lines we heard in the first reading,
the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali were already lost to Israel.
But he foresaw a time when a light would shine
upon the land of gloom.

When Matthew chose to cite those lines
at the beginning of his account of Jesus' public ministry,
he had that history in mind.
He was making a case for the beginning of the Gospel account
in the territory of Galilee—Jesus' home country,
but recent, peripheral, and of lesser consequence
to the people of Judah to the south, and Jerusalem, its capital.

And who can forget the remark of Nathanael, in John's Gospel?
"Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

But Matthew is saying yes.
On the one hand, he is making a point
that the first territory to be lost
is the first to be regained in the ministry of Jesus.

But he is saying something more:
He is saying that the movements of the divine in history
are often enough unexpected, coming from unexpected places.
He is charging us, as he is charging the skeptics of Jesus' day,
with being unwilling to accept the possibility that God
would arrive in our lives outside the approved and familiar avenues.

It is here that I detect a lesson
for our participation in the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity.
We may be impatient with progress toward unity on an official level.
We may be frustrated with the scarcity
of opportunities and possibilities at the grass root level.
We may feel that things are happening elsewhere,
but not where we most desire it.

But the lesson today is that divine movement
frequently occurs in places we do not anticipate it.
It eludes our programming.

I think of an insight offered by Rev. Avery Dulles
in one of his books of typology.
He suggested that it is not yet time for official unity,
and he pointed out that the different Christian churches
seem to specialize in different aspects of Christian witness.
This has seemed to me, ever since, to be true.

The Orthodox churches offer a vast catalogue of tradition and liturgy
that enriches the wider Christian community.
The Lutheran witness to the primacy of faith
as total trust in God's love and care for our lives
is single-minded, and necessary.
The Methodist emphasis on social concern,
the Calvinist sensitivity to our radical limitation in the face of God,
the Quaker and Mennonite insight
into the meaning of the nonviolent Gospel,
the Amish gift of gentleness and unconditional forgiveness
—the list can go on almost indefinitely—
each adds something to our Christian sensibility
and becomes part of our common heritage.

And we need not and ought not see our own, not inconsiderable,
contribution to this heritage as Catholics.
    But among the things we can learn is precisely that
    —the significance of our own witness,
        whether we describe that as sacramental reality,
        or a sensitivity to the role of human mediation,
        or something else.

Maybe our obligation at this point in time and our different stories
is to listen to one another,
to appreciate the different churches' witness and learn.
    Maybe we will discover that, despite all expectations,
    something good can come out of Nazareth.

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 30, 2011

Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13	A humble remnant
Psalm 146:6-10	The Lord sustains the poor
I Corinthians 1:26-31	God chooses the weak
Matthew 5:1-12	The Beatitudes

With the Beatitudes,
Matthew shows Jesus inaugurating his ministry of teaching.
It begins the Sermon on the Mount,
and the Sermon on the Mount serves as a quasi-manifesto
for the rest of Jesus' story,
as teacher, "scribe," master of parables.

This weekend we celebrate Catholic Schools Week.
Yesterday, at the 5:30 PM Mass, as a part of Catholic Schools Week,
I was honored by Sacred Heart School, Waterloo, IA
as one of their "distinguished grads."

It was an interesting trip down memory lane,
with some who have spent a lot of time there.
I had my start with the Mercy Sisters who operated the school.
Since spending K-12 there, I attended six other schools,
which, as it happens, are all Catholic.

Thirty years ago this coming May,
one of my schools, Aquinas Institute of Theology,
left Dubuque for St. Louis, where they entered a covenant
with the Jesuit school of St. Louis University.

At that time I was an instructor on the Aquinas faculty.
Although I was invited to, I chose not to go with them,
but elected to stay in Dubuque, moving a few blocks to Loras College,
where I spent the rest of my academic career.

You might remember that there were a number of Dubuquers
who attended Sunday liturgies at Aquinas.
These were the days in the vivid aftermath
of the Second Vatican Council,
and there was a ferment in the life of the church.
And on the local scene that ferment could most vibrantly be experienced
at Aquinas Institute—or, in the lexicon of Dubuquers, St. Rose Priory.

But in 1981, Aquinas left Dubuque,
and those locals who attended Aquinas liturgies
were left to wonder where they might go next.

This dilemma was made concrete
by a couple of Dominican fourth-year seminarians,
Mike Demokovich and Jim Spahn,
both now in the full maturity of their ministries,
when they asked the question: What will the Anawim do now?

They framed their question in terms of a recent book
at that time, on Catholic justice spirituality,
the name and author of which I have been unable to retrieve,
but a book that focused its attention on the biblical Anawim,
especially as depicted by the prophet Zephaniah.

The basic texts were those chosen for our first reading.
One has to assume that the book and the lectionary editing,
which occurred about the same time,
were not isolated from one another in their development.

Literally, Anawim means the humble, the lowly,
the disregarded population of the land.
It implies a piety that is simple and true-hearted.
Today, as we have heard, Zephaniah speaks of the lowly, the Anawim,
as the remnant of Israel.
His notion is that when the invasion comes,
the imperial armies will target the elites,
and the common folk will survive,
and their piety will water the roots of survival for the faith.

When Demkovich and Spahn called the faithful left behind the Anawim,
they were thinking more of the remnant than of the pious lowly ones.
But their words had an impact, and only a year or more later
did the community that was left behind agree
that they were not only the remnant,
but also the Anawim, the simple-hearted and the lowly.

What do we make of this biblical theme of the remnant,
the mission of the lowly?
How do we understand its place of priority above
the elites, the notable, the celebrity faction?

In political terms, we might think of the popular uprisings
that are taking place in the Muslim countries
—Tunisia, Yemen, and most spectacularly this weekend, in Egypt.
A former student of mine spent a semester at the University of Cairo,
and she has been monitoring the Egyptian situation very closely,
almost obsessively.

Her passionate postings on Facebook have kept me
up-to-date on the progress of the uprising.
She reported, for instance, on the nonviolent protestors
having formed a human wall around Cairo's main museum,
containing some of the oldest artifacts of human history,
in order to forestall looting.

Her passion is inspired by her identification
with the will of the common people.
Their aspiration is not to be denied, although it may be deferred.
The verdict isn't yet in.

Or, when we consider the lowly of the land,
we might think of the ordinary faithful,
if they can be said to be ordinary.

This past Wednesday I was invited to speak
to the Serra Club of Dubuque.
Their mission is to pray for vocations
to the religious life and priesthood, as you know.
I took the opportunity to reflect on something I usually take for granted,
namely, my experience of having a vocation to the ordained priesthood.
I took the offer to examine it in ways I hadn't before.

After the talk, there was a time for questions.
The main question had nothing to do with my talk, at least not directly.
One of my old time friends asked,
What do you think is the future of the church?

Suddenly I recognized that this was the real question.
This was the real topic I should have addressed in my presentation.
While the Serra Club was ostensibly praying for vocations,
what they were really petitioning God about
was the future of the church during an uncertain time.

They were praying the church into the future,
and for them that meant having an adequate supply
of religious men and women.
This was the church that they knew,
and consequently this was the content of their prayer.
But their overriding mission was to keep the church in existence.

My answer to them was impromptu, inadequate, and lame.
I didn't know what the future of the church was
any more than they did. But I did what I could.
However, my strongest impression was that this group before me

was another incarnation of the biblical Anawim,
the faithful of the church keeping it alive by its unrelenting witness.

Matthew's account of the Beatitudes differs from that of Luke.
Luke's are more direct, more confrontational.
However, Matthew's version seems to be leavened, permeated,
by the example of Zephaniah
and his theme of the Anawim, the lowly.
When Matthew's Jesus speaks of the poor in spirit,
the meek, the peacemakers,
he is invoking the words and themes of Zephaniah.

But Matthew's account of the Beatitudes,
and the Sermon on the Mount which follows,
is an instruction to the disciples, and the meaning of discipleship.
We take our lessons from these words,
and [in the spirit of St Francis himself] count ourselves
as Anawim, no matter how uncomfortable we find the fit.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 13, 2011

Sirach 15:15-20	Two ways set before you
Psalm 119	Selection of sayings
I Corinthians 2: 6-10	God's wisdom
Matthew 5:17-37	But I say to you...

One of the values to which this community
has explicitly committed itself is that of nonviolence.
In the past week we have seen a history-binding example
of nonviolence in action,
and it would be negligent of me not to reflect on these events
in light of the scriptures for today.

Next week we will hear from the Sermon on the Mount
concerning the practice of nonviolent action.
Today we might reflect on its power
—not too long, given the lengthy Gospel reading.

The events themselves were momentous.
Jonathan Schell, in his book The Unconquerable World,
points up the neglect we give to the successes of nonviolence,
in contrast with our obsessive attention to wars and conquest.

We tend to think of nonviolence as ineffective,
while war and violent conflict
are thought to be tough-minded and realistic,
what is needed if we want to effect change.

But violence is no more successful in its enterprises,
for there are losers in every conflict, and sometimes no winners.
Which would make it less than 50% effective.
And if we include contests like we witnessed these past two weeks,
even less than that.

Schell notes two major changes in the modern world
that were accomplished by nonviolent movements.
In the campaigns of Gandhi the world we saw
the end of British imperialism,
and the beginning of the end of naked imperialism itself.
In the fall of the Berlin wall, we saw a visible emblem
of the nonviolent collapse of Soviet communism.

The 18 days of the nonviolent protests in the cities of Egypt
are no less momentous.
For this would seem to be the beginning of the end

of the system of patriarchal tribalist oppression in the Arab world.

When we turn to the words of today's scriptures, what do we find?

Sirach speaks of a fundamental choice: fire or water, life and death.
Our freedom of choice is affirmed.
Sirach is speaking to our roles as moral agents.
We are ethical beings for whom freedom of choice is inherent,
though it is not always easy to exercise that choice.
Occasionally examples of extraordinary courage inspire us.

Paul writes to the Corinthians of a wisdom that is not of this world.
He has already characterized it as a power of weakness
that the powers of the world do not know.
Today he makes his point more strongly:
"We speak a wisdom to those who are mature,
not a wisdom of this age,
nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away."

And then there are the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.
Today we hear interpretations of the commandments:
You shall not kill;
You shall not commit adultery;
You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.

The Sermon takes these laws back
to the impulses that require them.

The mutual respect that can go by the name of love:
where there is no name calling against those thought to be an enemy,
there will be no impulse to seek revenge, or to kill.

The commitment to relationships that honor the dignity of the other:
where covenants are honored among those
thought of as friends, loved ones, the breach of trust
seen most devastatingly in adultery, will not occur.

The truth-telling that speaks to friends and enemies alike:
where truth is honored,
there is no need to support my statements with oaths.

As Jesus' Sermon makes clear,
connecting these to the next verses,
to the nonretaliation and love of enemies seen next week,
respect, fidelity to commitments, and truth
are the foundations of nonviolent conflict within relationships.

Where there are authentic human relations,
where others are honored despite
what seems at times to be almost intolerable differences,
    those differences can be resolved.
    And if not resolved, managed within terms of mutual respect.

The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are radical,
but no more radical than the call to be a Christian.

President Obama greeted the events of the week with these words:

This is the power of human dignity, and it can never be denied.
Egyptians have inspired us, and they've done so
by putting the lie to the idea that justice is best gained through violence.
    For in Egypt, it was the moral force of nonviolence
    —not terrorism, not mindless killing—but nonviolence,
    moral force that bent the arc of history toward justice once more.

And while the sights and sounds that we heard were entirely Egyptian,
we can't help but hear the echoes of history—
    echoes from Germans tearing down a wall,
    Indonesian students taking to the streets,
    Gandhi leading his people down the path of justice.

And according to Thomas Merton,
    it was Gandhi who named Jesus
    as perhaps the most active resister known to history.
        His was nonviolence par excellence.

Sunday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time

February 20, 2011

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18	Love your neighbor as yourself
Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13	The Lord is kind and merciful
I Corinthians 3:16-23	You are God's Temple
Matthew 5:38-48	Love your enemies

"Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."
We grew up with this.
And we were frequently defeated,
since it sets a pretty high standard.

Of course we knew what it meant.
It meant to be faultless, blameless in our behavior.
It meant to be without blemish.
But since that was humanly impossible,
we were unable to maintain the standard,
and so we had to deal with our own failure.

And later, when we found ourselves in the position
of being publicly identified with religion and the church,
we found it all the more necessary to appear faultless.
And since we were not,
we had to deal with the feeling of hypocrisy.

And worse, being found out for being what we were: human beings,
though (we hoped people understood)
human beings with a desire to lead saintly lives.
This directive on perfection didn't seem to help that project.

Thinking about these matters, it occurred to me to wonder
if the word, "perfect," might mean something else,
something more liberating.

So I packed my bag and my detective kit
and went out in search of the missing meaning, looking for clues.

The first clue came in the net of languages and translations.
As you know, Jesus spoke Aramaic,
the language of the land at the time.
Hebrew had been dead for a couple of centuries.
No longer spoken, it couldn't even be read
without a system of markings on the page to help the readers out.

But Jesus seems to citing a passage from the Hebrew Bible,

and the passage is in today's first reading:
"Be holy, for I your God, am holy."

There it is interpreted by a following verse or two:
bear no hatred, cherish no grudge against your neighbor.

I remembered that in Mark's Gospel
Jesus opposes a view of holiness as purity
in favor of holiness as compassion.
That seemed to square with Luke's version of this saying.

Jesus spoke Aramaic, but the Gospel writers wrote in Greek,
the international language of the day.
So they had some room in deciding
which words to represent Jesus' teachings.

In Luke the saying reads like this:
"Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."
I thought this seemed recognizable as close
to what Jesus might be expected to say.

But Matthew has "perfect," not "compassionate."
So my first clue only took me so far.

So in search of my second clue I went to the dictionary to see
what Matthew's Greek word, teleios, meant.
(And here is where I expect to put you to sleep.)

I was thinking that it meant 'far,' as in our words,
Television and Telephone—seeing far, and speaking far.
But that is a different word.
This word is related to telos, which means End.
teleios has to do with coming to the end, finishing.
It means complete, or full, or finished.
Matthew is speaking about what it means to be the complete disciple.

But, since Matthew is the only Evangelist to use this word,
I thought it might be interesting to see what other ways he uses it.
There was one other verse.

You remember the passage about the rich young man.
After having explained that he had indeed kept the commandments,
Jesus responded, "If you would be perfect (teleios),
sell what you have, give to the poor ... and come, follow me." (Mt 19:21)

Of course, this passage comes pretty close to home,

since it is the scriptural basis of one of the evangelical counsels:
the vow of poverty.
Once again we can get paranoid about not being quite perfect.

But in comparing today's passage with that of the rich young man,
and with the help of a couple of my books,
I made a surprising discovery. At least it was surprising for me.

Both instances of the call to perfection
follow a list of citations of the commandments.
In both cases, Jesus moves beyond the commandments,
or maybe behind them, to something prior.

After the young man asks what he should do,
Jesus lists some commandments:
do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal,
do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother,
love your neighbor as yourself.

It is then, when the young man assures Jesus that he has done all that,
that Jesus calls him farther.
If you would be perfect, or complete,
sell what you have, give to the poor, follow me.

Today's Gospel reading comes at the end of Matthew 5.
Here too we had a list of commandments, in the pattern of
You have heard it said, But I say to you.

The list very similar:
Do not kill, do not commit adultery, Do not bear false witness,
Answer an eye for an eye, Love your neighbor as yourself.

But here too Jesus is calling the disciple beyond the stated command.
Do not kill becomes Do not be angry.
Do not commit adultery becomes do not lust in your heart.
Do not swear falsely becomes do not swear at all.

And today we heard:
Do not retaliate; Love your enemies as well as your neighbor.

So these past weeks with the Sermon on the Mount
we have been hearing something very similar
to that which the rich young man heard.
It is a call to discipleship,
an invitation to follow in the footsteps by taming the spirit.

And with this, today's reading, I came to my third clue.
In addition to the web of languages,
in addition to Matthew's particular word choice,
I came to the context given by today's reading, today's passage.

Jesus has just instructed the disciples to love their enemies,
and not only their friends.
And then, attached to this, pulling the meaning out of this,
he says, “SO be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
The "perfection" is connected with the unbounded love.

We are invited to love those whom God loves,
and not simply those we wish God loved.
It doesn't say we won't have enemies, only that we are to love them.

And right before the invitation to love our enemies,
immediately preceding it, we hear the call to non-retaliation,
as a concrete example of what it means to love one's enemy.
We are not to pay back injury for injury, harm for harm.

This is very difficult. Non-retaliation is at the heart of nonviolence.
It speaks to nonviolent conflict resolution.

(And here I might mention that another homily occurred to me.
One that spoke to the values of nonviolence,
seen in so many ways in the world today, Mideast and MIdwest.
Just this week the NY Times carried an article about Gene Sharp,
the nonviolent theorist I had mentioned last week,
and how he has been so instrumental
in providing inspiration and practical guidance
for the nonviolent actions taking place this month.
But that homily was already given.)

Today I think we can look at what expectations belong to the disciple.
Compassion, love of enemies, a commitment to nonviolence.
This is not a matter of maintaining a checklist, a perfect record,
but rather a matter of being committed to a set of values
and a program for life that reflects those values.

It is about following a dream, more than marking a checklist.

Sunday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

March 6, 2011

Deuteronomy 11: 18, 26-28	A blessing and a curse
Psalm 31:2-4, 17	In you, Lord, I take refuge
Rom 3:21-25	Justice of God manifested
Matthew 7:21-27	Parable of Two Builders

Last night I was talking to someone who uses the homily books
that this community put out in the past few years.
He was jokingly complaining that the A Cycle was missing
the past five or six Sundays.

At that time, Lent came as early as possible.
This year it does just the opposite.
It comes as late as possible.
It is not often that we have nine Sundays of Ordinary Time
before Ash Wednesday.
As a result, it is not often we hear this Sunday's Gospel parable
where it belongs: at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.
In the past few weeks we have taken a tour through the Sermon,
and now we come to its concluding statement,
the parable of the Two Builders,
one who built on rock, the other on sand.

The parable is about standing—or building—in a secure place.
Its message is one of consolation
to those who are aware of the risks that life brings our way,
without adding into the consideration the issues encountered
trying to live a life of faithful discipleship.
It instructs us on how to be careful.
Prudent. Acting with full foresight.
Plan carefully, plot out the lay of the land,
and you will find survival, if not full success, to be yours.

Today we hear that those who hear these words and do them
are like the one who builds on rock,
and those who hear these words (and who hasn't?)
are like the one who builds on sand.
We are assured that the rock is doing all of these things,
while the sand is not doing them.

But there is something counterintuitive here.
After all, consider the lessons of the Sermon
we have been hearing the past month and a half.
Let your light shine. Do not be angry, or lustful.

Simply say the truth without supporting it with oaths.
Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies.
Do not worry about what you are to wear.
Or eat, or drink.
Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The Sermon's lesson is one of trust.
Trust in God, who is the Rock,
and trust in one another as followers of the Teacher upon the Mount.
Here is where you will find the true security.

But is this so? I would bet that anyone you ask
would consider this program one of high risk.
It does not the follow the usual blueprint for finding one's security.
It is not what we commonly hear about as the proper way to be safe.
Our culture has other candidates for finding safety and security.

As you leave the Target shopping mall
you will encounter a little sign that advises as follows:
"Get your CWP,
Concealed Carry Classes,"
along with a web address and a phone number.

CWP stands for Concealed Weapon Permit,
and the web address is www.e2c.us;
e2c stands for 'equip to conceal.'
The website is sponsored by the NRA, the National Rifle Association.

So here we find another proposal for achieving security.
It has nothing to do with trust.
In fact, it doesn't consider trust an option for even a micro-second.
It is a policy of deterrence,
with which we are familiar from the Cold War Era.
Its sense of security is the same as that we experienced then, as well,
when the clock of global survival was set a few minutes before midnight.

With the new emphasis on concealed weapons,
I am reminded of one of these trainers I saw interviewed on TV,
who warned that if we think ourselves unable to kill another person,
we probably ought not obtain a weapons permit.

What is it that drives this movement?
Is it not based on a belief that everyone is a threat?
Does it not assume that everyone else is out to do you damage.
Have they who adopt this view not watched too much TV,
imagining that you never know who might have a psychotic break

and destroy your family?

This viewpoint assumes that every one must have a gun,
because (it also assumes) everyone already has a gun.
Everyone but you and me.

Of course, the response to this observation
will be that, of course, not everyone has a gun,
but that many do, and you never know.
For all practical purposes, then, it is the same thing.
Act as if everyone has a gun.

Now I can hear someone object that this is an extreme position.
An increasingly popular one, but still extreme.
It is not the real foundation of our culture,
which actually is one of trust. We are a nation of faith.
After all, it even says "In God We Trust" on our money.

Why on our money, I wonder?
What does this say, except that we put a disclaimer on our money
because we need the reminder?
As if we suspect, we have this deep feeling, that money is our real God.
So we brand each bill with a message
that reminds us to return to our proper priorities.
Or maybe even as a way of literally buying God off,
with a bit of flattery.

And here I always think of my uncle Merrill,
who married into the family.
Merrill was a fan of money,
and was for a while national president of the Numismatic Society,
the organization of coin collectors.
He was part of the group that lobbied
for the slogan to be put on our money.
It was during his term as president that it happened.
This tended to confuse me, because Merrill was not only a millionaire,
with a house on a real rock
—a skyscraper on the bedrock of midtown Chicago.
He was also an atheist.

I sometimes suspected that for him
the message on the money meant, "In [this] God We Trust,"
referring back to the money itself.

It would seem that we need more than good words,
wherever they might be posted.

We need to be shown what this trust entails.
What is the program of the Sermon on the Mount?
What is authentic trust?

It is here that I find the witness of Christian community.
It is here that we can find trust in God made visible.
It is trust that provides authentic security,
as it is lived out in mutual trust,
one for another, each in all.
Probably it is most clearly witnessed in religious orders,
but the Sermon is intended for all disciples, not only the few.

This is not to say that we don't have our differences,
and that we can't get rather difficult in our relations.
But beneath that there is a fundamental agreement, a basic trust.

Furthermore, there is a confidence there
that leads to a certain kind of joy,
a happiness that cannot be constructed on one's own.
It is a gift of joy built on belief.

