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Preaching the Parables

REFLECTIONS ON THE PARABLES OF JESUS

by Rev. Jack and Rev. Liz Miller

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Introduction

What is a parable? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a parable is “a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.” I believe the parables contained in the New Testament go even deeper than this definition. Parables are short stories or illustrations that the Jesus used in his teaching ministry, and they are very rich with meaning and excellent instruction for all Christians. They have been described as 'earthly stories with heavenly meaning.' Parables serve two important functions: They function as mirrors and as windows. As mirrors, they help us to see and understand ourselves, as we really are. And as windows, they help us to see and understand life and God. Parables also have a place in the tradition of Jewish storytelling. Jesus' parables used elements of everyday life to illustrate a more profound message. In modern times, parables are almost always associated with Jesus' ministry.

During his public ministry, Jesus' words transformed humanity, challenged conventional wisdom, demonstrated servant leadership, and called on his followers to demonstrate the radical love they would need to build God's kingdom on earth. He often did this by teaching with parables.

Parables compose a large share of Jesus' words captured in the Synoptic Gospels. He delivered some of his most memorable lessons through parables. Terms like “The Good Samaritan” and “The Prodigal Son” have transcended religion and become terms people of all faiths recognize.

For many of us, parables are not simply a collection of Bible verses or stories we learn in school. They are dynamic lessons that continue to take on new significance and meaning in an ever-changing world.

The precise number of parables in the Bible varies based on different definitions of what a parable is. Most scholars believe that Jesus gave us more than 30 parables in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Others suggest the total number of parables to be 50 or more. We should avoid fixating on the exact number of parables Jesus shared. The number of parables is far less important than the message they bear.

Jesus encountered so many different groups of people during his public ministry. He spent time with his disciples, with Pharisees, with large crowds of strangers who were listening to him for the first time. Because he needed

to engage different groups of people, Jesus told stories that were able to draw in diverse crowds with different points of view. With parables, Jesus told stories that revealed the truth about God's kingdom while simultaneously challenging the commonly held world views of those who gathered to listen to him. Jesus made references to the ordinary things that would resonate with his followers, using everyday concepts to draw in his audiences. He taught lessons to followers through images of plants, vines, seeds, and Sowers. He shared parables about family dynamics, dinner parties and weddings.

Although the synoptic gospels contain the most parables, there is a growing number of scholars who also believe that there are parables in the Gospel of John. These include the little stories of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–5) or the Childbearing Woman (John 16:21).

Parables attributed to Jesus are also found in other documents apart from the Bible. Some of these overlap those in the canonical gospels and some are not part of the Bible. The non-canonical Gospel of Thomas contains up to fifteen parables, eleven of which have parallels in the four canonical Gospels. Those unique to Thomas include the Parable of the Assassin and the Parable of the Empty Jar.

The noncanonical Apocryphon of James also contains three unique parables attributed to Jesus. They are known as "The Parable of the Ear of Grain", "The Parable of the Grain of Wheat", and "The Parable of the Date-Palm Shoot". In addition, the hypothetical Q document is seen as a source for some of the parables in Matthew, Luke, and Thomas.

Parables often challenge the way we view the world. Catholic theologian Barbara E. Reid writes, "By shattering the structures of our accepted world, parables remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God."

This work contains reflections of some of the most common parables found in the synoptic gospels that Rev. Liz and myself have shared over the years. A few were written by our retired Deacon and others adapted from other sermons and publications. Whether you agree or disagree with our commentary, we sincerely hope that our thoughts and insights will stimulate your own thoughts and insights, and ultimately lead to a better understanding of how the Parables of Jesus reflect on our lives in this day and time.

Note: Some portions of this Introduction were adapted from “Parables of Jesus: A Guide to Parables in the Bible, What They Are and Why Jesus Used Them,” by Stephen Spiwak (<https://hallow.com/blog/parables-of-jesus>), and excerpts of the “Parables of Jesus,” from Wikipedia.

Parables of Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16 - “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built upon a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor would someone light a lamp and then put it under a basket; rather, it is placed upon a lampstand so that it may afford light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine so that it can be seen by others; this will enable them to observe your good works and give praise to your Father in heaven.”

Mark 9:50 - “Salt is good, but if salt loses its saltiness, how can you revive its flavor? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”

Mark 4:21-22 - He said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed? To the contrary, it is placed on a lampstand. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing is secret that will not be brought to light.”

Luke 11:33 - “No one lights a lamp and then puts it in a cellar or under a basket; rather, he places it upon a lampstand so that people may see the light when they come in. ”Salt and Light share one thing in common; they need to be activated to be useful. Salt in the shaker is just a spice, and a light switch in the off position produces nothing but darkness.

Through the images of salt and light, Jesus impresses upon his listeners the principle vocation we have as Christians: As Jesus is the image of salt and light to us as his followers, so must we reflect his presence in our place and time by becoming the images of salt and light in our world today.

Salt and light by themselves are all but worthless and can even be harmful. Their value is realized only when they mix or interact with other things, and their addition brings out the fullness of whatever they come in contact with.

A small portion of salt brings out the natural flavor in every kind of food, from the finest of steaks to freshly popped popcorn. The four ounces of salt in our bodies enable our muscles to contract, our blood to circulate, and our hearts to beat. Salt purifies and softens, cleans, and preserves. Salt is an important

element in making glass, building roads, manufacturing soap and shampoo, bleaching paper and even cooling nuclear reactors. There are over 14,000 uses of salt, but by itself, passive in its container, salt is simply a spice.

Light's true beauty is realized only when we look away from its source and toward what it illuminates. Light transforms the coldness of night into the warm assurance of day. Light enables us to discover, to study, to discern, to behold the beauty of our world and the wonders of God's creation. Light warms, nurtures, sustains, reveals, and cheers the soul.

Salt is perhaps the simplest of chemicals; light is among the most generous of all physical properties, but they share a common limitation; they are useless unless their active properties are put in motion.

Jesus' call to us to become "salt" and "light" for the world is our challenge to live the Gospel we have heard and profess to believe. Until our hopes for justice become our work for justice, until our prayers for peace and unity are first lived in our own home and community, until our professed belief in God as Creator of all things affects every one of our relationships, we are nothing more than flavorless salt, and a lamp hidden under a basket.

Jesus asks us to embrace his example of humility and generosity. Those who are considered the "salt of the earth" do not seek admiration for their acts of virtue or holiness. They are too busy bringing out God's goodness in us and everyone else. Those who are truly a "light for the world" tend to divert attention from themselves in order to focus the spotlight on the goodness of God actively working in our midst. To become "salt" in the spirit of Christ is to bring forth the "flavor" of God in everyone and everything; to be "light" that is a true reflection of Christ is to illuminate the presence of God amid the dark and the cold, the hidden and the unclear.

Our selfless good works are in keeping with the principle of Christian love. If we love one another, our love will be shown in our acts of kindness extended toward others, even complete strangers. Sacrificial service draws people to Christ, and every community needs people who devote themselves quietly and powerfully to the service of those in need. They are, indeed, the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

Jesus is asking us to shake the salt in its container and set it free; flip on the light switch and release the brilliance of God's love for all to see. If we do, this planet on which we live will become a better world, a world filled with flavor, and a brighter world for us and for the generations to come.

Let us become salt and light for Christ.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders

Matthew 7:24-27 - “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts in accordance with them will be like a wise man who constructed his house on a rock foundation. The rain came down, the flood waters rose, and fierce winds battered that house. However, it did not collapse, because it had its foundations on rock. In contrast, everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act in accordance with them will be like a fool who constructed his house on a foundation of sand. The rain came down, the flood waters rose, and the winds blew and buffeted that house. And it collapsed with a great crash.”

Luke 6:47-49 - “I will show you what everyone is like who comes to me and hears my words and acts in accordance with them. He is like a man who in building a house dug deeply and laid its foundations on rock. When the flood rose, it burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been solidly constructed. In contrast, the one who hears and does not act in accordance with my words is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. As soon as the river burst against it, the house collapsed and was completely destroyed.”

Jesus instructed us not to worry. He reminds us that God knows what we need and will provide for us as he does for all creation. He pointed to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field as examples of being clothed and fed by a God who provides. Jesus also reminded us that worrying will not add a single moment to our life-span. What does add length, and depth, and richness to our life comes from serving our heavenly Father. “Seek first ye the kingdom of God and his righteousness” Jesus told us, and if we do, all the things we need in life, all the things we spend so much time and effort worrying about, will be provided; made available to us by a loving and caring God who knows exactly what we need.

In today’s scripture Jesus “Prescription for Life” continues. He tells us that if we live our lives in faith, doing what he asks us to do, that our lives will be solid and strong, like a house built on a rock.

In a small Virginia church, a number of years ago, there is a story told about a long-time member of the congregation. She was a widow with six small children, who although poor and destitute, gave the church \$4 each month as a tithe of her income. Members of the church council were moved by her generosity but concerned that her gift added more to her hardship. They urged the pastor to talk to the poor woman and let her know that, given the weight of her responsibilities to her family, she should not feel obligated to give to the church.

The pastor went to the woman's humbled home and told her of the concerns expressed by the church council. He told her as graciously and supportively as he knew how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. But as he talked with her, tears came into her eyes, and she began to sob. "I want to tell you," she said through the tears, "that in asking me to stop giving to God's work, you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning."

Though poor and struggling herself, this woman's life was centered on the "rock" of humility and gratitude that is of God. She understood that the meaning of her life was found in the dignity of Gospel mercy, reconciliation, and justice. She realized that the values of selflessness and compassion that she was instilling in her children as a parent were as important as the food and clothing she struggled to provide for them. This is authentic faith; faith that is centered in the values of the heart, with an understanding of God's love for us and the irrepressible longing to respond to that love. The faithful disciple builds his/her "house" on the foundation of God's love and seeks to bring that love, with conviction, integrity, and perseverance, into the lives of all who call that house their home.

This is why Jesus tells us that we must build our house upon a rock, the rock-like fidelity of faith. So that when storms, winds and floods come our house will not be swept away and we will inherit the kingdom prepared for us. But he also tells us that we must open our hearts and respond to his will in our lives; that faith in itself is not enough. The work we do to serve the kingdom is the outward expression of that faith. To the poor widow with six children to care for, giving \$4 a month to further God's work became the outward expression of her faith.

What about you and me? How can we be obedient to the Father's will in our lives today? God's call is different for all of us, but no one, regardless of their status in life, is exempt from that call to service. Not even a poor widow with only \$4 to give.

Frances Bacon wrote, "It is not what men eat, but what they digest that makes them strong; not what we gain, but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read, but what we remember that makes us learned; not what we preach or pray, but what we practice and believe that makes us Christians.

Jesus "Prescription for Life" is that simple and that complex. All we need is faith and the willingness to respond to God's Call.

The Parables of New and Old

Matthew 9:16-17 - “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, because the patch eventually pulls away from the cloak and a worse tear results. Nor do people pour new wine into old wineskins, for if they do, the wineskins burst, the wine spills forth, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins. In this way both are preserved.”

Mark 2:21-22 - “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. Nor does anyone pour new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and then the wine and the skins are both lost. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins ”

Luke 5:36-39 - He also told them this parable: “No one tears a piece from a new cloak and sews it on an old cloak. If he does, the new cloak will be torn, and the piece from it will not match that of the old. Nor does anyone pour new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and spill out, and the skins will be destroyed. Rather new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one who has been drinking old wine will wish for new wine, for he says, ‘The old is better.’ ”

Sixty years ago, Bob Dylan recorded “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” a song he wrote to create an anthem for the times. The 60s were all about change. Listen to these lyrics, “The line it is drawn The curse it is cast. The slow one now will later be fast, as the present now will later be past. The order is rapidly fadin’, and the first one now will later be last. For the times they are a-changin’.”

Dylan’s anthem continues to play even now. The times are still changing aren’t they? And as everything around us is changing at breakneck speed, the church of yesterday is faced with a decision regarding today. How does the church balance a changeless message in an ever-changing culture? Well, just like anything and everything else we encounter in life, Jesus has dealt with this one too.

In the backstory to the verses above, we find Jesus at a little get together at Matthew’s (the tax collector) house. Luke 5:29 tells us that Matthew’s fellow tax collectors and “other guests” were there. You don’t have to be too

creative to figure out what kind of shady characters would be the guests at a party that a tax collector is having. Verse 30 tells us that the Religious leaders of the day were pretty concerned with the fact that Jesus is hanging out with these types of people. One version says “scum”. That’s how they viewed broken people who didn’t know God.

Finally, they have had enough. You know that feeling when you just can’t stand it anymore? When your convictions about something have reached the passion boiling point and you have to just say something to somebody? They do. Here’s what they say (Luke 5:33): “John the Baptist’s disciples always fast and pray and so the disciples of the Pharisees. Why are yours always feasting?”

Fasting was like a huge part of the religious fabric of Judaism. They practiced and encouraged fasting as display of one’s level of religious temperature. The more you fasted, the more spiritual you were. And to prove this, the Pharisees fasted twice a week minimum.

The funny thing about this is that only one time in the Old Testament where the Jews were commanded by God to fast, on the day of Atonement. Jesus himself taught about fasting once, in the “sermon on the mount”, where he said not to do it for the wrong reasons.

So, when they question Jesus about why his disciples spend more time feasting than fasting, Jesus knows that their question has very little to do with fasting and very much to do with the changing times.

Jesus’ entire ministry was viewed as an attempt to take the old way (the Law) and trash it to bring in a new way (grace). The only problem with that thinking is that this isn’t what Jesus wanted to do at all.

Jesus’ ministry was all about moving people from an old way of doing things to a new way of doing things. Same thing needed done (people needed to be reconnected back to God) but new way to do it. And the religious leaders just couldn’t see making the shift. So, what does this have to do with old and new things?

Here’s how Jesus put it. In Luke 5:36 he says, “No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and uses it to patch an old garment. For then the new garment would be torn, and the patch wouldn’t even match the old garment.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. The new wine would burst the old skins, spilling the new wine, and ruining the skins. New wine must be put into new wineskins.”

You would never think of taking your new batch of wine and putting it in an old, un-stretched skin. Why? The result was inevitable. There was no mistaking what would happen. The wine would ferment and because the skin was old it would come apart and the wine would be lost. What a waste. It was unthinkable.

Let's put this in perspective. Wheaties is a breakfast cereal that has been around forever, and they have always put pictures of sports heroes on the box as a marketing tool. Can you imagine Wheaties trying to market their product with a picture of Clem Daniels on the box? Does anyone in here 30 and under even know who Clem Daniels was? I doubt even an avid Raider fan under 30 would remember this running back who scored 54 touchdowns in his 9-season career. I would remember the name, but I'm pushing 80.

If you want to sell Wheaties, the "Breakfast of Champions," to a 2024 consumer market, you need to change the picture on the box, not the content of the box. Today, T.J. Watt, the linebacker with the Pittsburgh Steelers, graces the Wheaties box. To young football fans, especially those who support the Steelers, he is recognizable ... and he eats Wheaties.

So, to address the real issue. In order for God to continue his mission to reconnect people to himself, we have to recognize that there is a new way of doing it. It's called Grace. It is no longer about religion and carrying out systematic acts of worship – it is about relationship and pursuing worship in every aspect of who we are.

Jesus is saying. It is a new day in the kingdom of God. And this day doesn't call for heavy fasting, it calls for feasting on this new wine that God is sending into the world.

And just like the religious leaders of the day, every church in every generation is faced with the same decision. Are we willing to see that God is a God of freshness and creativity and newness and that he recognizes that in order to communicate his message of reconnection to the ever-changing world – it takes freshness and creativity and newness. It takes a church that is willing to say the old was good and it worked, but that doesn't mean it will work now. Every church in every generation has the responsibility to ask itself are we willing to make the shift to keep the mission moving?

One last thought. I think it would be good to look at verse 39. Incidentally, Luke is the only one who includes this verse. Jesus said, "And no one who has been drinking old wine will wish for new wine, for he says, 'The old is better.'"

Why do you suppose people think the old wine is better? It is because they know what it tastes like. They know what it looks like, smells like, how it feels and what it will do. There is a familiarity factor.

Nobody likes the unknown. But you don't have to read far through the Scriptures to see a pattern develop. The pattern is that God uses the unknown in the lives of faithful people to unleash his biggest movements.

Because when we don't know what to expect, we are more prone to lean. So, brace yourselves to lean into the unknown as we watch God do more than we ever thought possible. As "the times they are a-changing."

[Adapted from "Shrinking Jeans And Broken Bottles," a 2006 sermon by Brett Adams.]

