



PREACH THE WORD!

Reflections on the Gospel Readings / Cycles A – B - C

2 Timothy 4: 2

“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” [NIV]

Rev. Jack and Rev. Liz Miller
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"What is the difference between a Homily and a Sermon?" our instructor in Homiletics asked the class. There was intense silence as all of us pondered the answer, not one brave enough to venture a guess. "A sermon takes the form of a lecture or discourse given for the purpose of providing religious instruction or proper moral behavior," he offered with a pause. "In contrast," he continued, "a homily is a scripturally-based reflection that provides "food for thought" about the challenges of living in today's busy and hectic world. The homily, then, should relate to the worshipping community's experience of life in their real world."

Having grown up as a Southern Baptist preacher, I've never claimed to be a "Homilist," although I do believe in the separation of instruction and scriptural reflection from the ambo (pulpit). I've seen too many folks preached into unconsciousness by well-meaning presbyters, proud of the Greek and Hebrew words they can actually pronounce correctly; dealing out complex theological phases like a deck of cards and spouting eloquent words that flow from their lips like honey from a jar. No thanks, I'd rather listen to the down-home preaching of Billy Sunday, or the picture-painting Dialog of Peter Marshall, who could surround you with the message as if you were standing in the middle of it.

I consider Rev. Liz and myself as hybrids of sorts - purveyors of *sermonetics* (yes, I made up the word). Sometimes the message resembles a Homily, sometimes a Sermon, and sometimes a little of both; and sometimes, neither at all. Luckily, we cannot lay claim to anything good that comes from the reflections we have shared in this work. Thankfully, God has all too often taken control and shared the message He (or She) had in mind. Many times, I've sat down only to discover that I never looked at my notes; never turned a page. God had tuned and played a beautiful melody on the old violin once again. Rev. Liz has experienced the same thing. If you have felt this sensation in your own preaching or teaching, then you know what a humbling and wonderful experience it can be.

The reflections contained in this collection are only written words - God often changed their actual presentation, and at times, left them unsaid entirely. We are simple country preachers, blessed to be instruments of God's will; certainly not worthy of any personal praise or recognition. So, if you are touched in some way by the reflections contained in this book, give all praise and glory to God.

May God's Peace and Blessing be upon you. *Rev. Jack*

Charles "Chuck" Swindoll, the well-known evangelical pastor, author, educator, and radio preacher once said, "If I ever write a book on preaching, it will contain only three words: **Preach The Word!** Get rid of all the other stuff that gets you sidetracked; **Preach The Word!**"

In the life we live, the compassion we show, and the gifts of love we share with each other, we all become the conduit of God's message, an instrument through which Christ can reach out and touch our world today. So, what are you waiting for, go out and Preach the Word!

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Cycle A

Advent Season

1st Sunday of Advent
Matthew 24: 37-44
"Come, Lord Jesus - Come"
By Rev. Liz Miller

Today we start a new season in the church year. During the first two weeks of Advent, we focus on the second coming...when Christ will come again, but how many of us focus on the end of time during this holy, wonderful season as we prepare for the birth of our savior? The last two weeks, as we get closer to Christmas, we focus on the birth of Christ...when he came into the world as a tiny little baby. All of this has to do with God longing to save all people and to be a part of our life.

In reading the scripture today we should limit ourselves to the points that Jesus makes:

1. Christ will come again.
2. His coming will be swift and surprising.
3. He will divide people into two groups...those taken and those left behind.
4. We need to be ready.

We don't need to worry about the details but only need to trust that our God has it all under control. If we are living our faith, we have no need to know the day and time because we will be ready.

We are told to be awake or to watch or be on guard. Our preparation has to do with spiritual rather than physical wakefulness. How do we get ready? What do we do? Jesus gives two answers. First, he tells us to use our God given resources for God's benefits. Second Jesus tells us that feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoners are activities that we do for Christ. It all comes down to loving and serving God and loving and serving our neighbor.

Advent calls us to stay awake and not sleep through the opportunity's life gives us to discover God and the things of God, to watch for, to pay attention to the signs of God's unmistakable presence in our lives. We need to live in the present and leave the future to God.

Life is a constant Advent experience. Our lives are Advents of waiting to be healed, waiting to make things better, waiting to complete and move on; the everyday Advents of our lives are filled with fear, doubt, and struggle. Our Advents are ultimately fulfilled by the arrival of Christ, who comes to dwell in our midst, to establish his eternal kingdom, to walk and talk with us once more.

Advent also calls us to wait, and waiting is a wise teacher. The experience of waiting enables us to realize what we appreciate, value, and cherish; waiting teaches us how to be present and attentive to family and friends; waiting opens our vision and spirits to realize the love of God in the here and now. Advent marks the coming of our great hope, the Messiah Jesus, who comes to make our lives complete and fulfilled, to bring healing and liberation to those difficult times we all experience. May we welcome the Messiah this Advent, who fulfills our waiting and longing with hope that we may discover meaning and purpose in the days God has given us.

There's an old saying, "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly." Advent gives us this wonderful reality; our intimate end leads us to a new and beautiful beginning that has no end. This is the Advent promise, from the birth of a child in a manger to his return in glory, we wait, and watch, and hope. Each of us can be one with God, one with one another. In the declaration of early church writers, "God became human to make us divine." To give us a share in God's own life; to make it possible for us to believe what is beyond belief, to hope against hope, to love as Jesus loved.

Are we ready to meet the child and the King? Then let our constant prayer be lifted on earth and in heaven: Come, Lord Jesus - Come!

2nd Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3: 1-12

"Proclaim and Share the Gift"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Israel had not seen one for more than 450 years. Not since Malachi warned against empty sacrifices and God's coming judgment had the people of Israel seen a real, live prophet. To put that in perspective, imagine not having a good preacher around since the founding of America's oldest city, St. Augustine, Florida in 1566. That's what 450 years looks like. But there he was, making his appearance in the wilderness of Judea, preaching repentance, baptism, and preparation for the promised messiah; Israel's new prophet, and his name was John the Baptist.

John's message and outreach gives us a clear idea of how God feels about such things. True love, God's love, is always inclusive. We see in our Gospel reading today that people came to John from "all Judea" and "the whole region around the Jordan." John received everyone, not just the good Jewish folks, but also tax collectors, prostitutes, and even Roman soldiers. He knew they all had something in common: they needed God in their lives, they needed forgiveness, they needed to repent and change the direction of their journey in life. Everyone was welcomed to the Jordan by John; everyone who was dipped in the waters left renewed in mind and spirit, everyone left with God's love in their heart.

That is what a good prophet does. A prophet is "one who proclaims" God's message to everyone within hearing, saint, and sinner alike, no matter who they are or where they come from; no matter how they are dressed or what the status of the bank account is. And the best news of all, the very best offer we will ever receive is that you and I can be prophets too. In the kindness, affirmation, and encouragement we extend to others, we proclaim the same peace and compassion of God that John proclaimed on the banks of the Jordan River. We have many opportunities in our own everyday lives to be prophets of God's love, to play the role of John the Baptist in our homes and businesses and schools, to proclaim in our own time and place that the peace and justice of God is at hand.

God wants us to be like John the Baptist. God wants us to be a voice and not a whisper, a burning flame and not a dying ember. Some say that when God made

John the Baptist, God threw the mold away. During this Advent we should pick up our flashlights, find that mold, and squeeze ourselves into it.

In baptism, each one of us has been called by God to the work of the "prophet," using whatever talents and skills we possess to transform the wastelands around us into harvests of justice and forgiveness; to become a conduit through which our God can reach out and renew our troubled world with compassion and peace.

In opening our hearts, especially during this Advent season, in serving God in simple everyday ways, we share the same spirit that empowered John the Baptist to proclaim the coming of God's Christ. In expressing the love of God through our everyday acts of kindness and compassion, we give the world around us, and those in need, the true gift that God brings into our lives, a greater gift than money can ever buy. It's the same gift of hope that John the Baptist offered so many years ago; the same gift of joy and anticipation. Let us proclaim that gift with all our hearts to everyone we know, share that gift with everyone we meet; Christ the Lord is coming! Prepare the way of the Lord! Halleluiah!

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11: 2-11

"The One!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The depiction of John the Baptist in today's Gospel reading is quite different from last Sunday's image of the charismatic figure preaching to the crowds along the Jordan River. John had been imprisoned for perhaps six months. Wasting away in his small cell near the Dead Sea, John knew that his end was near. He had committed his life to proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, and now that bold witness would soon cost him his life. Like any human being faced with such a dismal future, John had to wonder if he had backed the right man. The people of Israel had been expecting a much different kind of Messiah than the gentle, humble worker of miracles from Nazareth. They expected a Messiah who would liberate them from Roman domination, much like Moses had freed their ancestors from Pharaoh in Egypt. And to top things off, Jesus had never laid claim to the title, he never said publicly that he was the Messiah. So, John's question to Jesus makes great sense. Are you the guy? Are you the One who the prophets of old said would come? Are you the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams and prayers, or should we keep looking?

To John's question, Jesus refuses to give a simple "yes" or "no" answer, and neither confirms or denies that he is Isaiah's promised deliverer. Instead, he points to what has been happening as the key to his real identity. There is no mention of kingly power, dominance, or royalty in any form. Instead, Jesus describes a healing ministry geared toward liberating the marginalized, both physically and spiritually. Jesus sends the messengers back to John to report all they had witnessed; the blind could see, the lame could walk, lepers were cleansed, the deaf could hear, the dead were raised, and the Good News of God's love was being proclaimed to the poor. Notice that Jesus does not say that he himself was doing this. He simply says that it was happening; what was promised through the prophets of old was being fulfilled.

Jesus seems to be telling John, look at what is going on around you and decide for yourself if I am the One, the promise, the deliverance and redemption of Israel foretold by Isaiah.

John's question is essentially our question as well. Like John and the people of Israel we have our own moments of doubt and uncertainty. We are surrounded by a violent world filled with hatred, tragedy, and despair. We are slaves to forces that we seemingly cannot control and events that shake our faith. But we have hope; we have the promise, we have subtle "signs and wonders" to show us that God is present in our lives; God is here in our world today. Jesus is sending to you and me the same message he sent to John; miracles are happening all around you if you look for them. See them and believe, know that I am the One.

As we celebrate the Advent of Christ's birth, we also reaffirm our belief that the Kingdom of God is a reality in the here and now. We experience God's presence and promise when we surrender ourselves to God's love, compassion and reconciliation which is always present in our lives. All we must do is recognize it. God loves us all. Even amid our emotional and spiritual challenges, we experience the Good News of God's love and compassion. John's question was answered, and our questions are answered as well. There is no need to look elsewhere. The promised One is here!

Amen? Amen!

4th Sunday of Advent

Matthew 1: 18-24

"God with skin on him"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a story is told about a little girl who was terrified of the dark. Her father tried to calm her by assuring her that she had no reason to fear, the spirit of God was with her. But she would not be put off. She told her dad, "I don't want a spirit, I want God with real skin on him."

In today's Gospel, we find Matthew's version of the birth of Christ. Luke's familiar story is the one read most often at Christmas time. You know the one. Shepherds, angles, a birth in a stable, wise men, the star in the east. That's the story we read to our children. Matthew's account is nothing like that. It's all about a young unmarried woman finding herself pregnant, and her very hurt and confused fiancé wondering what to do about it.

Joseph is described by Matthew as "a righteous man." This meant Joseph observed all the Jewish customs and laws, but more than that, he was a kind and compassionate man. He also cared for Mary and had no desire to subject her to the full force of Jewish law. So, Matthew tells us, Joseph planned to divorce her quietly. But God intervened and an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, quelling his fears, and revealing that this child was very special; this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Because of his complete faith and trust in God's promise, Joseph does the right thing, he takes Mary as his wife, and the unborn child as his own son.

As Matthew's gospel tells us, an angel appeared to Joseph and said: "Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home." That angel speaks to all of us as well. In our own situations of hurt and frustration, we too hear the angel's voice urging us not to be afraid to forgive and seek forgiveness; not to be afraid to embrace the good that every human being possesses; not to be afraid to take into our hearts and our "homes" the needy, the desperate, the unimportant, and the forgotten. And as Mary opened herself to the Spirit in receiving the Christ-child, so should we open our hearts to receive him as well.

"The birth of Jesus," David Lloyd-Jones wrote, "Brings the infinite God within reach of finite man." That said, it looks like the birth of Jesus gave that little girl I

mentioned at the beginning of this homily exactly what she wanted; a God with real skin on him.

May this season of giving strengthen our faithful response to God's call, a call to bring the joy, wonder, hope, and peace that accompanies the birth of his Son's into every season, every place, and into the heart of every person we meet.

Amen? Amen!

Christmas Season

The Nativity of the Lord

Luke: 2: 1-14

"Christmas Blessings"

By Rev. Liz Miller, M.Div.

Merry Christmas everyone and welcome to all our visitors.

Tonight, we celebrate the birth of Christ. I believe we have the best parish in the world, but I am sure every pastor says the same thing.

God has invited you and me to live on this earth. Religion is designed to teach us how to live and God has always promised us he would come and teach us how to live so when everything was right and in order, God entered the world.

The Old Testament was rather barbaric at times. The religion the Israelites believed in had a major function, to offer sacrifices to make up for sins. In the Israelite community, if a person had a bad week, then they had a busy worship day to atone for their sins. God comes along, enters the world, and says he would like to take over that role. Jesus comes into the world and invites us to a new way of being. Jesus wants us to live in the present with as little fear as possible.

Jesus came onto this earth about as small and insignificant entrance as possible. The birth of Jesus is very humble and wonderful. The angel Gabriel appeared to a young girl, probably around 13 or 14 years old. Mary was not famous or well known. Her son, Jesus was born in a stable with the animals and the hay. There was no special place for Jesus to be born. He had no special blanket. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, which is a food trough for the animals. Angels appeared in the sky and proclaimed the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. The angels did not appear to the kings or religious leaders, but to the shepherds and the lowly.

These were all simple and poor people. I sometimes wonder what they must have thought when all these extraordinary things started happening. What did Mary's parents and Joseph think when they heard about Mary's pregnancy? The shepherds in the field were watching their sheep when the heavens opened.

Jesus was born in a humble setting and spent thirty years doing very little that seems important, at least in the world's standard. He grew and lived his daily life

the same as we do. When he was 12 years old, he got in trouble with his parents. They were upset when he got lost.

When Jesus started his ministry and for three years he taught, he forgave, he healed, and he struggled but he changed the world.

Jesus came at the time God had planned. Look at us. Our existence too, is at the time that God planned for us. Everything in our life has brought us to where we are today. Every event, every experience, had absolute meaning. Every relationship in our life, the good ones and yes, even the bad ones are important in our life because they made us grow and become who we are meant to be.

Tonight, we come together as a community to celebrate the birth of our Lord. We believe the Spirit flows through the words of the Liturgy in a unique way. We are all connected in our mutual longing for the miracle of Christmas. We are joyous on this wonderful feast of the birth of Christ because God is revealing himself to us. He becomes more real. This God incarnate is truly the light that comes into the darkness. Because of the birth of Christ, the relationship between God and humankind was never the same.

Christmas is so much more than the birth of a child. It was a most wonderful event that transformed human history. God's extraordinary love allowed our creator to become one with humanity, and we became one with God and with one another. We are family: brothers, and sisters, sons, and daughters of the living God. The birth of Jesus, the Christmas story is all about love, it's all about family. Let the celebration of that birth begin. In God's love, Merry Christmas, and blessings to each of you.

The Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2: 1-12

"When the song of the angels is stilled"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The Christmas season is closing. Trees and decorations are coming down and stores are already putting out heart shaped candy boxes in preparation for Valentine's Day. The liturgical Christmas season traditionally ends when the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated tomorrow. We will return to Ordinary Time next Sunday. The question that may come to mind is this, what does a story about wise men following a star have to do with finding our way after Christmas?

What we may fail to recognize is now that the season is ending, the real work of Christmas is about to begin. The story of the wise men is our guide, our marching orders, our great commission which is about to unfold. The Epiphany of the Lord, the appearance of these travelers from the East is our wake-up call, our bugle blasting reveille, our Ah-ha moment. It signals God's open invitation to the whole world to salvation's message, the proclamation by our Creator that all people are called to the Grace of God which began with the birth of a child in a manger. Jesus did not come into the world for the benefit of a select group of people. He came for all the people. This truth is a great mystery to those who see themselves as the sole benefactors of God's Grace, and who look with indifference and disdain towards those who they deem as outsiders or unworthy.

It is the magi in our story today, travelers from the East who were considered non-believers, and the shepherds from our story last week, who were considered lowly outcasts in the eyes of Israel, who possessed the humility of faith, the openness of mind and heart, to seek out, bow before and pay homage to the newborn savior of the world. They were the first to recognize who Christ was, and the first to spread the good news of his arrival to a waiting world.

The Epiphany is the story of a journey: a mysterious group of travelers are driven to follow a star to an unknown place to encounter God's promise, a child-king. Their journey mirrors our own journey through this life to find purpose and meaning. Our own journey may be one of clarity and purpose, or one filled with desperation and terror. We come to realize that it is in and through the love of God, in all its joys

and sorrows, in all its demands and gifts, which makes us real and whole as human beings.

How do we find our way after Christmas? Perhaps the answer can be found in the poem written by Howard Thurman.

“When the song of the angels is stilled,” Thurman writes, “When the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and the princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost; To heal the broken; To feed the hungry; To release the prisoner; To rebuild the nations; To bring peace among people; To make music in the heart.”

In the coming year, may our encounter with Christ, in Word and Sacrament, in our everyday journeys of both struggle and grace, be a constant epiphany of re-creating and transforming our lives. Let the work of Christmas begin today! Let’s begin it together!

Amen? Amen!

The Baptism of the Lord

Matthew 3: 13-17

"Sacrament of Rebirth"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Every January, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John. The event is found in all four Gospels. There are slight variations in the story. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of the "voice from heaven," while in the Gospel of John it is John the Baptist who "bore witness" to the "dove from heaven." (John 1: 32). John's is the only voice that was heard. In Mark and Luke, the "voice" is directed to Jesus (while in prayer according to Luke) and speaks directly to him: "You are my beloved son..." the voice says, while in Matthew's account, the voice speaks to all present saying: "This is my beloved son ..." And finally, it is only in Matthew that we find the dialogue between Jesus & John about who should be baptizing whom.

But in each of the four Gospels, Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry of teaching and healing that will reach its fulfillment during the events of Holy Week. It marks the beginning of something wonderful, not just for Jesus and for those who follow him, but for all of humankind as well. For in the story of Jesus' earthly ministry, justice for the poor and enslaved is possible; reconciliation among the estranged and divided become a reality, and compassion re-creates and heals the broken-hearted. Through Jesus, hope that gives birth to new life, light that shatters the darkness of despair, and love that lifts the fallen, all become realistic possibilities if we follow his example in our own Jordan River's and beyond. Through our own baptism, we can embrace the same Spirit that hovered over Christ as it guides us through our life-journey of service to others in Jesus' name.

In Christ, baptism becomes the Sacrament of Rebirth, a reception of new life. Christ comes to transform our lives into one that is centered on reconciliation, peace, and justice. It is the same transformation that began for Jesus at the banks of the Jordan River. The Spirit of God descended upon him and the voice from heaven consecrated the ministry Jesus was about to begin. In our own baptisms, the same Spirit enables us to discover the loving presence of God in each one we meet. In lifting the poor and broken in hope and healing, we carry on the ministry of Christ. Each time we are kind to the downtrodden or the socially unacceptable, we are continuing the ministry of Christ. Each time we respond through grace to do

something kind for someone else, we are continuing the ministry Jesus began so many years ago.

The work and ministry God calls us to can take many forms. It can often be found in our simplest acts of kindness and charity. But into whatever journey of faith we are called, the Spirit of God transforms our every loving act into the image of Christ in our midst. In humbled gratitude for the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we should mirror Christ in the life-journey we have been given; let us become the instrument through which the Spirit descends upon others with wisdom and grace.

The Spirit of God is descending on you and me today. The Spirit of God is hovering above us and calling us to continue in the year to come the ministries Jesus began so long ago. We are called to seek out and find the lost, to heal those who are hurting, to feed the hungry, to free the imprisoned, to rebuild nations, and to bring peace to all peoples everywhere. It is a formidable task but let us begin; one step, one day, one act of loving kindness at a time.

Amen? Amen!

Lenten Season

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18

"Living the ashes, we receive"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The season of Lent is upon us. Ashes, fasting, abstinence, fish on Fridays all come to mind when we think of Lent. It's the one time of the year we wear our Christianity on our foreheads for all to see. We may do our other penitential acts in private during Lent, but we announce to the world that our period of penance has begun on Ash Wednesday; unless we attend Mass in the evening that is. I like what our little bulletin insert says about this celebration, it is the one day of the year that we come to church clean and return home dirty. But Lent is so much more than receiving our "mark" of ashes; it begins 40 days of "living" the ashes we receive.

Our Lenten journey toward Easter is all about reflecting on the lives we are living and adjusting as necessary. We use prayer, fasting, and acts of kindness to help us focus on changing direction; making a turn from the way we are traveling and heading off on a different compass heading. For some of us, Lent brings about a subtle course correction, while for others it takes the form of a drastic right or left, and even a complete 180; a total reversal from the way our life was heading.

In Hebrew, the word for repentance is to turn, like the turning of the earth toward the sun at this time of year, like the turning of soil before spring planting. Our Lenten journey begins on Ash Wednesday and calls us to repentance, to turn away from those things that separate us from God and to change the direction of our lives to bring us closer to Creator and the whole of God's Creation.

In today's Gospel, Jesus instructs his listeners on the proper Christian attitude toward prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Such acts are only meaningful, Jesus tells us, if they are outward expressions of an internal change or turning that has already taken place within our hearts.

Just as the earth will turn toward the sun in the weeks ahead, transforming the dark and cold of winter into the light and warmth of spring, so should these ashes mark the beginning of the Lenten transformation of our souls.

The Spirit who called Jesus into the wilderness calls us, as well, to our own forty-day walk in the desert. The aspects of fasting, penance, and other disciplines of

Lent are not only an imitation of our Lord's wilderness experience, but a way of helping those who are already baptized to spiritually renew their baptismal promises. It's a time for all of us to repair our relationship peacefully and quietly with God, so that it becomes the center of our lives during this Lenten season and every season of the year that follows.

Let us pray for one another and for all who are preparing to enter the Church at Easter. Let us all receive our ashes with great humility today, but more importantly, let us live the ashes we receive through our own fasting, penance, acts of kindness and prayer. May these simple expressions of humility become for all of us, the seeds which promise a more abundant life in Jesus Christ our Risen Lord.

Amen? Amen!

1st Sunday of Lent

Matthew 4: 1-11

" The Desert "

By Rev. Liz Miller

Jesus was baptized and experienced the heavens opening and saw the Spirit of God descend upon him like a dove. He heard a voice say, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. What an experience that must have been? After Jesus was baptized, he went into the desert for 40 days and was tempted. What a change that must have been from the baptism, but he needed time to discern, understand and prepare for his mission in life. Jesus prayed, fasted, and was tempted. He focused on God's will for his life. It was not an easy time. Think about the desert. It is hot, dry, and dangerous.

Jesus probably had little food or water with him. He was hungry, thirsty, tired, weak, and dirty so was pretty beaten down when the devil tempted him. The devil always seems to know when a person is at their weakest point, and he wastes no time.

The tempter came and said, "IF you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." In this statement the devil introduced doubt, challenging Jesus to prove his identity. Jesus was hungry. Hunger drains a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Jesus said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" Jesus knows we must have bread and food, but our deeper need is only satisfied by the word of God. Jesus will not turn his back on God.

The devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple. This is the height of a modern 15 story building. "IF you are the son of God, throw yourself down." The challenge is for Jesus to prove his identity to himself and to others, and to take advantage of his power. "Again, it is written, 'Do not test the Lord your God' "No one has the right to put God to the test. Testing God is not faith but doubt.

The devil then took Jesus to a high mountain. He showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory. "I will give you all of these things, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus came to save the world and the devil offers him the world. Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall serve him only. "Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan to Peter when

Peter protests Jesus' announcement of his coming death. The tempter offers everything but delivers only filth and heartache.

When the devil left Jesus, the Angels came to serve him. When Abraham passed the test, God blessed him. When Job passed the test, God blessed him. Now God blesses Jesus. There is hope for us. When faced with a difficulty, remember that God has a blessing waiting. Jesus will have the power the tempter promised but the power will come from God. The path to power will not be kneeling before the devil but being lifted on the cross.

We are now in our 40 days of Lent. We ask ourselves the same questions. Who are we? Who are we becoming? What is God calling us to be? Most of us here have found our calling in life, yet God continues to lead us and to change us. During this Lent, let us rediscover the Spirit of God in our lives. A Spirit who leads us from darkness into light, a comforter who heals our wounded hearts and will nurture us back to spiritual health. Let us reach out to others. Let us reconnect to the God who loves us. May this be a time when we, like Jesus, become more deeply at home in the heart of God.

"Renewal and Preparation"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The Gospel for this First Sunday of Lent is Matthew's account of Jesus' experience in the desert. His forty-day ordeal is marked by intense prayer and fasting, not out of a sense of penance, but to focus totally on God's will for his life. The three temptations all confront Jesus with very human choices, temptations we all experience in one form or another: greed, power, and pride.

Jesus' encounter with the devil depicts the struggle he experienced during this lonely and difficult time as he came to terms with the life and ultimate death that lay before him. In the end, Jesus resists the devil's offerings and follows the Spirit obediently on to Galilee to begin his earthly ministry.

The same Spirit that led Jesus into the desert leads us into this forty-day experience of Lent. We will ask ourselves the same kind of questions as we strive to understand who we are, and to discern the person God is calling us to become. Just as Jesus

was tempted, we too will be confronted with many different choices and goals in life.

We experience many times of uncertainty in our journey through life; times of change, decision, transition, growth, and discovery. The wilderness we experience are those unknown and terrifying places we find ourselves due to circumstances often beyond our control, through mistakes we have made, or through our own encounters with the devil and his offerings of greed, power, and pride. But the desert is also in a place where we discover the Spirit of God in our lives. A Spirit who leads us from darkness into the light, a comforter who soothes our wounded hearts, and nurtures us back to spiritual health and wellbeing. We too can find the strength to resist temptation, and we too can follow the Spirit and serve others just as Jesus did.

Lent is a time of spiritual renewal; a recommitment to our journey of following the life and example Jesus gave us. It is more than simply going without, fasting in a prescribed way, rattling off a few prayers from memory, or putting some coins on the offering plate. These forty days of Lent is also our time to reflect on Jesus. A time to consider his sufferings and sacrifice; his life, death, burial, and resurrection and just what that all really means to us. It is our time to reexamine our journey and our faith, and, if necessary, to make some adjustments in the way we relate to our world and the people around us. Lent is the time for renewal as we prepare for the wonderful celebration that Easter morning will bring; the amazement of the empty tomb and the utter joy our risen Lord can bring to us and to our hurting world.

Let us begin our Lenten journey today. Let us walk with confidence through the deserts we encounter and confront life's challenges together. Let us be of One Spirit, One Faith, and One Baptism, as we follow Jesus Christ who is and was and will always be, One Lord of all!

Amen? Amen!

2nd Sunday of Lent

Matthew 17: 1-9

"*Metamorphosis*"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In today's Gospel, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Most scholars believe it was Mt. Tabor which sits at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, about eleven miles west of the Sea of Galilee and near Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. In scripture, mountain tops are often the place where people encounter God. Abraham and Moses encountered God on a mountain, as did many of the prophets. Jesus was no exception. He loved mountain tops because they offered him a quiet place to pray, refresh his soul, and to be closer to His Father in heaven. I have read that Mt. Tabor offers a straight ascent for over eighteen hundred feet; it's a very strenuous climb. Even today tour busses can't make it all the way to the top, but Jesus made the climb. While his exhausted companions could think only of sleep, Jesus chose to pray. It would not be the only time this would happen; Jesus would pray at Gethsemane while those close to him slept as well.

But what really happened on the mountain top that day? Peter, James, and John were given the privilege of seeing a glimpse of Jesus' true self. God let these three disciples in on a little secret: Jesus was more than a man, more than a good teacher, more than a compassionate healer. Jesus was the Son of God. That was made abundantly clear not only by Jesus' shining face and dazzling clothes, not only by the presence of great prophets from Israel's past, but also by the very voice of God. In Luke's account a cloud surrounded them on the mountain top that day. Have you ever stood in a cloud? I have and it is an eerie experience. Peter, James, and John could feel a presence all around them. Their hearts were pumping hard against their chests, they were trembling with fear, and then from the stillness of the cloud the voice of God thundered all around them saying, "This is my beloved Son; Listen to him."

What Peter, James and John witnessed on the mountain top that day was the divinity of Christ shining from within. In describing Jesus' transfiguration, Matthew uses the Greek word *metamorphoo*, from which we get the word "metamorphosis." It means that Jesus was transformed, his true divine self-shining through his outward human appearance. This Lenten season is a time for each of us to experience such a transformation, a touch of divinity within ourselves,

allowing the love of God within us to shine forth in lives dedicated to compassion, justice and reconciliation. We become participants in this transformation each time the Eucharistic table is prepared, and the celebrant whispers the words, "*By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*" God is present within each one of us, calling us, guiding our steps, and enlightening our vision with wisdom to bring God's justice and mercy into our hurting world.

The power of that sacred presence that Peter, James, and John experienced on Mt. Tabor that day shines through you and I as well. As we experience our own transfiguration, we realize that there exists within each of us a divine spirit, that enables us to become the person God calls us to be; to go through our own metamorphosis by letting the divine nature inside of us shine for all the world to see. Let us become what God calls us to be. Let God fill our life with purpose and blessing and glory during this Lenten Season. Let our lives be transformed; let us be transfigured as our very souls are touched by the hand of Christ, just as Peter, James and John were touched by Jesus that day. Let our hearts be moved by the voice of God within, calling us to listen to Christ's message of hope and then share it with a desperate world seeking a better way. Let us shout from the mountain top: "*Christ be our light, shine in our hearts, shine in our darkness. Christ be our light, shine in your church, gathered today.*"

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Lent
John 4:5-42
"High Noon at the Well"
By Rev. Liz Miller

First, it is important to understand the history of that time. There was hatred and conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans. Israelites and Gentiles intermarried during the Babylonian exile, which created the Samaritan people. When the Jews returned to their homeland Nehemiah refused to allow the mixed people of the land to rebuild Jerusalem. The Jews destroyed the Mt. Gerizim temple, which caused more issues between the Jews and Samaritans. The conflict continued and the hatred against each other continued to grow.

Men could not converse with a woman in public, even with their own wife. It just was not done. Jews avoided contact with Samaritans. They did not want to become contaminated. Women were oppressed. Widows were even more oppressed, and Samaritans were also held in low esteem.

By speaking with this woman Jesus crossed ethnic, religious, and gender boundaries. It was scandalous for him to speak directly to a woman, any woman, especially alone. The town people probably avoided her because of her reputation. Jesus was aware of the conflict, but salvation was for all, and Jesus would reach out to all.

At the beginning of this story the apostles go into town to buy some food. There was togetherness with the apostles. I can picture a beautiful day with the sun's gentle rays shining on them. The birds were singing in the air and a breeze was blowing softly against their clothing. The apostles were all hungry but in good moods. They were excitedly talking about all they were learning from the Master. They had never met anyone as charismatic as Him before and yet they did not totally understand Him. He was a mystery.

Jesus stayed behind. He was tired and thirsty so sat down to rest. While He was resting, He noticed a Samaritan woman coming to the well. This woman was alone, and probably older. It was a hot day, around noon and she was hot with the long outfit and veil she was required to wear. The Samaritan woman was a social outcast and a sinner. She was of a hated race. She had a bad reputation with the townspeople because of all the husbands she had, and she was just living with a

man now. She came at a time when other women did not come, probably because of her reputation and respectful women avoided or rejected her.

She comes to the well and is surprised because this Jewish man starts to talk to her, which is unheard of because he is a Jew and a man. He is thirsty but has nothing to draw water with. The story continues to become even stranger because he tells her everything she has ever done. Who is this person who knows everything about her? For being a woman with low status she seems to know her history when she talks about how her ancestors worshipped in that area. This woman goes from non-belief to belief and is so excited that she leaves her water jar and runs to the village to share the news of Jesus, the Messiah. She has been touched in a powerful way and shouts to the people, "Come, see Him for yourself, the savior of the world, the Messiah. He told me everything I have ever done...Come!" They believed because they listened to Him and heard him themselves.

Jesus' goal was to bring all to himself and to bring salvation to all of humankind. It did not matter to him the status in life, the sex of the person, the nationality, the religion, or the sins involved. He did not follow social norms, nor did he bend to people's expectations and laws. He was willing to reach out to people and to do the will of God. He had a plan. Jesus treated the woman with respect and did not judge her. She saw the light and could have continued in her evil ways or made the choice to change.

The other message in this scripture was that salvation was for all. Jesus is speaking of living water; water that is flowing and continuous. It is water that brings us to eternal life and is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. John 3:5 Salvation was for all...Jewish people and the Gentiles. The Samaritans were the first to hear and believe. Jesus was talking about Himself being the living water. We are all called to believe.

In this scripture, Jesus admits he is the Messiah. Jesus had not said that to his disciples! He had not said that to his inner circle, Peter, James, and John! He had not said it to the priests! He had not said that in Bethlehem, where he was born; nor in Nazareth, where he grew up; nor in the synagogue, where he worshipped; nor in Jerusalem. It was here, in this ungodly place with this ungodly woman standing in the dust at high noon that Jesus first revealed himself to be the Messiah. That is how Jesus works. He picks the unlikeliest candidates, and he continues that even today.

How does this story fit in our world today? Jesus is the same now as He was then. He wants to draw us ever closer to Himself. He does not want to lose even one of us. He wants us to know and love God. We are God's creation, and the message is for the whole world.

The woman in this story could be the homeless today, the promiscuous, the prisoner, the unbeliever, the gay community, or the mentally ill. Who are the marginalized? Who are the people who don't know God? Who are the people we judge? Do we judge and reject people because they don't fit into our concept of society? Who do we turn away from Christ because of our misuse of the bible and taking verses out of context? The Samaritan woman in the time of Jesus was the lowest in society and yet Jesus spoke to her. He shared with her that He was the savior of the world. He did not go to the leaders, the rich, or the people in power. How often are we told to reach out, not to a select few but to all? Finally, many people in the town believed because of the testimony of a woman who was the lowest of the low came running to tell them about Jesus. The Samaritan woman at the well was the first evangelist. It was here that many people first believed, first accepted Jesus as the Messiah, first accepted Jesus as Lord. Maybe what Jesus is also trying to teach here is that all people are to be treated with respect and in today's world we need to reach out to all, including the lowest in society, without discrimination or hatred. Wouldn't this world be a better place if instead of hate and judgment we showed love and acceptance despite our differences? A Presbyterian preacher said, "Humanity is like a giant spider web. Touch it anywhere and the whole thing trembles. For as we move about our world, a kind word here, an ugly act there, what we do for good or ill will touch this person, this person will touch another person, and so on and on, until who knows where the whole thing ends. No man, no woman is an island. "The miracle in Samaria did not end there, at the well. The miracle continues through you and me. Remember the response this morning, "Today, if you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts."

I would like to end with a poem I wrote for one of my classes.

"A Samaritan woman of ill repute, just trying to survive in a Patriarchal world. She didn't have much, was ignored, unseen, invisible, but continued each day in an unjust world. One fine day the light came, she was restored by Jesus the Christ, with compassion and love He made Himself known, that day she changed and

became complete While the soul within her Cried out in joy, For the savior of the world Touched her soul and made her whole."

May Jesus touch us and make us whole.

"Preachers one and All"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

What is an evangelist? Preachers like Billy Graham, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Sunday come to mind. In today's gospel, we are witnesses to the birth of an evangelist, perhaps the most unlikely evangelist of all.

As today's story unfolds, Jesus arrives at the well tired, thirsty, and in a foreign land. He finds himself alone; an alien in a town filled with people who have a long history of disdain for his kind. Most in this situation would lay low and not want to draw attention to themselves, but not Jesus. He immediately breaks a social taboo by speaking to a woman in public, something a good Jewish boy would never do, not even if the woman was his sister, his mother, or even his wife. The woman is surprised, even startled, but also intrigued because Jesus refuses to make an issue of her gender or nationality. He begins their dialogue by expressing a simple human need, thirst, and then engages her in conversation and teaching; something Jesus was very good at. His special gift was to invite people to interact with him while he passed on wisdom and knowledge. In the end, this encounter with Jesus liberates the woman from her own prejudices and misguided beliefs. *Where* we worship is secondary, Jesus tells her. *How* we worship is more important.

Jesus uses the water as a metaphor to teach this woman. He speaks to her about living water, which gives eternal life and divine grace; water that ends our spiritual thirst. The woman craves this type of water because she wants to have eternal life. In the end her spirit is enlightened and illuminated. She now realizes what it means to take freely of the water of life, which is the spiritual refreshment that comes into the soul after a personal encounter with Jesus. She believes he is truly the Messiah, the Anointed One. As the story closes, she goes back to tell her family, friends, and neighbors how she met Jesus, how he revealed his knowledge of her sins and his offer of live-giving water. She went on to lead many in her village to also believe in Jesus through her zeal and love for God through her witness and testimony. She

had no training, no degree's hanging on the wall, but she became an evangelist, a preacher proclaiming the Good News that is Jesus Christ.

But what does this wonderful story tell us about our own lives, and our own journey of faith. What can we learn from the Samaritan woman and her high-noon meeting at the well with Jesus? The answer is in the example she sets for us. Because of her personal encounter with Jesus, her life was transformed; changed forever. She shared her experience with others and through her testimony they were led to their own personal encounter with Jesus as well.

All of us are potential evangelists, and through the sharing of our own encounter and journey, others will find their way to encounter Christ as well. We accomplish this as the lives we live become the faith we share, and the visible expression of the belief we hold in our hearts. In sharing that belief in the smallest of ways we become evangelists, preachers one and all, proclaiming the Good News that is Jesus Christ.

Amen? Amen!

4th Sunday of Lent

John 9: 1-41

"I was blind, and now I can see!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

What would it be like to be blind all your life? Can you imagine spending your days and nights in darkness with only sounds and smells and touch to guide you: Never seeing your parents or friends, never watching a sunrise or sunset, feeling but never seeing a storm or the sun. We who have our sight can only wonder what that would be like.

A few years ago, I went through cataract surgery on my right eye. It was the worst of the two although surgery on the left eye would follow two years later. My view of life through that right eye was like seeing the world through a frosted shower door, and what was worse, I had grown accustomed to that view. Two days after my surgery the bandage on my eye was removed; it was a day I will never forget. I was overjoyed at the brightness and beauty around me and how clearly, I could see everything. The shower door was now crystal clear, and in that moment, I could relate to the blind man in our gospel story in a very small way. Like me, he had grown accustomed to his circumstance; not having sight at all, but that would change in a dramatic way when his mud bandages were washed away. His experience must have been completely overwhelming. That's why I'm so fond of the video message we watched today, because it seems to depict the range of emotions experienced by the blind man better than other productions do; his wonder, his joy, and his gratefulness for the one who changed his world.

As one commentator put it, the blind man's story is more like a play with six scenes; his healing by Jesus on the Sabbath; the townsfolk's reaction; his first testimony before the Pharisees; the testimony of his parents; his second appearance before the Pharisees which resulted in his expulsion from the synagogue, and finally, his return to recognize and accept Jesus for who he is. What is even more intriguing is that it appears Jesus orchestrated the whole play. He was aware of the laws regarding the Sabbath, and yet he chose to challenge them. Why? The blind man's condition was chronic, he was not suddenly struck blind and demanded immediate attention. According to the law, neither the blind man nor Jesus could travel on the Sabbath, so what was the urgency; both would be there tomorrow. All Jesus had to do was wait until the next day and the laws of the Sabbath would have been

preserved., and the man born blind would still be healed. Could it be that the miracle itself was secondary to greater teaching?

In our gospel, last week, Jesus told the woman at the well that worship of God goes beyond a physical place. Could Jesus now be showing us that true worship also goes beyond a specific time or day and is measured not in defined rituals and pious practices, but in our openness to seize the opportunities, great and small, to show kindness to others on God's behalf; no matter the day, no matter the place, no matter the benefactor of the kindness we express.

Our faith demands that we see things not through the eyes of practicality, but with the eyes of Christ's selflessness and humility: to look beyond the laws that rule our faith to discover the timeless and profound truths of the human heart.

During this Lenten season, let us embrace the reality that God is profoundly present in even the simplest and most ordinary events of life: in the kindness and love of others, in the devotion and care provided by friends and family, and in the gifts of the earth that sustains and nurtures us. Such a vision of faith enables us to re-create our world, and not be satisfied in living as we've always lived.

Ultimately, the healing of the blind man is a sign that points us toward Christ. In our gospel story, the blind man sees this, but the Pharisees refuse to see it. Thus, the irony; the blind man sees, but the Pharisees who have sight, are blind to the truth. We too can close our eyes and pretend to see as the Pharisees did, or open our eyes, wash away the darkness that surrounds us, and be filled with the light of God's justice, compassion, reconciliation, and peace. The choice is ours to make. In the face of Easter's dawn, what will our decision be?

In the name of the Father, + the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen!

"Lord, I Believe"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Last week we witnessed the story of the woman at the well. Jesus longed to give her living water, life giving water.

This carries over into today's gospel where Jesus wants us to see, not always with just our eyes but with our minds and heart. God longs to give us life, his Spirit in so many ways, if only we can see.

Our reading today is all about seeing. We see things differently than God sees. Our minds are limited. We will never understand. He sees who we really are, and God loves us, even with our imperfections. He sees our goodness, despite our sinfulness. We see appearances but God looks in the heart.

It reminds me of Paul on the way to Damascus where the bright light shined on him and blinded him. He was blinded for a while. During that time, he had time to think. He finally recognized God and his whole life changed. There are times in our lives when we are blinded.

Let's look at the Pharisees. They were so caught up in the rules and regulations that they missed the miracle. They were blinded and could not see what was happening around them. They could not see the obvious. The Pharisees believed that Jesus violated the law by performing unnecessary work on the Sabbath. Jesus disobeyed because it was not God's law, but human interpretation of that law.

What about us? Are we blind to what is happening in the world? There is discrimination, it seems with all nationalities or people who are different. People feel entitled and if you don't agree with them, you are wrong. Women are powerless to shape their world in any way but a masculine mold. There is intolerance for people who are gay. Let's not destroy each other with unkind words, bullying or meanness. Let's not turn our back on people because of our own blindness.

Into today's gospel we see the light. Jesus, said, "I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall ever walk in darkness; no, he will possess the light of life."

As Christians and having read scripture and attending church we know the miracles that Jesus performed so we do believe but can we see? Do we truly understand?

We know our minds are darkened by sin, but Jesus came into the world to destroy the darkness. Jesus told us that he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to show us how much God loved us. We rebelled against God, yet he still came. He gave us a new life, of God living within us, of a life beyond this life. Faith is our light, as we say the prayer, "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief." On the cross we see God redeeming humankind; we see him in a small white wafer, not lifeless bread but the Bread of Life. I can see God in the oil that anoints, in the hand of a priest raised to forgive and in the words of a bride and groom. God is all around us. We just need to look and see.

The next time you face serious difficulty as an adult, or a teenager keep in mind that God is with you. Keep in mind that God will help you and keep in mind that in facing your trouble you are not alone. Sometimes bad things can turn into blessings, but God can help you through all.

During this season of Lent, we can share in Jesus' passion and death. We can do so in faith because we see with God's eyes. The Spirit of God is deep within us if we only but listen. If we follow Jesus, we become the light of the world. What does that say to us in today's darkness? To you and me as individuals and as a community? How can we be light in darkness?

In a society that we live in today we need to be the hands of Jesus by offering understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. We are one with one another. We are the Body of Christ in this world.

Do we, as individuals, or as a community become light? Does our light shine before others? Yes, the darkness in our country can be disheartening, but only if we forget the light of the world is Christ, Christ in us, Christ at work in all the world, Christ who died to destroy the darkness.

The blind man was made different by his contact with Jesus. We, too, will be different by our contact, faith, and prayer with Jesus. The blind man, declared, Lord, I believe.

As the song says, I saw the light! Let us become that light and let us also declare, Lord, I believe.

5th Sunday of Lent

John 11: 1-45

"The Easter Dawn is Coming"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Chapters 1-12 of the Gospel of John are often called "The Book of Signs." In these chapters, Jesus uses a series of miracles beginning with the wedding feast in Cana, to introduce images that reveal to us who he truly is.

The last of these signs we have studied over the past weeks. Through his encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus revealed himself to her as living water (4:10). He heals a man born blind and reveals himself as the light of the world (9:5). And in today's scripture he raises Lazarus from the dead and reveals himself as the resurrection and the life (11:25).

Like John's account of the healing of the man born blind in last Sunday's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus is more than just a sign of Jesus' love and compassion. Each of the seven miracles that John includes in the first twelve chapters of his Gospel is carefully placed to introduce us to some dimension of the redemptive nature of Jesus' work and ministry.

Our reading this morning is about three people whom Jesus shared a special relationship, Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. When he visited Bethany, Jesus would always drop by to chill out on the couch, rest his weary feet, enjoy some home cooking and lively conversation. He always left refreshed. Jesus was close to this family. Mary and Martha sent notice to Jesus that Lazarus was very ill and close to death, but Jesus did not come quickly as one would expect a close friend to do. Jesus arrived four days later, and Lazarus had already died. Martha greeted Jesus with the words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." As Mary joins them, she is in tears. When Jesus saw how Mary's heart was broken, it broke his heart as well. The two sisters wept, and Jesus wept with them. He was strong but not stronger than Mary and Martha's tears. Jesus felt their pain, even though he knew this would all be for the glory of God.

At the tomb, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out," and he did, wrapped in his burial cloths. One commentator wrote that Jesus cried so loudly that he woke Lazarus up. Ever wonder how Lazarus felt at that time? He was dead and then he heard a loud voice: Come out Lazarus! He looks around and he is lying

in a tomb wrapped in burial clothes and surrounded by darkness. Maybe Lazarus did not want to return. In heaven, every tear is wiped away and all pain removed. Why would Lazarus want to leave paradise and return to earth with all its problems? And in the end, he would eventually have to die again. Isn't one death in a lifetime enough?

But, as he calls Lazarus from the grave, we see a preview of Jesus' own resurrection that will take place in the weeks ahead. And just as Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb, he is also calling us out of our own graves of self-centeredness, anger, and fear; tombs that we often dig for ourselves. Jesus is calling us out from the darkness into the light of his compassion, reconciliation, and peace, to walk in the promise of his hope and expectation.

Resurrection is an attitude that finds faith in the hardest of times and uncovers life among the devastated and broken; resurrection is a perspective that sees light even in the darkest night. To each one of us belongs the work of resurrection: to bring the healing and transforming power of the Easter Christ into our own lives and the lives of those around us.

Jacqueline Kennedy, one who knew the anguish Mary and Martha felt when their brother passed away once said, "Death is not the putting out of a light. It is rather turning off the lamp because the dawn has come." Easter dawn is coming and life in abundance and joy is ours to embrace once again. Let us walk in the light of Christ together until he calls us home, home to a place where there are no more tomorrows, no more tears, no more death. A place where we will live in the light of his grace forever. A place where Jesus will roll away the stone and call our name. Amen? Amen!

Easter Season

Palm Sunday

Matthew 27: 11-54

"Mission or Agenda?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Only Matthew and John mention the fulfillment of Zachariah's prophecy as Jesus enters the city on that first Palm Sunday. Their quotation is carefully tailored to reflect the coming Messiah, not as a conquering warrior astride a noble steed, but as a Messiah-king who is one with the poor and lowly of the world. As you envision Jesus passing by that morning, you might think of the lines written by Henry Emerson Fosdick: "Genghis Khan, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon all perished from the earth as fleeting shadows from a glass," the only one to come "conquering down" through the centuries is Christ, who carries no sword, and rides a donkey.

When Jesus emerged on the public scene, he was an overnight sensation. Crowds of people lined the streets as he came into town. On that first Palm Sunday, the crowds welcomed Jesus with palms and cloaks laid before him, and there were shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" As one preacher quipped, it was an "early Palestinian equivalent of a ticker tape parade."

Bill Hybels is the founder and Senior Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois. You may have heard of it and him. Willow Creek is a small little church with an average weekly attendance of a mere 25,000 or so. Bill Hybels wrote about that day in Jerusalem and the crowd of onlookers. "Everyone who lined the streets had a different reason for waving those palms" he writes. "Some were political activists; they'd heard Jesus had supernatural power, and they wanted him to use it to free Israel from Roman rule. Others had loved ones who were sick or dying. They waved branches, hoping for physical healing. Some were onlookers merely looking for something to do, while others were genuine followers who wished Jesus would establish himself as an earthly king. Jesus was the only one in the parade who knew why he was going to Jerusalem--to die. He had a mission, while everyone else had an agenda." What about us? As we sing and wave our palms this morning, do we have an agenda or a mission?

There is a certain paradox with the traditional Palm Sunday liturgy. It begins with a sense of celebration as palm branches are carried and Hosannas sung, much like the people of Jerusalem did so many years ago. But Matthew's account of Christ's Passion confronts us with the cruelty, injustice and selfishness that lead to his

crucifixion and death. Are we any different? We welcome the Christ of victory, the Christ of Palm Sunday, but do we tend to turn away from the Christ of suffering and of the poor, the Christ of Good Friday? Do the palms we hold become symbols of the inconsistency that often exists between the faith we profess with our lips and the faith we profess with our lifestyle; the paradox of what we say and what we do? In celebrating Palm Sunday, do we have a mission or an agenda?

It is easy to welcome the Palm Sunday Jesus into our own Jerusalem's because we see hope in him. He speaks of a kingdom in which we are forgiven, we are healed, and we are loved. But Jesus wants more. Jesus asks us to take up our own crosses and follow in his footsteps, insists that we sell all we have and give to the poor, asks us to embrace a faith that is centered on more than words and rituals. On this Palm Sunday as we wave our palms and shout hosanna, Jesus wants us to have a mission, not an agenda. Jesus wants us to be his follower, not just a curious onlooker with nothing else to do.

As we celebrate Christ this Palm Sunday, may we fully embrace the Jesus of love, justice, humility, and selflessness. As we strive to mirror Jesus' compassion, may we be willing to imitate his limitless reconciliation and unconditional forgiveness, as well. Let this week's focus be on the Christ of Alfred Lord Tennyson who wrote: "The Lord from heaven born of a village girl. Carpenter's son. Wonderful. Prince of Peace. The Mighty God." Let us follow that image of Christ and join him in his mission to make our world a better place.