Some would counter that it is not real joy. It is a naïve joy,
based on lack of experience of the real misery in the world.
But I would invite those critics to follow religious women
into the dark and painful corners of the world
where they do their ministry,
and then see if they still believe that they are prisoners of naïveté.
How then would they account for the joy they find there?

This week Lent begins.
There are many ways of entering into the season.
One might be to reflect on the meaning
of that basic trust that makes us disciples.

First Sunday of Lent

March 13, 2011

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7	In the Garden
Psalm 51:3-6, 12-13, 17	Be merciful, O Lord
Romans 5:12-19	The Second Adam
Matthew 4:1-11	In the Desert

Just as every Ordinary Church Year begins
with the story of Jesus' baptism,
so every Lent begins with the story
immediately following that in the gospels,
the story of Jesus' Temptation in the Desert, as we say.
In Matthew's Gospel the juxtaposition of these two stories of Jesus
are especially telling, insofar as the Gospel
seems to make a point of comparing the two.

I think of them (and here I am borrowing
a page from my book on Matthew, Banished Messiah,
as I will no doubt be doing most of this year of Matthew)—
I think of them as Voices in the Desert.

We know that John is called a Voice in the Desert.
It is concerning John that Matthew writes:
It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said:
"A voice of one crying out in the desert,
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"

But today we hear another voice in the desert,
and that voice is the voice of Satan.
Where John shows Jesus the greatest deference
("I need to baptized by you, and yet you come to me!"),
Satan takes an entirely different approach.

It is of Jesus that he demands deference. As we just heard:
Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain,
and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence,

and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you,

if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."

And so, as we begin the season of Lent,
we are confronted with the voices in the desert, the basic choice.

Or perhaps more accurately, we are reminded
of the basic choice that we have made,
and no doubt continue to make daily.

We are summoned into the season of metanoia,
the season of a change of heart.
    We are invited to review and renewal of the fundamental decision
    that brought us this far.
        Like Jesus, we reflect on the meaning of our call,
        the implications of our baptism.

But when we reflect on the desert sojourn of Jesus
and the choices he has been given to make,
    we notice something more.

John is announcing the Kingdom of God, about to arrive:
"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."
    Jesus is the one to make the Kingdom present.
    Later on John will inquire, to be sure:
"Are you the One who is to come, or should we look for another?"
    Jesus assures John that his program is the Kingdom that is coming.

But Satan has another program for Jesus, entirely different,
and another program for the Kingdom.
    "All the kingdoms of the world I shall give to you,

    if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."

We recognize in Satan's proposal the project of the Empire.
    It is not without significance that attempt
    of subduing all the nations of the earth is precisely
    the program of the Roman Empire.

I cannot read Matthew's Gospel without remembering
that it was written in the shadow of the destroyed Temple,
    the aftermath of Rome's wrath visited upon the city of Jerusalem,
    and the Temple at its center.

For Rome this was a theological act.
    It was intended to demonstrate that the God of the Judeans
    was helpless, impotent, of no help to the Jews.
        The Roman army could destroy the Holy Place,
        with nothing happening to that army,
        no reprisal from God Yahweh.
Rome was victorious, and the obvious conclusion
was that the gods were on the side of Rome.

Furthermore, the proof lay in the greater violence.
    The gods of destruction prevailed.

And the demolition and looting of the Temple was a clear statement
of the theology of violence as the superior reality.

In Matthew, Satan is the spirit of the theology of violence,
especially in its role of imperial domination.
Thus it is that Satan takes Jesus to the temple parapet,
in one of the temptations.
It makes the theological implications clear.
And so it is that Jesus, in order to win over the nations,
is told to worship Satan, the spirit of violence,
seen by the advocates of domination as the only route to worldwide rule.

Jesus refuses Satan's overtures in the desert story.
He rejects his theology of power and violence.
And in the very next chapter we hear him, in the Sermon on the Mount,
setting out a vision of God's will for the disciples of the Kingdom
that flatly contradicts the views of this desert voice.

And yet the trials will continue,
right up to the final temptation in the Garden.
And so the two trials frame the Lenten season,
just as they frame the Gospel
—from the desert testing at the beginning
to the Gethsemane trial at the Passion.

Deserts and Gardens.
Nor should we forget the original Garden scene
that begins today's liturgy, with the first parents,
from Garden to Desert, scenes contrasted by Paul
in his letter to the Romans
as the trials of first and the second Adam.

It is in Gethsemane that Jesus makes
the definitive rejection of the resources of violence,
in rejecting the sword raised against the guard coming to arrest him:
"Those who live by the sword by the sword will perish."
And twice he affirms this
as the fulfillment of God's will in the scripture.

It is customary to devote Lenten meditations,
especially at the beginning,
to considerations of personal and individual spiritual wellbeing.
I am not adverse to concerns of private spirituality.
But I purposefully moved beyond this to speak of the larger frame,
not only because the Gospel takes me there,
and not only because this community has explicitly

committed itself to nonviolent values.

But there is another reason,
which has to do with the major needs of the world in which we live.
At this point I had intended to list some of the many ways
in which our nation, perhaps inadvertently in many instances,
has adopted the customs of empire.
But I have taken too long to get here,
so I will have to leave it to your own imaginations.
It does complicate the work of discipleship,
though it brings us closer to the world of Matthew.

But I will say this:
Recently I received an email from a friend, now retired,
but who spent his life in the State Department
and other diplomatic roles.

In his letter he wrote:
"There are no more important issues
than those of violence/non-violence,
eg. treatment of terrorists, torture, capital punishment, nuclear war,
and (I am with those who include) poverty." (Charles Ahlgren)

Recently, in the Middle East, we have seen governments
toppling through the power of nonviolence,
with only one, Libya, the one that abandoned nonviolent opposition,
admittedly under the greatest provocation,
moving toward stalemate or even failure.

While there are a number of stands we can take
in our entry into the season of metanoia,
one I believe we are being called to take
is to adopt the spirit of nonviolence.

Perhaps, in fact, it underlies the other virtuous programs.
Lent is a season of quiet rebirth,
and in the stillness we might rediscover
the peace that stills the spirit.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 20, 2011

Genesis 12:1-4	Call of Abraham
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-22	We place our trust in you
2 Timothy 1:8-10	The grace now manifest
Matthew 17:1-9	The Transfiguration

If you got a glimpse before the clouds set in,
you might have seen the full moon last night.
It was what the media is calling a super moon.
That means that it reaches perigee in its elliptical orbit around earth,
which is as close to the earth as it gets,
while simultaneously timing its appearance as a full moon.
It is something that happens only every 18 years.

Some are suspecting that the tidal pull of perigee
is prompting global disasters, such as earthquakes.
Others think that the full moon causes lunatic behavior
in unstable societies.
Those who study such things tell us that none of this is true.

Nonetheless, we like to think that hidden forces shape our destinies.
The tug and pull of unseen influences control us, at least somewhat.

Today is also the Second Sunday of Lent,
when we hear about the event on the mountain
that we call the Transfiguration.
It is as if the scales of the eyes of the observers were peeled away
and they saw behind appearances to the reality beneath.
As if unseen forces were at work
behind the screen of our everyday world.

But when we hear the voice from heaven,
repeating what it said back at the beginning, by the lake,
and when we get a glimpse of the Easter story of the empty tomb,
we realize that this is a moment in a story,
with something before and something after.

It is not simply a matter of the fullness of reality revealed,
it points to the meaning of a story.
It is not simply a further dimension to the daily reality we experience,
it suggests a purpose for the story that we are living.

In Matthew's Gospel, in particular,
the Transfiguration is told to foreshadow
the Empty Tomb story of Easter morning.
Not only is there extra emphasis on the bright light,

evoking the OT theophanies of Moses and Elijah, appropriately present,
but also the consequent dismay of the awe-struck onlookers.
The disciples here;
the guards assigned to the tomb at Easter.

There is a possible interpretation of the images of shock and awe,
one that I tend to favor, that would see the display of power
as an assurance that the hidden power of God
surpasses that of the imperial forces that dominate their world.
God is the greater power.
Despite the appearances of a Jesus movement
that is harassed and subjected,
they are in fact in tune with the divine reality,
now glimpsed in a fraction of its fullness.

There is one small problem with my interpretation.
For if we are to believe that authentic power belongs to God,
and that it is hidden, only poised to be revealed,
are we not saying in effect that
the final truth of the matter is power, and that awe is fear,
and fear rules the day.
How is this any different from the worldly powers
that they confront in their lives?
That we confront in our lives?
It suggests that our powerlessness breeds resentment,
in which we can only wish for the time
when we are in a position to settle scores.

But if the disciples awe is not a terror of threatening power, what is it?
To what is their awe a response?
Is it the fear of control over the observer, who feels helpless?
Isn't it rather something more,
something else to which awe responds?

Perhaps it can be said to be a matter of horizons.
I am thinking that the dimensions of the small world opens up
to reveal a larger, almost unfathomable world,
one that is unsuspected and as a result overwhelms.
This is not fear of power so much as it is astonishment,
and more than astonishment.
What evokes their awe is dimension, more than threat.
In a way it is true that the vision positions the story
above the powers of the empire, but it is more.
It also positions the story beyond the expectations
of those who are engaged in living it.

On the one hand, it is a reminder
that we live a story that is not our own making.
We share in a larger narrative.
In this sense, it is a guard against hubris,
the pride that fails to know its limits.

A recent commentator noted three recent failures
of human projects that were considered foolproof.
One occurred on Wall Street, dismaying those
who taught that collapse was now mathematically impossible.
Another occurred in the Gulf of Mexico, rendering systems
that were thought to be guaranteed by back-ups
dangerous and useless.
The **third** happened this past week in Japan,
affecting not the slipshod nuclear power constructions
of Russian Chernobyl,
but the sophisticated and supposedly secure nuclear stations
of a careful nation.

While we need to plan,
we also need to understand the limits of our plans.

On the other hand, along with the cautions against pride,
we have the assurance of the deep significance of our Christian story.
This is not so much a matter of discerning
the power behind the apparent powerlessness,
the pride beneath the humility.
It is rather a profession of faith in the powerlessness itself,
the power of humility.

What changes the world, what redeems it, is not crushing it,
not destroying one's opponents.
What brings it to its fuller realization is the promise of life,
and not the fear of death,
which is behind the threat of dominating power.

The awe experienced at the Transfiguration is not
the fear of danger, the dread of death.
Rather, it is the vision of an expanded horizon,
far beyond their ability to manage such news very well.
It is a vision of life without limit.
And it points to Easter, the fullness of life
that comes after the dark days ahead.

It is their promise, and it is ours.

Third Sunday of Lent

March 27, 2011

Exodus 17:3-7
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
John 4:5-42

This morning I am conscious of mirror images
of the Samaritan Woman, the woman at the well.

One of these is Lynn Sutton,
recently named to the Dubuque City Council.
Another that comes to mind is last week's issue of Newsweek,
honoring 150 woman who have made a difference in our world.
Here's a third: A recent article inn that same Newsweek,
by Kathleen Parker, called "Why Women Make Lousy Men."
Her thesis is that feminism has in some cases allowed itself
to take the male model as the model for success,
and that misses the point of what women can do for society.

But if these might in someway be called
images of the Samaritan Woman, who is the Samaritan Woman?
And how are these versions of her?

In our search for the Samaritan Woman,
we might immediately dismiss some of the biased stereotypes.
Sr. Sandra Schneiders, in her book The Revelatory Text,
devotes a chapter to this story,
and the first thing she does is demolish the list of false images
that have been set up by generations of preachers,
who in addition to a gender-blinded bias
approach the text with the unimaginative literalism
that denies the Gospel its poetry.

In particular, she notes that the mileage
that preachers have got from the five husbands
neglects the way the text evokes the typical biblical scene
of the patriarch's encounter with his future bride at the well.
We see this with Jacob, and Isaac, and Moses, among others.

Furthermore, the gospel draws on the biblical tradition
of Israel's covenant with Yahweh,
which has as its counterpart the image of idolatry as adultery.
We see echoes in the Song of Songs,
an allegory of Yahweh and Israel for the Jews,
of Christ and the Church for Christians.
In this vein, the woman is Samaria itself,

and the five husbands are the pagan religions
that were at home in the territory
in the seven centuries between the time it was lost to Israel
and the time of Jesus.
We need to learn how allegory works.

In our quest for the Samaritan woman,
we also need to pay attention to the conversation.
The encounter at the well is depicted as a dialogue
between Jesus and the woman.
The disciples have gone into town, and the woman comes to the well.
Jesus opens the conversation by requesting a drink.

Sandra Schneiders' professor, the late great Fr. Raymond Brown,
first brought the dialogue to my attention
in his famous commentary on John's Gospel.
It was a great example of how to interpret John's stories.
He showed how Jesus opens with two agenda items for the dialogue:
if you knew with whom you were talking,
you would ask for living water.
Living water and Jesus' identity are keys to the dialogue.
Sure enough, these shape the dialogue,
for halfway through the conversation she asks for this water.
And the exchange ends when she recognizes him as the Messiah.

Ray Brown wrote his work before feminism made much of a dent
in American Catholic consciousness.
(Sandra Schneiders was among those who would help to remedy that.)
So perhaps we can understand why
he missed something else about the dialogue.
If we pay attention, helped with Brown's notion of a drama,
we will notice that the woman also has an agenda for the dialogue:
Why are you speaking with me, a woman and a Samaritan.

I like to separate these two, woman and Samaritan,
because they represent two different issues.
In the exchanges between the two of them
much is said about the Samaritan issue.
But we might not notice anything about the matter
of talking with a woman.
However, the disciples certainly noticed,
when they returned from the city to join him at the well.

"They were amazed that he was talking with a woman."

Apparently there were social rules that discouraged such activity.

The woman's agenda items are also honored in the dialogue.
As I just mentioned, the two of them get involved
in the difference between Samaria and Judea,
and Jesus takes the opportunity to point out
that these differences will be transcended in the time to come.
Which already is arriving, though the woman doesn't know it yet.

And then there is the matter of a Judean man talking to a woman.
It is my suspicion that Jesus' abrupt suggestion
that she call her husband is a response to her concern.
If she feels uneasy about him talking to her,
well, he can talk to her husband then.
However, she will have none of that.
She is enjoying the exchange too much.

Both Jesus and the woman have issues
they wish to resolve in the dialogue, and both have them resolved.
Jesus' issues are resolved by her answers.
Her issue of the Samaritan matter is resolved
in Jesus' interpretation of the time past and the time to come.
But does her concern about his talking with a woman find a resolution?
It isn't discussed, apart from the oblique reference that I mentioned.

It seems to me that it is not false to the story
to understand that this issue is not resolved
in a specific topic in the dialogue,
but rather in the action of doing the dialogue itself.
Especially insofar as the dialogue continues
after the concern has been raised,
it would seem that it becomes a recognition of her worth,
acceptance of her participation in the repartee.

And what is the water that brings life
and what is Jesus' messianic identity for her?
Often we hear about the waters of baptism,
or perhaps the Spirit that flows like water.
But again, I think of the dialogue itself.
It is the exchange of dialogue that the woman finds life-giving.
It is in the recognition that she receives.
And Jesus thereby shows his identity
—the one who recognizes those who suffer without it,
and shows how just that can be lifegiving.

So each responds to the other, in speech and in action.
Jesus' action consists in continuing the speech.
Her action consists in returning to the city

and preaching, through diplomatic speech, the arrival of the Messiah.
She becomes an apostle.

All the more reason why libeling her is a scandal.
She becomes a soul sister of Mary Magdalen,
first witness to the resurrection,
but given to be remembered for alternative reasons,
largely invented.

The search for the Samaritan Woman
casts some light on her mirror images.
Our new councilwoman not only receives due recognition,
but also brings with her an alienated community,
the city's African Americans, the city's "Samaritan" population.
She is not only a symbol but also a vehicle of inclusion,
as was the woman at the well.

The Newsweek articles on significant women of our time,
as well as why women make lousy men,
gets some illumination from the last scene
in the gospel drama for today.

When the disciples return,
they bring the lunch they went into town for,
and are surprised that Jesus doesn't eat.
He speaks of food of which they know not.
He speaks of produce, and the fields ripe for harvest.
He says there is a saying that One sows and Another reaps.
He says, "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."

I cannot help but think of the outcome
of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman,
now bearing fruit as she persuades the people of the city,
and how that contrasts with the disciples,
who were just there in town.

She, with the help of Jesus, who never left the well,
are converting Samaria.
The disciples have been there and back.
They have brought back lunch,
but not a single convert.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

April 10, 2011

Ezekiel 37:12-14	Dry Bones
Psalm130:1-8	From the depths I cry
Romans 8:8-11	Those in the Spirit will live
John 11:1-45	Lazarus

After Jesus left Jerusalem because of the attempt on his life
after the interlude about the Good Shepherd,
he found himself with the disciples in the place
where John had been first baptizing.
He knew that if he were to return to Jerusalem it would be risking death,
as Thomas also knew.

In the scriptural selections of the liturgy we tend to ignore
the circumstances in which the events occur.
But they remain critical and part of the story.
In the case of Lazarus, it means that Jesus was in flight for his life.

It was under these circumstances when he received
word from Mary and Martha about the last days of Lazarus.
After pausing for a few days,
he resolved to return to the city despite the danger,
knowing that it probably meant
that he was exchanging his life for that of Lazarus.
Thomas knew what it was about.
"Let us also go to die with him."

When they reached the village of Bethany,
the sisters came out to meet him one at a time.
First, Martha. "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."
Their exchange was reassuring, positive in its outlook.
Jesus not only affirmed the possibility of resurrection,
but he announced clearly, "I am the Resurrection and the Life."
There will be nothing to worry about.
He does not say explicitly that he is about to raise Lazarus from the grave,
but he does not mince words.

After this encouraging discussion,
Martha returned to the house and sent her sister Mary to greet Jesus.
She began the conversation with the same reproach:
"Lord,if you had been here my brother would not have died."
The same opening but an entirely different response.
Following this we have the famous shortest verse in Scripture:
"Jesus wept."

We hear that he is deeply troubled, disturbed with inner turmoil.

And here is the anomaly in John's story:
the same reproach, but radically different responses.

I am the Resurrection and the Life.
And then: Jesus wept.
From the eternally positive to the sorrowfully negative.

And again deeply troubled when he arrives at the tomb
and confronts the very death that he has come to undo,
even as he begins to undo it.

What are we to make of this?
John's stories are always rich in lessons,
so rich as not to be easily exhausted.
But here are some reflections upon those lessons.

We understand that even the assurance of resurrection,
even the presence of resurrection,
does not erase the loss and devastation of death.
Resurrection life is not a escape from death, but an overcoming of it.
It is not a release from the experience of death,
but a promise and life on the other side of it.
Death remains, but it is chastised.

And here we discover another lesson.
In raising Lazarus from the dead,
the lie that death is the final stop is exposed.
If Lazarus comes back he comes back
from somewhere that is beyond death.
Death is exposed as not really the final stop,
despite its reputation for being so.

We might imagine that the power of death,
being revealed as impotent, will not let matters go so easily.
Death seeks its revenge
and finds it in the accusations against Jesus,
which follow this story.

We read that shortly after the raising of Lazarus,
the chief priests met with the Pharisees,
and concerned that the Romans would misinterpret
the fervor among the people that followed from the raising of Lazarus,
pondered what they might do.

"But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year,
said to them,

"You know nothing,
nor do you consider that it is better for you
that one man should die instead of the people,
so that the whole nation may not perish."
"So from that day on they planned to kill him."

His premonitions were correct.
Jesus was to exchange his life for that of Lazarus.

It has been said about the Gospel of John
that here more than anywhere else we have a picture of Jesus
dying as he lived, for the sake of others.
His death was a continuation of his life.
They were of a piece.

And this is not more visible than it is in the story of Lazarus.
Here, not only is he living for others,
but in bringing others to live, he gives his own life.

In this last Sunday before we enter the mysteries of Holy Week,
we have a rehearsal of the meanings of Holy Week.
We see the claims that love makes upon Jesus,
and how this evokes a total response,
despite some hesitations at the beginning.
We learn the pattern of the Passion account,
with its profound sense of loss,
along with its assured promise of Easter.

We live in the middle of this mystery, the tension of this mystery,
between death and life, devastating loss and fullness of life,
Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

But today we are most conscious of the pull and demands of love,
requiring a total response,
a full, even costly, response.
It is the story of Jesus,
and, we understand, the story of those
who call themselves his disciples.

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion A

April 17, 2011

Matthew 21:1-11	Triumphal Entry
Isaiah 50:4-7	Third Servant Song
Psalm 22:8-9,17-20,23-24	My God, My God, why...
Philippians 2:6-11	Kenosis Hymn
Matthew 26:14—27:66	Matthew's Passion

Although this is already a rather long liturgy,
perhaps a few words might still be in order.
After all, the story we have just heard
has inspired the most sublime art
as well as the most devastating violence against the Jews.
There is no more sublime choral music
than J.S. Bach's St Matthew's Passion.

At the same time, the cry of the people,
"His blood be upon us and upon our children,"
has provided that excuse for the centuries long
persecution of the Jews by Christians.
The deepest nadir of this blind fury is, of course,
the Shoah, the Holocaust of Nazi Germany.
But its spirit still breathes today,
and I can show the Christian websites where it can be visited.

The devastating cry of the people has implications for the Gospel as well.
At least twice during the course of the Gospel story
Jesus insists that he is sent exclusively
to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"
to "save his people from their sins."
It would seem that the people in their outcry
announce his failure to accomplish that.

The cry of the people is part of a theme
that appears in Matthew's Passion, and here only.
It is the theme of Innocent Blood.
There are three moments in this theme I would like to bring to mind.

The first is that of Judas,
concerned about the effect of bloodguilt
resulting from killing an innocent person.
The second is similar, and it is the story of Pilate,
also concerned about the guilt of innocent blood.
These two reflect two sides of a futile effort to overcome evil.

In our stories, as in our lives,
two strategies dominate the imagination
as ways of ridding our world of the evil that has entered it.
Both employ violence.

The first is retribution, returning evil for evil
and paying back violence for violence.
Payback has the promise of squaring the record, evening the score.
It attempts to arrive at justice,
through an equal and opposite reaction.
Unfortunately it usually creates a new situation on the other side,
which also now feels a need for retribution.