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23 - He said: "A sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. They sprouted quickly, since the soil had very little depth, but when the sun rose they were scorched, and since they lacked roots, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. But some seeds fell on rich soil and produced a crop—some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times what was sown. Therefore, listen to the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart; that is the seed sown on the path. As for the seed sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy. But such a person has no deep root, and he endures for only a short time. When some trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, he immediately falls away. "The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but worldly cares and the lure of riches choke the word, and it bears no fruit. However, the seed sown in rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Mark 4:3-8, 14-20 - "Listen! A sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. It sprouted quickly, since the soil had no depth, but when the sun rose, it scorched, and since it lacked roots, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it produced no crop. But some seed fell onto rich soil and brought forth grain, increasing and yielding thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what was sown. What the sower is sowing is the word. "Some people are like seed that falls along the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan immediately comes and carries off the word that has been sown in them. Others are like the seed sown on rocky ground. As soon as they hear the word they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no deep root and they endure for only a short time. When some trial or tribulation arises on account of the word, they immediately fall away. "Those sown

among thorns are the ones who hear the word, but worldly cares, the lure of riches, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. But those sown in rich soil are those who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit and yield thirty or sixty or a hundred times what was sown.”

Luke 8:5-8, 11-15 - “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some of the seed fell along the path and was trampled upon, and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some fell onto good soil, and when it grew it produced a crop of a hundredfold. After saying this, he cried out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” The meaning of the parable is this. The seed is the word of God. The seed on the path represents those who hear, but then the devil comes and carries off the word from their hearts so that they may not come to believe and be saved. Those on rock are the ones who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a short while, but in time of trial they fall away. That which has fallen among thorns are the ones who have heard, but as they go along, they are choked by the concerns and riches and pleasures of life, and they fail to produce mature fruit. But that which is on rich soil are the ones who, when they have heard the word with a good and upright heart, keep it and yield a harvest through their perseverance.”

Francis Bacon once wrote, "God almighty first planted a garden. And indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures." I grew up on a small farm and my parents always kept an extensive garden. Corn, green beans, tomatoes, radishes, carrots, zucchini, along with many herbs and spices were planted in neat rows. As the season began the ground was prepared by hand and the seeds were planted and watered with care. There was great expectation for a glorious harvest. It is much the same in the little garden Liz has created in our backyard. The wood planter-boxes were constructed and filled with rich soil, and then the young seedlings were planted and watered. We had fresh zucchini and a salad made with lettuce from that small garden last night. It is as Francis Bacon wrote; gardening is one of the purest pleasures we can experience. Look around you this morning, can you feel the joy in

these boxes and vines. But anyone who keeps a garden knows that while the seeding part is something that requires our constant attention, the actual growing part is beyond our control. We must have faith that our efforts will produce a rich harvest.

In the Parable of the Sower Jesus is talking about this very thing. He tells us that planting a garden entails a combination of hard work and patient faith: All a person can do is plant the seed and nurture it along with water and care, but it is God's unseen hand that transforms the seeds we plant into a great harvest. Christ asks us to embrace the faith of the sower: to plant seeds of peace, reconciliation, and justice in the certain hope that, in God's good time, our plantings will result in a plentiful harvest for the kingdom of God.

In the Palestine of Jesus' day, unlike farms here in the United States, sowing was done before the plowing; before the soil was prepared. Seed was not carefully or precisely placed in the ground. The sower scattered the seed in all directions, knowing all the while that much would be wasted. But the sower also knew that enough seed would find its way to good earth and ensure a plentiful harvest. It is a simple lesson; the sowers' job was to scatter the seed on whatever ground was available, not to decide which soil was good or bad; this would be determined by the plowing that would follow. The sower could not foresee the end result for the seed, only have faith that the harvest would come. Even ground that appeared hard or full of weeds could, under the plow, become good soil, and part of a plentiful harvest. The same is true for us. The outward appearance of a person, their race or culture, economic status, or personal choices in life, should not deter us from planting the seeds of salvation; we cannot know what the end result may be.

We are entrusted with making the kingdom of God a reality to others by the life we live and by sharing the faith we hold. By spreading our "seeds" of faith among all of God's children, our smallest acts of compassion and generosity, our seemingly unnoticed offerings of affirmation and support, can transform the most barren of places into great gardens of hope. We never know how much a kind word will mean to someone else or how the smallest act of charity we extend will transform another person's life.

Sitting Bull told his people, "Behold, my friends, the spring has come; the earth has gladly received the embraces of the sun, and we shall soon see the results of their love." God wants us to be the spring sunshine, the conduit through which the world is changed for good. Through the infilling of the

Spirit and the power of God's grace we can foster peace and hope, love, and joy in a world desperate for a better way. Today we are asked to sow seeds of joy with love and faith, and to leave the harvest to God. Then we too will receive the warm embrace of the Son, and soon see the results of the love we shared in God's name.

The Parables of Weeds, Mustard Seed, and Yeast

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 - He then proposed another parable to them: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep, his enemy came, sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. When the wheat sprouted and ripened, the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and asked, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where then did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘One of my enemies has done this.’ The servants then asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?’ He replied, ‘No, because in gathering the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. At harvest time, I will tell the reapers, “Collect the weeds first and tie them in bundles to be burned. Then gather the wheat into my barn.” Then he dismissed the crowds and went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” He answered, “The one who sows good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned in the fire, so will it be at the end of the world. The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all who cause sin and all whose deeds are evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Matthew 13:31-33 - He proposed still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of plants and becomes a tree large enough for the birds to come and make nests in its branches. And he offered them yet another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until it was completely leavened.”

Mark 4:30-32 - He then said, "With what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use to explain it? It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the greatest of all plants, and it puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Luke 13:18-21 - He went on to say, "What is the kingdom of God like? To what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches. Again, he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until it was completely leavened."

Jesus gives his followers a triple measure of parables to consider. It's parable-madness as Jesus speaks of weeds, mustard seeds, and yeast; an unlikely combination of teaching about the world we all live in, our place in it, and the Kingdom yet to come.

When we hear Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds, it is easy to envision the forces of good and evil coexisting in an imperfect world until the coming of God's kingdom. But in truth, every one of us possess within ourselves something of both the "good" wheat and "evil" weed. We all could do compassionate and good things out of love - but, at the same time, there exists within us that impulse to selfishness and fear that can struggle to control our actions and thought process. We could respond to any situation by taking the moral and ethical high ground - but we can also choose to find some justification for acting out of our own wants and needs or devise some rationalization for taking a less demanding and more profitable approach. Fr. Chris, the Chancellor of our Seminary calls this "The Un-Holy Trinity of Me, Myself, and I." Discipleship recognizes that this struggle exists within each one of us and embraces the hope that, in seeking to imitate Christ's spirit of loving servant hood, we may become the "wheat" for a world that is all too often choking in "weeds."

The second of our parables deals with what is often called "mustard seed faith." Such faith is the ability to see the potential in the smallest of things and the courage and perseverance to unlock that potential. A mustard seed is normally about 1 or 2 mm in diameter, but it can grow into a tree as high as 30 feet. Humanity's dreams of peace, community and justice will be realized, first, in the everyday acts of goodness each one of us does. Christ asks us to embrace the faith of the mustard seed: to trust and believe that our simplest acts of kindness and forgiveness, our singular acts of compassion and reconciliation, can result in a great harvest of peace, justice, and human dignity - one person, one family, one act of grace at a time.

Our final parable seems almost out of place in comparison to the three agricultural parables that came before it. Last week we heard the parable of the Sower, and this week the parables of the weeds and the wheat and the mustard seed. Where does a parable about yeast and flour fit in? The parable of the mustard seed and the yeast are also found in the Gospel of Luke and in the same order. The importance of these two parables is that they emphasize how something very large can grow from the tiniest of beginnings.

Yeast is a living and active ingredient, and a little goes a long way. I remember watching old movies of the Three Stooges & Laurel & Hardy as a kid. They both contain funny scenes where too much yeast is added, and the raising flour gets out of hand. In the parable, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a woman who put yeast in three measures of flour. That's a lot of flour and yet a little yeast makes it all rise. In being the yeast for the world, we have many opportunities to become a living and active ingredient in spreading God's message of hope. Through our acts of kindness and grace we are hiding a handful of yeast in the great mass of humanity that surrounds us. We are in a sense, playing goodness forward as our acts of charity touch or are witnessed by others and they, in turn, extend kindness & grace toward someone else.

Yes, today Jesus speaks of weeds, mustard seeds, and yeast; an unlikely combination of teaching which point toward a central theme: out of any sense of smallness, or emptiness, or nothingness we may have, God's greatness will flower in an astonishing way. God wants us to be the wheat among the

weeds; the mustard seed that grows into a might tree, and the yeast that changes the world for good. Through the infilling of his Spirit and the power of his grace we can become co-workers with Christ, working side by side to foster peace and hope, love, and joy in a world desperate for a better way. All he asks for is our faith and trust.

"All to Jesus I surrender; all to him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust him, in his presence daily live."
Let that be our hymn of commitment today.

Parables of the Hidden Treasure and Pearl

Matthew 13:44-46 - "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure buried in a field, which a man found and buried again. Then in his joy he went off and sold everything he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went off and sold everything he had and bought it."

A teenager lost a contact lens while playing basketball in the driveway. After a brief, fruitless search, he gave up. But his mother took up the cause and within minutes found the lens.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"We weren't looking for the same thing," she explained. "You were looking for a small piece of plastic. I was looking for \$300."

The mother understood the true value of her son's contact lens, and our search for the Gospel "treasure" and "pearl" begins with the same concept. First, we must understand the real value of what we are searching for, and second, we must understand the investment of time and energy required to find what we are searching for. In asking the Lord for wisdom and "an understanding heart" in our first reading, Solomon shows us that the real "treasures" and "pearls" of lasting value are not made of plastic, or silver or gold for that matter, they are the things of God: the love of family and friends, the support found in being part of a community, the sense of joy and fulfillment found in serving and giving for the sake of others. The Gospel "pearl" of great price is having grace that transcends logic, efficiency, and self-interest; grace that sees beyond the currency of the earth to gain the riches of God: love, justice, mercy, and peace. The Gospel "treasure" is the joy and wholeness one experiences in imitating the humble compassion and forgiveness of Christ.

Both of Jesus' parables in today's reading are about seeking, and the hard work required if we are to possess the "treasure" we discover. In the end, what is easy is not usually worth the time, and things that are cheap eventually reveal their real worth. But treasures of real value, treasures that

gives our lives purpose and meaning, requires commitment, humility, and sacrifice. Today's parables challenge us to focus on the things of God and not be caught up with the things of this world. True wisdom begins with tirelessly seeking such treasures that our lives may be enriched, and our hearts filled with joy.

In today's Gospel, both men found treasure by seizing the moment for a fresh life when it came. Both were willing to gamble with the new cards they were dealt. And so, must we. The American poet James Lowell wrote, "once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide." There comes a time in everyone's life when we must decide whether to be consumed by the kingdom of earth, or to embrace the promised Kingdom of God. It's never too late to make that choice. Jane Fonda, the famous actress, made her decision shortly before she divorced Ted Turner. She was 63 at the time. When she was criticized by people and the press for finding Christ so late in life she simply replied, "It doesn't matter if you're a late bloomer as long as you don't miss the flower show." She reminded her friends that while "catfish cannot become a swordfish," we can leave our miserable selves behind, even when we're old, and become a new person in Christ.

Texas preacher and author Max Lucado, puts it this way, "God loves us just the way we are, but refuses to leave us that way. God wants us to become just like Jesus. God wants us to become treasures." The Kingdom of God on earth it seems, is more of a verb than a noun. God expects us to be active treasures, not stagnant boxes buried in the ground. We cannot be an observer in following Christ, he expects us to participate. So, let's become a spiritual and material treasure for others starting today. Let us begin right now to, as Jane Fonda put it, "question everything we do in the light of what Christ would have done." If we can do that, I'm pretty sure we won't miss the flower show.

The Parable of the Net

Matthew 13:47-50 -“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net cast into the sea where it caught fish of every kind. When it was full, they hauled it ashore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish into baskets but discarded those that were worthless. Thus will it be at the end of the world. The angels will go forth and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Some years ago, it was popular to ask the question: "Are we having fun yet?" Those living for God's kingdom would respond: "No, I'm not having fun and I don't expect to." This is not to say that kingdom-living is a "drag," although it is like a dragnet. We are not talking about the TV Dragnet with Jack Webb as Sgt. Joe Friday, or the Movie Dragnet with Dan Aykroyd and Tom Hanks; we are talking about a fishing net that is drawn along the bottom of the sea to catch fish. Like the one in our scripture. Being in a dragnet containing old shoes, tires, tin cans, seaweed, or whatever garbage they had in Biblical times is not a pleasant experience. Verse 48 says the fishermen bring the net ashore and separate the good fish in baskets and throw away the fish that are of no use to them. Therefore, if you're struggling in your Christian life, that's to be expected; it comes with the territory.

To use the examples of Isaiah 64:7 and Jeremiah 18:6, we are like clay which is being pounded, drenched, swirled, cut, molded, and fired. This is not something we feel like doing every day. Kingdom-living does not come under the category of fun. It's beyond that. Kingdom-living is better than fun; 1 Peter 4:13 says that it is "inexpressible joy." Kingdom-joy is not the absence of suffering but is the extent of our proportionate share of the sufferings we endure for Jesus.

Human beings eventually get sick of having fun. Having fun becomes a drag. Look at some of our young people near the end of summer vacation. We eventually want more than fun, diversion, and trivialities. Deep down, we want life to be full. In John 10:10, Jesus says that he comes so that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

How do we accomplish this? Matthew 6: 33 says it all: "See ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you." We want to seek first God's kingdom, even if it is like a dragnet.

For us, the question is not: "Are you having fun yet?" but "Are you living in the kingdom yet?"

The Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin

Matthew 18:12-14 - “Tell me your opinion. If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the other ninety-nine on the hillside and go off in search of the one who went astray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he is more filled with joy over it than over the ninety-nine who did not wander off. In the same way, it is not the will of your Father in heaven that a single one of these little ones should be lost.”

Luke 15:4-10 - “Which one of you, if you have a hundred sheep and lose one of them, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he does find it, he lays it on his shoulders joyfully. Then, when he returns home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my sheep that was lost.’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. Or again, what woman who has ten silver coins and loses one will not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching thoroughly until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I lost.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The gospel this week consists of three parables. The first two are short parables; the third, and probably the best known, is the story of the prodigal son. The first two parables deal with something lost being found. They show that God spares no effort in searching and saving all who have lost their way. Jesus shares these stories because the Pharisees and Jewish scholars are put off by the company he keeps. They complain that Jesus not only welcomes sinners, but he also dines with them. What was considered a sinner in Jesus’ time? It included people who obviously did bad things, but it also included those who were sick, maimed or possessed by demons. Jewish culture at the time believed these people were being punished for some sin committed by them or their parents. Also, tax collectors often

overcharged so they could pocket some of the money they collected. Because of their dishonesty they were considered sinners as well.

Jesus was given the title of rabbi, or teacher, by those who followed him. Teaching is closely related to preaching because both professions often call for a clear explanation of an idea or fact. As a teacher, Jesus welcomed every opportunity to explain his mission on earth. In using the parables of a lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, Jesus wants to make it very clear that the Son of Man is concerned about, searches for, and desires to save the lost by helping them to find a clear path back to God. Because we have heard one or two homilies about the prodigal son over the years, I shall concentrate on the first two parables. Have no fear, I'm sure that we will hear about the prodigal son again in years to come.

We have all experienced loss. Whether it was in the form of a treasured object, a relationship, a job, or a loved one. It is a very common human experience. In a job that was considered menial at the time, the shepherd was perceived as smelly, often shifty, and not really accepted in polite society. In the first parable, we see the shepherd making a rather risky move by leaving the ninety-nine to go search for one lost sheep. We would like to think that he was relying on the cooperation of his fellow shepherds in guarding the sheep in his absence. It was common practice to gather herds of animals together for added protection. It is likely that this is when the shepherd counted his sheep and discovered one was missing. We have read accounts of how when the sheep were ready to move on for grazing purposes, that the shepherd would call his sheep, and they would know his voice and follow him. The bond between the shepherd and his sheep is almost human-like, similar to the relationship between parent and child. For the shepherd to go in search of the one lost sheep demonstrates that bond. Through this parable, Jesus is teaching us that that same bond exists between God and all humankind.