Let us begin this holiest of weeks as the people of Jerusalem did so long ago. Let us open the gates of our hearts, line the pathway to our souls with all that we have to offer, and welcome God into our midst. Then let us proclaim our Hosanna's with our palms and voices for all to see and hear and live our Hosanna's as well; through every act of kindness, we extend on Christ's behalf. Let us have a mission and not an agenda. Let our lips and our lives proclaim for all to hear, we follow the Christ, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Amen? Amen!

Holy Thursday

John 13: 1-15

"What about Judas?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our liturgy tonight, we traditionally celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the last supper; the new covenant between God and humankind sealed in the body and blood of Christ. But there is more. Jesus also institutes another new commandment in the washing of feet. By the symbolic washing of each other's feet, we follow Jesus' example and fulfill his commandment to serve one another, and to love one another as we have been served and loved by Christ.

Christ takes a towel and bowl of water and washes the feet of each disciple, and then dries them lovingly. While most sermons single out Peter's dialogue with Christ about washing his feet, there is a valuable lesson missed from the other disciple mentioned in this passage. What about Judas?

Our passage clearly indicates that Judas already has betrayal in mind. Scholars believe that either the devil had already convinced Judas to betray Christ, or that the devil had plans to tempt Judas to betray him; the original Greek is unclear on this point. In any event, Judas would leave the gathering and betray Jesus, that part is certain, but not before, as noted in John's Gospel, Jesus humbly kneels before him and washes his feet. And what's more, in the remaining gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is no indication that Judas left the table until after receiving communion as well.

In Matthew's account the betrayer is identified by dipping a piece of bread in the bowl with Christ. In John's gospel, it gets even more personal as Jesus dips the piece of bread in the bowl and gives it to Judas saying, "what you do, do quickly" (John 13:27). Before this, when Jesus announces to the group that one of them will betray him, all the disciples ask, "Is it me?" ... even Judas asks (Matthew 26: 23-45) "It isn't me, is it, Rabbi?" To which Jesus responds, "You have said it." At that very moment, Judas sat at table with Jesus and the other disciples clearly identified as the one who would betray Christ and hand him over to the authorities. In other words, there was no mistaking who the betrayer was; he was sitting right there dipping his hand in the bowl with Jesus, after having his feet washed by Christ, and, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, after receiving communion. Thus, the lesson we so often miss; there's a place at the table for everyone, even Judas. Betrayer that he

was, there was a place in Jesus' heart for him. Jesus served Judas the bread and the wine, and washed his feet, just as he had for the others.

What about Judas? Is there room in the kingdom of God for a traitor, a thief, an unrepentant sinner? What about Judas? How are you going to deal with him and his role in the drama of salvation? Maybe we need to follow Jesus' example and focus on the first part of the story. How, even though Jesus knew Judas' heart, he took a wash basin and a towel and got down on his knees and washed his feet.

Washing someone's feet was, and still is, a powerful symbol of humility and devotion. It says to you and me that no matter how you look at it, Jesus loved Judas every bit as much as he loved Peter, James and John and the others, and he ultimately gave his life for Judas, as much as you and me.

This is the Good News that we need to hold on to for as long as we live, that there is a place for the vilest of sinners in the Kingdom of God, that God's love is that big. Romans 5:8 says, that "God demonstrates his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." While we were wasting our lives in sin, God revealed the enormity of his love in a very tangible way; Christ died for us.

There is a story told about the day of final judgment, that great day of victory when evil is finally vanquished, and here is great rejoicing in heaven. Everyone is singing and dancing except Jesus who is standing quietly at the gates of heaven. Saint Peter goes and asks the Lord why he is standing there, to which Jesus replies: "I am waiting for Judas." This powerful story reminds you and me that Jesus never gives up on any of us. He is always ready to forgive even the ones who have betrayed him.

Let us keep that in mind as we wash each other's feet tonight, and we venerate the cross during our service tomorrow night, and as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Sunday. Jesus came to humbly serve all of humankind; can we do any less? Let us all make a commitment to serving and remembering Jesus, by loving and serving each other after his example.

Amen? Amen!

Easter Sunday

John 20: 1-9

"That's what Easter is all about."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

All four gospels record the events of Easter morning, although the story varies slightly with each writer. Mary Magdalene, accompanied by Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and Salome, come to the tomb while it is still dark. In John's gospel Mary Magdalene is the star, and at Easter in his account, she arrives alone at the tomb that first Easter morning. You must admire Mary: she possesses the faith and courage to continue to hope that the story of Jesus did not end with his death on the cross. She refuses to surrender the sense of love and compassion Jesus has drawn from within her. And this morning, as Mary walks in the stillness of the predawn darkness to extend one final kindness, one final act of love and devotion towards the man who changed her life, God whispers to her, and to us as well; Jesus is not there in the tomb - He is risen!

The empty tomb is the first bud of God's new spring of rebirth and re-creation. Because of her perseverance and compassion, the faithful and courageous Mary Magdalene becomes the Risen Christ's first witness. She is sent to tell the Eleven the good news of the empty tomb, and in doing so, becomes the Apostle to the Apostles. That alone should give the rest of us reason to hope and rejoice - to follow her example and carry the Good News to others. That's what Easter is all about.

Easter is more than dogmas and rituals, more than the ornate candles and fragrant flowers that adorn the altars of our tabernacles of worship. Easter is found in the small candle that defies the darkness, in the small flower that pierces the cold April earth, in the hand of someone who cares enough to reach out to you when everything in your life seems hopeless. Easter is the eternal morning after our darkest, stormiest night. Easter is the stubborn hope of a God who continues to re-create us and our world until his dream of a humanity bound in his love is realized. Easter is the Risen Christ in our midst, enabling us to rebuild our broken lives on the wings of his compassion and love. That's what Easter is all about.

The empty tomb of Christ proves for all to see that love, compassion, generosity, humility, and selflessness will ultimately triumph over hatred, bigotry, prejudice, despair, greed, and death. The Easter miracle enables us, even in the most difficult and desperate of times, to live our lives in hopeful certainty of the fulfillment of the

resurrection at the end of our life's journey. Easter is the promise of the resurrection: that from the ashes of our lives, God can roll away the stones that entomb us, so we are able to walk freely in the light of his grace. That's what Easter is all about.

Easter is the promise of renewal, allowing us to leave behind the soiled linens of our old life, and dawn the new garments worn by those who are reborn in the Christ who challenged us to love one another, and taught us about compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, sincerity, and selflessness for the sake of others. Easter is the fulfillment of the hope that Mary Magdalene carried with her that first Easter morning; the hope that our lives can change as hers did, one new moment, one second chance, and one fresh start at a time. Let our hearts be filled with the same joy and amazement Mary experienced that very first Easter morning, as she ran to tell a waiting world what you and I must continue celebrating today; Jesus Christ has risen! Halleluiah! That's what Easter is all about!

Amen? Amen!

2nd Sunday of Easter

John 20: 19-31

"Jesus' love is that big."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The Emperor Caesar Augustus once gave a citizen a magnificent jewel. The man said, "This is too much for me to accept." Caesar said in reply, "Perhaps, but it is not too much for me to give."

On Good Friday, Jesus gave us what many may feel was too great a gift for us to accept. Yet, he willingly gave himself as a ransom for all humankind, paid the ultimate price for our transgressions, and through his suffering opened the doors to eternal life for all who believe in him. Centuries before, the Prophet Isaiah (53:5) wrote about the suffering Jesus would endure, how he would be "pierced for our transgressions," and "crushed for our iniquities." But Christ counted the price he paid was not too much to give to save humanity, and "by his wounds," Isaiah writes, "we are healed."

Our Gospel story is a familiar one. Jesus appears to the disciples as they are huddled together behind locked doors. Thomas, the twin, was not with them. When he returns, the disciples tell him of Jesus appearance, and Thomas has trouble buying their story. He wants physical evidence of the risen Christ before he believes. Thomas wants to see the wounded hands and side; to touch them, to put his fingers inside. We all know how the story ends. Jesus appears again a week later and this time, Thomas is there. Jesus offers his wounded hands and side, and Thomas believes. What is missing and often overlooked is that although Jesus invites Thomas to probe his wounds there is no evidence that he ever actually does. Thomas does not touch the wounded hands; Jesus wounded hands touch him instead. And through that touch, Thomas is healed and filled with the Spirit. He doubts no more. Thomas would sail to India in a few years and spend the rest of his life ministering there; the touch of wounded hands passed on to countless others in a faraway land.

What about you and me? Does the risen Lord still reach out with wounded hands? Absolutely! Thomas was looking for the certainty of physical evidence, but Jesus offered him something more: the Easter promise, a reason to hope, and a foundation for belief. For you and me our faith in the Risen Christ brings us the

fulfillment of that same promise. Like Thomas, we will still have our moments of doubt, those times when we are not sure where or how to proceed, when we question our own motives and the motives of others, when all seems lost and pointless. Easter does not deny Christ's suffering or wounded hands and side, nor does it erase the wounds we may suffer in this life. We all have life-wounds to remind us that all pain and grief, all ridicule and suffering, are transformed into healing and peace in the love of God we experience from others, and what we extend to them in return. The touch of Jesus' wounded hands is extended through you and I in the compassion and forgiveness we show toward others. Christ's wounded hands can mend broken spirits, heal the nail-marks of life we bare, and restore faith that has faltered. In the light of Easter's hope, the wounded hands of Christ continue to touch people today with the assurance of God's unlimited love.

Christ asks you and I to be agents of that love for others. Those needing the touch of Christ's wounded hands are all around us. Jesus asks us to be willing to place ourselves in the pain and struggle of others and bring the joy and peace of Easter into their hearts. Jesus asks us to let his wounded hands continue to bring comfort and healing into our hurting world by being his feet and hands, his ears and eyes, his voice.

May this Easter Season, especially in these difficult times we live in, inflame our spirits with the light of hope. Let us all feel the transforming and healing touch of Jesus wounded hands; it may be the gift we struggle to accept at times, but not too great a gift for our Savior to give. Jesus' love is that big.

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Easter

Luke 24: 13-35

"Unity Through Word and Table"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Although it is a very familiar story, our scripture today raises a serious question: How can we, in 2017, know Jesus and have a personal relationship with him two thousand years after his resurrection? How can we know Jesus even though we have never seen him in person, heard him preach or teach, and have not physically witness the miracles he did? The answer is found in our story today. We come to know Christ through the reading of scripture and in the breaking of bread. We know Jesus because of what has been written about him by those who walked with him and were witnesses to his miracles, those who agonized over his death and rejoiced at his resurrection.

Luke's Gospel was written toward the end of the first century. By that time, most of the early church was composed of followers who had not witnessed Christ in the flesh. That is why the Emmaus story is so important. It connects those first century followers with Christ, and with us as well. Even today, after two thousand years, the same Christ is revealed through the reading of scripture and in sharing the sacred meal in his memory. In this, disciples of any age are not at a disadvantage because they have not seen Jesus in the flesh. Remember the words he spoke to Thomas in last week's scripture, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

It has been said that true friendship begins when people share a memory. Like the two disciples who recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread, we, too, are bound as a body of believers by the common memory, an experience we share in the reading of scripture and the breaking of the bread. In this, we are united as God's love is both remembered and relived, giving us hope and direction and meaning. We become One Body and One Spirit in Christ Jesus.

As the two disciples discovered on the dusty road to Emmaus, Christ is alive, and the journey is not ended. Christ is present in 2017 and found in the love, charity, and goodness we give and receive, in moments of prayer and grace, but most of all, in the reading of scripture, and in the sacrament of his body and blood we share together.

How can we come to know Christ two thousand years after the resurrection? We find Christ today where he has always been, in the words of scripture and in the breaking of bread. Let us be a people who share both God's Word and Table so we can rediscover the true Christ that still lives and dwells within us, the Christ who is reflected in the faces of those around us, and in the love and grace we share with one another in Christ's name. Let our Emmaus journey continue today and tomorrow and always.

Amen? Amen!

4th Sunday of Easter

John 10: 1-10

"He Calls Us by Name"

By Rev. Liz Miller

He calls his sheep by name. His own! This reflects a personal nature of our relationship with Christ.

G.A. Smith tells of watching shepherds in Judea. "Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells to which three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed with each other, and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own again. But after the watering and the playing were over the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley, and each called out his special call; and the sheep of each drew out of the crowd to their own shepherd." The shepherd leads rather than drives them. The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd and follows him. I think this is amazing.

In Jesus' day, sheep and shepherds were common. Much of Judea was rocky. During the day, the sheep would graze unfenced land under the watchful eye of the shepherd. At night, the shepherd would gather them into the sheepfold for protection.

There were two kinds of sheepfolds. In a village, there would be a communal sheepfold with a strong gate. Sheep from several herds could be kept there. In the morning, each shepherd would call his sheep, and those who belonged to him would come running.

However, shepherds couldn't afford to spend many nights in the village. There just wasn't enough grass close to the village to support the flock. Shepherds spent most nights away from home--in the lonely places where sheep could find grass to eat. In those lonely places, sheepfolds were much simpler--just a solid fence with an opening for the sheep to enter and to depart. At night, once the sheep were safely inside the fold, the shepherd would lie down across the opening and fall into a light sleep--ready to awaken at any sign of danger--ready to do battle with any wild animal that might attack the sheep--ready to confront any thief that might try to steal the sheep. At daybreak, the shepherd would rise and stretch--and then he would lead the sheep to a place where they could find green grass and fresh water. He was a shepherd 24/7, but at the sheepfold he also became the gate. This is so

much like Jesus.

Jesus said, *"I am the gate. If anyone enters in by me, he will be saved, and will go in and go out, and will find pasture"* (v. 9). Stop and think about that for a moment. *"If anyone enters in by me, he will be saved."* That's the purpose of a sheepfold, isn't it! The shepherd brings the sheep into the sheepfold to protect them from wild animals--from thieves--and from their own foolishness. Inside the sheepfold, with the shepherd lying across the opening, the sheep had little to fear. Outside the sheepfold, there was danger. Outside, there was death.

I personally find great comfort in that idea. The Good Shepherd goes before us to prepare the way, which means there is no place that we go that the Shepherd hasn't already been. He's already made sure the path is clear and safe. There may be hardships, there may be mishaps, there may be struggles but The Good Shepherd has already seen those and knows how to help us negotiate through the treacherous territory. He has already prepared a way for us to get through. All we must do is continue to listen to His Voice.

And when we prepare our hearts through prayer and worship we can more fully and more clearly listen to the voice of the Shepherd. And when we listen, the voice of the Shepherd guides us.

The voice of the shepherd is consistent, filled with compassion and love. The voice of the shepherd calls us by name, inviting us into a deeper relationship with him and to follow him more completely. Are we listening?

We might ask ourselves these questions. How am I growing closer to God and experiencing the presence of God? How do I encounter the "holy?" Do I experience the love and compassion of God and how do I show that? Do I follow his voice, and do I know what God wants to do in my life or where God might be leading me?

What can we do to hear the voice of God? We need to take time to be quiet and still to hear his voice. I challenge you to turn off the television, radios, telephone, and internet so you can listen for the voice of God speaking to you.

In today's world that is not the easiest thing to do. I am not one who necessarily likes quiet. Even Jesus, would always take time away to spend quiet time with God. We need quiet time to pray. We need to listen to the God, the shepherd who speaks

to our soul. Our God goes right to the heart and awakens something within us if we only allow it.

Our shepherd is trying to lead us into a deeper relationship. There will be peace when we listen and follow his voice. He calls each of us by name. Listen closely, can you hear him?

5th Sunday of Easter

John 14:1-2

"The Work and Mission of Christ"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus assures his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them in his father's house. A place, he says, that offers many rooms, and enough space for everyone. The Ira Stanphill hymn, based on today's scripture, promises a "mansion just over the hilltop," in a "bright land where we'll never grow old." As Christians, we hold to the hope of one day living in God's dwelling place, walking in God's presence, and being united with loved ones. We long to leave this world of pain and anguish behind, to live through eternity in peace and tranquility. What we often forget is that place of hope, compassion and peace can exist in the here and now. It is not just a hope of something to come, it is a vital part of this life in which we now live. A journey that becomes the work we do and the mission of Christ we continue. The mansions of God we build in the here and now; dwelling places where the poor and sick are cared for, the fallen are lifted-up; the lost and rejected are sought after and brought home.

On the night before he died, Jesus asked his disciples to take up the work and mission that he had begun; the work and mission of becoming humble servants who place the hurts and pain of others before their own, the work and mission of charity that does not measure the cost, the work and mission of love that transcends the earthly limits and conditions this world may place in our path.

In following Christ, we take up the work and mission of compassion and reconciliation that he first entrusted to his disciples. You may be asking yourself; how can we do this; how can I take up the work and mission of God? As we place our trust in God, we will become empowered to build God's house in the here and now, expressed in the simple, mundane tasks we perform each day. The seemingly ordinary work and mission of being a parent, of being a member of a family, of being a friend, of being an active part of a faith community. This the very "work and mission Jesus was speaking of.

Through our simple acts of justice and healing, others are inspired to carry on the same work and mission that was begun by the disciples so many years ago. Those simple acts of kindness and charity we accomplish in God's spirit of love, are played

forward through those who will follow us. This is the work and mission of Christ; the very thing he asked his first disciples to begin; the work and mission he asks you and I to continue today and tomorrow. By placing our trust in him, we help to exalt the risen Christ, build his Father's mansions here and now, and carry on the legacy of his mission here on earth.

Jesus said to his disciples in verse 6, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." Nine words of great importance, nine words spoken with love and authority. Jesus is not a way, he is The Way; not a form of truth, he is The Truth; not merely a way of life, but Life itself. Thomas Kempis wrote in the 15th century, "Without the Way, there is no going. Without the Truth, there is no knowing. Without Life, there is no living." King David knew this when he prayed in Psalm 86, "Teach me thy way, O Lord, and I will walk in thy truth."

Our personal encounter with the Way, the Truth, and the Life is a journey of change. As we walk in the truth that is Jesus, we not only discover who we really are, but who we are becoming. After encountering the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and being changed by the experience, we become the instruments of Christ's message of hope; his hands and feet, his eyes and ears and voice, his modern-day disciples who carry on his work and mission of peace and love. Once we are changed by our journey with Christ, a journey that gives us new life, we become co-workers with the Risen One in offering that same life to others through the work we do in his name. Let's not wait another moment; let us begin the work and continue the mission of Christ today.

Amen? Amen!

6th Sunday of Easter

John 14:15-21

"Here I am, Lord."

By Rev. Liz Miller

Our God is amazing! God's love is the one thing that keeps us going. Without it we feel a void and life is more difficult. In today's gospel Jesus emphasizes love. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." He asks us to love one another.

Jesus also states that God will give us an advocate to help us on this journey. The Holy Spirit gives us comfort and strength when we need it. The Spirit helps us to know right from wrong and teaches us how to love and care for each other.

Can you imagine how the disciples must have felt? They were with Jesus and had developed a relationship with him. They were learning so much and probably wondered what the years to come held for them. Then Jesus dies. What were they feeling? Grief, loss, abandoned and orphaned... But Jesus promised he would not leave them orphans and so the Holy Spirit was sent.

Christ calls us, his disciples, to reach out to all people in his name. We all do that in so many ways. I have seen the giving you all do by reaching out. You give of yourselves in so many ways. We all are called to serve, and each calling is important because God has a plan for each of us.

Today Helen is answering the call to serve God in a different way. She is on a journey to the diaconate and today she will be ordained to the last two Minor Orders...that of Healer and Acolyte. This is another step in her journey to her ordination as deacon in August. In each step Helen takes to prepare for ordination as a deacon she is making a public declaration of a lifelong commitment to serve God's people. You are here to witness this and to support her in prayers. This is not just about Helen though. It is about all of us, about what it means to be followers of Jesus in a challenging and changing world. The Christian life is not just about individuals, but it starts with the individual. Take time to reflect on your own calling and how that has evolved for each of you.

For myself, I was happy with what I was doing. I was serving in the church as a vowed nun for 12 years, signing for the deaf and thought my calling was complete, but God is full of surprises. It did not seem to be enough for me. I felt the pull to something

more, not realizing at the time that God was calling me to be a priest. God sure pulled me out of my comfort level. I said yes as I questioned God's motivation and my own sanity. I think that maybe God is not finished with us until we take our final journey to be with God.

God is calling Helen into a new work. He is looking at her heart and asking her to trust. Jesus calls all of us, and we follow, learning and growing as we go through life with him. Jesus is the vine that flows with life. We are the branches that receive nourishment from him and reach out to touch others with the eyes and hands of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit our God reaches out to us and enters our hearts in love. He asks us in return to go beyond ourselves, because when we do, we pass God's love onto others.

As Jesus chooses one for ordained ministry he does so out of love, and as we are instructed by today's Gospel, we are expected to love in return; to keep the love flowing. Answering the call to ordination goes deep within one's heart and is a permanent call to being a servant, always there for the benefit of others and serving with compassion and love.

Every story of a vocation or answering the call of God in whatever work we decide to do is a beautiful story of grace. Our God does reveal a path in our lives that lights the way. Sometimes it is early in life and sometimes it is late in life. Sometimes the road takes many turns, but God's timing is just right, and we need to trust. From what I've experienced we are not called once, but we are called continuously by our loving God repeatedly. Are we listening for God's call and what will our answer be as we journey through life?

Helen today is another step on your own special journey. It is a step at times that might feel a little overwhelming. Take one step at a time, one day at a time and one prayer at a time.

This is a happy day for you. All of us here, family, friends, and community support you and we are happy for you. We are all here for you... no one walks a journey of faith alone. You are answering God's call and ordination to the Minor Orders is a small step as you move closer to being ordained a deacon. We are so blessed to have you in our community and a part of St. Clare's Pastoral Center. You are truly loved.

Remembering the words to the song today: "Here I am Lord, is it I, Lord, I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart. "

"Stand by Me"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a story told about a sailboat caught in heavy seas. A rogue wave flipped the boat over. The heavy keel righted the boat, but there was heavy damage. An SOS brought a Coast Guard cutter to the struggling ships aid, but the seas were too rough to rescue its crew. So, the cutter placed itself as close as it could to the sailboat's side, protecting it from the brunt of the 10-foot waves. Finally, they made it through the storm and to the safety of a nearby port. Our relationship with the Holy Spirit is much the same. The Spirit takes the brunt of our troubles. The Spirit not only lives within but also stands beside us, protects us from life's difficulties, while guiding us to a safe harbor.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus words bring comfort and reassurance to his troubled disciples. He uses a Greek word that translates as remain or stay; it's a word found more than forty times in John's Gospel. Jesus says he will remain with his disciples through the presence of the Holy Spirit who will stand beside them, bring comfort and protection, while guiding them through the storms of life's journey.

The most common phrase used to describe the Holy Spirit in scripture is the Latin word Paraclete, which translates as advocate or comforter. But many ancient Greek texts use a different phrase that is perhaps more descriptive of the association we have with the Spirit, one that is closer to what Jesus had in mind. It is the word Parakletos which means called to one's side as a helper, defender, advocate, and comforter.

A group of people who were translating the New Testament into the common language found in equatorial Africa were having difficulty coming up with a word to adequately describe the Holy Spirit.

Then they noticed porters walking in a line along a path, each carrying a heavy burden, all but one person. That one person was carrying nothing. When they

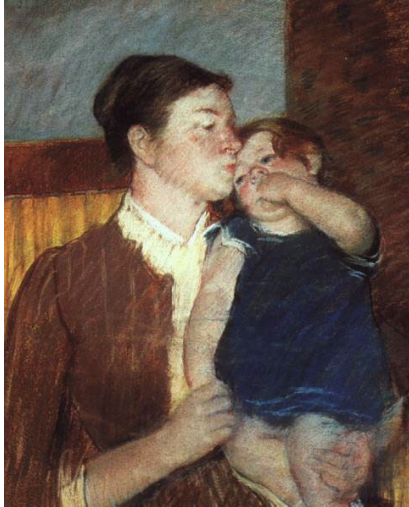
asked why, they learned that the man who carried nothing was expected to walk beside and help anyone who became too exhausted to carry their own burden. When a porter collapse from exhaustion, the man would kneel beside them, comfort and give them water, help them to their feet and then shoulder their load. He would walk beside them until refreshed, they could carry the load once again on their own. In their language he was called, "The one who falls down beside us." That gave the translators the word they were looking for to describe the Holy Spirit, the Parakletos, "The one who falls down beside us."

This is the Spirit Jesus promised to his disciples, the advocate and helper, the comforter. One who is called to our side, the one who falls-down beside us when life's struggle overwhelms us, the one who carries our burdens for us when our load becomes too heavy. The Spirit does not leave us behind but walks with us to shelter and protect us, until our strength and resolve return and we are able to resume our life-journey. This is the promise of Jesus, to remain with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Parakletos.

Perhaps the Charles Albert Tindley hymn says it best. "When the storms of life are raging," we call Jesus through the Spirit to our side and plead; "Stand by Me." In time of "tribulation," when our "strength begins to fail," when we are faced with our "faults and failures," when "we do the best we can" and it's not enough, we call Jesus through the Spirit to our side and plead; "Stand by Me."

Jesus waits patiently for us to fall back on his promise, our SOS send out in moments of distress. Jesus will be with us always through the presence of the Holy Spirit to bring healing, relief, and comfort. Jesus is but three words away when we need him; "Stand by Me."

Amen? Amen!



7th Sunday of Easter

John 17: 1-11

“Finishing the Work”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Mary Cassatt is an artist who lived in the 1800s. Although she never married and had no children, she liked painting images of mothers and children. Here is an example of one of her paintings called “Mother and Child.” See how close the mother and child are to each other? The mother holds the child's hand and kisses her. You can see and feel the love these two have for each other.

Can you imagine this work if the artist had not included the mother in the painting? What if the child was not a part of the painting? No, the painting would not seem complete. The artist, Mary Cassatt, worked on this painting until the mother and child, their expressions, the colors, the light, and the background, were all in harmony. She worked until those viewing the painting could see and feel what is happening in this beautiful image. When it was finished, it became a work of art.



Now look at this drawing by David Bowman from his series “Expressions of Christ.” It is called “My Child.” Ask yourself the same questions you asked about the Mary Cassatt painting. Can you imagine this work if the artist had not included Jesus in the drawing? Can you imagine this drawing if the child was not a part of it? Without both Jesus and the child, the drawing would not seem complete. Like the Mary Cassatt painting, David Bowman worked on this drawing until everything was just right, everything was in harmony. He worked on it until those looking at it could see and feel the love

that Jesus shows toward the child, and the security and love the child feels in return. When the drawing was finished, it too became a work of art.

Art like this can be a way of bringing honor to God.

The work that Jesus was given to do while he was on earth was to show us God's love. He did that in many ways by performing miracles, healing the sick, and giving

his life for us. He honored God by remaining here until his work was finished, until everything was just right. Jesus worked on his masterpiece until those looking at what he said and did and taught could see and feel the love that God has for us, a love so great that God would send Jesus as the sacrifice and redemption for all humankind.

In today's Gospel, Jesus prays for the Church he leaves behind. In this touching scene from John's account of the Last Supper, we see and hear Jesus entrusting his new Church to his disciples. They were certainly not among the most capable of leaders or the most dynamic of preachers. Yet with so small a beginning, Jesus changed the world. And as he prepares to return to the Father, Jesus leaves a portion of the Father's glory behind to those who will continue the work he began. Disciples who were embraced by his love, awed by his teachings, and would play forward the love they experienced to new generations of people looking for truth and meaning in their empty lives.

It continues today. We all have special work to do, and through our service in Jesus' name, each of us have an opportunity to honor God, and to become in God's eye's a work of art. No matter how small the gift we share, God sees and knows and loves us even more as we strive to carry forward the work Jesus began.

I attended a children's choir concert some years ago. The man next to me told me his son was singing in the choir. "Wait till you hear him," he said. The concert began. The choir was made up of about eighty boys and girls. The father leaned over and asked, "Doesn't he sing beautifully?" I of course could not hear the boy, but I was certain his father could hear every note. God feels the same way when it comes to you and me. Though we are all part of a huge chorus that makes up the six billion plus people in the world today, God sees and hears each of us as though we were singing solo.

Amen? Amen!

Special Liturgies

The Presentation of the Lord

Luke 2: 22-40

"A Light to all Nations"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today we celebrate the presentation of Jesus in the temple. This feast occurs every year, but it only falls on Sunday once every few years. The short version of the gospel only talks about Simeon, but I think it important to consider the whole reading because Anna, an old woman who also met the Holy Family.

- Simeon is in the temple because the Spirit guided him there.
- Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are there to fulfill the requirements of the law. Mary's ritual cleansing calls for the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon but they were poor, so the accepted offering was a pair of pigeons.
- Anna is always there, worshipping with fasting and petitions night and day.

The temple was a very busy place with many people walking around and swarming with activities. People were there to worship the Lord and to fulfill religious obligations. Mary and Joseph were there, and I am sure there were many parents with babies' present. Normally, a single family would hardly be noticed among the hundreds of people there. However, that is not the case with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died, so he was on the lookout every day. Simeon spent the last years of his life searching for a sight of the Savior. When Mary and Joseph entered the temple, he knew that Jesus was the Messiah. Can you imagine what it must have felt like to come over to Jesus, a tiny baby and to look in his eyes and realize he is the Messiah. Simeon, an old man, in the temple sings out in a loud voice:

"Lord, you now have set your servant free, to go in peace as you have promised; for these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see; a light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel."

Simeon blesses the baby and addresses Mary, *"This child is destined for the fall and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed---and a sword shall pierce your own soul also."*

Joseph and Mary knew who Jesus was, but I wonder how Mary felt at hearing

Simeon say these words.

Then an old woman comes up. Anna is a prophetess and outranks Simeon, who was praised for being righteous and devout. Anna is the New Testament's only named female prophet. As a prophetess, Anna receives insight into things that remain hidden to ordinary people. Anna recognizes who this child is and tells of his significance to the people in Jerusalem. She gives thanksgiving at the arrival of the child who will complete God's promise and her teaching would have been heard by those at the temple.

I am sure that Mary and Joseph were confused and a little in awe about what happened at the temple and throughout the life of Jesus. From the time of his conception until his resurrection, the Jesus-story is one of redemption; a story that continues even today.

Simeon and Anna waited to see the Christ child. What can we learn from this? Maybe we should have hope to find and see the Christ as well. Do we seek him? Have we found him? The fact is that we can and do see the Messiah every day; all we must do is look for him. We see him in the care and compassion we show others, in the forgiveness we give and receive. We see him in the eyes of those we look upon, our friends, family, and neighbors.

We can journey through life, happy, successful, and joyous but we cannot be at peace until we know that our Savior has come to love us; each one of us. God calls us to himself. God touches our lives in many ways each day. God continuously calls us to a deeper level on intimacy. We are not fully alive until we immerse ourselves in that love; to live fully and faithfully is to feel God's presence in our lives and embrace it. Let us love God and one another as Jesus commanded us to do. Let us share the love and compassion that comes from Christ while we walk hand in hand with a God who loves us and fills beyond comprehension.

Like Simeon we are set free because we have seen Christ in one another. Like Anna we continue to share the promise of God in our day and time: a promise to carry his light to all nations, one hour, one day, one individual at a time.

The Ascension of the Lord

Matthew 28: 16-20

"Follow my footsteps."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Jesus' Ascension is both an ending and a beginning. His physical appearances in human form were now at an end; his personal teaching was complete; the promise of the Messiah was now fulfilled. The Ascension also marks the beginning of the disciple's role in spreading the Good News to a waiting world, teaching what they had learned and sharing what they had witnessed.

Christ places the future of his Church in the care of a collection of fishermen, tax collectors, peasants, and ordinary folks; people very much like you and me. It was not a very promising or educated bunch, and yet, what began with that early group of men and women has grown and flourished through the centuries to become this very gathering of believers; our own community -- our parish family.

The Church Jesus left to us is not rooted in buildings or wealth, in formulas of prayer or systems of theology. It is based on a faith nurtured in the human heart, a faith centered in joy and understanding that is empowering and liberating. It is a faith that gives us the strength and freedom to be authentic and effective witnesses of the Risen Christ; our Savior who is still present in the world today through the lives we lead in his name.

In our short Gospel reading this morning, the words Jesus spoke to his disciples on that mountain top in Galilee are also aimed directly at you and I today. We are called to teach, to witness and to heal in our own small corners of this world, to hand on to others the story that has been handed on to us about Jesus and his Gospel of love and compassion.

Saint Margaret of Yorkshire was martyred in 1586 at the age of 33 for harboring priests and celebrating Mass in her home. This was illegal in 16th century England when priests were hunted down, arrested, and executed. To shelter a priest, to teach the Catholic faith, to provide any aid or support to what Parliament deemed an "outlaw religion," was considered treason, and punishable by death.

From her prison cell the night before she died, Margaret made a final request: she left her shoes to her eldest daughter, Anne, who was 12 years old at the time. The message from mother to daughter was clear: *Follow in my footsteps.*

On that mountain top in Galilee Jesus left us his "shoes." In doing so, he asks us to follow in his footsteps -- to carry *on* his Gospel of healing, compassion,

reconciliation, and hope. Having given his life to reveal the love of God for all of us, he entrusts the continuation of that work to you and me. He commissions us to be his witnesses even though we are faced with risks and despite all our doubts and fears. The work of building his church requires humility, respect, and patience; it asks us to let go of our own interests and wants and to open our hearts to the service of others. In baptism, every Christian takes on the role of witness to all that Jesus did and taught. We are his witnesses in this day and time; not only in sharing the powerful words of the Gospel but in the quiet, simple, but no less powerful expressions of compassion and love that we share with others; expressions that mirror the same compassion and love of Almighty God who is Father and Son and Brother and Sister to us all.

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations," Jesus asks of us today. "Follow my footsteps and carry on the work I started and share the love I've shown to you with others in my name. In this we are not alone. Jesus promised his first disciples and us as well, that he would be with us always, guiding our steps along the way, lifting us up when we stumble, comforting us when we are sad, and rejoicing with us in times of joy. He will be by our side and in our hearts always, each hour, each day, until the end of time. The command and promise are extended: What will our answer be?

Amen? Amen!

Pentecost Sunday

John 20:19-23

"Come, Holy Spirit"

By: Rev. Liz Miller

The wind of the Spirit will blow where it will!

Pentecost was a major Jewish Holy Day. Jews from all over the world made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They called it the Feast of the Weeks. Jerusalem was a small city of fifty thousand, but its population was as many as a million people when all the pilgrims journeyed there for the celebration of Pentecost.

The first Christian communities were fearful, and they were in hiding. Peter had previously denied Christ and they all feared for their lives, but something very special was about to happen. God would send out his Spirit. The disciples gathered. Can you imagine what they felt when the Spirit descended? They had kept in hiding and were keeping a low profile when suddenly, they heard a roaring sound, like a violent wind. Then what seemed like tongues of fire began to settle on them. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in foreign languages, languages they did not understand or had learned but the Spirit was working through them, and all people present heard in their own language. Three thousand were baptized that day from every nation. They would return home forever changed by what had taken place. This was the beginning of the church...the birth of the church, the beginning of a new era in which God "will pour out the Spirit on all people".

We need the Holy Spirit to breathe life into us and set us on fire. God is willing to fill us with his Spirit. The fire started when we were baptized. What changes in our life after that depends on how we responded to God after our baptism. Some Christians throw open the doors of their hearts while others close many doors. We all go through the ups and downs in our walk with Christ. We go through our belief and unbelief as we question things we don't totally understand. When I was in my seven-year desert my only prayer was, "hang on, Lord, hang on." That is a simple prayer that came from my heart and turned my life completely around. The Spirit produces fruit and new life, fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faith, gentleness, and self-control. With the Spirit we are made sons and daughters of God. We are truly a temple of the living God. The Holy Spirit is alive within you.

I look around the room here and I see people who generously give of their time, their love, their prayers, and all of you reach out in one way or another. What we all do is an extension of the Eucharist. We are challenged to serve others.

I would like to share a story with you. Images that were captured by Wes Lowery of the Washington Post that I believe portray the Spirit at work.

This year's Boston Marathon was an extraordinary event of hope and healing. Among the many stories of generosity, courage, and commitment that day was this one small moment, caught on video, that was particularly moving.

A Massachusetts man was running in the middle of the pack, one of the thousands of runners who know they'll never win the race but run for the joy of the sport. About a third of a mile from the finish line - just past the 26-mile marker - the man started to struggle to stay on his feet. His legs began to vibrate rapidly, nearly giving out.

A runner not far behind him saw what was happening. He caught up with the tiring runner, wrapped the man's left arm around his shoulder and began to carry him. "We're gonna make it, we're gonna make it," he kept saying to the staggering runner, "but you're gonna have to help me get there." But the exhausted man had nothing left; he was slipping from the runner's grasp.

Then another runner came along side and took the faltering runner's other arm. Two more runners, a young man, and a young woman, also came to the rescue - and the four of them carried the exhausted man the last quarter mile. They stopped just short of the finish line and the man was able to walk across under his own power. When all five crossed the line, they exchanged high fives. Nothing more was said. Then they went their own ways, satisfied that this year everyone finished Boston.

Four strangers, amid completing their own races, can stop and help another runner finish his. Such a vision of compassion and generosity is the Spirit of God in our midst. Those marathon photographs are images of Pentecost: the unseen, immeasurable presence of God in our lives and in our Church - God's *ruah* ("breath") that animates us to do the work of the Gospel of the Risen One, the *ruah*

that makes God's will our will, the *ruah* of God transforming us so that we might bring his life and love into our broken world.

Today, living in a world with technology, power, money, discrimination, and scandals in the churches, we are called to be a driving wind and fire. "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, fill my heart and kindle in me the fire of your love."

"A Pencil in God's Hand"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our first reading tells us that the remaining disciples had gathered together in one place, perhaps the upper room, to celebrate Shavuot; the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of the Harvest; Pentecost. Their friends and families would have been there along with their children. Shavuot was celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover, or the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan and is traditionally a joyous time of giving thanks. It was customary to study the Torah on the first evening of the celebration. Children were encouraged to memorize Scripture and rewarded with treats, and the Book of Ruth was read. Traditional Jews still follow these customs today.

So here they are together in one place again, not in anticipation of what was to follow, but to celebrate with others a time of thanksgiving. Over their months together there were many tense moments and infighting along the way; they saw things that left them speechless, exhilarated them, terrified them. Then came the events of the past seven weeks. But they are still together, united in their astonishment at his re-appearance, in their humiliation at abandoning him, and in their fear at not knowing what was going to happen next. His peace, which he shared in this very place, had taken hold of them, and they found just enough hope to stay together, just enough faith to be ready for whatever lay ahead.

And then comes that moment of awareness. First, they hear something like a strong wind that fills the place they have gathered, then there is fire; the Spirit of God descends upon each one of them.

Just like the disciples so many years ago, we gather together despite our doubts and questions, our struggles, and disappointments. We come together despite the world telling us that there are better things to do today. But we have seen the

presence of Jesus in the moments of compassion and forgiveness we have experienced; we have been grasped by his hand when we have slipped and fallen; we have known his peace in the storms of our lives. So, we gather as they did that first Pentecost to pray, to listen, to bless and break bread in his memory, resolved to take on whatever task we are asked to embrace.

As we celebrate Pentecost Sunday today, let us take time to appreciate the Spirit of God's ongoing work in our lives. Feel the Spirit of God, let it transform us, fill us, and enable us to follow in the footsteps of those first disciples. Let the Spirit of God help us to recreate our world and our lives into something lasting and timeless. Let the Spirit of God form us into a community of faith; people of humble service and selfless generosity, reflecting that of Christ himself.

As the master of surprises, the Spirit of God will assist us in making the impossible possible. The Spirit of God, in the words of Author Patricia Opatz, reminds us that God does not require great people to do great things; just unselfish ones. Everyone, Mother Teresa told us, is a pencil in God's hand. This Pentecost let us become God's well-used pencil, doing unselfish things in God's name, and in so doing, write God's message of love and peace, reconciliation and joy upon hearts searching for a better way. Let's sharpen our pencils and leave our signature on the world.

Amen? Amen!

Trinity Sunday

John 3:16-18

"The Great Mystery"

By: Rev. Jack R. Miller

At a confirmation service, the elderly archbishop asked the children for a definition of the Holy Trinity. One little girl answered in a very soft voice, "The Holy Trinity is three Persons in one God." The old archbishop, who was almost deaf, replied, "I didn't understand what you said." The little girl reached out and touched the archbishop's hand and said, "You're not supposed to understand. The Trinity is a mystery."

Scholars have struggled to understand the mystery of the Trinity for centuries, and the debate continues today. And yet we invoke this marvelous mystery each time we open and close our Eucharistic celebration. Through our baptism and confirmation, in blessings and prayers, our lives are touched by these simple words and solemn gesture of faith: "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Even in death, we are sent on our final journey by the sign and gentle words of this mysterious gift we know as the Trinity.

"With the Sign of the Cross," author and theologian David Walker wrote, "we trace the Trinity on ourselves. We bring God into our minds first. Then we bring the Trinity down to our hearts. And, with our hearts filled with compassion, we move the Trinity across our bodies to our shoulders and arms to better bear the burdens of our family and friends."

As the Easter Season ends and Ordinary Time resumes, we observe two "solemnities of the Lord" on the next two Sundays. The first of these, The Most Holy Trinity, focuses on the essence of our faith: the loving providence of God the Father, the Creator of all things, the selfless servanthood of God the Son, our Redeemer who emptied himself to become like us in order that we might become like him; and the joyful love of God the Spirit, who sustains us and brings unity to the Father and Son and to all creation.

In Native American theology, the Creator has many names. Perhaps the most descriptive and my personal favorite is "The Great Mystery." The triune nature of God, the Creator of all things, is a great mystery. But as Albert Einstein once said, "the most wondrous thing in the world is the mysterious." Personally, I think the

Trinity is more than a concept to be understood, it is an essence to be embraced each time we sign the cross. It is a promise fulfilled, a presence felt, a voice within, and the constant assurance that we are loved by a God who knows no limits, builds no walls, is fully acquainted with what it is like to be a human being living in this world. A God who accepts each one of us for who we are.

Today's feast of the Trinity invites us to re-discover the many ways in which the love of God is revealed in our lives. We witness that love in the life God breathes into our souls, in every wonderful work of creation formed by the hand of God, and in the love of God dwelling among us in the joy we share with family and friends. The reality is that the idea of God as a triune being lies beyond the grasp of our time-bound and earth-bound human understanding. The Trinity will always be a mystery, but signs of that mystery fill our lives and our homes and our hearts. In realizing such joy, such wonder, may our questions about God's three-fold nature be transformed into an awareness of God's unconditional love, a spirit of gratitude for the precious gift of life we have received through God's mysterious and boundless love for all humankind.

Today we celebrate The Most Holy Trinity, that triune nature of three divine beings, the three Persons in one God found in the little girls answer to the elderly archbishop, three Persons equal in majesty and yet undivided in splendor, that most glorious mystery. So, let the celebration begin ...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

John 6: 51-58

"True food, True drink"

By Rev. Liz Miller

This is my body; this is my blood. You must eat my body and drink my blood to have life within you.

God came into our world as a little baby. Before he left this world, he gave us his body and his blood to eat and drink. If I had not grown up believing this and it was not part of our religion, it would appall me to even think about how strange this concept is. However, this is a very dramatic and powerful way of awakening people to an understanding of a mystery that cannot be described in the way it happens. It can only be described by the effect it has on people's lives. We cannot describe this literally but only with the eyes of faith. When I say the words of consecration over a piece of bread or a cup of wine nothing appears any different, but I believe that the bread and wine is transformed into the body and blood of Christ. This has to do with faith. It cannot be described. In receiving the Eucharist, we are invited into God's presence in our lives. We are connected to our God and to each other. The Eucharist is a symbol of our togetherness and our unity. As I grow, I realize more and more how connected and united we truly are.

Our God is a God who chooses to use the natural. He does not choose something that is not attainable to all people. In the early church bread and wine were the most common. They were inexpensive and ordinary. The bread and wine; body and blood were given for all. Even Judas, the betrayer of Christ was given bread and wine.

Blood is ordinary. It is our life stream. Without blood we cannot live. Blood is a symbol of life for us, physically and spiritually. In the Old Testament, there were sacrifices of blood but more powerful was the sacrifice of God's own Son.

He took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to the twelve and they all drank it. And he said to them: "This is the blood of the new covenant." (Mk 14:24) Many other religions feel it is just a symbol but if you read the words of Jesus, they are very clear. He says, "This **IS** my body, and this **IS** my blood." He does not say this is a symbol. This covenant is signed with the blood of God made flesh for us...for us. What love he has for us. We did nothing to deserve this. It was the powerful love

God has for us. Today, when you approach the table and as you take the body and touch the blood to your lips keep in mind that God is faithful that you were loved long before you came into this world and no matter what we do that love will always be there. God could not have given us anything more personal than his body and his blood. He gave it to us to give us strength and to always be a part of us. This is such an intimate gesture from our God. Therefore, the eating and the drinking of the body and the blood of Christ is at the very heart of our worship. We cannot live and do what God asks us to do without God being an integral part of our lives. The body and blood make us one with our God. Our God comes to us in a very special way.

God did not leave himself in the consecrated host primarily to be worshiped. He will be with us until time is no more. Pope Pius the XII said, "If you have received worthily, you are what you have received. You are transformed into Christ.

Remember by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male, or female.... (1 Cor 12;13) Every single one of us is important to God and the church.

A powerful Presbyterian preacher once said, the religious man or woman is a mixture of three persons, "the poet, the lunatic, the lover." "I pray that the poet might find a place in you: for the poet is a person of profound faith, seeing beneath the appearance of things, seeing with new eyes, with the eyes of Christ. I pray there may be a fair measure of lunacy in you the wild idea, the foolishness of the cross, for herein lies your Christian hope. And I pray, that whatever the risk, even on your cross you will always be Christ the lover with your arms open wide.

"In Christ, God has become both provider and provision, both preparer of the feast and the feast itself, both the giver and the gift. The love of God which is Jesus the bread of life is real food for our hungry souls, real drink that is the very life of God flowing through us."

On this extraordinary feast on the Body and Blood of Christ we are called to awaken ourselves, to drink in and feel the power of the invitation of our God to change us and what we are being called to do. May the Eucharistic Christ continue to feed you, and to lead you.

"Transfusion of Grace"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Two soldier friends served together in Iraq. In personality and backgrounds the two were opposites, yet there was a chemistry that made them inseparable. The quiet and reserved friend was wounded and needed a blood transfusion. The other, the outgoing and boisterous one, shared the same blood type, so, he gave his blood to save his friend. When the wounded fellow learned whose blood had saved his life, he said to his companion, "I feel like a new man."

Something similar should take place each time we receive the Eucharist. We drag ourselves into mass looking for a spiritual transfusion, a pick-me-up, a refueling. The world has wounded us in some way. And just like the soldier in our story, we become a new person after we receive the life-saving gift from this table of sacrifice, a gift from a friend who is very different from us but loved us enough to give his own blood as a ransom for our soul.

"I see the church as a field hospital after battle," Pope Francis wrote. "It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. You must heal his wounds first. Then we can talk about everything else."

The Eucharist is more than a symbolic gesture as some believe; more than a meaningless ritual celebrated and then forgotten. In this miracle, the bread and wine take on a dual-nature and become the Body and Blood of Christ for us. And as we consume the elements, we become what we have received, we give to others what has been passed to us, and the communion we share becomes a community embracing the love of Christ with everyone who is gathered at table together. In this one miraculous act, we continue the memory of Christ's gift from generation to generation.

Jesus told his followers that each time you do this, each time you share the bread and wine, remember me; remember the love I have shown you, and remember to share that love with one other. Therefore, the Eucharist is the heart and soul of our faith, the core of our belief.

Here in our own community of believers, we come to the Eucharistic table to celebrate our identity as Christ's disciples and to seek the sustaining grace to face the challenges in life that are part of such discipleship. We make our table the

Lord's own table, a place of reconciliation and compassion. A table open to everyone; a table that reflects the love of Christ himself.

The Eucharist transforms us from a collection of diverse, disconnected souls into a community of faith. We come to this table with our struggles and doubts and pains and sorrows and, if the Eucharist is what Jesus intended it to be, we find support and compassion from those who join us at the table of the Lord; we become a new person.

Today's feast of the Body and Blood of Christ reminds us that we are called by this same Jesus to be both guest and servant, participant, and host in the banquet of God. We come to be fed and nourished but at the same time, we are compelled to become the Eucharist for others; to make the limitless and unrestrained love of Christ a reality through our own acts of love and kindness. And in doing so, become the needed transfusion of those wounded by a world filled with hate and indifference, pain, and sorrow.

Today's feast celebrates Christ's gift of the Eucharist to us. It is the source and summit of our life together as his Church. A Church that first and foremost heals wounds and brings people to a newness of life. A Church that offers a transfusion of love and grace to all who approach her table. In our sharing of the body and blood of Christ, may we become what is expressed so beautifully in the inspiring words of the Bob Frenzel hymn:

"One bread, one body, one cup, one call, one faith, one Spirit present in us all. One prayer, one blessing, one hope, one peace, one church, one people, one love released."

Amen? Amen!

Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25:31-46

"The Face of Christ"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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.

Amen? Amen!

Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Matthew 16: 13-19

"Mismatched Saints"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Mutt and Jeff was a newspaper comic strip created by cartoonist Bud Fisher in 1907. It is considered by many to be the first published comic strip and remained in syndication until 1983. Over the years, it employed the talents of several cartoonists, including Al Smith who drew the strip for nearly 50 years. Its theme was a simple one; two mismatched and unlikely friends share a common passion that resulted in misadventure after misadventure.

Mutt was tall and lanky and married. Jeff was short in stature and single. Mutt was a simple man and Jeff was well educated. They were two likeable misfits sharing a common journey, much like the two saints we remember today.

Peter was tall. His remains uncovered under St. Peter's Basilica in Rome are marked with the words, "Here lies Peter," and they are the remains of a large man. Peter was a fisherman and not well educated. Scripture tells us that he was married. Jesus came to his house and healed his mother-in-law of a fever. Peter was indeed a simple man, but one who became the leader of a movement that changed the world.

Paul was much different than Peter, but the two mismatched saints shared a common journey. Paul was short in stature, perhaps tiny when compared to his fisherman alter ego. Changing his name from Saul to Paul was a bit of a joke when you consider that the name Paul comes from the Latin word *paulus*, which means small. Unlike the big fisherman, Paul was very well educated and made a conscious choice to remain single so he could devote himself to God's calling. Both men were powerful preachers, but Paul was a teacher as well. People throughout the ancient world who listened to him or read his letters not only became followers of the new way of life, but they willingly offered their lives for Jesus Christ. Paul passed on to them the Holy Spirit he had received on the road to Damascus, and through his ministry people lived and died, not for Paul, but for their belief in Jesus Christ as the very Son of God.