Judas, in throwing the money back into the temple treasury,
attempts a futile effort at restoring the record through payback.
It fails.
Jesus, at his arrest in the Garden, shows us the only viable alternative.
He explicitly rules out the option of paying back harm for harm.
In the saying found only in this Gospel, Jesus points out
that "Those who live by the sword, by the sword shall perish."

The second strategy for overcoming evil or violence in our world,
honored in both story and history,
is to scrub the world clean through violent cleansing.
In obliterating the opposition,
we think we can return the score to zero,
and begin again in an innocent world.

If payback desires justice, purgation desires innocence,
a purity that would by marred by no trace of the contaminating evil.
If payback brings us just war,
purgation brings us holy war, and ethnic cleansing.

When Pilate conspicuously washes his hands
before the priests and the people,
he makes a gesture of purgation, of cleansing.
It too is a mockery; for he continues on
to deliver the verdict that only he has the power to deliver.
He hands Jesus over to the guards for execution by crucifixion.

But I mentioned three violent strategies, and I have only spoken of two.
What is the third?

In ancient societies it was common
to relieve the community of guilt by the violent ritual of sacrifice.
In shedding blood, blood wrongly shed was atoned for.

There is an age-old tradition that sees Jesus' death on the cross
as such an act of sacrifice, releasing from guilt.
Some see Matthew as intending this as well.
But one wonders, given that he twice introduces into the Gospel
the line from Hosea: "It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice."

As a matter of fact, it is in the innocent blood theme of Matthew
that we see his understanding of Jesus' redemptive death.
As Fr. Raymond Brown has pointed out,
in the course of this passion story we hear all of the main participants
denying any responsibility for the death of Jesus.
Judas, the priests, and Pilate each make their denials,
even though the story implicates them.
The only party that accepts responsibility is the people:
His blood be upon us...

Matthew knew that there was a procedure in the books,
a ceremony of purification for clearing a community of bloodguilt
in the case of a crime with an unknown perpetrator.
We find it in Deuternomy 21.
It deals with local situations, but here we have an entire people at risk.

Matthew also knew there was a ritual in place for just such a situation,
clearing away the guilt of the whole people.
It is the ritual of the scapegoat, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.
The scapegoat is not a sacrificial animal.
It is not sacrificed in the Temple.
The guilt of the people is ritually conferred upon the scapegoat,
and then it is driven into the wilderness,
carrying their guilt with it, away from the settlements.

In his nonviolent refusal to pay back harm for harm,
Jesus absorbs the violence, takes it upon himself.
He becomes the scapegoat, and the evil ends with him.
His mission to save his people from their sins proves to be successful.
His Father does not glorify violence.
God did not send him to be sacrificial victim,
but to carry forward a mission of peace and nonviolence,
a mission that involved a cost.

Even in his death he shows us the way.

Easter Vigil Homily

Recently a rather pious friend was complaining
that Easter Sunday was being forgotten.
She was concerned that all the emphasis nowadays
is on the Easter Vigil instead of the day itself.
I tried to explain that the vigil mass is the Easter Liturgy in full,
it is the announcement of the Resurrection.
I think she was unconvinced,
since she said something like, "So that's their excuse."

As a matter of fact, the entire vigil liturgy
is infused with the spirit of Easter.
We begin with the ceremony of Light: Christ our Light.
And then the Exsultet,
which is nothing less than the Easter proclamation.

Some feel this is a little early in the ceremony to be announcing Easter,
and that it should be postponed to a moment closer to the Gloria,
with its own exultant proclamation.
But it is the candle blessed here
that will remain with us throughout the Easter season.

One can imagine there were practical reasons
for having the light ceremony at the beginning.
We forget that electric lighting, like the internet, was not always with us.
We need light for the extended Liturgy of the the Word which follows.

But having said that, we notice that very statement has an Easter meaning.
It is in the light of Christ's resurrection
that we understand the scriptures anew.
The story of Israel reads differently now.

In the sequence of readings we review the history of God's people.

It can be seen as the bible reading itself,
as the divided waters of creation revisit them
in the creation of Israel as it crosses the Red Sea.

And the loss and return to the land
as a watery path through the arid desert
rather than a dry path through the sea
signals another new beginning under the guidance of God's hand.

It is the story of a community that understands itself as God's people.

But that review of Israel's story
concentrates on the place that the element of water takes
in the unfolding story of the holy community.
And so it prepares us for the next part,
in which we turn to the sacramental presence of God.

First of all, the waters of baptism
introduce the sacraments of initiation.
Here the people of God is the renewed community.
Catechumens are invited in,
and all of us renew our enrollment in the redeemed community.

The New Testament writings of Paul repeatedly remind us
that we have died with Christ,
and in some way we are already among the risen,
for we are members of the Resurrection Community.

Just as the Easter candle
sheds the light of Christ upon the biblical story,
and the waters of that story lead us to baptism,
so all of these find their culmination
in the communal celebration of the Eucharist.
Here we find the fullest expression of the Easter mystery
available to us in the here and now.
It is the Word of Alleluia made Flesh.

St Augustine said it for the ages:
"We are Easter people and Alleluia is our song."

Second Sunday of Easter

May 1, 2011

Acts 2:42-47	All things in common
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	The Upper Room, one week later

The great news among Catholics today
is the beatification of P. John Paul II.
There have been beatifications before,
but none have dominated the news cycle like this one.
It is no surprise that the beatification is taking place
on Divine Mercy Sunday, the feast that John Paul established.

Also, given the fact that this earlier-than-usual beatification
is generating a larger-than-usual debate,
it is a fine irony that this is also Doubting Thomas Sunday.

The dissenting voices generally cite
the pope's lack of oversight on the scandals of his day,
particularly his close dealings with the notorious Fr. Marcial Maciel,
the founder of the Legion of Christ.
But there are other items as well,
some that commentators dismiss as mere ideological differences.

But since ideology concerns values and beliefs,
I suspect this is more central to the case.
I personally regret his apparent program
of reversing the policies of Vatican II.
But in any papacy that lasted more than a quarter of a century
there will be things to cheer and things to regret,
from any side of the issues.

I might applaud his support of the poor in their full dignity,
while regretting his support of wealthy secretive organizations.
His harsh criticism of capitalism will stand alongside
his successes in defeating communism.

He is the first pope to condemn capital punishment.
His sheer force of personality, along with his gifts of promotion,
have enchanted an entire generation of younger Catholics,
and theirs is the future of the church,
however we may configure that.

A distinct mark of his style of Christian leadership
was to promote and legitimize private devotions.
From his reading of Genesis, in his theology of the body,
to his revamping of the rosary,
he was confident of bringing a renewal of belief in this way.

Maybe a good example is today's feast,
now known as Divine Mercy Sunday.
In the year 2000 John Paul canonized Sr. Faustina Kowalska,
a fellow Pole.

I had seen on billboards around town sayings of Jesus
that clearly did not come from the New Testament,
and I was eventually to learn that these
were quotations from the visions of St. Faustina.

The sayings are framed in the language of
the cultural Catholicism of the 1950s, as I remember it.
I discovered that people quote them as sayings of Jesus,
similar to the way others use red letter editions of the New Testament.

Among the prescriptions received by St Faustina
was to devote this Sunday to Divine Mercy,
as the culmination of a novena that begins on Good Friday.
At the time of her canonization
Pope John Paul made this practice
an official part of Catholic worship.

This struck me as strange, since it appears to eclipse
the highest holy days of the Christian church.
It would seem to be the least opportune time
to pursue a particular devotion.

To my mind, it would be like saying the rosary during Mass,
though on a much grander scale.
What happened to the idea
of joining in the common action of the liturgy?

When I was doing some research into the matter,
I noticed more than one commentator saying
that we celebrate Easter as a fact,
but we never hear about its meaning.
So I began to understand that the novena and feast
offered to fill in the meaning gap for many
who had no other way of accessing the mysteries of the Triduum.

Clearly there were many people who did not have the experience
that we have in this chapel during Holy Week and Easter,
an experience that displays the meaning of the events
vividly and fully, even without commentary.

As a part of unfolding the meaning of the season,
Divine Mercy Sunday wants us to remember God's mercy
as revealed in the events of the season.
Commentators point to the response psalm and the Gospel
in explaining the appropriateness for today
of emphasizing the theme of "mercy."
"His mercy endures forever," says the psalm.
And in the Gospel the words of forgiveness find emphasis.

A small set of themes govern the Easter season.
One of them is witness.
Thomas does this today, in response to his special experience.

Another is forgiveness, and this is not restricted to Thomas.
In all the Easter stories there is this hint
of past wrongs being dispelled.

You will recall that the last time the apostles saw Jesus
was in the Garden of Gethsemane, when they deserted him.
When they meet again in the upper room,
his words are "Peace be with you."
I often think that he could have said
"I would like to meet with each of you individually for a half hour."
The greeting of peace indicated this was unnecessary.
They were forgiven.

Then there is that breakfast on the lakeshore,
with the repeated question, "Peter do you love me?"
It would seem to be no coincidence
that Peter denied Jesus repeatedly in the high priest's courtyard.

And even Paul,
encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus,
was greeted with "Why do you persecute me?"
Even Paul, not a member of those
who traveled with Jesus in his lifetime,
even Paul experienced the Resurrection as forgiveness.

And today we can enlist Thomas the Doubter in that group.

Not all may have experienced Easter in this way.
Consider the women,
They were notable for not leaving the scene during the darkest hours.
Perhaps their sense of futility was less,
their sense of hope greater.

Mercy is a good word.
I tend to think that compassion and forgiveness are even better words.
But that may be a matter of taste and different life experiences.
In any case, they point to the same thing,
God's love,
which today's psalm says is "everlasting."

We all need forgiveness,
and what we see in the Easter scriptures
is this need acted out
even in the apostles,
even in Peter, whose sainthood no one would deny.

It would seem we are all sinners,
even the saints among us.
We all need forgiveness,
and as Easter people we learn to forgive.

Third Sunday of Easter

May 8, 2011

Acts 2:14, 22-33	Peter's Pentecost Sermon
Psalm 16:1-2,5,7-10	You show the path to life
I Peter 1:17-21	A spotless unblemished lamb
Luke 24:13-34	The road to Emmaus

Perhaps it's Mother's Day that has me thinking of Spring bonnets.
Perhaps it is the Kentucky Derby.
Or maybe because May is finally here in full.
The garden shops were mobbed yesterday.

May Day itself was a week ago.
And that night we learned about an historic moment.
Or maybe you did. I missed it,
as I was fighting a health issue that had me asleep most of the day.
But most other people, I've discovered,
saw the President make his announcement to the nation
that Osama bin Laden had been executed in a raid on his compound.
It was a defining moment that brought people back
to the original violation on September 11, 2001, nearly ten years ago.
This week has been a time of wonder and analysis in the national media.

The matter would seem to deserve reflection,
if for no other reason than it isn't like any other international news item.
There is a reason we consider events that shape our world
in the light of the scriptures, but this is unique.
It seizes our attention.
It makes a claim on us, and demands a response.
It thrills us and disturbs us, at the same time.
It begs to be placed in a framework of faith,
not only so that we know what to think about it,
but so that we know ourselves better.
For we ourselves have been challenged
by what has been done for our benefit, in our name.

When we turn to the Scriptures for guidance today, what do we find?
Here in Acts is Peter's faith statement,
witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus.
And in Luke's Gospel we hear the familiar story
of the Emmaus road experience of Cleopas and his companion,
hesitant at first, but confident at the end.

Their discovery of the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread
seems to be the story's invitation for us to make the same discovery.

Faith and testimony to the resurrection of Jesus is the message of the day.

Commando raid and assassination is the question of the week.
Is there a line that leads from one to the other?
Or are they in two separate worlds, never to engage in dialogue?
That is what I have been asking myself all week.

Here are some meager thoughts about
some of the issues dominating the national conversation,
seen, to some degree, in the light of Easter faith.

Topic A in the national conversation
concerns the **legality** of the raid on bin Laden's compound.
In my view, the legality discussion is code
for another, more profoundly disturbing question,
namely, the ethical or moral implications of the action.
We observe people cheer, as if at a sporting event,
and we are uneasy because we ordinarily do not
applaud killing human beings.

The word of Easter reminds us that we value life.
Having departed from life, we rise to new life.
Life is not only a value,
it is a destination, an ultimate value. A goal.
The mystery that is a single human life causes us to venerate it.
Not because we count favoring life among a set of talking points,
but because its mystery moves beyond
what we can comfortably imagine.

It is what gives the events of 9/11
their enormity beyond comprehension.
Everyone has his or her own way of remembering that day.
For me it is the awful image of bodies dropping from the sky,
as people jumped rather than endure
the awful prospect of going down in the burning buildings.
Each jump represented a decision made by a human spirit.
Likewise, the mystery is what gives one pause
on the news of the assassination
of the mastermind behind the cataclysm.
We do not applaud the killing of a human being,
no matter how necessary the deed is deemed.

Perhaps Topic B in the newsmaking industry
was the revived consideration of **torture**
as an effective means of eliciting needed information.
The discussion went in a couple of directions.

Usually the debate discussed its effectiveness,

with predictable conclusions from different sides.
Sometimes the conversation moved
to the question of its ethical standing.

The word of Easter speaks not only of rising to life,
not only resurrection, but resurrection of the body.
Bodily resurrection means that Jesus can say to Thomas,
touch my wounds, put your hand in my sides.
We thrive on touch, because we are bodily beings.
Marge Piercy's poem, called the Tao of Touch,
was featured on Writer's Almanac this past Thursday, May 5.

Her poem begins with this stanza:

> What magic does touch create
> that we crave it so. That babies
>
> do not thrive without it. That
>
> the nurse who cuts tough nails
>
> and sands calluses on the elderly
>
> tells me sometimes men weep
>
> as she rubs lotion on their feet.

But bodily touch is also what allows bodily torture.
It is a perversion of the need to be in contact,
it is the need turned against itself.
The wounds that Thomas touched were, in fact,
the wounds of the tortured,
and the healing that Thomas felt was a physical surge
of deliverance, relief.

The risen body of Christ took torture beyond its narrow necessity
to the larger frame of the full life of resurrection.
The redeemed, risen body brandishes the marks of torture as trophies,
badges of honor of the martyrs,
a word that means witnesses.

If there is a third talking point for the week,
Topic C might be the question of **closure**.
Does this swift, decisive move end the anxiety of the last ten years?

Does it bring closure to the families of the dead?
"Justice is served," said the President. Is that true?
Wives of 9/11 tell us that their husbands are still gone.
Nothing has changed.

The word of Easter shows us the mysterious figure
of the Risen Christ.
When he invited Thomas to touch,
we are amazed that the wounds are still present.
Why are they not removed in the completion of bodily resurrection?

But the wounds of Jesus tell us that nothing is lost, all is retrieved.
His history is written on his body. All is retrieved.
What is done in secret is made known.
Secret losses endured are honored.
Quiet courage is given its due.

And inviting Thomas to touch,
Jesus reminds us that we are in this together.
We share one social body, one body of Christ.
We are not isolated spirits, but a gathering of embodied persons.

And because we are in this together,
the message of Easter is forgiveness.
Forgive one another as I have forgiven you.
And in the forgiveness we already discover new life.

And in forgiveness,
we give Easter witness to the bodily resurrection
that is at the center of our faith.

Which leads me to conclude with the words of a survivor,
posted this week on the internet.
(Some of the language have been cleaned up
as otherwise inappropriate for this setting.)

[survivor's statement]

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 15, 2011

Acts 2:14,36-41	Peter calls for repentance
Psalm 23:1-6	The Lord is my Shepherd
I Peter 2:20-25	Scattered like sheep
John 10:1-10	Gate to the Sheepfold

Sometimes Good Shepherd Sunday brings to mind
cuddly images of lambs and kindly shepherds.
    However, as far as I know, this often doesn't reflect the reality.
    Raising livestock is never especially romantic,
    although that I have heard it is often rewarding.
        Then there is the fact that you have to be happy
        with not too much time off.

That doubt about comfort being the keynote for today
is echoed in the reading,
    insofar as not only (first) is the reading about the gate
    rather than the Shepherd,
        but (second) it is addressed to the Pharisees,
        not to the disciples.

I have usually heard these words
as words of consolation to the followers of Jesus,
    like the psalm, which provides the words of assurance,
    "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."
        But no, Jesus is talking to his opponents, not his friends.

The lectionary makes explicit what is implied in the Bible.
Jesus has been disputing with the Pharisees,
    and the last thing he says before this chapter is—to them—
    "Your sin remains."
        And now this, as we just heard.

When we read the passage as a word of contradiction,
we begin to notice that it does indeed contain some hard edges.
    It does make charges. It does implicate.

It uses words like "thieves" and "robbers." "Strangers."
Persons who enter the sheepfold by other means than the gate.
    They are not legitimate.

The legitimate and authentic shepherds not only enter by the gate,
but they have a personal relationship with the sheep.
    Not far down the page

Jesus will compare the true shepherd with the hireling.
I must say that “hireling” is a word that I have heard
only in connection with this chapter of John.
I am more familiar with the term “hired hand.”
In any case, I think they mean the same thing.
The hireling doesn’t have the same regard for the sheep,
the same concerns at stake.

It is not easy to think of present-day parallels to the shepherd.
One that occus to me is the teacher and the substitute teacher.
The substitute doesn't use her own money to decorate the classroom,
or buy special aids that will help certain students.
The substitute simply takes over the class for the duration,
following the printed instructions posted somewhere on the desk.

The substitute doesn't identify
which students are in difficulty and need special help,
which are more talented and need a challenge,
which are energetic and need help to stay out of trouble.
And so forth.

The substitute may be a decent person—not a thief or a robber—
but she is still a stranger, most likely.

As we know from cultural traditions like that of pastoral poetry,
the word “pastor” means “shepherd,”
and in our own context it usually means ministerial work.
Not particularly so in the old days,
when the shepherd was an image for the king,
or other figures of authority.

Thus, when Ezekiel collects his various shepherd oracles
in what is now his 34th chapter,
we understand that he is critiquing the leadership of his day.

The tenth chapter of John is squarely this tradition.
Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees
for the lack of leadership that they exhibit.
Or perhaps the kind of leadership they practice.
It would seem that they find other realities more important
than their concern for the sheep.

There is a common distinction in church practice
between the pastoral and the juridical.
The juridical goes by the book of rules;
the pastoral deals with the specific situation,

in all its stubborn particularity.
Whereas the book of rules tends to cover
the problems that have shown up in the past,
the particular situations have the unsettling ability
to work up new combinations of difficulty
that strain the judgment for a proper response.

While the juridical book of rules provides guidelines,
it never seems to have the precise case
that faces us in the actual, trouble-making present.

Today we seem to have the words of Jesus
as a determining guide for responding in a pastoral manner:
concern and care of those most affected by the decisions.
This would seem to favor preserving the sheep
over preserving the rules.

In my own experience, in my own observations,
one of the primary differences between the pastoral and the juridical
is that the pastoral has a much higher risk factor.
There is not only the criticism of those
who disagree with a judgment, which, after all,
was often enough made in the mix of a conflicting situation.

But there is also the self-doubt usually attending
the one making a pastoral decision,
or how can we be sure that this is for the good of the sheep?
We do our best.
Even when that doesn't seem to be enough.

The tension between the two approaches
is a part of the life of the church,
and continues today as it has in the past.
And there are concerned parties on both sides of the conversation.
I do believe, however, that the word of scripture for today
should be an active part of the dialogue.

Recently I was discussing with another priest in our department
the transformation of P. Benedict XVI.
In our view, he turned out to be much more pastoral in his approach
than we would have expected,
given his reputation, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger,
as God's Rottweiler.

It seems to me that he recognized his change in status
as requiring a move from the juridical to the pastoral.

But it has not been without risk.
Particularly since he has an entire world watching closely,
ready to weigh in with verdicts.

And he has not always survived undamaged from the risks.
Nonetheless, he illustrates the need and courage
to engage with the pastoral necessities,
even for those without the same stakes.
Or the same cost.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 22, 2011

Acts 6:1-7	Seven Deacons
Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19	We place our trust in you
I Peter 2:4-9	Like Living Stones
John 14:1-12	Many Mansions

Harold Camping and his followers
were expecting the rapture yesterday.
To no one's surprise, at least among those whom I know,
this did not happen.

The doomsday sect prompted a lot of easy ridicule,
both privately, and publicly among the media.
As one report put it,
it was an occasion of mockery for atheists and skeptics.
The implicit suggestion was that there is no middle ground,
that Christianity in general was exposed as bogus.

Today we hear about Jesus' own departure,
as we anticipate the feast of the Ascension.
The convergence with the promise of the rapture
prompts some reflection.

Apart from his rather mechanical reading of salvation history,
there is a certain tone in Rev. Camping's concept of the rapture
that contrasts rather sharply with the account
we have today in John's Gospel.

The rapture seems to be animated by a sense of election
that has a bit of an edge to it.
It seems to include generous amount of retributive thinking.

The departure of Jesus has a completely different tone
from that of the rapture.
The gospel tone is one of compassion and concern.
Jesus leaves, but he will return to bring the others with him.
In no sense is he leaving them behind, and too bad for you!
Just the opposite, I will not leave you behind.
Instead of that, we have a sense of continuing care.
I go to prepare a place for you.

It is a different concept of the divine movement in salvation history.
(To use the big words.)
By "divine movement," I am referring to God's behavior
in the story of salvation as revealed in the biblical story.
It is a story of continual retrieval.

The followers are lost, and then retrieved.
It is a story of second chances.
Of not allowing the mistakes to prevail, to claim the final result.

Look at the story of disciples today.
In the reading from Acts we visit
the idealized, perfect community of the early Easter church.

And what do we find?
A quarrel about who is served and who is slighted.
The dispute concludes with an adjustment
in the way things are done in the community.
The loss becomes a moment of retrieval.
A new order—that of deacons—is set up.
And the mission beyond Jerusalem,
which is, after all, the main business of Acts of the Apostles,
begins.

And in the Gospel,
as Jesus is trying to soften the blow of his departure,
he receives nothing but obtuse misinterpretations.

Thomas, true to his doubting nickname,
points out that he has absolutely no notion of where Jesus is going.
Philip jumps in with a request to see the Father.
He would find that helpful.

In both cases Jesus responds with clarifications
that ultimately we need to thank Thomas and Philip for.
Jesus is the Way,
he is the Light that allows us to see the Father in him.