In the next parable the point is made that the woman had ten coins and lost one. Women in Jewish society were seen as possessions, not equal with men, and they had few rights. So, it is significant for Jesus to be using a woman in a parable. It appears that in this household, and probably in most households of that time, that the woman of the house kept track of the money

and expenses. The woman in our story even uses precious oil to light a lamp to search for the missing coin. She seems almost obsessive in her search. It is important to note that she takes it upon herself to find the missing coin and does not shift the responsibility onto someone else. All she knows is that it is lost somewhere in the house. The lesson Jesus is teaching is that we can't assume someone else is searching for the lost soul. We must make it our personal responsibility even if it results in the expense of precious time and effort.

So, what's the bottom-line lesson in these parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin? The simple answer is this, every soul is important to God, each one of us is a child of the same Creator, brothers, and sisters through Christ Jesus. The Parable of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin reminds us that we all are lost and need saving. Christ calls you and I to help him in this noble cause. Like each of the characters in these parables, we must seek out the lost and hurting, and help them to find their way back; back to God. We do this through every kind gesture or word we extend in Jesus' name.

Bishop Fulton Sheen once said, "God does not love us because we are valuable. We are valuable because God loves us." A sheep, a coin, they have value as measured by the world, but you and I are valuable because of our relationship with God, as measured by the cross.

"In Search of Value," a sermon by Rev. Helen Schwinden, retired Deacon

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Matthew 18:21-35 - Then Peter came up to him and asked, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy times seven. For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a man was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. Since he had no possible way to repay what he owed, his master ordered him to be sold, together with his wife, his children, and all his property, to satisfy the debt. At this, the servant fell to his knees, saying, ‘Be patient with me, and I will repay you in full.’ Moved with compassion, the master of that servant let him go and canceled the debt. However, when that servant left, he encountered one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii, and, choking him, he demanded, ‘Pay me back what you owe.’ His fellow servant fell to his knees and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Be patient with me and I will repay you.’ But he turned a deaf ear and had him thrown into prison until he had repaid the debt. “When his fellow servants observed what had happened, they were greatly upset, and, going to their master, they reported everything that had taken place. Then his master sent for the man and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you for your complete debt because you begged me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?’ And in his anger his master handed him over to be tortured until he repaid the entire debt. In the same way, my heavenly Father will also deal with you unless each of you forgives his brother from the heart.”

“Lead me not into temptation, I can find it all by myself.”

That line from the country music song “Lead Me Not” by Lori White, may make us smile a bit, but it also makes us think about what tempts us in life. Exactly what are the most common sins? “Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll?” No, they ranked way down on the list. It may surprise you, but one survey ranked procrastination, overeating and laziness as the top three sins tempting most Americans.

While we may relate to this survey in one way or another, there is a greater temptation and sin we all face that did not make the list; the ever-present sin of refusing to forgive others. The elusive virtue of forgiveness is mentioned more times in the scriptures than the virtue of purity.

In our scripture reading today it seems almost odd that Peter should ask the question about forgiveness that introduces the parable of the unforgiving servant, since Peter himself will be forgiven by Jesus for his denial in the months to come.

It was common teaching in Jesus' time that one must forgive another three times, so, Peter may have been expecting a pat on the back by suggesting forgiveness seven times rather than the conventional three; but Jesus responds that there should be no limit to the number of times we must be ready to forgive those who wrong us, just as there is no limit to God the Father's forgiveness of us.

Forgiveness can only be given out of love and, therefore, demands sacrifice on the part of the forgiver. To forgive as God forgives means to intentionally act to purge the evil that exists between us and those who harm us, to take the first, second and last steps toward bridging divisions, to work ceaselessly to mend broken relationships and to welcome and accept the forgiven back into our lives unconditionally, totally, and joyfully.

Forgiveness begins with empathy, that is the ability to see a situation from the perspective of the other. As the story of the unforgiving servant makes clear, such empathy does not come easily to humankind: it means overcoming our own anger and outrage at the hurt we have suffered and to refocus our concern, instead, on the person who wronged us; such empathy also means possessing the humility to face the hurt we may have inflicted on others because of our own insensitivity and self-centeredness.

Before our merciful Father in heaven, every one of us is spiritually overleveraged, unable to make good on the debt we owe, sinners one and all. But the great mystery of our faith is that God continues to love us, continues to call us back to a grace filled relationship, continues to seek not retribution but to make things right between us. All God asks in return is that we forgive one another as he forgives us, to help one another back to our

feet when we stumble, just as God lifts us back up when we have fallen and helps us to find the straight and narrow path again.

Jesus calls us to seek reconciliation that transforms and re-creates forgiveness that is joyfully offered and humbly but confidently sought; forgiveness that transforms the estranged and separated into family and community; forgiveness that overcomes our own anger and outrage and focuses on healing the relationship with the person who ruptured that relationship.

Real love creates a climate where forgiveness and understanding are readily given and received. In all his parables on forgiveness, Jesus calls anyone and everyone who would be his disciples to be committed to the work of reconciliation, to be always ready and willing to make the first move toward forgiveness, and to be actively engaged in the work of creating community. Only in forgiving and seeking forgiveness are we able to realize the possibility of bringing healing and new life to a pained and grieving situation. Christ calls us to create within our families and communities that kind of place, that kind of environment.

Francis of Assisi prayed, “It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.” Let that be our prayer each day as we pursue the elusive virtue of forgiveness.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16 - “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o’clock, he saw some others standing idle in the marketplace. He said to them, ‘You also go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’ When he went out again around noon and at three in the afternoon, he did the same. Then, about five o’clock, he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the workers and give them their pay, beginning with those who came last and ending with the first.’ When those who had started to labor at five o’clock came, each of them received a denarius. Therefore, those who had come first thought that they would receive more, but they were paid a denarius, the same as the others. And when they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner, saying, ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour, and yet you have rewarded them on the same level with us who have borne the greatest portion of the work and the heat of the day.’ The owner replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am not treating you unfairly. Did you not agree with me to work for a denarius? Take your pay and leave. I have chosen to pay the latecomers the same as I pay you. Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ Thus, the last will be first and the first will be last.”

Does today’s parable seem unfair? We live in a world where everything needs to be fair. Are we jealous because someone else gets more? Do we always have to keep up with our neighbor or do we feel happy for them when good things happen?

The landowner pays a full day’s wages regardless of how long they have worked. He also responds to those who are unemployed and find little work. They still need a day’s wage to survive. Each was paid as agreed. We also see that God is just and compassionate.

The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is centered on gratitude and thankfulness for what we have received and the humility to share those blessings with others. In this spirit of being thankful, we discover the happiness that is of God. Today's gospel calls us to a change on how we see and live our lives. Jesus calls us to look beyond ourselves and rejoice in all that we have been given. We have family, friends, our health, opportunities, and freedom.

What is this parable about and how does it speak to us today? The employer in this story is a caring person. This story was written in a time when there was the threat of unemployment. Who are these workers who come late? Those who repent on their deathbed. Those who battle addiction all their lives. Those who wasted their youth and were only able to give Jesus there withered last years? Tax collectors? Prostitutes?

Jesus gave us this story to make a point, to leave a lesson. The employer is a caring and compassionate person. The early birds are furious because they worked all day and got the same amount. It was a just wage, but they expected more.

What does the parable have to do with the kingdom of heaven? This is how God acts towards his people. Our God is kind and merciful. No one earns the kingdom of Heaven. It is a gift of grace.

Some of us are blessed with doing the will of God from an age of understanding. We all make detours in our faith, but we try to be what God wants us to be throughout life. Is it fair then that someone on his or her deathbed is converted, or the killer in prison finds God? Will their reward be the same as those who followed God all their lives? Where is the fairness in that?

One must remember that our ways are not Gods ways. God speaks in a thousand different ways: "To Moses, the thunder on Sinai, to Elijah, the still small voice on Horeb, the word of the Lord from the pulpit, the flesh of the Lord that you receive, the faith of a friend, the despair of a dear friend but our intellect can get in the way.

A dear friend of mine named Ernie was a father figure when I was growing up. I had not seen him in many years, but he ended up in a nursing home in

Lynden with Alzheimer's. He recognized me until he got worse and then he recognized the veil I wore. I gave Ernie a picture of Jesus. One day he said to me, "You know what I do with the picture of Jesus?" He went on to say that at night when he could not sleep that he used his flashlight and just looked at Jesus. What a profound way to pray. The silence and love of two...the loved and the beloved. This was an encounter of love.

We may have the degree, the salary, the house, and the friends but look at all that God has given us. Turning to God is a gift. I believe that this parable talks to us about conversion, and the need to change. We have a covenant with God that ties us to every person as brothers and sisters. God gave us life. Eyes to see, hands to touch, a mind, a heart to beat...the power to believe where others deny, to hope where others despair, to love where others hate. Turning to God is a gift.

God constantly offers forgiveness. When the criminal on his own cross of death begs to be remembered at the coming of the kingdom, Jesus did not respond. Life is tough, but you are too late. It is almost 3:00 PM. You should have come around earlier. No, Jesus said, "today you will be with me in paradise."

God asks us to open our minds and hearts to something so much bigger and better. He tells us to trust and pray. Conversion is a daily work in our lives. We need to grow and change.

The landowner invited all the laborers into the workplace, and everyone gets exactly what they need. When we say the Our Father we say, "Give us this day, our daily bread. We need to let go of the world and trust in God to do just that. We will never totally understand the love God has for us, but we need to learn to surrender to the life has called us to live.

The Parable of the Two Sons

Matthew 21:28-32 - "What is your opinion about this? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'My son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not,' but later he had a change of heart and went. The father then gave the same instruction to the second son, who answered, 'Of course I will,' but then did not go. Which of the two complied with his father's instruction?" They responded, "The first." Then Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to show you the path of righteousness, but you did not believe him, whereas the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. Yet even after you realized that you still refused to change your minds and believe in him.

A man lived alone and was confined to bed. His parish priest came to see him. After a short visit, the priest stood to leave and said, "I'll pray for you." The bed-ridden man replied, "I can pray for myself, Father. If you really want to help me out, you could take out the garbage and do the laundry." It appears that the man had been studying the Book of James which teaches that as Christians, words that are not accompanied by actions are useless. (James 2:17 NLT)

How do people know that we are Christians? What identifies us as a follower of Jesus? The cross around our neck? The Bible under our arm? The fact that we walk into and out of a church on Sunday. Does that make us a Christian? If we meet a stranger on the street, how would we know if they are a Christian? Do we really know what a Christian is? Would we recognize one if we met one?"

We live in a world infatuated with labels. Act or dress in a certain way and you are given a label. Drive a certain type of car, work in a certain industry, convey certain mannerisms, talk with a certain inflection, pitch, or accent, and you are given a label. If you carry a Bible, wear a turban, have tattoos or facial hair, you are given a label. Where we live, what we eat, where we shop, who we call a friend or enemy, everything we do or do not do results in being labeled. Our society is obsessed with labels and putting them on

other people or groups of people. What label has society placed on us, and more importantly, does that label really identify who we truly are?

In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus uses a parable about two sons to make a point about how we perceive others. The outward actions and appearance of a person does not necessarily identify the real individual who dwells within; labels that we or our society or our culture place on others can be deceiving, and they may not define a person's true nature. The son who said “no” but changed his mind, the son who said “yes” and did not go, the tax collectors, the prostitutes and even the chief priests and elders were all given labels by the times and the culture Jesus lived in. But as he points out to his listeners, these people truly were on the inside and defied the label they had been given on the outside. The seemingly disobedient son became obedient, the apparently obedient son was, in truth, disrespectful; those who should have shown faith in the kingdom lacked the capacity to recognize it, and those who society and culture had marginalized, became welcome and accepted because they openly embraced and boldly expressed their faith.

The foundation of Jesus' teaching upholds the sacred dignity of all men and women in the eyes of God: the poor, the powerless, the ignored, the forgotten, the marginalized, and yes, those who have been wrongly labeled. Christ calls us to look beyond hasty impressions and faulty perceptions, he asks us to seek out and lift-up the goodness that resides in every person, who is like each one of us, a child of God, our brother or sister in Christ. Compassion, forgiveness, and mercy are only words until our actions become full expressions of those values in our relationships with others. How much better would our opening story have been if the priest had said, “let us pray together,” and then ask if there was anything he could do to help-out afterwards. Identifying ourselves as Christians and calling ourselves disciples of Jesus mean nothing until our lives express that identity in the values we uphold and the beliefs we live. True discipleship requires us to embrace the Gospel not as an unattainable ideal, but as an attitude and perspective for approaching our world, and a compass that guides us on our journey.

Let us be the bearers of the Good News in all that we do and say. Let God shine through our life as we humbly, willingly, openly, and lovingly place all

that we are on the altar of God's service. And above everything else, let us follow the example of Jesus who tells us to love God and one another as he loves us. Let us live the faith we possess. "My life," said Gandhi, "is my message." Christ wants the same for you and me. Let the label we wear on the outside truly express the contents of our heart on the inside; let our words and deeds speak the same language.

Parable of the Tenants

Matthew 21:33-44 - “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, fenced it in on all sides, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went off on a journey. When the time for harvest approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his share of the produce. But the tenants seized his servants and beat one of them, killed another, and stoned a third. Again, he sent more servants, but they treated them in the same manner. Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ And so, they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now what do you think the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants when he comes?” They said to him, “He will kill those evil men, and then he will lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest. Jesus then said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes’? Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce fruit in abundance. [The one who falls on this stone will be broken into pieces, and the one on whom it falls will be crushed.]

Mark 12:1-11 - Then Jesus began to speak to them in parables: “A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went off on a journey. “When the time arrived, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized the servant, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again, he sent them another servant, but they beat him over the head and treated him shamefully. Then he sent another, and that one they killed. He also sent many others, some of whom they beat, and others of whom they killed. Finally, he had only one other to send—his beloved son. And so, he sent him to them, thinking: ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours!’ And so they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner

of the vineyard do? He will come and put those tenants to death and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord this has been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes'?"

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, a dragon wreaked havoc throughout the land. One day, while the king was away, the dragon attacked the castle. The dragon was so ugly and smelled so disgusting that the guards froze in terror as the dragon demolished the palace. As the destruction continued, the guards finally came to their senses and began to shout and curse at the dragon and threatened the beast with their weapons. But the angrier and more threatening the guards were, the bigger the dragon got, the worse the dragon's smell became, the more violent destruction the dragon wreaked.

Amid all this turmoil, the king returned. He had never seen a creature as ugly or experienced a stench as foul as this dragon, now twice the size it had been. But the wise king knew exactly what to do.

He smiled at the dragon and welcomed it. He softly patted the dragon's scaly tail.

"Welcome to our palace," the king said. "Has anyone offered you anything to eat or drink?"

And with each kind word and gesture, the dragon became a little smaller, less smelly, and less threatening.

The king's court began to catch on. One steward offered the dragon tea; another brought bread and jam; the court physician treated an old wound in the dragon's hide. With every kind word, deed or thought, the dragon grew smaller and less threatening. The king and his court continued to be kind. Soon the dragon became so small he could hardly be seen. Then, after a maid offered a blanket for the night, the dragon vanished completely.

In its place there appeared a small dove, that flew away into the morning light*.

Like the tenants in today's parable, we are often too quick to reject whatever scares us or threatens us, whatever we don't understand, whatever challenges us and the safe little worlds we have created for ourselves. Christ the Messiah comes with a new, transforming vision for our "vineyard": a vision of love rather than greed, of peace rather than hostility, of forgiveness rather than vengeance, a vision that enables us to come to terms with the ugliest and smelliest dragon among us.

In the person of his Son, God enters the human experience. He lives our lives, embraces our fears and hardships, and shows us how to transform and re-create our own lives in his love. Faith is not a power bestowed on a self-elected elite nor is God a club we swing to impose our sense of right and wrong on others; faith is the awareness of God's presence in our lives, a presence that should humble us with gratitude and inspire us with hope to continue our journey in this life and beyond.

Fear, selfishness, and bigotry can kill whatever chances we have of turning our part of God's vineyard into something productive; but, through justice, generosity, and compassion, we can reap a rich and fulfilling harvest for the kingdom of God, regardless of how small or poor or insignificant our piece of the vineyard may seem.

Christ's vineyard is growing here and now. Whether it will yield a harvest worthy of him or the wild grapes of Isaiah's vineyard, will depend in a large measure on us, on the depth of our faith and love, on our enthusiasm, on the way we dig and plant and build and make peace with the dragons that walk among us.

*Adapted from "The anger-eating demon" by Ajahn Brahm.

Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Matthew 22:2-14 - “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent forth his servants to summon those who had been invited to the banquet, but they refused to come. Then he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Behold, my banquet has been prepared, my oxen and my fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet. But they ignored his invitation. One went off to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged, and he sent forth his troops who destroyed those murderers and burned their city to the ground. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy of that honor. Go forth, therefore, to the main roads and invite everyone you can find to the wedding banquet.’ The servants went forth into the streets and gathered together everyone they could find, good and bad alike. And so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to greet the guests, he noticed one man who was not properly dressed for a wedding. ‘My friend,’ he said to him, ‘how did you gain entrance here without a wedding garment?’ The man was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind his hands and feet and cast him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Luke 14:15-24 - On hearing this, one of the dinner guests said to him, “Blessed is the man who will dine in the kingdom of God.” Jesus said in reply, “A man gave a sumptuous banquet, to which he invited many. When the hour for the banquet drew near, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited: ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But one after another they all began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have bought a parcel of land, and I must go out to inspect it. Please accept my apologies.’ Another said, ‘I have purchased five yoke of oxen, and I am on my way to try them out. Please accept my regrets.’ Still another said, ‘I have just gotten married, and therefore I am unable to come.’ When the servant returned, he reported all this to his master. Then the owner of the house became enraged, and he said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and

bring in here the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ Shortly afterward, the servant told him, ‘Sir, your orders have been carried out, and some room is still available.’ Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the open roads and along the hedgerows and compel people to come,[b] so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, not one of those who were invited shall taste my banquet.’ ”

Jesus shares a parable about a king and the wedding banquet he has planned for his son; a feast, a table of plenty. It is Jesus' third encounter with the religious leaders of his day and his story contains two chapters, each with its own unique message.

In chapter one, the king sends out an invitation to the people to come to this magnificent banquet which is already prepared and waiting. The invitation is sent out twice, but the people refuse both requests. Unlike Luke's account (14:16-24) Matthew's version does not provide details about their refusal, but at the second invitation the people mistreat and even kill the king's slaves. In anger the king retaliates by killing those who murdered his slaves and then he burns their city to the ground. To us it may seem to be a harsh response, but in the honor and shame system of Jesus' time, this type of reaction would be expected; for Matthew and his readers, the memory of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. would be fresh in their minds. Chapter one is just another illustration of how Israel has rejected God's promise through the centuries, ignoring God's message and killing the prophets, blinded by the letter of the law, and not seeking or fulfilling the spirit of the law.

A third time the king issues an invitation to the banquet but this time the call is extended to all people good and bad alike. Gentiles, foreigners, and those who do not know God, are invited to the Lord's table. Finally, the wedding hall is filled.

Now we come to what seems to be a very odd event. In chapter two of our story, the king sees a man present at the banquet who does not have on a wedding robe. This is strange in that everyone would have been given a robe as they entered the hall. The king confronts the man who is surprised and

speechless, and then has the man bound up and thrown out of the hall. What could this mean? It means that salvation is not automatic. Entrance into the kingdom of heaven demands change. Matthew 7:21 states, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." The wedding robe symbolizes a new person, a new self-understanding, a new way of living. Our old self must be left behind in the baptismal waters. Christian living demands fundamental change, donning a new robe as our new life begins.

The Christian who does not wear this mantle of repentance and good deeds will suffer the same fate as those who reject outright the invitation of God to attend the wedding banquet in heaven. As the apostle Paul instructs in Romans 13:14, we must "put on," "clothe ourselves" with the garment of Christ.

God invites all his children to the table. Any distinctions our world may draw based on economic class or influence, discrimination by age or race, gender or orientation, reservations due to mental or physical ability disappear. Regardless of our circumstances, despite our doubts and sense of unworthiness, God says "Come;" Come to the feast.

The parables of the king's wedding feast and wedding garment confront us with the reality that we cannot be Christian without conversion; we cannot come to the feast of heaven while remaining indifferent to the empty plates before so many of the world's children; we cannot love the God we cannot see if we cannot love those we can see.

Our daily lives are pieces of cloth that we sew together to make a garment fitting to wear at God's wedding banquet. They are made from the fabric of our kindnesses, our caring, our compassion; they are sewed together with the thread of gratitude, respect, and humility. God's invitation should fill each of us with hope despite the obstacles we encounter on the way; making our lives into a proper garment for that banquet should give a sense of direction and meaning as we make our way to God's heavenly feast. Let us accept God's invitation today.

Parable of the Fig Tree

Matthew 24:32-35 - "Learn this lesson from the fig tree. As soon as its twigs become tender and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things take place, know that he is near, at the very gates. Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."

Mark 13:28-29 - "Learn this lesson from the fig tree. As soon as its twigs become tender and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things come to pass, know that he is near, at the very gates."

Luke 21:29-31 - Then he told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree or indeed at any other tree. As soon as it begins to bud, you know that summer is already near. In the same way, when you see these things come to pass, know that the kingdom of God is near."

"The falling leaves drift by my window. The autumn leaves of red and gold."

The plot and storyline of the 1956 film starring Joan Crawford and Cliff Robertson may have faded with time, but the lyrics of its title song, sung by Nat King Cole, have lived on. The autumn leaves that fall are a signal of change; the warmth of summer is behind us and the cool of winter lies ahead.

The leaves of autumn remind us that we live in an ever-changing and temporary world. The images Jesus describes in today's Gospel, like the leaves of autumn, can be unsettling as they confront us with the reality that everything in our lives will one day be no more. For some, thoughts of such change are hard to handle, but that is not what God intends for us. We can choose to stay buried in sorrow and hopelessness over the fallen leaves of our lives, or we can stop to consider the possibilities of new life given from the seeds we have planted without even knowing. Jesus calls us to embrace, not the things of the body but of the soul, not the things of the world but the things of God: the lasting, eternal treasures of love and mercy, the joy that comes only from selfless giving, the satisfaction that comes from lifting up the hopes and dreams of others.

The readings from these last Sundays of the liturgical year are meant to shake us up a bit. We hear from Daniel (12: 1-3) about the distress that will face the world when the end of times are near. "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake," Daniel writes, "some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace." But in this prophesy we are not being called to panic, to awake from our earth-slumber in fear and distress. Instead, we are called to be awake and aware, ready for what is to come, and at peace in the knowledge that the love of God will overpower any threat we may perceive.

In today's Gospel, Jesus prophesies that, at the appointed day and hour, a time known only to the Creator of all things, he will return to earth once again in the same splendor that he left. Mark writes that we "will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory," and he will send out the angels to gather his "elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky." This is an interesting word that Mark has used here. In both Hebrew and Greek, in both the Old Testament and New, the "elect" refers to God's chosen ones. While many misinterpret this to mean one particular faith tradition or another, the usage in Mark is clearly applied to the universal Church of God; the body of believers who have become the followers of Christ's teachings, and accepted Jesus for who he said he was. Mark tells us that no effort will be spared in finding these chosen ones; the angels will scour earth and sky so no one is left behind, and all will be welcomed in the comforting embrace of the Father's love. Why should we fear such a moment?

But the work of the angels to find and lift up the chosen ones in our midst does not wait for some unknown day and hour, it begins in the here and now. You and I can become the earth-angels who give hope to the persevering, who pick up the stumbling, who heal those broken in body or in spirit. Through our own baptisms, Jesus empowers us to begin the work of the building the Father's kingdom by gathering his elect, his chosen ones, through the acts of compassion, reconciliation, and justice we accomplish in his name.

The autumn leaves are indeed a sign of change, but they also bring a promise of hope. When winter fades away, we know a new spring and

summer will follow. Let the circle of seasons encourage us in our own journey through the circle of life. Let us awake anew to the task God has called us to: as "autumn leaves start to fall."

Parable of the Wise and Faithful Servant

Matthew 24:45-51 - “Who, then, is the faithful and wise servant whom his master has put in charge of his household to give its members their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant if his master finds him doing so when he returns home. Amen, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. But if that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is detained,’ and he proceeds to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will return on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. He will punish him and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Luke 12:42-48 - The Lord replied, “Who then is the faithful and wise steward whom his master will put in charge of his household to give its members their allotment of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant if his master finds him doing so when he arrives home. Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his property. But if that servant says to himself, ‘My master is detained in arriving,’ and he proceeds to beat the menservants and the maids, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will return on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know. He will punish him and assign him a place with the unfaithful. The servant who knew his master’s wishes but did not get ready or do what his master wanted will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know those wishes, and who acted in such a manner as to deserve a beating, will be beaten less severely. Much will be demanded of a person to whom much has been given, and even more will be asked of a person to whom more has been entrusted.

I seldom use sports illustrations, but I came across this one that leads right into the message today. It was January 3, 1993, and the NFL playoffs had begun with the wildcard round between Houston and Buffalo. The clock said 13:19 in the third quarter, and Houston was so far ahead of Buffalo (35-3) that the fans began streaming out of Joe Robbie Stadium. It was January in Buffalo, so why stick around when the weather was chilly and rainy?

But the game wasn't over. Had those Bills fans stuck it out, they would have seen something quite amazing. In less than 7 minutes, the Bills had scored twenty-seven points, coming within four points of Houston. But the game was still not over. The game went into overtime and the game ended with the Bills winning 41-38.

It was Yogi Berra that said, "It ain't over till it's over." On that chilly day in January, a lot of Bills fans had given up on their team, but had they remained faithful and stuck it out, they would have witnessed the largest post-season comeback in the history of football.

Semper Fi (short for Semper Fidelis) is a Latin phrase adopted by the United States Marine Corps. Semper Fi means "always faithful," or "always loyal." For followers of Christ, "it ain't over till it's over" applies to the return of Christ. We are called to serve him and continue serving him until he calls us home. Semper Fi, fellow Christians. Always be faithful to the end.

The servant that Jesus speaks of in our scripture is no ordinary one. Many times, a well-to-do household had a servant who was like a manager, overseeing the Masters estate and his servants. Such a high-level servant could oversee giving rations to other servants if the master weren't present. Since the master can return at any time, a wise servant maintains the character of readiness and faithfulness to the task in front of him. As a result, the master will entrust his faithful servant with all his possessions because the servant was faithful with some of his possessions.

Whether we think we've been given much or little, we are to use what God has given us for the sake of his kingdom. What he has entrusted to us is his. We are merely stewards of what he has placed in our hands. So, we are to use it as he would want it to be used. That says a lot about giving to the Lord and being good stewards of what he has given us.

The parable of the wise and faithful servant illustrates the principle that we should always be ready for Jesus's return. That readiness includes always being faithful and being found doing what we are called to do at the time Christ return. We need to realize that our life, our breath, our energy, and our gifts are entrusted to us from God to be used in his service.

Jesus is telling you and me that the reward for our faithfulness and the responsibilities we've been given, is even more responsibility. That may

sound strange but there is a sense of boundless joy that accompanies these responsibilities. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), those who were given more, those put in charge of many things, were told that they would share their Master's joy. Let us pray that when Christ returns, we may be found faithful to the work of God.

So, here is the lesson within a lesson. Yes, we should be faithful to Christ, be alert, and watching joyously for his return one day. But at the same time, we should be ready to share the gospel when the opportunity arises. As Christians, one of our tasks is to proclaim the gospel and point others to the hope, grace, and salvation found only in Jesus Christ. Think of it this way, once Jesus returns, our opportunity to share Christ will be gone, and so will others' opportunity to accept him.

So, let's continue the good work by living lives that reflect the faith we hold. Semper Fi fellow servants of God. Let's always be wise and faithful to Christ our savior.

Amen? Amen!

[Adapted from a 2022 sermon by Rev. Jerry Cospers]

Parable of the Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13 - “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. When the foolish ones took their lamps, they neglected to take any oil with them, whereas those who were wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. Since the bridegroom was delayed in coming, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, a shout was raised: ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ Then all the virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ The wise ones replied, ‘No, for there may not be enough for both us and you. You had better go to the merchants and buy some.’ While they went off to purchase it, the bridegroom arrived, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. Then the door was locked. Afterward, the other virgins returned, and they cried out, ‘Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!’ But he replied, ‘Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Believe it or not, I was a Boy Scout as a kid. I still have fond memories of scouting. Back-packing through the woods, cooking pan-cakes over an open campfire, and earning merit badges. My swimming merit badge was quite an accomplishment considering that I almost drowned at summer camp the year before. I taught myself how to swim that summer, but swimming was never really my thing. I relate to the comedian who said, “swimming to me is staying alive while I’m in the water.” (Paul Stookey) That’s why I joined the Marines instead of the Navy after high school.

Scouting was a great experience though and taught many valuable lessons that I carried into adulthood. To always strive to “do my best,” to “do my duty to God and Country,” to be helpful to people, and to “keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.” All parts of the oath every Boy Scout takes, and the Scout motto everyone tries to live each day; “Be Prepared,” always be in a state of readiness, mind, body, and spirit. That’s what our gospel passage is all about this morning, being prepared.

A Gallup poll revealed that 78% of Americans anticipate going to Heaven. Yet, many of them admit they never pray or study the Scriptures or even go to church. Why would God want them in Heaven? Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. The responsibility of being prepared is a strength we all must have. Our conduct today determines our future tomorrow with Christ.

Time is a gift from God. Too often we fall into the mindset of the five "foolish" bridesmaids of today's Gospel: We believe that there will always be enough time to make our lives what we want them to be and that there is an unlimited amount of "oil" in our lamps to make it all happen. Today's Gospel calls us to see our lives as a wonderful gift from God, but a gift that is short and fragile. Jesus calls us to realize that now is the time to seek the compassion and peace of God for ourselves and for those we love, while our lamps are filled with God's wisdom and grace.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids reminds us that we have only so many opportunities to become part of Jesus' work of mercy and reconciliation; that we have only so much oil in our lamps to illuminate the love of God in our lives. There is so much we want to accomplish in our life, but the many demands on our time to make a living derail us from making a life, a life that is centered in the love of family and friends, in an awareness of God's loving presence in our midst, in a yearning to contribute to the greater good of all. Christ warns us not to fall into the trap of the five bridesmaids who squander their time before the Bridegroom's arrival, but to embrace the wisdom of the other five bridesmaids, trimming our lamps with the oil of compassion, generosity, and forgiveness in the precious time we have until Christ's return.

The question and challenge for each of us today is this, when Jesus comes to take us home will we be found ready? Will we be prepared? Will our lamp shine brightly, or will it have fizzled and gone out? "The one who perseveres to the end," Jesus said, "will be saved." (Mt 24:13) None of us comes with a warranty, no one is guaranteed a specific number of years in this life. Like the Boy Scouts motto, we must always be in a state of readiness for Jesus' return, we must be prepared!

Character and virtue is not something we can buy; just like learning to swim so many summers ago, we must develop it on our own. We cannot attach ourselves to someone else's relationship with God either; we must work to gain our own special connection. We must be prepared always, be ready for Christ when he comes knocking at the door. For as Jesus warns us today, "You know not the day nor the hour."

"We must do long-range planning for the coming of Jesus at the end," wrote Joseph Donders, "but just as important is short-range planning for Jesus' coming in the here and now." Salvation may be free, my friend, but it is not cheap. So, let us all make sure that what we are living for is also worth dying for. Let us always be in a state of readiness for Jesus' return. Scouts for Christ - Be Prepared!

Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30 - “Again, the kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey who summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents] to another two talents, to a third one talent—to each according to his ability. Then he set forth on his journey. “The servant who had received the five talents promptly went to invest them and gained five more. In the same manner, the servant who had received the two talents gained two more. But the servant who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long period of time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing an additional five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you gave me five talents. Behold, I have gained five more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Since you have been faithful in small matters, I will give you much greater responsibilities. Come and share your master’s joy.’ Next, the one who had received the two talents also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. Behold, I have gained two more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. Since you have been faithful in small matters, I will give you much greater responsibilities. Come and share your master’s joy.’ “Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, ‘Master, I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed. Therefore, out of fear I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Behold, I give it back to you.’ His master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant. So you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered! Then you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have gotten back my money with interest. Therefore, take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he does have will be taken away. As for this worthless servant, cast him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Luke 19:12-27 - He said, “A man of noble birth was preparing to go to a distant country to receive a kingdom and then return. So, he summoned ten

of his servants and gave them ten gold coins, instructing them, 'Trade with the money I have given you until I return.' But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him to give this message, 'We do not want this man to be our king.' When he returned after having been made king, he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money to ascertain what profit they had made through their trading. The first came forward and said, 'Sir, your money has increased tenfold in value.' He said to him, 'Well done, my good servant. Because you have proved trustworthy in this very small matter, you shall be in charge of ten cities.' Next, the second servant came forward and said, 'Sir, your money has increased fivefold in value.' He said to him, 'You shall be in charge of five cities.' Then the third one came forward, saying, 'Sir, here is your money. I kept it wrapped up in a handkerchief. For I was afraid of you because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put down, and you reap what you did not sow.' "The master said to him, 'I will condemn you by your own words, you wicked servant. You knew I was a hard man, taking out what I did not put down, and reaping what I did not sow. Why then did you not deposit my money into a bank so that on my return I could have drawn it out with interest?' Then he said to those standing by, 'Take the money from him and give it to the one with the ten gold coins.' They said to him, 'But sir, he already has ten gold coins.' He replied, 'I tell you, to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he does have will be taken away. But as for those enemies of mine who did not want me for their king, bring them here and put them to death in my presence."

Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man, going on a journey, who summoned three servants and entrusted his goods into their care. He gave them enormous amounts of money to look after while he was gone. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents and a third, one talent. In Jesus time a talent was a unit of currency equal to 20 years of an average person's income. In the context of our world, he gave more than a million dollars to one servant, half a million to the second, and a quarter a million to the third.

Today we use the word talent differently. We talk about people having a talent for music, being a leader, being charismatic or the talent of making money. In our world, a talent can mean many things.

Two of the servants doubled their master's investment. But the one with the quarter million was afraid, so the servant buried the money. What was this servant thinking? It reminds me of the image of an ostrich with his head buried in the sand.

When the master returned he demanded an accounting of his money. To the two servants who doubled his investment he was pleased and said, "Well done, good and faithful servant." We already know what the third servant did. No effort was made to make it grow like the other two had done. The master put a lot of trust in this servant and must have been very disappointed. As a result, the third servant received only criticism and disapproval as a reward.

God has given us all many talents and gifts. Some of us might think that we either have nothing to give or we are unclear about our talents. None of us are perfect. Even those who hold high places of honor are not perfect. Yet, every one of us have been given unique and wonderful gifts. Some people have been blessed with enormous wealth, but they are not happy. Most of us look at the faults and imperfections we have and see a long list. Don't stop there. What about the list of our gifts and talents? Have we made such a list? It may be longer than we think. How many times have we wondered about our gifts, and failed to recognize what other people see in us; how others perceive the gifts we have?

Do we recognize our gifts and talents or are we like the third servant who buried them so deeply that they were no longer visible? We need to ask ourselves often about what God has given us and how we have shared those gifts with others. Are we actively using our God given talents or have we put them out of sight, afraid to use them in the way God had intended?

Jesus told this story to warn his followers and us that one day we will be held accountable for the gifts God has given us. It won't matter if we are wealthy, beautiful, and talented, or ugly, not very smart, and poor. God has given us all a gift to share, and God will expect us to share that gift in return.

A general's new mission. This general is not a wealthy man but gave of himself.

Green Berets don't get post-traumatic stress disorder. Especially generals. You don't seek help. You tough it out.

That's what Brigadier General Donald Bolduc thought. But shortly after returning from eight combat tours, General Bolduc began suffering from severe headaches. He was moody, he couldn't sleep - even his balance was off. It took 12 years from his first battlefield trauma for him to seek help. But at his wife's urging, he did the unthinkable in the hypermacho culture of the military: he sought medical help.

He learned that he not only suffered from PTSD, but he also had a bullet-size spot on his brain, an injury probably suffered in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan in 2005 that the general walked away from.

After three years of treatment, General Bolduc is doing well. He is now commander of American Special Operations Forces, battling terrorist groups in Africa - and he has become an evangelist for letting soldiers in his command know that it's all right to get help for mental health problems and brain injuries. He makes it clear to his soldiers - who are stationed in some of the world's most dangerous places - that seeking help will not hurt their careers. To their CO, PTSD is the same as a broken arm.

"The powerful thing is that I can use myself as an example," the 54-year-old general says. "And thank goodness not everybody can do that. But I'm able to do it, so that has some sort of . . . credibility to it."

General Bolduc's initiative is helping bring an end of the stigma attached to seeking help for PTSD. Other high-ranking officers are coming forward, as well, talking openly about their struggles with post-combat stress and brain injuries. The Defense Department estimates that a quarter of all injuries suffered by U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq were brain injuries and as many as 20 percent of veterans of those two conflicts experience post-traumatic stress disorder. General Bolduc tells his personal story every time a new soldier comes into his command and urges anyone experiencing the same kind of symptoms to get help.

Recently, General Bolduc was visiting a team under his command who had just returned from battle. He asked how many of them had been close to blasts, bombs and mortar shells. Everyone raised a hand. Then he asked how many had sought treatment. No one's hand went up. General Bolduc told them his own story. All of them men decided to get exams. Doctors found a tumor in one soldier's brain, and he was flown to Walter Reed in Washington for treatment.

[From "A General's New Mission: Leading the Charge Against PTSD" by Dionne Searcy, The New York Times, October 7, 2016.]

What about the smile we share with a stranger, or the phone call we make to a friend, or sitting with someone who is hurting, has a life-threatening illness or is depressed? We have so many opportunities to give of ourselves, and in doing so, we become the instruments by which God's love and compassion touches the lives of others.

What can we do with what we have been given? Let our challenge this week be to think about our gifts and to try and locate those talents we may have buried. God's grace will lead you to their hidden place. Let's take out our shovels and dig them up and dust them off. Then, let us all honor the gifts God has given to each of us by using them in God's service. God will be with us in this. If we can accomplish this personal challenge, God will be very pleased. We may even hear those special words whispered in our ears, "Well done, good and faithful servant? Enter into the joy of your Lord."

Parable of the Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31-46 - "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was ill and you took care of me; I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will say to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you something to eat, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and come to visit you?' And the King will answer, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brethren of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you did not give me anything to eat; I was thirsty, and you did not give me anything to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me; I was naked and you did not give me any clothing; I was ill and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they will ask him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison and not minister to you?' He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you failed to do for one of the least of these brethren of mine, you failed to do for me.' And they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous will enter eternal life."

Matthew provides the only description of the Last Judgment in any of the Gospels. Our scripture today is Jesus' final discourse before the events of the Passion begin to unfold. In this last parable, Christ is the king who sits in judgment using mercy and charity as the standards for determining one's entry into the kingdom of God.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus the Shepherd-King calls us to make the kingdom of God a reality in whatever place we are, in whatever time we live. God's reign is established, not by acts of greatness but by our simplest and most hidden acts of compassion, reconciliation, peace, and justice. Faithfulness begins with our ability to see in every man, woman, and child the face of Christ, and to see him especially in the faces of the poor, the hungry, the needy, and the lost.

In the face of Christ, we all stand as brothers and sisters; in the face of Christ the distinctions of class and culture that separate us disappear; in the face of Christ, we are all loved without condition or limit. Our challenge is to see the world in the light of Christ's face and to build a community centered in the holiness of God; a community that reflects the face of Christ in the compassion and mercy we show in our care of one another. To belong to and build such a community is central to our call as a disciple and our mission to build the kingdom of God in our own time and place.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta put today's Gospel into perspective when she said: "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by the words of Christ, 'I was hungry, and you gave me to eat . . . I was naked, and you clothed me . . . I was homeless, and you took me in.' Hungry not only for bread," she continued, "but hungry for love; naked not only of clothing; but naked of human dignity and respect; homeless not only for want of a room of bricks, but homeless because of rejection." In reflecting on these words, it seems there is a bit of hunger and nakedness and homelessness in each of us; we are all poor and needy in one way or another. We all seek refuge in the one place where grace abounds, the glorious face of Christ our Lord.

As we go about our daily routine this coming week, let us keep an eye out for the face of Christ. He is here in our midst, in the love of family and friends, in the support and wisdom of those whose counsel we treasure. But look closely for you might get a glimpse of Christ in the most unlikely places; in the face of a neighbor, the clerk at the supermarket, or in the smile you exchange with a stranger. Once you expect to see the face of Christ, you will begin to see him everywhere.

On this last Sunday of the church year, may we embrace God's vision of his creation and our place in that vision; may God's spirit instill in us the compassion and wisdom to recognize the face of Christ in every human being. As the liturgical year draws to a close and we welcome the dawn of a new Advent, let us embrace a spirit that will bring God's kingdom to life in our day and time. Let us be the face of Christ to one another.

Parable of the Secretly Growing Seed

Mark 4:26-29 - [a]He went on to say, “The kingdom of God is like this. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, while he sleeps and while he is awake, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not understand how. The ground produces fruit of its own accord—first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ripe, he immediately stretches out the sickle, because the time for harvest has come.”

Scripture Notes: Mark 4:26 This parable, the only one peculiar to Mark, illustrates his idea of the power of the Gospel. The term harvest is an image of the judgment (see Joel 4:13; Rev 14:15).

Rev. James Gilhooley told this story...A man walked into a store. He found Jesus behind the counter. He asked, "What do you sell here?" Jesus replied, "You name it." The man said, "I want food for all, good health for kids, adequate housing for everyone, and abortion to cease." Gently Jesus answered, "Friend, I do not sell finished products here, only seeds. You must plant them and water them. I will do the rest."

When Jesus told the parable of the smallest seed in the world, his disciples were sad. They had worked so hard and so little had happened. Jesus told them the parable of the mustard seed because he wanted his disciples to realize that despite their few numbers and the opposition against them, a great church would rise from their labors. If we just look at history, we can see how correct this was. From the original 12, more than 70 walked with Jesus each day on his travels. Now one-third of the earth's population, over 2 billion people claim to be his followers. We must always remember that great things can come from small beginnings.

In today's world the tiny mustard seed is not the smallest. That distinction belongs to the dust-like orchid seed. However, in Jesus' day it had the status of being the smallest of all known seeds. Our message here is that the kingdom of God had its beginnings in a small, almost invisible way.

This year I planted my garden in containers. I did not start from seed. I bought the plants already started. It is hard to wait, and I wanted to see growth

immediately. It is great to see the progress of the plant's growth. We need to be patient. and go about our daily business. I check on my plants everyday though and I am very impatient waiting for the fruit of the vine. The seed grows because nature takes its course. The seed grows because of the life force given by God. The earth bears fruit only because God has made it possible.

The church is very much like that seed. We can count on the earth to produce great plants from small seeds, but we can count on God to also bring about a great kingdom.

God is a mystery and does things differently than we would expect. We would think that he would select the greatest and brightest to be his disciples but instead he chose ordinary people...fishermen, a tax collector and the list goes on. You would think that Jesus would compare the kingdom of God to a large, majestic oak tree, yet he compares it instead to a small mustard seed. The emphasis here is not on the seed's growth but on the contrast between the large plant and the tiny seed from which it came. The primary point is the contrast between the small beginning of the kingdom and the certainty of its great future; from 12 to 2 billion ... not bad at all.

Jesus uses parables to make us aware that we are a living part of a deeper, real-life story. The seeds do what they are intended to do. What about us? Most of the time the problem with humankind is that we too often do everything other than what God intended for us. We try to keep the largest share of our lives to ourselves and offer only a small part to God. It is as if we are saying that Sunday is enough. God does not want only a small part of us; God wants all of us. Who are we to set limitations before a God of limitless vision? What are we thinking? Jesus tells us we will be rewarded a hundred-fold for whatever we do for God. God created us, Jesus died for us, and the Spirit sustains; why hold back? Jesus says that if we give our lives completely over to God, we will be transformed. Just as the small mustard seed is transformed into a wonderful tree whose branches provide for others, we too will grow into something beautiful, something God can use to reach our world. God will give us more than we can imagine. God will make us great trees. None of us can make ourselves or others grow. Only with God's help can we accomplish that.

Remember, our smallest acts really do make a difference. We may not be able to change the world, but we can make a difference in the world. So we need to do each small thing well; grow where we are planted. The kingdom of God is like a slow growing tree. We may preach, invite, and witness, but not see results right away. In fact, we may never know exactly how we touched someone or how we made a difference in their lives, but God will know. Jesus promised that others will reap where we have sown.

Our challenge is to love God, love our neighbor and not to worry. So let us do the work that God sets before us. Know that God is faithful and will not fail. Let us all try to live a faith-filled life and stay true to Christ's teachings and direction in our daily walk. Let us plant and water; Jesus will take it from there.

Parable of the Vigilant Steward

Mark 13: 32-37 - "But as for that day or that hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on your guard and keep alert because you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey. He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his own duties to perform, and he commands the doorkeeper to remain alert. Therefore, keep watch, for you do not know when the master of the house will return, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, lest he arrive unexpectedly and find you asleep. What I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake!"

Luke 12:35-40 - "Fasten your belts for service and have your lamps lit. Be like servants who are waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that they may open the door as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he arrives. Amen, I say to you, he will fasten his belt, have them recline to eat, and proceed to wait on them himself. If he comes in the second watch or in the third and finds them still awake, blessed are those servants. The Hour of the Son of Man. But keep this in mind: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. So, you must also be prepared, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

C.S Lewis wrote "The greatest thing is to be found at one's post as a child of God, living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years."

As we begin a new church year, we recognize that beginnings are very important. This is a time to reflect on the new directions we are invited to pursue. The cycle of a liturgical year is the cycle of the life of Christ. We are invited to participate in his mysterious life, recognizing that in the life of Christ we find all kinds of wisdom and insight to help us in our own lives. This season, Advent, is a word that means "coming." It is a period of four weeks to prepare for Christ's coming into the world. We are asked during this season to take some time. There are few commodities more precious or

seemingly less available in our culture than time. We're asked in these weeks to take some time away from the "busyness" of our lives to reflect on our ultimate goals. We ask ourselves the question - what is our real work of life as a child of God?

At the heart of the real work is the challenge to hear a deep, inner voice. This voice seems to tell us that we are made for union. We are made for connection. Fundamentally, the coming of Christ is about bringing us to the place of union with God. It's important to take time to reflect upon what God's coming into our world means. Why did God want to embrace humanity? Why would he come into our world and live such an ordinary life - doing very mundane things that human beings do? He got up in the morning as we do; he helped his parents. He learned about his religion. Ninety percent of the time he spent on this earth was doing the simplest of tasks. The other ten percent - three years of his life - was spent doing the extraordinary work of reaching out and trying to touch other people.

In this God of ours, we find a deep desire to be intimate with his people. That's what is so unusual. He is interested in pursuing closeness with his creation. For most of salvation history - from God's revelation to Abraham to the Incarnation - human beings have always desired to reach God. We want God to be close. We want more than rules and laws.

Within our desire for intimacy with God is a longing that this intimacy will be affirming, that he will say the things we need to hear. And one of the things we need to hear is that our lives are both good and meaningful. God tells us that he wants to be a part of your life. He wants to be there intimately. His presence in our life reflects this challenge of being. God has come into history to tell us that all the ordinary, mundane events of life are filled with great meaning and purpose - and we need to drink the message in.

The gospel message today emphasizes this theme. Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples. He's worked with them intimately. He wants them to understand what he's taught. But mostly, Jesus, being a good teacher, wants everyone to look not just at his message but at him. He is the message; the word made flesh. Remember how often Jesus complained about the scribes and Pharisees? He said the really big problem was that they articulated the

message, but they weren't living it. They hadn't taken the message in and made it part of them. It can be very confusing to hear words and to experience something very different from those words. But when we center on Christ as our spiritual leader, we find that his words and his person are both the same. What Christ says to us is that there is something about this seemingly ordinary life of ours; this union we are able to have with him, that brings about meaning and purpose.

The challenge in the Gospel today, and during this first week of Advent is to be alert, to be on guard, to be conscious. Let's begin this season of Advent by trusting in what God is saying by entering into our lives, by becoming one of us. He's trying to say something about how good our lives are. The Incarnation, God's capacity to enter into the human condition, is an invitation for all of us to be one with our humanity. The issue is not to move away from life as it is, not to move away from the body or the ordinary, thinking that we can become truly spiritual by reaching to the heavens. Rather, the issue is to become connected to our lives, embracing it, loving it, and being an intimate part of it. Then, we find the things that are life-giving for us and discover the God who came into the world to save us.

Advent calls us to "be watchful" along the way and be attentive to the unmistakable signs of God's presence in our lives. Let us strive this Advent Season to live our life with joyous expectation; embracing each and every day as a gift from God.

Parable of the Two Debtors

Luke 7:36-43 - “One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dine with him. When he arrived at the Pharisee’s house, he took his place at table. A woman of that town, who was leading a sinful life, learned that Jesus was a dinner guest in the Pharisee’s house. Carrying with her an alabaster jar of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were really a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Jesus then said to the Pharisee, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” He replied, “What is it, Teacher?”

There were two men who were in debt to a certain creditor. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other owed fifty. When they were unable to repay him, he canceled both debts. Now which one of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I would imagine that it would be the one who was forgiven the larger amount.” Jesus replied, “You have judged rightly.”