The eleventh chapter of the Book of Revelation speaks about two witnesses who would be put to death in a great pagan city, but who would rise and give testimony

to God. Perhaps Revelation was speaking about ancient prophets like Moses and Elijah. Or maybe its writer was speaking about Peter and Paul, who would have died before Revelation was written. Certainly, Peter and Paul gave witness to Jesus Christ with their words, their deeds, and their lives. The power that Peter and Paul had to spread the Gospel came from the Holy Spirit. They were two very different men who shared a common faith, gave of themselves totally to the monumental task God had placed before them, and in the end, paid the ultimate price in a martyr's death.

The power and drive that fueled the quest of Peter and Paul has been passed on to you and me in the gift of the Holy Spirit we have received. We too can be witnesses for Jesus Christ in the words we speak and the lives we live. Others can see Christ in us and through the working of the Holy Spirit find their way to the very presence of God. To accomplish this, we need to be less concerned about our stature in the world, be it physical or social, and more concerned about our place in the Body of Christ. All we need is to focus on Jesus, as Peter and Paul did, put aside our fears and apprehensions, our doubts, and insecurities, and let the Holy Spirit work in and through us. We have the same gift that they had, we have the same story to tell and peace to share. We have the same Holy Spirit that guided their steps in a journey of service. Let our prayer today be that through the intercession of these two great saints and the blessing of the Spirit, we might have the determination and the courage to proclaim Jesus Christ to a world desperate for a better way and a more fulfilling life.

Let us proclaim the Risen Christ's Gospel of compassion, generosity, reconciliation, and love. In whatever bread we can offer, in whatever peace we can extend, in whatever brokenness we can mend, may we continue the work begun by Peter and Paul, our ancestors in the faith, to bring about the kingdom of God in the here and now.

Amen? Amen!

Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God

Luke 2:16-21

"Go tell it on the mountain."

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

The song, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, first came to light when John Works published it in 1907. Works did not write the song though, its roots date back to the 1860's and the original author is unknown. It is a song that transcends culture and time, showing popularity as a Christmas Carol, a praise song, and folk song. But at its core, this inspirational hymn, penned over 150 years ago, tells a beautiful story of shepherds watching their flocks by night, their encounter with singing angels in the nighttime sky, and a special child lying in a manger.

After the angels left, the shepherds said to themselves, *"Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened."* Our scripture says that they *came in haste*. No one asked who would care for the sheep. No one said that they would stay behind and watch the camp. Like the fisherman in years to come who would leave their boats, and the tax collector who would walk away from his booth, the shepherds followed the call of God to become witnesses of the Good News.

More sophisticated people may have hesitated that night outside of Bethlehem, questioning the authenticity of the call, the consequences of their involvement, or worrying about what people would think. Years in the future, they would be the ones blinded by tradition to God's new message, walking away from God's call because the sacrifice of their worldly possessions was too much to ask; or ones who let their places of prominence overshadow the emptiness of their lives. They will become the people with places to go, things to do, family to bury and friends to say goodbye to beforehand. Those who lack the childlike faith God looks for, and the mustard seed faith God needs to grow the kingdom, are of little use to a God who needs people ready and willing to serve.

The shepherds eventually returned to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard; they were changed men. An encounter with Christ does that to people. Verse 20 tells us that the shepherds went on to share with everyone they met the things they had seen and experienced. Just as others would later become the witnesses to the resurrection, the shepherds served as the first witnesses to the Good News of Jesus' birth.

Even today, once we have been blessed to experience God's presence, we too have a responsibility to share that experience with other people, to spread the word, to proclaim the Good News.

In this New Year, may we come to realize as the shepherds did so many years ago, that to personally experience the life changing event of Christ's birth is news that must be shared.

"Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born."

Amen? Amen!

The Exultation of the Holy Cross

John 3: 13-17

"The Old Rugged Cross"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In 1912, evangelist George Bennard was holding a revival meeting in Michigan. As he prepared himself one night, he began to think about the cross after reading John 3:16; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The words to a song came to mind as he meditated that night, but he was unable to finish the lyrics until the following year. His friend Charles Gabriel helped him with the final manuscript and the Old Rugged Cross soon gained popularity as other ministers used it during their evangelistic services. Despite its wide popularity though, the song was not accepted by most major hymnals until the 1950s. Publishers hesitated to include the hymn because of the somewhat controversial nature of its lyrics that express great affection for the cross itself, rather than for Jesus Christ who died upon it.

The history of this old and powerful hymn and the long pathway to its acceptance is not unlike the mass we celebrate today. For the early Christian church, the cross was an embarrassment, the humiliating symbol of defeat and death. It was, after all, the primary means of execution in the Roman empire, and thousands had died on Roman crosses. Think of it, if Jesus had died today, by the means commonly used in executions, what would be our symbol of his suffering? Eventually the Church did embrace the cross as a symbol of hope: the cross was honored as the tree of life, and the instrument God used to bring salvation to a sinful world.

Today we celebrate the Exaltation, the "bringing too light" of the Holy Cross, commemorating the discovery of Golgotha, the empty tomb, and the cross of Jesus in the fourth century by St. Helena, the mother of Constantine. According to ancient historians like Josephus and others, Helena toured Jerusalem in 326 C.E. she came upon the temple Hadrian had built near the end of the second century. This temple was reported to have been built over the hill known as "The Place of the Skull," the very hill where Jesus and two thieves had died. Helena ordered the temple destroyed, and according to Christian tradition, uncovered the cross of Jesus and other holy artifacts during the excavation. The authenticity of the find

will be argued until the end of time, but the cross as a Christian symbol had finally won acceptance as Helena had the Church of the Holy Cross erected on the site.

But what does the cross mean to us today? Think about it. We make the Sign of the Cross over ourselves to begin and end the mass. We make the Sign of the Cross before and after prayer, we hang the cross on our walls and around our necks, and the cross is made on foreheads during the many rituals we celebrate. We are asked to bear our cross but what does that really mean? Do we consider the cross we are asked to carry in a negative way, as obstacles or challenges we long to put aside and be free of? Do we think of our crosses as burdens, things, and people; objects that demand our time and energy? Do we see our sufferings and our brokenness as "crosses" that condemn us to incomplete and unfulfilled lives of sadness and despair? That was not what Jesus had in mind. Our real crosses, the crosses God places on our shoulders and that Christ bears with us, are sources of hope, of joy, of discovery, of life, of resurrection, for both you and I and the others who share our life. Our crosses are not meant to limit of our lives but to become the means to live our lives to the fullest; the vehicles for discovering the meaning and purpose of this journey God has set us on.

Despite our rejection of the ways of God, our questioning of the values of God, God continues to call us and seek us out. God loves his creation too much to write us off or condemn us; instead, God raised up his Son as a new light to illuminate our hearts, to make us see things as God sees them, to share God's hope for our redemption and that of all humanity.

God wants us to embrace the cross of Christ today, and to embrace the crosses God puts upon our shoulders. Starting now, let us look to the cross more often and remember the great gift God gave us, and the great sacrifice Jesus made on it on our behalf. Let us make the Sign of the Cross often, and realize in doing so, that we bring our whole selves to God; our minds, our souls, our bodies, our will, our thoughts, and our hearts; everything we are and will become. Let our hearts rejoice in the words of that great old hymn: "So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it someday for a crown."

Amen? Amen!

All Souls Sunday

John 6: 37-40

"No Fear of Going Home"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Tecumseh, the great Shawnee leader said some powerful words about death in the early 1800's; words that are still remembered in movies, and in the lives of our modern-day warriors. "When your time comes to die," Tecumseh told his men, "be not like those whose hearts are filled with fear of death, ... Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home."

All Souls' Day confronts us with the sobering inevitability of our own mortality, and the reality that we will one-day pass from this world into the next. But it is our faith in God's love that tempers any apprehension we may have and replaces that fear with trust and hope; trust that we live in the promise of Easter's empty tomb, and hope that every step we take is guided by the light of the Risen Christ. Faith enables us to see death not as an ending but as a transition, not so much as leaving our home but in the realization that we are going home.

In the waters of baptism, we entered the life of God; in death, our baptismal journey is completed. Just as we have lived this life with Christ, we take our leave of this world with Christ; in our passing, the baptism that made us part of his death now makes us part of his resurrection.

As Jesus often told us in scripture, greatness is discovered not in finding ourselves but in losing ourselves in the great tasks of life; not in our own wants but in our generosity in helping others find their own reasons to hope and persevere; not in gaining satisfaction for ourselves but in finding the enduring joy of loving and being loved. For those called to be Jesus' disciples our purpose in life is realized in the act of doing good and not the recognition or acclaim we may receive. In realizing that we imitate Christ in such work we find the assurance that we are bringing the love of God into the lives of others. Christ-like service begins with a sense of gratitude for the blessings we have received and the commitment to live lives worthy of those blessings. Jesus, who welcomed to his side the rejected and scorned of society, who washed the feet of his friends and taught them to love unconditionally, leaves this legacy of service to you and me in this day and time.

Every word of the Gospel comes down to love. The love that Jesus speaks of is simple enough to understand but so demanding that we often shy away from it. The great mystery of God's love is that God loves creation so completely and so

selflessly; all God seeks in return is that such love is shared. In the simple act of loving others more than ourselves, we model the great love and compassion of the God who spared nothing to bring us to him, not even God's only Son, who through his death and resurrection opened the gates of eternity to all who follow his teachings and example. May we seek to follow the great commandment of the Gospel: to love with the same selfless compassion, care, and completeness of God.

And as we celebrate All Souls Day by remembering those who have gone before us, let us never lose sight of the world beyond this that is waiting for us as well. Jesus told us not to fear but to trust in him, and when our journey on earth is finished, he promised to be there and to guide us on our final journey home.

"There's something about death that is comforting." actress Angelina Jolie shared in an interview, "The thought that you could die tomorrow frees you to appreciate your life today." Let us embrace and appreciate our life of today and have no fear of tomorrow. Jesus Christ is with us always, even until the end of time.

Amen? Amen!

The Dedication of the Lateran Basilica

John 2: 13-22

"One Table - One Church"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Since the 12th century, November 9th has been set aside to celebrate the dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran. It was the first church built in the city of Rome by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, and it was the residence of popes until 1307. The building has had its ups and downs; it has experienced fires, wars, earthquakes, and bad popes. It has been renovated and restored. But it still stands, and its dedication marked a sea of change in the history of the world. Several structures have been built on the site over the centuries, and the present church was constructed in 1646.

Two hundred years later, a French Priest and a group of Native Americans would erect another church in a land far, far away. Like the Lateran, this church would make history, undergo change, controversy, rebuilding, and a move. Unlike the Lateran's majestic interior, its walls were made of branches and mud. There were no hardwood pews, so you had to sit cross-legged on the dirt floor. While the Lateran displayed ancient icons and priceless works of art, the little church had a simple cross on the wall, fashioned from rough-hewn wood by one of the tribal members. Chant and incense fill the air of the Lateran during mass, but here the community sings a folk song in the local dialect to the beat of a drum.

Brocade and silk are worn by those who preside in the solemn setting of the Lateran, but in this place, a plain, thread-bare robe, no longer white, is worn by the presider during the celebration of mass.

Two churches: the first, a magnificent cathedral in one of the world's great cities; the second, a small hovel of wood and thatch in an Indian village in Northwestern Washington. The distance between the two houses of worship is much greater than just the miles and centuries that separate them, but at the center of both places it is the same: A table of bread and wine and a book of stories about the Creator of All Things, the loving God of all, who invites everyone to share in the feast wherever the table is placed.

Today's solemnity is more than honoring Rome's "first church" - today is a celebration of the unity of all our churches: the pope's cathedral, a mission church

on the Lummi Reservation, and our own parish community here in Mount Vernon. The body of Christ is not a building but Christ himself; God is not found in this or any structure no matter how exquisite or ornate, but in the people, who gather within its walls to worship. Today's solemnity calls us to realize that the sacrament we share marks our identity as the People of God. We are the Church that the Risen Jesus formed at his table and the ones he calls to gather in one accord; to bless, break and share his body and blood in the Eucharist.

In the waters of baptism flowing from every church's font, we become brothers and sisters in Christ to every man, woman, and child; at the Eucharistic table in every place we worship, we are one family, breaking one bread, sharing one cup, and becoming One Church - One Spirit in Christ Jesus.

Amen? Amen!

Ordinary Time

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 1: 29-34

"Come and See"

By Rev. Liz Miller

We are now back to Ordinary time, but things are different. The crib and decorations are back in storage; the wise men have returned to the East, the shepherds to their flocks; the star has disappeared, and the flowers have wilted. Instead of a gospel about a newborn baby named Jesus we hear about John the Baptist. We need to remember that Christmas is not an end but a beginning. Christmas changed our world but only if you let it be changed.

The witness of John the Baptist is crucial to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Imagine what John was like. He wears a garment made from camel's hair and a leather girdle. Locusts and wild honey are not my type of dinner. He was a prophet who called you on your sins. Probably was a person you would not hang out with but, according to Jesus there was no greater born of woman than John the Baptist. John made it clear that he was not the Messiah but was sent to make straight the way of the Lord. John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

We are all on a journey. We are all called. He calls us all in some way. God calls us all to be...We point to Christ, not by what religion we are but by who we are.

God does not call perfect people. Look who Jesus called to be his followers. Peter denied him; Judas betrayed him. They were fisherman, uneducated and unknown. They were fearful. When Jesus said, "Come and see," and they responded. It was a life-changing experience.

Jesus gathers ordinary, imperfect people with ordinary gifts. Peter has been called the rock. "Thou art Peter and on this rock, I will build my church." (Matt 16:18) Why would Jesus choose Peter? He was spontaneous, not rock like, he will walk towards Jesus on water only to falter. In anger, he will cut off an ear of one of the men who will seize Jesus and will swear loyalty to Jesus only to deny him, not once but three times. Peter was a hot-blooded kind of person who always seemed to rush in where angels fear to tread, and when he realizes he is in over his head he retreats, he runs away.

We are so much like the apostles in many ways. Recently, I felt like I was over my head in my job. I was feeling overwhelmed and tried to give my resignation. My manager is a wise person and she called me on it and told me I was running away. Imagine that! She is a very perceptive person, and I was astounded she could read me so well. I love my job, but I was feeling like a failure. Like Peter I chose the easy way out. We talked and by the time I left I rescinded my letter of resignation. I realized my boss knew my weaknesses, but she also knew my potential. I truly feel valued because of this. Jesus knew Peter's weakness as well and loved him anyway. Peter felt valued as well because of the relationship he shared with Jesus.

I have quoted this metaphor before and it is so true as people of God, in our everyday life and at work. In his book "The Hungering Dark," Frederic Buechner compared humanity to an enormous spider web: "If you touch it anywhere," Buechner wrote, "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. 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. No person is an island..."

When we say yes to Jesus, he can change us in the most extraordinary ways. Like Peter we may not become what God wants right away; sometimes the process of life takes time. But as Buechner implied, our life is shaped and molded by the trembling of the web; the web set in motion by the hand of God.

God will reach into our heart and see our potential. It is such a great realization that God and our friends will not give up on us. God made us as we are. It does not matter to God if we are powerful, great, or ordinary. God calls us out of darkness into the light. He calls us to *come and see*. We have a personal God who wants to know us. Our God longs for us. Our God calls us into a relationship. He calls us to be servants. God calls us and he knew us even in the womb. As the psalmist wrote, "O Lord, you have searched me, and you know me...you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Ps 139:1 & 13)

Jesus said to his followers, and he is saying to us today, "Come and see." Are we willing to listen and to answer that call?

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 4: 18-23

"Vessel of Light"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Four-year-old Jill asked her mother, "God is bigger than us and lives in us, right?" Mom agreed. Then Jill blurted out, "If God is bigger than us and lives in us, shouldn't he show through?" Jill is a promising theologian and speaks to the bottom-line of our gospel passage this morning.

Matthew describes the call of Jesus' first disciples from their fishing boats along the Sea of Galilee. He invited Simon, Andrew, James, and John to leave their livelihood and families, all their worldly possessions and security, to join him in his ministry to the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden, the sick and the needy.

This foursome of brothers heard the call of the Lord, dropped everything, and followed him. They were common, everyday people, not the sort of individuals one would suspect of being particularly religious. They were just fishermen. How could they be expected to convince others to change their lives or take a position of leadership in the conversion of the world? They were, after all, just common, everyday people. But they were called. They responded. And God worked his wonders through them. Yes, God is bigger than us, and lives in us, and when that is the case, God does show through.

Like Peter and Andrew, James, and John, we are called by Jesus, we are asked to leave behind our own needs and wants, our own secure lives, to follow Jesus' example of love and servanthood. He calls disciples of every time and place, and we are no exception. We are called to catch the falling, rescue the endangered, and to embrace the lost and forgotten. We are asked to let God become a part of our lives, fill our inner most being, and become instruments of God's compassion, just like those first disciples of long ago.

We may think to ourselves, "I can't do that! I'm not a scholar or a preacher; I'm not even a good person." We may feel held back by how imperfect and unworthy we think we are. Everyone feels like that at times. The first disciples were no different. Peter was uncouth, uncultured, and impulsive. Andrew, James, and John lacked refinement. Philip seemed indecisive. Thomas doubted. Matthew was considered a traitor by his fellow Jews. Simon the Zealot was a dangerous patriot. Judas was,

among other things, a thief. Each one was flawed in some way and yet, Jesus chose them. John Calvin wrote, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, there a Church of God exists, even if it swarms with many faults." Jesus works with and through our imperfections and misgivings to reach out to a world that badly needs love, unity, and healing. Jesus isn't looking for perfection in his disciples, he is looking for our willingness, loyalty, and trust. Jesus is looking for a lamp to fill and to let his light shine through.

Jesus extends a personal invitation for us to leave behind the things that hold us back, the insecurities that get in our way, and to follow him. He asks us to become his vessel of light, proclaiming the Good News of his love to all who will listen. He asks us to take on the challenge of discipleship; to extend, regardless of our own circumstances, the love of God to all; to proclaim in our own time and place the compassion, forgiveness, and justice that is at the heart of Jesus' teaching.

All our life, we search for someone we can really trust. Jesus is the one. He loves us unconditionally and he is calling on us to love and serve others in his name. If we follow him, Jesus promises to make something wonderful of our lives. Yes Jill, you are right, if God lives within us the love of Christ can't help but show through. Let's love him; let's become his vessel of light; and let's see what Jesus can do with "lives that swarm with many faults" serving in a world filled with suffering and despair. Let our journey begin today.

Amen? Amen!

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5: 1-12

"The Blessed of Christ"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a story told about a woman who came to Jesus saying, "I can give you nothing but myself." Christ replied, "Then you have given me everything."

For over twenty centuries, the followers of Jesus teachings have struggled to practice the nine Beatitudes mentioned in our scripture this morning. Some have done well in achieving the goals set forth by Christ; most of us have struggled a bit.

The Beatitudes outlined in today's Gospel were portions of a longer talk Jesus gave on a hillside in Galilee. The whole presentation is called the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes have been called the Charter of Christianity and the Magna Carta for humanity. If you notice, they refer to the world we live in, the here and now, and not the life hereafter.

The Beatitudes describe the person of Jesus himself. As the New Testament scholar, Reginald Fuller, put it, "He was all the things and did all the things the Beatitudes enumerate." Jesus was detached from material things, caring and compassionate, humble, and merciful, centered his life on God and was a true peacemaker in every sense of the word. He was, above all else, the one who was persecuted for the sake righteousness. Jesus was and is and will ever be the Blessed One of God, the living example of the Beatitudes we strive to embrace.

Dwight L. Moody wrote that the Beatitudes were given not to increase our knowledge but change our lives. Astronaut James Lowell once remarked that he wished Christ had added few. "Blessed are they who can laugh at themselves, for they will never cease to be amused," was one. "Blessed are they who have nothing to say and cannot be persuaded to say it," was the other. Fifty years before Christ was born Cicero wrote, "There is nothing that makes a man more like God than mercy." Here lies the foundation of the Beatitudes we struggle so hard to live. It's all about love. Showing our love for God by loving one another and believing in our hearts that God loves us back.

In mirroring the love of Jesus in our daily lives we become the "blessed" who seek God's way of compassion, who live in humble gratitude for the gift of life, who

imitate the mercy and consolation of God, the “blessed” who by their very lives embody the Beatitudes in today's Gospel reading.

When we tell Jesus "I can give you nothing but myself," we become the "blessed" in the Sermon on the Mount; *the poor in spirit who are detached from material things, the ones who mourn, who value caring and compassion, the meek who show a true humility that banishes all pride, those who hunger and thirst for a justice that incorporates all of humanity, the merciful who have the ability to see things from another's perspective, consider another's feelings, and share another's joys and sorrows. We become the pure in heart who center their life on God, and the peacemakers who know that real peace is not merely the absence of discord but a positive condition that strives for humanities highest good. In following Christ by giving ourselves totally to him, we may also become the persecuted, ridiculed for the faith we hold and the devotion we show.*

Let us pray for the strength and courage to put God first in our lives and commit our very being to follow God's will in all that we do. Jesus, who transformed the world through the love of God, calls us to do the same in every kindness we extend to others in his name. Let us strive to live the Beatitudes today and every day. Let us be like that woman before Christ and offer him the greatest gift we can offer, and then let us proclaim to all who would listen that the love of God gives our lives' purpose and meaning, a new perspective in determining what is good and right and just in our world, and a new understanding of the holiness that dwells within every person who has been made in the very image and likeness of God. Let us become the blessed ones of Christ in our time and place.

Amen? Amen!

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5: 13-16

"Be Salt and Light for Christ"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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 principal 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 encounter.

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.

Amen? Amen!

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5:17-37

"Ben detto Nonno, ben detto!"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

Growing up my grandfather, my Nonno, would always tell me the importance of honesty; "say what you mean, and mean what you say" he would tell me over and over.

Our readings today seem to reflect the wisdom in my grandfather's words. In our first reading we are told that before every person is "life and death, good and evil," and "whichever" option we chose will be given to us. Clearly, the reading tells you and me that we are responsible for our actions; we are accountable to God to say what we mean and mean what we say. The psalmist asks the Lord to give him discernment (understanding, wisdom) to not only observe the law, but to keep it with all his heart. It is a prayer to mean what we say and say what we mean.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus asks us to consider the weight and meaning of what we say, and the importance of consistency between our words and our actions; saying what we truly mean and living what we are truly saying.

Jesus is telling us that obedience to the Law, whether God's or humankind's, begins in the heart. What we say, what we do, what we decide, are all responses to the choice's life puts before us, and the God who speaks to us in the depths of our hearts, the God in whose image and likeness we have been created.

While the scribes and Pharisees were obsessed with keeping the letter of the Law, Jesus taught the importance of the more difficult task of embracing the spirit of the Law with love and humility. Christ speaks not of rules and regulations but the much deeper and profound values of the human heart. He preaches that we cannot be satisfied with merely avoiding the act of murder but must also curb the insults and anger that lead to murder; we cannot be satisfied with just avoiding the act of adultery, we must shield our hearts from influences that may lead a person to consider committing an act of adultery; we cannot be satisfied with just fulfilling contracts to avoid being sued but must seek to become honest and trustworthy persons in all our dealings.

By our compassion and caring for others, by our ethical and moral convictions, by our sense of awareness and gratitude for all that God has done for us, we do the

great work of passing on Jesus's teachings of love, reconciliation and justice to a world overwhelmed by a flood of endless rules and restrictions that seem impossible to keep.

Jesus comes to teach a new approach to life that is motivated by the recognition and celebration of the humanity we share with all men and women. Our favor in the eyes of God is not attained through the observance of laws, oaths, statistics, or rituals alone, but from the depths of our heart that prompt us to make the decisions we make, and to live the life we live. Jesus asks for accountability and consistent behavior between our words and actions, our inward thoughts, and outward deeds. Jesus simply says, let your "Yes mean Yes," and your "No mean No." Isn't that what my grandfather used to tell me? "Say what you mean, and mean what you say?" Ben detto Nonno, ben detto! Well said! Words to guide us all.

Amen? Amen!

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5: 38-48

"Lighthouse for All"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Exodus 21 (23-25) tells us "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." In today's scripture, Jesus is saying that this line of thinking is considered old-school, and it was time for change. Despite the violence done to us, regardless of the injustice we have suffered, Jesus asks his disciples to take that first and difficult step toward forgiveness. Our first concern as Jesus' followers, must be God's work of reconciliation: to love the unlovable, to reach out to the alienated, to dismantle whatever walls divide and isolate people, and to help build bridges that bring people together.

The real challenge for you and I is not in loving some designated political, sociological, or economic group, or by loving some remote sinner we will never meet or have anything to do with. Today's Gospel is asking us to love the people we live with and work with and go to school with, the people we struggle with, the people who really annoy us. The very folks Fr. Phil Bloom calls the "human toothaches" in our lives. What we must remind ourselves often is that Jesus came to serve those who needed him the most, and gave his life for everyone, saint and sinner alike. How can we as his follower's love any less or restrict our love in any way.

To truly "love our enemies" in the sense of today's gospel, is to create and maintain an atmosphere where reconciliation is always possible and actively sought. Jesus is trying to instill in us a vision that sees beyond stereotypes, politics, and appearances; a vision that recognizes and honors the inherent goodness possessed by every human being. The love that Jesus asks us to show means that no matter how much our "enemies" hurt us, we will never let bitterness close our hearts to that person or seek anything but good for their lives. That is the challenge of discipleship: to show our love for the humanity we all share as brothers and sisters, as children of the one true God.

Love is a powerful word and an even more powerful emotion. The word love appears in scripture more than 500 times. God's love is the most powerful of all, and unites all men and women, no matter what their differences may be. Martin

Luther King, Jr. perhaps said it best, "Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it." Let us release our love today, let us be in harmony with all of God's creation, and let our light so shine that it becomes a lighthouse for others; a pathway to salvation for all who see its light and follow it safely home.

*"And I thank God for the lighthouse, I owe my life to Him. For Jesus is the lighthouse and from the rocks of sin; He has shone a light around me
That I could clearly see, if it wasn't for the lighthouse tell me
where would this ship be."*

Jesus called his disciples to change things, and he is calling you and I to do the same. Let us respond to God's call by becoming mirrors of the love God shares with all people, let us become ministers of God's forgiveness, and vehicles that transport God's healing grace; despite the hurt we endure, despite the cloak we give up, and despite the extra mile we will walk in God's name. Let the love we show to all become a lighthouse for others, releasing the harmonic illumination of God's love for all creation, now and forever.

Amen? Amen!

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 6: 24-34

"Consider the Lilies"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our readings, today we find some of the most comforting words in all the Bible. There is a common theme: trust in God's immeasurable love above all else. In our Gospel passage Jesus encourages his followers to align their priorities properly: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God" and everything else will find its proper place in your life.

The reading from Isaiah was written during the Babylonian exile six centuries before Jesus was born. The people of Israel found themselves in bondage with no hope of ever seeing their homeland again. Their greatest fear during this ordeal was that God had forgotten them. In this short passage, Isaiah first echo's their cry of anguish and then proclaims that God will never forget his children no matter what. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb," Isaiah writes, and even if that were possible, "I will never forget you, says the Lord."

There are times in each of our lives when we have the feeling that we've been forgotten that God is somehow separated from us. Some crisis hits our family or that of a friend. Perhaps a marriage is in jeopardy, or a close friendship starts to fall apart, and we ask, "Where is God in all this?" Isaiah's words tell us that God is here and that we are loved by our Creator more than we can imagine. God loves each one of us. God is not putting off his love until we accomplish some great deed or right some wrong, God loves us right here, right now just the way we are. Perhaps Rhett Massey said it best in writing, "God knows everything there is to know about you, good and bad, and still loves you! It may be hard to believe, but yes, it is true! God loves you for you, warts, and all."

In what is possibly the most beautiful section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points to the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field, and tells us that if God cares for them, how much more will God care for us. Don't let anxiety over such transient things as food and clothing take control your life, Jesus is saying, God knows what you need; trust in God's love.

Worry and anxiety is a cancer of the soul that strikes both the rich and the poor. The rich person is anxious to increase their wealth while the poor person is anxious

about keeping a roof over their head and food on the table. But Jesus tells us that anxiety over such things is not productive. It will not add a day to our lives and, in fact, could lead to illness that will shorten our days on earth. Consider the lilies Jesus says, look at the birds of the air. They are free of anxiety and God takes care of them.

"Worry is the opposite of faith," Ruth Graham Bell writes. "Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its trials, it simply empties today of its joy." What we should fear being without is the assurance that we are loved and the realization that our lives have purpose. Jesus does not deny the reality of basic human needs for food and clothing and shelter, but to displace the holiness of God with worry over the perishable things of this world is the ultimate human tragedy.

Jesus warns that all too often we become the servants of our fears rather than the masters of our lives: our worry and anxiety over things we cannot control tends to push aside the possibility for goodness, joy, justice, and reconciliation. Jesus is telling us that we have nothing to fear before a God who has proven that we are loved unreservedly despite our imperfections; yes, a God who loves us warts and all.

Consider the lilies of the field, look to the birds of the air, and take comfort in the fact that the God who provided for us yesterday can meet our needs today and continue doing so into our tomorrows. Let our souls find rest in God alone who is our constant provider and companion. Consider the lilies and be at peace.

Amen? Amen!

9th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 7:21-27

"Prescription for Life"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

In last week's Gospel, Jesus instructed us not to worry. He reminded 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 lifespan. 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, several 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 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.

Therefore, 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 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.

Amen? Amen!

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 10: 26-33

"Vision of Hope"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

John Berryman was an accomplished American poet and scholar. He won the Noble Prize for poetry in 1965. In his poem "Addresses to the Lord," Berryman wrote about Jesus saying, "His words were short, precise, terrible, and full of refreshment." That description of Jesus' oratory skills rings true in the light of today's passage. Jesus has a way of challenging us, scaring us, calming our fears, refreshing our souls, while giving us a vision of hope to share with him and all humankind.

Scholars call our scripture today the third part of Matthew's "missionary discourse." In this final installment, Jesus instills in his disciples the need for courage and discernment in their preaching and outreach. He warns that the disciple who faithfully proclaims the Good News of Christ's life and ministry, death and resurrection can expect to be denounced, ridiculed, and abused. Jesus' words are rooted in the history of an Israel famous for persecuting the prophets. The point being that, if the prophets suffered persecution and Jesus would suffer crucifixion, his disciples, then and now, could expect similar treatment.

But Jesus also challenges us with a call to action. At times, we are called to be the vehicles of God's love for those desperate to realize that presence in their lives, and at times we are the recipients of such blessings, forgiveness, and compassion. Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid. The body can be harmed but that deep interior faith enjoyed by every believer can never be touched by even the most dangerous situation. He tells his disciples not to fear because they are loved and highly valued by God. A God who cares for sparrows and even more deeply for us who are worth more than many sparrows. Jesus reveals a God who has counted the hairs on our heads, and a God whose providence manifests itself in the love of family, the comfort of friends, and in the support of church and community.

Jesus calls us beyond our fears and insecurities; he invites us to embrace a spirit of joy and possibility that lies beyond our comfort zone. Jesus asks us not to deny him before others, not only in what we do, but in what we fail to do. Jesus asks us not to deny him by our silence in the face of injustice, by protecting our own interests

at the expense of the common good, or by our failure to respond to the cries of the poor, the abused, the desperate and the lost.

Three times in today's Gospel, Jesus assures us that we have nothing to fear before a God who has proven that we are loved and accepted without reservation or restriction. Christ calls on us to embrace a vision of hope that is the opposite of fear, a vision of hope that matches our uncertainty of the unknown with the certainty of God's love; a vision of hope that can only be found and embraced once we reach beyond our own fears to confront the fears and heal the hurts of others; a vision of hope that persecution will ultimately lead to victory, and the Good Fridays of our lives will be transformed into the dawn of Easter joy.

John Berryman was right, Jesus' words were "short, precise, terrible, and full of refreshment." Every life is confronted with moments of exhilarating joy and inexpressible pain. What enables us to survive is the assurance that the love of God is a reality in our lives, and that we are always embraced by that love. Jesus' challenge to you and I is to proclaim his vision of hope to a hurting world, knowing that we have nothing to fear from those who oppose us. This is the promise we share as we walk together in this life and continue towards our eternal reward that waits beyond the clouds.

Amen? Amen!

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 10: 37-42

"To Receive a Prophets Reward"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

A missionary went to an island to introduce Christianity. He spoke to the natives about such subjects as virtue, justice, and sin. His audience was unimpressed. In fact, he bored them. After months of failed efforts, he concluded it was time to cut his losses and head home. The natives agreed.

Since his ship would not arrive for months, the priest spent his remaining time translating the Gospels into their native language. When the work was finished, he read to the inhabitants the scripture about the sufferings and death of Jesus.

The natives were overwhelmed. They asked him to read the passion chapters again. Finally, their chief said, "Why did you wait so long to tell us about a God who voluntarily suffers for us? You must not leave. Tell us more about this strange God who died for us." Soon the priest had to write for more missionaries to deal with his many converts. He had learned a valuable lesson, people are not attracted to Christianity by dry catechetical recitals but by the crucified Christ, who suffered and died for our sins, and rose again so we might have eternal life.

In today's Gospel Jesus speaks of the sacrifice demanded of his disciples and the suffering they will endure for their faith. Jesus clearly is not attacking family life; he is warning his disciples of the conflict and misunderstanding they will experience by proclaiming the word. To be an authentic disciple of Jesus means embracing the suffering, humility, pain, and selflessness of the cross; to be an authentic disciple of Jesus means taking on the role of prophet for the sake of the kingdom, no matter how unpopular that position can be; to be an authentic disciple of Jesus means welcoming and supporting other disciples who do the work of the Gospel.

God calls every one of us to become a modern-day prophet: to proclaim his presence and spread his message of love. Some are called to be witnesses of God's justice amid profound evil and hatred; others are called to be witnesses of his compassion and grace to those in pain and anguish; and many are called to the work of enabling others to be effective witnesses and ministers of God's love. The gift of faith opens our spirits to realize and accept our call to be God's witnesses, prophets of hope, proclaiming for all to hear that salvation is ours, paid for by Jesus who

suffered and died on the cross, and then rose again to conquer death and open the gates of paradise for all who believe.

As the priest learned on that far away island, as we must learn in this day and age, the most difficult part of imitating Jesus is the cross and what it stands for: unconditional forgiveness, the totally emptying of ourselves of our wants and needs for the sake of another, the spurning of safety and popular convention to do what is right and just.

To “receive the prophet’s reward” is to seek out every opportunity, to use every talent with which we have been blessed, to devote every resource at our disposal to make the love of God a living reality in every life we touch.

Committed disciples of Jesus possess the vision of faith and determination of hope to use anything; a cup of cold water, an encouraging word, a kind act, a small gift, and the moments we spend listening. Our smallest acts of compassion and generosity, our seemingly unnoticed offerings of affirmation and support, can enlighten minds and bring comfort to the soul of those who are lost and seek meaning and purpose in their empty lives. We never know how much the small acts of charity we extend in Jesus’ name will affect another person’s life.

As that missionary learned in a land far away, the same truth applies here in our own homes and community. The shadow of the cross must fall across the disciples of Christ in their mission of faith. Let us shoulder its weight and spread the good news for all to hear; Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.

Amen? Amen!

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 11: 25-30

"Come unto me"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The intimate relationship Jesus has with the God the Father is clearly expressed in our gospel passage this morning. He offers a hymn of praise to the Creator of all things who deeply loves us as a father loves his children; all his children. We see God's great love for all humanity revealed in the life and sacrifice of Jesus the Son, and united with you and I through the gift of the Holy Spirit; we are family. We are not just participants in a religion, or practitioners of ritual for rituals sake, we are God's children, part of God's family, celebrating together the relationship we share. We are yoked together, working in unison to spread the Good News of Christ's hope and love and peace to a waiting world.

Father James Gilhooley writes, "Most of us have studied the Gospels and concluded they are difficult and so we turn to religion. We conclude that belonging to a religion is much easier than being religious and less demanding than serving Christ." Religion needs to be more than a submission to a set of endless rules and regulations dictating every dimension of our lives. But that is exactly how Jesus' listeners and many filling the pews today see their faith. What Jesus is proposing is a radical change in attitude regarding the way we express our beliefs. Our relationship with God is not based on how well we keep a certain set of statutes, but in and through the love we share in Jesus' name with others. Our relationship with God is not based on a sense of enslavement or weariness, but on hope and joy and the promise of eternal life.

William Barclay tells a story about the mayor of a small city running into Christ in the street. He asks Jesus, "Is there anyone here who will be saved?" Jesus looks around and says, "No one except that couple." The mayor runs up to the pair and asks what they are doing to serve Christ. They replied, "We are merrymakers. When we see people depressed, we cheer them up. When we see them quarreling, we try to make peace among them." So, we can conclude from Barclay's story that God's kingdom on earth is built by people doing kind and simple things for one another. Not just practicing our religion, but in living our faith.

Christ calls us to embrace a faith that is centered in child-like simplicity, and yet profound in embracing the love, compassion, and hope of God: love that is not compromised by self-interest and rationalization; compassion that is not measured

but offered without limit or condition; hope that is validated through the many ways God's presence is revealed in our day to day lives. It is an approach to faith that is not compromised by our complexities and complications but with child-like directness and optimism. "If you carry your childhood with you," the Jewish poet wrote, "you never grow old."

To love one another as God has loved us, to serve one another as Christ serves God's people, brings the message of Jesus to everyone. It is the yoke we share with Christ that fits us well and calls us to use whatever gifts God has blessed us with, to give hands and feet and voice to our faith, so others can share the sense of joy and fulfillment and meaning that only Christ can bring to our lives. Jesus is saying to you and me this morning, "Come unto me." How can we refuse his offer? How can we not put on the yoke of service he calls us to wear? It is our chance to walk together in perfect harmony with Christ, and to be united with him in his mission of hope.

Amen? Amen!

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13: 1-9

"Sowers of God's love"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Francis Bacon wrote, "God almighty first planted a garden. And indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures." That seems to echo poet Alfred Austin who wrote about the "glory of gardening" nurturing and feeding both body and soul; "hands in dirt, head in the sun, heart with nature."

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 was much the same in the little garden Liz created in our backyard last season. The wood planter-boxes were constructed and filled with rich soil, and then the young seedlings were planted and watered. We soon enjoyed fresh zucchini and a salad made with lettuce from that small garden. It is as Francis Bacon wrote; gardening is one of the purest pleasures we can experience. 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 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, "a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold," 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 result for the seed, only having 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 you and me. 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 result will be.

We are entrusted with making the kingdom of God a reality to others through 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 the small act of charity we extend in Jesus' name will affect another person's life.

We often plant seeds without realizing it. An encouraging word, a kind act, a small gift, a moment we spend listening, can all result in a harvest of hope we cannot imagine. Such sowing is pure faith: planting small seeds that break open to yield the harvest within, seeds that fall on the pathway, or among the rocks, or among the thorns, all provide a measure of hope for the harvest that is to come.

God needs workers and the fields are ready. Are you willing to become the hands and feet and voice God uses to change the world for good? Through the infilling of God's Spirit and the power of God's grace we can foster seeds of peace and hope in a world desperate for a better way. Jesus challenges us in the Parable of the Sower to spread seeds of joy with love and faith regardless of the soil we must work with. Christ invites us to trust in him and believe that our simplest acts, our humblest offering of help, our giving of only a few minutes to listen to the plight of another soul may become the seeds that "fall on good soil," and yields an abundant harvest for the kingdom of God, "a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold." Francis Bacon and Alfred Austin were right in their thoughts on gardening. But even greater glory, fulfillment and joy is ours to grasp when we channel our efforts and become faithful gardeners for God. That is indeed the "purest of human pleasures," and the ultimate nourishment for both body and soul.

Amen? Amen!

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13:24-30

"Weeds, Mustard Seed and Yeast - Oh My!"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

In today's Gospel, 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.

Amen? Amen!

"The Weeds among the Wheat"

By Rev. Liz Miller

A farmer sowed his field with seed to prepare for another crop of grain. Under the dark night sky, a neighbor sowed bad seed. This was a common way to get even with each other. They would sow weed seeds into the neighbor's crop. This evidently got so out of hand that the Roman government passed a law against it.

The zizania, bearded darnel resembles wheat, making it almost impossible to identify. As the plants mature, the roots of the weeds and wheat intertwine, making them almost impossible to separate. Any attempt to pull the weeds will also pull the wheat. It is necessary to separate them though because darnel is bitter and mildly toxic. If it is not removed before milling, it will ruin the flour. The symptoms of eating darnel grain were dizziness, slurred speech, convulsions, vomiting and diarrhea.

What is Jesus trying to tell us with this parable? This week you cannot tell the difference between the good and the bad. They both grow together until the harvest.

People mingle together and we see both good and bad. Look at the early church. "The Pharisees practiced a rigid code of conduct that built a wall of exclusion between them and those less observant. The Essenes relocated to a desolate wilderness so they would not be defiled by what they considered a corrupt priesthood. The Zealots were agitating for a break with Rome even if it meant war. Many expected that the Messiah would gather the righteous, but Jesus was consorting with publicans, sinners, harlots so was allowing bad seeds to infest good wheat."¹

Jesus is telling us to be patient and wait. Even the disciples have difficulty. Weeds were growing in the inner circle of those chosen by Christ. If Judas had been weeded out too soon things might have been different. Who might have left with him because the roots were tangled too deeply? James and John were called, "Sons of Thunder" which suggested impatience, and Simon, other than Peter was called a Zealot. Jesus did not exclude Judas. Judas excluded himself from the 12 by an act of betrayal.

¹ William Hull

Jesus wanted to sow the seeds in the whole world by making it available to everyone, regardless of race, gender, or nationality. Even today people are so threatened by outsiders or someone who is different. The seeds of exclusiveness are scattered. No one wants to risk openness to those who are different. We exclude gay people, the disabled, and women. Many are put in their place by those with shallow minds. They exclude and keep a distance. They judge!!

Sometimes it is hard to tell a friend from a foe. Do you know people who have come into your life and appear wonderful, only to find out later it was all a show, and they were not what they professed? Some people in the name of goodness can and will do a lot of harm. Sometimes choices are not clear, so we need to let God do the judging. God knows the secrets of every heart and renders verdicts that are different from ours.

I have heard people say they don't go to church because the church is full of hypocrites and sinners. They don't feel welcome, or people are not friendly. Maybe they don't go because there is a woman priest or a gay couple or people who think different than they do. How quickly people are to judge. Yes, there are many weeds in every church. It does not matter what nationality or gender, whether we are right or wrong. No one is perfect. To throw anyone out of church denies him or her the opportunity to hear and see a witness that might one day change their lives. We are an impoverished church if we condemn or exclude anyone.

Paul writes that we are all part of one body in Christ. If we exclude parts because they are different, then the body is incomplete and cannot function properly. We must love and know that even the most weed ridden lives... that God is waiting and yearning for change. We are to continue to sow good seed and to grow a strong faith that even with many weeds, it can hold its own. We must do this together with the good and the bad seeds.

Remember, every weed is a potential flower. All it needs is the right kind of crossbreeding and cultivation such as Jesus offered the human weeds of his day. We ask about the weeds that will never change. God will know what best to do with them. Our parable today concludes by reminding us that despite evil there will be a great harvest. Our focus is not on the little that is lost but on the promise of the harvest. The bad with the good will co-exist until the end. We must not be discouraged by small beginnings. We must not give up on people. We must not lose

heart when our efforts seem hopeless. We only see the surface, but God sees the heart. God sent us love. God will take care of the judging. Jesus wants us to be united so that the unbelieving world might come to believe in him. Let us investigate the light and trust the one who is bringing us this message today. Two words come to mind: Love, trust. Practice those two things this week. That is God's way. Let us make it our way.

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13:44-52

"Don't miss the flower show"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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.

Amen? Amen!

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 14:13-21

"Bring them here to me"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The way our gospel story begins today, you can't help but feel sad for Jesus. He learns of the death of John the Baptist and needs some quiet time away from the crowds. He needs time away from the demands of his ministry, and even those who had been his closest and constant companions. John and Jesus were related and may have grown up knowing each other. Perhaps they spent summers playing as Mary and Elizabeth spent time visiting and catching up on each other's lives. Scripture and history are unclear on the extent or closeness of their relationship, but it is obvious from our reading that Jesus was greatly saddened by the news of John's death. But his hope of a quiet cruise to a remote shore was short lived. The crowds learned of his journey and were waiting when he arrived. But even in his time of grief, Jesus was moved with compassion by the needs of the crowd, so he put aside his own desire for solace and spent the day healing the sick among them.

What happened next is one of the most widely known of all Jesus' miracles. It is the only one recorded in all four gospels and a cherished story among the early Christian community. In Matthew's account the day of healing and ministry has gone on into the late afternoon, and the disciples are wondering what to do about the crowd. It was almost dinner time and how were they going to feed them. They encourage Jesus to send the crowds away to the near-by villages to find food and lodging. But Jesus said to them, "There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves." The disciples were taken back, and protested Jesus' suggestion. A figure of 200 denarii to feed the crowd was thrown out in Mark's account, and that would only buy enough to give each person just a little bread according to Luke. They were talking about 200 days' wages for a common laborer in Jesus' day - almost 15 grand at today's minimum wage rate. As the disciples argued can't you see Jesus shaking his head, eyes closed, then looking up, hands outstretched toward heaven and wondering when God the Father would inform his crew that they should learn to trust him.

Jesus finally asks the disciples how much food was available. Five loaves and two fish were the reply. John's account is the only gospel which provides us with the source of the food; it is a small child's lunch. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said

to Jesus (John 6:9), "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?" To that question the lesson and miracle begins with Jesus' reply, "Bring them here to me."

What happened when Jesus fed the crowds can also happen in our own homes. Not that we can take a few of fish sticks and a couple of dinner rolls and feed five thousand unexpected guests, but we can reconnect as a family and a community over the gifts God provides to each of us. What is more astounding than Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is that he was able to transform that crowd into a community; a diverse community who became one in their need, one in the bread they shared, one in the love of Christ who had brought them together. As a community, we all have gifts to share as well. God isn't likely to call us to feed five thousand people, but he may call upon us to serve our community in any number of ways. Paul wrote that we all have been given talents, some more and some less, but none greater than the other. All that are needed for the Body of Christ to function. But like those first disciples who encouraged Jesus to send the crowds away, we are often tempted to tell Jesus that we have nothing significant to offer, no talent or gifts of note. But Jesus says in return, "Bring them here to me." And then he takes our small talent or gift and blesses it. And in his hands that little bit we bring to Jesus begins to swell and take shape, and in the end, Christ transforms our small offering into something miraculous.

"Bring them here to me," Jesus is telling us today. He wants us to trust in him that when we offer what little we have; he will multiply our effort beyond our understanding. Augustine wrote, "Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand." That is what Christ is asking of you and me today; to believe. To believe that Jesus wants our little lunch bucket filled with meager talents so he can build the Kingdom of God. How can we not offer him what we have and entrust our gift, no matter how small we may think it is, it into his capable and loving hands? What have we got to lose?

Amen? Amen!

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 14: 22-33

"Stand by Me"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Charles Albert Tindley was born in 1851 and the son of slaves. At 17 he taught himself how to read and write and later to compose music. He wrote 48 hymns over the years, some of which survive today. One of Tindley's hymns, "Stand by Me," was even recorded by Elvis Presley. The words of that song not only reflect Tindley's personal struggles in life, but the struggles we all go through from time to time in our Christian journey. They also reflect the theme of our gospel story today.

Matthew writes that Jesus had just finished feeding the vast crowd and wanted to get back to what he had planned at the start of the day; find a quiet place away from everything and everyone so he could spend some time alone in prayer. Jesus sent his disciples on ahead in a boat bound for Capernaum while he dismissed the crowds, and then he found a nice spot on the mountain to pray. It was a peaceful place with a great view of the sea, and Jesus sat there alone until early the next morning.

Some of the high places around Lake Galilee reached 2,000 feet, so it's no surprise that in Mark's version of our story, Jesus could see the boat with his friends in it struggling to row against a contrary wind. Normally the winds would be favorable when sailing toward the southwest, but now and then they would reverse direction, blow to the northeast, and that usually meant trouble for even the most experienced sailor. Lake Galilee is surrounded by high ground, and it sits nearly 700 feet below sea level. A wind tunnel effect develops and can quickly turn smooth sailing weather into a violent storm due to the Lakes shallow depth. When the wind is contrary, 30-foot waves, drenching rain, and near hurricane winds were not uncommon. It was in such a storm that the disciples found themselves, too far offshore to turn back, and facing certain disaster ahead.

What happened next during the early morning hours is recorded in three of the four gospels. There were no Coast Guard cutters or helicopters to help back then, no SOS signal to save the disciples fighting the storm in their little 26 by 7-foot wooden boat. They were all alone in their distress, and only a miracle could rescue them from perishing; and that's exactly what happened. Just before sunrise during the

fourth watch, Jesus came walking toward them on the water. Not on a submerged sandbar as some detractors attest but walking on the surface through the wind and rain and waves. All three gospels agree that the disciples were terrified at the sight of the lone figure walking toward them; they thought it was ghost. But Jesus called out and told them that everything would be OK; though the storm was raging all around them, he would see them through, and stand at their side.

Only Matthew records what happened next. Good old Peter wanted to get into this walk on water action too. Jesus waved him on so off he went, into the storm-tossed sea, walking across the water toward Jesus. Poor Peter, he just had more gumption than faith, and when he took his eyes off Christ, looked around at the wind and waves, felt the stinging rain on his face, his faith failed him, and he began to sink. "Lord, save me!" Peter cried, and thankfully Jesus was close enough to reach out, pull Peter up and walk him back to the boat. As soon as Jesus stepped on board, the wind and waves ceased, and all was calm on the Sea of Galilee once again. The disciples were stunned, astonished by what they had witnessed; the Son of God had saved them, and stood beside them when all seemed lost. And guess what? Jesus is there beside each one of us as well.

In the words of Charles Tindley's hymn, "When the storms of life are raging," in the "midst of tribulation" and "persecution," despite our "faults and failures," and even when we're "old and feeble," all we need ask is "Lord, save me!" "Stand by Me," Lord, and Jesus is right there.

Despite the storms that make it difficult for us as we make our way across the sea of life, Christ promises to be a calming presence and steady hand. All he asks is that we keep faith in him, for he is both our guiding star and our destination. May we be the hand of Christ for one another as well; may we create a safe harbor of understanding and support for others struggling to keep their heads above the turbulent waters of life, and may we be a lifeline of support and trust for all who need a helping hand just to get through the day. Let us be there for others as Christ was for his friends that morning on the Sea of Galilee, and especially for those lost souls who cry out from life's stormy seas; Lord, save me!" "Stand by Me," Lord! Let us become the hand Jesus uses to reach out, the arm of hope and comfort, and the calming voice who says everything will be OK.

Amen? Amen!