Or consider the second reading from I Peter.
This letter is a often-ignored little gem.

Today we hear the famous passage about the community
being a temple built of living stones.
The passage reflects on the book of Isaiah, and Psalm 118,
tracing a theme of cornerstones:

"For it says in Scripture:
Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion,
a cornerstone, chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.

Therefore, its value is for you who have faith,

but for those without faith:
The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone, and
A stone that will make people stumble,
and a rock that will make them fall."

Certainly there is a bit of irony here,
when we remember that Jesus nicknamed Simon
"Petrus" (Peter)—the Rock.
Here is the letter from Peter
talking about not being put to shame,
talking about a stumbling stone and a rock causing people to fall,
talking about the stone that was rejected.

But Peter was the Rock, who in a very public way
rejected Jesus, literally in his hour of trial.

And yet Peter was not lost, but was retrieved,
to become a centerpiece himself, a cornerstone.
Peter was the stone that was rejected to become the cornerstone.

This saying might be called the principle that organizes today's set of readings.
Here it has special resonance because of Peter's name,
and his rejection of Jesus.

For no one is to be lost.
No sense of schadenfreude.
No feeling of good riddance.
No one is to be lost.

If the story for the individuals involved is one of second chances and retrieval,
it is even more impressive on a larger scale,
in which the faults of the discipleship community
almost become a requirement for the further life of the church.

In the Exultet of the Easter vigil
we remember the famous line, O Felix Culpa, O Happy Fault.

It refers to the sin of our first parents,
without which there would have been no incarnation
nor work of redemption.
A good that outweighs the evil that prompted it.

Or today, as we hear:

the stone that was rejected became the cornerstone.

It is the disagreement among the early disciples
that prompted the new order of deacons,
and began the mission of the church.

A chapter or so later, we discover that they still haven't left the city.
A persecution breaks out, and this propels them into the countryside,
where the mission finally takes it beginning.

Thomas's key feature, his doubt, is his gift to the Gospel.
Today it prompts Jesus' teaching of his continuing care,
just as later it will reinforce the witness to the Resurrection
—feel my wounds, touch my side.

And then Peter. His retrieval is not only personal.
It is the hope and continuation of the early church.
It is more than private, it is public and institutional.
Here too, the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone,
since the Rock that denied and rejected
became the Rock upon which the community was grounded.

In the history of second chances and retrieval of the lost
we find a story of the divine movement
that doesn't fit the disruptive and arbitrary dislocation of the rapture.

The God we discover in the Scripture and in our life of faith,
in our liturgy and sacraments,
is not such a God,
and in the confidence of the compassion of God
we can perhaps be forgiven our doubts about the doomsday date.

It is not based on an attitude of skepticism,
but rather on an experience of God is much fuller and full of feeling
than a coded calculation of dates would allow.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 29, 2011

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17	The Spirit comes to Samaria
Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20	Let all the earth cry out with joy
I Peter 3:15-18	Brought to life in the Spirit
John 14:15-21	Promise of the Paraclete

Today we hear Jesus promise to send another Advocate,
a Paraclete,
one who will be a guide and presence among his followers
after he has risen and ascended.
The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit will be with the church
and continue to direct it
as it moves through the chapters of its story.

How can we visualize that story?
One way, it occurs to me,
is to walk down the hallway outside the chapel and to the right.
In the photographs there we see unfold
a story of the Spirit guiding the church.
It moves from Germany to Iowa,
where it spreads out in ministry.

Another story of the Spirit is detectable there,
in the changes of habit that mark the progress down the hall.
What we see there is the story of the American religious women
responding to the call of the Council.
What is equally apparent is the total response
that the call elicited from religious women.

What is not so apparent, but which one might surmise,
is the turmoil that attended those days of transition.
It would take other photographs to suggest the attrition that occurred,
the tensions, the strains upon relationships.
And yet, the story unfolds there,
one we believe is the story of the Spirit working through the church.

Which makes the more recent developments so difficult.
Not only do we see a smaller number of vocations
to religious life and priesthood,
but we hear that the answer to these
is a return to the particular markers and emblems
that set Catholics off from the rest of society.
Back to fasts and novenas, back to distinct religious wear.
It is as if we are to reverse the story of the photographs in the hall.

Some feel that the changes have gone too far,

others that they have not gone far enough.
Most feel that some of the changes were necessary.
But not all agree on which changes that might be.

And so, after having made a life stirring commitment once,
we are asked, it seems, to undo it.
And we wonder about what it means
to enjoy the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
the presence of the Paraclete, the Advocate.

Of course, having made the most thoroughgoing commitment
in what was perceived to be the impulse of the Spirit,
religious women remain the model and inspiration.
But they represent a large number of Catholic Christians,
not nearly as public.

I cannot articulate your own experiences,
but perhaps as one of those who share many
of your frustrations and disappointments,
I might mention my own,
and perhaps let that represent that of others.
In trying to understand what is happening in today's church,
I've found that my best move is to read the analyses of John Allen,
Vatican correspondent for the NCR.
He is unfailingly fair,
according to the rule of journalistic objectivity
that says you have succeeded when each side of a dispute
feels that you have represented their view as they see it themselves.

With that in mind, I read recently
his principle for interpreting the recent Vatican moves
toward what they call the reform of the reform.
The key idea is that in order for the Catholic church
to influence the world,
it has to have a clear identity.
Succinctly put, we cannot change anything
unless we know who we are.

Following the general principle
that so much of what concerns us has happened before,
I am reminded of the struggle in Judea
when they returned from exile in Babylon.
The Isaiah movement interpreted their exile
as a mission to the wider world, a mission to the Gentiles.
This animates the final chapters of the book of Isaiah.

But there was another faction,
represented by prophets such as Malachi and the priest Ezra,
that felt that they could not afford a mission to the world
without first securing their own identity.
Instead of looking outward,
they looked inward and circled the wagons.
Out of this came the kosher laws and restrictions on marriage.

The last chapters of the book of Isaiah
were repeatedly adjusted by one party and then the other,
in a game of dueling editors.

In my own way, I wonder what it means
to say we cannot influence anyone unless
we pull back and attend to our own identity.
How is that better than actively involving ourselves
in the places of struggle and strain in the places
where the world is hurting?
How can disengaging from the world help us to change it?
I find it difficult to believe that the need to pull back
is anything but an abandonment
of the mission to the modern world.

But once I find myself saying that,
I am reminded of the message of John's Gospel for today.
The Paraclete, the Advocate, is with the church.
I do not have the full picture.
I have only my view.

Furthermore, I have done my part,
and the future will belong to someone else.
I know what I believed was needed in the past,
but it is now another generation's turn.
If I believe that the Spirit is with the Church,
I will be willing to allow the Spirit to work,
even if it is not what I have come to believe for years
was what the Spirit was doing.

So, for instance, Loras is experiencing
a revival of the Knights of Columbus.
And not only that, but also the Daughters of St. Isabella,
the ladies' auxiliary of the Knights.
And they are doing good work.

And this summer a donor is funding a move of the grotto

from the periphery to the center of Campus.
All these are changes that bring excitement to the college,
even if they are not particularly to my taste.

But my taste is not what guides the Spirit.
In fact, the Spirit is known for producing surprises.
As John says elsewhere,
in the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus,
the Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will.
You hear the sound it makes,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

However, there is this.
The Spirit fills the church.
As St Paul will tell us on Pentecost,
there are many gifts but one Spirit.
No one has a lock on the will of the Spirit.
And yet each gift is important.
No one view is fully that of the Spirit,
but rather the fullness of the community.

I take this to mean that each of us has a piece of the truth,
and that we are obliged, both for the health of the church
and in fidelity to the Spirit,
to speak the truth as we know it.
Our convictions, honestly come by,
whether in or out of season,
are our gift to the church,
and to the world as well.

Solemnity of the Ascension

Acts 1:1-11	The Ascension
Psalm 47:2-3, 6-9	God's enthronement
Ephesians 1:17-23	Seated at the right hand
Matthew 28:16-20	The Great Commission

If you should have the good fortune to spend some time
in the vicinity of the Old City of Jerusalem,
you will probably have the opportunity to visit
the Muslim shrine on top of the Mount of Olives
that claims to being the last place that Jesus set foot on earth.

This little monument to the Ascension
includes a stone in the center with a dent in the top
where Jesus is thought to have stepped his last.

For some, the brute fact of the Ascension is enough.
There is no need to inquire further.
Its glory is that it happened; why?, we need not ask.
It is simply a part of the mysteries.

A more elegant expression of the meaning of the Ascension
came to me this week in the form of a parish bulletin notice
that included these words:

"We remember that it was Jesus' return to glory
with His Father outside of time and space
that led to the promised sending of Holy Spirit
and the "enlivening" of the Christian Church."

This takes us a little further,
but it still remains tantalizingly elusive.
What do these fine words mean?

When we turn to the Gospels, and Acts,
we get a picture of Jesus returning to his Father
to complete the work he was sent to do.
He returns to say, in effect, "mission accomplished."

This part of the story now done, it is time to move to the next,
with the sending of the Holy Spirit, in the age of the church.

Perhaps this note of completion
is our best clue for today's commemoration.
For with the completion of that mission,
the work of retrieval is assured, our salvation is assured.
This is the ground of our confidence in the love of God for us,

the God who loved us so much
that he sent his only Son for our deliverance.

The Ascension says that work is completed,
and we can rest assured.
We can be confident of our favored status.

This is the source of our joy, our belief in a benevolent God.
This is not the same as the evangelical phrase we hear often,
that we are saved by our belief in Jesus Christ
as our personal Lord and Savior.

It includes that, of course, but it is not limited to it.
There is something peculiarly American
in the rugged, even radical, individualism in this affirmation of belief.
We need to add the note of community.
We need to add the new creation.

For as the second reading points out,
God seated him at his right hand in the heavens,
far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion,
and every name that is named
not only in this age but also in the one to come.
And he put all things beneath his feet...

It is not just me and the Lord Jesus.
There is also the new creation,
the new order that is established by the completion
of the work that Jesus has accomplished.

But what does it mean to be placed
above every principality and power,
every authority and dominion?
Surely it doesn't mean that the Jewish peasant
has become the new Caesar of the universe.

Surely it is not simply a replication of the imperial power,
but at a higher level.

We need only remember that the risen Christ
retained the wounds of crucifixion
to realize that he doesn't leave the cross behind,
but rather brings it with him
into the new dispensation, the new era.

We need only remember that the feast of Christ the King

shows him upon a throne which is nothing other than the cross.

The world is not outdone on its own terms
but rather it is brought under the sign of the cross,
the judgment of the cross.
Jesus has not left the cross of Golgotha for the crown of Caesar,
but has brought the crown under the rule of the cross.

And so we have the mission that is insisted on in the readings today.
A consequence of the Ascension to the Father
is the mission to the world.

Matthew speaks of baptizing
in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Acts tells of a mission from Jerusalem,
to Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the world.

This world is the world of the empire, if you will,
the known world of the day.
But the mission is not to repeat the work of the empire,
but to repeal it, reverse it,
bring it under the rule of the crucified Son.

The mission extends to include us in its work.
What is it we bring to the world?

The Sister Water Project, missions in Mississippi,
St Mark's Community Center, parishes in Dubuque,
the projects on this hill, Stone Hill, Shalom Center,
the mutual care of one another,
seen for instance in the new infirmary,
these continue the mission of the Spirit
announced in the Ascension scriptures.

Instead of the will toward domination,
the value of relationship, of service.
We affirm a common humanity that is violated
when some control, enslave, brutalize others.

Instead of a stoic resignation to our fate, a spirit of joy.
The joy that we experience
is not known beyond the assurance of faith,
outside of the confidence that it provides us.

Even as we immerse ourselves in the agonies

of those without the resources needed in our world,
    even as we enter the suffering and sorrow of the disregarded,
    we live with a sense of rejoicing, and bring that joy to them.

Instead of anxiety,
a confidence in the love of God
    that prompts us to overcome denials of that love,

    such as a fear of a God
    we imagine as exacting
    and arbitrary in his demands.

It is for this reason that we do not succumb
to patterns of scrupulosity and anxiety.

The Ascension puts the seal on the work of our redemption,
and we rejoice in the celebration of being loved,
    not unlike children who have been wandering far from home,
    and fearful of being lost,
    are found and taken home.

It is an assurance of unconditional love in practice.

Which is why we celebrate,
    with the return of Jesus to the Father,
        our own coming home.

Pentecost Sunday

June 12, 2011

Acts 2:1-11	The First Pentecost
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34	Send out your Spirit
I Corinthians 12:3-7,12-13	Gifts of the Spirit
John 20:19-23	The Upper Room

This year the Holy Spirit comes to Dubuque,
and the upper room is the Mazzuchelli Gymnasium,
where the Archbishop is celebrating the convergence
of the Franciscan parishes into the one parish of Holy Spirit.

What do we mean by the Holy Spirit? Here are some clues.

First, there is the headline that caught my attention.
The headline was "Pentecost: The Coming of the Wild Goose."
Jim Wallis, in this week's edition of Sojourners
reports that in the Celtic Church the symbol of the Holy Spirit
is the wild goose.

Elsewhere someone wrote as follows,
"The Holy Spirit was symbolized by the wild goose.
Doves were docile and delicate,
but the wild goose was untamable, free, and unpredictable.
Instead of a soft coo, the wild goose was noisy and raucous."

And in today's story from Acts of the Apostles,
it is tongues of flame, not name tags.
Of course, name tags were hardly necessary,
since everyone could hear and understand what was begin said.

And similar to the story of the early church
beginning its dispersion from Jerusalem,
we are also reminded that in Irish history the "wild geese"
are the dispersion of mercenaries from Ireland.

More recently the wild geese is a name given
all the emigres from Ireland, fleeing from famine and persecution.
Of all their destinations,
America is the benefit that benefited the most.

The wild goose remains a symbol of freedom,
and the image is that of the wanderer.
I am reminded of the old Tennessee Ernie Ford song
about the wild goose.

"My heart knows what the wild goose knows

And I must go where the wild goose goes."

But I am also reminded of the verse from John's Gospel,
in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus,
where Jesus explains:
"The wind blows where it wills,
and you can hear the sound it makes,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes;
so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The Spirit cannot be tamed.
The Spirit cannot be contained.
The Spirit is unpredictable.
The Spirit is the life of the Church.

In Luke's picture of the Holy Spirit coming upon the church
and sending it out into the larger world,
we have a shorthand characterization of the community.
The buzz that it creates
causes a disturbance among those observing.

Unlike Judaism, and nearly every other religion in the ancient world,
the Christian movement was not a matter of birth.
Christians became so by conversion from something else.
In the early years, all Christians were adult converts.
To be born again in water and the Holy Spirit
was to make a radical swerve in your life career,
and leave behind the prescriptions
that custom and heritage had laid out for you.

As Paul, for one, takes the life of the Spirit into the wider world,
his churches were identified by their unruly manner, their ecstasy.
So much so, that he had to make some remarks about it
to the church of Corinth.
The Spirit is a sign of unity,
and should not be a cause of division.

Enthusiasm and ecstasy were not to the liking of Roman culture
and its sense of religion.
Roman religion was of the state, and for the state,
and the state liked things to be consistent, business-like and sober.
Religion was delegated the task of preserving public order,
and other religions that entered the Roman domain were suspect.

Especially if they showed signs of enthusiasm and ecstasy.
Freedom has to be brought under the law.

The early Christians were automatically listed
among the groups to be watched closely.
All of this wild liveliness cannot be good
for maintaining the status quo ante.
It clearly threatened to disrupt the precise honeycomb orderliness
that passes for civic virtue.

The ancient Galatians were wild geese in more than one way.
The word Galatia refers to the Galts,
which is another way to say Celts.
The etymology of the word seems to be the word "white,"
referring to their unusual skin color, no doubt.

My own Irish mentors and teachers in Scripture
were fond of tracing Irish connections to the Galatians,
and suggesting that their mercurial nature is typically Celtic.
Those of us of more Teutonic ancestry remained dubious.

However, it is clear that the Galatians were wild geese.
The fearsome Galatian warrior spiked his blond hair,
wore face paint, and scorned the use of armor,
going into battle with his torque, a band of gold around his neck,
and apparently little else.
It would seem that the Galatians took quickly
to Paul's message of the Spirit.

Generally speaking, it is a human tendency
to want things in neat categories,
to sort them out into boxes and keep them there.
We do not particularly appreciate having our worlds
turned over and upside down.
We do not appreciate someone entering and mixing things up,
especially just after we have got things organized.

This is true in the church as well.
We like to have things clearly defined,
gifts and contributions clearly assigned,
lines of authority clearly aligned.

When we have a period of turbulence,
we prefer to dismiss the agents of disorder
and return to the way things were before.
We knew how to behave then.
We knew what to do and when to do it.

That is why, to me, the Spirit is so remarkable.

The Spirit is God's anarchic spirit of renewal.
The Spirit up ends our plans
and makes things possible that we had not imagined.
If there is a law of the Spirit,
I suspect it is the law of Unintended Consequences
—the law that says the outcomes of our actions
often enough are not the outcomes we intended.

We can be certain that those times
when we get too cautious, too timid,
when we want to cut back, return to safe horizons,
the Spirit is there to confound us,
disturb our need for secure boundaries
and open things up again.
We might take consolation in that, if we dare.

When we worry that we are backing away from the great movements
we saw in the last four decades of the church,
we can remember that the Spirit took us there,
and the Spirit is still making surprise moves.

So what does it mean to pledge a parish to the Holy Spirit?
We may think it is a salvage operation,
to consolidate our efforts in a time
of diminishing vocations and membership.
But I would bet that it commits to an open future,
that it means inviting the Spirit to take us into that future.
It means we are willing to risk a future we cannot imagine,
far beyond whatever conserving motions we make in the present.

We need not worry
if we believe in the wildness of the Spirit.
Except for the fact that we will need to endure the risk.

Corpus Christi

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

June 26, 2011

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16
Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20
I Corinthians 10:16-17
John 6:51-58

We are familiar with this feast as Corpus Christi,
but it is officially known as
The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.
However, in a time when we are encouraged to exhibit our Latin heritage,
perhaps we can still call it Corpus Christi.

So what do we celebrate when we celebrate Corpus Christi?
Theology has much to say on this score.
But the liturgy turns instead
to the revealed word of God in the Scripture.

And as we do so, we discover, first of all,
that the image of bread dominates the readings for today.
It is seen in the manna in the desert,
the bread without precedent in Israel's experience.
It is seen in Paul's remarks to the Corinthians,
when he talks about the one loaf.
It is in Jesus' discourse about the Bread of Life,
following upon his multiplication so the loaves,
in the 6th chapter of John's Gospel.

So the question becomes:
what does the image of bread tell us about the feast we celebrate?
When we consider bread, we are thinking about the staff of life,
the basic foodstuff of nourishment
for all branches of the human family,
at every level, in every corner of the globe.
We are talking about the fundamental food that nourishes.

And what we see is that God provides for life,
that God presents his care for us under the image of bread,
and in fact God is present to us as bread, in the Eucharist.

Centuries of piety has taken the fundamental image of bread
in new directions.
We make our Eucharistic wafers in such a way
that they are unique in themselves,
and do not suggest bread,

at least not bread as we know it in our daily lives.
And yet, it is unmistakably bread,
and the image remains.

Or we surround our devotion for the Eucharist
in the imagery of an audience in the royal presence,
as in the rite of Benediction,
so as to honor the divine presence in the Eucharist.
With our gold and our homage, we defer to the sacred presence,
but in all of that it retains its image as bread.

We speak of the altar of sacrifice,
and evoke the temple worship,
though in a bloodless form of sacrifice.
But the Eucharist remains bread,
and the altar remains a table.
And the Eucharist remains a meal.

It is a meal that witnesses to God's care,
to the nourishment of God's life in us,
and to the sharing of that life among us
in the community of sacramental communion.

The manna is the bread of sustenance in the rigors of the desert.
The one loaf is the common life of the community.
The Bread of Life is our share in the divine life
that makes us children of God.

From the meal emerges the spirit of hospitality.
In the sharing of God's generous life-giving
emerges our own desire to share the meal, in open communion.
In our experience of God's presence we find a need
to share that experience with others,
as grace overflows in the gesture of hospitality.

But as we look again at the scriptures,
another dimension of its meaning shows itself.
For in each case the text about the nourishing bread
is found to be uttered in a time of conflict.

The manna in the desert is given to Israel
by the God of the Covenant,
who brooks no strange Gods beside him.
And in the desert that allegiance is strained to the breaking point.
But in the manna, God shows that their loyalty is not in vain.

Paul's message to the church at Corinth
is not taken from the eleventh chapter, as we might expect.
For it is there that he treats the topic of the Lord's meal.
No, instead it is from the tenth chapter,
which finds itself in another context entirely.

In an extended discussion of wisdom of purchasing and dining
on meat that was put on the market left over from pagan sacrifices,
he generally gives his okay.
But in this passage he warns about compromising the Christian unity
that comes from participation in the sacred meal,
sharing the one cup and the one loaf.

He is saying that there is a common life that comes
from bonding with Christ,
a mystical bonding
that has its most evident source in the common meal.
It is a question of refusing to compromise that bond of loyalty,
that commitment.

In John's account of the Bread of Life,
Jesus speaks of another unprecedented meal,
and produces immediate reactions.
Some leave. Some stay put, but with difficulty.
Again there is a conflict between those who remain loyal,
and those who do not.
Again there is a tension between loyalty and competing attractions.

In other words, each of the readings speak
not only to the bread as nourishing the life of the believer,
but also of the mysterious union with God and with one another
that is part of the mystery of the Eucharist.

In each case, this mysterious and intimate unity
is affirmed in the face of temptations to go elsewhere,
to violate the bond of the one loaf, the unity of the one body.

In our celebration of the Eucharist we differ.
For some of us it seems to be an opportunity for hospitality,
to continue the generous gift by sharing it.
For others of us it represents a mystical depth
that cannot be entrusted to everyone.

For some it is a bounty that requires hospitality.
To others it is a mystical bond of unity
that belongs to the intimate circle of the family.

And since there is something of both here,
both witnesses will continue.
    And both are needed.

For what is worth sharing
is also worth preserving in its deep mystery.
    And what is worth preserving is also worth sharing.