Our scripture begins with a familiar story that highlights a contrast between traditional religion and the intimate and personal relationship with God (through Jesus) that we are all seeking. It is something Simon the Pharisee was confronted with but not able to comprehend. As with all Jesus’ parables, the meaning is hidden from those who do not have the Spirit to understand the deeper message.

Jesus paid the debt for all of our sins at the cross. And more than that, “God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) But if there was a scale that could be used to measure the number or magnitude of sins that we committed during our life, how would we compare with other people? It’s crucial to understanding this parable.

Had Jesus not forgiven all of our sins already, where would we rank on the scale of needing forgiveness? We might think it’s not worth considering since

Jesus did indeed pay the entire debt. But the fact of the matter is that the rank that we assign for ourself, according to the parable, determines the amount of love we hold for him. Paul measured himself in Romans 7:24-25 when he wrote, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body destined for death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, with my mind I am a slave to the Law of God, but with my flesh to the law of sin."

Hopefully, we are able to see ourself like Paul saw himself. In doing so, our relationship with Jesus will grow in meaning and purpose for our life.

The woman recognized Jesus as being supremely important. By anointing his feet; she was looking up from her lowly position. She was seeking his acceptance, knowing that her very best was less than his least. From the perspective of the story of two debtors, the woman knew the enormity of her debt and so she loved Jesus greatly, even more than Simon the Pharisee.

We should all recognize that our human nature does not change even after we establish a personal relationship with Jesus. It will not improve. Although our actions might appear better as Christians, our inner thoughts, and attitudes remains unchanged and destined for destruction. As Paul put it, "Who will rescue me from this body destined for death?"

The point and lesson of this parable is that we can grow in our love for him, that personal relationship with Jesus can become more visible in our life by first knowing the enormity of the debt he canceled on our behalf, and then trusting in Jesus as the one who can rescue us from our sinful human nature.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Let us take his hand today.

Amen? Amen!

[Adapted from the parables section of MyRedeemer.org]

Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke 10:30-37 - Jesus replied, "A man was going down[a] from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him and beat him, and then went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be traveling along that same road, but when he saw him he passed by on the other side. A Levite likewise came to that spot and saw him, but he too passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan who was traveling along that road came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went up to him and bandaged his wounds after having poured oil and wine on them. Then he brought him upon his own animal to an inn and looked after him. The next day, he took out two denarii[c] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Look after him, and when I return I will repay you for anything more you might spend.' Which of those three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He answered, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

In her 1984 Grammy Award winning song, Tina Turner asks the question: "What's love got to do with it?" Her question, and our questions as well, about defining what love is all about, was answered over 2,000 years ago when Jesus shared the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

Our reading begins with a dialogue between Jesus and a Jewish 'scholar of the law;' one well-schooled in the letter of the law, but perhaps not as well schooled in the spirit of the law found in the life Jesus was living and teaching. He asks Jesus a simple question: What's the bottom line here? What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? To Jesus' probing questions we see that this scholar is able to recite the law: to love God with all of your heart as found in Deuteronomy (6:4-5), and love your neighbor as yourself found in Leviticus (19:18), but his challenge is in understanding the spirit of the law; what is love and who is his neighbor? In response the scholar's limited vision of the world that surrounds him, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

In this famous parable found only in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus stuns his hearers by making a Samaritan the hero of the story. Those listening would expect a Samaritan to be the villain of the story, not the hero. While the two

clerics do not help the man for fear of violating the law and being defiled by the dead, the compassionate Samaritan, a man presumably with little concern for Jewish belief or morality, is so moved by the plight of the poor man that he thinks nothing of stopping to help regardless of the cost of time or money he may incur in the process.

What we must understand is that the Jews of Jesus' time would limit the definition of "neighbor" to other Jews. Their culture would identify a neighbor as one who is like they are, someone who lives close by, shares common values, common faith, and common interests. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the concept of "neighbor" is expanded to include everyone, not just those with whom we share common perspectives and viewpoints.

One of the most radical dimensions of Christianity is the principle that all men and women are "neighbors": children of the same heavenly Father, brothers, and sisters in Christ. The Samaritan and the traveler illustrate that Jesus' concept of "neighbor" is not limited to one's own clan or community. Christ-like compassion must be manifested in deeds of kindness; morality, in the light of today's Gospel, cannot be guided by the letter of laws inscribed in some stone or scroll. The love Jesus speaks of is guided by the spirit and written upon the heart.

What Jesus makes clear in his story of the Good Samaritan, is that we are always each other's neighbor, we are always brother and sister to one another. The parable of the Good Samaritan calls us to embrace a vision of faith that sees every man, woman, and child, regardless of whatever labels society has assigned to them, as our "neighbors." Christ calls us as his disciples to look beyond what divides and focus on what unites; to put aside our own needs and wants to embrace the needs of others; to see our own wealth, whatever that may be, as a means for bringing healing and hope into the lives of those who are in need. The Good Samaritan is the epitome of Gospel charity, the embodiment of the Gospel vision of humanity as a community of everyone; male and female, rich and poor, able, and challenged: sharing the same sacred dignity as sons and daughters of the God of all that is good.

What does love have to do with it? Apparently, everything. The Good Samaritan let love be his guide. He let love move him to reach out to a stranger in need when others passed by. May we each be so moved by love and compassion that our definition of who our neighbor is continues to widen. May we each have the courage to let love lead us in our daily lives.

Parable of the Persistent Friend

Luke 11:5-8 - [a] He also said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says: ‘My friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey, and I have nothing to offer him,’ and the friend answers from inside: ‘Do not bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up now to give you anything.’ I tell you: even though he will not get up and give it to him because of their friendship, he will get up and give him whatever he needs because of his persistence.”

Scripture Notes: In the Palestine of that time, people went to bed early; moreover, the entire family slept in a single room, and the door was secured from inside with a heavy bar. Thus, awakening a neighbor caused a great deal of inconvenience, but the latter would be ashamed to remain insensitive. And since God is mercy itself, could he refuse the request of believers when it concerns essentials?

Jesus presents this brief parable in the form of a rhetorical question, and then supplies the obvious answer in order to drive his point home. Then he goes on to offer some application of the parable’s teaching.

The question itself is quite long but it is pretty easily understood, nonetheless. The question demands an answer something like, “Of course my friend would not refuse to help me in such a situation!” Jesus is simply asking us to think about how a friend would indeed get up in the middle of the night in order to help us with a need. And he assumes that we all have friends who would not refuse us but would help us out. After all, isn’t this what friends do?

But beyond this simple point, Jesus also ties the question to the preceding context when he describes the man in the story as in need of bread. Notice that Jesus has just taught the disciples how to pray by use of what has come to be known as “The Lord’s Prayer.” And in verse 3 He has said that they should pray, “Give us day by day our daily bread.”

So, in this parable Jesus wants to encourage the disciples not to be afraid to keep asking every day for their daily bread. He wants them to know that they can be confident in seeking God to meet their daily needs. If a friend would get up in the middle of the night to give us bread when we have need, then wouldn't God also give us our daily bread? Especially since God has commanded us to ask daily for it. Perhaps the key term for understanding the meaning of this parable is the word persistence. Jesus' use of metaphorical language teaches us just how passionately we should persist in prayer.

The main point of the parable is that God wants us to pray this way. Jesus wants you to know that God never gets tired of listening to his children! God promises an answer to the one who diligently seeks him. Many of our dispassionate prayers are not answered for one good reason, because it is almost as if we ask God to care about something we care little or nothing about. (*Commentary on Luke, e-Sword*)

We naturally persevere in our prayers when someone close to us is sick. If one of our children becomes ill, we pray without ceasing. Likewise, if we are in financial trouble or if we are hoping for a promotion or if we have a frightening or dangerous task ahead of us, we generally find it easy to pray.

But do we persist in prayers for spiritual growth for ourselves or for others? Do we "ask... seek... knock" for a pure mind? Do we keep on knocking for a forgiving spirit or for the removal of an angry or critical spirit?

So, our lesson from the parable is that all prayer is to be focused ultimately upon the glory of God and the accomplishment of God's will. And, even when we pray for our own needs, this should be with a view to the glory of God. This is the kind of praying Jesus has in mind when we come to the verses before us this morning.

If we want to be the kind of Christlike people the God has demanded of us, and if we want God to meet our needs, both physical and spiritual, and if we ask God for such things, then we can be supremely confident that God will give us all that we ask for!

Amen? Amen!

Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:16-21 - Then he told them a parable: "There was a wealthy man whose land yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I do not have sufficient space to store my crops?' Then he said, 'This is what I will do. I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, where I will store my grain and other produce, and I shall say to myself, "Now you have an abundance of goods stored up for many years to come. Relax, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be required of you. And who then will get to enjoy the fruit of your labors?' That is how it will be for the one who stores up treasure for himself yet fails to become rich in the sight of God."

I would like to share a story with you. This story is about: "The estate of Mattie Dixon"

Mattie Dixon didn't have a will; she hadn't taken care of anything. She was eighty-nine when she died. She didn't have any children; she was a widow, and she had some distant great-grandnieces, nephews, cousins maybe. They didn't attend the funeral; they didn't really know her. They didn't know what to do, what would happen to the house, the property and the mementos, the personal effects.

Finally, the taxes had to be paid; other bills had to be paid. The auctioneer came, and strangers crawled around all over the personal effects of Mattie Dixon.

There was her wedding ring, one of those heavy ones. When she was alive, if you said to her, "Mattie, I love that ring, I'll give you a thousand dollars for it," she would turn that ring on her finger and say, "Fifty-six years of marriage, and you want to buy this? I wouldn't sell you this for ten million dollars!"

And the gavel of the auctioneer came down. "Sold. Two dollars."

What is the true value of what we possess? Where does our heart lead us? What are our priorities? I think the issue is not what we own but are we owned by our possessions? Money is not the problem but the love of money above all else is the problem. Where is our security? Is it in all the wrong places?

Possessions and money are not bad. We need money to survive. What responsibility do we incur though when we have more than we need? Where is our heart when we see those less fortunate than we are?

In today's reading the words "I" is used 6 times and the word "my" is used 4 times. He has no concerns for anyone else. Everything is "I" and "my." This man was a rich man.

There seems to be no bonuses for those who work for him. There is no thanksgiving to God for what he does have. He has more than he needs to even live in luxury, but he wants more. I would say that in spite of what this man has that he is not a happy person. He wants more; he wants to hoard his wealth; he is full of greed. Are we also blinded by our possessions?

When I was born I had nothing. I was born naked, and my parents provided all for me. When I became an adult I treasured more things, many that are unimportant to other people, but they are my treasures. I am having a hard time trying to simplify my life and get rid of things, but I am determined. Letting go is not always easy but that is another homily for another time. As I get older and grow spiritually my mind seems to open to what is around me and I gather wisdom.

I have been in nursing homes and retirement centers. I visited Ernie and he taught me lots. When Ernie and his wife were young they had a nice house with beautiful furniture and many memento's they gathered in life, but as I looked around his room during my visit I was struck with how little Ernie now had. His room was nice. He had a bed, bed stand, chair, television, and a few pictures on the wall. In other words, all that he had collected in life had lost its meaning to him. He was ready to leave this world and none of what he had would go with him. His most prized possession in this room was a picture of Jesus. He told me that when he woke up at night he would use his flashlight and shine it at the picture of Jesus, and he would smile as he told me this. He said, "I would look at him and he would look at me." What a beautiful way to pray.

The man in today's reading was told, "You foolish one, tonight your soul will be required of you." This man increased his wealth but could not take it with him. Mattie Dixon died with no one to inherit her treasures. Their treasures

would perish or go to someone who might squander their wealth. We are born with nothing, and we die with nothing. What is important then?

Jesus gave us two great commandments. You shall love the Lord, your God above all else and to love your neighbor as yourself. I think therein lies our treasure. It depends on how we handle our wealth. A rich person might be very generous towards others. Some poor people will share with others in need unselfishly while others will hoard a piece of bread. We can all share in different ways. We need to be rich in what matters to God. That does not mean giving everything away but in being conscious of our neighbors and their needs; to be compassionate and loving. We must not allow our possessions to be the center of our attention. Remember, when we are standing before God, money will not do much for us. Scripture says, "When I was hungry you gave me food' when I was thirsty you gave me to drink and when I was naked you clothed me. God won't care if you are a Bill Gates with all the money in the world; if you have a high IQ with many degrees or if you hold a high office. God wants to know where your heart is, what your treasure is and how you loved. After all, someone once said, "the gold you have is but pavement on the streets of heaven. Our priorities then, should be to look to God and to love our neighbors. We will then be truly rich. Let us put God first in our lives, so that we may be blessed with every blessing, and we will be transformed.

Let us not be crushed by our possessions and lost to one another by our pursuit of more. The real treasure in life is the selfless and affirming love that is and of God that creates, and embraces, affirms and consoles, enriches and lifts up.

Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

Luke 13:6-9 - Then he told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, but whenever he came looking for fruit on it, he found none. Therefore, he said to his vinedresser, ‘For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and have never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue to use up the soil?’ But the vinedresser replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year while I dig around it and fertilize it. Perhaps it will bear fruit next year. If so, well, and good. If not, then you can cut it down.’ ”

"Dance, then wherever you may be. I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. I'll lead you all wherever you may be, I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he."

Do you remember your first dance with that special someone? I remember that first dance with Liz but I'm sure it is the same for everyone. You take your partner by the hand, you hold each other close, you look into each other's eyes, and you dance. The music and steps are all secondary. For most of us, our first dance is the discovery of this amazing person you have fallen in love with. Then, with family and friends, champagne, and roses, you begin your new dance as partners in life.

Love is an active relationship. It cannot survive the pressures of life if there is not a commitment to make it work. The dance continues, and grows, and changes. Different steps, different rhythms, different settings, and before you know it, the whirl of courtship becomes the shuffle of old age. But the choreography is the same: you take your partner by the hand, you hold each other close, you look into each other's eyes, and you dance to the music that is the love of God; the Lord of the Dance.

The readings warn us that we cannot be passive in our relationship with God either. We cannot sit on the sidelines and watch as life passes us by. We must find the dance floor made especially for us and dance the dance of life with full assurance that the Lord of the Dance will show us the steps and guide us gently through life's dips and twirls.

The example of Moses and his "burning bush" experience, shows us that our God calls us to action. Moses was surely leading a good life in Midian, but

cruising through life was not enough; God called Moses to the dance floor for the sake of the people. Lent is also God's call for us to act; the Lord of the Dance calls us to leave our wall flower days behind and join in the dance of life. If we are simply living good lives, we need to know that it is never enough; there is always more that we can do to bring the justice of God to the world.

The parable of the fig tree reminds us of the ever-changing choreography of our lives. In keeping in tune with the love of God, every season can be productive and meaningful. The life of God is always about continuing the dance with hope and trust. Despite the sadness and tragedy that can fill our lives with disappointment and despair, God continues to plant in our midst opportunities to start over, to try again, to rework things, to move beyond our hurt and pain to make things right. As God's mercy and compassion continue to play out before us, we are able to continue in a life of purpose and happiness; and the dance continues.

The challenge of the Gospel message is to take up the crosses of our lives, the crosses that are part of every human experience, and transform them into seeds for new life, the means for bringing light and hope into life's darkness and despair. Christ calls us to embrace the hope of the fig tree and the determination of the gardener, to remember that God's endless grace enables us to experience the promise of resurrection no matter what life throws our way. In every Good Friday we experience, there is the Easter Promise of the empty tomb and life everlasting waiting on God's dance floor built from a cross left behind.

"Dance, then wherever you may be. I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. I'll lead you all wherever you may be, I'll lead you all in the Dance, said he."

During this season of Lent let God fill our hearts with trust and love. Let God open our eyes to see a world full of need. Let us reach out and take God by the hand; feel God's warm and surrounding embrace, and then ... let us dance!

Parable of the Ambitious Guest

Luke 14:7-14 - When he noticed how the guests were securing places of honor, he told them a parable: “When you have been invited by someone to attend a wedding banquet, do not sit down in the place of honor in case someone who is more distinguished than you may have been invited, and then the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, ‘Give this man your place.’ Then you will be embarrassed as you proceed to sit in the lowest place. Rather, when you are invited, proceed to sit in the lowest place, so that when your host arrives, he will say to you, ‘My friend, move up to a higher place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Invite the Needy. Then he said to the one who had invited him, “When you host a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, lest they invite you back and thus repay you. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then indeed will you be blessed because they have no way to repay you. But you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

What is humility? When you think of someone as a humble person, what is the image that comes to mind?