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 15: 21-28

"God doesn't make junk or rotten stuff."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our gospel passage this Sunday, we find Jesus traveling north to the area of Tyre and Sidon, two port towns on the Mediterranean Sea. The two coastal communities are in an area outside of Jewish territory, approximately 25 and 50 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. We are not told why Jesus would walk so far north or if he reached either place, only that he went out from Gennesaret on the northwestern shore of Galilee and withdrew to the region. Tyre and Sidon were in Phoenicia, a land heavy in Greek influence, the land of the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. Although tensions remained high throughout the centuries between the Jews and Canaanites, they had heard about Jesus, and had followed his story.

The event captured by Matthew in our scripture today is a difficult one to read and understand. We find Jesus acting very un-Jesus like when he first encounters the Canaanite woman, but the lesson for his disciples and for us, becomes crystal clear as our story comes to its happy conclusion.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman was especially important to predominately Gentile Christian communities. His healing her daughter became a prophetic model for the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The woman is not only a Gentile but also a descendent of one of Israel's oldest and most despised enemies. But Jesus does not see in this woman an old enemy; he sees her great compassion and love for her daughter, he sees a loving mother; he sees her courage in coming forward even if she faced rejection and insults. Jesus sees a woman of great faith. Is our faith as strong? The Lord calls on us to show the same compassion and love toward each other, regardless of our differences, our nationality or heritage, stereotype, or label.

The Canaanite woman in today's Gospel seeks what we all seek to be acknowledged as good, to be respected as a child of God, and to be welcomed as a sister and brother to all. In honoring the goodness and love of this Canaanite mother, Jesus hopes to enable us to see one another as God sees us.

In her courage and wisdom, the Canaanite woman bridges the gap between the divisions found in her day. Are things so different in our day and time? Her story reminds us that even if there are great philosophical, political, or religious differences dividing us, we are bound by a common humanity, and even if we are old enemies and do not like each other, we can still share a common table and a common desire for God's healing touch to descend on all those who are sick and hurting.

Most of us would consider ourselves fair-minded and unbiased, neither bigots nor racists; but if we're honest, we would probably recognize times we have treated people differently because they are somehow different than us; we treat them differently because they don't quite measure up to what we think they should or should not be. What we fail to realize is that God does not measure people by our standards but welcomes all who seek him in faith. I am reminded of that old saying, "God knew what he was doing when he made us. God doesn't make junk or rotten stuff." (Ethel Waters)

Jesus calls on us to break down the walls that separate us. He wants us to discover the Spirit of God's compassion, generosity and justice that unites us as the one human family envisioned from the dawn of time.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman should help us navigate the real or perceived divisions between us and inspire us to cross those boundaries that are obstacles to realizing God's kingdom of justice and peace in this time and place. Yes, Ethel Waters was right, "God doesn't make junk or rotten stuff." Let our faith be that strong and let our love be that deep.

Amen? Amen!

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 16:13-20

"Who do YOU say that I am?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our Gospel story today is recorded in all three synoptics. Jesus asks a two-fold question, "Who do the people say that I am," and then the harder one of the two; "Who do YOU say that I am?" Peter answers for the group in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, but only in Matthew's rendition of the story do we find Peter getting his new name, becoming the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, and receiving the keys to the kingdom.

The setting of our story is in the northeastern corner of Palestine. This was not Jesus' usual territory. Caesarea Philippi was a place filled with worship centers and temples, altars erected to the gods of Greece and Rome. In the middle of the city was a great white temple built by Herod and dedicated to the "divinity" of Caesar (hence the name of the city). Oddly, it is in this marketplace of pagan gods and temples that Jesus first teaches his plans and hopes for his new church.

The question Jesus poses to his disciples is asked of us every minute of every day, and every decision we make is ultimately a response to that question. Our faith is not just a matter of knowing about Jesus, it is one of knowing Jesus; knowing the answer to the question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" Our love for family and friends, our dedication to the cause of justice, our commitment to the highest moral and ethical standards, our taking the first step toward reconciliation and forgiveness, our simplest acts of kindness and charity, proclaim for all the world to see just who we believe Jesus is and what his Gospel means to us.

Peter is the first of the disciples to grasp the divinity of Christ. Jesus blesses him with the new name of "rock" (*Petros* in Greek), indicating that his faith will become the first stone in the foundation of the new church that will form in the months to come. And all who are baptized into this new church, become living stones adding to that foundation through the faith we live and share with others in Jesus' name. It is the light and hope of the empty tomb, the joy of our Risen Lord.

The "keys of the kingdom of heaven" are entrusted by Christ not just to Peter and the institutional church, but to each one of us because we are the church. Christ has given every one of us a key to the kingdom: the means to unlock the presence of God in our world by sharing the gifts we have been given, no matter how small we may think they are, to spread God's love in our broken world. Our keys may be

patience and understanding, a talent or skill we possess, a listening ear, a gentle voice; gifts we can use to unlock a door or open a pathway enabling those we love to realize that the kingdom of heaven is upon us, right here and right now.

This is what Christ calls us to become as a disciple, and as a church: a family of brothers and sisters who put aside their own individual needs and hurts to bring healing and hope to others in Jesus' name. We cannot belong to that family, that community of believers unless we embrace the spirit of selfless servanthood; we cannot stand with Jesus unless we unconditionally and completely love and forgive others as he did; we cannot hope to share in his victory over death unless we can put aside the fears, self-consciousness and prejudices that blind us from seeing Jesus in the faces of every human being.

To each of us, Jesus leans over and whispers, "Who do YOU say that I am?" That question will never go away. When Saint Paul was writing his second letter to Timothy, he did not say "I know what I have believed." He wrote, "I know WHOM I have believed." (2 Timothy 1:12) Would the story of our life journey proclaim the same message? "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Amen? Amen!

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 16: 21-27

"All are called. All are chosen."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Baylus Benjamin McKinney or B. B. McKinney, as he was commonly known, was an American singer, song writer, teacher, and music editor. He wrote the words and music to 149 hymns and gospel songs. His most famous included "The Nail Scarred Hand," "Let Others See Jesus in You," "Satisfied with Jesus," and "Breathe on Me," among others. In 1937, he wrote "Wherever He Leads I'll Go" based on our scripture today.

"Take up thy cross and follow Me," I heard my Master say: "I gave my life to ransom thee, surrender your all today." Wherever he leads I'll go, wherever he leads I'll go. I'll follow my Christ who loves me so, wherever he leads I'll go."

These are moving words sung by countless congregations from all over the world. Words lifted by choirs and soloists, in small home churches and massive cathedrals; an altar-call anthem for jam packed revival stadiums where Billy Sunday, Billy Graham and others poured out the gospel message to thousands. But as one anonymous writer penned, *"What a sight it would be -- Christians bearing their cross, instead of simply singing about it."*

We are here today to talk about cross bearing and what discipleship means to you and me. It is never too late to take up whatever cross we are asked to bear and begin to share whatever gift God has blessed us with. As William Penn once wrote, *"No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown."*

The only guarantee we have is that whatever cross we are asked to take up and carry will not be an easy load to shoulder. Why? Because it often represents a value system that runs counter to our own, and it compels us to make choices we would rather not make. The life of the true disciple of Christ is one of generous, selfless, and sacrificial service to others in order to bring the joy and hope of the resurrection into our lives and theirs.

Christ's call to discipleship often compels us to embrace values that run counter to the worlds. Jesus also asks his disciples to detach from the temporal things of this world, and to attach ourselves to the lasting, fulfilling things of God: compassion, reconciliation, justice, love, and peace. Authentic discipleship involves shouldering

the cross and denying ourselves; disowning ourselves as the center of our existence and realizing that God is now the object and purpose of our lives.

Jesus' vision of community includes disciples grounded in his example of selflessness and service. Such a community represents a value system that is centered in the reality of the cross and the certainty of the resurrection. Christ asks us to put ourselves and our own needs second to the common good, to lift the fallen, enable the weak, and encourage the struggling. This is the life of the true disciple of Christ, this is the cross we all take up and carry, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant our gift may appear. All are called; all are chosen.

Today, let us renew our commitment to follow the call of Jesus in our everyday lives. Let our hearts sing the words and our life express the message that B. B. McKinney penned in 1937, *"I'll follow my Christ who loved me so, wherever he leads, I'll go."*

Amen? Amen!

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18: 15-20

"Love and Reconciliation"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today's readings are about forgiveness and love.

Jesus doesn't seem to be interested on who might be right but in our personal relationships and how we handle them. He knows we are human and in our humanness things happen. We all have heard that when we are angry, we hurt ourselves more than the other person.

Have you ever been so angry at someone, even though the anger is just ...that it ruined your day or when that person came to mind that you no longer felt peace in your day or in your life?

Reconciliation takes work. Jesus offers the process for dealing with conflict within a community. This gospel was written in the late first century. The church was suffering persecution from without and growing pains from within, being expressed in tensions and disputes. Jesus emphasized the importance of Christians living together in harmony.

We all know it is not easy to love an offensive person so we must always pray for grace before beginning an intervention. We need to invite the Spirit to prepare us to go in love. What happens when a person is mentally ill, or are not honest people? I am not sure that we can always approach a person. Yes, there are times to approach a person with forgiveness and gentleness but there are also times that we must just give it over to God with compassion, gentleness, and love. We need to let it go. I also feel it is a process. It took me over 30 years to forgive my father. I had to do it over and over. In fact, I was becoming rather tired of it. One day, I knew I had finally forgiven him and at the same time I let go of all the pain and hurt in my life. I knew I was finally complete. I was finally able to forgive and let it go.

Jesus was not there to wound his disciples but to make them whole and to show them a better way. We are not here to hurt the people we love but to show a better way. Forgiveness is love and love is of God. Whoever is great among you must be your servant for Jesus came to serve, not to be served.

We are in this world to work together. There is no such thing as private salvation. There is no such thing as a private religious life. Jesus is our model. He came wanting to help people and to show us the love of God. Jesus wanted people to be free, to be whole, to be complete and to enter a place they were made for... a place of great peace.

We face the world with Christ, and we face it with our sisters and brothers. When we are together there is power in prayer. Jesus said, wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also. How powerful is that? We are a small group here, but he is with us, every single Sunday, here at our Eucharist. How awesome is that.

When we look at the commandments they are about love and respect. Don't kill, don't steal, don't covet... The challenge is to love one another and take care of one another. The gospel does not ask us to be perfect. It just asks us to do our part.

Today's gospel is about starting over, about transforming relationships and our lives in the love of Christ. We can be lifted out of our anger and disappointments and travel in a new direction. Our transformation can be about love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

Christ is always with us. His presence should move us, inspire us, and transform us into a community of disciples and witnesses.

Someday, we will all be with God and with each other in heaven. It won't matter what degrees we have or what we have done here. How we love one another is what will matter, and we will truly be brothers and sisters as the family of God.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift his face to you and give you peace. Amen.

"Sing Your Song"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In his book *Wisdom of the Heart*, Alan Cohen offers inspiring and condensed lessons in life that make an excellent daily meditation. One such story is *"Sing Your Song"* that goes well with our gospel reading this morning.

When a woman in a certain African tribe knows she is pregnant, the story begins, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they pray and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its unique purpose and essence. When the women become attuned to the song, they sing it out loud. Then they return to the tribe and teach the song to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to him or her. Later, when the child begins his or her education, the village gathers and chants the child's song. When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together to sing. At the time of marriage, the young spouses hear their songs. And, finally, when the soul is about to pass from this world to the next, family and friends gather at the individual's bedside and, just as they sang at the dying individual's birth, they sing the person into the afterlife.

There is one other occasion when these African villagers sing to the child. If, at any time during his or her life, the individual commits a crime or bizarre social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around him or her. Then they sing the child's song to them. The tribe realizes that the correction for antisocial behavior is not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity. When you recognize your own song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt another.

A friend is someone who knows your song and sings it to you when you have forgotten it yourself. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made or dark images you hold of yourself. They remember your beauty when you feel ugly; your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty; and your purpose when you are confused about your path in life.

Though we do not belong to an African tribe that sings one another's song at crucial transitions in our lives, every life is, nonetheless, a constant challenge to be in tune with both the good and bad, and to harmonize with the many communities we are a part of family, school, community, work, and church. That awareness is Jesus' point in today's Gospel: God asks us to call out the best in one another, to celebrate what unites us, singing and listening to the song that expresses the meaning and values of our individual lives. Gospel-centered reconciliation is not about punishing those who wrong us but confronting those misunderstandings and issues that

divide us, grieve us, and embitter us, so we can repair and rebuild broken relationships in the compassion and peace of God. We should never give up on people, and we should never give up on ourselves either.

There is an old story told. The Second Coming was history and the saved were partying in heaven. But Jesus was missing from the gathering. Peter went looking for him and found Jesus at Heaven's gate. "Master!" Peter exclaimed, "you are missing the celebration, come and join us." Jesus replied, "Peter, I'll be there soon, I'm waiting for Judas." The point of the story is this, if Christ doesn't give up on people, not even on Judas, we should not give up on people either?

Discipleship is the hard work of building a community that is grounded in love for one other, work that begins with respect and love for every human being, work that seeks God's justice and peace above all. It is sweet music and a chorus that is pleasing to God. And best of all, Christ promises to be right there and sing our song with us. Jesus said, "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" (Matthew 18:20) So, *Sing your Song!*

Amen? Amen!

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 18:21-35

"The elusive virtue of forgiveness"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

"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 a survey completed in 2013 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.

Amen? Amen!

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 20: 1-16

"God's Ways are not Our Ways"

By Rev. Liz Miller

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 a 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 their 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.

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 21:28-32

"My life is My message"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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.

Amen? Amen!

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 21: 33-43

"What More to Do for My Vineyard?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

The reading from Isaiah is a parable. What is a parable? It's a story: a fictitious story, not real, made up, imagined, to bring out a moral or spiritual truth. It is about love-love lavished but not returned. Listen to the story. A man owns a vineyard; it is very dear to him. He lavishes extraordinary care on it. He digs it, clears it of stones, plants it with choice vines, builds a watchtower. With such preparation, he expects his vineyard to yield splendid grapes. It yields wild grapes which is the fruits of a corrupt nature.

What is the lesson, the truth, the reality within the parable? Start with the vineyard's owner: Who is he? Yahweh, God, the Lord. Then what is the vineyard? The house of Israel, the people of Judah. What was so wondrous about its planting? Israel was a people of God's own planting, God's special choosing, God's special care. " He had lavished love upon it. What did the Lord have a right to expect from His people? Justice-the rights of the poor defended. What did Israel bring forth? Social crimes, violence, bloodshed. What might the Lord have expected? Righteousness. What did His people produce? An outcry, the cries of the exploited poor.

At that time, Israel had a social order that let the powerful grow rich at the expense of the weak. This continues today in our own time.

Where did God's people place their trust? Not in God. In things other than God: magic, foreign powers, earthly wealth, military might, idols. How did God react? A frightening sentence, in the very human language of the prophets: "Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against His people, and He stretched out His hand against them and struck them; and their corpses were like refuse in the streets" (Isa 5:25). It is the strong language of the prophets. We would say, God left them to their own folly; God left them where they wanted to be left, to what they could achieve by their own wits, their own might. The result? Disaster.

In Jesus' parable, the vineyard is somewhat different from the vineyard in Isaiah. You are the Lord's vineyard-but not the whole vineyard. Recall Jesus' words the night before he died for us: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in

me and I in you, you bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch, cut off and withered, which they collect and throw into the fire to be burned" (John 15:5-6). The point is, "the branch gets its life from the vine, that is, the disciple gets their life from Jesus."

You and I are alive in Christ only if we are in Christ and he is in us. His life began in us at baptism, when, as St. Paul sang, "In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13). But this body of Christ that is the "we" of Christians, this body, like our physical body, must grow; but to grow it must be nourished. How is this body of Christians nourished? Nourished wondrously by the very flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ...union with Jesus and with one another.

Meditate on the words of Jesus:

I myself am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. And the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.... Let me firmly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. And I shall raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. (John 6:51-56)

This is the food that changes us into Christ, deepens and expands our likeness to him. This is the bread that makes us alive in Christ, makes it possible for us to believe what we cannot see, hope for what is still not ours, love one another as Jesus has loved us. Here, in the Eucharist, the branches, you, and I, live off the vine, off Jesus, more richly than anywhere else.

It is not enough to receive-even to receive Jesus into our bodies. With Jesus within us, we should be on fire to give. Not just money in the collection. Like Jesus, to give ourselves.

There are unnumbered ways in which we can give ourselves.

All of us are called to give of ourselves as God gives us to give. The bedridden and the house ridden have a significant role to play: a wedding of prayer and suffering that rises to heaven like incense, is incredibly effective if it is your sharing in the cross of Christ.

Hospitality is a loving welcome to every new parishioner because each of them is part of the same Body of Christ.

We are "catholic which means universal. This means we are wonderfully open to all that is human, hands and arms outstretched especially to the lonely and the unloved, to the outcast and the despised, to the children who are the most vulnerable of Americans. For this is to love as Jesus loved.

Your vineyard, Christ's vineyard, is growing here in Mount Vernon. Whether in the coming millennium it will yield a harvest worthy of Christ, 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. In this most wonderful adventure, it is not earthly success but the joy that comes from carrying the cross of Christ ... with Christ and with one another.

"The Dragons Among Us"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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 in Skagit County. 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.

Amen? Amen!

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

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 22:1-14

"Come to the Table of Plenty"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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. Let us clothe ourselves in Jesus and sing with the heavenly chorus:

"Come to the feast of heaven and earth, come to the table of plenty.

God will provide for all that we need, here at the table of plenty."

Amen? Amen!

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 22: 15-21

"We Belong to God"

By Rev. Liz Miller

The Pharisees went to Jesus to try and entrap him. They knew they had to be careful. They wanted to catch him off guard and tried to flatter him. They tell Jesus he is true and dependable. They do not want to alienate the crowd. They want Jesus to lower his defenses and make him vulnerable. They want Jesus to say the wrong thing. Jesus was not impressed by their power or possessions and was not influenced by their false praise.

When people paid a custom tax, they could see some benefits, but the census tax was imposed by the Roman province and was more of a head count. There was no benefit, and it went directly to the emperor. The tax was based on a day's wages and had to be paid using a denarius bearing the image of Caesar; a graven image.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? What a loaded question. If Jesus answers the taxes are lawful, he will alienate the people who hate the tax and the coin. If he answers that taxes are not lawful, the Romans will arrest him. There was no free speech in those days. Jesus was in a tough spot. The purpose in their question was to destroy Jesus but he saw through to their wickedness.

In answering the Pharisees question, Jesus acknowledges our liability to the state, but affirms our larger obligation to God. All things (coins, Caesar, Rome, earth, the universe) come from the mind of God and are under God's dominion. God's realm is eternal.

Jesus' comment about the coin was so subtle that we need to think about it for a moment. The coin was created in the image of the emperor, so it was appropriate to give it to the emperor. But there is something created in God's image, and we should give that to God. What is created in God's image? Do you know? The Book of Genesis makes it clear (1:27), all of humankind, man, and woman alike, was created in the image and likeness of God. That is why Jesus calls us to give ourselves to God.

I heard a story that helps us understand what that might look like. A church in a small Tennessee town had a bus ministry. The pastor went door to door in poor neighborhoods to identify people who might ride the bus to church. At one home,

he found a nine-year-old boy at home. As they talked, the pastor asked the boy if he would like to receive a free-gift, and the boy, of course, said yes. The pastor began to explain the plan of salvation, and the boy said, yes, he would like to receive the free-gift of life.

The next Sunday, the bus picked up the boy and took him to church. Keep in mind that this boy had never been to church before. He sat in the pew clueless. At one point in the service, he saw several people go to the front and pick up wooden plates. He watched as they walked up the aisle.

Suddenly, the boy realized what was taking place. The congregation must be giving money to Jesus. He reflected on the free-gift he had just received. He searched his pockets but couldn't find a thing to give Jesus. When the plate came to him, he had to let it pass without putting in any money.

Then he had an idea. He walked to the back where the ushers were gathered and asked for the plate again. He put it on the floor and stepped onto it. He then said:

*"Jesus, I don't have any money to give you today,
but I give you myself!" (Sermonwriter)*

We do not belong to Caesar. We do not belong to the state. We belong to God. Many times, we ask ourselves, "What can I give to God, what does God want from me? British poet Christina Rossetti wrote:

*"What can I give God, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man or woman, I would do my part; Yet what can I give God;
give my heart." (In the Bleak Midwinter)*

We all know the world is in bad shape with so much anger and hate. We pay a lot in taxes. I don't think anyone likes taxes. Jesus was not saying that we divide the world. He was saying that each of us are important! We were created in God's own image, in God's own likeness. We come from God and will return to God. We must give ourselves over to God. Never forget, we are all created in the image of God. We are only on a journey in this world.

God has formed us. God has redeemed us. God has called us by name and has claimed us. Let us lift our eyes and render to God what is God's...our very heart and soul.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 22:34-40

"What else is there to say?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a story told about the Apostle John, who, near the end of his life, would still preside over the liturgy. Old and weak from his many years of service and persecution, John could barely move or speak. When it came time for him to preach, he would stand up and say only one thing, "God is love," and then sit back down. The people started to grumble about this, but to their questioning John would reply simply, "What else is there to say."

In today's gospel reading, the Pharisees challenge Jesus with a question: "Teacher [or Rabbi], which commandment in the law is the greatest?" With some 613 commandments in the Torah, it was inevitable that Jewish rabbis would dispute and debate among themselves about which commandments were the most important. And so, in today's story, a scholar of the law, one skilled in the interpretation of Torah tries to trap Jesus by asking what commandment does he think is most important? The intention in posing the question was to force Jesus into a single school of thought, thereby opening him up to criticism from all other sides. In his reply to the question, Jesus recites the Shema, the prayer every Jewish child learns, and many Jews still chant or sing twice each day, once in the morning and once at night: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In answering the question, Jesus first draws upon the very best traditions of Judaism, and then clarifies his answer by weaving together two commandments, namely the love of God (Deut. 6:4-9) and the love of neighbor (Lev. 19:18) and showing that the two were inseparable; not only inseparable, but in fact, one commandment.

Last week we talked about the image on a coin. Just as coin has two sides, two images forming a single piece of metal currency, the image of true love has two faces as well; love of God on the one side, and love for neighbor on the other. Devotion to God is not genuine unless it includes love for our neighbor, and commitment to others is incomplete without recognition of God as the source of all love. We often underestimate what we can accomplish when we act out of love;

love that is centered in the needs of another, love that has no ulterior motives, love that is selfless and unconditional, love that is of God.

The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” is not confined to our own circle of people or to a list of specific situations, but includes every relationship we have, every encounter we experience, and every decision we make. Devotion to God is not genuine unless it includes love for neighbor. It is in the compassion and kindness we extend to others that we praise the God of love, and it is in our acts of charity and selflessness that we show how much we love God.

As our society becomes more and more diverse, as science continues to make once unimaginable advances in all forms of technology & medicine, the ethical and moral questions we face become more complicated and more challenging. The two-fold commandment Jesus gives us is the starting point for dealing with such issues. In loving others as God loves us, loving without limit, without condition, without counting the cost, we find the ultimate meaning and purpose in what we practice as Christians, and the essence of our faith is rediscovered.

Let us reach out to embrace the love of God today and let us pray for the grace to serve the God of love by reaching out and bringing God's gift of love to someone else. After all, "God is love ... what else is there to say."

Amen? Amen!

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 23: 1-12

"The Great Pretenders"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

*"Oh yes, I'm the great pretender
Pretending that I'm doing well."*

Remember that song by the Platters? I like that song. It's one of my favorite oldies. One of the lines in that song says, *"My need is such that I pretend too much."* I suppose that applies to all of us at times. Our need is such that we pretend too much. We pretend to know what we're doing. We pretend to be having fun. We pretend not to be lonely. We pretend not to be afraid.

Sometimes pretending is O.K. When someone asks how we are doing, they expect us to say, "Fine! How about you?" Then they can say in return, "Fine, thanks!" and keep going about what they are doing. *"Oh yes, I'm the great pretender!"* Sometimes though, pretending isn't the best idea!

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus talks about the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day. They were great pretenders; pretending to be holy, pretending to care about God, pretending to help people.

Jesus didn't call the scribes and Pharisees pretenders, of course. He called them hypocrites, which is pretty much the same thing. We get the word hypocrite from the Greek word *hypocritas*, which means a stage-actor; a person who pretends to be someone else. It's O.K. for an actor to pretend because that's what we expect. An actor knows that he or she is just pretending, and everyone else knows it too.

But the scribes and Pharisees weren't onstage. They wore special clothes to be seen, to be noticed. They wanted people to know that they were important, to call them "sir," to invite them to the front of the line. They coveted the respect that they received as they moved through the marketplace.

But that wasn't the worst of it! The scribes and Pharisees spent their days thinking up religious rules, rules that went far beyond what God required. They imposed those rules on people AS IF they were God's rules. In the process, they turned religion from joy to burden.

"Christianity is not about learning how to live within the lines," Mike Yaconelli writes, *"Christianity is about the joy of coloring."* I guess the scribes and Pharisees missed that class in pre-school. They made people's lives more difficult than they needed to be.

Jesus knew the scribes and Pharisees; he knew their hearts. He knew that they were people focused on themselves, selfish people rather than Godly people. *"A proud heart,"* wrote Ben Franklin, *"is like a crooked fence. All the paint in the world won't straighten it."*

"He who is greatest among you will be your servant," Jesus says in our gospel reading, *"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"* (vv. 11-12).

Christ-like servanthood requires us to see life from another's reality. Jesus exalts those whose leadership and influence over others are centered in humble service, in selfless integrity, in respect for the hopes and dreams of others, in the ability to reach out to the suffering and struggling, the poor and forgotten. Jesus, who welcomed to his side the rejected and scorned of society, who lifted-up the "little ones," who washed the feet of his friends and taught them to do the same, leaves the legacy of such "greatness" to us.

In Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland," Alice found a mushroom. When she ate one side of the mushroom, she found herself getting smaller. When she ate the other side, she got taller. Of the two situations, Alice decided smaller was better. For, as she was reduced in size, all things, and people about her looked more wonderful. Less, she discovered, can be more. Small can be beautiful.

We are forever circling that same mushroom. If we allow ourselves the portion that makes us larger, everything else about us will lack wonder. If we permit ourselves to grow smaller and smaller, we will be able to see, as William Blake wrote, "the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower." Not only will we find joy, but we will share that joy with others.

Let us try living the servant life, and I think we will find ourselves both a blessing and blessed.

Amen? Amen!

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mathew 25: 1-13

"Be Prepared!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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 pancakes 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 are 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!

Amen? Amen!

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 25: 14-30

"Gifts Freely Given"

By Rev. Liz Miller

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 them 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, 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 to 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."

Cycle B

Advent Season

1st Sunday of Advent

Mark: 13: 33-37

"Be Watchful"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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 in 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.

Amen? Amen!

"Come, Lord Jesus"

By Rev. Liz Miller

As we begin a new church year, we recognize that beginnings are important. It is a time to reflect on the new directions we are invited to pursue.

Advent means, "coming." We have four weeks to prepare for Christ's coming in the world. We need to take time. Those of us who are older know that time is precious and goes by too quickly. In our culture we have little time. During these few weeks of Advent our challenge is to take some time away from our busyness to reflect on our ultimate goals. What is real work in our lives and what is important? The commercialization of Christmas robs us of the true meaning of Christmas, and it is only getting worse as the stores prepare in early November.

As we prepare for the birth of our savior, I ask myself why did God want to embrace humanity? He came into the world and lived an ordinary life just like we do. He learned about his religion. He helped his parents. He learned at the side of Joseph how to be a carpenter. I would imagine he took care of his mother Mary when Joseph died. He did the simple things in life. The last three years of his life he did the extraordinary work that he was sent to do. He touched people, healed people, and treated people with love. We find a deep desire for God to be intimate with his people.

In our first reading today is an image of people longing for God, but God does not appear to be very close. It does not feel like an intimate relationship. We look at our world and it is pretty messed up. We are not all we should be. We are a sinful nation. Yet, we want God to be close. We desire that close relationship even though it is a little scary at times. The love that God has for us and our desire to know God makes our lives good and meaningful.

In the mystery of the incarnation God is both human and fully divine. What an awesome God to become like us, to live with us and to show us how much we are loved by God. God is telling us that he wants to be a part of our life, an intimate part. All the ordinary events in life are filled with great meaning and purpose. It helps us to grow and become who we are meant to be.

Jesus is the message...the word made flesh. The Pharisees and scribes preached the message, but they were not living it. It was not a part of them. The message in the gospel reading is to be alert and on guard. God calls us to be watchful. This does

not mean we need to stay awake at night. It means we need to stay spiritually alert. We live in a world of soul killing temptations and distractions. We are subjected to advertisements that trivialize life, movies that glamorize violence, drugs, and sex. The temptations are endless. Jesus tells us to watch and keep alert. We need to be fully ready even in our least ready moments. The equivalent of falling asleep for us is a lack of spiritual preparation, failure in our Christian walk, failure to do what Christ has called us to do. Keeping awake has to do with spiritual wakefulness, spiritual preparation, and spiritual readiness for Christ's coming again. Let's get ready, better yet let's live ready. Watch, keep alert, pray. Live faithfully, full of faith, day by day. Then we will be ready for whatever comes, even our own death.

Do you want to live Advent? Then be Advent. Be a sign of hope to the hopeless. Today's gospel warns us to be alert, on watch for the Messiah. Don't look for him only in a Christmas crib. Christ is alive, with us, Christ is here, Christ is in you, and he will speak through you. Watch, stay awake, and hope. Prepare for Christmas by bringing Christ to life again. Advent is a season of hope and reawakening. Prepare ye the way.

2nd Sunday of Advent

Mark 1: 1-8

"Become that finger!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Do our lives point people toward Christ? Or do they turn them away from him because of the life we live?

The twentieth century Protestant theologian Karl Barth regarded John the Baptist as the prototype of Christian discipleship. From the time he was a young pastor, Barth kept a reproduction of a painting by Matthias Grunewald over his desk. On the left panel of the work, John, the beloved disciple, holds Mary, Jesus' mother, as she looks in horror at the bloody, pierced body of her son on the cross. To the right, John the Baptist, in bare feet and camel's hair cloak, holds a book in one hand and points the long, bony index finger of his other hand toward Jesus on the cross. When asked what it truly means to be a disciple of Christ, Barth would walk over to the painting, gesture toward the image of John the Baptist, and exclaim, "Become that finger!"

Do our lives point people toward Christ like the image of John the Baptist in the Grunewald painting? That's exactly what Advent asks us to become, a finger that points others toward Christ, living lives that reflect the grace and love Jesus expressed through the life he lived, the teachings he shared, and the sacrifice he made for all humankind.

To be a prophet like John the Baptist we must begin by accepting God's vision of what the world can and should become, and then give ourselves totally to the work of pointing folks toward that vision of hope. Pointing them towards the coming of Christ.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist appears preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom that welcomes every heart and soul and reveals the truth that lives can be transformed into visions of hope and possibility. And that same Good News John preached continues to be proclaimed by modern day prophets in our day and time. Prophets called to point others toward Christ, prophets like you and me.

Let us take up John's Advent work: to straighten the crooked roads of our lives, to transform 'deserts' barren of love into places of welcome and reconciliation, to

gather up the lost and forgotten, and to proclaim the coming of God's Christ. Let's become heralds like John as we go about our holiday preparations. May every act of kindness and generosity we extend this Christmas season mirror Christ's presence in our hearts and may the gifts and greetings and hospitality we extend proclaim the good news that God's love for all humankind is about to dawn once again. Let us become that finger in the Grunwald painting, pointing others toward Christ whose birth we will soon celebrate.

Through simple acts of kindness and compassion, we give the world around us, especially those in need, a greater gift than money can ever buy. It's the same gift of hope that John the Baptist offered so many years ago; the proclamation that Christ the Lord is coming! It is not just the promise of these four weeks of Advent or even of Christmas itself, it is a promise fulfilled each day throughout the year. God's love, compassion and peace knows no season. Let our lives reflect that promise, let us become God's expression of that hope, let us become that finger pointing others toward Christ.

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Advent

John: 1: 6-8, 19-28

"Am I Listening? Do I hear?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Do you ever feel you are limited in your bodies, and held back? Have you ever wished you could do things without being held back? Our human spirit is the part of us that longs to soar, to reach the heavens, and to accomplish great things. The soul is that wonderful place where each and every one of us longs for more. We long for things to awaken that part of our soul. We long for things that open our souls to fullness. Our soul longs for a Messiah. Advent is a time of longing, of hope and of waiting. God would never place within us a longing that he would not also desire to fulfill for us.

These last two weeks John the Baptist has been a key player. People thought that John the Baptist was crazy. The Scribes and Pharisees labeled John as insane. They labeled Jesus as a glutton, a lover of sinners, someone who broke the law all the time. They were filled with judgment and criticism for anyone who did not think as they did. When John and Jesus lived there were great problems in religious leadership. The leaders of that time were not open to what God was calling them to do.

When John enters the picture, he is there to clean things up that are not as they should be. Many people were caught in their illusions.

How is John the Baptist present to us today in our time? Maybe we should stop and look around and challenge the truths that we are not reflecting on as deeply as we should be. John is all about calling people to repent. Sure, I am sorry for my sins. I ask for forgiveness each day, but repentance is more than that. Repentance means to turn around, to look again. It's about conversion. It's about challenging conventional ways that we have been looking at things and opening ourselves up to the truth God has placed deep in our hearts, and saying, "Is this really what I should be engaged in?" Is the life I am living right now in sync with the gospel, and scripture? Am I listening; am I hearing?

When John the Baptist got things stirred up, he realized it was only the beginning. Maybe each day should be a beginning. Don't think long term. At the beginning of each day say this is the beginning of today. This is the day that God has made. What

will I do for God? With John his work was extraordinary, but the real work came later. It was beyond his capacity to finish. Many times, we are with someone, or we pray for someone, but we don't see the finish or the ending. It is beyond our capacity. God finishes what we have started. Remember that when it seems difficult to live the gospel or when we feel like giving up. We all feel that way at times.

Today, the gospel tells us what John is not. He is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not worthy to untie the strap of the Messiah's sandal. John has only the supporting role, not the main character. We, as followers of Christ are in a supporting role and each one of us is a key player.

God touches us and his gift is wonderful. Many of the people we read about in Advent were touched by something extraordinary. Elizabeth is barren; she is way past the time when she could have a child. Being barren at that time was a curse. It was seen as a sin that was committed. Elizabeth becomes pregnant. Mary carried Jesus within her, the first Tabernacle. Jesus at his baptism saw the sky open and the Spirit descending on him and filling him with light and strength. John recognized that Jesus was the Messiah. We are gifted with the presence that comes into the world. God comes down from his place in heaven to join us in our experience. Sometimes I wonder if God became more understanding when he became human and experienced what it was like. The spiritual life we are called to live is a gift. We have not earned it and maybe we did not choose it.

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent and we wear pink, my favorite color so it must be God's favorite color too. We focus on the wonderful gifts that we have been given. God comes into our lives and says, I want to gift you with my presence. I want to give you, my grace. I want to be there with you to feed the deepest longing of your soul. God so desperately wants to connect with us.

Yes, we may be limited in our bodies, with what we can do but God can do so much more with us, if we only say the word. Let us go forth, turn around, and open ourselves to look at things differently. Are we listening to the voice crying in the wilderness? Do we hear it?

4th Sunday of Advent

Luke: 1: 26-38

"God's Special People"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In today's Gospel, God begins the story of Jesus' birth with Mary, a simple Jewish girl who is at the very bottom of her people's social ladder; the God who created all things makes the fulfillment of his promise dependent upon one of the most dispossessed and powerless of his creatures. Mary was young in a world that values age; female in a world ruled by men, and she had neither husband nor child to validate her existence. Her parents are not even mentioned in canonical scripture. And yet God chose her; God exalted her humility, her simplicity, her trust in his love and mercy. Years later Mary's son would speak the words we are so familiar with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). God's favor, it seems, belongs to the poor, the rejected, the abandoned and the forgotten; God's favor belongs to each one of us.

In becoming a man, God enters human history to show us how to live God-like, grace-filled, holy lives of compassion, forgiveness and justice in our time and place in that history. The God who created us became one of us to show us how to be more like him. God loved us that much!

Mary's "yes" to Gabriel's words set the stage for the greatest event in human history: God taking human form. The mystery of this special event is relived every time we say "yes" to God in our own life; God's call to Mary is God's call to each one of us. In baptism, we are called despite our own feelings of insignificance, weaknesses, and inadequacy. In that call, God invites us to put aside our own doubts and fears, in order to embrace and be embraced by the new life that the birth of Christ brings.

Although we would like to think that great historical events only happen to special people like Mary and others in the Bible, the truth is that God calls every one of us to the vocation of prophet, the ministry of charity, and the work of forgiveness. To God, we are all special people. An angel like the one who appeared to Mary may come to you and I in the form of an invitation, a plea, or a concern for another's well-being. If Mary, the ordinary Jewish girl, could believe the incredible event that she was about to be a part of, if she could trust in God and believe in her role in the

greatest story ever told, then the most ordinary of us can believe in the roles that God has for us as the story continues.

In the Advents of our own lives, God calls us to bring his Christ into our world; to focus our attention on God's love and mercy, God's compassion, and grace, even in the midst of our busy holiday lives. Let our thoughts of Christmas be filled with the true joy of the season. Like Mary, may we accept with gratitude and joy, God's invitation to bring his beloved Son into our own lives, and give us ample opportunity to share that love with a world that continues to need it.

Our challenge is to respond to God's call in our own lives with the same faith and trust Mary showed that very first Christmas so many years ago. Our challenge is to put aside our own doubts and fears, realize we are God's special people, and to say to God, as Mary did, I am your servant, O Lord, I am here, I am ready and willing to take on the task of bringing Christ into the world, making his presence known, and announcing that we have nothing to fear; the Lord is with us - Christ is Born, Halleluiah!

Amen? Amen!

Christmas Season

The Nativity of the Lord

Luke: 2: 1-14

"Christmas Blessings"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Merry Christmas everyone and welcome to all our visitors.

Tonight, we celebrate the birth of Christ. I believe we have the best parish in the world, but I am sure every pastor says the same thing.

God has invited you and me to live on this earth. Religion is designed to teach us how to live and God has always promised us he would come and teach us how to live so when everything was right and in order, God entered the world.

The Old Testament was rather barbaric at times. The religion the Israelites believed in had a major function, to offer sacrifices to make up for sins. In the Israelite community, if a person had a bad week, then they had a really busy worship day to atone for their sins. God comes along, enters the world, and says he would like to take over that role. Jesus comes into the world and invites us to a new way of being. Jesus wants us to live in the present with as little fear as possible.

Jesus came onto this earth about as small and insignificant entrance as possible. The birth of Jesus is very humble and wonderful. The angel Gabriel appeared to a young girl, probably around 13 or 14 years old. Mary was not famous or well known. Her son, Jesus was born in a stable with the animals and the hay. There was no special place for Jesus to be born. He had no special blanket. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, which is a food trough for the animals. Angels appeared in the sky and proclaimed the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. The angels did not appear to the kings or religious leaders, but to the shepherds and the lowly.

These were all simple and poor people. I sometimes wonder what they must have thought when all these extraordinary things started happening. What did Mary's parents and Joseph think when they heard about Mary's pregnancy. The shepherds in the field were watching their sheep when the heavens opened up.

Jesus was born in a humble setting and spent thirty years doing very little that seems important, at least in the world's standard. He grew and lived his daily life

the same as we do. When he was 12 years old he got in trouble with his parents. They were upset when he got lost.

When Jesus started his ministry and for three years he taught, he forgave, he healed, and he struggled but he changed the world.

Jesus came at the time God had planned. Look at us. Our existence too, is at the time that God planned for us. Everything in our life has brought us to where we are today. Every event, every experience, had absolute meaning. Every relationship in our life, the good ones and yes, even the bad ones are important in our life because they made us grow and become who we are meant to be.

Tonight, we come together as a community to celebrate the birth of our Lord. We believe the Spirit flows through the words of the Liturgy in a unique way. We are all connected in our mutual longing for the miracle of Christmas. We are joyous on this wonderful feast of the birth of Christ because God is revealing himself to us. He becomes more real. This God incarnate is truly the light that comes into the darkness. Because of the birth of Christ, the relationship between God and humankind was never the same.

Christmas is so much more than the birth of a child. It was a most wonderful event that transformed human history. God's extraordinary love allowed our creator to become one with humanity, and we became one with God and with one another. We are family: brothers, and sisters, sons, and daughters of the living God. The birth of Jesus, the Christmas story is all about love, it's all about family. Let the joyous celebration of that birth begin. In God's love, Merry Christmas, and blessings to each of you.

The Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2: 1-12

"Follow that Star!"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

The exchanging of gifts is one of the most enduring traditions of the Christmas season. It has its origins in the story of the Wise Men, learned astrologers from the East who discovered and then followed a star to the place where a new king was born. Finding the child, they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold being a gift fit for a king, and Jesus was born king of the Jews. Frankincense was used by the priests in worship, and Jesus would become our high priest; mediating the ultimate sacrifice to reconcile us with God the Father. Myrrh was a spice used for anointing bodies for burial and would be used one day to anoint Jesus' body after his death on the cross. Each of these expensive gifts was very special and had symbolic meaning for both the life Jesus would live, and the death he would suffer.

Although the hymn "We Three Kings," specifies that there were three travelers, Matthew doesn't identify the exact number or call them Kings, but tradition has held over the years that there were three because of the three gifts mentioned. There is an old joke that says there was actually a fourth wise man, but his gift was a fruitcake, so they didn't let him in. By the sixth century this trio of travelers were given names and physical descriptions. Caspar was young and beardless with a ruddy complexion; Balthazar was somewhat older and had dark skin; and finally, Melchior is described as being much older, with grey hair and a long beard. Fact or legend, who can know for sure, but the three travelers from the East provide us with a multitude of valuable lessons for our own journey in life.

First, they found God while doing their everyday job. They were astrologers and one day they went to work and discovered a new star in the western sky. They researched the star, learned of its significance, and decided to follow it. We too can meet God in the midst of doing our everyday tasks. Encounters with God are not limited to a certain place or time; like Sunday's at 10:00AM mass. God can be revealed anytime and anyplace, and that is why scripture advises us to be vigilant for the signs of God's presence and mission for us in this life. Each of us has a star to discover and follow.

The second lesson is found in the willingness of the Wise Men to spring into action. They could have easily noted their discovery, published their findings, and documented their analysis that something or someone special was associated with the new star. That was their job, that is what is expected of astrologers. But they did more. The Wise Men attached commitment to their convictions, put feet to their faith, and began their journey to discover what destiny held in store. When God brings a new opportunity of service our way, we should be as willing to go beyond what is expected, to embrace the challenges that may come our way, and commit to a journey of faith ahead.

The third lesson lies in the fact that the Wise Men asked for guidance when they temporarily lost their way. Instead of following the star to Bethlehem, they stopped off in Jerusalem to ask where they might find the newborn King of the Jews. This fact has caused some women I know to suggest that the travelers from the East were the first men in history to actually stop and ask for directions. The Wise Men found their answer in the scriptures. For the prophets had written that Bethlehem in Judea was the place they needed to go. So, they reset their GPS, and continued on their journey. During our walk in this life, we often encounter roadblocks, side roads, obstructions, and a wrong turn of two along the way. We need to follow the lesson of the Wise Men and not let these temporary setbacks divert us from following God's pathway in life. We too can find clarification, reassurance, and direction in the scriptures.

The fourth and final lesson is in the gifts the Wise Men brought with them. Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. Symbols of wealth, worship, and healing. The Wise Men brought the best gifts they had to offer. The question for us to consider is what we can bring to Jesus as a gift? The three "T's" come to mind; Time, Talent, and Treasure, that is what most church communities preach, all important gifts, but is it the best we can offer? The truly best gift we can offer to Jesus is the gift of our hearts. That is the best gift that we can give Jesus at Christmas, or anytime of the year for that matter.

Yes, there are lots of life-lessons in this short passage, but these days, as we approach the uncertainty of a new year, we can use all the help we can get. Let's review:

Lesson 1: Just like the Wise Men, we need to be ready to meet God in the midst of our everyday activities.

Lesson 2: What we believe should determine how we behave. We need to be willing to put feet on your faith.

Lesson 3: Diversions, distractions, and setbacks are a normal part of living. Scripture is a wonderful resource for us if we lose sight of God's plan for our life, and sometimes we need to ask for directions to continue our journey.

Lesson 4: We shouldn't worry about what gifts we have to bring, and we shouldn't get hung up on our feelings of inadequacy or limitations; each of us has a unique gift to offer and we need to present it with love and humility.

We need to follow the star just as the Wise Men did so many years ago. To paraphrase the chorus of an old Elvis song, we've got to follow that star wherever that star may lead; we need to *keep a-movin, movin along, keep a movin, movin along*.

Where is the light of that star leading us in 2012? Hard to know sometimes, and it may lead each of us in different directions. But no matter the separate roads we may travel, they all lead to the same destination. At journeys end, all stars lead to Jesus. So, let's get *movin*; let's follow the star!

Amen? Amen!

Lenten Season

Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-18
"Laughter or Tears?"
By Rev. Liz Miller

What is the meaning of Lent in Liturgy and life? When I think of Lent I think of penance, sacrifice, fasting, abstinence and giving up something. During Lent do we look gloomy or is there laughter?

Wow! Laughter during Lent. What a concept. How does laughter relate to the tears of Lent? Is Lent for laughing or crying? Did Jesus ever really smile?

In the Gospel they said that he cried but no reports of his smiling. I see Jesus having all the emotions of the people he serves and the people he loves. Yes, he wept in sorrow, but he also laughed for joy. When he held a child in his arms, at Cana when the good wine was served, after all it was a joyous occasion. When he saw Zaccheus up a tree. That must have been a sight. When Jaures's daughter was awakened at his touch. Did he smile when Peter put his foot in his mouth again. One of the video's I have shown Jesus laughing and dancing when the blind man was healed. How can one not smile at times like this? Are we so aware of Jesus divinity that we have forgotten about his humanity?

There are moments when we cannot smile. Gethsemane was not a laughing matter and there are times that are painful.

Is Lent for laughing or crying? I would say both. We need to remember we are risen Christians. Jesus is risen and we have risen with him into a new life. During these weeks we re-live the stages of our Lord's pilgrimage in Jerusalem, his way to the cross. The cross is victory, not defeat.

Risen we are, but not yet fully risen. We symbolically reproduce the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. We walk the journey with him. We feel the pain. We wonder how this could have happened and yet we know Easter is around the corner and the pain will be turned into joy. It is through tears that we smile; and we pray with Jesus, "Father, remove this cup from me."

We are entering a time for repentance. The gospel says to repent. Because of our sinful nature we need constant conversion. There have been times I have said in prayer, take my free will from me Lord, it would be so much easier because by my

very nature I can't just not sin. I have tried to be perfect, but it is impossible. I then realize I need to offer my imperfect self to God and let him do the work in me. We are all wonderfully made but we are a bundle of contradictions. We believe and we doubt, hope and despair, love, and hate. We are excited and boring, enchanted, and disillusioned. We are cool on the outside and hurt within. Sometimes we feel bad about feeling good, are afraid of our joy, feel guilty if we don't feel guilty. We are trusting and suspicious, selfless, and selfish.

When I cross your head with ashes I will say, "Remember you are dust and into dust you shall return." What a somber realization. And yet, next Sundays Liturgy I will start the preface with: "All powerful and ever living God... each year you give us this joyful season and so Lent is both sorrow and joy; tears and laughter. The symbol of dust is pretty grim but when I dust your forehead, I dust it with another symbol: the sign of the cross that declares that dust has been redeemed. Death is not the end of our dust. The cross is indeed a sign and Christ's Spirit dwells within each of us.

We will smile when we realize how much God loves us. We are so very lovable, not because of anything we have done or made of ourselves but because God loves each of us, God died for us, and God lives in us now.

We need to be real. Let people see the real you. Maybe, not far from you someone is afraid and needs your courage; or loneliness and needs your presence; or hurt and needs your healing. So many feel unloved and need your touching; are old and need to feel that you care. Many are weak in so many ways and need for support your own-shared weakness. You will rarely know greater happiness than when through your smile is born on the face of someone in pain; you will have given birth to a smiling Christ.

This Lent overcome fear and death, right here, right now. By bringing the smiling Christ, the joy of Jesus, to one man, woman, or child...who knows. It might be your own healing, your own salvation.

Yes, Lent is for tears and laughter, it is in dying and rising. It is a journey that mingles gladness and sadness, satisfaction and frustration, high hopes and sometimes despair. Remember though, you walk that dusty journey with Jesus, and you walk it as risen Christians. From the moment that water from your baptism flowed over your forehead in the shape of a cross, the life of the risen Christ has been flowing

through your bloodstream. You are alive. Allow yourself to feel that life within you and live it. Come alive in Christ. Laughter and tears are both life giving.

Come, let us walk this journey together.

The 1st Sunday of Lent

Mark 1: 12-15

"Our Wilderness Experience"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Jesus had just been baptized. When we baptize people today, it's a cause for celebration. When Liz baptized her first grandson a few months ago it was a time of great joy for all of us. But when Jesus was baptized, God's Spirit immediately drove him out into the desert; the wilderness. Immediately is a word that Mark likes to use throughout his gospel, and there's an abruptness here that is unexpected. What's the hurry?

The answer is that God the Father had sent Jesus the Son into the world to bring about the defeat of sin and death, and it was time for Jesus to get on with the job. There would be time for celebration later, after his resurrection, when his purpose for coming to earth was accomplished. What was needed now was for Jesus to get started, to step onto the battlefield where he would encounter Satan and temptation face to face.

So it is with us. Our baptism did not spell the end of temptation, but rather the beginning of a journey that has often been difficult. Our lives as Christians are not characterized by a long series of high moments, but by a rhythm of hills and valleys.

Jesus' baptism was a grand moment, but it was followed by His confrontation with Satan and the testing of his faith in the wilderness. So it is with us. We have our ups and downs; our good times and bad times. We need to understand that God has not promised us a life free from temptation or hardship, but has instead called us to take up our cross and follow him.

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. Mark doesn't go into detail. He doesn't recount three temptations, as Matthew does in his Gospel. Mark just leaves us with the impression that Jesus is out there in the wilderness for a very long time. Satan used this time to probe Jesus' defenses, tempting him when he was physically weak; trying and failing, but always trying again.

That's how it works with us too. When we wake up each the morning, we need to remind ourselves to be on guard, because Satan is persistent. He will be looking for ways to trip us up, especially when things are not going well. We need to start each

and every day in prayer, asking God to guide us through the landmines that Satan will be planting in our pathways.

Lent is a time when Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline. But Lent is more than simply doing without. These forty days of Lent is also our wilderness experience so to speak, allowing us to set aside time for reflection on Jesus Christ. Time for us to consider his sufferings and his sacrifice, his life, death, burial and resurrection, and just what that means in our lives. It is a time for us to examine our journey and our faith, and make adjustments if necessary. Lent is our time of preparation for the glorious celebration that will follow; the joy of Jesus resurrection.