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 3, 2011

Zechariah 9:9-10	The Prince of Peace
Psalm 14:1-2, 8-11	My King and my God
Romans 8:9, 11-13	Flesh and Spirit
Matthew 11:25-30	Meek and humble of heart

The generation of scripture scholars
that was teaching when I was in school
was that which was commissioned after the Second Vatican Council
to produce the lectionary we use today.
Knowing how they were thinking in their approach to scripture
gives one an insight to some of the lectionary selections.
For instance, today.

It was Donald Senior, of the Chicago Consortium,
and general editor of the Catholic Study Bible,
who once pointed out that the word "meek" appears
three times in the New Testament,
and they are all in the Gospel of Matthew.

This Sunday that observation has its moment.

Not to keep you in suspense,
the three instances of Matthew's Gospel are,
first, today's Gospel reading, when Jesus makes the claim for himself,
"I am meek and humble of heart."
A **second** instance occurs in the Palm Sunday story,
when a passage from the prophet Zephaniah,
which happens to be our first reading today,
is quoted in reference to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.
The **third** instance you will remember easily enough,
since it is in the Beatitudes:
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land."

So in one case, today's Jesus asserts this quality of meekness of himself.
In the second, Matthew asserts of Jesus.
And in the third Jesus describes it as a quality of the true disciple.

So what is this "meekness,"
which is the dominant, though appropriately unassuming,
feature of these readings today?
My Greek dictionary musters a handful of synonyms
—gentle, humble, considerate, courteous,
and meek in what it calls the old favorable sense.

But the definition it prefers is
"not being overly impressed by one's self-importance."
For his part, Donald Senior has suggested
that in Greek culture of the day

it was a quality particularly prized in cultured women.

So "meek" is somewhat of a loaded term.
In fact, the Christian virtue was quite countercultural in its day.

Here I am afraid you may be misled by the holy card tradition,
which shows a Jesus who is not only mild but very soft.
One gets the impression that Jesus was mild
because he was born that way. It was an innate trait.

But I would suggest that it is rather an acquired trait.
After all, it is a virtue, which implies that ones somehow responsible for it,
and not simply born with it.
If one becomes a disciple by metanoia, Jesus' call to repentance,
and the beatitude describes one who has undergone this conversion,
we again see that it is not a natural disposition,
but a deliberate quality of discipleship.

An example from our selection of passages might help here.
The passage from Zechariah is sometimes called the Prince of Peace.
It is not long. In its brief statement it says a lot, however.
The passage is styled as the triumphal entry of a conquering hero,
returning to his home city.
Typically, this involved long processions of troops and chariots,
with a parade of captured warriors and elites as war prizes.

But in this account there is simply the returning hero.
No army, no prominent prisoners.

"a just savior is he,
meek, and riding on an ass."

In fact, once he enters he begins a program of disarmament:

"He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim,
and the horse from Jerusalem;
the warrior's bow shall be banished,
and he shall proclaim peace to the nations."

Matthew uses this passage to describe Jesus
in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

And once he enters, he performs the cleansing of the temple.
This is not the action of a timid or mild man.
At the same time, I would insist that neither is it violent,
but rather a public display of civil disobedience
demonstrating against the failure of a system
that punishes the vulnerable and marginal.
Not the work of a timid person.

His action is squarely within his role as the just savior who is meek,
whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light,
who is meek and humble of heart.
Who is advocate of all who labor and are burdened.

Perhaps it is purely coincidental
that this set of scripture texts appears on this holiday weekend.
In any case, it would be negligent of me to ignore
how it is equally countercultural today,
when we celebrate all things American,
as it was then.
After all, ours is the culture that contributed phrases like:
“have an attitude,” or
“in your face,” or
so sue me,” or
you have a problem with that?”

Not exactly meek. Not adopting a posture of
“not being overly impressed by one's self-importance."

Tonight is the big show.
Not only fireworks, but a B1 bomber, and other military aircraft.
We celebrate the Fourth with a great deal of military display.
One tends to forget what we are celebrating
is a group of men gathered around signing a document;
we are not commemorating a battle.
Of course, I admit that simply re-enacting a group signing
isn't a very exciting way to celebrate.

We are, of course, celebrating our political freedom.
There is no end to reminders of this.
Sometimes you hear another very un-meek saying,
namely that freedom comes out of the barrel of a gun.
Many people believe this.

But it is useful to remember that freedom
can be seen as "freedom from"
and "freedom for."
"Freedom from" is the perhaps idle dream of removing
all impediments to my personal sway of action.
t is basically a negative process.

But "freedom for" understands that freedom has a purpose,
and that purpose is to make a choice, a commitment.
It is not until freedom from moves forward to decision
that it becomes actual freedom.
It is this kind of freedom that the signing
of the Declaration of Independence exhibited.

Freedom of commitment.

Actually, there is another American democratic tradition,
which is to avoid being too annoyingly self-important.
This sounds a lot like the definition from the Greek dictionary.
It is a tradition of common effort and cooperation,
of joining in together taking action without dominating over others.
This is worth celebrating, and even reviving, if necessary.

And so it is that we hear today, perhaps in a new way:

"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,
and I will give you rest.

Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

July 10, 2011

Isaiah 55:10-11	As the rain waters the earth
Psalm 65:11-14	Yield a fruitful harvest
Romans 8:18-23	All creation groans
Matthew 13:1-23	Parable of the Sower

For some people the golden age is in the past.
It is the lost Eden, Shangra La, the lost continent.
Or maybe simply the world that our grandparents lived in,
when life was simple and everyone knew who they were
and their place in society.

Life and reality are a shadow of their former selves.
The object of living is to hold onto what we have as best as we can.

For others the golden age is in the future.
The promised land, the just society, the American dream,
Paradise and the coming age.
For them the good life is just around the corner,
we have yet to achieve our best,
there is a new world, if only we know how to get there.

The object of living is to dream a new world into being,
doing what is necessary to arrive there.

On the whole, the Bible shares the second vision.
Eden is the bliss of the past.
But it is also the fall from which we must recover.
The scriptures speak of promise and fulfillment,
the life to come, the world beyond the present troubled dispensation.
Israel awaits the fullness of Shalom.

Today Paul speaks in that vein, as he dreams of a redeemed world.
Theologians talk about his vision in abstract and technical language,
as the Jewish doctrine of the general resurrection.

Paul prefers the liveliness of metaphorical speech.
He speaks of a new creation.
Though he also means his metaphor somewhat literally.

All creation is groaning in anticipation.
The language evokes a world giving birth,
and his image shares with pregnancy an inevitability, coming to term.

Isaiah is also dealing in symbolic language.

His metaphor is extensive and remarkably precise.
If it were appropriate, God would make an oath regarding his intent,
but who can be called to witness it?
So instead God devises some elaborate poetry.

Just as (1) the rain and snow come down,
and (2) do not return until they water and fertilize the earth,
(3) giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater
so shall (1) my word go forth,
and (2) shall not return to me void,
but (3) shall achieve the end for which I sent it

God's promises hold.
God's people look to the future, and they will not be disappointed.

The Gospel falls into the spirit of the readings.
Maintaining the nature imagery,
with the fulfillment of the promises under the figure of the harvest,
the fullness of Shalom.

But the parable of the Sower delivers a minority report.
It issues a caveat.
It raises some questions about the inevitable fulfillment of the promises.

To appreciate the implied question,
we might imagine the apostles coming to Jesus
to ask why they are as successful as they expected to be.
After all, isn't it obvious that this is the answer?
What could be more plain? What are we doing wrong?

Jesus answer with a parable that describes different soils,
and how they respond to the sower's art.
The problem is not with the seed, for soils differ.

In other words, persons respond freely to the invitation,
and difficult as it is for the enthusiastic disciples to believe,
some will say no.
The kingdom is a realm of freedom,
as Paul has insisted so eloquently today.

There is a massive literature on utopias
and dystopias, or negative utopias.
The ideal society, the ideal world is a dream
as old as the human race of dreamers.
But often enough the utopia is much less than it promises.
The Marxist utopia, in which the proletariat would throw off its bonds

and the state would wither away,
turned into something quite different under Lenin and Stalin.
And Mao Zedong.

Or maybe it is purposefully restrictive from the very beginning.
When the philosopher Plato designed his ideal Republic,
he banished the poets.

After all, everyone knows that poets are difficult to manage.
They cannot be trusted.
They live apparently undisciplined lives, often enough.
They raise questions after all the answers are satisfactorily in place.
They seem unable to make sensible compromises,
but insist on what they call the truth.

In the manager's paradise, the poet is not welcome.
But judging from the barrage of metaphors in today's readings,
the poet is not banished from the freedom of the Kingdom of God.
Not only do some freely refuse,
but those who come, also do so freely.

I should say something about this term, "Kingdom of God."
For some it is irredeemably patriarchal.
They substitute other terms, such as Reign of God.
Or even more adroitly, Kindom—without the g—of God.
This is perhaps too clever.

These strategies have their merits.
But I would not want to lose the political overtones of Kingdom.
For it sets up this Jesus community
in opposition to the conventional political alliances we know.
Perhaps we could say Republic of God.
But then that sounds too clever, too.

When Jesus selects images for the Kingdom,
as he does in today's parable, he indulges in metaphor.
And he celebrates freedom.

The new society he envisions is not a manager's paradise.
It is not Plato's Republic.
It is messier than that, and more fully human.
In his call to repentance, metanoia,
in his invitation to follow, he initiates an alternative society.

It is not simply that it is built from the bottom up,

rather than from the top down.
And that it derives from commitment rather than from heritage or force.

It's power is that of faith and grace,
of call and response to that call.

Yesterday we celebrated the final vows of Sr. Sarah Kohles.
There was a spirit of joy in the air that almost vibrated.
There was a quality to the music and the singing
that seemed to move it into a realm apart.

I believe that it was the joy of the occasion, and more.
I believe that we experienced the life of the kingdom at its best.
Not to say that there aren't valid
and wonderfully fruitful ways other than this
to live the life of the kingdom.

But here, for me,
we caught the very heart of the life of the Kingdom,
the call and the response to the call.
The 100, 60 and 30-fold.

The free, the human, and the graced.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 24, 2011

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12	Solomon's Dream
Psalm 119	More precious than gold
Romans 8:28-30	All things work for good
Matthew 13:44-52	Net, treasure and pearl of great price

Yesterday, watching the news,
I saw a commercial about insurance
that took as its theme the American Dream.
It assured us that it—the insurance company—
was there to help us achieve that Dream.
Each of us has a part of that Dream, it told us,
and it was there to help.

I was reminded of a remark I recently heard
by someone who insisted that America is not the land of equality,
but rather that it is the land of equal opportunity,
which is a different thing.
In this view, each of us has an equal chance to be a success.
Life is competitive, but each of us has a chance for the prize.

And in this vernacular, success has a fairly specific meaning.
It has to do with one's personal financial worth.
This is handy, because this way success has a number.
It can be measured and compared,
to see who is more successful and who is not.

Naturally certain personal qualities are rewarded in this system,
beyond that of simple dumb luck
and the foresight to be born into fortunate circumstances.
But these do not have a number, like money does.
So it's a useful system to have a bottom line.

Of course, not everything is pleasant in this measurement of success.
Right now the branches of our federal government
are stubbornly refusing to cooperate
so as to allow the country to avoid defaulting on its national debt.

Unfortunately for our personal monetary success index,
this would promise to have devastating effects
on most financial indicators,
and would affect our personal holdings as well,
making us feel bad, and not at all successful.

It would appear that the Ancients in the time of Solomon

had a similar measure for determining the successful life.
Solomon, by all accounts,
led one of the most successful lives in the Old Testament.
He was the paragon of success.
He was famous for his wealth and his wisdom.
He was the model and envy of Israel.

Today we heard about his dream,
when he was first selected to be king,
and how God came to him in the dream,
offering to give him whatever he wanted.
Everything except half the kingdom,
as Herod promised Salome,
because after all he already had the kingdom.

Solomon is famous for asking—wisely perhaps—
for the gift of wisdom, rather than wealth,
or a long life, or the lives of his enemies.
That is, a long life for himself and short lives for his enemies.
God is pleased with Solomon's answer,
and readily grants his request.

As a matter of fact, God grants more than that,
but our reading for today is abbreviated,
and so we do not hear the rest.
Reading on, we see that he was given wealth, as well as wisdom.
Which we already knew, since he was famous for just these things.
We might also discover that he did indeed enjoy a long life,
and that his enemies were not likely to.

When we come to the Gospel parables for today,
we find a similar motif of riches,
—no doubt the reason Solomon was selected for our instruction
in the first reading.

Jesus' parable of the Treasure isn't very long,
but it still contains some surprises.
For one, we tend to overlook the fact
that the lucky person who discovered the treasure
was not actually looking for it.
So it is not a parable about searching for the Kingdom.
Rather, it is a parable about how to consolidate your find.
The parable spends its time telling
how the finder responded to this good fortune,
by purchasing the field, and so forth.
It doesn't tell us how to find the kingdom.

It tells us what to do when we have already found it.
Act with dispatch; cover all the angles; make secure your gain.

The parable of the Pearl of Great Price is just as short,
but slightly different.
It does, as a matter of fact, say
that the merchant was searching.
But the response is excessive.
Selling everything to purchase the pearl
means liquidating the pearl business.
All that is given up for the pleasure of possessing the singular pearl.
So here too the emphasis is on the overwhelming response.

I suppose the merchant who gave up a career in the pearl trade
in order to possess a single pearl
might be compared to Solomon,
who was willing to put aside riches in order to attain wisdom.
But there is a significant difference
with the treasure of the parable, and the pearl of great price.

The wisdom of the Kingdom is not like the wisdom of Solomon,
that inevitably issues forth with riches as well.
The wisdom of the Kingdom is another thing entirely.
It is a gain beyond gains, beyond wealth,
beyond a collection of possessions.
Beyond the self-evaluation of one's success,
and anxious comparison with others.

And yet it is definitely the mark of success.

It includes giving everything away,
in the sense that giving replaces acquiring,
offering replaces demanding,
helping replaces dominating.
It is the successful life that doesn't think of itself as a successful life,
but simply a life of doing what God wants of us.

Or, in some cases, of vowing poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Not long ago, in the ceremony of final profession,
Sr. Nancy Schrek quoted the newly professed Sr. Sarah,
who upon asked why she was going forward with profession,
answered, "It's the only thing that makes sense."
Making sense of one's life is no small thing.

All of us have lived through

some of the more turbulent times in our church.
Many we know, who have travelled part way with us,
have taken other turns in their lives.
And yet we are still here.
My guess is that the reason is not far from
the thought that Sarah expressed. It makes sense.

It allows us to live for more than ourselves and our resumés.
It satisfies our need to live for others,
our need to lose our lives in the needs and service of others.
If those who lose their lives,
for his sake and the Kingdom, will gain them,
then so be it.
But part of the idea about losing them,
is giving up our anxiety about gaining.
And measuring and comparing.

Perhaps the most telling indicator is something deeper.
Beneath the daily disappointments, annoyances,
the petty feuds we sometimes engage in,
beneath the surface of daily tribulations,
a deep sense of joy, of relative certainty,
a sense of rightness that says,
Yes, this is what I should be doing with my life.

And the psalm, or even the Magnificat,
that celebrates it.

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 31, 2011

Isaiah 55:1-3	Come to the water
Psalm 145:8-9, 15-18	Just in all his ways
Romans 8:35, 37-39	Nothing separates us from Christ's love
Matthew 14:13-21	Five loaves and two fish

Given the events of the past week,
it is hard to hear the invitation of Isaiah in the first reading
without a dose of irony.
We lately haven't had much need to come to the water.
Rather, the problem is how to get clear of it.

They call natural events like those of this week "acts of God."
The prophet Second-Isaiah would seem to agree,
since he shows God to be in charge of the water.
Of course, he is speaking in a different situation,
where in the drought of the desert water would be a good thing.

Among the many voices that we hear these days
there are the skeptics who point to floods and droughts
and ask how we can believe in a God in charge of the weather.
These are the people who are vigilant
about keeping church and state separate.
As, for instance, in the case this week
of the huge cross made of iron beams
erected on the 9/11 site in New York,
where they did not fail to raise pointed questions
about the appropriateness of a Christian memorial
in public place where many non-Christians also died.

In their opposition to religion,
this contingent often takes as the model for Christianity
the more extreme versions of belief.
For instance, the fact that the mass murderer in Oslo
described himself as a Christian
fits quite neatly into their caricature of religion
as a breeding ground of violence.

And certainly they have this much correct
—that great violence can be committed only by those
who are very certain of their cause.
And there are those versions of Christian belief
that exhibit a sense of certainty
that can make the more uncertain of us Christians uneasy.

But isn't that exactly the kind of certainty

that Paul is insisting on in today's passage from Romans?
He makes two major lists in support of his conviction
that our place with God is secure.
First, when he asks the question
about what might possibly separate us,
it is anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine,

or nakedness, or peril, or the sword.
Then when he answers his own question, that nothing will
—neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities,

nor present things, nor future things,

nor powers, nor height, nor depth,

nor any other creature.

Once we grasp Paul's point
—that nothing can separate us from God's love, seen in Christ—
we notice that the other readings for today build on that.
2nd-Isaiah's call to come to the water, for that and more
—for those without means or money
to come to God for bread, for wine, for grain and milk—
this is a cry of confidence in the trustworthiness of God's care.

And, of course, the familiar story of the loaves and fishes
involves God, through Jesus, taking care
of those without money or means.
In fact, only five loaves and two fish.
Not enough for everyone.

What prompted Paul to make his plea?
Or 2nd-Isaiah to compose his poem in God's name?
Or Matthew to recount the story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes?

Without knowing the exact circumstances of each of these writers,
we can surmise that their hearers needed
the reassurance that these passages provide.
We can guess that they had reason to doubt God's caring presence,
and so Paul, and the Prophet, and the Evangelist Matthew
utter plea, poetry and parable
to make as forcibly as possible that God does indeed care for them,
and they can trade on that trust.

Their problem is not certainty, but uncertainty.

The elements of today's readings
are often given a spiritual meaning,
and this is not at all alien to the texts.
Water is a symbol of the spirit, and of God's grace.
And certainly the story of the loaves
is intended to evoke the breaking of the bread of the Eucharist,
with its specific language, and its gathering up of the fragments.
So a spiritual meaning is part of
the intended meaning of these words.

But again, the words of assurance imply
that doubts and questions need to be addressed.
And what would raise doubts about God's care?
About God's attention to their needs?
About God's love for them?

I think it is not coincidental
that the images used for spiritual values
are very human physical needs
—water, and food, and drink.
It is at this level that questions arise
when needs are not met for some time.
So the poetry and language of meals
is not incidental to the questions of faith.

In other words, no one is without a social safety net,
for God is taking on that responsibility.
But that does not mean that God works apart from our efforts.
We need not turn to an image of God who acts in spite of human effort,
but rather a God who works through human effort.

Whether we think about the safeguards offered by a government office,
or a charitable organization funding a shelter or youth center,
whether it is a case of family members or neighbors,
as we saw in the recent flash floods,
we cannot assume that this is not part of God's work.

We can doubt with the skeptics
and ask how God could allow such an event as the flooding.
Or we can notice the response to that disaster
and remark how there is good in the world.
But it needs an occasion to show itself.

As for ourselves, we can use the assurance.
We are often not so much skeptical as we are hesitant.

Our doubts are not systematic, like the agnostics and atheists,
but rather, daily and ordinary.
We doubt, because we so often doubt ourselves.

We question God
because we are so impressed with our own failures
that we cannot imagine God would find it reasonable to forgive them,
to accept us with our catalogue of faults.
We want a God whom we hope would have higher standards,
one who would not accept us as we are.

However that may be,
however we rationalize our un-loveliness,
we have the firm assurances today that God cares for us,
despite all the odds. We can put money on that.

Or if we are without money,
without payment and without cost,
we can come to the water.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7	A house of prayer for all peoples
Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8	Let all the nations praise you
Romans 11:13-15, 29-32	The Apostle to the Gentiles
Matthew 15:1-28	A Gentile Daughter is Healed

Today's reading from the book of Isaiah
is the opening passage of the third part of the book,
the last eleven chapters sometimes named Third-Isaiah.
It was written back in the land, after the return from exile,
when many Judeans felt the need to circle the wagons
against those who had moved into their once abandoned territory.
It was a time of identity concerns,
of insecurities and fears for survival as a people.
Against this trend the prophet sounds a theme
of openness to outsiders.

In the passage that we heard, the prophet speaks to a future
when the temple will be open to foreigners,
who even might preside at the rituals.
Actually, the reading has been trimmed
to fit the theme today about the nations of the world.
That is one example that is given in the passage.

Another example cited by the prophet is that of the eunuch,
whose physical imparity prohibited entry to the sacred precincts.
In fact, the prophet is talking about a system of prohibitions
that went under the heading of holy and unclean.

The holy were those admitted to the temple.
The unclean, however, were barred.
There were many reasons for being listed among the unclean,
but two primary reasons were physical impairments,
since holiness sometimes means wholeness,
and foreignness, which put a person
outside the ranks of the holy people.
One day, promises the prophet, eunuchs and foreigners
will be allowed into the temple, and even lead the ceremonies.

Part of the reading probably sounded familiar.

You have heard the words,
"my house shall be a house of prayer," before, no doubt.
It is one of the lines from scripture
that the gospels report Jesus citing at the temple cleansing,
the climactic act of resistance by Jesus in the gospel narrative.

Once we see the context of the quoted lines
we understand that Jesus' objection was not
that they were not keeping proper decorum in the temple,
but that some were excluded.
The issue was access to the divine.
Those who did not meet the requirements were shut out.

In a pattern that is clearest in Mark's Gospel,
Jesus is shown ministering to the diseased and abused in the society,
bringing them back from the margins to the social family.
Many if not most of his healings
involve dealing with rules about the unclean.
The leper, the unclean spirits, the impaired.

And when he turned from Galilee toward Jerusalem,
heading to the temple where he would address
what seemed to be the cause and center of the malaise in the land,
he would bring with him, in the form of a virtual, proxy mob,
all the maimed and marginal that he spent his ministry among.
And so it is the he charged the temple with Third-Isaiah's words:
My house is a house of prayer for all people.
The issue was access, not propriety.