Gospel-centered humility realizes that we are not the center of all things but part of a much larger world. It is a humbled spirit that is centered in gratitude for all the blessings we have received as a result of the depth of God’s love, and not because of anything we have done to earn it. When we come face to face with this realization, all we can do is to try and return that love to those around us.

The Pierre de Coubertin medal has only been awarded 17 times in Olympic history. At the recent Rio Olympics, Nikki Hamblin, and Abbey D’Agostino became the 18th and 19th to receive the award. It was not for their athletic achievements, but for what the International Olympic committee called a display of “humanity and sacrifice.” The two collided and fell during their race, injuring D’Agostino badly. But they got up and helped each other to

finish the race. They both crossed the finish line last, but their extraordinary act of humility moved them into first place in the hearts of Olympic fans and fellow athletes all over the world. Their simple act of compassion and sportsmanship, as one commentator voiced, is what the Olympics is all about.

Humility is the virtue of suspending our own wants and needs in order to consciously seek God in all people and experiences. True humility is centered in the things of God – love, compassion, mercy, selflessness, tolerance, and forgiveness.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less.”

The spirit of humility as taught by Jesus is not the diminishing of oneself but the awareness that we share with every human being the sacred dignity of being made in the image and likeness of God. As taught by Christ, humility is realizing who we are before God; of our constant need for God, our dependence on God for everything, and of the love and forgiveness that God sends our way without limits or boundaries. Jesus is our perfect model. To be humble as Christ teaches humility is to see one another as God sees us and to rejoice in being ministers to each other in both our joys and struggles.

God’s banquet table includes places of honor for every poor, hurting, confused soul. At the Gospel banquet table, we are both guests and servers: We welcome and are welcomed as brothers and sisters of Christ, sons and daughters of the same God and Father. We all share equally in the bounty of this table.

More often than we realize, the “banquet” of today’s Gospel can be found in a simple offering of support, empathy and encouragement to a friend or total stranger. At God’s banquet table, sometimes we are the guest: we are welcomed and are served by God like we were part of a compassionate and understanding family. And sometimes we are the server, enabling others to share in the bounty of God’s table; the way we share at our table each time we gather to pray and worship together.

What is humility? What image comes to mind when you think of a humbled person? The answer to both questions is found in the life and person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus asks all who would be his disciples to embrace a spirit of faith-centered humility that enables us to see beyond appearances and labels in order to welcome one another as brothers and sisters, children of the God who is Father of every one of us. The words “Everyone is welcome at our table” that appears on our bulletin cover is more than a catchy phrase, it is our mission and purpose as a community of faith. Let us live our mission each day in all that we do.

Parable of the Cost of Being a Disciple

Luke 14:25-53 - Great crowds were accompanying Jesus on his journey, and he turned to them and said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Which one of you, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has sufficient funds for its completion? Otherwise, if he has laid the foundation and then finds himself unable to finish the work, all who see it will ridicule him, saying, 'There goes the man who started to build but was unable to complete the work. Or what king marching into battle against another king will not first sit down and consider whether with ten thousand soldiers he can defeat the enemy coming to oppose him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the enemy is still a long distance away, he will send a delegation to ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any one of you who does not renounce all of his possessions cannot be my disciple."

The Thomas Shepherd hymn asks the question, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free?" then answers that very question in saying, "No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me."

Thomas Shepherd was an English minister who wrote those words after preaching an Easter sermon about Simon of Cyrene, the man pressed into service by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus' cross. The haunting words of this classic hymn pose a question that you and I must ask ourselves each day: "Must Jesus bear the cross alone?"

The message of our Gospel reading this morning can be difficult to fathom. Jesus says, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Why would a loving Jesus tell his followers that the cost of discipleship would come at the expense of their relationship with family, friends, personal possessions, and even one's own life? The words seem harsh and insensitive. Who would turn their back on family and friends for the sake of discipleship; who would renounce everything they held as

important in life? This seems to be contrary to the very nature of Jesus' teaching which centers on the selfless love and care of others.

At this point in history, Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem to face torment, rejection, and death on the cross. He knew what was in store for him and what was waiting beyond the palm branches and cries of hosanna. Jesus also knew that his followers were unprepared for what was to come or what the cost of discipleship entailed. Because of this his comments that day were pointed and direct; nothing or no one should impair us in our quest to follow the pathway of service God has set before us, and we should weigh the costs carefully before committing ourselves to the demands of discipleship. Anyone who prefers the love of family, friends or self to Christ cannot be his follower. These are hard words. How then can you and I commit to paying such a price?

Jesus tells us, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness; And all these things will be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33) Jesus makes us a promise that if we commit ourselves to his teachings, take up the cross along with him, and follow his example in building the Kingdom of God, everything else of importance in our lives will fall into place, even the relationships we hold dear; father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters. Jesus asks us to let go of the things in life that often hold us back. Sadly, when we hold back, our discipleship is in danger of becoming a charade. The gifts of God can only be grasped with open hands of humility and prayer. If our hands are too busy holding on, grasping to material things at the expense of committing fully to discipleship in Christ, we condemn ourselves to a life of emptiness. Ritual will not be enough no matter the faith tradition we follow. We can attend church faithfully, sing hymns, lift prayers, take communion, and put money in the basket each week, but never embrace the cross Jesus calls us to bear.

Our challenge today is to earnestly consider the cost of following Jesus, embrace with greater intention and commitment the cross of Christ, and in doing so, find the grace to live and love with greater freedom, humility, and service. Let us give Christ our whole heart. Let us give Christ our whole life. Jesus will teach us how to bear our cross in this life, and he will teach us how to wear our crown in the world to come. All he asks is that we trust him, that

we love him and that we put the things of the Kingdom first in our lives. If we do, Jesus will see that everything else will find its place in our lives, Hallelujah!

Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32 - Then he said: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that I will inherit.' And so the father divided the property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered together everything he had and traveled to a distant country, where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissolute living. When he had spent it all, a severe famine afflicted that country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who sent him to his farm to feed the pigs. He would have willingly filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more food than they can consume, while here I am, dying of hunger. I will depart from this place and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired workers. So, he set out for his father's house. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly bring out the finest robe we have and put it on him. Place a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us celebrate with a feast. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost, and now he has been found.' And they began to celebrate. Now the elder son had been out in the fields, and as he returned and drew near the house, he could hear the sounds of music and dancing. He summoned one of the servants and inquired what all this meant. The servant replied, 'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The elder son then became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him, but he said to his father in reply, 'All these years I have worked like a slave for you, and I never once disobeyed your orders. Even so, you have never even given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returns after wasting his inheritance from you on

prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf for him.’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are with me always, and everything I have is yours. But it was only right that we should celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and now he has been found.’

The Pharisees and scribes were judging Jesus. He was welcoming and eating with Tax collectors and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees believed that, if anyone welcomed sinners, it was because he approved sin—and was probably no better than the sinners.

But that isn’t how Jesus saw it. He told the scribes and Pharisees a parable. A father had two sons, and the younger son asked for his share of his inheritance, so the father divided his property between his sons. This is unusual because usually the sons would stay close to home and tend the fathers land until he died. Then the sons would inherit the property—and continue taking care of their mother.

When the younger son asked the father to give him his inheritance early, it was as if he was saying, I would rather you were dead; It was a slap in the father’s face. but the father did what the younger son had asked—and gave his son his share of the property. The younger son took his inheritance and went to a far country—a place where mom and dad couldn’t look over his shoulder—a place where he could do what he wanted. Jesus said, He wasted his property with riotous living.

Soon the young man was broke, and the young man’s friends were nowhere to be found, so he had to look for a job. Having no money and no friends and few skills, the only job he could find was feeding pigs. He was so hungry that he was tempted to eat the pig slop. It couldn’t get much worse than that.

It occurred to him that his father’s servants didn’t live like that. They had plenty to eat. He decided to go home and beg for a job. If his father would just hire him as a servant, he would begin to pull himself together. He was remorseful and said, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired servants.

His father was **MOVED WITH COMPASSION** and hugged and kissed him.

He ordered his servants to bring his son a robe—the best robe—and a ring—and shoes. Then he told them to kill the fatted calf, so they could celebrate: For this, my son, was DEAD, and is alive again. He was LOST but is found.

That's the part we love, because it promises that, no matter how bad we have been, we can always come to God, and he will welcome us.

Jesus started this parable by saying A certain man had TWO sons. What about the OTHER son—the ELDER son? Keep in mind that the thing that prompted this parable was the scribes and Pharisees commenting that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. The scribes and Pharisees weren't happy about Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees were like the elder son. Like the elder son, the scribes and Pharisees stayed home to do their duty. Like the elder son, the scribes and Pharisees had no use for sinners. Most of the time, we focus on the prodigal son, the sinner—and ignore the elder son, the one who stayed home.

Could it be that the story of the elder son contains the main point of this two-point parable? When the prodigal came home, the elder son was working in the field. When he came home, he heard music and dancing. He asked a servant what was going on. The servant said, your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and healthy.

But the elder son became angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him. Begged him! Fathers were not supposed to have to beg but the elder son said, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed a commandment of yours, but you never gave me a goat, that I might celebrate with my friends, but when this, your son, came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him. There are several things to notice about that little speech.

FIRST, the elder son said that he had never disobeyed his father, but he was in the process of disobeying him at that moment. The father had begged him to come in, and the son had refused—had disobeyed. SECOND, the son's speech is full of self-pity—and empty of love. He loves neither brother nor father. I doubt that he even loves himself. He has been doing his duty at home but has had no joy in that—and no joy in being with his father. THIRD,

the elder son speaks of his brother ... YOUR SON, ...who has devoured your living with prostitutes. This is the first mention of prostitutes in this parable. The elder son doesn't know what the prodigal has done. He is consumed with anger, So the father says, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours, but it was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for this, YOUR BROTHER, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

Let me ask this question. Which was the good son and which the bad? In truth, BOTH were bad sons—the YOUNGER son for squandering his father's money in loose living—and the ELDER son for disobeying his father—and for hating his brother.

Are we like the PRODIGAL son? I suspect that at times we are like both sons. However, the father loves both sons—and it means that God loves you, but it also tells us that the dutiful, self-righteous elder son has the larger problem. The YOUNGER son can ask forgiveness. The ELDER son can't imagine that he needs forgiveness. The elder son is like the scribes and Pharisees. His soul is in danger. We must be able to ask forgiveness and give God the glory! For this, my son, was DEAD, and is alive again. He was LOST but is found.

Parable of the Crafty Steward

Luke 16:1-8 - Jesus also said to his disciples: “There was a rich man who had a steward, and he was informed that this steward was squandering his property. Therefore, he summoned him and said, ‘What are these reports that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your stewardship because you can no longer be my steward. Then the steward said to himself, ‘What am I going to do now that my master is dismissing me from being steward? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am too ashamed to beg. What I must do is to make sure that people will welcome me into their homes once I am removed from being steward. Then he summoned his master’s debtors one by one. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ When he was told, ‘One hundred jars of olive oil,’ he said to the man, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and change the number to fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And you, how much do you owe?’ When he was told, ‘One hundred measures of wheat,’ he said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ The master commended the crafty steward because he had acted shrewdly. For the children of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light.”

In the 2013 film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Leonardo DiCaprio plays the real-life character Jordan Belfort, who amassed and lost a fortune while still in his 20’s. He did this by defrauding wealthy investors of millions while living a lavish lifestyle of sex, drugs, and thrills. Belfort was a brilliant and persuasive young man who preyed on the greed of others while feeding his own lust for money and power. In the end, Belfort paid the price for feeding the wolf within him.

There’s an old Cherokee proverb that says there are two wolves inside each of us, one good and one evil. One is filled with anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, lies, inferiority, and ego. The other joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy, and truth. The inner wolf that wins the battle over our soul, the proverb concludes, is the one we feed. A question each one of us needs to ask ourselves is this: Which wolf do we feed?

The underlying meaning of our Gospel reading today is often misunderstood. In sharing the Parable of the Dishonest Steward, Jesus was not endorsing the steward's evil ways, but admiring the decisiveness and ingenuity he showed in taking control of his situation. Upon learning that he would lose his job, the steward quickly adjusts the accounts of several of his master's debtors in the hopes that they will return the favor by welcoming him into their homes or perhaps help him find work.

Jesus is saying that our faith should challenge us to be as dedicated for the sake of God's Kingdom as we are in our careers and professions, to be as ready and willing to use our time, talent, and treasure to accomplish great things in the name of Christ. As "children of the light" we are asked to be stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us, whatever form those gifts may take.

"No one can serve two masters," Jesus tells his followers, "you will either hate one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both ..." There is a common misconception about this passage; it does not equate wealth with evil or imply criticism of those with an abundance of worldly possessions. Material possessions and money in themselves are morally neutral. They are neither good nor bad. The real challenge for you and I is how do we use our wealth, however that is defined in our lives. How do we live in relationship with our material possessions, and how do our material possessions affect the way we interact with others? Do we share our time, our talent, and our treasure with the marginalized and those in need; do we offer our gifts freely, with no strings attached, and without expectation of return? In our relationship with our possessions, who possess who? Anyone who owns a cat will understand that sometimes the things we think we possess, actually possess us.

This is the danger Jesus is constantly warning his followers about. Not to trust in wealth for its own sake but to use our wealth, the God-given gifts in which we are entrusted, to build the Kingdom of God in our time and place. Our lives find their meaning and purpose not in the things of this world, but in what we are able to contribute to the common good and progress of all humankind. Our challenge this week is to make the right choice of which master we will follow; which wolf we feed. Let us commit ourselves to live in

a relationship with our worldly possessions that reflect the teachings of Christ and the values of the Kingdom of God.

The chorus of the old hymn proclaims, "I owe no other Master, my heart shall be thy throne; My life I give henceforth to live, O Christ, for thee alone." Let that be our prayer, living for Jesus; today, tomorrow, and forever; let us feed the good wolf within.

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31 - “There was a rich man who used to dress in purple garments and the finest linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would have been grateful to be fed with the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores. Now the poor man died, and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In the netherworld, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham, far off, and Lazarus by his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames. But Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that during your lifetime you received many good things, while Lazarus suffered greatly. Now he is being comforted while you are in agony. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm has been established, so that no one who wishes to do so can pass from our side to yours, nor can anyone pass from your side to ours. Then I beg you, father,’ he said, ‘to send him to my father’s house, to warn my five brothers, lest they too end up in this place of torment.’ But Abraham responded, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them. He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ Abraham answered, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

We must be careful not to misinterpret today’s scripture. While this parable seems to be about money, it is really about values.

The rich man was dressed in purple. Purple symbolized wealth and purple dye was expensive. Also, in that time the common people were lucky if they ate meat once a week, but the rich man ate it almost daily. The gate also serves as a sign to the rich man’s wealth and as a barrier to unwanted visitors.

Now we encounter Lazarus, a beggar with oozing sores, just outside the gates of the rich man. He is so hungry he just wants the scraps from the rich man’s table. At those banquets, the people would wipe grease from their

hands onto a piece of bread and then throw the bread on the floor. Can you imagine what Lazarus must have felt?

Both Lazarus and the rich man died. However, this parable is not about death but about life, what's in our heart and our attitude. The rich man ended up in Hades, a place of final judgment. Lazarus was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man evidently knew who Lazarus was because he looked up and asks Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water. Even now, he still sees Lazarus as an errand boy, below his status. He asks Father Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water and he will ask Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. Isn't It interesting that Lazarus once coveted the scraps from the rich man's table? Now the rich man covets a drop of water from Lazarus' finger. The rich man who could no longer help himself begins to think of his brothers. He still shows no concern for neighbors, and certainly none for the poor or the marginalized.

What does all this mean to us? God is calling us into a relationship with him but throughout scripture God longs for people to be connected to each other. The rich man did not pay attention. This story tells us that the value of being conscious and aware of our need is a key element of being the people God calls us to be. We cannot and should not disconnect from the needs of the human spirit or get lulled into some sort of comfort where we go through life semi-conscious or self-righteous.

This story does not attack the rich man's riches. The problem is, he doesn't care. The rich man is concerned only with himself. He is indifferent to the needs of others. It is easy to spread the table of wealth with the beautiful people, for the educated, the smart, for our kind of person, a person who might give back or help us up the ladder of success. How do we act towards others, the disadvantaged, the unattractive, those you can't stand? These are people who might resent your help and rarely repay your kindness. How much do you/we care?

Do our possessions make us blind? Some see physically but don't really see; what they see is what they want to see: the lazy and the cheat, the drunk, the killer or the person who has a disability. Are we like the priest in the story of the Good Samaritan and, "pass by on the other side?" I have had people

tell me that the disabled should be shut away in homes and should not be seen. As an advocate for the disabled that statement appalls me and yet those comments continue. It seems our sin is our inability to see; our lack of insight; our lack of awareness; our lack of consciousness.