Let us begin our wilderness journey together.

Amen? Amen!

“Joy or Pain”

By Rev. Liz Miller

Christmas was just a few months ago. We anticipated the season, and it was one of joy, family, and memories. Today is the first Sunday of Lent. How can we go so quickly from joy to Repent and gloom? Is it truly gloom or is there more meaning to Lent than we even realize?

We are dusted with ashes at the beginning of Lent. The ashes remind us that our life is only temporary, a journey in this life. We were once dust and to dust we shall return. Lent does have a serious side to it. Lent helps us to focus and to turn away from things that distract us. Sometimes our life seems to be in shambles, and we wonder...why...are...we...here? What were we really made for? We all have moments of doubt.

Jesus wants repentance. Is it skipping meals, giving up something, wearing sackcloth like the early Christians or fasting? At times repent means that we regret something, and we feel remorseful. It could be some of that, but I think repenting goes so much deeper. Repentance is turning away, turning around, changing. It is recognizing our limitations and trusting God. It is a change of heart and new attitudes. God does not want sacrifice but love. God speaks of love more than anything else.

To repent is to turn more completely to a living Christ. We should not imprison ourselves in the past but into today and the future. The past is dead and gone. We cannot change it. The future is not promised to us, but we do have today, and God wants us to love...today...one day at a time. Love is stronger than death, it was the love of Christ that took away the sins of the world. Love has power! Trust God, give him the power to shape us.

Lenten repentance is shaping our lives from death to life, from sin to love and from fate to freedom. We live love freely.

Lent is also about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not simple or easy. Sometimes it takes a long time to forgive. Jesus gave us a powerful prayer. "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." If we forgive others than God will forgive us. If we do not forgive others, then we will not be forgiven. This is important and is not a choice. For me I start out with wanting to forgive and asking God to help me forgive. It is hardest to forgive people who have really hurt me when I have done nothing wrong. However, in releasing that there is so much freedom. It took me over 30 years to forgive my earthly father but when I truly let it go it was no longer a burden.

As Christians we need to walk with Christ, sharing in his journey. We have been made new because of his sacrifice on the cross. Our pilgrimage is not finished, and this is not our home.

"During Lent, take time to pray, to sit in silence and look at the cross. Link his pierced hand to yours and hear him say, "I'm here because I love you," No need for words; He knows what lies in your heart. Let yourself feel-Maybe your sadness for sin, maybe gratitude of how important we are to God. Don't try to analyze it; feel it, sense it, touch it! Feel the profound joy that Jesus promised us." (Liturgy.com) These 40 days keep the crucified Jesus in front of you.

During the Eucharist today remember it is the replay of the supper and the cross; "This is my body given for you" When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." Touching him, tasting him, we proclaim Gods victory over death. His body is given to you, each day.

During this Lent forgive others and yourselves. Break the chains of oppression and celebrate the cross that made it possible for us to believe, to hope and to love. Embrace this change and allow God to change your heart.

There are moments when we feel the pain. Gethsemane was not a laughing matter. Is Lent joy or pain? I would say both. We need to remember we are risen Christians. Jesus is risen, and we have risen with him into a new life. During these weeks we re-live the stages of our Lord's pilgrimage, his way to the cross. The cross is victory, not defeat. Let us overcome fear and death. Lent is for joy and pain, it is dying and rising. It is a journey with high hopes and sometimes despair.

Make Lent a loving look at Jesus crucified, Give your mind a rest. Let the senses and your emotions feel.

Come alive in Christ, laughter and tears are both life-giving.

Come, let us walk this journey together.

The 2nd Sunday of Lent

Mark 9: 2-10

"Willing Hearts"

By: Rev. Jack R. Miller

Do you wish you could have seen Jesus in the flesh? Do you wish you could have heard him teaching the crowds, seen him heal a leper or a blind man? I sure do. The original disciples, of course, got to see Jesus every day. They walked the roads of Palestine with him, ate with him, listened to his teachings, and observed his miracles. They saw his gentleness with children and his compassion with the sick. They saw him raise the dead, calm the seas, walk on water, and feed thousands. They thought they had seen everything but there was more; something that only three of the disciples would see.

In today's Gospel, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. There were twelve disciples, of course, but these three were Jesus' inner circle; his favorites. In the Bible, mountains are often where people encounter God. Abraham and Moses encountered God on the Mountain, as did many of the prophets. In his now famous speech, Martin Luther King said he had been to the mountaintop. Even in Native American culture, people go up to the *"high places,"* the mountain tops to be near to, and experience the Creator of all things.

But what really happened on the mountaintop that day? Peter, James, and John were given the privilege of seeing a glimpse of Jesus' true self. God let these three disciples in on a little secret: Jesus was more than a man, more than a good teacher, more than a healer. Jesus was the Son of God. That was confirmed, not only by Jesus' shining face and dazzling clothes, not only by the presence of great men of the past, but also by the voice of God, saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!"

It was important for those three disciples to understand Jesus' true nature, because Jesus' life was about to move in a new direction. After this mountaintop experience, Jesus would begin his preparation for the cross. Although Peter, James, and John would not really understand who Jesus was until after the resurrection, this little glimpse of his glory on the mountain would help them to prepare for what would transpire in the months to come.

These three disciples and others like them would have to carry the message to a waiting world once Jesus ascended back into heaven. And if his message of hope were going to continue, it would be through the testimony of his disciples that eyes would be opened, and his glory revealed. Jesus entrusted these ordinary men with the awesome task of carrying his precious Gospel to others. Not through their own power, but by the infilling of his spirit projecting through their willing hearts.

Through the transfiguration on the mountain that day, Peter, James, and John see in Jesus the very life and love of God that dwelled within him. That same divinity dwells within each one of us today, calling us to "transfigure" our lives and our world in God's compassion, justice, and reconciliation. In realizing that sense of God's life and love within us, we can become a means of "transfiguration," enabling others to realize the holiness and grace that exists within them, and thereby enabling all of us to transform despair into hope, sadness into joy, anguish into healing, estrangement into community. All by allowing God's infilling Spirit to speak through our willing hearts.

The weeks ahead call us to the mountain top with Christ, to embrace the sacred goodness and value within each one of us; value that enables us to realize the Easter promise in our own lives, and to share that promise with others. Let God fill our lives with purpose this morning. In fact, let us begin each day of this Lenten Season by asking God to show us his will for our life, then give us the courage and strength to do what we are called to do that day; become the person God calls us to be. May the love of Christ and the peace that only he can bring fill our hearts each day as we continue our journey toward Easter morning and beyond. May God speak through our willing hearts.

Amen? Amen!

The 3rd Sunday of Lent

John 2: 13-25

"Open Our Eyes, Lord"

By: Rev. Liz Miller

In today's reading the city and the temple were crowded. I can imagine it was a hot day with many people milling around. There was livestock noise and manure. It was crowded because the Passover was nearby. Their Passover was like our Easter. Priests were working overtime with the sacrifices. People were buying sheep and lots of money was being exchanged. Have you ever felt like that? It is a special time, like Easter or Christmas, so you are excited and happy with many expectations, but you are stressed to the max. That's how it was on that day so long ago.

Things started out with so much anticipation. The Jewish people were coming to worship their God. Animal sacrifices were required, and people traveled from afar so needed to purchase an animal. Merchants set up booths, much like at our street fairs, and they made lots of money. Did this become a money raiser? The priests and the moneychangers over charged the people. There was much corruption, and they truly were a house of thieves.

Jesus had a reputation by now and they did not know quite what to think about him. He came into the Temple and with a whip drove the cattle brokers and moneychangers out of the holy place. I'm sure he made quite a spectacle of himself. Can you imagine the moneychangers on their hands and knees on the floor trying to get all their money? Remember, the floor was not clean because of the animals.

Who was this person called Jesus? What right did he have to do this? Why didn't he use his words? Jesus was good with words. He always turned words back around on Pharisees. Why didn't Jesus use his words and explain things?

They asked Jesus what sign they could show him. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." It took 46 years to build it and it was only half done. This sounded so unreal to them. We know that Jesus was talking about the temple of his body. Not even the disciples understood what he meant until after his resurrection.

What does this story mean for us today? How can we relate? We don't slaughter animals and we usually don't set up booths to sell things. We have a worship service, but do we worship God with our whole being? Do the things of this world

or earning money distract us? Yes, we are on a journey to know God and we have good intentions, but do we make many detours to the things of this world. Are our motives clear and our hearts pure?

Just as the people in Jesus' day do we attend church for the wrong reasons? Are we in our own little world when we receive the precious body and blood of our God who has come to be with us? Do we attend church for what we can get out of it? It is ok to come to church to get something out of it and there is nothing wrong with that. We are strengthened and renewed. We sing, listen to scripture, and pray. Hopefully, we get something out of the homily. In all of this where is our focus? We must keep our focus on God and not on ourselves. In our worship we come to offer God our praise, our time, our offerings, and ourselves. We must remember to always put the Lord first.

We live in a culture where everything is about the individual person. What can I get; what do I want; how can I get it? Do we try to make God into our own image and that God should fit into our own mold?

We always hear that God does not need us, but we need him. Maybe we need each other. He is a life-giving God. God wanted us to understand how destructive sin is. In the first reading God tells us who he is. "I am the Lord; I am your God. God frees us from the binds of sin. He transforms us. God does not want us to worship false gods. Money and material things can cause our hearts to turn away. The people in the Temple lost their way. Jesus knew what was in their hearts and he was angry. He takes it upon himself to do what is needed, and in the process turns everything upside down on one of the temple's busiest days of the year. This action would alienate the religious leaders of the day and lead to his crucifixion. Jesus was not anti-temple, but anti-exploitation. The temple is his Father's house, and it is to be treated with reverence due to the house of the Lord.

God wants us to love him for who he is, not for what he gives us. Being a Christian is complex. Many people today are like the people in the Temple. They act like Christians. They say the right things and sometimes even do the right things but is Christ really alive within them. Do they truly believe what they say?

Lent is a time for change and renewal. This Lent let us open our eyes and see God for who he really is. Once we begin to really love God, we have it all...we begin to understand...we will find life.

At the end of Lent, we will relive again Jesus giving himself over to his enemies to be destroyed, mocked, humiliated, scourged, and crucified. His enemies think they have won. This does not make sense to us, but we must enter into this process for Easter to come. Easter frees us and we need to trust and believe in it. If we trust in the process and fall in love with our God, then we find life and we will be changed.

The 4th Sunday of Lent

John 3: 14-21

"The Promise"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Three years ago, a young man named Tim Tebow wrote John 3:16 on his eye black while playing in a college championship football game. If you aren't a football fan, you may never have heard of eye black, or Tim Tebow for that matter. Eye black is greasepaint that athletes smear under their eyes to reduce glare from the sun or stadium lights. Sometimes athletes write a short message across their eye black. There isn't much room there, but Tebow, a quarterback, wrote "John" under his right eye and "3:16" under his left eye. Seeing him on camera, you would see "John 3:16" written across his eye black.

Tebow's idea was to use his eye black as a pulpit to preach the message of God's love. When he wrote "John 3:16" on his eye black, within 24 hours, 90 million people did a Google search on "John 3:16." In fact, for that 24-hour period after the televised game, "John 3:16" was Google's highest-ranked search term. Whatever you think of football or Tim Tebow, he created a powerful witness that touched millions of people. He remains a very public Christian today as a pro football player, letting his light shine so that God is glorified through his simple displays on and off the field.

But we have millions of Christians who are content to hide their light under a basket. There is no shortage of invisible Christians, many who are suffering a spiritual "mid-life" crisis. As one writer put it, we all come to a spiritual "mid-life" where our grief's, failures, and disappointments bring us to a point where we think God is absent; we are exhausted of struggling to hear God in the noise of our lives and trying to find him amid all the expectations and demands made of us.

What we need to keep in mind is that our baptismal conversion from darkness to light, as Jesus describes in today's Gospel, is an ongoing journey; our search for God begins at baptism, it does not end at baptism. The challenge is to keep our hearts and spirits open to the presence of God, to realize God's presence intentionally and stubbornly in prayer, in whatever good we can do, in the love and support of family and friends. In our spiritual "mid-life," when we feel most alone, when we feel

furthest away from God, God invariably makes his presence known if we remain vigilant in looking for Him.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

In this powerful promise, Jesus reveals a God of life and restoration, a God who seeks not our punishment or humiliation but our healing and reconciliation with him and with one another. The God Jesus reveals is not the God of condemnation and destruction but the God of forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. God is detached neither from us nor from the world He created. God is not about death but about life. The God revealed by Jesus is the Father of creation who constantly seeks to create and nurture life, to heal the broken and broken-hearted, to raise up those who have fallen down and those who feel pushed aside. God's own Messiah comes as a "light" to enable humankind to realize the great love and mercy of God. We meet God as the loving parent, the compassionate physician, the good and wise friend in the person of Jesus. In Him we discover our identity as children of God and co-participants in his redemptive work.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

That's the promise of God's love!

Believe it!

Live it!

And let that promise brighten your every day.

Amen? Amen!

The 5th Sunday of Lent

John 12: 20-33

"Letting Go"

By: Rev. Jack R. Miller

In 1969 the Beatles released an album called "Abbey Road." It was the last album they would record together as a collective group. The last song on this last album is appropriately entitled "The End." In the song, written by Paul McCarthy, there is a line that says, *"And in the end the love you get is equal to the love you give."* What a profound message - it is the message found in today's gospel.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."

Only by loving is love returned, only by reaching out beyond us do we learn and grow, only by giving to others do we receive, only by dying do we rise to new life. That is the challenge of today's words about the grain of wheat: only by letting go, by "dying," do we truly learn to love as God loves.

To become the people God calls us to be, to live our lives in the joy of God's love, begins by our letting go; "dying" to our doubts and fears, "dying" to our self-centered wants and needs, "dying" to our immaturity and prejudices. There is risk in expressing God's love, the risk of being hurt or misunderstood, perhaps by those we hold most dear.

But life demands risk to facilitate change. If we are willing to let go and risk loving as Jesus did, he promises us a rich harvest and bountiful love in return. In our willingness to nurture healing and forgiveness, in the compassion we show towards others, there will always be new beginnings, second chances, constant plantings and unlimited blessings.

The truth of this is written on the winds of creation, and it is evident for everyone to see. It is found in something as small as grain of wheat, which dies to give new life. We are God's new seed to be planted, we are his words fulfilled, we are the expression of his love in this world. Christ gave his life on the cross in order that new life would flourish from the steps of his empty tomb. In letting go and leaving behind the things of this world that bog us down and hold us back, Jesus can transform our lives in the newness and joy that Easter morning brings.

The grain of wheat is Christ's assurance to us of the great things we can do and the powerful miracles we can work by trusting in him and letting go. Letting go of

anything that would hinder us from imitating the compassion and love of Christ. In letting go we are forever changed by the grace and peace only God can bring into our lives.

May we all possess the faith found in a grain of wheat this morning. May we find the courage and strength to lay to rest our focus on self in order to embrace the harvest of justice and forgiveness found in serving others. May we be willing to give of ourselves for the sake of others as Christ gave himself for us. May we all let go and let the Easter Christ shine through our lives today.

Amen? Amen!

Easter Season

Palm Sunday

Mark 11: 1-10

"Hosanna!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In 1964, Gene Smith, a noted American historian, wrote "When The Cheering Stopped." The book contained story of President Woodrow Wilson and the events leading up to and following World War I. When that war was over President Wilson was an international hero. The world was filled with optimism, and people actually believed that the last war had been fought and the world had been made safe again.

On his first visit to Europe after the war Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. In a Vienna hospital a Red Cross worker had to tell the children that there would be no Christmas presents that year because of the hard times brought on by war. The children didn't believe her. They said that President Wilson was coming and they knew that everything would be all right.

The cheering lasted about a year before it gradually began to stop. The European leaders became more concerned with their own agendas than they were a lasting peace. At home, Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations proposal was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President's health began to break. In the next election his party was defeated. So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man who barely a year or two earlier had been heralded as the new world Messiah, came to the end of his days a broken and defeated man.

It's a sad story, but not an unfamiliar one. When Jesus emerged on the public scene he was an overnight sensation. Crowds of people lined the streets as he came into town. On Palm Sunday leafy palm branches were spread before him and there were shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Many people came to hear him preach and teach. A wave of spiritual expectation swept through the land; many believed the long awaited messiah had finally come.

But the cheering did not last for long. Why did the people turn against him? How did the shouts of hosanna on Palm Sunday change into the shouts of crucify him on Good Friday? In five days it all fell apart. Why? Why did the cheering stop? More importantly, how do we in this day and age, transform the sorrow of Good Friday into the joy and hope of Easter Sunday.

Woodrow Wilson ended his days a broken and defeated man. He never lived beyond his personal Good Friday. Jesus, on the other hand, rose above it.

In the events of this Holy Week, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, God lifted us out of our despair and gave us hope, replaced our sense of coldness and alienation with feelings of compassion and community. We who have been baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus have been entrusted with continuing his work of redemption. As we walk with Jesus this Holy Week through the gates of Jerusalem, from the temple to the upper room, from Gethsemane to Golgotha, and from the cross to the garden tomb, may we discover new ways to continue his work in our world today.

As we remember the passion of Jesus, may we embrace those who every day endure crucifixions of illness, poverty, and fear. May we behold the crucified Christ in them, and may we re-commit ourselves to the difficult, exhausting, frustrating work of bringing resurrection into those lives. Let us commit ourselves to finding ways for the love of God to rise amid the tombs of despair and fear in their lives and ours. Let our goal this Holy Week be transforming all the Good Fridays of this age into the joy and hope of the eternal Easter morning.

Let us proclaim with our palms and voices for all to see and hear: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Amen? Amen!

"The Cross"

By Rev. Liz Miller

We begin the most significant eight days in the Church's calendar. Today is called Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, depending on the chosen liturgy. We honor a triumphant king by waving our palm branches and shouting Hosanna, just like the joyful crowds did in welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem so long ago.

But there is a tension here, and maybe a contradiction or two. Palms bending in adoration and reeds striking a thorn crowned head. A king who is also a convict. Hosannas and mockery, triumph, and tragedy. All contained in a single Liturgy. Does this make sense?

Jesus is heading for his death - he is heading for the cross. He is embracing his cross out of love for his people.

What is the cross for us? How do we see it? This week I have seen it very clearly and I have lived it. I woke up at night thinking of this cross in my own life and the ones we all bare...it is what we share with Jesus as the people of God. The cross took on new meaning this week, during the midnight hours.

A baby died this week. At 3½ months this baby could not survive outside his mother's womb. The parents faced their cross and in the raw stages of grief asked the question why, and there is no answer. A young couple who we married just a few years ago faced their cross this week...one partner, just 37 years old, suffered a stroke and was given a 20% chance to live. We prayed for a miracle and the next day received one - the swelling in her brain went down and her chances of survival improved. It will be a long recovery. Marcia who had Chemo and we don't know the outcome. She is facing her cross.

The cross!! I think many of us would like to go around the cross...skip the pain but as Christians we must face it. How can a person carry their own cross? How does one help another person carry their cross when there are no words that can convey how you are truly feeling, no words that can really make a person feel better. I, for one, would like to take the pain away and tell them everything will be ok, but things are not ok for these people, not now, not this week. They are facing an insurmountable task and the cross they must bare seems so large and so impossible.

In the garden, even Jesus asked that this cup be removed; "not my will but yours." Even Jesus needed help in carrying his cross. Simon of Cyrene was forced to help Jesus carry his cross. Simon walked next to Jesus and shared the burden of carrying his cross. The mystery of Jesus, silent and suffering touched his heart. Although Simon did his best to help, Jesus still died.

When we are deep in our own pain how do we carry our own cross? I don't think we can carry our cross alone. God did not put us on earth to be alone. We are here to be with people, to help others as they struggle in life. When we see a person suffering, they should not have to suffer alone. It may be uncomfortable, and we may be at a loss for words, but we still feel their pain in our heart. We want to help. Our heart takes on some of their suffering. We hug them, we are with them, we

offer to help, and we pray for them. Sometimes that is all we can do - shoulder their cross for a little while.

As Christians, I think our cross is a little lighter because of our faith. Even in those times we question our faith; especially when we lose someone close in death. We can't take the pain away but just being there says they are not alone. Whenever we show kindness to the suffering, the persecuted and the defenseless, and share in their sufferings, we help to carry their cross, just as Jesus carried his for us.

Back in the time of Christ, during Holy Week, the touch of God changed the world; changed it through his suffering on the cross he bore for us. How will that cross change you and I this week? Will it change us?

Today marks the beginning of an intense week as we walk with Jesus toward the cross and beyond. It is a week of contradictions. Not palms or passion; both. Not triumph or tragedy; triumph through tragedy. Not a dying Christ; a dying rising Christ. The whole paschal mystery is just a series of events, it is one mystery one event: Life anew, in and through death; death on a cross.

The cross is triumph and victory. In Christ's death there is new life. The church puts palms and thorns together. Christ is triumphant on Calvary. The mystery of Christ is revealed - the cross leads to the empty tomb - through his dying the world lives - his resurrection is ours to share.

Let the pain we all feel in carrying the cross we bare permeate with the Easter promise. There is no death that does not bear within it the seeds of fresh life, renewed life. As we shoulder our own cross or touch the cross of another person, there is life, there is hope, and it is in that life and hope that we see the face of Jesus.

The old hymn asks the question, "Must Jesus bare the cross alone?" What will be our answer today? Amen? Amen!

Easter Sunday

John 20: 1-9

"That's what Easter is all about."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Have you ever tried to explain to a small child what Easter is all about? Amid the TV commercials for Cadbury chocolates, catchy tunes like "Here comes Peter Cottontail," and animated specials featuring Bugs Bunny, Yogi Bear, and even a Peanuts presentation of the Easter Beagle, how do you explain the palms, the cross, and the resurrection? The true meaning of Easter, much like Christmas, is often mired in commercialism. Can you blame a two-year-olds preference for a basket full of colorful eggs, over a crown of thorns? But there is common ground; the empty basket and empty tomb yield the same results; they bring unbridled joy! That's what Easter is all about.

While the Easter mystery does not deny the reality of suffering and pain, it does proclaim a reason for hope. The empty tomb of Christ proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that love, compassion, generosity, humility, and selflessness will ultimately triumph over hatred, bigotry, prejudice, despair, greed, and death. The Easter miracle enables us, even in the most difficult and desperate of times, to live our lives in hopeful certainty of the fulfillment of the resurrection at the end of our life's journey. When there are no more Easter baskets for us to fill or carry, there is the promise of life everlasting that Jesus gained for you and me through his sacrifice on the cross. That's what Easter is all about.

Easter is more than an event, it is an attitude; Easter is liberation; Easter is life, our life, in the here and now. Today we stand, with Peter and John, Mary, and her companions, at the entrance of the empty tomb; and with them, we wonder what it all means. But the truth of Easter moves us beyond those feelings of doubt and despair, just as easily as it moved the stone that first Easter morning.

Easter is the Risen Christ in our midst, enabling us to re-create our broken lives on the wings of Jesus' compassion and love. Easter is the promise of the resurrection: that from the ashes of our lives, God can roll away the stones that entomb us, so we are able to walk freely in the light of his grace. Easter is the promise of renewal, allowing us to leave behind the soiled linens of our old life, and dawn the new garments worn by those who are reborn in Christ Jesus. Easter is the promise of hope; hope that our lives can change and will change. Hope that by living our lives for Christ, other lives will change as well.

Easter is more than worldly images of the season, more than baskets of eggs, more than chocolate bunnies, cartoon characters and catchy tunes. Easter is the Risen Christ walking in our midst, sharing his love through the compassion shown by loved ones, the support of friends and family, and the care were extended toward one another. Easter is the ultimate expression of the Creator's love for all creation. Easter is this table and the Eucharistic meal we share to remember all that Christ did for us. Let this day overwhelm and envelope us with joy. Why? Because that's what Easter is all about.

Amen? Amen!

The 2nd Sunday of Easter

John 20: 19-31

"My Lord and my God!"

By Rev. Liz Miller

What a somber, distressing day that must have been for the disciples. They were terrified and huddled together realizing they were marked men because of their association with Jesus, a condemned, crucified criminal. His tomb was also reported as being empty, and those who disturb graves could receive the death penalty.

On the day of the resurrection Mary Magdalene rushed from the empty tomb to declare to the apostles that she had seen the risen Lord. John and Peter raced to the tomb, Peter went inside and found it empty and said he saw and believed. It was all so puzzling. There was excitement, disbelief, confusion, and their minds were trying to understand all that was happening. In spite of this they were hiding, huddling together behind locked doors, frightened and afraid.

All of a sudden, there stood Jesus among them. He passed through the sealed doors of his tomb and now through the barred doors of a locked room. It did not make sense. How could that happen? How would you feel if someone close to you died and three days later just appeared in your home? It would be a little disconcerting to me.

Remember, Jesus had been betrayed, denied, and doubted. He did not come into the room and say, hi ya all, let's talk about how you, my close friends treated me the last few days. Jesus did not judge them. No, instead, his first words were, "Peace be to you." After all that happened what a blessing that was. He stood there with love in his eyes and arms outstretched and offered peace. There was no condemnation, no blame. At the last supper Jesus said, "You are sad now; but I shall see you again, and your hearts will rejoice with a joy that no one can take from you." Jesus, who had died is now standing with the disciples and he says, "Peace be to you. He then breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." They all must have felt fear, astonishment, and joy.

Thomas was not with the group when Jesus first appeared. When he returned the disciples were all excited and shared their experience with him. Jesus is alive! Fear and sadness is gone. They rejoice!! Thomas does not respond with joy but with skepticism. He refuses to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he can see for himself and place his fingers in the wounds made by the nails of the cross and into the side of Jesus.

Thomas...how can we condemn Thomas when we ourselves have been there, in his shoes, doubting the very existence of God. It was Thomas, when Jesus prepared to go to Jerusalem, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." I imagine the crucifixion broke his heart. Thomas believed but he knew Jesus had died. In his mind people die and they don't come back from the dead. In his sadness he could not see the light. It just did not make logical sense. He cannot see beyond the limitation of his thoughts. Thomas had expected the cross -- and no more. His faith had been shattered and he felt lost.

After 8 days, Jesus again came into the room that was locked and stood in their midst. He greeted them with Peace and said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see my hands. Reach out your hand and touch my side. Don't be unbelieving but believing." One of the most intense and humbling prayers in scripture...the supreme profession of faith. Can you feel it with Thomas..."My Lord, and my God." Touching is not believing. Thomas' "cry from the heart" the doubting disciple's "My Lord and my God, went far beyond the evidence. Thomas believed, lost faith, and returned to even greater faith.

This gospel shows us there are different kinds of faith that comes in different ways, with different intensities to different people. Mary believes when the Lord calls her name. The beloved disciple believes upon seeing the empty tomb. The disciples must see the risen Lord. Thomas says he must touch Jesus' wounds. We all have different needs and various routes to our faith. The other disciples had their problems with faith too. What about us? Can we look back on our life and see our struggles with faith and also see that at the end of that struggle that our faith was more mature, stronger and like Thomas we can make that supreme profession of faith..."My Lord and my God." We make that profession of faith each time we receive Jesus in Communion at this very table.

I love Thomas and I love the stories of the apostles in their struggles. These are Jesus' close group of friends. They walked with Jesus; they were in his physical presence. We walk with Jesus, but we have never seen him. We have our struggles with our faith, but it is ok, it is normal. Jesus said, Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe. All of us at one time or another, experience the doubt and skepticism of Thomas. We hear this story of the empty tomb every year but does our own doubts, problems and sorrows prevent us from realizing the good news in our own lives. We all have scars from our own Good Fridays that remain despite our small resurrections. Our own "nail marks" remind us that all pain and grief, all ridicule and suffering, all disappointments and anguish, are transformed into

healing and peace in the love of God we experience from others and that we extend to them. In raising Jesus from the dead, God also raises our spirits to his love for us. Jesus says to Thomas, his brothers, and sisters to not be afraid of the nail marks and the scars and the crushed spirit and the broken heart. Compassion, forgiveness, justice, no matter how clumsily offered, can heal and mend.

The Easter promise, a reason for hope and foundation for our belief. Easter does not deny or erase the wounds we suffer in life, but Easter moves us beyond the scars to the healing and wholeness of God's compassion. Allow God to transform us with his peace.

The gift of faith is found in the wounded hands of Christ who continues to reach out to us today, to touch our lives. The touch of the wounded hands can still transform, remake, re-create and re-focus our lives to reflect the very image of God that dwells in all of us. Let go of the doubt and allow Jesus' wounded hands touch us.

May the Easter season, especially in these difficult times we live in, inflame our spirits with hope. Let us feel the transforming touch of Jesus wounded hands as we kneel at his feet and proclaim, My Lord and my God. Amen.

The 4th Sunday of Easter

John 10: 11-18

"Shepherd me, O God"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

"Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants,
beyond my fears, from death into life."

In this Marty Haugen song based on Psalm 23, we can see a reflection of our inherent need for guidance and protection; our need for a shepherd. The songs refrain is a plea for God to become that shepherd in our lives, that divine presence who gives us comfort and direction, a God who helps us to live and give beyond our self, beyond our limitations, beyond our apprehensions, beyond our fears of failure, and beyond our feelings of unworthiness. Our scripture this morning makes it abundantly clear that Jesus Christ is that shepherd, in fact he is the Good Shepherd who loves us enough to lay down his life in defense of the one-fold, the one flock of which we are a part.

Jesus is not like the hired hand who runs away as danger approaches, who leaves the sheep to be caught or scattered; Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for those he knows by name; a flock who know his voice and trust in his compassion and love.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to the same vocation, to become shepherds of Christ in our world. As followers of Christ, we belong to him, but we also belong to one another; our lives being committed to serving our community, our one flock in his name. A good shepherd does not dominate or patronize nor is the work of the shepherd designed for the benefit of only the weak and self-absorbed. Being a good shepherd is selfless and generous work that realizes with gratitude that we are sometimes the shepherd and sometimes the one in need of a shepherd. Christ calls each one of us to bring compassion and healing to the sick, the troubled and abused; to bring back the lost, the scattered and the forgotten; to enable people to move beyond their fears and doubts to embrace the mercy and love of God; even if the one in need is our own reflection in the mirror.

Christ speaks in many voices, including our own. Christ needs many shepherds to tend to his flocks, including you and me. We become the voice of Christ to others

through our simple acts of kindness and selflessness, but to become shepherds of Christ demands that we not only hear his voice but act upon it. First we must hear Christ speaking to us in the plight of the poor and helpless and persecuted, and also in the needs of those closest to us who we all too often overlook, and then we must reach out and act; become Christ's voice, Christ's shepherd through the compassion, comfort, support, and forgiveness we extend to others in the Spirit of Easter peace.

"Shepherd us, O God, beyond our wants, beyond our fears, from death into life."

... and help us to become a shepherd to others in your name.

Amen? Amen!

The 5th Sunday of Easter

John 15: 1-8

"Pruning"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today Jesus talks about the vine and the branches. In biblical times vineyards were familiar to Jesus and his disciples. They knew the difference between fruitful branches and branches that would drain the vine's energy. I always feel sorry for the plant when I prune but I must remember that pruning revitalizes the plant.

When grapes are pruned all the branches are cut and only the original vine remains. It looks torn, battered, and beat up. It looks dead.

God is the original vine, and we are the branches. In order to awaken us and help us to see, God needs to prune. I, for one, do not like the pruning process. It can be painful and difficult. Every branch that bears fruit is pruned so it may bear more fruit.

According to Rev. Judy Lee, lawlessness and violence are signs that love is dying on the vine. If we do nothing but talk we are not bearing fruit and are no longer connected to love and life. We will become dead wood, dead branches. Our communities will suffer as well.

Let's take this one step further. The church also needs pruning in order to give life. The church is dying on the vine when it conveys lack of acceptance and injustice. To refuse anyone at the table of Christ is unloving and unjust. To refuse baptism or last rights is the opposite of being Christ like. To refuse Holy Orders to anyone called by God and prepared is unloving and unjust. To attempt to cut ordained women and openly gay or married priests off from the sacrament of Holy Communion, use of faculties and Christian burial is vengeful, unloving, and unjust. It is impossible to undo our baptisms or our calls or sever us from the love of Christ. Our church is being pruned by God who loves us; it is being pruned so it can bear good fruit. Not the fruit of self-righteous traditionalism, paternalism, or misogyny, or heterosexism, or class entitlement and greed but the true fruit of love, inclusion, and connection to the vine forever."²

We know that life involves pain and God is not the one causing this pain. It is a part of life. We need to remember that God uses all for good, even though we may feel

² Rev. Dr. Judy Lee, RCWP

far from him. God will use what happens to his people to mold us, to shape our lives and to help us become the best we can be. He will renew the church and us.

When Jesus is talking about the vine and the branches he is talking about connection: how we connect with God and with God's spirit. Here is a light but I can't seem to get it to work. Oh, it is not connected to the source. It needs to be connected to receive its power. The lamp works better when it is connected to the electricity. We, too, need to be connected to the source. Jesus said that we work better when we are connected to him.

In the gospel, Jesus is saying that the Father is the one who takes care of the vineyard. He's the one who is in charge of everything. He sent Jesus into the world so that human beings can be more connected to the Father. The Father is the source of all things; Jesus is our link with the Father. Jesus becomes the vine. Now, the branches are what produce fruit. There are two things we are told about our connection with Jesus. If our connection with Jesus is not real, if it's just spoken, if it's not really something we believe in, then chances are there won't be much fruit. The branch simply withers and dies. It becomes a non-productive part of the whole system. It's cut off. To be a part of the vine, to be a part of its life-giving process, we have to be connected in a life-giving way. The vines that do connect produce a lot of fruit. If you know anything about gardening, you know what happens when you prune a bush back. It comes back, even though it goes through a period where it doesn't look very good or very fruitful. It comes back and becomes even more fruitful; even more productive.

Jesus is the vine, and he gives us new life. Our relationship with him is the key to our fruitfulness and to our destiny. As we follow Christ and mature in our relationship with him we find strength and purpose in our life. When we are grafted into the Christ –vine we become strong and do things we never thought possible. It is so amazing that in following Christ his strength becomes ours but as soon as we turn our back on him, our strength begins to drain away. Even the strongest person becomes vulnerable when separated from the true vine that is Jesus Christ.

Our prayer life can easily get swallowed up in busyness of the world we live in. What are our priorities? We all know we must pray, but we know that prayer and time alone with God can get easily lost in the rush of our day-to-day activities. Even Jesus

struggled with this problem, but scripture tells us he found time in his busy schedule to go off by himself to spend with the Father; to reconnect with the God of love.

How do we in this day and time stay connected to our loving God? Jesus says, "Remain in me" and then assures us that he will be with us all the time. He calls us to walk with him, to abide in him. We have a God who wants to walk alongside us. He wants to be there for us, to nurture us, to protect us and to bless us.

We must align our life with Christ. We need to ask ourselves, "Is our life lined up with God?" If it isn't it might subject us to the Lord's pruning shears, but it will also open the door for us to receive God's blessings. We need to spend time in prayer - reading scripture. We need to be genuine and show the love of God. You and I are the hands and face of God. We are a part of him and of one another. Let us reach out as branches of the one true vine. Let us be connected to God and to each other.

The 7th Sunday of Easter

John 17: 11b-19

"Blessed are the Unchosen."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our first reading tells a story that is familiar to us. The disciples felt the need to replace Judas and called a meeting. Scripture says that 120 believers gathered together with the singular purpose of finding someone suitable to fill the vacant position in the group called *The Twelve*; that special band considered as Jesus inner circle.

It is not clear who suggested the two candidates. Was it the eleven apostles or the assembly? It does appear that all agreed that there were two good candidates for consideration. The first is Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and the second Matthias. We have not heard of either of these men prior to this, and there is nothing further written about them in canonical scripture. Tradition says that Barsabbas went on to become a bishop in a small village south of Jerusalem and was once imprisoned and released by Nero. Matthias served as a missionary to Ethiopia. Both men were martyred for their faith. Both are Saints.

The final selection process used was an ancient one found 70 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament. It was the way major decisions were made. Kings were crowned and disputed property issues were decided using this method because it was thought to be unbiased and effective. Casting lots was not like rolling dice as pictured in most films, it was quite different. Lots were made of pebbles or sticks of random size with markings & symbols on them. They would be thrown in the lap or on the ground and someone would interpret the results to learn God's will. Unlike rolling dice, casting lots looked to God rather than to chance for help.

In the end, the lot fell on Matthias, and he became the replacement for Judas among *The Twelve*. Barsabbas is the Unchosen one, but his non-selection changed nothing in his life. What did all this accomplish other than to fill a vacancy and bring the number back to twelve. Both men continued in ministry, both men continued to serve God and spread the Good news. Both men were killed for their faith and both men became saints. Why then was there such a need to choose one of them? Why twelve apostles? Why not thirteen or twenty or fifty? There were more than seventy who followed Jesus including a group of at least six women who supported

his ministry. Scripture is not even clear about the names of the original Twelve. If you check the gospels, you'll tally fifteen names³ given in various places as men who were members of the twelve.

I have often thought about Barsabbas. He was equally qualified with Matthias. Both had been there from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, witnessed his resurrection and ascension, but Barsabbas was the one not chosen. One of the consequences of being the unchosen one is that there are no churches named for him, and there are hundreds of churches named for Matthias. Two men equally qualified. One is immortalized, the other forgotten. All because of a few pebbles on the ground.

We can learn from this story about the unchosen one. I'm sure each of us can point to moments when luck played a pivotal point in our future, for better or worse. Barsabbas accepted his lost opportunity, and lived a good life of integrity, humbly thankful that he was deemed worthy of that which he did not achieve. For me, Barsabbas is the patron saint of all those who didn't get something significant they were qualified for. Many of our lives have been profoundly shaped by what we didn't get. In our disappointments it helps to have a friend. More importantly we must remember that apostles of Christ are not created by ordination, appointment of election. It happens when we individually accept Christ for who he is and follow him in a believer's baptism. As Belgian Cardinal Léon Joseph Suenens said in the 1960's, the greatest day in the life of a pope is not his coronation but the day of his baptism. It is the beginning for all of us no matter the mission God sends us on in this life. We are all loved by God; we are all called to be his voice and spread his message. Blessed are the unchosen in this world, for in God's realm they are still his loving creation, and we are still his adoptive children. No matter how the lots may fall.

Amen? Amen!

³ [1] Simon called Peter (Mt 4:18, 10:2; Mk 3:16; Jn 1:42; [2] Andrew Mk 3:18, Jn 1:39; [3 & 4] James and John the sons of Zebedee Mt 4:19, 10:2; Mk 3:14; [5] Matthew Mt 9:9, 10:3; [6] Philip Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Jn 1:43; [7] Bartholomew Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; [8] Thomas Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; [9] James son of Alphaeus Mt 10:3; [10] Thaddaeus Mt 10:3; [11] Simon the Cananaern Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; [12] Judas Iscariot Mt 10:3; Mk 3:19; [13] Simon the Zealot Lk 6:15; [14] Judas the son of James Lk 6:16; [15] Nathanael Lk 1:49

Special Liturgies

Pentecost

John 15: 26-27; 16: 12-15

"The Fire of Love"

by Rev. Liz Miller

Pentecost is Greek for fiftieth and represents Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, the Jewish harvest festival. It is celebrated 50 days after Passover to commemorate the giving of the Ten Commandments; the birth of Judaism. For us, Pentecost marks the birth of God's Universal Church and the dawn of a new era. Until the events described in today's scripture began to unfold, God had bestowed his Spirit on only a few favored individuals. But this particular Pentecost marked the start of the new age in which God began to pour out the Spirit on all humankind.

Pentecost was a feast of pilgrimage so there were as many as 180,000 Jews and converts to Judaism in Jerusalem. It was the perfect time for God to intervene, to give the Spirit to the believing community.

After Jesus' crucifixion the apostles had gone in hiding. They had failed in many ways. They had sinned. They had doubted and they were weak. Jesus' resurrection brought them new hope and purpose, but they waited quietly after his ascension for the Spirit to come. Jesus had told them, "...stay in the city, until you are clothed with the power from on high." (Luke 24:49) Now the time had come. The heavens roared, with a sound like the rushing, mighty wind, and then tongues like fire appeared on each person. The apostles went from living in fear to proclaiming the gospel regardless of consequences. Jesus responded to their weaknesses by sending the Holy Spirit to give them hope and strength. The Spirit that filled the apostles is the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism. Jesus began his ministry Spirit filled, and now the fledgling church would begin in the same way.

When the sound was heard the multitude came together and were bewildered because everyone heard the apostles speaking in their own language. People were amazed and astonished because they regarded Galileans as unsophisticated and different. Remember the calling of Nathanael? When Philip told him of Jesus it was Nathanael who said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Most Jews did not expect much from Galileans, certainly not mastery of a foreign language, yet they were preaching and everyone there, no matter their nation or tongue, understood what they were saying.

Peter was the preacher on this momentous occasion. The same Peter who only seven weeks earlier had denied Christ three times. The Spirit was the power behind his sermon. The Spirit was responsible for the crowds overwhelming response. As Peter preaches, he is still addressing the Jews and his vision is not as broad as his words suggest. Soon the Holy Spirit will inspire him to throw open the church doors to all humanity, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women alike.

When Peter preached it was not a gentle sermon. Peter told the crowd that they had killed the Messiah. Luke tells us the people were cut to the heart. They wanted to know what they could do. Peter told them to repent and be baptized...three thousand were baptized that very day. They received the Holy Spirit and became new people. This did not make life any easier, but it aligned them with God's plan and sheltered them in God's grace. These three thousand people returned to their homes and told others about Jesus. The church began to grow and spread throughout the known world. Pentecost marked the birth of the Universal Church, the salvation of the world was at hand, and those who were present played an important role in spreading the Good News.

It is no different for us today. When we become Christians and the Holy Spirit lives within us, our decision to follow Jesus does not guarantee an easier life. We too become apostles and are sent out. God breathes the Spirit into our souls so we may live in the light of his life and love. God ignites the fire of the Spirit within our hearts and encourages us to seek God in all things. The Holy Spirit lives within us, frees us from sin and death, makes us sons and daughters of God, helps us in our weakness, and intercedes for us with God. Only through the power of the Spirit can we believe in the unbelievable, find hope in our darkest hour, and see the glory that waits beyond the grave. All because of God's grace that is freely given, and the filling of our hearts with a love beyond comprehension.

Today we are sent into the world to be witnesses to the truth. Sent into a world filled with temptations and a society blinded by greed and self-satisfaction. We are asked to share peace and joy that only Jesus can give. We are asked to show kindness in the face of selfishness and evil, goodness in the face of anguish and pain, and gentleness in the face of suffering and death. Jesus' faith becomes our faith, and the Spirit reaches out to the world through us.

This is the same Spirit who filled the first Christians on our very first Pentecost. God's promise is this: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17 NAB). The Spirit comes to everyone and draws our attention to what is valuable and true. With the fire of the Spirit within us, we will be transformed, and we will help to transform our world. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle them in the fire of your love.

Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28: 16-20

"Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

According to our gospel reading in Matthew, just before he ascends into heaven, Jesus turns to his followers and says: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." Their marching orders are clear; teach them, Jesus says, tell them what you know, share with the world all that you have witnessed, baptize them in the name of the One True God who is both three distinct natures and one eternal being; Father, Son, and Spirit. For in a faith centered on our covenant with this Triune Being, we find our own identity as God's children and become the continuation of Jesus' Great Commission in our day and time.

In the Trinity, God's true nature is revealed to us. First in God the Father, the loving Creator who continually invites us back when we have strayed; then in God the Son, the Redeemer who emptied himself to become like us so that we might become like him; and finally, in God the Spirit, the Sustainer our Creed describes as "the giver of life" who "has spoken through the prophets."

Today's solemnity of the Holy Trinity celebrates the many ways the presence of God is made known in our lives and in our world. This Trinity Sunday invites us to behold God in our midst: God who is the Father and Creator of all life, including our very selves, who fashions every molecule and atom that nurtures and sustains our lives; God who is the Son and our brother, the Redeemer who teaches us the depth of God's love; and God the Spirit, the Sustainer of that love until the end of time. It is through this love, given and returned, we become family and community, discover our identity as the People of God, and form Christ's holy Church.

Love is the heart of the faith we live and share, the core of Jesus' teaching and the root of the Great Commission he extends to all his disciples. We are called, just as those first disciples were so long ago, to bring to others the reality of God's limitless love; a love too perfect and complete for us to even begin to understand. How can we do this? By becoming the reflection of God's love in the life we live, the compassion we express, and the faith we both hold and project. In doing so, we show the world who God truly is, and we become the living, breathing evidence that a loving God still walks in our midst today. God does not exist in some far-off

kingdom above the clouds, God is alive and well and residing within each of us; here and now.

The Trinity we celebrate today is part of our very being, asking to be called upon, prayed to, and most of all, handed out, gifted to a waiting world; one smile, one act of kindness, one simple blessing at a time.

So, let us begin ...

Amen? Amen!

Body and Blood Sunday

Mark 14: 12-16, 22-26

"One Bread, One Body, One Spirit"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Today's celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ originated in the Diocese of Liege in the 13th century as the feast of Corpus Christi. In the reforms of Vatican II, it was joined with the feast of the Precious Blood to become the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord. It is a celebration of what has become the source and summit of our faith; Christ's gift of the Eucharist.

The feast itself was designated by Pope Urban IV in 1264, but the inspiration for this celebration came from another source. Orphaned at 5 and raised in a convent, Juliana took her vows at the age of 16. She was a very special child who studied the early writings of the church and held a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. In reality, it is through her urging and vision that we celebrate this feast today.

St. Augustine preached, "If you have received worthily, you become what you have received." In sharing the body and blood of Christ, we become the body and blood of Christ. If we partake of the one bread and the one cup, then we must be willing to become the Eucharist for others; to make the love of Christ real for all.

This was Juliana's vision as well. It was the realism in the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper and the depth of their meaning to you and I. His words over the bread, "This my body," and his words over wine, "This my blood, the blood of the covenant." Body and blood make a living person, and in asking us to eat his body and drink his blood, Jesus invites us to become, by our very participation, his living presence in this world. Jesus wants each of us to become the Eucharist for our world. But there is more. In associating us with "the blood of the covenant," Jesus links us to his sacrifice on the cross. Sacrifice is the gift of self, a gift toward the betterment of another to the point of laying down one's own life on their behalf. This is what Jesus did on our behalf, and what he asks of us in return.

Here in our own community of believers, we come to the Eucharistic table to celebrate our identity as Christ's disciples and to seek the sustaining grace to face the sacrifices we may face in life that are part of such discipleship. We make our table the Lord's own table, a place of reconciliation and compassion. A table open to everyone; a table that reflects the love of Christ himself.

Our coming to the Eucharistic table is more than just reliving the memory of Christ's great sacrifice for our redemption. In sharing his "body" in the bread of the

Eucharist we celebrate the unfathomable love of God who gives us eternal life in and through his Son, the Risen Christ. In drinking his “blood” in the wine of the Eucharist we take Jesus' life and sacrifice into the very core of our beings. We become what we have received as Augustine preached, and we become the living presence of Christ in this world as Juliana believed.

Today's feast of the Body and Blood of the Christ celebrates God's gift of the Eucharist to each of us. It is the source and summit of our life together as the People of God; the Church. As we hold the Body of Christ and sacred cup in our hands this morning, let us invite God to fill us with his grace and change us into people who share a common covenant. Let us become the "One bread, One Body, One Cup" that Christ desires us to become, the "One Spirit" that is present in us all. May the love of Christ we share at this table continue to feed us and guide us all the days of our life.

Amen? Amen!

Christ the King Sunday

John 18: 33b-37

"Nothing More-Nothing Less-Nothing Else"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a wonderful statue of Jesus located in the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen. This magnificent marble statue called the "Christus" stands over 10 feet tall. There are replicas of it scattered all over the world including one at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

The sculptor was Albert Bertel Thorvaldsen, and his concept was to create a monumental statue of Christ that would reveal Jesus in all his majesty. His hands would be raised toward heaven and his face would look out regally upon everyone and everything. Thorvaldsen hoped to depict Jesus as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. "Jesus is the greatest figure in human history," the sculptor said before beginning his great work, "and this statue will so represent Him." There is a story told that before starting on the final marble version, Thorvaldsen first created one out of clay as a model for those who had commissioned the work. However, a funny thing happened on the way to the showing. The statue was left in a shed near the water and the dampness had its way with the clay figure.

The upraised hands had drooped. They no longer commanded, they beckoned. The upturned face had lowered itself onto the Master's chest, and it was now a face that had known many trials and hardships and yet was the epitome of love and compassion. The statue was no longer of a mighty king before whom all would bow, it was of a kindly shepherd who cared for every one of his sheep. At first, Thorvaldsen was bitterly disappointed by the accident. Then he realized that this modified version was a more accurate depiction of Jesus than the one he had originally conceived.

So, he left the clay model undisturbed, and created his marble masterpiece in the same way. His original intention had been to inscribe the words "Follow My Commands" on the base of the statue. But now he realized that those words were no longer appropriate. Instead, he chiseled the softer message "Come Unto Me," based on Matthew 11:28 where Jesus welcomes all who labor and are heavy laden. Even today, this wonderful statue touches the hearts and spirits of all those who see it, and it is said to be so captivating that it brings onlookers to tears.

Much like Thorvaldsen's original concept, Israel was looking for an earthly king who would deliver them from Roman oppression. But as they discovered through Jesus' ministry and teaching, and as he proclaims before Pilate in our gospel reading, he is ruler of a kingdom not built on might, but one built on compassion, humility, love, and truth; a kingdom that is not of this world.

In John's Gospel there is no neutrality before Christ. There are those who are his disciples, following him as the way, the truth, and the life. And then there are those of "the world," who do not know the way, are full of falsehood, and facing spiritual death. To be faithful disciples of Christ is to be servants of the truth, truth that liberates and renews, truth that gives and sustains life and hope, truth that transcends our rational thinking, truth that serves as a looking glass for seeing the world through the eyes of God.

Making Jesus king over our lives involves more than a single decision, it is a choice we make each day of our lives, and one we can only accomplish through prayer and by the grace of God's love for us all.

Bobby Richardson played second base for the New York Yankees in the 50's and 60's. Later in life he was a much sought-after Christian speaker. Bobby was once asked to give a prayer to open a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting and someone in the group made a note of his prayer; it was a classic. Richardson prayed:

"Dear God, your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else."

If we want a life changing formula to help us proclaim ourselves as followers of Christ, this is it! We should pray that prayer every day, and then try to live it every hour, every day of our lives. The original disciples learned as the sculptor learned; as you and I must learn, Jesus is a king whose arms are open to welcome all into his embrace. All he asks in return is our faith and trust, "... nothing more, nothing less, nothing else."

Amen? Amen!