Among the people to which Jesus ministered was a surprise:
the pagan woman from Lebanese-Syrian territory
from whom we heard today.
The story is full of different species of uncleanness:
Jesus is outside the Holy Land, in pagan territory;
the woman is a foreigner, and a Gentile.
In fact, Matthew dredges up a term form ancient history
to emphasize the point.
He says she was a Canaanite woman.

Well, the Canaanites were the people who opposed Joshua
in the original capture of the land, a millennium earlier.
The term captures the hostility many felt
against their pagan neighbors.

Add to this her predicament that brings her to Jesus:
her daughter is possessed by a demon, an unclean spirit.
There is much for the holy to overcome here.

The repartee about the dogs is something we find very distasteful.
However, not only is it an exchange of wit,
but it concerns the issue of the unclean.

Coming after Jesus' declaration that foods cannot make you unclean,
it reminds us of the dictum in Exodus
that some foods are unclean, and so should be given to the dogs.
Turning that around, Jesus suggests
that if humans shouldn't eat food fit for dogs, that is, unclean,
then neither should dogs eat food fit for humans, that is, holy.

The woman's timely remark reminds him that dogs
do sometimes eat the kosher food
that is slipped under the table for them.
Family pets sometimes succeed in begging a meal;
and she too is begging, for health for her daughter.

Today Paul sums up the lesson.
We often hear that Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles.
And today we heard him say so himself.

But, we might ask, who are the gentiles today?
Who are the foreigners?
Who are the excluded, the marginal, without resources,
without access to the sacred?

We can think about that in at least three ways.

At a **societal** level we can easily consider the plight of the foreigner.
Immigration issues have not yet
broken out on the national campaign scene,
but it is only a matter of time.
Now that the governor of Texas is in the race,
there are many to criticize his more relaxed views on immigration,
and we will be hearing some very nasty things in the weeks to come.

Of course, this isn't only an American issue,
as the mass murderer in Norway showed us.
Europe is even more on edge than we are.
But we are the ones building a wall.

One is reminded of the post-exilic Judeans,
caught in a predicament of uncertain identity,
unwilling to accept the words of the prophet 3rd-Isaiah.
We address that situation in our own society with witness and education.
For many of us, it is a theme for ministry.

To exclude, as in immigration fears,
is to leave out those whom Jesus favored,
and place ourselves in a peculiar position regards the Gospel.

At another level, we might look at the **church**, which is currently
experiencing issues of access to the sacred for many.

Eugene Kennedy, former professor of psychology from Loyola in Chicago,
has been running a series of angry commentaries in the NCR,
with a tone not unlike the classical prophets.
Amos comes to mind. But Micah will do as well.

Kennedy's theme is the so-called reform of the reform,
with what he sees as attention to trivialities
while serious issues go unattended.

Trivialities like proper vestments.
Serious issues like the lack of supervision
over sexual predation among the clergy.
This week he is concerned about the revival of indulgences,
which he finds theologically incoherent,
fiddling while Rome burns, as it were.

The notion of a smaller, purer church
is not what Isaiah and Matthew are talking about today.
The Apostle to the Gentiles was driven toward including the outsiders.
The dynamic of Acts of the Apostles is a series of widening circles,
bringing in even the Gentiles to the embrace of a saving God.

To limit access to the sacred is to operate in directions
different from the ministry of Jesus, if not to reverse them.

I mentioned three levels.
One is societal. Another is churchly.
A third is **personal**.

We have our own circle of influence, our own range of action.
Within that we can repeat the experience of Jesus.
We may not be able to expel demons,
but we can give attention to the bedeviled,
recognition to the ignored and bewildered.
The angry and the alienated.

We can help to bring the marginal in our own daily experience
back into lively interaction of shared life.

We may have our eye out for those
whom most people consider the equivalent
of the maimed, the unclean, the leper
and Canaanite woman with the daughter possessed by demons.

We may not be medical professionals.
But we needn't underestimate the healing powers
of listening, caring, noticing, attending.

The greater distress is the isolation
and fear that no one understands, or hears.
Those things we can do something about.

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 21, 2011

Isaiah 22:19-23	Eliakim, son of Hilkiah
Psalm 138:1-3, 6, 8	I will sing your praise
Romans 11:31-36	How inscrutable your ways
Matthew 16:13-20	You are Peter

It is a commonplace that we have lost faith in institutions today.
From government to education to the church, the pattern holds.
"Tu es Petrus" has not been exempt.

Tu es Petrus. You are Peter,
and upon this Rock I will build my church.

We all remember the place that today's Gospel
had in our Catholic upbringing.
It is the proof text for the institution of the papacy,
the primacy of Peter.
The passage is about Peter's place and not his person.
The keys belong to the office.

This is confirmed by the reading from Isaiah,
featuring a couple of people whom we probably haven't heard about before,
and who will probably seem just as unfamiliar
when they show up again three years from now.
Shebna and Eliakim.

They were successive holders of the position of Palace Supervisor,
an office not unlike prime minister.
Unusual among Messianic passages,
this one is not about the coming Messiah,
but rather about the coming Messiah's right hand man.
Peter seems to fit appropriately.

Clearly the passage is about Shebna's lack of fitness for the office,
now to be given to Eliakim.
The passage concerns the office,
and a search for the proper person to hold that office.

Today we live in a world different from that of our Catholic upbringing.
Recently I had occasion to total up the friends and family members
who, good Catholics all, no longer attend church.

They are still religious, in my view,
but that devotion has transferred from ceremonies to service.

A phrase occurred to me that seemed to sum it up.

"Challenged (by Vat II & Church in the Modern World)
to leave the ghetto
and go out to change the world,
they never looked back."
And they still aren't looking back.

I am proud of the things that they are doing,
but that work is no longer openly identified
with the Catholic values that generated it.
I am reminded of a stone dropped in a lake
that creates a wave that moves out from there,
rocking boats and making changes, until it eventually ebbs.

David Cochran, a political scientist at Loras
has observed that in America there is no discernible difference
between the voting of Catholics and that of the general population.
One can wonder if this is because Catholics
have changed the world toward Catholic values,
or whether the world has changed Catholics. Or both.

If we lose track of the source of the changes,
will we be able to continue the change?
Will we be able to produce another wave?

My sympathies are with those
who received the call to go forth and change the world,
but now I am trying to view sympathetically
the direction of the church today.
I am trying to understand.

Current messages from the Vatican suggest that the new direction
is to be understood as the rise of Secularism.

Consequently, one of the strategies in the present impasse
is to become more visibly Catholic,
to produce what some call markers, or labeling,
and some call window dressing.

For example, this November the language of the Mass will change,
to make it more obviously in touch with our tradition.
Some of the language change is mysterious.
I do not understand
why the words opening the Second Eucharistic Prayer
change from "Lord, you are holy indeed"
to "You are indeed holy, O Lord."

But others are more consequential.
The word “cup” will be replaced with the word “chalice.”
Not because it is more accurate to the scriptures, because it isn’t,
but because it evokes our tradition more clearly.

I think that after a period of suspicion and doubts,
we will likely settle in and get used to the new language.
And life will go on.

We now call Catholic schools Catholic. As in “Wahlert Catholic.”
But in a former day, there was no doubt about the Catholicity of Wahlert,
given the number of religious women and diocesan priests on the premises.
But no longer.
What is to identify the school publicly now but the name?

This summer Loras College,
through the inspiration and generosity of one of its regents,
has relocated the grotto from where it was when I was a student
namely on the edge of the campus behind Rohlman Hall,
to another place entirely.
It is now at one of the main crossroads of the campus.
Those who were accustomed to praying there quietly
will find that its purpose has changed.
Now it is more of a display piece,
announcing to all that ours is a Catholic campus.

However, when I was a student, there were some 50 priests at Loras.
There was no question about its religious orientation.
Today there is one full-time priest on the faculty.
Two in campus ministry.
So what shows the world that we are Catholic?

It is questions like these that prompt some of the changes.
If the church and its members are to change the world,
what happens when there is no longer any discernible difference
between church and world?

And there are also more substantive issues than simple labeling.
For instance, the issue of proper theology,
as dramatized in the censure of Elizabeth Johnson.

The NCR reports this week of the Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy,
executive director of the Secretariat for Doctrine
at the U.S. bishops’ conference,
who was centrally involved in the censure decision.
In a statement no doubt calculated to raise hackles,

he is quoted as saying that theologians can be
"a curse and affliction upon the church."
He is a member of the Academy of Catholic Theology,
which in a familiar pattern was founded a few years ago
to counter what is seen as the more liberal influence
of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Among the favorable online responses to his action appears the phrase,
"speaking from the heart of the magisterium."
Your reaction to this phrase might indicate
where you are positioned on this issue.

Within my personal set of interests,
we have the new Navarre Study Bible.
A relatively recent production
of the Theology Department of Navarre University in Spain,
it features commentary from the long tradition,
especially the Church Fathers.
From my own limited point of view
it replaces the encounter with the scriptural text
with the tradition about the text.
Among recent reviews of its publication you will find
that it "speaks from the heart of the magisterium."
That phrase again.

Once again we encounter the question of the Catholic brand.
And the more pressing question of how we can change the world
if we cannot tell the difference between the church and the world.

But the new age of clear identity will not be like the past.
The new age will be the age of lay Catholics.
One thinks of the old model of soldiers in the Christ's army.
A feature of the military is unthinking obedience.
This model is not likely to return.
Not in a lay church, where positions of responsibility
move them beyond their former passive posture
to a critically self-aware appreciation of church and community.
Negotiation promises to be the mode of operation
in the new age of identity.
And changes will continue.

For there is the remainder of the story of Shebna and Eliakim.
The passage from Isaiah doesn't end with the present reading.
Another verse was added, apparently by a separate hand.
It indicates that Eliakim, in his turn, needed to be replaced.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 28, 2011

Jeremiah 20:7-9	You duped me
Psalm 63:2-6, 7-9	My soul is thirsting
Romans 12:1-2	Your self as a living sacrifice
Matthew 16:21-27	Peter, the Rock, stumbles

What is discipleship?
Today's readings offer us a pattern, a principle, and a path.

The **pattern** is the pattern of Jeremiah, and of Simon Peter.
Jeremiah is complaining bitterly in today's famous passage.
The prophets were never ones to mince words.
They spoke up to those in power,
and this does not exclude God Yahweh himself.

Jeremiah is remembering his call to prophecy,
recounted in the first chapter of his book.
He was skeptical from the start.
When the Lord said to him,
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,"
spoken at Jeremiah's call to prophecy,
Jeremiah answered: Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak.
I am too young."

Which in turn prompted God to give him words of assurance.
"Do not be afraid of them.
I am with you to deliver you."

But now Jeremiah utters those famous, almost blasphemous words:
You duped me, and I let myself be duped.

Everything he feared has come true.
Whenever he speaks, he delivers bad news.
The only result of all this is not reform, but rather mockery and insult.
And when he decides to keep his mouth shut, he cannot hold it in.
The word burns like a fire inside him, and he needs to speak.
And so the cycle begins again.

And yet, in the end, he does not despair,
but reasserts his trust in God.
One hopes that it is on a new level this time around.

Peter's experience is not that distant
from that of the prophet Jeremiah.

Having just successfully answered Jesus' question,

Who do you say that I am?,
he now finds himself at a loss, and in Jesus' disfavor.
Having asserted his notion of what Messiah means,
a common one in his day, he now stands corrected.
The common notion was that the Messiah would bring freedom
and independence to the people of Israel.

But Jesus instead announced a program of going up to Jerusalem,
not to assert control of matters gone out of hand there,
but rather to be arrested, suffer and die, and rise again.
Not what Peter was expecting.

And now there is this other thing.
Jesus renegotiates the call to apostlehood.
Back by the lake it was clarifying, but simple:
Leave everything and come follow me.
But now, abruptly upon the word that suffering was in Jesus' future,
the call is reworked.
Now it is "deny yourself, take up your cross, and come follow me."
There was nothing like this back on the lakeshore,
when the road to discipleship began.

So this is the pattern:
once the commitment to discipleship is given, it grows, changes.
Even seems to mutate, if that is not too flippant a term for it.
What once seemed simple now is complicated.
What was pure and wholehearted as a response,
is now compromised, redirected in unsuspected ways,
and in need of fresh clarification.
In need of a new word of commitment.

And the pattern of recommitment, of renewed innocence, will continue.
This same Peter, advised to deny himself
and take up his cross and follow,
will find himself later on in the courtyard of the high priest,
denying—but denying that he knows
the person inside taking up the cross.
This will be his moment, and he will get it backwards.

But this in turn will be a further epiphany
of the pattern of discipleship.

And no sooner do we hear these words to Peter,
no sooner are we made aware of the pattern,
than we are given the **principle** (which we might state as):
"You who wish to save your self will lose it,
but you who lose your self for my sake will find it."

The paradox in this saying is both profound and disconcerting.
It is in giving up our claims that we will achieve them.
It is in abandoning our ambitions that we will fulfill them.
It is in losing our selves in following the cross
that we will find our selves.

Perhaps we can point to other experiences of the principle.
It is in loving that we discover love.
It is in devoting ourselves to another and that person's welfare,
that we discover ourselves, and complete our own welfare.

It is seen in parents, whose lives suddenly turn away from themselves
to be almost totally invested in their offspring.
One day they pull back, take a look at what has happened,
and discover that they no longer pursue the avenues of entertainment
that at one time they thought they never could live without,
that the lives they led before
now seem somehow one-dimensional and shallow
compared to the full commitment and investment
they have come to experience.

In a word, they have discovered themselves, the "self" of each,
that is beyond what they had ever expected,
and in giving it away they find they have gained it.

And so it is with faith.
Faith, that is, as an act of trust, trust in God and in others.
In the free commitment that is an act of faith as trust,
freedom is given its due.
What before was freedom as possibility for choosing, for commitment,
now becomes freedom in action.
For freedom exists in the act of choosing and commitment.
Until then it is only freedom as promise and possibility.

But the paradox is that in committing oneself,
one takes on the restrictions proper to the vow, the decision,
and it looks a lot like lost freedom.
But it is experienced as freedom in fullness.

In taking up the cross and following,
in losing our selves in the call to discipleship,
    we paradoxically find ourselves,
    and the truth of ourselves.
Not looking for it, abandoning the futile pursuit of self-fulfillment,
    we find ourselves to be fulfilled.

And from the pattern and the principle we find the **path**.
    The path to discipleship is one of letting go.
    It is a constant and ever-renewing process.
        It is a path that finds itself going another step,
        when there was not notion that there would be another step.
What looks like the end-stop turns out to be
a disguise for a new beginning.
    And it is another possibility of letting go.

I am imagining a path of discipleship
that is strewn we cast off belongings, excess baggage.
    And then the path comes to places
    where what is cast off no longer seems a matter of excess,
    but rather what I once thought of as essential.
        But now it no longer seems essential. So it goes too.

Letting go is a continual school, a process of learning,
and if we are lucky, or wise,
    or maybe alert in the ways of discipleship,
    we do so gracefully.

Part of this, maybe most of it, is a process of aging.
Maturing.

It seems not much of a secret that today is my birthday.
At each of these, as you know, receiving gifts makes less and less sense.
    What you want to do is release, give away, bestow.
    Dump, not acquire.

In a poem I wrote some years ago,
I imagined the process of life is to disappear,
    until even my name is no longer remembered.
    Only then does rest come.

As all the news media are telling us, today is also
the 48th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" speech.
    This year is special insofar as it is marked
    by the dedication of the King memorial in the Mall in Washington D.C.

There is much o say about this event in time, and much is being said.
    But beyond the tribute to the campaign against racism
    —the memory most still retain of MLK—
        and beyond his less applauded but equally important achievements
        in nonviolent conflict resolution, witness against war,
            dedication toward improving the destitution of the poor,
there is also this:
he is a model of the pattern, the principle, and the path.

If we need another example in addition to Jeremiah,
someone along with Peter,
one who has found his self in giving it,
    it is this black American preacher,
    who is now not only a gift to America, but to the world itself.
Long before he experienced the unfortunate loss of his life,
giving himself most completely,
    he had already given his self, and found it,
        for us and for finding our own path of discipleship.

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 4, 2011

Ezekiel 33:7-9	The Watchman
Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9	Harden not your hearts
Romans 13:8-10	Love one another
Matthew 18:15-20	Fraternal Correction

What are the marks of the nonviolent community?
What are its visible traits? I am led to this question
by something that Elizabeth McAlister said some time ago.
It was that in conflict situations the Christian combines love with truth.
When it is a hard truth, it requires tough love.

She was speaking of nonviolent confrontation.
But is has long struck me that it makes a difference
as to whether the person with whom we have the dispute
is counted as a friend or a foe.

When it is a foe, we are tempted to go hard on the truth
and minimal on the love.
When it is a friend, it is often the other way
—strong with the love and not so much with the truth.
When it is a foe, we are in the arena of nonviolent confrontation.
But when we are dealing with friends, we are in the vicinity
of what has traditionally been called fraternal correction.
That is what the Gospel is talking about today.

And so I come to the question:
What are the signs of the nonviolent community?
I am not thinking of nonviolence in peaceful times.
A commitment to nonviolence doesn't mean so much
in times of smooth sailing. Who is not nonviolent then?
But in times of discord, that is when it comes into its own.
That is when it counts.

I think the first thing that the lessons today tell us
is that it begins at home.
Certainly it doesn't end there,
for injustices in our society must be addressed,
and we need to understand that violent opposition to injustice
complicates the situation
and multiplies the problems we hope to correct.
But while we want to show a nonviolent face to the world,
it surely begins at home.

And so we see a technique of resolving conflict offered in today's Gospel.
Fr. John Meyer, the noted Matthew scholar,

has surmised that the Gospel passage today
reflects a nonhierarchical community.
If Matthew lived in a community with clear lines of authority, he opines,
then he would be giving an alternative response
to experiencing wrong-doing.
It is a familiar one, namely, tell the person in charge.
Since that is not the recommendation here,
he guesses that it wasn't an option for that community,
that it was without a single person in charge.

That may be. But even so, I would like to think
that the advice Matthew's gospel gives today
is something that is promoted as superior
to running to the boss with your grievance.
Rather than doing that, it suggests we meet
with the person with whom we have a difference.
In other words, in speaking with the person directly,
we avoid temptations of bringing harm by remote control,
revenge without accountability.
This is a universal temptation, but not, I think,
a mark of the nonviolent community.

A second feature, along with personal encounter,
is the willingness to risk misunderstanding, or even rejection.
Or, it seems to me in today's Gospel example,
willingness to risk being wrong.
For when I cannot settle things with my opponent,
and we take it to one or two others,
who is to guarantee that they will take my side of it?
How do I know that they will not discover something
that I myself did in the interaction that contributed to the dispute,
something that I might be blind to?
How do I know that I myself might not be the one
asked to correct his ways?
And isn't my risk even greater if I take it to the full community?
That would be completely out of my control.

Furthermore, I might find that I am told
that I am all too eager to find reasons to correct others.
Especially if I enjoy the practice a bit more than is seemly.
After all, it is love that we are calling tough here.
When I enjoy it a little too much, I might wonder
if I am dealing with a friend or a foe.
Or a foe I pretend is a friend.

So I think that willingness to risk my self-regard

as well as the relationship
must be put alongside
willingness to resolve things in personal encounter
as marks of the nonviolent community.

But there is a third thing as well,
and not simply because there is always a third thing.

Today the prophet Ezekiel focuses matters
on the theme of responsibility for the community.
In his conversation with God, he shows us the prophet's responsibility.
But in company with the Gospel it shows us
that it is a matter of responsibility to the community,
whatever one's place in it.
Each is responsible for and to all.
Each owns the community that is home.
And each pitches in.

Sometimes this means the distasteful work of addressing wrongs.
More than distasteful, it is painful and done in a spirit of trepidation.
The gospel reading on fraternal correction gives us a model
—admittedly a very sketchy and generalized model—
for doing so humbly, considerately,
and in a spirit of nonviolent love.

None of this is new, of course.
Community life is a life of shared tasks, taking turns,
doing both the menial and the magnificent.
But in the nonviolent community it would seem
that this extends to easing life through practices enlivened by love.
Nonviolence is love as it works out in situations of conflict.

Today we install liturgical ministers for the coming year.
It is a fitting image of taking responsibility for the life of the community.
For the liturgy is the community in prayer,
and as such it is the image in worship of the community in life.
The liturgy is a vivid sign of our life as it is lived elsewhere,
for good or for bad.
Sharing in the responsibilities of liturgy
and willingness to share in those responsibilities
is a promising sign of communal health.
And in turn, the liturgy is the profound expression
of the nonviolent community at worship.

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 11, 2011

Sirach 27:30-28:7
Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
Romans 14:7-9
Matthew 18:21-35

In the past few days we have heard from many voices
recalling the events of ten years ago,
in the events that we have learned to give the general name of 9/11.
Memories have been poignant, searing, vivid, and immediate.

Eugene Kennedy poetically expressed it (online) in the NCR:

Indeed, 9/11 was itself a day of sacramental revelation
in which, suffused in Mystery, we learned something
about ordinary people that we had only speculated about before.
We learned what ordinary people –
like those in all the random gatherings in which we find ourselves,
in airports, lobbies, or at football games,
and, of course, at the Last Judgment
-- do when they know that they are going to die.

They do not cry out for mercy or run away in fear;
they do not deny or look away from Death's eyes
but stare unblinkingly into them.
They do, in fact, something quite human.
They call somebody else up to tell them that they love them.
Under the pall of flame and smoke,
the towers pulsed not with so much with groans of fear
as with expressions of love as spouses, parents, children,
and friends sought each other out to pledge their love
knowing that it triumphed over impending death.

Those voices and their whispered messages of love
will be heard in the soft winds that spiral up from the scars that remain,
deep vessels now of the exchanges between ordinary people
who, facing death chose life, and so made the site
forever sacred by their commitments to each other.

Kennedy was protesting the mayor's decision
not to invite any religious statements at the anniversary memorial.
In reporting on this, an article in the NYT (by Laurie Goldstein)
quotes Alan Wolfe, of Boston college:

"In miniature, this is what's happening to the whole country,

9/11 was this moment that we came together,
and it lasted about three-and-a-half minutes.
The country went from a brief moment of something like unity,
to complete Balkanization, and now we're seeing it
in religion and in politics, like in everything else."

Consider some of the conditions of public life today.
Air travel has changed from a pleasure to a nuisance.