We are put on earth as stewards and God expects us to use what we have been given. This means that I can be and will be called to account for the use I make of all that I have. I should not squander what is my own, or clutch it possessively, in total disregard for my sisters and brothers in need. Thomas Merton made the statement that; “No person gets to heaven by themselves.” We reach God through community.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian preacher compared humanity to an enormous spider web: “If you touch it anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling.... As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility, toward the people we meet, we too are setting the great spider web a-tremble.” Chief Seattle said, “Man does not weave this web of life. He is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.” The life that I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked. To paraphrase an old saying, no human being, man, or woman, is an island. The web touches others whether good or bad. Friday night we all felt the web tremble with evil as a man went into the mall and killed five people. His web touched the rest of us in Washington, but most assuredly here in Skagit County. The lives that were lost will hurt many people for generations. We did not know that person, but his web has touched us. How will we react to that web? Will we be hateful, indifferent or will we reach out in a more loving way?

Our challenge here is not to be indifferent or blind by love money or possessions. Are we willing to see Lazarus in our midst? What have we done to provide food, clothing, shelter, and human kindness? Jesus wants us to look at our priorities differently. We can make choices that are life giving.

We need to lift our eyes up and see. Lift them above ourselves, beyond what we own. Will we really see the other, actually see the deprived and degraded,

the drug abused and the sexually abused, see the disaster to people in any domination, whether male, female, military or financial, clerical, or lay. Only if we lift up our eyes will we be concerned for community and see through the eyes of God.

The scripture gives us a powerful image today that we need to embrace and accept which will move us to become more conscious. Sometimes maybe all a person needs is a presence, someone listening to them for a few minutes. It makes such a difference if someone listens as if they care about what is going on inside us. A touch can be so helpful. A simple smile can improve someone's day. We can make a difference in a person's life. Being an instrument of life and love to one another is our challenge.

Parable of the Unprofitable Servants

Luke 17:7-10 - "Which of you, when your servant returns from plowing or tending sheep in the fields, would say to him, 'Come right away and sit down to eat'? Would you not say, 'Prepare my dinner, put on your apron, and wait on me while I eat and drink, and then afterward you yourself may eat and drink'? Would you be grateful to that servant for doing what he was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have only done our duty.' "

The gospel this week starts with a request from the Apostles for Jesus to increase their faith. They also had asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Fundamentally the requests are the same. To pray is to focus our hearts on God, to love and trust God, and to have faith in God's concern for us. Every prayer is an act of faith in God. We can reverse that order in that every time we turn to God in faith we are praying.

Faith is a word that we hear and use a lot in religion, but what does it mean? The 11th chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for," and "the evidence of things not seen." Faith has many meanings. It is about the future, about truth and loyalty but mostly faith is about belief. It means believing in things even if we don't any logical proof, such as believing in God. We actually believe in the Creator because we have faith.

When the apostles ask Jesus for faith his response is to teach and not to rebuke. He compares faith to something as insignificant as a mustard seed, which is smaller than a pinhead. Faith should be something we nurture and hopefully grow. There are times it is easy to be faithful and loyal to God and our fellow man, the times when things are going well for us. Then there are times when we make all kinds of excuses why we are not nice to people; why we act in an unchristian manner. We don't have time because we are weak and do not have faith. Our faith clearly shows when we allow God's love to transform us from unbelievers to believers, filled with enough faith to follow Jesus wherever he may lead us. True faith is often shown by the way we

act. That is when we act like the dedicated servant and not try to be the master.

The second half of the gospel Jesus speaks of the servant and the master. It is hard to see the connection at first. The focus is not on the master but what is expected of the servants. Even when they are tired from working on one aspect of their job they cannot ignore any other aspect of their job. The thing of it is that we should do our job to the fullest potential. We need to have faith. Faith is following Jesus wherever he may lead us. Faith creates a reliance on God by attending to the seemingly insignificant things. Faith is a combination of joy, hope, and trust which allows us to let God's love transform us. Faith helps us to develop suitable attitudes toward earthly possessions. Faith helps us to detach ourselves from these possessions and form a greater love for God's people.

The late archbishop Fulton J. Sheen used to say that as Christians we are God's chosen people, but in the way we live our faith one would think we are God's frozen people. To be among the chosen people is not an elevation in status. Rather, we are chosen to live a life of Christ-like love and to spread the good news that He taught.

How do we show our love for others? Faith increases when we serve others not by being served. Just as Jesus came to serve. He showed that he was not above serving when he washed the feet of the apostles. True faith increases when we grow in servitude, and we become more like Jesus.

What kind of faith do I have? Is it unselfish love that will bring us closer to God or is it a faith that separates us from his love?

In her Liturgical Publications Blog this week, Mary Matestic posted the following prayer:

"O Lord, you walked upon this earth long before we arrived. You gave us your vision of hope; and though we walk in the shadow of death, it is good to know that you are always at our side, with your kindness and mercy leading us to places we never dreamed we would go. Indeed, give us the patience and perseverance to continue your work here in this, our time, trusting you to bring about your vision. Watch over those who flounder and give up. Meet them in the kindness of family and friends. Deliver us all from despair and help us keep our eyes upon you who give us faith. Enough to uproot trees,

enough to write down what is still to come, enough to wait for your vision fulfilled.”

Let this be our prayer, our act of faith in God this week as well.

Faith is to Serve

A sermon by Rev. Helen Schwinden, Retired Deacon

Parable of the Persistent Widow

Luke 18:2-8 - He said, "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor had any respect for people. In that same town there was a widow who kept coming to him and pleading, 'Grant me justice against my adversary. For a long time, he refused her request, but finally he said to himself, 'Even though I neither fear God nor have any respect for people, yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will see to it that she gets justice. Otherwise, she will keep coming and wear me out.' " Then the Lord said, "You have heard what the unjust judge says. Will not God, therefore, grant justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay in answering their pleas? I tell you; he will grant them justice quickly. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

The judge in this story was a very powerful man. He did not fear God or people. He was dishonest and probably very rich because of that. The widow in this story was very poor, maybe an outcast and looked upon with disgrace. She was a woman so had a very low status in society. She was probably ignored most of the time.

This widow wanted justice. She was persistent and a nuisance. She probably followed the judge around, screaming for justice, knocked on his door, sat in his courtroom, and sent him letters. She was not giving up. Children are good at that. Mom, please, please, please buy a candy bar, I'll be good, I promise. Come on mom. I will love you forever. I really want it mom, awe come on until finally, the mom says yes just to get them off her back. This is exactly what the judge did. He got so tired of her harassment that he finally said yes just to regain the peace in his life.

This story is not so much about the evil judge as it is about the widow. She was persistent until she got what she needed.

Now, let's compare the judge to God. The judge is evil and gave the woman what she wanted because of her persistence. God is good. God loves us and tells us to be persistent in our prayers. That means do not give up. Pray over and over. Keep on asking. Jesus says to pray always and do not lose heart.

While I was preparing my reflection, I came across a story about Mother Theresa I would like to share. Mother Theresa went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a famous Washington criminal lawyer. He was a very powerful man and was at one time the lawyer for Frank Sinatra, a famous actor and Richard Nixon, a former president. Mother Theresa visited him because she was raising money for the aid's hospice. Williams oversaw a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for her appointment, Williams said to his partner. "You know Paul; Aids is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to contribute, but I've got this Catholic Saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do. They agreed that they would be polite, hear her out and then say no. Well, Mother Theresa arrived. She was like a little sparrow sitting on the other side of this big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, but Williams said, "We are touched by your appeal, but no. Mother Theresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at his friend, they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Theresa made the same pitch, word for word for the hospice. Again, they said thank you but no. Again, Mother Theresa said, "Let us pray." Williams was exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, "All right, all right, get me my checkbook!"

Maybe that is what Jesus wants from us. Pray like Mother Teresa, pray like the widow, cry out, and bang on the doors of heaven with insistence.

This parable is about our relationship with God. If an evil judge will finally give to a poor widow, how much more will a loving God give to us, His children. God formed us in the womb and knew us before we were born. God loves us like no other and pursues us like only God can do. Our God does not give up on us. God wants to answer our prayers. I don't know why some prayers seem to us to go unanswered, but God says to pray earnestly. Our prayers are heard. We need to be persistent in our prayers. There are so many ways to pray. We can do formal prayer from books, prayer can be asking for things, asking for health, praying for others, silence before God in the Blessed Sacrament, the religious music we listen to, to praise God. God loves to hear our voice, but God loves the prayers from our heart the most. We need to pray to get to know God... to have that intimate relationship with God.

When my prayer of 7 years was, “Hang on Lord,” there seemed to be silence, but I was persistent in my prayer and after seven years felt the healing touch. Prayer does work, even if we say only a few words. I did not think God was listening but look at me now. God was actively involved.

God asks us to be persistent. God too, is persistent, and as our creator wants to have an intimate relationship with us. God wants us to pray and wants to be involved in our life. God wants a loving relationship with us. The reality of prayer is a personal relationship with God. God wants us all to “hang in there.” Be a nuisance to Him in prayer and storm heaven like crazy.

Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:10-14 - "Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and said this prayer to himself: 'I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and pay tithes on all my income. The tax collector, however, stood some distance away and would not even raise his eyes to heaven. Rather, he kept beating his breast as he said, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' This man, I tell you, returned to his home justified, whereas the other did not. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke presents us with a parable about the contrast between pride and humility. Two men enter the Temple to pray, both separated from Jewish society, one by choice, one by circumstance. One stands for all to see and lifts his voice for all to hear. One stands alone where he hopes no one can see and speaks softly for only God to hear. One prayer is eloquent and long, one prayer is simple, and straight to the point. Two prayers are lifted but only one reaches the heart of God. The other is left in the wind to drift into nothingness. Two men, two prayers, only one man left justified and only one prayer was answered.

The Pharisee and the tax collector are images of two extreme religious attitudes. Pharisees were the "separated ones" who were the keepers of the holy law; the Torah, and they were held in great esteem by the Jewish masses.

Tax collectors were Jews who worked as public servants of Rome. That's why some translators call them publicans. One commentator quipped, "If a publican was a tax collector, then what does a republican do?" As a tax collector, one had the right to collect taxes from the people in a certain region. As part of the arrangement, tax collectors could count on Roman cooperation to enforce their outrageous charges. It was a system filled with extortion. Rome required little accountability if they received their portion,

and there was no legal avenue of recourse for the poor they preyed upon. Tax collectors were despised by Jewish society as thieves and collaborators.

The parable also contrasts two very different attitudes of prayer. The Pharisee's focus is on the greatness his own piety, and not on the graciousness of God. In assessing his own character, he compares himself to the worst elements of his society and pronounces himself excellent by comparison. This is a lesson for us all. When picking a standard by which to measure ourselves, we need to look higher. The only faithful standard is Christ. If we compare ourselves to Jesus, our sin will be obvious, and we will not be tempted toward the kind of pride that taints this Pharisee's prayer. Attitude and actions are the essence of authentic discipleship, not just words and rituals empty of feeling or conviction. We manifest our love for God not through self-righteous acts of piety but through our love and care for the poor, the needy, the defenseless, the alienated and the rejected.

The tax collector, on the other hand, realizes his nothingness before God. He comes before God seeking mercy because of the good things God has done for undeserving sinners like himself. It is the prayer of the humble who come before God with an attitude of thanksgiving for God's unconditional and limitless mercy that is heard and exalted before God.

In our own time and place, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is played out not so much as a lack of humility before God but as a lack of awareness of the needs of others. Especially those around us who may have been dismissed by society or culture as lesser creatures because they do not meet some standard of acceptance, success, or status. Worse, perhaps, we sometimes fail to realize that they are our brothers and sisters who deserve our help for no other reason than that they are, like us, children of God. That is true Gospel humility: to realize that all the blessings we have received are the result of the depth of God's love and not because of anything we have done to deserve it. Faced with such a realization, all we can do is to try and return that love to those around us, to care for this world we all share with one another as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same loving God.

Jesus says, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." May it be so within and among us. May we each grow away from the excessive pride of the Pharisee and toward the humility shown by the tax collector. May we each recognize our need for mercy and compassion from God and from each other; and may we experience that which we seek; the merciful and compassionate embrace of God, and of others in our lives. Let us all beat our chest and proclaim as the tax collector did from Psalm 51, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner, create in me a clean heart, ... and put a new spirit in me." And let us go our way with grateful hearts, reconciled before God, assured that our prayers have been heard and will be answered.

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NEW CATHOLIC BIBLE (NCB)

Following the highly acclaimed publication of the New Catholic Version of *The Psalms* in 2002 and *The New Testament* in 2015, this translation of the New Catholic Bible has been accomplished by the same board of highly qualified Scripture scholars under the direction of Rev. Jude Winkler, OFM Conv., S.S.L. They were committed to render as perfectly as possible a translation of literal or formal equivalence. Numerous translations were consulted, and decisions were made by consensus according to accepted principles of textual criticism.

With a deep desire to be faithful to God's inspired Word, the translators used the best available Hebrew and Greek texts to achieve a dignified and accurate version of the sacred text in language that is clear and meaningful to today's readers. With extensive explanatory notes that reflect the most current consensus of Catholic scholarship, the New Catholic Bible is a translation that can be trusted to provide the reader with a prayerful and fulfilling Bible experience suitable for private devotion and study.

The purpose of the NCB is to provide a clear, faithful, and accurate translation that allows for a more global reach than other translations. Offering this fresh translation serves to provide English-speaking Catholics worldwide with another version to satisfy their interest in, devotion to, and study of, the Word of God. (biblegateway.com)

Who Are We? About the Author's

Rev. Jack and Rev. Liz were married in 2011 and serve as "*Equals in Ministry - Equals in Life.*" Although retired from active ministry, both remain in good standing with the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC), Pacific Northwest Diocese, and the First Christian Church - Disciples of Christ (DOC), Northern Lights Region.

Rev. Jack served in the United States Marine Corps including a 13-month deployment in Vietnam (1965-66). After leaving the Marines, he earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a Certificate in Leadership Management. He retired in 2008 after a 36-year career in the Real Estate Valuation Industry; the last 10 years in corporate management. Prior to retiring, Rev. Jack earned a Master of Art's Degree (MA) in Pastoral Ministry and a Doctorate (D.Min.) in Applied Ministries. After his ordination in November of 2010, Rev. Jack earned a Master of Divinity Degree (M.Div.).

Rev. Liz is a graduate of Central Washington University earning a Bachelor of Arts in Education. She went on to become a Certified Teacher with a Special Education endorsement and taught in the Bellingham School District for over 20 years. Rev. Liz earned a Master of Divinity Degree (M.Div.) from the St. John XXIII Theological Institute, have experience signing for the deaf at church, and was a licensed Foster Care provider for over 25 years. Rev. Liz was ordained in August of 2012.

Our Story: After years of service in the Independent Catholic Church, we found ourselves in a rather unique position in the final years of our ministry. While being Pastors of Saint Clare Pastoral Center, an independent Catholic community, we also served for three years in a pastoral role for the Mount Vernon First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). During that period and prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, our two communities shared an ecumenical worship service each Sunday on Zoom. It was a remarkable relationship that benefited both faith traditions and created a distinct ecumenical identity that aligned with the Mission Statement and Constitutional Preamble of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion (ECC), and the vision of unity found in both the Disciples of Christ, Council on Christian Unity, and the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis wrote of such relationships stating, "It is important to know each other better but also to recognize what the Spirit has shown in the other as a gift for us ... We must

walk united with our differences. There is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.”

The relationship between Saint Clare Pastoral Center and the First Christian Church of Mount Vernon developed into a welcoming and inclusive experience that led to a better understanding of what unites us as the People of God and served as a living, breathing example of the work begun by the Catholics and Disciples of Christ Commission for Dialogue. In this lies our calling of working toward the “visible unity of the one church of God,” which was the original goal of the commission when it began work in 1977.

Although First Christian Church sold its building and ended its visible ministry at the end of 2021, Saint Clare Pastoral Center continued to provide a transitional and ecumenical worship service each Sunday on Zoom through August 2022. This provided a safe haven for FCC members while they transitioned into other faith communities. Since everyone was welcome at our gatherings, the work towards Christian unity and walking together in our differences continued. In November 2022, Rev. Liz and I retired from active ministry, the Pastoral Center closed, and our Safe Haven website (www.stclarepastoralcenter.com) was born. Our ministry continues.

Rev. Liz, and Rev. Jack