Veteran's Day "Remembering Henry"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller, USMC 1962-1966, Vietnam Veteran

On November 11, 1918, Private Henry Nicholas Gunther was killed. It may seem historically insignificant, other than to Henry's friends and family, to consider the death of one soldier amid the 113,000 American's killed during World War 1. But Henry became the last American to die in the "war to end all wars." His death, like the 2,700 others killed in action that November morning in France, was tragically unnecessary.

At 5:00 am on November 11th, the armistice was signed in the private railway car of French Marshal Foch, in the Forest of Compiègne, 30 miles' northeast of Paris. While the news spread rapidly, the agreement called for the war to end officially at 11:00 am Paris time. Instead of standing down and waiting until the 11th hour, the fighting continued on both sides. Estimates are that almost 11,000 soldiers were wounded, killed or missing in action during that 6-hour period; exceeding the casualty count on D-Day in World War II.

As the men of Company A, 313th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division approached the village of Chaumont-devant-Damvillers, they encountered a German unit. The Germans fired on the Americans first. While some accounts considered this an ambush, others claim that the Germans appeared to have been firing over the heads of the Americans as if to signal them that the war was about to end.

Although one account says it happened at 11:01 am, one minute after the war ended, records show Private Gunther was killed rushing the German position at 10:59 am, a mere 60 seconds or less before the war officially ended. He was the only casualty in the skirmish, and the last Allied casualty of the war. Private Gunther was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Like so many other American casualties, his remains were brought home to the United States in 1923 and buried in Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. Henry was not forgotten though. On November 11, 2008, the town of Chaumont-devant-Damvillers in France, erected a monument to Gunther to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the end of the war. Two years later, on November 11, 2010, a new memorial stone with a bronze plaque was placed next to his grave in Baltimore. The inscription read: "*Highly Decorated for*

Exceptional Bravery and Heroic Action That Resulted in His Death One Minute Before the Armistice."

Henry Gunther was simply an ordinary man who lived at a time when his country needed soldiers to defend its freedom. Like thousands of others, he responded to the call and did his duty. Had he and his unit arrived in that little French town a minute or so later, he more than likely would have left France, returned home, and resumed his ordinary life. However, by a cruel twist of fate he became the last of soldier to die in the final hours of one of the bloodiest wars in our history.

On Veteran's Day, many of us observe a moment of silence at the hour the firing stopped to end World War I; the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. I don't know about you but in that moment this year, I thought about Henry and the sacrifice he made almost a century ago. In fighting for a cause he believed in until the very end, and giving his life in defense of the freedoms we enjoy today, Private Henry Gunther is an example to all of us who served, and what Veteran's Day is all about.

The Solemnity of All Saints

Matthew 5: 1-12

The 'blessed' ones of Christ

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

The celebration of All Saints dates back to the seventh century when Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Parthenon at Rome to the Virgin Mary and all the Martyrs. Pope Gregory III later designated November 1st as the day to celebrate All Saints, a time to remember the recognized saints of the church and their relics.

But the Solemnity of All Saints is much more than that. Today we celebrate the feast of all the saints, not just those we have read about like Clare and Francis of Assisi, Thomas More or Mother Teresa, but the saints we have known and who have lived among us; the “blessed” of our Gospel passage through whom God touches us and our world.

Today we honor those who gave their lives for others, those who taught us the wonders of life through their brave struggle to live, those who dedicated themselves to the cause of justice, those who left no other mark on the world but their love of God and their love for others. They are not plaster or plastic statues but real people from every walk of life who met the challenge of Christianity and were victorious. It is these individuals, men, and women, known or unknown who form the true and endless litany of saints, those who have walked the earth to inspire us to follow their examples of charity, humility, and reconciling love. Saints who seek God’s way of compassion, who live in humble gratitude for the gift of life, saints who imitate the mercy and consolation of God, saints who by their very lives embody the beatitudes in today's Gospel reading.

They are the "blessed" in the Sermon on the Mount; *the poor in spirit who are detached from material things, the ones who mourn, who value caring and compassion, the meek who show a true humility that banishes all pride, those who hunger and thirst for a justice that incorporates all of humanity, the merciful who have the ability to see things from another's perspective, consider another's feelings, and share another's joys and sorrows. They are the pure in heart who center their life on God, and the peacemakers who know that real peace is not merely the absence of discord but a positive condition that strives for humanities highest good. And they are often persecuted, ridiculed for the faith they hold and the devotion they show.*

All saints, liturgical or not, are saints in Christ. Without him there is no existence, there is no holiness. In reality the beatitudes describe the person of Jesus himself. As the New Testament scholar, Reginald Fuller, put it, "He was all the things and did all the things the beatitudes enumerate." Jesus was detached from material things, caring and compassionate, humble, and merciful, Theocentric and a true peacemaker in every sense of the word. He is, above all else, the one who was persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Jesus was and is and will ever be the Blessed One of God, the living example of the beatitudes we strive to embrace.

In the celebration of All Saints, we formally remember those women and men whose lives and witness embody the eight declarations of blessedness Jesus shared from a hillside above the Sea of Galilee. Those individuals who have gone before us, who walk among us and who will live in the future, all willing to sacrifice everything for the Kingdom of God. Will we take our place among their number? Will we stand with them and proclaim God's love with every breath and step we take, with our eyes, our voice, and our heart? Isn't that why we are here today? A saint or saints have touched our very soul and inspired us to live a life that mirrors their example of walking with God? Let us pray for the strength and courage to put God first in our lives and commit our very being to follow God's will in all that we do. Jesus, who transformed the world through the love of God, calls us to do the same in every kindness we extend to others in his name. And in doing so, we can *rejoice and be glad*, as our scripture proclaims, for our *reward will be great in heaven*. Let us become the saints of today, the blessed ones of Christ in our time and place.

Amen? Amen!

Ordinary Time

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 1:14-20

"Fishers of Men"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In studying today's Gospel story, I was struck by how obsolete the term "Fishers of Men" is in today's world. "Fishers of Men?" In the male dominated society of Jesus day the phrase may have worked fine, but not so in today's culture of equality and inclusivity. I found a cartoon that emphasizes the point. Two fisherman are standing on the dock and gazing at a woman hanging from the end on one of their fishing lines. "Throw her back man!" the one fisherman is shouting, "We are fishers of Men!"

Most modern translations change the phrase to "Fishers of People," which is politically correct, and more of what Jesus had in mind when he called his first disciples. Jesus invited Simon, Andrew, James and John to leave their nets, leave their livelihood and families, to follow him and become his messengers to all humankind. According to Mark, they immediately left their nets and followed him. Wow! Either Jesus' call was very compelling, or Mark chose not to provide more details about the encounter. Personally, I prefer Luke's account of the story where the call of these four disciples follows a great fishing miracle. After all, Mark was a story teller, Luke was a historian. He makes it easier for us to understand why they would drop everything and follow him.

But the real lesson for you and I, found in either version of the story, is that in being called to be "Fishers of People" we may not have to cast our lines very far. The help we offer to family and friends, to neighbors and parishioners, realizes the vision Jesus shares in today's Gospel. Christ entrusts to each one of us the work of discipleship: to extend, regardless of our own circumstances, the love of God to all; to proclaim, in our own homes and communities, the compassion, the forgiveness, the justice of the Gospel; to take on God's work of reconciliation and forgiveness among all his sons and daughters. As God is present to us in the person of Jesus, we are invited to be present to one another in the love and care we share.

"Follow me," Jesus said to his first disciples. He extends the same invitation to you and I today. We may think to ourselves, "I can't do that! I'm not a scholar or a preacher; I'm not even a good person." We may want to tell Jesus how imperfect

we are, how unworthy. Peter was like that too. "Get away from me Lord," Peter said in Luke 5: 8, "I am just a sinful man." In truth, Christ is an enabler, he makes possible what would we would otherwise consider impossible. For all of his faults and weaknesses, Peter was transformed by his encounter with Christ; we will be transformed as well.

John Henry Jowett was a great English preacher. He loved to share a story of a young servant girl who came to join his church. He wanted to make sure that she understood that this was a serious undertaking, so he asked her what she proposed to do to live the Christian life. She replied that her work did not allow her much time off, so she wouldn't be able to attend services regularly. Intrigued, Jowett inquired further as to how she planned to live the Christian life if she couldn't come to church each Sunday. "Well sir," she responded, "I always take the daily paper to bed with me at night. I look at the first page and I read the birth notices and I pray for the babies that have been born. Then I read the marriage page and I pray for the newlyweds, that their new life together may be happy and true. And then I read the obituaries and I pray that God's comfort may come to each sorrowing home."

All across the world today, there are people like that young woman making a difference by doing what they can. Extending the love of God by doing the simple everyday things that Christ has called them to do. Christ calls us in the same manner. All we have to do is listen for his direction, and watch for opportunities to share his love and compassion with others. We are all gifted in some way and there is no gift, no act of ministry that is too small or insignificant.

Helen Keller wrote, " *I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble.*"

In accepting Jesus invitation to become "Fishers of People," the first disciples left their old life of uncertainty behind to eagerly follow Jesus in a life filled with expectation. We are called in the same way. Jesus invites us to leave behind a world polarized with worry about things that really do not matter when viewed through his eternal lens. He asks us to follow him in the *great and noble* mission of proclaiming the Good News of his love to all who will listen. All we have to do trust in him, drop our nets, and begin the journey. Amen? Amen!

“Follow Me”

By Rev. Liz Miller

Fishers of Men!!! Hmm. I know that Jesus came for all people, so I wonder if he might have used a different word! In his day it was a male dominated society, but Jesus always treated women with respect. And, yes, Mary Magdalene was the apostle to the apostles. Translations have been many in the past 2000 years.

I will make you fishers of men and women. I will make you fishers of all humankind of all people. All men and women are the people of God. I wonder why the church fathers tried to leave out women, half the population when Jesus included women and showed respect for them?

What did Jesus mean by this phrase, “I will make you fishers of men? Jesus continues to say, “Follow me.” He invited his apostles, male and female and today he invites us. He does not discriminate. Those he called were not great or learned people. They were weak and flawed. Jesus chose fisherman, tax collectors and women with reputations, ordinary folks like you and me. I don’t know about you but when I look at my weaknesses, I am glad that Jesus chose the imperfect. It makes me realize that I do not have to be perfect to be loved by God.

What does it mean to answer the call today? At times we are all like Jonah and we run away. We are nearsighted. We might even resent what God is asking. God is merciful and persistent. Our God does not give up. I know we all have our stories of how we were brought to Christ and our belief.

What does it mean to repent? It simply means to turn to God. \[I know that as followers of Christ we can be harsh with ourselves and feel we are not worthy. We aren’t but that is not the kind of God we have. We have a God who leads us out of darkness into the light. Our God is not a small God. We cannot put him/her in a small box. Our God will call who he/she chooses regardless of gender, race, or weaknesses.

God calls each of us. It is a personal call, an invitation to follow Jesus rather to join a cause, to follow him and to repent.

What does repent mean? Yes, we need to be sorry for our sins, but it is so much more. To repent fully we must have a change of heart, to convert and turn to. We

need to look inside ourselves We must have a conversion to Christ that is constant, daily. Baptism is a sharing of God's own life. It is opening our eyes.

It is not easy to live in the constant deception of this world. We need to remember that we live in two worlds. We have one foot in this world and the other in the kingdom of God. This world is not perfect and the one that causes the problems. We are on a journey and need to keep our eyes focused on our future and our journey to a God who loves us beyond understanding.

Jesus says come, come, follow me. Those words are as true today as they were 2000 years ago. Christ extends the call to each one of us. Will we flee, like Noah did from his invitation or answer with a joyous and profound, yes?

We are also called to become Fishers of humankind. Our lines are cast to family, friends, and neighbors. We proclaim the love of God to all; to proclaim in our own homes and communities, the compassion, forgiveness, and the justice of the gospel. We are present to one another in the love we share. Follow me! Jesus is calling. Let us respond passionately to God's call each and every day.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 1: 21-28

"God within us"

by Rev. Liz Miller

In today's readings we find two different kinds of people who speak for God. The people in the Old Testament are afraid of God, for God is so powerful and so good that people are not as comfortable with him as God would like them to be. They want someone who will speak first to God, because they are afraid to be close to him. They believe God is awesome and powerful, demanding and distant. The prophet in the Old Testament is one who very clearly understands what God is saying to the people. If the people don't listen things will not go well. People will be punished.

Our God longs to put us in touch with what is real and true. He needs people to present him as he is. Let's look at the developments over many, many years when we see this new prophet, Jesus. Jesus is a great teacher. We sense a couple of very important things in the reading from Mark. Jesus is certainly one of us. He is human in all dimensions. I think it's so exciting to look at the life of Jesus and realize how ordinary it all was. He lived the first 30 years of his life in a small village. He was probably considered to be illegitimate by the people around him because of the story of his mother's pregnancy. He probably experienced a lot of rejection. He was loved. He was hated. He was understood. He was misunderstood.

He grew up normal. He knows what it's like to be human.

The Messiah could have come on some great cloud or lived in a great palace. After all, he was God and could have done anything. That wouldn't have been nearly as exciting as having somebody who experiences our life, standing up and talking to us about how we are to live that life. What that life could really be like. What it really could be like to live in the kingdom right now.

In today's gospel Jesus is beginning to preach a message that is very different from a message that sounds like there is a God who is distant and very far from us. Jesus' message is all about a God who comes and dwells within us, enabling us to be what he calls us to be. This God enters into us and enables us to be somebody. People are astonished at his message. Jesus doesn't speak like the religious leaders of the day. He speaks with an inner authority. People don't generally have much influence

on others when they simply tell them what to do. Or that they have the truth, or think they possess the truth. They proclaim this truth as a statement of their wisdom. Somehow these people don't have the ability to move us very far. But when somebody enters into our life and seems to have this authority we find in the gospel, we can be deeply moved. I want you to imagine with me that the authority rooted in Jesus was the simple power that he carried within him that represents the best we can be. He believed in us; he believed we could find this wholeness that is our inheritance. Not in his words but in his belief in us. When someone walks into our presence and tells us that they believe in us, telling us stories that connect to our experiences and speaking a word of hope while putting us in touch with a process that is real and true, they have enormous authority. We sense that Jesus is a new kind of prophet who is connected to people's experiences. He carries within himself an understanding of how the spiritual world works. He simply wants to share this with people. He's not interested in judging them. He's not interested in their past. He's interested in them entering now into his kingdom. How do you not love someone who walks into your life and believes in you and wants you to be better? Wants to teach you. Wants to show you things. Wants you to be able to do the work with their support, with the energy they long to pour into you.

The most exciting aspect of the message of Jesus is that he's constantly trying to teach you and me that we have this kind of God in our midst. Jesus is not someone who changes the Old Testament God. He's simply revealing the fullness of who God is. We look at a slow, unfolding process of the personality of this God in our life. It was important in the Old Testament to begin with a God who was awesome and powerful but God is not simply at a distance telling us what to do; he wants to enter into us. He wants to be a part of us. One of the ways Jesus gives his message is through experience in the gospel.

Jesus directly addresses the evil found in this man in the synagogue. Two things are very important to recognize: Jesus approaches people who are struggling with their demons, with their problems, and instead of addressing the person as evil, he addresses the evil itself. He addresses the dark side we struggle with. Jesus is able to name the evil as somewhat separate from the person. Instead of looking at a person and saying, "You are really messed up. You are no good," he's able to look at a person and see the source that messes them up. Jesus can see their goodness, and tries to free them from the source that is blocking their goodness. Jesus is never

filled with a spirit of condemnation for the person who isn't what they should be. He goes in and separates these issues to help us become who we should be. Jesus brings us into a place where we can recognize that there are forces, or situations that have occurred in our lives that have really blocked us from being the man or woman that we want to be. We need to work on freeing ourselves from that block. The word evil means a block, a barrier. Jesus comes into the world to give us power over evil. What he makes so clear is that evil recognizes him. Evil knows what Jesus is about. Evil knows that Jesus has the secret to free people. The powers that work against our goodness are stronger than our human weakness. But there is a power available to us that can deal with these issues. We have been given healing power through God.

When the people recognize the healing power in Jesus, they know they have found a source of overcoming the evil all around us. That's the reason for the excitement over this new, wonderful kind of prophet.

The reading from Paul to the Corinthians today can be so easily misunderstood. In that reading, Paul seems to be saying that the only way we can truly be spiritual people is to separate ourselves from the concerns of the world and relationships. We have to understand that Paul is talking about a situation where he thought Jesus was coming immediately. That image of Jesus coming any moment led Paul to make judgments as to how people should live. Be careful, though, of some of these images. Remember, we are not followers of Paul. We are followers of Christ. It doesn't mean Paul isn't right in his advice. But it means we need to be very careful with Scripture and not quote every passage of Scripture with the same weight. The weight of the Scriptures that speak of the power of Jesus reveal where the power really is. The power is in God who is in us.

"Stand up, speak up, shut up, and sit down"!

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In his book, *The Power Broker*, Robert Caro explains why the former New York Governor Al Smith was such a powerful campaigner. His secret was that he had the ability to reduce every issue to its most basic form. His opponent in 1922 was the incumbent Nathan Miller who had defeated Smith in the previous election. In one face-to-face encounter, Miller gave a speech claiming to have saved the state \$14

million dollars. When Smith's turn to speak came, he said, "Governor Miller claims to have saved the state \$14 million. All I want to know is--where is it, and who's got it?" Then he sat down. For a moment, the crowd was puzzled, not knowing what to expect. Then they began to "get it"--and to laugh--and to applaud--and to cheer.

Smith was indeed a powerful campaigner because he knew the speaking formula for getting his point across. It's the same formula I remember from speech class in college and homiletics in seminary. Speak with authority, keep things simple and to the point, be in tune with your audience and watch their eyes for clues, and always remember the four S's; stand up, speak up, shut up, and sit down.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus opens his public ministry in a Capernaum synagogue. It seems somehow fitting that Jesus would call his first disciples and then take them to church. Jesus' teaching authority and healing authority are intertwined. His teaching authority prepares people to receive his healing authority, while his healing authority confirms and reinforces his teaching ministry. Teaching and healing, exorcising unclean spirits, driving out demons, opening people's minds to great truths and healing their bodies of great afflictions, is a pattern that constitutes the major theme in the first half of Mark's Gospel.

People who encounter Jesus, just as those who attended synagogue that day in Capernaum witnessed, see in him a very different kind of authority figure, authority centered in empathy, compassion, and respect. Through his words and actions Jesus inspires rather than enforces; he sees his call to lead as a trust, as a responsibility to serve others by revealing a God who calls us to compassion and mercy for the sake of a kingdom filled with joy and love and peace, instead of pushing a God of judgment and vengeance. Jesus spoke with authority, knew his audience and their needs, listened with an open heart, stood with and not above those in need, and, yes, Jesus knew when to stand up, speak up, shut up and sit down.

What took place in Capernaum is still happening in our day and time. There are "unclean spirits" all around us - and within us - that can be cast out by an offering of kindness and generosity or silenced by a word of forgiveness and mercy. In Jesus' spirit of compassion, reconciliation, and justice, we can cast out the "unclean spirits" of anger, fear and hurt that isolate us, that mire us in fear and selfishness, that blind us to the love of God in our midst. To cast out such demons is not easy - it means we must refocus our attention from what is missing in our lives to what we

have been given, from grieving over our regrets and disappointments to finding meaning in what we can do for others. Through our own acts of mercy and generosity, we can speak with the voice of Christ to "drive out" the unclean spirits that "possess" our minds and hearts and "dispossess" us of the things of God.

Christ acted with authority at Capernaum, and still acts with that same authority today; through the church, through the sacraments, through the reading of the scriptures, through our prayers, through the work and sacrifices of the faithful. In every city and state, in every country and continent today, eyes are being opened and bodies healed by folks just like you and me, who willingly and lovingly become the extension of Christ in our time and place; his eyes and voice, his feet and hands.

Everyone can be a part of this movement. The first steps are to be open to Christ's loving authority in our lives, to allow ourselves to become obedient to his will, and then to trust our lives into his care. If we let Jesus work a miracle in us, cast out the demons in our life that hold us back, he will show us what kinds of miracles he can work in others through us.

We will all learn to stand up and speak up for the cause of righteousness. And speaking for myself, at least this humble preacher has learned when to shut up and sit down.

Amen? Amen!

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 1: 29-39

"Demons and Fevers - Healing and Grace"

By Rev Jack R. Miller

Jesus was beginning his ministry journey and had just called his first four disciples. Fisherman who left their nets and livelihood, to follow his invitation to become "Fishers of Men." They had traveled to Capernaum, a seaside town on the north side of the Sea of Galilee and the home of two of his new followers, Peter and Andrew. According to Matthew (4:13), Capernaum would also become home-base to Jesus over the next few years as he traveled throughout the land spreading the Good News.

When the Sabbath came, and what a memorable Sabbath it would turn out to be, they went to the synagogue. Capernaum wasn't like our communities today where people worship in small congregations and large, and even the smallest towns accommodate a wide variety of faith traditions. It wasn't like that in Jesus' day. There was one synagogue in Capernaum, and the whole town would have turned out to worship together.

So Jesus took his four brand-new disciples to the synagogue, and he was chosen to be the speaker of the day. The people were astounded at his teaching. Nobody fell asleep during the homily that day. A man in the congregation was possessed by a demon. and began to shout at Jesus right in the middle of the synagogue service. Jesus rebuked the demon and the people were amazed. Jesus became famous in Capernaum that Sabbath morning and his fame began to spread.

After the synagogue service, Peter and Andrew took Jesus to their home. I am sure they wanted to treat him as an honored guest. Peter's mother-in-law lived with them and she and her daughter wanted to be the perfect hostess; but something was wrong. Mom was sick with a fever. According to the Gospel of Luke, she had a high-fever. The kind of fever that drained your strength, caused one to tremble and shake, and drained your body of precious fluids. It was the kind of fever that could end your life. Can you see the old woman lying there, her face contorted in unrest, her daughter placing cold towels on her forehead and frantic with despair? But when someone told Jesus the old woman was sick he came immediately to her side. Jesus took her by the hand, lifted her up and the fever left her. I can only imagine

how the wrinkled face took on new life, a thankful and astonished face that looked into the eyes of Jesus as she felt the fever leave her body. Can you feel the joy that filled Peter and Andrew's house when they realized a miracle had happened right before their eyes?

The word spread quickly around Capernaum and that evening and all sorts of sick people were brought to Jesus. The whole city was gathered around Peter and Andrew's outer door. Jesus had compassion on the crowds and cured many who were sick and cast out many demons. There is no way of knowing just how many lives were changed by the presence and healing touch of Jesus that evening. The people were amazed beyond belief. There was an air of excitement as people praised God while watching friends and family cured right in front of them. Can you see them crowding around Jesus, filled with smiles and tears of joy; reaching out to touch him; to embrace him. Yes, what a memorable Sabbath it had turned out to be.

You would think that after such a day Jesus would have wanted some time to relax and recuperate. But the next morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went to a deserted place and prayed. Later, Andrew, Peter, James and John found him and said that everyone is searching for him. They urged Jesus to return to Capernaum. *"Let us go on to the neighboring towns,"* Jesus said, *"so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do."*

I'm sure that the people of Capernaum were disappointed when Jesus did not return. I'm sure his new disciples were disappointed when Jesus did not rush back to embrace the crowds. But Jesus knew that he was not sent to simply bask in his celebrity status in Capernaum. He came into the world to proclaim the Good News of salvation throughout Galilee and throughout Israel. Jesus was in perfect touch with the Father's will and that's exactly where he wanted and needed to be.

We might take a lesson from that. In our prayers, we often tell God what we want and that's OK. Our Heavenly Father wants us to feel free to tell him what is on our hearts. But we would do well to end our prayers as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane with the words, "Thy will be done" (Matthew 26:42).

Jesus didn't pray "Thy will be done" in a spirit of resignation as if to say that God didn't want good things for him. Jesus prayed knowing full well that God loved him and that the Father's will was perfect for his life. Jesus knew that he could not go

wrong by going where the Father led him and doing what the Father wanted him to do.

Jesus taught us to pray in the same way. He taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). We can ally ourselves with God's will through prayer, through reading scripture, through worship, and through association with others who share our faith. It is a start. When we do that, we will help God's kingdom to come into our little corner of the world. We will get at least a glimpse of the heavenly realm; a peek into eternity.

So let's do what Jesus did. Let's pray. Let's ally ourselves with the Father's will. Let's go where God leads us and do what God calls us to do. When we do that, we will become a blessing to others; an instrument of God's grace. As disciples of Jesus in our own time and in our own place, we are called to proclaim God's presence in our midst, to be agents of healing and restoration for the fallen, to enable God's reconciliation and forgiveness to heal and restore. Jesus sought to restore the sick, the suffering, and the desperate. Christ calls us to the work of driving out the demons that divide our families and sever friendships. He calls us to relieve the fevers in life that can enflame our spirits in hopelessness and despair. By the power of our own compassion, forgiveness and understanding, Christ works his miracles even today.

*"O Jesus, Lord and Savior, I give myself to thee; For thou and thine atonement, Didst give thyself for me; I own no other Master, My heart shall be thy throne; My life I give, hence forth to live, O Christ for thee alone."**

Amen? Amen!

* Chorus to *Living for Jesus* by Thomas O. Chisholm.

"Let us go and do Likewise."

By Rev. Liz Miller

Jesus is performing miracles, dealing with crowds and disciples who do not yet understand his ministry. Jesus calls his disciples to become fishers of humankind.

Jesus had just done an exorcism in the Synagogue of a man with an unclean spirit, his first act of ministry other than calling the first four disciples. They left the Synagogue and went to the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was

sick with fever. This was serious. In those days people died of fevers. When Jesus exorcised the demon, he used words. Now he uses touch.

Jesus' touch was gentle and helpful but unorthodox. In that culture, men do not touch women they are not related to. Jesus, however, often touches people who need healing, even a leper, whom he cannot touch without becoming unclean himself.

The mother-in-law was healed and begins to serve the men. Let's look at this in a different light than the woman's servant role. Jesus, honors women by making a woman the subject of this Gospel's first miracle. He will also raise Jairus' daughter from the dead and will heal a woman with a hemorrhage.

Most significantly, Jesus comes in a servant role, not to be served but to serve and he calls his disciples to do the same. The male disciples consistently fail to understand that, but Mark portrays the female disciples in a better light: at the temple, a poor widow will give more than anyone, a woman will pour costly oil on Jesus. When Jesus is crucified, Peter will deny him and the other disciples will be absent, but a number of women will be present. Jesus models his ministry on the servant role. Human dignity is rooted in the image and reflection of God in each of us, male or female. It is this which makes all persons equal.

Jesus came to show us a new way. He did not come to show us how to make money or acquire power. He came to introduce us to the kingdom of God.

In the world today the winners are kings, queens, presidents, movie stars, and the very rich. Jesus says it is very difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says that, in the kingdom of God, the winners will be servants, those who have focused on helping others. God favors service rather than power. He tried to teach his followers that he would conquer the world by the power of love.

We can say that Peter's mother-in-law got it. When Jesus lifted her up and made her well, she used her restored health to serve. It was only later that the men began to understand the power of servant ministry. It does not matter what gender we are or what status in life we have. It does not matter how we serve or if it even seems demeaning. What matters is that we serve all people with love, for no one is better than another. We are all children of God.

Jesus took the mother in laws hand and lifted her up, the fever left, and she began to serve them. We ought to do the same, all of us, men, and women. When Christ lifts us up, makes us whole and delivers us from those things that would destroy us; when Christ empowers us, we need to use those blessings to serve others. When we do that, we touch each person's heart with God's love. We are truly blessed when we serve others. Philip Yancy, a journalist interviewed many people over the years. He interviewed movie stars, football heroes, famous authors and people who have great wealth and fame. These stars, he goes on to say, are a miserable group of people. He talks about their broken marriages, their self-doubt, and dependence on psychotherapy.

Yancy talks about the servants, people like Paul Brand, a physician who worked among the poorest of the poor in India. He found when placed side by side, their servants were far happier and more fulfilled than the stars. Yancy goes on to say: They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, wasting their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. But somehow, in the process of losing their lives, they have found them.

Jesus came to Simon's mother-in-law, took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. He heals our brokenness. Let us go and do likewise.

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 1: 40-45

"He Touched Me"

By Rev. Liz Miller

We touch many things with our hands. A pencil feels smooth. When you touch a stone you can sense how hard it is. A pinecone is sharp and may prick your finger. On a cold day it feels good to wrap your hands around a cup of hot cocoa.

Sometimes we are reluctant to touch something that looks creepy, like a slug, or a crawly bug. We may decide not to touch something because it is too hot, too cold, or too dirty.

A leper came to Jesus begging for cleansing. He wasn't just asking to be healed, but to be cleansed. HEALING was for the body--CLEANSING was for the soul. Imagine, a person with sores all over their body, open, weeping. Would you want to touch that person? Yet, Jesus had compassion.... He touched the afflicted person.

In biblical time, being a leper was about the worst thing that could happen to you. Lepers couldn't live with their families. They were required to stay away from other people. They had to live out in the countryside; maybe in a cave or the hard ground. If they saw someone coming their direction, they had to shout, "Unclean, unclean!"

Lepers were judged. People thought that God was punishing lepers for something they had done. We get that same sort of attitude today with smoking and AIDS. If you are a smoker or have AIDS, people assume that you have brought your troubles on yourself.

Today's gospel says that Jesus was "moved with pity." At the man's plea, "If you want to you can make me clean". This person knew that Jesus could heal him. Jesus felt compassion, he is deeply stirred. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. He restores his body. Can you imagine the joyous sight as this happens? I can see the laughter and joy from both Jesus and the man.

However, Jesus' ministry, focused on two things--teaching and healing, and Jesus was concerned to keep the two in balance. He didn't mind people coming to him for healing, but he wanted them also to embrace his teaching. He was happy to heal their bodies, but he wanted also to transform their souls.

Now this leper was asking Jesus to cleanse him, and Jesus was concerned. It was one thing to heal Peter's mother-in-law of fever, as he had just done, but to cleanse a leper would be so dramatic that it might, indeed, attract people for all the wrong reasons--people who wanted help only with their sick bodies--people who cared nothing about their sick souls. This man was desperate and with all that was within him wanted to have his body healed. I can relate to that. When I had cancer 30 years ago I prayed with my whole being to be healed so I could raise my children.

Jesus felt compassion for this poor leper. But Jesus has a deeper concern--the healing of our souls. He didn't want people to forget that. He didn't want people to come ONLY for the healing of their bodies.

After the healing Jesus sternly warned the man not to tell anyone but the priest, but the man was so excited about being healed that he told people anyway. As a result, people came from everywhere to see Jesus. He could no longer go into towns, but had to stay out in the countryside. Even there, people came to him from everywhere. He had people who came to him for all the wrong reasons.

So what does that have to do with us? We, too, are tempted to follow Jesus ONLY for what he can do for us--and ignore his call to true discipleship.

But that's empty discipleship! When the leper came to Jesus for healing, Jesus was concerned about empty discipleship--people who would come to him for what they could get--but who would deny him their hearts. What does Jesus really want from us?

Our hearts! When we give him our hearts he can totally transform us. Jesus has the power to heal our bodies but he can only transform us if we give him our hearts.

"God's Heroes"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a touch of irony in today's gospel passage. Even though Jesus admonishes the man cured of leprosy to tell no one of the miracle, he is so filled with joy that he cannot contain himself; he tells everyone. Yet at the end of Matthew's gospel (28:19) in giving the Great Commission, Jesus instructs us to tell everyone about him, and what do we do? That's right, we all too often tell no one.

Mark's gospel is a book filled with stories of God's heroes, heroes like the unnamed man cured of leprosy in today's reading. Heroes like Bartimaeus the blind beggar (10: 46-52) who would not be silent; heroes like the woman suffering from a hemorrhage for 12 years (5: 25-34) who fought through the crowd just to touch the hem of Jesus garment. Heroes who despite being the outcasts of society, believed and trusted that Jesus was the Messiah of hope and the Lord of life. Their requests for healing were more than just cries for help, it was their profession of faith in a Christ who avails himself to each person; no matter what label the world places on them.

The curing of the leper in our gospel passage must have shocked those who witnessed it. The leper, according to Mosaic Law, had no right to even address Jesus. Yet, Jesus did not drive the leper away as would be expected; instead, he stretched out his hand and touched him. Jesus did not see an unclean leper knelling before him, he saw a human soul in desperate need.

All too often the people we fear, those who don't fit our image of sophistication and lifestyle, those whose religion or race or class or culture appear to threaten our own, become the lepers of our time and place. How often do we exile these perceived lepers to the margins of society outside our gates; how often do we reduce them to simple stereotypes and demeaning labels; how often do we reject them as too unclean to be part of our lives and our world. The Christ who healed the lepers of his time comes into our place in history to perform an even greater miracle: he comes to heal you and I of our debilitating sense of self that fails to realize the sacred dignity of all humankind. To see as Jesus did, not the leper but the human soul in need.

In today's reading, the leper approaches Jesus with the words, "If you wish, you can make me clean." If we seek to imitate Jesus, if we seek to see and act as Jesus did, then the leper's challenge is addressed to all of us. We possess the means and abilities to transform our lives and the lives of others in our world; what is required is the desire, the will, and the determination to do so: to heal the broken, to restore the afflicted to wholeness, and to reconcile with those very individuals we separate ourselves from because they are different from us in some way.

Jesus wants to awaken our faith, to restore God's vision of a world where all humanity is united as brothers and sisters in the love of God. Jesus calls us to be

his heroes, people who realize that before God, no one is a leper beyond the reach of his mercy and compassion; all of us are sons and daughters made in the sacred image of the God of justice, peace and reconciliation. Let us reach out to one another with dignity and touch each other's lives with respect and generosity. Let our own acts of charity and mercy be a sign of our committed discipleship to the gospel of love. Let us become God's heroes, unable to contain ourselves or remain silent any longer. Let our very lives become a living, breathing example of the miracle to be shared, that the promise of salvation is available to everyone, one healing touch, one gentle embrace, one loving smile at a time.

Amen? Amen!

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 3: 20-35

“Mama, He’s Crazy”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

“Mama, I found someone like you said would come along. He’s a sight, so unlike any man I’ve known. I was afraid to let him in, ‘cause I’m not the trustin’ kind. But now I’m convinced that he’s heaven sent and must be out of his mind.”

The lyrics from this Kenny O’Dell song, released by The Judds in April of 1984, are quite a surprise. Who would think that a country song titled “Mama, He’s Crazy,” would relate to our gospel message written two-thousand years ago. But guess what, it does!

A central theme throughout Mark’s Gospel is how Jesus’ hearers, especially his twelve closest friends, fail to comprehend the deeper meaning of his words and actions. The wild charges made by the scribes and the apologies offered by his family in today’s Gospel indicate just how misunderstood Jesus was by those closest to him.

The same Jesus who calls his disciples to be a united community is dismissed by his own family as being “out of his mind.” Mark uses a Greek word here, the same word found in each synoptic gospel, which translates “besides one’s self, irrational, insane,” and yes, “crazy.” After apologizing for Jesus’ exorbitant claims about himself and his challenging of the most cherished Jewish traditions and revered institutions, his family attempts to bring Jesus home because, he is “out of his mind.” He’s “crazy.”

Why would they think Jesus was crazy? He was a man who lived with his mom until he was past thirty years old, never held a job, never owned a home, never dated, and went to lots of parties and loved to eat and drink. He told folks that you only grow up by becoming a child, win by losing, get by giving and live by dying. In his famous sermon on a hillside, Jesus told the crowds that they were blessed if they were poor, happy if they were hungry and fortunate if they were spiritually inept. What? Blessed? Fortunate? Happy? Is he “out of his mind?” Is he crazy?

In truth, Jesus was not out of his mind, his mind just had a different way of looking at things. His words were not crazy-talk, in fact, he astonished people with his powerful teaching because he spoke with an authority they had never heard before.

Many didn't get him, including his disciples. After his resurrection, they spent countless hours banging the heel of their hands against their foreheads saying, "that's what he meant!" For his disciples, life after the ascension was filled with many ah-ha moments. They finally got it. They finally began to think like him. The disciples were out of their minds too, and that's just what Jesus was hoping for. Let's do the Vulcan mind-meld here, Jesus seems to be saying, let our minds become one.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians (2:5), "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Let me repeat that: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Paul does not say to be in your right mind or that you should have a rational, well-informed and disciplined mind, he says to have a Jesus-mind.

If the world sees Jesus as a "lunatic," then he comes to heal us of what is, in fact, our own "lunacy" – the lunacy of allowing pettiness, pride, anger, prejudice, and self-centeredness to alienate us from one another, the lunacy of exalting our own self-interests at the expense of what others consider necessities, the lunacy of constantly grabbing as much as possible as fast as possible while many on this planet have little or nothing.

Jesus comes as the means of unity among God's people, to reconcile humanity to God and to one another, to instill a deeper understanding and appreciation of our sacred dignity as being made in God's image. We are called, as the Church of the new covenant, to seek in every person the humanity we all share that comes from God, the Creator of all and the Giver of everything that is good. And if that's crazy, then crazy is where I want to be. What about you?

Amen? Amen!

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 4: 26-34

"Small Beginnings"

by Rev. Liz Miller

Rev. James Gilhooley told this story...A man walked into a store. He found Christ behind the counter. He asked, "What do you sell here?" Christ 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. Christ 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.

Last week I planted my garden, but I cheated this year. 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 seed's growth. Farmers need to be patient. They plant the seed and go about their daily business. 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.

Amen? Amen!

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 5: 21-24, 35b-43

"Talitha koum"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

In a story published in the April 2009 issue of Catholic Digest⁴, a young woman's prayer for a purpose-filled life was answered with two daughters and a set of car keys. "Drive," God told her, and so she did.

She drove her girls and their friends everywhere, the mall, volleyball practice, softball games, to church, the beach, Taco Bell, school, and the mall. Did I say mall already? She figured it was better than her girls finding a ride with someone she didn't know. Over the years her car was used as a cafeteria, beauty parlor, dressing room, and sometimes a confessional and sanctuary. When her car was full of girls something amazing happened - God was there too.

Her prayers for a "purpose-filled life" were answered; her vocation was to be a good mom, and the voice of God to her daughters and their friends in the little red car that became her temple of service. As the story concludes, with her daughters grown and on their own she misses the "driving-life" God gave her. As the author puts it, "It was mundane and ordinary, yet incredibly holy."

Moms and Dads know that parenthood is a full-time vocation. It demands everything we have and are for the sake of the children God entrusts into our care. In our Gospel story today, Jairus is a model of such dedicated parenthood. He was an official in the synagogue, yet, for the sake of his daughter, he puts aside his pride and his instinctive distrust of the radical rabbi from Nazareth, and willingly becomes a beggar, falling to his knees before Jesus. Despite the ridicule of the mourners and the depth of his despair, Jairus knows that Jesus is his only hope.

Scripture does not give the 12-year-old girl a name, but history does. Diana is her father's pride and joy. Can you feel the quietness as Jesus, James, John, and Peter, along with Jairus and Deborah his wife enter the small room where she lays; she is so still, so lifeless. Jesus takes Diana by the hand and says gently, "*Talitha koum!*"

This is an Aramaic & Syrian phrase that can mean "Arise, little lamb," but the Greek translation here in Mark is, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." Personally, I like the Aramaic rendition because it is more inclusive and freer of the arguments over tense and gender (koum, cumi, cum, etc.). After all, we are all God's children, we

⁴ "A Driving-Purposed Life" by Nancy Kennedy, Catholic Digest, April 2009

are all God's "little lambs." *"Talitha koum;"* simple words with powerful results; Diana awakes from her sleep.

Like the wailing mourners at the little girl's bedside, we sometimes resign ourselves to defeat as the regular order of things, and to death as its logical conclusion. Jesus shows us a different way; he shows us the life and hope we can bring into our world through the protective care of God and the inherent goodness that everyone possesses.

Jairus was a good and loving father and through his faith Jesus was able to work a miracle by returning life to his beloved daughter. It is through such complete and unconditional love that we too can become the hand of Christ, lifting up the fallen, bring healing to the suffering, and restore life to the spiritually sick and dying.

"Talitha koum" Jesus says to us today. Arise my "little lambs" from your slumber and be restored. Be renewed in the faith and love that only I can bring into your life, and then share your joy with others in my name. I have a "purpose-filled life" waiting for you, Jesus is telling us, all we have to do is have faith and look for it with the eyes of a child. *"Talitha koum!"*

Amen? Amen!

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 6: 1-6

"Open Our Eyes Lord, That We Might See"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Do we ever judge people? Maybe they are uneducated, the homeless on the streets, the alcoholics, druggies, people who are gay and women who are outspoken and believe in equality? Are any one of us better than another?

There were two problems facing Jesus when he came into town. Jesus had no formal training as a Rabbi. He lacked the credentials expected of a teacher. The Jerusalem scribes had begun to spread malicious rumors about him, so Jesus' hometown was reluctant to accept him as anything but a carpenter. Usually in that time they would identify a man by his relationship to his father rather than his mother. Identifying Jesus as Mary's son may be intended as a slur in the legitimacy of his birth. Jesus was being judged.

Jesus had been doing so much and should have been received as a hero.

- He had been in a small boat with the disciples when a storm threatened to sink them. The disciples awakened him saying, "Teacher, don't you care that we are dying?" Jesus rebuked the wind. He said, "Peace, be still!" and the storm calmed down. His disciples were amazed (4:35-41).
- Then Jesus encountered a madman--a man possessed by demons. Jesus commanded the demons to leave the man, and they went from him into a herd of swine, which ran over a cliff. The madman was healed, and the people were amazed (5:1-17).
- A woman with a hemorrhage came to see Jesus. She had had the hemorrhage for twelve years. She had spent all her money on doctors trying to find relief. But then she touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was healed; the people were amazed (5:24-34).
- Jairus, a synagogue ruler, came pleading for his daughter who was ill. Then Jairus' friends came saying, "Your daughter is dead. There is no need to bother Jesus anymore." But Jesus told Jairus that his daughter was only sleeping. Jesus went into the little girl's room. He said, "Talitha cumi"--"Girl, I tell you, get up!" and the little girl got up and walked around. Once again, the people were amazed (5:21-23, 35-43).

You would think that the people of Nazareth would have welcomed Jesus as a local boy made good. But his old neighbors weren't prepared for Jesus--for what he had become, and they took offense at him.

How could these people be so unresponsive? How could they fail to understand?

It isn't easy to see greatness--especially in the people closest to us. So, the people of Nazareth said, "Where did this man get these things.... Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" (v. 3). And they took offense at him.

They could have accepted Jesus as a contractor. After all, Jesus' father was a carpenter. If Jesus had been a carpenter, they would have received him gladly. They would have said, "How about fixing this or building that." But Jesus was a prophet, and that didn't seem right. They didn't like Jesus taking center stage as a prophet.

They knew about prophets. The prophets lived long ago. People remembered the prophets, and even quoted them. They knew God had promised to send a new prophet someday. But Jesus couldn't be that prophet! He was just a hometown boy!

Note that it was not Jesus' miracles that caused problems for the hometown folks. Mark says, "When the Sabbath had come, Jesus began to teach in the synagogue, and many hearing him were astonished" (v. 2). It was Jesus' teachings that offended them. It was Jesus speaking with authority that offended them. It was Jesus challenging their cherished beliefs that offended them. They were offended and scandalized.

Luke fills in some of the details that Mark omits. In the synagogue, Jesus read from a scripture which spoke of the coming messiah. He said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Jesus was claiming to be the messiah--the one for whom they had waited so long. No wonder they were astonished. How could they tolerate a hometown boy who made such claims for himself?

Aren't we a little like that? Jesus and the other Biblical figures are familiar--but they are also remote. We have read the Bible stories through our comfortable eyes for so long that we no longer hear their radical message.

- We hear the Bible as COMFORTING, rather than CHALLENGING.

- We hear it as REINFORCING the things that we believe, rather than demanding that we RE-EXAMINE them.
- We hear it as promising PROSPERITY, rather than demanding SACRIFICE.

Read your Bible! Go home today and open your Bible to the book of Mark and read it. Are there parts that you don't understand? Are some of the stories so unbelievable that you shake your head in wonder? There are many reasons why the Bible is difficult for us to understand, but one reason is that we so often assume that the Bible calls us to be what we already are?

We read the story of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth, and say, "How could they have been so stupid?" We don't stop to ask, what we would do if Jesus stood in this pulpit today and spoke plainly to us. Would we find him hard to take? Jesus often said hard things. Would he say hard things to us? If he did, would we listen?

Mark says that Jesus "could do no mighty work there.... He marveled because of their unbelief" (vv. 5-6).

Jesus marveled at their unbelief. In this series of miracle stories, Mark always speaks of the importance of belief.

- When the disciples woke Jesus during the storm, he said, "Why are you so afraid? How is it that you have no faith?" (4:40).
- He said to the woman with the hemorrhage, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be cured of your disease" (5:34).
- When the people told Jairus that his daughter was dead, Jesus said, "Don't be afraid, only believe" (5:36).

The age of miracles is not over, but miracles require faith.

- Have you experienced God's power in your life? I have, sometimes more powerful than other times.
- Have you experienced miracles--large or small? I look at the birth of my babies, the adoption of my children and the children in my care as miracles.
- Have you asked God to guide you? God needs to be a part of our lives. God is the very essence of who we are and who we are becoming.
- Has God answered your prayers? Yes, but I don't always see it or understand it. We all need to trust in something so much bigger than us and to realize

that God loves us so much more than we can even comprehend.

When Jesus came to Nazareth, Mark tells us that he was amazed at their unbelief. If he came to Mount. Vernon or La Conner today, I wonder if he would be amazed at our unbelief.

- Let us open our eyes to see Jesus!
- Let us open our ears to hear Jesus!
- Let us open our hearts to believe Jesus!
- Then we will see how Jesus can change our lives.
- Then we will see how he can save us!

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 6: 7-13

"Two by Two."

Rev. Jack R. Miller

God is always talking to us. In fact, God is talking to us today; perhaps, he is talking to us right now. But are we listening? Maybe that's the real question here. Can you hear him?

God is always finding ways to talk to those he cares about, especially those he has a special assignment for. In our first reading Amos has been called by God to be a prophet to the people of Israel. In his own words, he was nothing special, a nobody, a common shepherd and dresser of sycamores. He had no formal education, he had no great knowledge or special skills, but God called him anyway and then gave him the words to say. Could God be possibly talking to you and I? Calling us for some special tasks?

Our Responsorial Psalm says: "I will hear what God proclaims." But to hear God we have to be listening for his voice. In our second reading from Ephesians, St. Paul tells us: "You have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." So, according to Paul anyway, we have heard the truth, God has indeed spoken to us, God has called us. That's right, God is talking to us at this very moment ... now what do we do?

In the Gospel today Jesus tells his apostles exactly what to do. Jesus is sending them out "two by two" and asking them to become active participants in his mission here on earth. Why two by two? Does this mean that as apostles ourselves we are supposed to go out in twos, from house to house, knocking on doors as some Christian groups have interpreted this? I think not. It tells us of the importance of community, and a community is meant to pray together, support each other, and grow together. As a community we do things together, two by two, sharing our joys and sorrows, praying together, listening to each other, and discussing what God is saying to us; where he is leading us, where he is calling us.

In sending the Twelve on their first mission, Jesus instructs them to travel light, to focus on the journey and the ministry with which they have been entrusted, not with accumulating wealth, status, and power along the way. Clearing out the clutter of our lives in order to make room for the more important values of God is a

constant struggle for the man and woman of faith; but we have been called by Jesus to focus on the treasures of this life that have been given to us by God; love, mercy, reconciliation, forgiveness, compassion, joyful generosity, and hearts filled with hope.

Yes, God is talking to each one of us today. He is asking us to commit to our family community, our church community, and our larger community beyond. And when we are ready, we can be his prophet: go out to others in Jesus' name, not worrying about anything except sharing what we have heard, what we have felt, and what we have experienced in our own journey with Jesus. Let the Prayer of St. Francis become our prayer:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy."

The seed of Jesus teaching is planted in our inner soul already. Time for it to blossom into action. He has promised us that his grace will be sufficient, and his love will give us strength. Under his guidance we shall become a community united to further God's kingdom on earth; two by two, side by side. Let us pray that today we listen to voice of God, have the faith and courage to answer the call he extends in our life, and to boldly proclaim the Good News to all who will listen.

Amen? Amen!

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 6: 30-34

"People of the Clock"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our passage this morning from the Gospel of Mark has the feel on an interlude between two acts of a play; a reading that links the mission of the Twelve to the feeding of the multitude we will read about next Sunday. If you remember from last week's message, the disciples were sent out two by two on their very first mission. In our lesson today, they have just returned and are gathering around Jesus to report their experiences. They are excited and happy, probably everyone trying to talk at once. But they are also tired and hungry. Their travels were so successful that they scarcely had time to catch their breath, let alone sleep or eat. Jesus could see this and says to them, "Come away with me and rest a while." Let's go to a place where we can be alone, far away from the noise of the crowds, away from the demands of our ministry.

I think we have all felt like the disciples must have felt. For them the needs were great, the crowds were large, and they could not even find time for the basic necessities of life. We live in a world where our laborsaving appliances fail to save us from laboring, our communications technology creates barriers in communicating instead of bringing us together, and our leisure time is filled with everything but what we need the most; leisure. "Come away with me and rest a while," Jesus is saying to us today. Jesus knows that we are only human. He knows that we need to rest now and then. He doesn't expect us to work night and day. Jesus encourages us, as he did his disciples, to build some quiet space and time into our busy lives. Jesus calls us to seek out our own deserted places that take us far away from the demands of our calendars and to-do lists. We all need time and space to hear the voice of God speaking to us. We all need time to put aside our angers and fears, our egos and desire for control, in order to re-center our lives on the things of God; to re-create ourselves and our world in the compassion of Christ.

We are too often "people of the clock" and overwhelmed by our busy lives. As a society ruled by time, we feel the necessity to always be busy; working diligently to save time only to find ways to fill the little time we have saved with new tasks to do. There is a Native American story about a missionary who owned a beautiful gold pocket watch. After observing the missionary for a time an elder of the tribe was

asked for his opinion of the man. "He keeps his god in his pocket," was the elders reply. "How did you come to that conclusion?" the Indian agent asked. "Look," said the elder, "he takes his god out of his pocket by its chain and consults it before making any decisions." While the story is humorous, for "people of the clock" it is sadly true. Our lives are driven and bound by time.

"Come away with me and rest a while," Jesus is saying to us today. The deserted place Jesus invites us to can be a physical place of quiet and solitude, or it can be the few minutes we set aside in our day to stop, to realize God's presence in our midst and to feel grateful for God's grace. Let us find time for God in our busy lives; let us find a quiet place each day where we can hear God's still small voice whispering in our hearts. Let our souls be restored. Let God's love, that surpasses all understanding, embrace us, and bring us peace.