The presence of permanent security zones, such as dam 11,
below Eagle Point—no longer open to visitors.
The main entrances in public buildings are closed for security reasons,
with a small side door allowing monitored entrance.
The grand entrance to the US Supreme Court building
is a prominent monument to this predicament.

Immigration fears dominate our concerns,
with urgency building a wall along the southern border,
as if to make the entire US a gated community.
Profiling those of non-European appearance,
especially Hispanic and Muslim, has become a standard practice.
Islamophobia in general is a constant in our culture.
Wars have become our new reality, with two stubborn wars in place,
and the war against terrorism, as it is called,
now assuming a permanent part of public life.
Then there is the illusion that one more security measure
will solve our problems, until we are rigid with frustrated movement.

In the readings for today, especially in the Gospel of Matthew
we hear about forgiveness, and in fact
the need and requirement of forgiveness, offered repeatedly.
How do we manage the move from here to there?
To those we have heard from, I would like to add my own,
from the introduction of the book, Banished Messiah.
It is a reflection on Matthew's Gospel in the light ,
or maybe the shadow, of 9/11.

"[My] plans [for a book on Matthew] were interrupted
by the events of September 11, 2001.
It was clear, in the aftermath of the attacks
on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center,
that there was little public appetite for discussions of nonviolence.
Retribution was the cry of the day.
Likewise, there was little market for a topic
that no one wished to entertain.
So the project was put on indefinite hold.

"Sometime later, in a context now lost,
I became aware of a Jewish biblical scholar explaining
the relevance of the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE
by describing it as "our 9/11."
Although obvious differences separate the two events,
most notably the position of empire in respect to the deed,
the reach and depth of their impact on their populations was similar.
This prompted a reconsideration of the present project.

A massive act of violence had altered the perspective of a people,
and the world was changed.
No longer was it adequate to speak of the fall of Jerusalem
as an academic problem, as if loss of the Temple
was simply a problem of eschatological timing,
delayed beyond expectations.

Matthew's problem [writing in the aftermath of the destruction]
was not simply that the events of 66–70 CE
failed to bring about the close of the age
and called forth an attitude of retrenchment.
Matthew's problem was larger than that,
and it included the fact that, in the aftermath of the Roman destruction,
a message of nonviolence had become even less credible.
Destroying the Temple amounted to a theological statement
about power and divine reality.

"… in Matthew's world, the world in which the gospel was written,
the great object lesson of Roman control in Judea
was the destroyed temple.
Its absence continued as a pressure;
its presence was now the "Burnt Space,"
positioned like a ravaged desert
at the former center of the Judean world.

This was absolute violence that not only threatened
but also accomplished its work.
The message of the Burnt Space
was that the world has irrevocably changed,
and Roman violence had done it.
The singular strength of violence is destruction so total
that life has to be built again from the ground up,
presumably on the terms of the victor."

"For Judeans, Rabbinic or Christian, Pharisaic or other,

the only task left them was to fashion a future
somehow continuous with a long but eclipsed past.
For Matthew, the experienced reality was one
of the dominance of violence.
More than dominance, it was experienced
as the very terms of reality itself.

There is nothing in Matthew that promotes violence,
since it is in no need of promotion; for it is the fact at hand.
Rather, Matthew's task is to find a way to insert an alternative reality,
a reality that derives from his tradition in the Lord,
a nonviolent tradition.
The work of the Gospel is to find a purchasing point from that tradition
to get a hearing in a climate of utter implausibility.
And then, in the tale of the transformed cross,
to promise the transformation of the Burnt Place,
the renewal of the brutalized world."

"In Matthew's dilemma I saw an image of ours today.
And in discovering his resolve I found my own.
As this is being written, America is involved in two wars,
the legacy of 9/11, including
such ethically problematic methods as selective assassination
and the faceless mechanized weaponry of drone warfare.
The aftermath of massive violence
is not simply a time of disinterest in nonviolent alternatives,
it is also, and for that very reason, a time for asserting such options.

"Matthew produced his Gospel despite the unpromising conditions,
adjusting it to the new circumstances.
His text shows the tension of conflicting pressures,
the message of Jesus on the one hand
and the reality of violent retribution on the other ..." [end of quote]

This is the Gospel that reports Jesus' words
about turning the other check, about loving one's enemies,
and gives us the words of today's Gospel:
How often should we forgive? Seven times? No, seventy-seven times.
Does this mean unconditional forgiveness?
It does, as the parable of the unforgiving servant insists.

The spirit of forgiveness is one of allowance, of trust.
It gives without expectation of return.
As such it testifies to a belief in giving in, in order to get along.
It values life together as a prize in itself.
It refuses to let blame be the final word,

but instead makes a profound gesture toward reconciliation.
It refuses to hold onto legitimate claims,
in order to invite a similar generosity in return.

It does not always succeed,
for there are many obstacles to accepting forgiveness,
including the unwillingness to accept the fact
that one might be at fault.
But it does not demand success,
since it a free offer without claiming anything in return.

Forgiveness is then one of the necessary lubricants
of social, community life.
Given the fact that we are, without exception, broken beings,
we are not angels,
forgiveness is the form that loves takes
when living in proximity to one another.

Today we name new Prayer Partners:
this in some way expresses a similar belief in life together.
It is another way in which we live beyond ourselves,
we give of ourselves and invest in the life of others
and of the community.

The power of prayer is the power of care.
Where its members are working on the front lines,
there is a community of support behind them,
and the ceremony we enact today is a formal commitment
to that gift of self that sustains our life together.

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 18, 2011

Isaiah 55:6-9	Seek the Lord
Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18	The Lord is near
Philippians 1:20-24, 27	Whether by life or by death
Matthew 20:1-16	Parable of the Vineyard Workers

In all the years
that I have been writing a column on the Sunday readings,
only once or twice have I received a letter
in response to something I wrote. And that was years ago.
But this week I received two,
from people for whom this week's Gospel reading was a problem.
It has often been called a problem parable, and they would agree.

It doesn't seem fair that those who worked all day
should be paid the same as those who were hired only in the last hour.
And it doesn't make it any better to have the owner
pay the last first and the first last,
so that they can see what is going on.
It is as if the owner is trying to provoke trouble.
He says he is just being generous to those last hired.
And he asks, in effect, do you have a problem with that?

And then there is this:
We presumably are to identify the owner with God.
And the reading from Isaiah encourages this
when it says that God's ways are not our ways.
God's ways are far beyond us.

It is clear that the parable is talking about two notions of justice.
Two sets of values. Or maybe two view points.
To see what I mean, compare this parable of the Vineyard Workers
with the famous parable of the Prodigal Son.

In many ways they are the same.
There are those who do the work and behave themselves,
and there are those who get off easy.
But we look at the two stories differently,
Because we identify with the Prodigal, and see ourselves in him.
Especially when we are in need of clemency.
We do not identify with the older son who stayed close to home
and was grieved by the welcome of the prodigal.

But with today's parable we identify with the other side.
We share the daylong workers' resentment at the easy money.
We do not rejoice with the last group,

that they were finally hired, and received a full daily wage.

I was pondering these things,
thinking about what the message might be for this week.
And then the name of Michael Harrington
came across my computer screen.
Someone was complaining that all our troubles began
with Michael Harrington, and his book, The Other America.
You may remember it. And him.
But you may not have thought that it was the beginning of our troubles.
Who would think this?

Michael Harrington was born to a Catholic family in St Louis.
He was interested in both leftwing politics and Catholicism.
He joined Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement,
and edited the Catholic Worker newspaper from 1951 to 1953.
However, Harrington became estranged from religion,
though always interested in Catholicism.
He became the most visible socialist in America.

In 1964 he published The Other America: Poverty in the United States,
about the invisible poor in America, then 25% of the population.
It talked about a culture of poverty
and made the claim that it required a concentrated effort to be solved.
It was brought to the attention of President Kennedy,
and became the basis for Lyndon Johnson's War of Poverty.
Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps and expanded social security benefits
are said to be traceable to his ideas.

Later on Harrington's ideas were repudiated by the neoconservatives
—a title given them by Harrington himself.
In their view, giving assistance in federal programs
simply fed the culture of poverty by creating dependence.

I do not know if you read Paul Krugman,
the Nobel Prize winning columnist for the NYT.
In his column this week,
he was noticing that a certain segment of the population
attending the presidential debates this past week
were cheering the prospect of an ill person,
who chose not to be insured, should be allowed to die,
since it was his choice.
The governor of Texas was likewise loudly cheered
when it was pointed out that there were over a 300
persons on death row in that state.

Krugman made an illuminating comment.
He said in public life of America at this time,
we have fundamentally different moral visions.
Not just different visions. But different moral visions.
Different ideas of what is right and wrong.

Michael Harrington is the author that represents, I think,
one side of that divide.
The other is obvious, since she has been frequently invoked these days,
and that is Ayn Rand, author of The Fountainhead, and Atlas Shrugged.

Ayn Rand, as I've often mentioned here,
was a Russian-born American novelist and philosopher.
As her Wikipedia article points out,
"In her philosophy of Objectivism,
Rand advocated reason as the only means of acquiring knowledge
and rejected all forms of faith and religion.
She supported rational egoism and rejected ethical altruism.
In politics, she ... opposed all forms of collectivism and statism,
(read anything to do with community or social being),
instead supporting laissez-faire capitalism,
which she believed was the only social system
that protected individual rights."

Individual selfishness was Rand's radical ideal.
This was the key to a prosperous society
that rewarded the enterprising
and, incidentally, punished those who were less so.
It is a form of Social Darwinism that has been summarized as:
You're on your own.

Ayn Rand is the theorist behind the Libertarian movement in America,
and much of the Tea Party movement.
It is my suspicion that Ron Paul,
the Texas libertarian candidate for president,
named his son, Rand Paul, American senator, after the novelist.

For these people, Michael Harrington is the beginning of our troubles.

It occurs to me that these two authors, Harrington and Rand,
and their two visions are much like the two viewpoints
in today's problem parable of the Vineyard Workers.

On the one side there is the perspective
that sees the payment procedure as thoroughly unfair.

What can we say about this?
We can talk about contractual justice, as the owner does.
Or we can talk about why it seems unfair.
Isn't it because we find ourselves determining what is fair
by comparing ourselves to others?
What we mean by fair is everyone gets the same.
But what drives it is resentment of another's gain,
another's possible edge.
In this model, we are in fundamental competition as individuals.
In a word: You're on your own.

On the other side is something like permissiveness.
It consists of giving each of the workers a daily wage, a denarius,
no matter how long that person worked.
Guaranteeing a daily wage sounds like socialism,
at least the kind that undergirded the War on Poverty.

In 1964, 25% of Americans were in poverty.
This week new census reports came out.
We haven't gained much:
"About 46.2 million Americans now live below the poverty line,
the highest figure since the Census Bureau began tracking 52 years ago."

Certainly there is more going on in this parable.
But this much seems evident: God ways are not our ways,
particularly when it comes to acting
without self-interest or resentment.

For this much we should be grateful.

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 2, 2011

Isaiah 5:1-7	A Vineyard Song
Psalm 80:9, 12-16, 19-20	A Vineyard Psalm
Philippians 4:6-9	Peace beyond understanding
Matthew 21:33-43	A Vineyard Parable

Last week I was asking around about the new logo
in front of the Franciscan Motherhouse.
    Replies were various.

Finally I received a page giving the entire explanation.
Among other things, the tree, leaves, and green globe
    represent the intent for the community
    to have "a right relationship with all creation."
        Actually, this is what I expected,
so I guess I can say that from my perspective the logo is a success.

Of course, the relationship with creation
is squarely within the Franciscan tradition,
    or for what other reason would Francis be posing for pictures
    with all those birds and animals?

Today the liturgy pictures green creation
under the image of a cultivated vineyard.
    Isaiah, the Psalmist, and Matthew are all involved in the game.
    The only one going another way is Paul, in his letter to the Philippians.

As the Psalmist tells us, the vine,
taken from Egypt and planted in a new place,
is Israel in the promised land.
    As he tells it, the land has fallen on bad times.
    The psalm is a lament after a desolation.

Isaiah works the same field in his vineyard song.
    In this case, the bad times haven't yet occurred,
    but the prophet assures his listeners that they are on they way.

While the vineyard was carefully prepared, thoughtfully planned,
something has happened.
    The sweet domestic variety of grapes
    has somehow produced bitter, wild grapes.
        The accusation is clear.
Israel has not faithfully maintained its heritage.
Someone has not been watching the garden, the vineyard.

Jesus' parable clearly has Isaiah's song in mind.
Jesus too is working the tradition of God's vineyard.
He echoes Isaiah's account of preparing the vineyard,
with wine vat and tower.
We can expect he will be telling a similar story.

But there is a difference.
A new group of people is introduced into the mix: the tenants.
Now the parable is telling a story of a change in operations,
a new group of tenants will replace the old.
The inference is that the new management is Christian,
the followers of Jesus.
We have an indication of this in the quotation from Psalm 118:

> The stone that the builders rejected
> has become the cornerstone;
> by the Lord has this been done,
> and it is wonderful in our eyes?

In its original setting,
this psalm was sung on entering the temple,
as it is in Jesus' triumphal entry.
It provides the words, Hosanna in the highest.

In this setting, the stone that was rejected was Israel,
scorned among the nations, but chosen by God.
The psalm celebrated the day
when the nations would learn of God's true choice.

But now we hear that the psalm has been revised
to refer to Jesus, and his followers.
And in this sense Israel, once rejected, is now doing the rejecting.

Yet there is something a bit triumphalistic
about Christians claiming to replace the Jews as God's chosen.
It certainly doesn't sit too well today
when we are reassessing the history of persecution
experienced by the Jews at the hands of Christians.

We might better read it as a lesson about stewardship,
about managing things in God's stead, on God's behalf.

When hearing about the criticism
of the religious leaders of Jesus' day,
what comes to mind is church leadership today,
whether clerical or, as is increasingly the case, lay leadership.

There comes an occasional problem of letting the self
interpose between God and believers.
    However, I will let you compose your own homily
    about how that works, in the church or in your own life.

What I would prefer to consider
is the reason that the metaphor today is that of a vineyard.
    Why not a household, or a shop in the marketplace?
    Why is management regarded under the sign of the green branch?

I suspect it has something to do with Israel's feeling
for the land they were given.
    It is not hard to transition from this
    to their sense of stewardship of the created world,
    as given in the first two chapters of Genesis, for instance.

There is need for witness
to stewardship of creation in the world today.
    There are many contrary, or distorting, voices.
    One is that of Dominion Theology.

Dominionists are more prominent today,
thanks to the public exposure they have received
    with Michele Bachman and Rick Parry,
    candidates for President of the US.

According to Garry Wills,
in his book Under God: Religion and American Politics,
describing the influence of the ideology on Pat Robertson,
    "'Dominion theologians,' as they are called,
    lay great emphasis on Genesis 1:26–7,
    where God tells Adam to assume dominion
    over the animate and inanimate world."

They equate the call to stewardship in Genesis
with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom.

Wills adds:
    "When man fell, his control over creation was forfeited;
    but the saved, who are restored by baptism,
    can claim again the rights given Adam."
Consequently, they believe that only Christians
have a right to hold political office.
    Their program is to replace American civil law
    with the law of the Old Testament.

George Grant, the former executive director
of Truth in Action Ministries, puts it this way:

"Christians have an obligation, a mandate, a commission,
a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ
—to have dominion in civil structures,
just as in every other aspect of life and godliness," ...

"But it is dominion we are after. Not just a voice ...
It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time ...
World conquest."

This might only be a quaint footnote in history
if (a) two of them were not running for the highest office in the land,
and (b) they did not reject scientific findings on the environment.

The stewardship of Genesis 1,
readily interpreted as complete control,
is thought to mean that creation is given
for the sole purpose of human exploitation.
And that God has arranged things so that supplies will last indefinitely.

In any case, it is not thought to be a problem,
since at most it will encourage the end time
and the return of the Savior.

It is for reasons like this that a religious witness
to proper stewardship of creation is needed.
Not merely witness, but religious witness.

Efforts are taking place around us.
Awareness is growing among the society at large.
The city of Dubuque has dedicated itself to a greener vision.
A younger generation takes the matter very seriously.
People like my friend, Ann Bodnar-Donovan,
are committing themselves to action and organizing,
as in the anti-global-warming movement that calls itself 350.
It takes its name from the scientific consensus
that 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere
is the upper limit for survivability.
We are now at 391 per million, which is not sustainable.

And in terms of specifically religious witness,
there is a new book out, which I have seen
but not yet been able to purchase,
called Green Discipleship.

It is a collection of essays edited by Tobias Winwright,
an up-and-coming young Catholic moral theologian at St Louis University.
who interviewed for a job in our department at Loras.
    Its final essay was contributed by Matt Shadle,
    who actually took the job.
They are attempting to describe from a Catholic viewpoint
what a Christian ethical stance toward the environment
    might look like.

And there is the new logo.
    Of course, not in itself, but rather
    that it makes a public statement of a community commitment.
        Public statements tend to be backed by action.

But it is also a faith statement,
and one more probe into the still unmapped territory
    of green discipleship.

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 9, 2011

Isaiah 25:6-10a	Rich food and choice wines
Psalm 23:1-6	You spread the table before me
Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20	In scarcity or abundance
Matthew 22:1-14	Parable of the Feast

As you know, Steve Jobs died this week
—the genius that taught us what we needed
to negotiate the 21st century.

Appreciations have dominated the web,
just as the devices he sold us continue to do.

One favorite among the memorials was his commencement speech
for the 2005 Stanford graduating class.
He already knew had a fatal disease.
These are the words most often quoted:

"Remembering that I'll be dead soon
is the most important tool I've ever encountered
to help me make the big choices in life.

Because almost everything—all external expectations,
all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—
these things just fall away in the face of death,
leaving only what is truly important.

Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know
to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.
You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart."

Martin Heidegger made a similar point in his existential theory,
when he affirmed that the authentic life was lived
in the knowledge of one's death.

In his words:
"If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely,
I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life
—and only then will I be free to become myself. "

Maybe Heidegger was there first with these thoughts,
but Jobs validated them.

And they are not far from Paul's thoughts to the Philippians.
A few weeks ago we heard him
speaking about his ministry to these same Philippians
set in the context of his death.
Today he assures us he can live with plenty or with little.

He knows that he is already naked.

For me these thoughts framed today's talk of feasts.

The passage from Isaiah is a classic.
That day will be a feast of fat, juicy meats and choice wine.
Every tear will be wiped away.
The veil of death will be lifted.

Joseph Blenkinsopp makes a fine point when he describes this
as a "menu calculated to alarm the health-conscious today
but standard fare for the well-heeled in antiquity."

The point, as I take it, was that this was not a promise
to those who were accustomed to being "well-heeled."
It was a promise to those accustomed to being without.

Those whose tears will be wiped away are the sorrowing.
And the veil, the web that is woven over the nations,
is the burden of mortality.
But, I think, it is more than mortality.
It is the entire culture of death.

It is not just the common lot of humanity envisioned here.
Not just human hunger, sorrow, and death.
But rather, those peoples who bear the greater share of the burden.

I think of places in our world
where hunger is their constant thought.
Where illness, pogroms, abuse, domestic violence,
rape, honor killing, or terrorism make life
a matter of constant sorrow.
And where death is common, and life is cheap.
Cheap life is the web over nations, the veil that calls to be lifted.

The proclamation of Isaiah makes a case about Israel's God.
It is a God who values the least, even those
whose lives are valued as disposable,
whose suffering is considered a fact of live,
whose hunger has nothing to do with those who are satisfied.

Isaiah is the template
for Jesus' Kingdom parable of the Wedding Feast.

Exegetes have long considered the parable,

as adjusted at Matthew's hands,
as referring to the replacement of the Old Testament with the New,
the Old Israel with the New,
the Jews with the Christian Gentiles.

Thus the destroyed city is Jerusalem,
and the abused messengers are Christian missionaries.

However, this scenario was elaborated at a time
when we were still insensitive to the role of Christian prejudice
in regard to the Jews.
When we were still blissfully ignorant
of the fundamental Jewishness of the early church,
of Matthew, and of course of Jesus.

So if this is not about Christians replacing Jews, what is it?
Once again, we remember that Isaiah
has set the terms for the story that Jesus now tells.

By introducing the problem with invitations,
he adds another group—namely,
the elect who can take invitations for granted.
And refuse them, if they wish.
These are the property-owners, with farms and businesses,
those who have security people at their disposal
to rough up unwelcome messengers
with invitations to inconvenient wedding banquets.

Their presumption and their violence breeds retaliation.
And other invitations are sent out.

The new group, it is said, are whoever has been left out.
Bad and good alike, it says.
The criterion is not a virtuous life; it is a life lived at the margins.
It is not merit; it is invisibility, disregard, and need.

The parable ends with a story about a guest without a wedding garment
—a little parable that never fails to disturb us.
This guest is an object lesson reminding us
that those in the second group
can repeat the complacency of the first.

Or we might simply say it represents an amnesia about grace,
a forgetting that he is a guest, and guest only.
Not a position he earned.

The missing wedding garment is the paradoxical equivalent
of the existential nakedness known by Steve Jobs
and St. Paul.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 23, 2011

Exodus 22:20-26	Widow and Orphan
Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51	Rock, Fortress, Deliverer
1 Thessalonians 1:5-10	The Model Community
Matthew 22:34-40	The Great Commandment

Jesus is presented with a problem. It is a test.
What is the greatest of the commandments?
How might the law be captured in a single rule?
    It is the kind of things that the rabbis like to do.
    Jesus works at it, but he can only get it down to two.

There is the Sh'ma, of course, the daily prayer of the Jews,
the Tefillin and the Mezuzah,
fastened to their sleeves and their doorposts.
    "The LORD is 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."

That would be necessary part, but can it stand by itself?
What about those who say
    that social justice and compassion are not necessary?
    That loving God alone is enough.
        But how can they forget that God loves social justice,
        and to love God you must love what God loves?

No, better to add to Deuteronomy the line from Leviticus:
Love your neighbor as yourself.
    The two laws need each other.
    Otherwise it might not tell the truth.

Jesus is teaching from a tradition,
and part of that tradition is today's first reading from Exodus.
It too is from the law—the covenant code given by Moses at Mt. Sinai.
    At the heart of the law code for this new people, Israel,
    we find this powerful passage.

It is in two parts, and they are parallel
—something you might not have picked up in the hearing.
    The first part warns against molesting the alien,
    that is, the stranger in the land.

It also adds the widow and the orphan
to the list of those never to molest.
"If they cry out to me I will hear them,"

says the Lord, laying down the law.
    It is unquestionably the cry of the poor
    under discussion here.
And if they cry out, your wives will be widows
and your children orphans.
    For I am a God of wrath.

This last line feeds all our prejudices
about the so-called God of the Old Testament.
    But the passage moves on.

Next on the list to be protected are the poor neighbors.
Give back the cloak that was given as collateral.
    The stranger, the widow and orphan, the poor neighbor
    —what they have in common is one thing:
    they are vulnerable, they are susceptible to molestation.
        They lack the protections that the rest enjoy.

And then there is that line again:
If they cry out to me I will hear them.

And then the clincher: for I am a God of compassion.
The God of wrath is now a God of compassion.
    It is only an apparent contradiction,
    for the wrath and the compassion are clearly directed.

The compassion is for the vulnerable, the powerless,
those exposed to the dangers of the predatory.
    The wrath is reserved for those who would exploit them.

This is the law of the land.
    The implication is that a failure here means a failure
    for the society that is just beginning here at Mt. Sinai.
        It is an index of Israel's success.

And the prophets take it for just that.
Isaiah begins his book with the instruction:
    "Make justice your aim: redress the wronged,
    hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow."

And Jeremiah, in his famous temple sermon, makes it clear,
speaking in God's name:

"Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds;
    if each of you deals justly with your neighbor;
    if you no longer oppress the alien,* the orphan, and the widow;

... only then will I let you continue to dwell in this place,
in the land I gave your ancestors long ago and forever."

In fact, every time a widow appears in the scriptures
you can be sure that somewhere in the background
is this law from Exodus.

Loving this God means loving those God loves.
It means protecting the vulnerable.
For the criterion of Israel's society
is the criterion of any society.

And where today do we find the stranger in the land in danger?
It doesn't take much reflection to think about
the anti-immigrant fever that possesses the land today.
Latinos and Muslims need to watch out.

Laws like those in Alabama and Arizona,
as well as the animus seen in the election debates
need only be mentioned for this entire syndrome
to be vividly brought to mind.
One candidate has proposed
that the fence along the southern border be electrified.

Far from the model of protecting the stranger in the land,
we want to achieve a successful society by walling them out
and fencing them in.

Where is the widow and the orphan today?
You have your own examples.
I am thinking of single parents,
struggling to meet the standards of parenting today,
while shoved beyond their limits and resources.
And these quite often overlap with the third category:
the poor neighbors.

Of course, we would prefer they not be neighbors,
but stay somewhere out of sight.

And if we add the indebted to the poor,
we can note that this week college tuition debt
finally exceeded credit card debt.
Without jobs available, it is not clear how these will be paid.

How is our society standing up for the vulnerable?

How is it meeting the biblical criterion for a successful society?

Certainly among the most vulnerable
are the victims of a culture of abortion.
    It is as a failure to shelter the vulnerable
    that our cultural blind spot is most heinous.
And not as an intrinsic evil that sets it apart from all other failures,
without context and connection,
    available to being hijacked for polemical purposes.

For it is a part of the larger mood today
that applauds the lone operator,
    that insists that in the American ideal you are on your own,
    pulling powerfully and successfully on your own bootstraps.

Community and mutual care is proclaimed as socialism
and if you can't make it under these conditions it's your fault.
    Compassion simply postpones the inevitable
    and should be shunned as interfering with natural processes.

And much of the time this harsh and cruel argument
is presented as Christian teaching.

In contrast to this picture that I have drawn,
    there is a biblical story that seems designed
    to illustrate the passage from the law code of Exodus.

It is the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Both were widows,
both were strangers in a strange land,
both were poor.

But the two women prevailed by watching out for one another.
    When Ruth met Boaz, Naomi made sure
    that she would find a place in his house.
        When Ruth married Boaz, she made sure
        that Naomi, her mother-in-law, would be redeemed and rewarded.

But Boaz has a place in this picture as well,
for he is painted as the ideal Israelite,

    who sets guards to prevent Ruth from being molested,
    in the language of Exodus,

and cites the law in favor of Naomi,

against the unnamed relative
who would love to appropriate her property.

Mutual care and upright citizens.
The criterion of a successful society is shown in action.

The Scriptures give us more than the negatives of legal prohibitions.
It also paints pictures of shalom,
of life as it is to be lived in simple but successful terms.

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 30, 2011

Malachi 1:14b—2:2b, 8-10	Judgment on the Temple Priests
Psalm 131:1, 2, 3	Like a child on its mother's lap
1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13	As a mother cares for her child
Matthew 23:1-12	Call no one on earth "Father"

The Prophet Malachi put the blame on the priests.
It was after the Judeans had returned,
from their exile in Babylon,
greatly reduced in number, greatly diminished in prospects.
It was after they had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem.
Things were not going well.
Malachi put the blame on the priests, among others.

The Persians, who had released them to go home,
still kept strict control over their new life back in Judea.
God had not prevailed to allow them to restore the kingship.
And Malachi put the blame on the shoddy sacrifices in the temple.
He noticed that they were sacrificing lame and sick animals.
In effect, he was accusing them of thinning the herd,
by dumping the undesirable animals on the altar.
Malachi pointed out that they would never dare try this
with the emperor's tribute.

What were they thinking?
Did they believe that God couldn't tell the difference?
Did they think that God was too busy or distracted to notice?
What, in fact, was their idea of God?

Sometimes we forget who we are talking to, when we talk to God.
We might make unrealistic promises, use flattering speech.
All as if we were fooling someone.
After all, it is impossible to lie when we pray.
We can't pray lies. Who's to be fooled?
Maybe ourselves?

Jesus is being hard on the Pharisees in today's Gospel.
He accuses them of insincere piety.
Their works are performed to be seen, he says.
Seen by whom? Presumably by other people.
Not by God.
Is God impressed by pious appearances? Hardly.
What were they thinking?

To take it a step further, does God not notice
that they are paying more attention
to what impression they are making on other people
than they are in their act of worship.
Supposedly they are speaking to God,
but they are not paying attention to God.
It is as if someone is talking to you, supposedly,
while actually is texting someone else, monopolizing their attention.

In all of this, the talk is about priests and fathers.
But in the other readings,
the psalm and the passage from First Thessalonians,
we hear about mothers.
God loves us like a mother, the psalmist informs us.
Like a child on its mother's lap.
This is authentic love, not just for appearances.

And Paul tells the community at Thessalonika
that he was like a nursing mother for them.
He is saying that he deeply cared for them,
and the image that came to mind was a mother and her baby.
Authentic love, not appearances.

It is strange how we count on appearances.
And perhaps because we cannot see God
—God doesn't appear in front of us—
we may discount God's presence.
Because we cannot see God present to us,
we believe we cannot be seen.
Maybe we count too much on appearances.

A would like to make an analogy.

This is the season for wasps to enter buildings.
Sometimes a wasp comes into the chapel (as today?).
In honor of St Francis who talked like this,
I think of her as Sister Wasp.
This little wasp makes us nervous,
but she is simply doing what nature has given her to do.

Can she see us? There is a problem of scale here.
Very small animals see things at their level,
but larger items are not so obvious to them.
A hand? Yes. A full-grown person? Not so much.
But I suspect she can sense our presence.

She seems to get excited.
A room full of people fills it with energy,
and she seems to pick up on it.
I like to think she gets buzzed with all the energy,
and so she buzzes around, more active that usual.
She has an awareness, but it is limited.

That is like us in God's presence.
Especially in this room, in this chapel, in this sacred space.

But there is more than this.
Today, this space is filled with our guests,
with the sisters at the perimeters,
or in the balcony, or in the lobby.
Or in their room watching on closed-circuit television.
We are surrounded by them, though we cannot see most of them.

But usually we (they) are surrounded by you, not visible to us,
but you are out there, giving support and inspiration.
And we sense you are there, helping to make
what happens here in this Franciscan community more possible.
We sense that we are surrounded by a supporting community
of concerned believers, who today have come to visit.

And today we are thinking of those
whom we love who have passed on to join the community of saints.
They too are present here, surrounding us.
We are aware of them today,
and we can sense their presence among and about us.
Just because we cannot see them
doesn't mean that they are not present to us.

There is an old tradition
that at the celebration of the Mass
the heavenly choirs of angels gather round.
The back wall of Nativity church honors this tradition
with its three-storey-high angelic figures
worked into the pattern of bricks.
And so we can add other presences to the gathering as well
joining us in the high celebration of the liturgy.

It is no wonder that Sister Wasp gets excited,
in all this congregating of presences,
in all these circles of sacred circles.

In the end, appearances, upon which we put so much value,
doesn't count for all that much.
    What we see, and what we want others to see, may claim our attention.
    But what we cannot see may alter our lives.

Today or tomorrow the planet will reach 7 billion inhabitants.
There is a hive, for sure, surrounding us in the larger world.
    But for the moment, this is the center of the circles
    that move outward to include them.
        For the moment, this is the moment
        that draws the attention of the seen and the unseen.

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 6, 2011

Wisdom 6:12-16	Seeking Wisdom
Psalm 63:2-8	My soul thirsts for you
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18	Grieve not, the dead will rise
Matthew 25:1-13	Ten Bridesmaids

If you ask an American for a figure that personifies Wisdom,
you might get back an image from the cartoons
— an old man with a long beard, dressed in a white robe,
sitting crossed-legged on a mountain top
where people climb up to ask questions such as,
"What is the meaning of Life?"

That is one kind of image.
In the liturgy today we have another — six women,
five in the Gospel
and one in the passage from the book of Wisdom.
The five in the parable from Matthew's Gospel
contrasts with five that are foolish.
The wise are distinguished by their foresight
in bringing enough oil for the occasion.

The experts are not agreed on what the virgins were doing,
or why the bridegroom was delayed.
Clearly it was an evening wedding.
Marriage customs are the most variable of traditions,
and we haven't much information on ancient marriage customs.
One possibility that has been offered
is that the bride had been escorted to the groom's house by the virgins,
but the bridegroom was delayed due to extensive haggling
with the bride's family over the marriage contract, dowry and gifts.
In any case, there has been a delay and the oil is running low.

For Matthew, who was writing his Gospel
much later than Mark, for instance,
the parable represented another issue.
The Second Coming of Christ,
which everyone thought was immanent,
seems to have been delayed.

Matthew is concerned to deal with issues that might arise as a result.
For example, it is conceivable that the Christian community
would begin to get lax and lazy, thinking the pressure was off.
Complacency might present a problem.

Oil for the lamps represented the wisdom
that would carry them through for the long haul,
the in-between time when the first coming of Christ was a memory,
but the second coming was still a dream of the future.
It is the in-between time in which we still find ourselves.

What was this oil?
What was the wisdom for the in-between time?

We have two clues, one from Matthew himself,
and the other from today's liturgy.

To take the **first** of these, Matthew has included in his Gospel
another parable about the wise and the foolish.
It is the parable of the two builders, one we remember.
The wise one built his house on rock,
the other built on sand.

What is striking about this parable is that it concludes
the Sermon on the Mount, at the beginning of the Gospel,
where Matthew shows Jesus setting out his program.
If you hear these words of the Sermon, and do them,
you are like the man who built his house on rock.

But the Sermon is the most radical statement of trust in God
to be found in the New Testament.
Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek.
Do not worry about what you have to wear, or eat.
God will take care.

Does this sound like building your house on rock? Hardly.
Rather, it sounds like risking everything on a whim,
a wager that trusting in God will suffice
for negotiating the difficulties of life.
And yet there it is.

So one meaning of the oil in the lamps is the radical faith
that says God will provide.
It is the quality of faith that will carry the community
through the in-between time.
It supplies the urgency that might be lacking
once the bridegroom seems to be delayed.

The **second** clue to the meaning of the oil
is seen in the first reading today.

In a passage that depicts Wisdom as a woman,
we see a figure that knows what needs are to be met,
who takes care, who makes her rounds
attending with solicitude to those in her care.

Next week we will see this figure fleshed out
as the ideal woman of the house in the Israelite tradition.
She is a picture of competence, decisiveness,
and practical accomplishment.
The liturgy selection leaves some of the interesting things out.
She buys a field. She plants a vineyard.
Wisdom, it turns out, is also a good manager and practical achiever.

Peter Maurin, who along with Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker,
said the Christian builds the new society in the shell of the old.
This is Wisdom at work,
Peter the visionary dreamer, witnessing to the radical response of faith.
Dorothy Day, the practical builder who made that dream a reality.

All of this helps us to understand what we are doing here today.

The vows taken by religious women have been called eschatological signs.
That is to say, they live as witnesses to the fullness of time,
along with the realization that we are not there yet.
They build the new society in the shell of the old.

Another way of saying this is that they witness to a way of life
that makes little sense outside of faith.
They are witnesses, or signs, of this.

Signs to whom? To you and me. To Christians.
To that immense gathering of human beings that we call the "world."
In a world without God, their way of life seems delusional.
Critics can claim that they are life-deniers,
turning their backs to what the world sees as primary.
Until they see what joyfulness is a part of community life.

So they may decide they are naïve,
living a sheltered life without any awareness
of the real struggles that most people have.
Until they discover that religious women,
including the Sisters of St Francis, can be found
in the most difficult, degrading, and unpromising places of need,
where life is cheap,
where people are considered too unimportant to consider much.

So it turns out they are not so naïve, either.

They are a conundrum and a puzzlement.
A problem for those who would dismiss them.
They are a sign of contradiction,
of the new society that can be built inside the old.

They are the wise virgins (if you will)
who have enough foresight to plan ahead.
They are the capable woman who typifies wisdom.
They give credence to a faith that teaches about a God who loves us.

Today we remember those who have passed on before us—
those family and friends, heroes and mentors,
who have shaped the lives we live.
Whose lives in some ways live on in us.
It is this community of the faithful, gathered beyond our sight,
to which the signs of end-time fullness point.
It is this circle of faith that creates community,
this community of Franciscans, and you, the larger community
that lies beyond and behind this religious community.

And with that, perhaps we find a third meaning for the parable.
Without your help they cannot do what they do.
Without your support, they cannot be the witnesses they are,
cannot perform the ministries they perform,
cannot build that new society in the clefts and corners
where it cries out to be built.

With your prayers and support,
you provide the oil for their lamps.

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 13, 2011

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31	A "Worthy Wife"
Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5	Like a fruitful vine
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6	Stay alert and sober
Matthew 25:14-30	Parable of the Talents

In reflecting upon the parable of the Talents this morning,
I will be drawing upon my personal experience.
You can think of this as me talking about myself a lot.
Or you can think of it as a kind of parable,
which you can set against, or alongside of, your own experience
to see if it sheds some light on your own story.

I think the first time that I explicitly thought of the parable
in relation to my life
was when a student once asked me why I became a priest.

I realized in answering that question that the parable had an early effect on me.
I had read it in terms of "return."
That is, in line with the common understanding
I had interpreted "talent" as meaning personal gifts.
I experienced myself as been given certain talents, certain gifts.
And I think I was motivated by the desire
to give some return to those gifts.

As I look back upon the things that I have made,
it is interesting to me to see how many have to do with religion and faith,
even though I had no direct intention of making that emphasis primary.
I am thinking here of music, especially.
The Our Father, the Mark musical, the response psalms,
but also the drawings, much of the poetry, the books.
In retrospect it has shown a singular consistency.

In all of this is the decision to specialize in Scripture for a ministry.
Literature is what I know,
and this is where theology is literary.

But scripture led me to a new understanding of the parable of the Talents.
I learned a talent was a large sum of money, not the ability to play the piano.
The parable was about investment.
And now I began to think of the parable in terms of "risk,"
rather than reward.
Those who risked greatly were rewarded greatly;
those who shied away from taking the risk turned out losing.

Now the parable seemed to be about not playing it safe.

In this part of my life I became aware of those
who wagered everything on their personal talents.
I was already a fan of the work of James Joyce.
What impressed me about his personal life is that everything served his work.
If his literary production turned out to be nothing, he lost everything,
because he bet it all on that.

More close to home, there was Dave Rabe.
I think many of you know, or at least know about, David Rabe,
since he is a product of Holy Trinity parish here in Dubuque.
He and I were in the same class at Loras.
We were in the same creative writing class, with Fr. Ray Roseliep.
We were on the Spokesman staff together. And so forth.

Ten years after I left Loras,
after spending four years in the seminary and five at St Columbkille's,
in both places somewhat out of the mainstream,
I found myself at the Newman Center at UNI.
I will never forget the day I walked across the street to the drugstore
to pick up Newsweek magazine.
I opened it to a picture of Dave Rabe, Broadway playwright.
He had spent time in Vietnam,
and had written a trilogy of plays about his experience,
which were now being produced under the sponsorship of Joseph Papp,
famous New York theater figure,
known for his Shakespeare in the Park productions.

I had one of those moments: What have I done with my life?

But my most powerful impression
was how he had wagered everything on his gift, his writing ability.
I thought I would not be able to do such a thing.
And in fact, I thought, I had not.
For me, writing was something I did in my spare time,
not my daytime job, so to speak.
Whether or not it was accurate, that was my feeling.

I think I envied the ability to risk all.
Again I was measuring things against the parable of the Talents.
But now it was not about returns for the gift given,
it was about the willingness to risk everything.

This week, as I was preparing for today,
I realized that I now saw the parable under a new light.
Now it was neither return nor risk. It was something else.
In order to keep the alliteration going, I will call it "Reward,"
and have it follow Return and Risk.
But it is more the absence of reward that I am thinking about.

Now I am thinking about fidelity without rewards,
without punishments, without sanctions.

In the parable, the first two servants acted
without regard for reward or punishment.
They simply did the job, and did it well.
It was the third servant who thought about the consequences,
and the thought paralyzed him.
I am reminded of the person who is on a height,
maybe a bridge over an abyss of some kind,
and is told not to look down.
but once that person looks down, she or he freezes,
unable to move forward or backward.

My thought is that the parable
is about acting without concern for consequences,
but only to do what needs to be done.
In this, it is a bit like next week's parable of the sheep and goats,
the final sorting-out.

The parable is as long as it is because it insists on repeating
that those who were being judged did not know
that they were dealing with the ruler
when they fed the hungry and satisfied the thirsty,
welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked,
visited the sick and the prisoner.
Nor did those who failed to do so
know they were neglecting the king himself.

The parable is usually read as a warning
about the consequences of our actions.
It is usually interpreted as about rewards and punishments.
And so it would seem.

But the point is that those in the parable
acted without regard to rewards and punishments,
because they did not know it was an issue.
They did not know it was the ruler.

So it is today. Only the servant
who acted out of a concern for the consequences failed the test.

This is different from acting out of a need to show a return on the gift,
since there is no consideration of returns. It is just gift.
Do what needs to be done, for the very reason it needs to be done.

This is different from risk,
because if there are no consequences to be concerned about,
there is nothing obvious to risk.
It is just doing what faithfulness asks be done.

In all of this, the parable hasn't changed much.
At least, not on the page.
Where it has changed is in my reading of it.
One might even say it has changed in my ability to read it.
But what is that, after all, but the journey into discipleship?

A Labor Day Homily, 2011

Long ago, P. John XXIII urged us to read the signs of the times. Here, on this Labor Day, are the signs as I read them.

It was in 1980, that the first public act of newly-elected President Reagan was to bust a union. It worked for him. It was the air controller's union. It may be more than a coincidence that overworked air controllers are sleeping on the job. It may be a bitter irony that it was in the Reagan National Airport that this became a scandal.

Last year, the newly-elected governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, busted a union as his first public act. He explicitly had Reagan's example in mind. It worked for him.

Dubuque is a union town. On the way here today, I had to find a circuitous route to avoid the big parade forming downtown.

A week or so ago, in my nightly walk at Eagle Point Park, I saw the Teamsters gathered for their annual picnic. They effectively took over the park. Most impressive was a big semi rig with a huge Teamsters sign on it. It was dressed up with lights like a holiday display. When I finished my walk and drove out, it had just left the park. Following it some distance behind, I watched it blaze down Rhomberg like a fireball. It made quite a statement.

Last month the Hormel plant in Dubuque voted down forming a union.

It was a couple of weeks ago I found myself cutting out an article from the Telegraph Herald. It was not a political piece. If anything, it could be classified as a self-help article. It was written for you, if you were one of those who still had your job but were suffering from overload, because you were now doing much of the work of those who had been terminated, along with your own job.

It was written by a woman for women, especially (I think) secretaries, and it gave some tips on how to talk to your boss to explain your situation is such a way that you don't get yourself fired. For me, it was a perfect syndrome of powerlessness in a post-union era.

P. John XXIII instructed us to read the signs of the times. These are what I consider signs of the times this Labor Day.

P. John-Paul II, early in his time as pope, in 1981, issued a remarkable encyclical called Laborem Exercens, On Human Work. In it he affirmed the dignity of human work, and did so with a ground breaking new direction in papal teaching. Delivered on the 90th anniversary of P Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum, he leaves behind the tradition of describing the human being in the classical Greek terms of "rational animal." Instead, he turns to the almost Marxist language that would say we realize our being by our work. It is through work that we become who we are.

This past month, zero jobs were added to the American workforce.

I may read the signs of the times, but I have no expertise in addressing the problems of labor today. In the Sermon on the Mount, I learn that we are not to worry about what we are to eat or drink, or wear, or where to find shelter. It does not tell us not to organize. Simply not to worry. It doesn't say we should not take action; it simply says we should trust in God for our needs. We can do both, without contradiction.

It seems to me that it is a particularly Franciscan charism to do just that. Combine trust and action. However, it is not easy for many who are not Franciscan to do.

It may be that we are in a periodic but temporary crisis, the kind that unfortunately is part of the capitalist system. Or it may be, as some say, that we are moving toward a new era in labor, and that the old is going the way of typewriters, cassette tapes, and also, apparently, paperback books, CDs, network television, and so many things that are being changed by the present digital age.

No one seems to know for sure, though whichever pundit happens to have guessed right will be heralded in future discussions as a true genius. In the meantime, we are in this time of uncertainty and psychological depression, if not clearly an economic depression.

In other words, the advice of the Sermon on the Mount is all the more pertinent, but now more urgently than usual. Trust in God, like prayer, is always a fundamental part of faith life, but never more so than when it is the only certain thing we have.