Amen? Amen!

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6: 1-15

"The Ripple"

By Liz Miller

The dictionary says that a miracle is: a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency: *the miracle of rising from the grave.*

I believe a lot of miracles happen in our life that we might think is just coincidence. Some miracles are really large, and some are small. Bringing someone back to life or rising from the dead is a huge, unexplained miracle. Healing from a disease can also be a miracle if doctors cannot explain it. The birth of a baby is a true miracle but one we take for granted. Think about it...a new little life, a fully formed little baby. Completing my M.Div. with all the obstacles was a miracle to me. Sometimes we recognize miracles and sometimes we don't. I consider a miracle as something initiated by God, a direct intervention.

In today's gospel Jesus and the disciples had hoped for a little respite from the crowds but the crowds followed them and there were thousands. Jesus turned to Philip and asked the question to test him. Where can we buy bread to feed all these people? Philip asked where he would get the money to buy the bread to feed all these people. Andrew came forward with a boy whose mother had given him bread and fish for lunch. He had five barley loaves and two fish. Why did Andrew even bring the boy to Jesus? He must have had a reason. Did he have the faith that Jesus could do something and then started wavering in his faith? We are that way. In one moment, we believe, and in the next moment our faith crumbles.

What did the boy think who gave up his lunch to feed the crowd? Was he reluctant? Did he think it was going to be a long day and he was going to be hungry, or did he have faith and give it up cheerfully? What did he think after the miracle? I am sure he had quite the story to tell his mother.

This miracle story is the only one found in all four gospels. Unlike Matthew this gospel does not mention the compassion Jesus has for the crowds. This story has more to do with faith than compassion.

What does this story have to do with today's gospel and for us today? Throughout his ministry Jesus had compassion for all the people...the sick, a leper, blind men,

an epileptic boy. The people were like sheep without a shepherd. This story is about more than compassion though.

The gospel tells us that the disciples did not understand about the loaves. What did they fail to understand? At first the miracles of Jesus were handed down by word of mouth. As this story of the loaves and fishes were passed along the people started seeing a similarity between this story and the Eucharist. The multiplication was not the Eucharist, but the gospel see the multiplication as a sign. In the Old Testament God feeds Gods people. Just look at the exiles from Babylon, a new exodus and Isaiah echoes the words of the Lord, they shall not hunger or thirst. This all leads towards the Last Supper, when Christ would feed us with food that that gives everlasting life, the food that is his own flesh and blood. At the Last Supper Christ did not say this is a remembrance of my body but he specifically used the words, "This is my body, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me."

To Catholics the Eucharist is the soul of the church. This helps to bring the faithful to an intimate union with Christ through the sacrament of his body and blood. The Eucharist is not an individual sign. St. Paul says, Because the bread is one, we, though many, are one body for we all partake of the one Bread. (Cor. 10:17) I believe our oneness includes all the people of God who believe. Our belief transcends culture, creed, color, and denomination; we worship the same Creator, the same God. We are all brothers and sisters, men, and women, sent out to touch others in one way or another. If we allow God to speak to us through the Liturgy, we will emerge from the church a new people. We become what we have received. We give to others what has been given to us and ware changed. Paul exclaimed, "It is no longer I who live, Christ lives in me." We are linked to the risen Christ.

I don't think we even realize how our ordinary lives might affect people. We see our imperfections and faults and wonder how we can become Christ to others.

Here is an example. I was teaching in a school and my students and parents did not know I was a nun at the time. I taught Special Education from Kindergarten through third grade. I had a student who was very strange and difficult to teach. In all honesty I was looking forward to having him move on to the other special education teacher who taught 4th through 5th. The mother came to me and told me she could tell me something was different about me and she wanted her child to stay in my classroom. She said she could tell I was a Christian by how I worked with her child.

I was confident that he would move on and informed her that he would do fine in the other classroom. Needless to say, the principal informed me he would be in my classroom for the following year. This kind of thing happened with a couple of parents. I see myself as very ordinary and sometimes not behaving like I should, but these people saw something different. The grace of God worked through me, in spite of my humanness. We are so much more than our body and who we think we are. We have so much to offer, and we need to remember like the loaves and fishes, the Lord multiplies the contributions of his faithful people. I look out at each and every one of you and I see a people filled with faith, and at times doubt but I see Christ in each one of you as you serve the people of God in many different ways.

Live in a way that you are called to live. Live the commandment that Jesus gave us...to love one another as he has loved us. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. What we do in private triggers a human spider web: "if you touch it anywhere, you send set the whole thing trembling." The young boy with the loaves and fish triggered a web, that continues today with us.

Our challenge today is to ask the question...Are we a people of faith? Many people have power, they are the movers and shakers who cause ripples within a web. Ask yourself this question: where I work, where I spend my day, is that place different, better, more human, and Christian, more for others because I am there? Let us go out and become that web, that ripples for Christ. Let us become like the boy with the loaves and fishes and give all we have. Let God transform us into more than enough.

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6: 24-35

"Bread of God"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Last week the miracle of the loaves and fishes began our preparation for what is commonly known as the bread of life discourse. Today the reading from Exodus about the Manna together with the passage from Psalm 78, prepares us for the beginning of this discourse, found in John, chapter 6. Our Gospel reading this morning sets the scene, with Jesus understanding the real reason why the crowds are being so persistent, why they wanted more proof before they believed. I guess feeding five thousand families from a little boy's lunch was not enough. The crowds were still hungry for signs, for more evidence that will prove once and for all who and what Jesus is. Thus, the theme of the discourse is stated, that Jesus is indeed the sign they are looking for; he is the Bread of Life.

The reading from Paul is a piece unto itself, and calls us to be recreated, to be made new as the first disciples of Jesus were made new. An internal renewal of mind and spirit is what is called for; off with the old, and on with the new, an interesting phrase which means, for Paul, that a whole new person is to be reborn through the power of the Spirit of God.

As we hear the words of Jesus this morning, we learn that he offers to give us food that lasts forever. He says, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Jesus calls us to get beyond our desire for fast food and quick fixes and discover the Word of God which both creates and sustains our lives and the life of our world. He wants us to enjoy a meaningful life, a life that is not driven by the perishable things of this earth, but by the nonperishable and eternal values of God.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." This is the very "bread of God" that Jesus speaks about in today's Gospel: selfless compassion, grace, and gratitude; the food that will not perish, the food that nurtures all that is good, the food that sustains us on our journey to meaning and purpose.

The Eucharist demands more than the opening of our hands to take and our mouths to consume; the Eucharist demands that we open our hearts and spirits, as well, so that we may become what we receive.

Jesus calls us beyond our most basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, and offers to meet our deepest needs; the needs of our soul. May God give us the wisdom to

live lives grounded in the food that endures; the "bread of God" that feeds and nurtures us on our journey to our dwelling place with him.

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." In this he is claiming to be what we need to have life and continue to live it abundantly. Without him there is existence, but not life! Christ gives us the bread that both sustains us in this world and leads us into world to come. Jesus not only has life in himself, but he gives life to all those who will follow him. May we have this bread with us always; may it enable us to do the work of forgiveness and justice that is of God. In celebrating the Eucharist may we become what we receive; the very "bread of God." And in doing so, become the signs for our time and place that God's grace still lives among us.

Amen? Amen!

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6:41-51

"What is This?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

To anyone who is or has raised children there is a familiar phrase, a whine heard around the dinner table. You prepare something new, something different, and they are suspicious of the color, the shape, the texture, or the smell. Their faces seem to be asking the question, are Mom and Dad trying to poison me? They look up at their parents and, with a voice that could curl the dining room wallpaper, cry: *WHAT IS THIS?*

During the Exodus, the Israelites whined the same way to Moses. You hear the phrase "the people murmured" a lot when you read about their journey in the desert. *WHAT IS THIS?!*, they seem to be saying. *Why did we leave Egypt? We were slaves there but at least there was food. Now we're in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat. We're going to die out here.* It is apparent that during these episodes, Moses' approval numbers in the poles were very low.

So, God provided Moses and his fellow nomads "manna" to eat. Scripture describes manna "as a fine, white flake-like thing." Early each day, Israelite families would gather about two quarts of manna to grind and bake into cakes. There were rules though. You could only gather enough to feed your family and you could not store the manna except before the Sabbath when you were allowed to gather two days' worth.

Many modern-day scientists believe these "flakes" were formed from honeydew secreted by a certain insect that fed on the sap of tamarisk trees (yum, yum!). In the dry desert air, most of the moisture in the honeydew quickly evaporates, leaving sticky droplets of the stuff on plants and the ground. When eaten raw, it is said that manna tasted like wafers made with honey. Since the Exodus, manna became the living symbol of God's protective care and love for the Jewish people.

By the way, the word manna comes from Hebrew and literally means ... wait for it ... *What is this?*

Manna is both the question and the answer to *What is this?* Manna is generosity and kindness; manna is consolation and support; manna is the constant, unconditional love of family and friends. Manna is food for our own journeys to God. God sends us manna in many forms every day of our lives; the challenge of faith is to trust in God enough to look for manna, to collect it before it disappears,

and to consume it and be consumed by it. Because in doing so, we become the manna for today's spiritual nomads; the manifestation of God in our midst. We become God's heavenly food in the generosity and kindness, consolation and support, and the constant, unconditional love we extend to others in God's name. We, too, can give life to the world when we look beyond our own needs and security and work for the good of others, nourishing one another in the love of Christ.

May we find the manna that God rains down lovingly each morning of our lives. What is This?! It is Christ, the new manna, who says to us today, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever." Jesus invites us to eat this living bread and to become living bread for the world. Let us take this bread and not ask, What is This? Let us eat it, share it, and shout Halleluiah!

Amen? Amen!

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6:51-58

"Jesus is the Living Bread"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Our homily today continues with the Bread of Life Discourse given at the Synagogue in Capernaum. This makes it especially difficult for Jesus' listeners to accept his words. They complain. How can this local boy, their neighbor, claim to be bread from heaven. How can his father give him true bread from heaven? His father was Joseph, an ordinary carpenter, not a baker of heavenly bread. Who does he think is making these remarks?

Jesus responds with even bolder claims. He claims to be the bread that came down from heaven, and if anyone eats this bread, they will live forever. Yes, the bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh. I would find this a little difficult to accept also. I would be asking; How can this man give us his flesh to eat? What the folks in Capernaum did not realize is that Jesus was using sacrificial language; one's flesh is the greatest and most personal gift of all sacrifices. In this instance Jesus is not only making the sacrifice for Israel but on behalf of the whole world.

What does this mean for us today?

God has said to us over and over in the Old Testament, to not be afraid. "Don't be afraid, for I am with you," we read in Isaiah 41:10, "Don't be discouraged, for I am your God."

What is God calling us to do? We are being asked to be connected to God and involved in life. This is not a journey where we are to judge or be on a pedestal. That would take away from our individual journey with God and hurt our walk with others. We need to go deeper and enter into something that is mysterious. It is about entering into the depths of what is going on and being present to things that are, and somehow participating in a plan that is not ours, but God's...and to trust. To let go and trust is not easy.

Time is important. Each day is important, and sometimes it is a challenge to enter into it. In the New Testament we are invited to enter into a great intimacy with Jesus, our savior, when we are invited to eat his body and drink his blood; when we invite his presence into us so that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit live inside of us. We will not always understand what is going on, but Jesus is saying

that we will always have his presence within us. This is our ultimate goal, to be in a relationship with God, to become one with God because we need that presence within us in order to make it through this journey, we call life. Our God is saying, "I'd like to stay with you. I'd like to be with you."

Do we at times believe that God does not stay with us if we are bad, or not doing the right thing? When we feel so unworthy and unloved do we feel God is no longer with us? I think we all feel this way at times. However, if God left us at these times when we felt so vulnerable and unworthy that would make God's love conditional. That would make our journey impossible. God's love for us is unconditional and it is all around us. God promised to be with us until the end of time. God will never leave us.

When we are in our personal desert and we feel lost and alone, God surrounds us, feeling our pain and crying with us. While we are in these dark places God's spirit is watching out for us. God's spirit is leading us into a place of ultimate fullness and life. If we don't believe that God is on our side, then we are on our own. That is when fear takes over.

We need to trust as God is revealed to us. We may not always be filled at the same level. As our body grows in life we also grow spiritually in life. We are at a different place now then we were as children.

We are invited in the readings today to believe that God will always feed us. This has nothing to do with a growling stomach. Jesus was talking about a spiritual hunger, that sad, empty feeling we get that shows us we need something more for our heart and soul.

We gain a better understanding of the Living Bread as we read scripture, pray to God, and attend church. In these times as we read, pray, and attend church God fills us and takes away that spiritual hunger. As we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, at this very altar, we are given sustenance at the deepest level of our being, and we are intimately connected to our God in a very intense and personal way.

St. Augustine put it this way: Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

Jesus put it this way:

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you don’t have life within yourselves. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I in him.” (John 6:53-56.) Jesus is the living bread. Amen? Amen!

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 6: 60-69

"To Whom Would We Go?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today's readings conclude the bread of life discourse and the passage from Ephesians concerning the image of Christ and the church as modeled in the relationship between husband and wife. However, there is such a strong reaction to this passage in today's world that I need to make a few comments. Paul speaks clearly about the role of hierarchy and how it relates to all relationships, with God and others. In the ancient world this was crucial, but God is telling us about relationships in general. We must remember it was a patriarchal society. These kinds of writings were culturally conditioned. Today there is a shift and a movement away from excessive dominance of male over female, husband over wife. We all, in one way or another, is submissive to each other. This takes men out of negative dominance and into a more positive place.

Submission is a word that most of us do not like. In our society of today we want to be self-sufficient and not rely on others. The truth is that as husband and wife we rely on each other and work together. Jesus wants us to be able to submit so we can rely on our God. Jesus is trying to do everything with us, in us, and for us so that it will be for our good. If given the chance, God can change us and bring us to peace.

We have been hearing the words for the last few weeks: "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life within you. This was an obstacle for many of his followers. What does this mean that we need to eat his body and drink his blood? How can we accept this? It is ludicrous! We cannot follow this person.

Yet, Jesus was firm with his words in that all his words were spirit and life. Because of this many of his disciples left him. Jesus, then asked his twelve apostles, his close friends, "What about you, will you leave too?" Can you feel the anguish in Jesus question when he asked his apostles if they were also going to leave? Jesus would not compromise his teaching. Peter exclaimed, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words to eternal life."

We humans are frail, but God is always faithful. Our God is here for us. Our God will never leave us and will be waiting, even if we run from him. I had a time when I ran from God. It was a very dark time, but things changed, and I was able to give over

to God the dark night of my soul and I could feel God's presence when I finally prayed, Lord, help me. I do believe. God wants to be involved with us in a most intimate way. God's love for us is intense and unconditional. I don't know how I could survive life without God.

We must remember God's ways are not our ways. The teaching and life of Jesus will, at times challenge us and we will feel like walking away. We must always renew our response to him as we continue our journey here on earth.

Today's concluding discourse is a turning point for the first disciples of Jesus. Will they join the ranks of the skeptics, who have dismissed Jesus and his talk of "eating his flesh" or commit themselves fully to him, as the shadows of the cross begin to fall?

Church attendance is in decline in America. US Census bureau statistics show that over 4,000 churches close their doors each year. Even worse, more than 2.7 million church members fall into inactivity every year. How about us today? Will we continue to follow Jesus or join the ever-increasing number who walk away? May we acknowledge, as Peter did, that the words of Jesus are the only way to transform and restore our lives and our world into a life with God. Let our answer become the same profession of faith voiced by those first disciples: To whom will we go Lord? You have the words of eternal life.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

"Identity Markers"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

With the seasons beginning to change, vacations ending and school starting this coming week, it seems like most of the world has been doing a lot of shopping.

The million-dollar question is, did you buy the right things?

Will your kids be wearing the right colors and the right styles? Have you paid close attention to the labels?

Will they be wearing the right shoes, the smartest footwear in the coolest colors?

What about their hair? Is it styled the right way? Will the cut make them fit in with their team, their posy, their circle?

Have your kids been listening to the right music, reading the right books, seeing the right movies, and been to the right events over the summer?

Clothes, styles, labels, music, social rituals, and beliefs are important not only to our kids, but to all of us as well. They mark our identity. Every group of human beings tends to be exclusive; every group wants to know who is on the inside and who is on the outside. So, we adopt "identity markers," those visible practices of dress or vocabulary or behavior that serve to distinguish us as individuals.

The Pharisees in today's Gospel cherish the "markers" that identify them as part of the Jewish community. Through the centuries the religious elite had constructed a rigid maze of definitions, principles and more than 600 laws in an attempt to define what constitutes complete faithfulness to the will of God. As a result, the ethics of religion in Jesus' time were often buried under a mountain of rules and taboos. But Jesus teaches that the markers that should identify us as the people of God are built on justice and peace, the cleaning away of hatred and division, tables that are set with places for all, and traditions that honor charity and forgiveness. These are our "identity markers" as disciples of Jesus.

Authentic faith is expressed in the good that we do for others in God's name, the praise we offer from the depths of our hearts, and not simply in words and rituals performed. It is the good that one does that is important in the eyes of God, not how diligently one keeps the laws and rituals mandated by tradition.

The kind of human being we are begins in the values of the heart because that is the place where God dwells within us. The evil we are capable of as human beings,

the hurt we can inflict on others, is only possible when God is displaced by selfishness, greed, anger, and hatred. But to be a disciple of Jesus is to let God's presence transform any evil within us into love, compassion, and forgiveness.

There are still many people in our world who are just like the Pharisees in today's scripture. People who want to do things the same old way and who judge or try to find fault with anyone who is different. Our challenge is to let Jesus create in us a heart that is sensitive and understanding, wise and loving. That is the "identity marker" God longs to give us. Our task is to be open and willing to receive it.

Amen? Amen!

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 7:31-37

"Do We Listen Funny?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

A mother was planning a birthday party for her six-year-old son. She wanted to protect him from the social consequences of inviting Jason, an unpopular child, to the party. Jason stuttered, so he was constantly teased, often cruelly, by the other children.

But Mom realized that her son had to make up his own mind whether to invite Jason or not. She was pleasantly surprised when her son not only invited Jason to the party but also stuck up for him.

When other children started making fun of Jason's stutter, her son stood up to them, saying: "He doesn't talk funny. You listen funny."

In our Gospel story today, Jesus is confronted with his own "Jason," a deaf man with a speech impediment whose friends have brought him to be healed. Much like Jason, the man was probably subject to ridicule, isolated from the community because of his disability, an outcast forced to beg help from others to survive. But like Jason, he had friends who cared enough to stand by him and bring him to the one who could help. They cared enough to look beyond the man's infirmity, acting out of love and kindness for someone in need.

Jesus restores the man's hearing and speech with the word *Ephphatha* – "Be opened!" In doing so he releases the man not only from his disability but from his isolation within the community as well. Isaiah's vision in our first reading of a Messiah who would come with hope and healing, is realized in this episode from Mark's Gospel: " ... the deaf hear and the silent are given voice."

Do we listen funny? Do we turn a deaf ear to the helpless and needy around us? Fear and ignorance often distort our ability not only to hear but also to see the good in the midst of bad, and the reasons to hope in the midst of despair. The words Jesus spoke to the deaf man in today's Gospel are spoken to us, as well. Jesus wants our hearts and spirits to be "opened" to reach out to those who are different and uncool. He wants our hearts and spirits opened to realizing that God is present even in times and places that make us squirm. Jesus wants our hearts and spirits opened to realizing God's grace despite our difficulty to trust, to accept, and to understand.

Through God's grace and the guidance of the Spirit, we too can bring healing and life to those who need our love, support and affirmation, no matter the perceived or real impediments life may throw in our path.

Jesus calls us to remain open to the possibilities for being transformed through selfless love, for re-creation that is enabled by humble generosity, and for restoration that can be brought about by patience and understanding. When faced with feelings of grief, fear, and despair, we often "listen funny;" unaware of the presence of God, isolating ourselves from God's compassion and hope in the midst of our pain. But we can discover, as the man in our Gospel story did, the transforming hope that Jesus Christ can bring into our life, and how his love can enable us to deal with our own handicaps with optimism and hope.

Ephphatha! Jesus says to us. Be opened to bringing the compassion and mercy of God's presence into each and every life we touch today.

Amen? Amen!

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 8: 27-35

"Which Peter are We?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our Gospel story today is a familiar one, although Mark's version is somewhat condensed. The event is recorded in all three synoptics with the same basic three-act theme: First, Jesus asks a two-fold question, "Who do the people say that I am," and then the harder one of the two; "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers for the group in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, but Mark's rendition of the story is missing a lot of the parts we remember from Matthew. You know what I'm talking about, Peter getting his new name, becoming the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, and receiving the keys to the kingdom; little tidbits that are missing here in Mark's gospel.

In the final scene, Jesus begins to teach his disciples about what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. Peter loses it, rebukes Jesus for suggesting such an outcome, and is abruptly told that he is letting Satan do his talking, not God. Wow! In one moment, Peter exhibits the kind of faith that builds a kingdom, and in the next he is called on the carpet for being unwilling to commit to the self-denial, hard work and sacrifice necessary to accomplish it. Peter is a model of what is called vacillating faith, a model that is sadly typical of the reaction many have when Jesus extends the call to discipleship. Two different Peter's, two different levels of faith: It makes us wonder ... Which Peter are we?

The setting of our story is in the northeastern corner of Palestine. This was not Jesus' usual territory. Caesarea Philippi was a place filled with worship centers and temples, altars erected to the gods of Greece and Rome. It is in this bazaar marketplace of religions that Jesus asks Peter and the Twelve, "Who do the people say that I am? . . . Who do **you** say that I am?" It is a turning point in Mark's gospel. For the first time Jesus talks about the dark things ahead: rejection, suffering, death and resurrection, all concepts his disciples are unable to grasp.

In this incident, Peter immediately confesses his faith in Jesus as the Messiah; a Messiah of victory and salvation. But when Jesus begins to speak of a Messiah who will suffer rejection and death, Peter objects. Is not Peter's reaction the response many of us have as well? Do we prefer to follow the popular, happy Jesus, the

healing and comforting Jesus, but back away from the suffering, humble, unsettling Jesus of the cross? Which Peter are we?

Our faith, as our second reading from James would suggest, is not just a matter of knowing about Jesus. It is one of knowing Jesus; knowing the answer to the question he asked his disciples in our Gospel, the same question he asks each of us today. Every moment we live, every decision and choice we make, every good thing we do is our most revealing and telling response to the question, "*Who do you say I am?*" Our love for family and friends, our commitment to the highest moral and ethical standards, our willingness to take the first step toward reconciliation and forgiveness, proclaims for all the world to see, just who we believe this Jesus is and what his Gospel means to us.

This is what Christ calls us to be as a disciple, and as a church: a community that readily takes up our own crosses in order to help others bear theirs; a family of brothers and sisters who put aside their own individual needs and hurts to bring healing and hope to others in Jesus' name. We cannot belong to that family, that community of believers unless we embrace the spirit of selfless servanthood; we cannot stand with Jesus unless we unconditionally and completely love and forgive others as he did; we cannot hope to share in his victory over death unless we can put aside our fears, self-consciousness and prejudices that blind us from seeing Jesus in the faces of every human being. We have a simple choice to make. Are we one who knows about Jesus or are we one who knows him. We must ask the question ... Which Peter are we?

Amen? Amen!

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 9: 30-37

“Childlike Faith”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In today's Gospel, we see different hopes and expectations of the long awaited “age of the Messiah” collide in an almost comedic discourse. On the one Hand, Jesus speaks of his death and resurrection, while on the other those closest to him argue about their own greatness and status during the Messiah's reign. On the one hand, the disciples dream out loud of a kingdom filled with power and influence, while on the other Jesus outlines for the Twelve the great paradox of discipleship: *Do you wish to be first? Then become last. Do you seek to attain greatness? Then become small. Do you want to be masters? Then become the servants of those you wish to rule.*

To emphasize this point, Jesus picks up a little child and places the child in their midst. This would be confusing to the disciples because in their world only grown-ups would deserve such recognition. A child had no influence in the affairs of society, they were completely marginal, and had little or no status. Why then would a child merit such attention? What the disciples didn't understand, what we often fail to comprehend, is that the innocence of child-like faith is never dissuaded or discouraged, never becomes cynical or jaded, never ceases to be amazed and grateful for the many ways Gods presence is revealed. The power of such simple faith is its ability to overcome every rationalization, fear, complication, and agenda in order to mirror the selfless love and compassion expressed in Christ Jesus.

In their simple joy and wide-eyed wonder, children are constantly discovering the world about them; in their ready acceptance of our love, in their total dependence on us for their nurturing and growth, children are the ideal teachers about faith in a power greater than ourselves. A power that asks us to trust in the spirit of truth, love in the spirit humble servanthood, and follow the example of Christ in the spirit of sincere thankfulness.

Jesus calls us to embrace the simple but profound faith that we seek to teach our children: to love God and one another with honesty and faithfulness, without condition or expectation. Only in opening our own hearts to mirror Jesus' uncomplicated and straightforward compassion, generosity, and forgiveness, can

we help our sons and daughters, our brothers, and sisters in Christ, and ourselves to become genuine, bona fide followers of Jesus.

This is at the heart of what Jesus wanted his disciples to learn about faith, what he wants us to learn as well. It is Jesus' own recipe for authentic discipleship. He wants us to become willing servants, and actively involved in spreading the Good News to our hurting world. He wants us to free ourselves from the chains of this world that weigh us down and hold us back. If this sounds like a tall order, you are right, it is! But as difficult as it may seem, such childlike devotion is an essential part of who we are as Christians.

Jesus valued each and every person, and ultimately laid down his life for all humanity. His love is never ending and continues to change the lives of all who encounter him even today.

The author and missionary Charles Studd once wrote, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him." As a child of God, as Jesus' modern-day disciples, as bearers of the Good News to in our time and place, how can we do any less than the one who gave his all for us.

Amen? Amen!

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 9: 38-41

"The True Ring of Christ"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In today's Gospel story, John tried to stop someone who was using Jesus' name to cast out a demon. "He's not one of us!" John is saying. Jesus responds by condemning jealousy and intolerance, warning his followers against a view of discipleship that diminishes the good done by those we may consider as "outsiders," or different than ourselves.

In admonishing John in today's Gospel, Jesus is calling for an end to the *we're right and they're wrong* perspective of the world. Jesus mission, then and now, is to build his Father's kingdom, a faith community based on acceptance, generosity, humility, respect and understanding for all, and by all. Miguel de Cervantes, the author of Don Quixote, once said, "Many are the roads by which God carries his own to heaven." Who are we to think that one road is better than another, or that our faith tradition provides the only pathway to salvation. That is God's work not ours.

Jesus invites us to recognize that others, even strangers and outsiders, can work for the just cause of bringing peace and harmony, hope, and salvation to a hurting world. Remember the Samaritan woman and her encounter with Christ at Jacob's well? She was an outsider, a woman of questionable reputation, and yet God used her testimony to bring the Good News to her entire village. We are called to serve not because of our association with a particular tradition or group, but because we belong to Christ. We follow the right pathway by selflessly serving others in Jesus' name, and in doing so, we become an extension of his ministry in this day and time.

In his commentary on today's Gospel, William Barclay shared an old eastern fable. A man possessed a ring set with a wonderful opal. Whoever wore the ring became so sweet and true in character that everyone loved him. The ring was a charm. The ring was passed down from father to son, generation to generation, and never failed to do its work. As time went on, it was passed down to a father who had three sons whom he loved equally. What was he to do when the time came to pass on the ring? The father had two other rings made precisely the same so that no one could tell the difference. On his death-bed he called each of his sons in, spoke some words of love and to each, without telling the others, gave a ring. When the three sons

discovered that each had a ring, a great dispute arose as to which was the true ring that could do so much for its owner. The case was taken to a wise judge. He examined the rings and then he spoke. "I cannot tell which is the magic ring," he said, "but you yourselves can prove it." "We?" asked the sons in astonishment. "Yes," said the judge, "for if the true ring gives sweetness to the character of the man who wears it, then I and all the other people in the city will know the man who possesses the true ring by the goodness of his life. So, go your ways, and be kind, be truthful, be brave, be just in your dealings, and he who does these things will be the owner of the true ring."

Jesus is asking of you and I today the same thing he asked of his first disciples; don't concern yourselves with who is wearing the true ring, who is claiming to serve people in my name, concern yourselves with serving all people in my name. Show compassion and charity to anyone and everyone because each and every person, no matter their circumstance, status or condition belong to Christ. In whatever opportunities we have, with whomever we meet and are able to help, we must not hesitate to act in Jesus' name. Christ is asking us to be kind, truthful, brave, and just; to become reflections of the true ring in Barclay's story and mirror the Christ who welcomed all and served all with love, humility, and compassion. Let us put on the *True Ring of Christ* today, push aside anything that would hinder our mission, and carry on the work that Christ has called us to do.

Amen? Amen!

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 10: 2-16

"Right Relationships."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The question of divorce posed by the Pharisees in today's Gospel went straight to the heart of one of the most divisive issues in Jewish society at the time. The Law of Moses stipulated that a husband could divorce his wife for any form of indecency. Unfortunately, the interpretation of exactly what constituted indecency varied greatly, ranging from adultery to accidentally burning the evening meal. Furthermore, the wife was regarded under Mosaic Law as a husband's property, with no legal rights to protection or recourse in seeking a divorce on her own. Because of the women's lack of status, and since marriages were often arranged in the husband's favor, divorce was tragically common among the Jews of Jesus' time.

The Pharisees underestimated Jesus and his response probably sent them away with their heads held low. Jesus cites the Genesis account of the creation to emphasize that men and women are equal partners in the eyes of God. The language of Genesis indicates that the Creator intends for the union of two people to reflect the fullest expression in human form of the communion of love God desires to establish with us. As in previous confrontations with the Pharisees, Jesus appeals to the spirit of the Law rather than arguing legalities: It is the nature of this covenant that partners in relationships owe to one another total and complete love and mutual respect, and in sharing responsibility for making their union succeed.

Jesus appeals to his followers to embrace the Spirit of love that is the basis of God's law; that we are called to act out a sense of the compassion and justice of God rather than fulfilling legalisms and detached rituals. The union of two persons is more than a contract between individuals; it is a Sacrament, a living sign of God's presence and grace in our midst, the manifestation of the love of God, a love that knows neither condition nor limit in its ability to give and forgive.

A couple's life together is centered in trust and forgiveness; modeled after the profound love of God: love that lets go rather than clings, love that happily gives rather than takes, love that liberates rather than confines. Paul wrote of such love in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not

irritable or resentful; Love does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

The sacrament Jesus taught, is a total giving and sharing by each partner so that the line between "mine" and "yours" disappears into only "ours" and "us." In the life they create together a life that sometimes means both taking on and letting go for the sake of the other, Christ is the ever-present catalyst who makes their simple, everyday life together a miraculous sacrament, in which the love of God is revealed to all of us in the love a couple share with one another. This places the love of God at the very center of our human relationships. The challenge for you and I is to surround our relationships with the love of God.

The Spirit that dwells in you and I is manifested in our capacity to be in a healthy relationship with God and with one another. Yes, it's not easy; it was never intended to be. We have to struggle through it at times, but it does not mean that the love Jesus envisions is some unattainable ideal. To the contrary, our very nature longs for healthy relationships with one another, just as God longs for healthy relationships with us. Only by making God our central focus will we find fulfillment in the life we create together, a life centered in trust, patience, and humility. It is the love God intended for us since the beginning of time.

An unknow author wrote, "I will do more than belong, I will participate. I will do more than care, I will help. I will do more than believe, I will practice. I will do more than be fair, I will be kind. I will do more than be friendly, I will be a friend. I will do more than forgive, I will love."

Let us love!

Amen? Amen!

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 10: 17-30

"Spiritual Poverty"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

"In the end," Donald Trump once said, "you're measured not by how much you undertake but by what you finally accomplish." In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats found in Matthew 25 (verses 35 & 36), is a vision, a final accounting of what *"The Donald"* so eloquently stated. People waiting entry into eternity are divided into two groups and judged not by what they undertook in life, not by the good they thought of doing, but by the good they accomplished without giving it much thought. An Unknown Author paraphrased the passage in this way: "I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club to discuss my hunger. I was imprisoned and you crept off to pray for my release. I was naked and in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless and you preached to me of the love of God. I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God. But I am still very hungry and lonely and cold."

In praying the "Confiteor," we confess to God and our brothers and sisters in Christ, that we have sinned. Sinned in our thoughts and deeds; by what we have done and what we have "failed to do." This is at the heart of our scripture this morning. It is not about the difficulty of being wealthy and being a Christian, our gospel story brings to light the universal problem of spiritual poverty.

A college's star baseball player went up to Jesus and asked: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Go to the local playground and help set up an after-school program for kids at risk." The baseball star's face fell, and he went away sad, because his focus was on making it to the major leagues. He was suffering from spiritual poverty.

The owner of a small business asked Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "Go and create job opportunities for those who have lost their jobs and whose families are struggling." The business owner's face fell, and he went away sad, because he was barely keeping his own company going. He was suffering from spiritual poverty.

The man in our scripture reading was very rich but he also suffered from spiritual poverty. There is evidence that he was probably a good man; he had never stolen, he had never defrauded anyone, and he had never knowingly harmed anyone, but neither had he ever used his wealth and power to be positively and sacrificially generous. The challenge Jesus laid before him was this, with all your possessions, with all your wealth, with all the resources you have at your fingertips, what positive good have you done for the benefit of others? How much have you gone out of your way to help and comfort and strengthen others by using your enormous wealth to help those in need? Have you sinned as the Confiteor would suggest by what you have failed to do? The Book of James is quite clear on this subject; we are called to be "doers," happy to share with and serve others in the name of Christ.

I think we all know how the rich man felt in today's gospel. There is a cost associated with being a disciple of Christ. We are asked to give our everything as well, but Jesus asks only for what we have, he does not ask for anything we do not already possess. Each one of us have been gifted with talents and resources, skills and assets that could be utilized in the work of making God's kingdom a reality in the here and now. Authentic discipleship compels us to refocus every dimension of our lives, and that may require a reordering of our priorities and a restructuring of our days to make time for the things of God. The burning question for you and I today is are we willing to do what Jesus is asking of us? Can we turn everything we are and will become over to him?

In our scripture story this morning the rich man went away sad. He couldn't bring himself to do what Jesus asked of him. His faith was not strong enough for him to break free of a life that consumed him; he could not raise above his spiritual poverty. God does not want you and I to suffer the same fate but how do we avoid it? Perhaps the opening verse from the old hymn *I Surrender All* gives us a clue:

*All to Jesus I surrender;
All to him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust him,
In his presence daily live.*

Let us strive to love and trust Christ always and try our very best to live each day in the shadow of his grace. Let his love and power fill us and guide us in the path of righteousness. Let us be the happy "doers" Christ wants us to be.

Amen? Amen!

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 10: 35-45

"I Came to Serve"

by Rev. Liz Miller

Do you ever listen to someone and hear only what you want to hear? I think that we, as humans, tend to do that.

The apostles were no different. In fact, they were blind in many instances and did not or could not comprehend all Jesus was saying.

James and John wanted to make sure they were first in Jesus' glory. After all, they had seen some of his glory days earlier. At the Mt. of Transfiguration Jesus clothes had become dazzling white, brighter than anything they had ever seen. Jesus talked to Moses and Elijah. They heard a voice from the cloud saying, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." In seeing all this James and John wanted more. They had seen the glory of Jesus, but they could not understand his cross and death. Jesus told his disciples that he would suffer and die but having seen what Jesus they could do could not comprehend that.

Maybe they had a vision of Jesus as king, sitting in his palace, surrounded by people honoring his name and they wanted to be in the middle of that. James and John said, Grant to us that we may sit, one at your right hand and one at your left hand in your glory."

Jesus is like no other though. He came from heaven to earth to be born in a stable. He was born in a small town. His parents were poor and did not have much to offer but food on the table and a great faith in God. However, when Jesus grew up, he was teaching with wisdom, knowledge, and healing illnesses. Who can blame James and John for wanting more? They did not understand that Jesus' glory was the sacrifice of the cross and his resurrection. What I see wrong in this whole request is they are asking Jesus to fit into their plans rather than fitting into his plans.

Would we understand Jesus and his words if we walked with him 2000 years ago? We know the story and what happens. We have listened to scripture year after year.

Jesus, asks them, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus looks at them and tells them that whoever wants to become great among them shall be a servant of all. We have rules in our world, but the rules of God are different from the rules of

the world. In this world people want power, money and often are selfish. We only need to look at our politicians, or billionaires, as we see the middle class disappearing and a more dramatic line between the rich and the poor. The poor want housing and food, and the rich want more money.

When Jesus preached, he turned the world upside down. He changed our whole perception of God. Jesus asks us to serve others. He is not interested in our degrees or how much money we have. He is interested in how compassionate we are to others and what we have done for others. Jesus is asking us to see the world differently and to respond with challenges with a different set of values. An early church father said to serve is to reign with Christ. Our calling is to respond with love, mercy, and forgiveness.

When you get discouraged and feel nothing is happening, I would like you to think about a story about Albert Schweitzer. He was a physician and a concert organist in France. At the age of 30 he felt called to Africa as a physician. However, at the time he was not yet a physician, but that did not stop him. He enrolled in medical school and graduated three years later with a medical degree. He and his wife went to Africa and established a small hospital. They served there the rest of their lives. Albert sometimes got discouraged because it seemed like he was accomplishing so little. He told of throwing himself into a chair and telling Joseph his assistant, "What a blockhead I was to come out here to doctor savages like these!" Joseph had the perfect response. He said, "Yes, doctor, here on earth you are a great blockhead, but not in heaven."

We are in good company when our faith is weak. We, as ordinary workers, is as important as the great saints. We all try to do what God asks us to do...to serve, to encourage to just be there. We are all called to serve. Sometimes, we, as Christians just don't get it. Many of our acts of kindness are directed at strangers and people we may never see again.

I see people here, in our own small community who has served Christ and their neighbors for decades. I see good hearts and generous behavior...people who love God...and a few blockheads too.

Thank you each of you for the blessings that you shower on others. May the Lord shower you with blessings in return.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 10: 46-52

"Lord, I Want to See"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Sometimes I wonder who is really blind.

Jesus travels with his disciples toward Jerusalem and he tells them three times of his coming death, but they respond inappropriately showing they are blind. Peter, James, and John were with Jesus at the Transfiguration but seemed to be blind to the truths Jesus was trying to show them. Did they really listen to what Jesus is saying or are they blind because they expected something else from their Messiah? Just recently we talked about James and John who wanted to sit next to Jesus in his glory, and Jesus had just finished telling them he was going to die. It seemed the disciples were completely blind and yet they traveled with him daily. They should have known him better than anyone.

I like the story in today's Gospel. Bartimaeus is the image of one without anything to offer; anything to claim. I can imagine him sitting and begging in the hot sun day after day. He was listening to all the talk around town. He had heard about Jesus and all the healing stories. I imagine that his thought was...if only Jesus would come here. If I could only see....my life would be different. I am sure his feelings were conflicting. He knew Jesus could heal him, but he was only a beggar with nothing to offer so who would listen to him? In spite of his feelings Bartimaeus was listening for Jesus. When he heard Jesus coming, he had hope. It was his one chance, and he was going to give his all.

There was a large crowd, but Bartimaeus was focusing on Jesus instead of his begging. This was a special day, and he could have gotten lots of money, but he wants the help that he believes Jesus is able to offer. Bartimaeus cries out and is ordered to be quiet, but he continues to shout and plead for mercy. He will not be quiet to please the crowd. His future, his very life is at stake and so he cries out in a louder voice.

I believe that Jesus heard the cry of his heart. Amidst the noise, Jesus stops and asks the crowd to, "call him here." Jesus is stopping to help a beggar.

Jesus reaches out with love and authority to include the powerless, the vulnerable, the poor, the women, and the children. He sees our weaknesses, our sins, and our brokenness. He excludes no one. He hears the beggar and has pity on him.

Bartimaeus does something so unusual. Beggars typically sit with their cloak spread on the ground to catch the coins tossed to them. This man's cloak is his livelihood, but he tosses aside his cloak and coins to stand before the Son of God. So, unlike the rich young man who walked away. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" His answer is simple: "Lord, let me see." He asks not to be seen but to see and to live a normal life. He is healed by his faith, and he follows Jesus. His brief encounter with Jesus has changed his life just as it can change our life.

Are we blind because of the busyness and demands of our lives? Do we justify or rationalize our lack of compassion or responsibility for our actions or inactions?

Christ comes to give us sight, to transform us. Are we blind like the disciples at the time? Jesus will cure us of our blindness, open the eyes of our hearts and be present to us, if we give him the chance.

If we had an encounter with Jesus today and he asked us the question, "What do you want me to do for you?" What would our answer be? Would we ask for a new car, a new house, riches to make life easier? Are blinders on our eyes too? Or would we respond by saying, Lord, let me see? Remove the blinders from my eyes. Let me see the world as you see it. Let me see your vision of my life. Let me see what you would have me do and how you would have me live. Lord, let me see.

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 12: 41-44

"A Tale of Two Widows"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our first reading and the Gospel story share a common thread. Even though nearly eight centuries divides the passages, each is about a destitute widow and desperate times. Both widows were probably every day, hard working women. Both were poor. The first has a son but it is assumed the second has children to care for as well. Both put their trust in God by giving all that they had to offer.

Like the widow in our first reading, the widow in our Gospel is literally down to her last bit of sustenance; two small coins, each worth about an eighth of a cent by today's standards. And like the widow who offered her last bit of food to Elijah, our Gospel widow is willing to sacrifice what little she has to help others. There is one difference in our stories through. Unlike the first widow who received flour and oil for a year, our Gospel widow was not rewarded for her generosity, or if she was, we are not told about it.

Most of us would relate better to our Gospel widow. We can probably remember times in our own lives where our offerings of help and support went unnoticed or even unappreciated. When you think about it though, those times may have actually been a great blessing. Jesus did say during the Sermon on the Mount, *"...your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."* (Matthew 6:18) When we feel that the gifts we offer are insignificant, we should always remember that our contribution, no matter how small it may seem or what form it may take, will not go unrecognized. Like the widows who gave from their want rather than their surplus, our offerings of time, talent or treasure will make a difference. God who sees and understands all things, will remember our sacrifice.

Someone, probably with nothing better to do, identified four different types of giving. The first is called grudge or tight-wad giving. This is where we just hate to part with that twenty-dollar bill, but we do anyway. The second is shame or "keeping up with the Jones" giving. In this model we are driven to match whatever our friends or neighbor is giving. The third is calculated giving. We part with our money with what is sometimes called a "lively sense of favors to come." Bingo and raffles fit very nicely in this category. I personally observed this type of giving at a Boys and Girls Club fundraiser the other night. One couple at the table in front

of me bid \$4,500 for the chance to receive a vacation package to Mexico, but only pledged \$50 toward the club's general support fund. The final category is thankful giving. This takes place when we joyously give of our time, talents, or treasure simply because God has been so wonderful and generous to us. The widows in today's readings fit well into this type of giving.

The message we gain from today's scripture is that we must place our trust and confidence in God rather than in our material possessions. This is difficult for us to do because it demands our practicing the forgotten virtue of humility. A humble person recognizes where he or she stands before God. A humble person recognizes his or her profound need for God. A humble person is certain that the presence of God in his or her life is fundamental to happiness, not money or other earthly goods.

Our two widows gave from their substance rather than from their abundance. They put their trust in God, and with their actions, shouted for all the world to hear that God's presence in their lives was far more important than anything money could buy, or this world provide.

Our *Tale of Two Widows* today points to another sad truth. The majority of us do not fully give ourselves to Christ, no matter the type or form of giving we are talking about. Our widows gave all they had, and God is asking us to make the same commitment.

Like the two widows, we need to give Jesus our all. We need to put our faith and our trust in him, and we need to be assured that Jesus sees us; Jesus knows us, and Jesus cares for us. Jesus willingly gave his life for us on Calvary. The question for all of us to ask ourselves is this, what are we willing to give to Jesus in return?

Amen? Amen!

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 13: 24-32

"Autumn Leaves"

by Rev. Jack Miller

"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 or tradition, 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. Jesus empowers us to begin the work of the building the kingdom of God 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."*

Amen? Amen!

Cycle C

Advent Season

1st Sunday of Advent

Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36

"Signs"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Meteorologists watch a storm form in the middle of the Southern Atlantic. They begin plotting its course, feeding data into their computers. Satellites are trained in the area and weather reconnaissance aircraft probe the tempest for information. NOAA super computers then develop possible paths the storm may take and the impact it could have in communities along the Eastern Seaboard. Warnings are issued and people begin to prepare, thanks to those who watched for the "signs" of things to come and understood the depths of their meaning.

Throughout our lives we encounter similar "signs": indicators of realities we either do not see or chose not to see or understand, or worse, ignore altogether. These "signs" urge us to look deeper into things, to see beyond our selves, and to confront issues before they become disasters.

On this First Sunday of Advent, Jesus calls us to pay attention to the many "signs" of God's love amid every trial and challenge we encounter. God's Spirit of humility and wisdom enables us to realize Christ's saving work with the dawn of each day, the continual "awakening" that is our life-journey on earth.

In his book "Disciplines of the Christian Life," Eric Liddell wrote:

"Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. Our broken lives are not lost or useless. God's love is still working. He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out his wonderful plan of love."

In his gospel, Luke concludes that our "judgment" before Christ will be a moment of illuminating truth, when our facade will melt away, and our rational thinking will fail us. In that moment of clarity, we will see our true holiness and face our true failures. But rather than make us tremble, the prospect of standing before Jesus should fill us with hope: hope that Christ comes to redeem us despite ourselves, that, in him, God loves us in both our holiest and most sinful moments. Liddell was right, *"God is not helpless among the ruins"* of our lives, no matter how *broken or lost or useless* they may seem.

The season of Advent reminds us that the Christ who came in a manger will come again someday in glory. But it also reminds us of the "signs" that Christ is with us every day in both our times of great joy and great sorrow. Advent is a "sign" from

God reminding us that Christ turns our failures into victories, our disappointments into triumph, and our Good Fridays into Easters.

Jesus is telling us in today's gospel to not let the anxieties of our daily life, our obsession with things we can't control, distract us from our preparation for his return. Jesus wants us to pay attention to the "signs" we are given so that we come to know God in the love and goodness we receive and share with others. In this our lives become a perpetual Advent in which we make our way to God by creating a road for that journey, a highway built on compassion and justice, forgiveness, and love.

So, when the "signs" seem to surround us, when the sun and moon and stars, earth and seas and nations are in dismay: when that final moment comes, whether in our passing or at the end of days, we can stand upright and lift our heads to welcome Christ's return in glory. And because of God's *wonderful plan of love*, our redemption is at hand.

Amen? Amen!

"Come, Lord Jesus"

By Rev. Liz Miller

As we begin a new church year, we recognize that beginnings are important. It is a time to reflect on the new directions we are invited to pursue.

Advent means, "coming." We have four weeks to prepare for Christ's coming in the world. We need to take time. Those of us who are older know that time is precious and goes by too quickly. In our culture we have little time. During these few weeks of Advent our challenge is to take some time away from our busyness to reflect on our ultimate goals. What is real work in our lives and what is important? The commercialization of Christmas robs us of the true meaning of Christmas, and it is only getting worse as the stores prepare in early November.

As we prepare for the birth of our savior, I ask myself why did God want to embrace humanity? He came into the world and lived an ordinary life just like we do. He learned about his religion. He helped his parents. He learned at the side of Joseph how to be a carpenter. I would imagine he took care of his mother Mary when Joseph died. He did the simple things in life. The last three years of his life he did the extraordinary work that he was sent to do. He touched people, healed people, and treated people with love. We find a deep desire for God to be intimate with his people.

In our first reading today is an image of people longing for God, but God does not appear to be very close. It does not feel like an intimate relationship. We look at our world and it is pretty messed up. We are not all we should be. We are a sinful nation. Yet, we want God to be close. We desire that close relationship even though it is a little scary at times. The love that God has for us and our desire to know God makes our lives good and meaningful.

In the mystery of the incarnation God is both human and fully divine. What an awesome God to become like us, to live with us and to show us how much we are loved by God. God is telling us that he wants to be a part of our life, an intimate part. All the ordinary events in life are filled with great meaning and purpose. It helps us to grow and become who we are meant to be.

Jesus is the message...the word made flesh. The Pharisees and scribes preached the message, but they were not living it. It was not a part of them. The message in the gospel reading is to be alert and on guard. God calls us to be watchful. This does not mean we need to stay awake at night. It means we need to stay spiritually alert. We live in a world of soul killing temptations and distractions. We are subjected to advertisements that trivialize life, movies that glamorize violence, drugs, and sex. The temptations are endless. Jesus tells us to watch and keep alert. We need to be fully ready even in our least ready moments. The equivalent of falling asleep for us is a lack of spiritual preparation, failure in our Christian walk, failure to do what Christ has called us to do. Keeping awake has to do with spiritual wakefulness, spiritual preparation, and spiritual readiness for Christ's coming again. Let's get ready, better yet let's live ready. Watch, keep alert, pray. Live faithfully, full of faith, day by day. Then we will be ready for whatever comes, even our own death.

Do you want to live Advent? Then be Advent. Be a sign of hope to the hopeless. Today's gospel warns us to be alert, on watch for the Messiah. Don't look for him only in a Christmas crib. Christ is alive, with us, Christ is here, Christ is in you, and he will speak through you. Watch, stay awake, and hope. Prepare for Christmas by bringing Christ to life again. Advent is a season of hope and reawakening. Prepare ye the way.

Amen? Amen!

2nd Sunday of Advent

Luke 3: 1-6

"Waiting"

By Rev. Liz Miller

As a people we always seem to be waiting.... waiting for what? So many times, we will say, "I can't wait for Christmas, I can't wait for winter break, I can't wait to see my children, and the list goes on.

We wait for Christ, but he already surrounds us. We see him in the eyes of people, and he is within us. Each time we gather, each time we receive him at this table is a new Advent.

I wonder what it was like for Mary to wait. Jesus was there. He was living inside her, but she had nine months to wait to hold him, to see him, to cuddle and touch him. Most mothers know what it is like to wait for the birth of a baby. You have days of discomfort, fear, sleepless nights, feeling like an overgrown whale and then your child is born. Mary believed that Jesus was there, in her mind and she felt him within her body but when he was born, she could now experience him with all her senses: eyes, ears, touch, taste and smell. Her waiting was then complete.

The question is this: Christ is all around us but how alive is he for you, for us?

We are being seduced by the stores, the television commercials, and activities all around us. It is a crazy time of year when we can be pulled in every different direction. We go out to buy the perfect gift, the best gift. Advent can become impersonal, just a winter season.

In today's Gospel John says, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." How can we do that in all this activity? We need to consciously remember that the greatest gift of all is the birth of Christ. The "perfect gift" it seems, is bringing Christ to others. This can be a most amazing experience. We can be there for people who are lonely, people going through surgery, or with a friend as they grieve for a beloved who has died. Sometimes a simple smile or a prayer is all we can do but it goes straight to the heart of God. Jesus comes to us in the hungry and thirsty, in the stranger and the helpless, in the sick and the imprisoned. Sometimes this kind of Advent is rough, and like a mother in labor you will cry, gasp, and pray. You may at times be in despair and need all the faith, hope, and courage that only God can give.

It's okay to enjoy this holy season if we keep our focus on the Christ who not only was once born for us but at this instant is alive within us. We must let that Christ

out, so we can jump for joy and his light can shine from deep within us. Our challenge this season is to be aware of Christ's presence; in us, among us, and all around us.

Yes, we will all experience the high mountains and the deep valleys in our lives, but with the eyes and strength of faith the light of Christ will shine, and he will awaken an inner calm and peace in us.

Christ is a part of us. Our whole life can be a ceaseless Advent, all we must do is to say with Mary, "Whatever you say, Lord," then do whatever he says, and we will be transformed; it will change our lives. As the reading from Philippians said today, "God has truly begun something in us and will bring it to completion."

Mary's waiting was over when Jesus was born. Our waiting will be over as we celebrate in joyful hope the day of his return in glory.

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Advent

Luke 3: 10-18

“The True Meaning of Advent”

By Rev. Liz Miller

Father James Tahaney was the director of the deaconate program in New York. “Keep in mind that Advent is designed to give a serious electrical shock to one's spiritual nervous system,” Fr. Tahaney told his class. “It is true that Jesus cannot be born again, but we can.” Isn't that what Advent is resolute in demanding? That we, in Fr. Tahaney's words, “give birth to our best selves.”

Advent comes every year and is a joyous occasion. However, with the season starting earlier every year do we get caught up in the busyness of the holidays instead of the real reason.

John warns about the coming of the Messiah. How do we prepare spiritually for the arrival of the Christ Child, for Christmas? Where are our hearts. Are we into the busyness of the season with shopping, and the joys of the packages being wrapped and given? There is so much going on during this time to make us lose our way.

I once saw a short film that left me wondering. It started out by showing people laughing, singing, buying gifts, going to parties and really being in the holiday spirit. Then the scene changed. It showed Mother Theresa bending over the poor, those who had no one, no family and dying alone in a cot on the floor. It showed poverty and loneliness. There were no Christmas lights, no joy, only desolation...nothing to look forward to. What a contrast to the true meaning of the season.

Do we take time to get into the real meaning of Christmas and helping those who are down on their luck?

John the Baptist replied, if you have two coats share one. If you have extra food share with the needy. He also said to not go over your fixed amount. These words say a lot. It's all about being a good Christian. Don't cheat, don't steal, don't lie and to be content with what you have; share with others.

I think many times that we forget the simplicity of this message. We think we need to do more. Look at Bill and Melinda Gates. They do great things and give to many charities. They can do that. They do not have the restrictions we have. Give within your means, John told the people who asked what they could do. God does not ask

us to give more than we have but he does want us to be concerned about those around us. We need to realize that what we do might not mean much to others, but it does mean something to the person or family we help. God sees us. We are like the widow with two small coins. She gave what she could, and she is the one remembered in the scripture story, not the ones who dropped lots of coins just for recognition. Just recently there was a story about a man in his 80s working at Walmart because he and his wife could not live on social security alone. He may never be able to retire.

There are so many needs around that it might seem overwhelming to us. Do we do nothing because the need is so great, and we are so small and ordinary? What can we do? Sometimes what we give cannot be bought with money. Yes, we can give the poor food, clothing and help families at Christmas and that is good if we can do that. We can also help by being with the person in grief because they lost a husband or a child. Maybe they lost their job, or their house was repossessed. Look at our seniors of today living only on social security. There are so many needs around that it might seem overwhelming to us. The fires in California did so much damage. Many people lost their homes and lost everything. Some even lost their lives.

Do we do nothing because the need is so great? No!! We do what John suggested and we help the people around us. A little can go a long way.

What Advent teaches us to anticipate is Jesus, the Christ, the anointed one. If it seems difficult to await the arrival of someone who has already come, it might be time to examine the many ways Jesus still comes and will continue to come to us today. Advent means coming. Yes, Jesus has already come in his birth in Bethlehem two millennia ago. While we wait to celebrate his birth once again let us dwell on how Jesus comes to those around us, in the events of daily life, in the beauty of creation, and the most powerfully, in the Eucharist. What are the expectations as Christmas draws nearer? The same as they are any other time of the year: to deepen our relationship with the one who came for us and never left. Let us continue to be there for others all year long. Let us be the eyes, ears, and arms of Jesus. Christmas is not a one-time observance. It is all year long. Let us be Christ to others and love as he loved. Let this season be a time when we “give birth to our best selves.” Isn’t that what Advent is all about?

"Rejoice"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Certain Sundays throughout the liturgical year take their names from the first word in Latin of the Introit, the entrance psalm or antiphon recited or sung at the beginning of Mass. Gaudete Sunday is one of these.

On this the Third Sunday of Advent the Introit in both the Traditional Latin Mass and the Novus Ordo Mass which we celebrate, is taken from our 2nd reading in Philippians 4: "*Gaudete in Domino semper*" ("Rejoice in the Lord always").

Like Lent, Advent is both a penitential and joyful season, so a priest in the Roman Church normally wears purple vestments. In many Independent Catholic Jurisdictions, the priest wears Blue vestments to emphasize the joyful side of Advent. But on Gaudete Sunday, having passed the midpoint of Advent, the Church lightens the mood a little, and the priest may wear rose vestments. The change in color provides us with encouragement to continue our spiritual preparation for the arrival of the Christ Child, for Christmas: which is now only 11 shopping days away.

For the same reason, the third candle of the Advent wreath which we light on Gaudete Sunday, is traditionally rose-colored.

Today's Introit is one of the few drawn from the Epistles of Saint Paul. It is more than a quiet and reflective statement it is an exhortation to joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." (Phil 4:4-6).

What we get in the Latin "gaudete" and in the English "rejoice" is the same word used by the angel Gabriel to greet the Virgin of Nazareth. It embraces health, salvation, loveliness, grace, and joy, all at once. In the mouth and in the ear of Christians, the taste of the word is indescribable.

In Philippians 4 Saint Paul's greeting is not so much an imperative, a command to be joyful, it is more like Paul is giving us a gift from the Lord. What I wish for you, Paul is saying, what I send you, what I offer you in the Lord is grace, and loveliness, and joy.

On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, through the remainder of this joyous season and beyond, let that be the anthem of peace and love we share with each other and the world. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!"

Amen? Amen!

4th Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 39-45

"Shall we dance?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our gospel story today, a very young girl meets her older cousin. Both are pregnant. Both feel misunderstood. The young girl's husband to be, a devout Jew and fearing a scandal, is considering a quiet separation. The baby is not his. The old woman's husband, a priest in the temple, has been unable to speak for some time now, and he doesn't seem to understand what's happening. The women themselves are puzzled, confused, and feeling a bit lost.

Mary travels to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Luke never says exactly why she goes, but we can guess: She wants to be with her cousin in the last months of what must have been a very difficult pregnancy; but she goes, too, to seek the elder Elizabeth's counsel and support. Mary is a young girl, perhaps in her early teens, and she needs to get away from the staring eyes and whispers. She knows that Elizabeth will understand and offer her a safe and welcoming place to rest and prepare for the arrival of her son.

As the two women meet and look at each other, they shout for joy, and they embrace. Can you see them? They hold each other; they cry, and they laugh. Fear and self-consciousness fall away from both. Elizabeth understands, affirms, and celebrates. Her whole body is jubilant; the child in her womb leaps for joy; dancing before his Lord.

At the end of Advent, we should be left with the knowledge that God has prepared the world for the mission of Jesus, and that likewise, God has prepared a mission for each of us. Our lesson in the story of Mary and Elizabeth is that the Spirit of God is present in the healing, comfort and support we can extend to one another during life's challenging moments. In the stirring of the infant in Elizabeth's womb, God calls to humanity in every time and place, saying: "I am with you every step of the way. I am with you in every storm. I am with you when the night seems unending." In Mary's Child, the immeasurable love of God becomes real to us, the peace and justice of God becomes reality; God becomes one of us.

Mary and Elizabeth, who are both called by God to motherhood at very unexpected and difficult times in their lives, where able to put aside their doubts and fears, and

open their hearts to trust in God. This same God calls each one of us to look beyond our own self-centered wants and needs and to trust in the opportunities we must mirror the love of Christ in our smallest acts of generosity, forgiveness, and justice.

Our Advent waiting is nearly over as Christmas draws near. Our gospel story is not just about what happened once upon a time, it is also about what's happening now, in this time. Once upon a time, two women, both pregnant, are heralds of the good news; prophets of hope. Luke has patterned the event of their meeting after the story of King David's dancing before the ark of God (2 Samuel 6). As the Ark of the Covenant, the sacrament of God's holy presence, was brought into Jerusalem, David danced before it. As Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant, carrying within herself God's holy presence enters Zechariah's house, John the Baptist leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb; dancing before his Lord.

In Jesus' birth, God has directly intervened in human history, sanctifying, and transforming all humanity in his love. God's Spirit, who inspired the prophets to preach, continues at work in our world in new and creative ways. Jesus Christ is the ultimate and perfect fulfillment of God's covenant with you and me. Our Advent is not merely waiting for Christmas but anticipating the coming birth of the Lord who will dwell in each one of us. Imagine, God's Holy Presence incarnate in you and me. Faced with such wonder I can think of only one thing to say:

... Shall we dance?

Christmas Season

The Nativity of the Lord

Luke 2: 1-14

"Heaven Came Down"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

John W. Peterson was a songwriter who had a major influence on evangelical Christian music in the 1950s through the 1970s. He wrote over 1,000 songs, and 35 Easter and Christmas cantatas. In 1961 he attended a Bible Conference in Pennsylvania and was asked to give a personal testimony during one of the sessions. In describing the night, he met Christ, he used the phrase "it seemed like heaven came down and glory filled my soul." He sensed almost immediately that this would make a fine title for a song, so he wrote it down and later that week completed the hymn. "Heaven Came Down" has blessed the hearts of people all over the world ever since.

"O what a wonderful, wonderful day, day I will never forget;

After I'd wandered in darkness away, Jesus my Savior I met.

O what a tender, compassionate friend, he met the need of my heart;

Shadows dispelling, with joy I am telling, he made all the darkness depart!

Heaven came down and glory filled my soul ... "

The story of Christmas is all about God's love for humankind and humankind's love for God; an intersection between we as human beings and the divine nature of the Creator of all things. The birth of Christ brings the two together as the divine took on human form. Jesus walked the human walk, talked the human talk, and embraced all of humanity. We witness this intersection each time the elements are prepared at the altar. As the water is added to the wine, the priest or deacon recites the words, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." This intersection of heaven and earth, this sharing of human and divine natures is made possible because of the birth of a child, when heaven came down and glory filled our souls.

In fact, that's a nice thought on this Christmas Eve, and one that I hope we all take home with us. Sometimes we work too hard trying to bring heaven into our homes at Christmas time. We decorate with images of angels and shepherds and wise men gazing up at a star, all in order to make a connection between heaven and earth,

divinity with humanity. I would not diminish that image for a moment. In fact, we do the same here in our home. We all do.

But when all is said and done, when the house is decorated and the cookies are baked, when the presents are wrapped and waiting for all those eager little hands to rip them open in a frenzy of flying paper and bows, we are finally left with this and this alone: tonight, on this eve of a day filled with joy and amazement, our world has stopped for a moment simply because “a child has been born unto us.” And with that event, the hopes and dreams and future of all humankind is born as well. Tonight, for each one of us, heaven came down and glory filled our souls.

*"Now I've a hope that will surely endure, after the passing of time;
I have a future in heaven for sure, there in those mansions sublime.
And it's because of that wonderful day, where at the cross I believed; Riches
eternal and blessings supernal from his precious hand I received.
Heaven came down and glory filled my soul ... "*

May the glory that fills each of our souls this night be the very presence of God made flesh and dwelling within us.

Come to us, Lord Jesus, into our hearts we pray, Amen? Amen!

"Christmas Blessings"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Merry Christmas everyone and welcome to all our visitors.

Tonight, we celebrate the birth of Christ. I believe we have the best parish in the world, but I am sure every pastor says the same thing.

God has invited you and me to live on this earth. Religion is designed to teach us how to live and God has always promised us he would come and teach us how to live so when everything was right and in order, God entered the world.

The Old Testament was rather barbaric at times. The religion the Israelites believed in had a major function, to offer sacrifices to make up for sins. In the Israelite community, if a person had a bad week, then they had a busy worship day to atone for their sins. God comes along, enters the world, and says he would like to take

over that role. Jesus comes into the world and invites us to a new way of being. Jesus wants us to live in the present with as little fear as possible.

Jesus came onto this earth about as small and insignificant entrance as possible. The birth of Jesus is very humble and wonderful. The angel Gabriel appeared to a young girl, probably around 13 or 14 years old. Mary was not famous or well known. Her son, Jesus was born in a stable with the animals and the hay. There was no special place for Jesus to be born. He had no special blanket. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, which is a food trough for the animals. Angels appeared in the sky and proclaimed the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. The angels did not appear to the kings or religious leaders, but to the shepherds and the lowly.

These were all simple and poor people. I sometimes wonder what they must have thought when all these extraordinary things started happening. What did Mary's parents and Joseph think when they heard about Mary's pregnancy? The shepherds in the field were watching their sheep when the heavens opened.

Jesus was born in a humble setting and spent thirty years doing very little that seems important, at least in the world's standard. He grew and lived his daily life the same as we do. When he was 12 years old, he got in trouble with his parents. They were upset when he got lost.

When Jesus started his ministry and for three years he taught, he forgave, he healed, and he struggled but he changed the world.

Jesus came at the time God had planned. Look at us. Our existence too, is at the time that God planned for us. Everything in our life has brought us to where we are today. Every event, every experience, had absolute meaning. Every relationship in our life, the good ones and yes, even the bad ones are important in our life because they made us grow and become who we are meant to be.

Tonight, we come together as a community to celebrate the birth of our Lord. We believe the Spirit flows through the words of the Liturgy in a unique way. We are all connected in our mutual longing for the miracle of Christmas. We are joyous on this wonderful feast of the birth of Christ because God is revealing himself to us. He becomes more real. This God incarnate is truly the light that comes into the darkness. Because of the birth of Christ, the relationship between God and humankind was never the same.

Christmas is so much more than the birth of a child. It was a most wonderful event that transformed human history. God's extraordinary love allowed our creator to become one with humanity, and we became one with God and with one another. We are family: brothers, and sisters, sons, and daughters of the living God. The birth of Jesus, the Christmas story is all about love, it's all about family. Let the celebration of that birth begin. In God's love, Merry Christmas, and blessings to each of you.

The Holy Family

Luke 2: 41-52.

"Losing Jesus?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today we celebrate a special family; the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Its definition and composition may have evolved over the years, but the family is still the basic unit in our society that gives us nurturing and support throughout our life-journey on earth. Families, regardless of their makeup, are the first and best places for the love of God to come alive.

In Luke's stories of Jesus birth and childhood, life for the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is portrayed as difficult and cruel. They are forced from their home; they are innocent victims of the political and social tensions of their time; they endure the suspicions of their own people when Mary's pregnancy is discovered; their child is born under the most difficult and terrifying of circumstances; and in today's story, they even experience every parents' worst nightmare: their child is missing for three days. And yet, through it all, their love and faithfulness to one another remains intact. The Holy Family is a model for our own families as we celebrate the joys, and confront the many tensions that threaten the stability, peace, and unity of being a family in today's world.

Imagine for a moment what it was like for Mary and Joseph when they discovered that they had lost Jesus. In the custom of the times, they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem with friends and family just as they had every year. Traveling as a group was much safer and made the long and dusty journey bearable. But somehow in the midst everything they had lost Jesus; they had lost track of their child. According to Luke's account, they traveled a day's journey before they even knew he was not among their relatives and friends. After three days of frantic searching, they finally found him in the temple, sitting at the feet of the teachers. Why was it the last place they looked for him? Had they forgotten the miracle of his conception and birth? Had they forgotten the words of the angel foretelling who Jesus was and what his purpose on earth would be?

Don't be too hard on Mary and Joseph for losing Jesus; who among us has not been guilty of losing him once or twice. We try to walk the right path, we want to live a righteous life, but too many corners are cut, we go along to get along one too many

times, we take too many moral and ethical shortcuts, and we lose Jesus. We experience a separation that is too great to bear, a betrayal too painful, a grief too dark, and we lose Jesus. God does not seem to hear our cries for help and guidance, so we stop praying. Church becomes an empty cavern, so we disengage. Sound familiar?

If we have lost Jesus or our relationship with him isn't what it used to be, it may be due to the choices and decisions we have made on how to live our life and what our priorities are. I love the story of the old farmer and his wife driving along in their pickup. She asks, "How come we don't sit all cuddled up like we used to?" To which the old farmer replies, "I ain't moved."

And there is the reality; if we find ourselves further away from Christ than we once were, guess what ... he ain't moved! While we may lose sight of him, Jesus has not lost sight of us. He is there in our temples, traveling in our caravans, and dwelling in our families. All we must do is look for him and we will find him again.

Jesus remains with us even when he seems most distant and farthest away, when he is nowhere to be found. He is with us in the love and compassion of family and friends, in the forgiveness we receive and give, in the generosity and healing we make happen even in the simplest and most hidden ways.

With the assurance of his constant presence, let us seek out Jesus in every moment and experience and relationship of the coming New Year. And don't stress out if it feels like you've lost Jesus, it happens to each of us at one time or another. It's OK, he ain't moved! He's still here. And this is a great place, among your friends and fellow believers, to find him again.

Amen? Amen!

The Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2: 1-12

“Presents and Presence”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

During Christmas time we give presents to different people and others give presents to us. It all goes back to the story of the wise men going to Bethlehem, falling on their knees, and offering the best gifts they could afford to the Baby King. But Christmas is not just about giving presents. It's more about being present, sharing warmth, affection, and sincerity. The quality of our personal presence is everything. In practice, gift-giving may sometimes be aimed more at keeping on someone's good-side, or keeping the peace, rather than being present for them. In fact, gift-giving may at times be part of the commercialisation of Christmas instead of an expression of love.

The seventeenth century painter Guido Reni has left us a magnificent painting of Matthew. An angel is whispering to him various events in the life of Jesus. The attentive evangelist is frantically writing down all that he is told. The tale will become his Gospel. A portion of those whispers was today's story of the Epiphany. Only Matthew shares this tale filled with wonder. Why the other gospel writers ignored this magical story, we will never know.

Christian tradition pictures three Wise Men and has even given them the exotic names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Perhaps they travelled from Persia or Arabia, though all that Matthew says is that they came “from the East.” The wise men were completely single-minded and sincere in their gift-giving. Their gifts were expressions of their respect, reverence, gratitude, and love for the child. Their gifts were given with no strings attached, no conditions, and no ulterior motives. The flaws in our own gift-giving may make us feel at times that the whole business of exchanging Christmas presents should be abolished, and that the commercialisation of Christmas should be eliminated altogether.

If we entertain such thoughts, it may help to remember that the consumerism of Christmas is somewhat necessary. Were it a completely spiritual celebration, hundreds of small businesses could suffer. Thousands of factory workers making bon-bons, trees, chocolates, decorations, cards, and toys, would find themselves unemployed. It may also be helpful to remember that if people did not spend

money on gifts for family and friends at Christmas, their consciences would not be roused to make donations to the poor and needy at this special time of giving and sharing. Many charities, in fact, experience a big boost at Christmas time.

Despite the limits and flaws in our gift-giving, it's not hard to purify it of its worst excesses. It's particularly important to the lives of children. The good news is that while they are attracted to receiving presents, they are also attracted to the Crib and to the story of the baby lying there clothed in rags. Their hearts are touched by the plight of his parents who are so poor that they can offer him nothing but their protection and affection, their presence in his life.

In fact, children very easily get the message that this is a story of love. They appreciate the humanity of the Holy Family, their struggles, and their sacrifices, to bring to humanity the Light of the Nations. The story of the Wise Men is a story of giving and receiving. It speaks of how gifts express love between persons, and of how gifts given with love bind people together. But it is not simply about the giving of things but the giving of persons, the sharing of selves.

In celebrating the Epiphany, we are celebrating God's deeply personal love for us. For it was out of love that the Father gave us the Son, and gave him to be our Light, our Savior, our King, and our Joy. God's Present to us it seems, is nothing less than God's Presence in our lives, made possible through the birth Jesus Christ; the greatest gift ever given.

Amen? Amen!

"We saw his star"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today's reading is about the three wise men following the star.

Epiphany means appearance or manifestation of a divine being. This epiphany marks the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, but Epiphany means so much more. It is the breaking down of dividing walls, and the end of hostilities between groups of people. In Matthew it is made clear that barriers separating people from each other do not separate them from God's love.

A little history here. We seem to group shepherds and the Magi together, but the shepherds came from near, and the Magi came from afar. Notice that the words

used in this account, “the Magi came to see the child.” Herod, who is threatened orders to have any child two years old and under to be killed suggests that Jesus could be at least two years old when the wise men appear so many scholars feel that two years could have elapsed since the birth of Jesus. God warns the wise men and Joseph to flee.

The three kings were Gentiles. This story shows how Christ enriches those who bring them their hearts. The magi came with joy in their hearts to see the Christ child, and God allowed them to see wondrous things. Like the Magi’s journey for the newborn king of the Jews, we too, search for meaning in our life and we search for God. We are challenged in our search, our own journey. Do we navigate by the stars to search for wealth, power, and prestige? Those are stars that change, fade, and burn out. Or do we fix our lives on the great star of God, which is peace, compassion, mercy, justice, and forgiveness. God’s gift to us is an invitation to change direction, to change our lives and follow the star that leads us to meaning and hope as we seek God.

We have our own epiphanies throughout our lives where we grow in the love and compassion of Christ in the peace of family and friends. In times of great joy and accomplishment, of turmoil, pain, and disappointment, the love of God is manifested to us in the most hidden of kindnesses.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph picked up everything for a new beginning. The wise men finished their long journey. We have a brand-new year, a brand-new start. This story began by following the star. Let us continue our journey to find Christ in our own lives by following the star of God’s reconciliation, and justice, enabling us to behold our God in all things.

The Baptism of the Lord

Luke 3: 15-16, 21-23

"Our coming-out party"

by Rev. Jack R. Miller

This Sunday we end the Christmas Season with the second epiphany of the Lord, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Jesus' baptism is an epiphany because it demonstrates to the whole world that he is the Son of God, the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One who is ready to begin his mission and ministry to all humankind. Jesus is no longer the babe in a Bethlehem manger, or the child visited by three kings who followed his star. He is no longer the pre-teen sitting at the elder's feet in the Temple or the young man growing in wisdom and knowledge. Today we celebrate his debut, his coming out party, his link to the Father, and his becoming the living, breathing bridge between heaven and earth.

The Lord's baptism is a vital moment in our own story of salvation. Where John used the waters of baptism to make others holy, Jesus through his baptism made the waters holy for all who follow his example. Today's gospel has Jesus beginning a journey which each of us is asked to travel. It is a journey full of purpose, a journey of intent. Saint Peter summarized the purpose and pattern of Christ's life when he said that "he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." (Acts 10:38) We are each invited, personally, to make this purpose our own. Through our own acceptance of who Jesus is, and our own baptismal experience, the gates of heaven are thrown open to welcome us because God loved us enough to send his only son and gave us the promise that anyone who believes in him will have everlasting life.

Our baptism is the beginning of a lifelong call, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to carry out what it calls us to be. We may have been baptized as children, but it is as adults that we say a personal 'yes' to the Lord who has blessed us from the start. It may be as late as our twenties or even later that we adopt that 'yes' with all our heart and soul and mind. In those mature years we can more fully hear the call of Isaiah, 'Come to the water all you who are thirsty; Seek the Lord while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near.' (Isaiah 55: 1 and 6) From the moment of our baptism the Lord keeps guiding to us through his words and teachings, and as the Scripture declares, that word "does not return to me empty,

without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.” (Isaiah 55:11)

After his baptism in the Jordan by John, Jesus hears the voice from heaven speak words of approval and blessing, and through the waters of our own baptisms that same voice speaks to you and me. Just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as he prayed, that same Spirit hovers above each of us today, blessing and compelling us to take on the work of the Gospel; continue in the year ahead the mission and ministry Jesus began so long ago. This is our epiphany, our ah-ha moment, our coming-out party. It is a monumental task, but we can do it. Like Jesus himself, today we turn our ears again to hear our baptismal call. So, let us begin; one step, one day, one act of loving kindness at a time.

Amen? Amen!

Lenten Season

1st Sunday of Lent

Luke 4: 1-13

"Deserts in Life"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The Gospel for this First Sunday of Lent is Luke's account of Jesus' desert experience. The desert described here is more accurately understood as a wilderness; a dangerous, uncharted place, inhabited by wild beasts and bandits, and many believe, haunted by demons.

Jesus' desert experience is a time for discerning and understanding his mission as the Messiah. His forty-day ordeal is marked by intense prayer and fasting, not out of a sense of penance, but to focus totally on God's will for his life. The three temptations all confront Jesus with very human choices, temptations we all experience in one form or another: greed, power, and pride.

Jesus' encounter with the devil depicts the struggle he experienced during this lonely and difficult time as he came to terms with the life that lay before him. In the end, Jesus follows the Spirit obediently on to Galilee to begin his earthly ministry.

The same Spirit that led Jesus into the desert leads us into this forty-day experience of Lent. We will ask ourselves the same kind of questions as we strive to understand who we are, who we are becoming, and to discern what God is calling us to be. Just as Jesus was tempted, we too will be confronted with many different choices and goals in life.

We experience many deserts in our journey through life; times of change, decision, transition, growth, and discovery. The wilderness we experience are those unknown and terrifying places we find ourselves as a result of circumstances often beyond our control, through mistakes we have made, or through our own sinful nature as human beings. But the desert is also in a place where we discover the Spirit of God in our lives. A Spirit who leads us from darkness into the light, a comforter who consols our wounded hearts, and nurtures us back to spiritual health and wellbeing.

Lent is a time of spiritual renewal; a recommitment to our journey of following the life and example Jesus gave us. It is more than simply going without, fasting in a prescribed way, rattling off a few Hail Mary's, or putting some coins on the offering

plate. These forty days of Lent is also our time to reflect on Jesus. A time to consider his sufferings and sacrifice; his life, death, burial, and resurrection and just what that all really means to us. It is our time to reexamine our journey and our faith, and to make radical adjustments in direction if necessary. Lent is the time for us to prepare for the wonderful celebration that Easter morning will bring; the amazement of the empty tomb and the utter joy of our risen Lord.

Let us begin our Lenten journey today. Let us walk through the desert and confront life's challenges together. One Spirit, One Faith, One Baptism, One Lord of all!

Amen? Amen!

2nd Sunday of Lent

Luke 9: 28-36

"Keyholes for Christ"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

A group of African missionaries were at a retreat discussing how best to spread the Gospel. Various methods were suggested. Some wanted to pass out literature, others wanted to produce videos for television, and still others suggested using radio announcements and social media. Finally, a young woman addressed the gathering and said, "When we judge a pagan village is ready for the Lord Jesus, the first people we should send in is a Christian family. It is their lives that will inspire the villagers to think seriously about becoming a Christian. Their presence would be a much better testimony than fliers or videos or radio announcements. They will become a keyhole through which others see Christ."

The Second Sunday of Lent always presents us with the wonderful image of Jesus' Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. A keyhole moment through which we catch a glimpse of what heaven will be like. Peter, James, and John were there, and they woke from their afternoon nap to witness this glorious event. They didn't want it to end, this special preview of heaven, this transformation of Jesus before their very eyes, this visit by Moses and Elijah; they didn't want any of it to end. They said "Hey! Let's put up tents," let's hang together a while here on the mountain top; they wanted to hold on to this special moment, but it had to end. It had to end because there was work to be done. Moses and Elijah appeared to speak about the Exodus. Not the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, but the Exodus of the new people of God from a world of terror and sin to a world of love and peace. They would be led by a new Moses and hear the truth spoken by a new Elijah. His name was Jesus and their job as his followers was to become the keyholes through which a hurting world would see Christ. And it would be through the testimony of their lives that others would be inspired to become Jesus' followers as well.

"Example is not the main thing," Albert Schweitzer once said, "It is the only thing." This is our challenge during this season of reflection and change. Like Jesus in today's Gospel, we too must become transfigured, transformed into keyholes through which others see Christ. It is in this holy endeavor that we help the lost and downtrodden to realize the holiness and grace that exists within each of us, and

through our living example, inspire lives filled with despair and anguish, to transform into lives blessed with hope and healing.

Someone asked Mother Teresa how she might better spread the Gospel. She replied simply, "Smile more often. Live as though you really believe that there are 542 references to joy in the Scriptures."

In 1994 before a gathering of the 104th Congress, House Minority Whip ONewt Gingrich spoke these words which still ring true today: "It is impossible to maintain our American civilization," he said, "with 12-year old's having babies, with 15-year old's killing each other, with 17-year old's dying of AIDS, and with 18-year old's ending up with diplomas they can't even read." It is a sad truth about the times we live in. We find ourselves becoming the kind of society that other nineteenth century societies sent missionaries to. We need keyholes through which our world can see Christ. Just like the young woman shared with that gathering in Africa, we need to become missionaries of the Gospel in our own time and place, keyholes through which our country and our world can see Christ.

Let God fill our lives with purpose this morning. Let God fill us with peace and blessings and fortify us as his missionaries amid our hurting world. Let God's love flow through us as we reach out to others in God's name. Let us live the faith we hold, smile more often, believe in joy and hope, and begin our work anew as keyholes through which others can see Christ.

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Lent

Luke 13:1-9

"Are We Willing?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Thomas Jefferson left instructions that his tombstone was to only mention that he was the author of the Declaration of Independence, and to make no reference to him being the third President of the United States. Jefferson was attempting to make a very serious point. One's title or titles are not as important as one's accomplishments in life.

When the people in our gospel reading told Jesus how some Galileans died, victims of Pilate's anger, they wondered how God could have let this happen; but instead of explaining it, Jesus asks "do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" He goes on to warn about the need of repentance and illustrates this with the parable of the fruitless fig tree.

Jesus' roundabout answer should make us stop and think. He rejects the popular myth that all misfortunes are the results of divine punishments. Our Creator is not a stern, punishing God who deals out sickness, accidents, and tragedy as a response to people's sins. Doesn't the sunshine and the rain fall on everyone? Notice how Jesus redirects the discussion and invites his followers to examine their own lives, saying, that they must listen to God's call to conversion and to a change of lifestyle. Life is too fragile, too short, Jesus seems to be saying. Why wait another moment to find peace in God.

We Christians need to internalize our religion if we want to revive our faith. It's not enough to hear the Gospel, we need to listen to Jesus living in the deepest part of our being. Everyone, saint, and sinner alike, need to listen to God's Good News, not from outside but from within. Let God's word descend from our head to our heart. Our faith will be stronger, more joyful, more contagious, and, yes, more fruitful.

Francis of Assisi once invited a young friar to go with him into town to preach. Francis and the young man spent all day walking through the streets and then came home. When the day's journey was done, the young friar was disappointed and asked, "Weren't we supposed to preach today?" Francis replied, "Son, we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We were seen by many, and our behavior was noted. It is of no use walking anywhere to preach unless we

preach wherever we walk!" To Francis, preaching wasn't merely quoting some words out of the Bible from time to time but becoming one who lives by the word of God each day. Francis knew that people gain more from seeing faith in action than merely hearing about faith, and he was willing to let his life become his testimony. What about us? Are we as willing?

The gardener in our Gospel passage asked the owner of the vineyard to give the barren fig tree another chance to produce fruit. He promised to dig around it, fertilize it, to give it one last chance to prove itself. In this parable, Jesus suggests that we too need to nurture our faith and commit ourselves to being helpful in the lives of others. We too, deserve another chance to prove ourselves, and Jesus wants to help us accomplish this. Question is, are we willing? Are we willing to let Christ dig and prune and fertilize and water, let him refine our faith as we strive to love as God loves? In a word, are we willing to be one of those people like Thomas Jefferson who believe that accomplishment in life is more important than titles? Or St. Francis who believed that faith is shown more through action than words alone. Jesus is our gardener, and he is ready to heal us, help us grow, make of us a tree that bears much fruit. Question is, are we willing to let him do his work?

Amen? Amen!

"Lord of the Dance"

By Rev. Liz Miller

*"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 Jack 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. All we need to do is trust.

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 wallflower days behind and join in the dance of life. God will lead us. 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. Let us show love, not hate.

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. Don't ever give up on hope. 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 can 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! Amen?

4th Sunday of Lent

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

"Which Son are We?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

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 forgiveness, but they can’t be empty promises. Celebrate your blessings and give God the glory! For this, my son, was DEAD, and is alive again. He was LOST but is found.

5th Sunday of Lent

John 8: 1-11.

"Land of Beginning Again"

By - Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our Gospel story, a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought before Jesus. She had to be terrified and certainly expected to die; her guilt was undeniable, and the Law of Moses dictated her fate. The Pharisees intentions are very clear, what would Jesus, the prophet of love and kindness say about this; what would he do? I'm sure the Pharisees thought they were being clever and had created a no-win situation for Jesus. It didn't really matter whether he condemned this woman or let her go, they didn't care about the woman, nor did the crowd the Pharisees brought with them, they wanted to discredit this prophet from Galilee, expose him as a fraud, and end, once and for all, this threat to their lofty positions in the community as the authority and caretakers of the law.

Instead of responding though, Jesus knelt, put his fingers in the sand, and there was overpowering silence. Can you see it? The Pharisees pointing fingers, the crowd holding stones, the woman cowering and weeping softly, the disciples pondering, all while Jesus knelt and wrote in the sand, the only record of his writing anything.

When Jesus finally stood and spoke, the sheer power of the words stunned everyone. He raised his head and gazed at the crowd, eye to eye with each man who held a stone, eye to eye with the finger pointing Pharisees; "Let the one among you who is without sin throw the first stone" Jesus said, then went back to his writing in the sand; the silence returned. Powerful words, compassionate words that forced the woman's accusers, one by one, to shrug their shoulders, drop their stones and walk away until only Jesus remained. Then from the silence Jesus spoke again, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she replied. Then Jesus looked up from his writing once again. Helping the woman to her feet, he looked into her eyes and said, "Then neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."

It is very important that we understand the lesson our scripture is giving us. Jesus did not make light of or dismiss the woman's sin, he gave her a second chance, an opportunity to "go and sin no more," a hope that she could change her life. The basic difference between the Pharisees and Jesus is that they wished to condemn

the woman, and he wished to forgive her and offer a better way to live. Isn't that what we are all looking for?

There is a poem written by Louisa Fletcher that comes to mind:

*"How I wish that there was some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never put on again."*

The good news for all of us is that there is such a place, a land where new beginnings are found. It is in the gospel of second chances Jesus offered the woman in our reading this morning; a gospel he also offers to you and I and to all who have made mistakes in life. It is offered to each of us every time we receive the Eucharist. It is a chance to be renewed, reborn, and to begin again. And because we are followers of Jesus Christ, it is what we must offer to one another as well. It is the bread and cup and spirit we share as a community of faith.

Christ calls us to walk with all our brothers and sisters in this Land of Beginning Again. We are called to help restore and heal the lost, the troubled, and the disappointed with whom we share God's love and compassion. In doing this, we become a reflection of God's Easter promise; a voice through which God speaks, hands that God can use to reach out to the lost, the lonely, and the frightened.

The woman in our reading this morning was given the most precious of gifts; a second chance, a new life resurrected and ever changed by her encounter with Christ. That is our gift as well. Let us take it in our arms and hold on tight; let us raise from the dust, go our way, and sin no more.

Amen? Amen!

Easter Season

Palm Sunday

Luke 19: 28-40

"Mission or Agenda?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Only Matthew and John mention the fulfillment of prophecy as Jesus enters the city on that first Palm Sunday. Their quotation is carefully tailored to reflect the coming Messiah, not as a conquering warrior astride a noble steed, but as a Messiah-king who is one with the poor and lowly of the world.

When Jesus emerged on the public scene, he was an overnight sensation. Crowds of people lined the streets as he came into town. On that first Palm Sunday, the crowds welcome Jesus with palms and cloaks laid before him, and there were shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" As one preacher quipped, it was an "early Palestinian equivalent of a ticker tape parade."

It is easy to assume that everyone who lined the streets that day had a different reason for being there, for waving their palms and lining Jesus' path with their cloaks. Some were probably political activists; they'd heard Jesus had supernatural powers, and they wanted him to use them to free Israel from Roman rule. Others may have had loved ones who were sick or dying, and they waved their branches hoping for physical healing. Just like today, I'm sure there were some onlookers as well, looky-loos with nothing better to do, while others were genuine followers who wished Jesus would establish himself as an earthly king. Funny thing, Jesus was the only one in the parade who knew why he was going to Jerusalem. He was going there to die. He had a mission, while everyone else had an agenda. What about us? As we sing and wave our palms this morning, do we have an agenda or a mission?

There is contradiction within the traditional Palm Sunday liturgy. It begins with a sense of celebration as palm branches are carried and Hosannas sung, much like the people of Jerusalem did so many years ago. But Matthew's account of Christ's Passion confronts us with the cruelty, injustice and selfishness that lead to his crucifixion and death. Are we any different? We welcome the Christ of victory, the Christ of Palm Sunday, but do we tend to turn away from the Christ of suffering and of the poor, the Christ of Good Friday? Does the palm branch we hold become symbol of the inconsistency that often exists between the faith we profess with our

lips and the faith we profess with our lifestyle? In celebrating Palm Sunday, do we have a mission or an agenda?

It is easy to welcome the Palm Sunday Jesus into our own Jerusalem's because we see hope in him. He speaks of a kingdom in which we are forgiven, we are healed, and we are loved. But Jesus wants more. Jesus asks us to take up our own crosses and follow in his footsteps, insists that we sell all we have and give to the poor, asks us to embrace a faith that is centered on more than words and rituals. On this Palm Sunday as we wave our palms and shout hosanna, Jesus wants us to have a mission, not an agenda. Jesus wants us to be his follower, not just a curious onlooker with nothing else to do.

As we celebrate Christ this Palm Sunday, may we fully embrace the Jesus of love, justice, humility, and selflessness. As we strive to mirror Jesus' compassion, may we be willing to imitate his limitless reconciliation and unconditional forgiveness, as well. Let this week's focus be on the Christ of Alfred Lord Tennyson who described Jesus as the "Lord from heaven born of a village girl. Carpenter's son. Wonderful. Prince of Peace. The Mighty God." Let us follow that image of Christ and join him in his mission to make our world a better place.

Let us begin this holiest of weeks as the people of Jerusalem did so long ago. Let us open the gates of our hearts, line the pathway to our souls with all that we have to offer, and welcome God into our midst. Then let us proclaim our Hosanna's with our palms and voices for all to see and hear and live our Hosanna's as well; through every act of kindness, we extend on Christ's behalf. Let us have a mission and not an agenda. Let our lips and our lives proclaim for all to hear, we follow the Christ, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Amen? Amen!

"Place our all before the Lord"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

What's the single most important thing that you own? What's the one thing that defines who you are as a person? What single item could you not be without?

Maybe it's your investment portfolio, your savings, your children's college fund, your retirement account or pension. For some of us it could be our personal items,

our paints, our tools, our sewing and crocheting needles; our outlets for creating something beautiful. For others it could be our instruments of expression; our piano, our guitar, our violin; our means of making the music we feel in our very souls. Maybe it's simply something electronic. What about that iPad, cell phone or laptop? Or maybe it's your work tools, your microscope, your wrenches, and drills. Things that define who you are and what you contribute to your world.

Perhaps what is most important to us is not a thing at all. Maybe it's our happiest or most challenging moments; the album of life that unfolds with memories of good times and bad. Whatever that single most important item or moment is, Palm Sunday challenges us to place it all before the Lord; lay it on the ground before Christ.

Why? Because that's what the crowd does in our Gospel reading today. They take their most precious possession, their cloaks, and lay them on the ground before Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. Palm branches do not play a large part in Luke's account of the event. Palm branches are everywhere and cost little or nothing. But cloaks are put on the animal's back, and cloaks are strewn on the roadway. In Jesus' time, your cloak was the most expensive article of clothing you possessed, and most people only owned one that was constantly mended and never discarded. It was nothing like the disposable clothing that we have today. And for the poorest of the poor, their cloak was more than an article of clothing, it was their shelter; their home. But in our story today, everyone, rich or poor, place all that they have at the disposal of the Messiah-King. Can we do any less?

This Sunday is about emptying oneself in order to be filled with the love of God. As Christ empties himself of his very divinity to reconcile humankind to a life with God, the people of Jerusalem empty themselves of their most precious possession to welcome into their midst the Anointed One, the Christ, and his reign of peace and love. To be true disciples of Jesus is to put the things we value the most in life at his service. To be true disciples of Christ we must empty ourselves of our own needs and expectations and to place all that we have, all that we are, at his disposal to help create the kingdom of God in our time and place.

Let us begin this holiest of weeks as the people of Jerusalem did so long ago. Let us open the gates of our hearts, line the pathway to our souls with all that we have to offer, and welcome God into our midst. Let us proclaim with our palms and

voices for all to see and hear: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Amen? Amen!

Holy Thursday

John 13: 1-15

"Become what we have received."

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our liturgy tonight we traditionally celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the last supper; the new covenant between God and humankind sealed in the body and blood of Christ. But there is more. Jesus also institutes another new commandment in the washing of feet. This evening is often called Maundy Thursday, taken from the Latin word "mandatum," which means "commandment." The special character of this second covenant is rooted in humbled servanthood. By the symbolic washing of each other's feet, we follow Jesus' example and fulfill his commandment to serve one another, and to love one another as we have been served and loved by Christ.

Through this gesture of washing his disciples' feet, a menial, degrading task which was only done by slaves, expresses the fundamental significance of the life and passion of Jesus. It is a love so profound that Jesus is willing to offer up his very life to cleanse the transgressions of all humankind; atone for your sins and mine.

Jesus washes his disciples' feet to signify their spiritual purification as well as to link this action with the Eucharist they are to share in loving humility; and in remembrance of him. It is through this cleansing of blood and water that we are also renewed. The new commandments Jesus instituted on this night so long ago, comes at a price we must be willing to pay: We must become what we have received, we must become for each other Christ the healer, Christ the compassionate and selfless brother, sister, and friend; Christ the humble "washer of feet."

This same Jesus who revealed the wonders of God in stories about mustard seeds, fishing nets and ungrateful children, on this last night of his life leaves his small band of disciples and us his most beautiful parable: *As I have washed your feet like a humbled servant, so you must wash the feet of each other and serve one another. As I have loved you without limit or condition, you must love one another without limit or condition.* Tonight's parable is so simple, but its lesson is central to what being a real disciple of Christ is all about. When we are inspired by the love of Christ, the smallest act of service done for another takes on extraordinary dimensions.

Jesus became a servant to show us how to become servants. Jesus humbled himself to show us how to be humble. Jesus wanted his disciples and us to see that in becoming servants, doing day in, day out what may seem the simplest of tasks, we become the means by which Jesus carries on his ministry in a loving and compassionate way in our day and time.

Let us keep that in mind as we wash each other's feet tonight, and we venerate the cross-tomorrow night, and as we celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Sunday. Jesus came to humbly serve; can we do any less? Let us all make a commitment to serving and remembering Jesus, by loving and serving each other after his example. Let us become what we have received.

Amen? Amen!

Easter Sunday

John 20: 1-9

"Easter People"

By Rev. Liz Miller

I want to start my homily today with a blessing for each of you.

"May the Lord stir in your heart an Easter faith; may the Lord open your eyes to his Easter power; may the Lord inspire you to sing today with Easter joy; and may the Lord bless you today with his Easter love. Amen."

I pray the Lord will bless you each personally, with an Easter blessing.

Easter is at the heart of what we do here in this sanctuary, in the church, our homes and as Christians. What did Jesus come to accomplish? Christmas is a great holiday and one that most people love. Yet, Easter is the greatest of all the feasts. We need Christmas to celebrate the Incarnation, the coming of God into our world. We need Good Friday, the day Jesus died on the cross and Easter, the day that Jesus rose from the dead. We cannot have Easter without Christmas or Good Friday. Jesus came to save us from sin and death. It was at the open tomb that he made that possible. He opened the door to us for eternal life. Easter is the day that Jesus defeated death, not only for himself, but also for us.

Can you imagine what it must have been like on that Friday afternoon when Jesus was hung on the cross and the skies turned dark as he uttered his last words. His followers had such dreams for him, and they loved him but all of that was now only a dream. There was nothing left for them. He said he was the Son of God but now he was gone. He was dead. Was their faith shaken to the very core of their being? Had they lost all hope? They must have felt that Jesus had failed, and his enemies had conquered him. The men ran away in fear, all but the women and the beloved apostle went into hiding. They were terrified.

In today's gospel we notice that Mary Magdalene, the first to discover the tomb is empty evidently doesn't believe in the resurrected life. She thinks someone has taken Jesus. She does not even consider that Jesus might have risen from the dead. Even when she sees Jesus, she does not recognize him until he calls her name. She is thinking logically. How that must have grieved her heart. John arrives and sees the wrappings on the ground and recognizes that something has changed. Jesus is not there. Peter arrives and examines the tomb. Maybe John had some sort of

insight to what Jesus was doing. John saw and believed even though he did not understand the scripture that Jesus was to rise from the dead.

I know that if someone died, I would expect that person to stay dead. I would not expect the grave to be empty in three days. How many of us would act the same way as Mary and the apostles? The advantage the apostles had thought was they lived with Jesus for three years and saw his miracles, including the calling forth of Lazarus. How could they forget the teachings of Jesus?

Today, do we just take the resurrection for granted? We read this story every year. Do we live through Holy week and Easter Sunday just as another day or do we take this time to deepen our faith and grow closer to the God who gave his all so we could have eternal life with him/her?

What does resurrection mean to us? To me it is life giving. We need to look at who we are, who we are becoming. We all go through the dark nights, the questions, the pain in life, the Good Fridays, but then comes the morning and we see the Easter sun, the brightness, the hope, and we are lifted. The resurrection is new life and a new way of seeing things, a new way of being.

When Jesus appeared in his resurrected body there was no judgment or condemnation for the apostles. Maybe the resurrected life exists in all of us, and we are asked to let go of judgment and to see people as God sees them. Maybe we are the ones that cause damage because of our perceptions instead of seeing clearly like Jesus sees. When God created, he rested and on the 7th day and said, "this is good?"

We know there is evil in the world, but we need to go beyond this and see the person that God has made. As Christians we need to see and live the Easter message...Is Jesus asking us to go through a process of new life and look for the life giving? With his help, in the dark times we should cling to him and try to piece together the fabric that holds us together, that comforts us, that clothes us, that makes us warm and protects us. We need to take the hand of Jesus and of each other to live the power of the resurrection.

When Jesus appeared outside the tomb Mary did not recognize him until he used her name. He said. "Mary", and she immediately knew who he was. Today, he calls us each by our name. Jesus came in love and forgiveness. How can we do any less? John Paul once said, "Do not abandon yourselves to despair. We are the Easter

people and hallelujah is our song.” May we truly live the Easter message and be transformed to understand the extraordinary plan that God has for each of us! The tomb is empty. He has risen, as he said he would.

2nd Sunday of Easter

John 20: 19-31

"Of breath and peace"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Stories of the appearances of Jesus after his crucifixion are very familiar to us. Early in church history encounters of individuals and groups with the Risen Christ were told over and over long before the first Gospel was written.

The story of Thomas, called Didymus (the twin) begins as the terrified disciples are gathered on Easter night. Thomas is missing. Perhaps he is off gathering supplies. Even though the door is locked the Risen Jesus appears in the room and greets the astonished disciples with the words "peace be with you." Can you imagine what that was like? Then Jesus does something strange. He breathes on them and says, "receive the Holy Spirit." John wants his readers to understand that just as God created man and woman by breathing life into them in Genesis 2: 7, the Risen Christ re-creates humankind by breathing new life into us through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

As John's story continues, Thomas has returned, and the disciples excitedly share what they had seen and heard. Jesus was alive! Thomas does not respond with joy but skepticism. He refuses to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he can place his fingers in the wounds made by the nails of the cross, and until he could see where the Roman spear had stabbed Jesus in the side. This is important to us because Thomas stood where we cannot stand, saw what we cannot see, touched the One we cannot touch, and ended up confessing, "My Lord and my God."

A week later Jesus appears to his disciples again, and this time Thomas is with them. Jesus invites Thomas to examine the wounds in his hands and side and to no longer doubt but to believe. In response, Thomas makes a profound profession of faith because of what he had seen with his own eyes; touched with his own hands. Jesus responds by acknowledging his faith and the even greater faith of we who "believe without seeing." In this he promises that the same peace and breath of Christ that brought his first disciples' new life through the Spirit is available to you and me today; right now; right here.

The peace that Christ breathes into us is not just a good feeling; it is a call to hard work. The peace that Christ breathes into us asks that we honor one another as

children of the same Creator; the peace that Christ breathes into us demands that we seek to build bridges and find solutions rather than assigning blame or extracting punishment; the peace that Christ breathes into us desires that we build relationships with one another that are just, ethical, and moral.

Thomas was looking for the certainty of physical evidence, but Jesus offered him something more: the Easter promise, a reason to hope, and a foundation for belief. For you and I our faith in the Risen Christ brings us the fulfillment of that same promise: that we are loved that our lives matter, that we are becoming the people God created us to be. We will still have our Thomas- moments, those times when we are not sure where or how to proceed, when we question our own motives and the motives of others, when all seems lost and pointless. Easter does not deny the effects of, nor does it erase the wounds we suffer in life, but Easter moves us beyond the scars to the healing and wholeness of God's compassion. We all have life-wounds to remind us that all pain and grief, all ridicule and suffering, are transformed into healing and peace in the love of God we experience from others, and what we extend to them in return. Compassion, forgiveness, and justice can mend our broken spirits, heal the nail-marks we bare, and restore our faith. In the light of Easter's hope and with the assurance of God's unlimited grace, even in our simplest acts of kindness and understanding we find the realization of Easter's promise.

The gift of faith is found in our hope that through the peace Christ breathes into us we can transform and remake, re-create and re-focus our lives in the love of God and in the life of Christ. May this Easter Season, especially in these difficult times we live in, illuminate our spirits with the light of hope.

Amen? Amen!

3rd Sunday of Easter

John 21: 1-19

"Do you love me?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

*"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach ... "*

Who can forget the beautiful words written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning? Words that are read at countless weddings as an expression of true love. Love is a word so often expressed but just as often misunderstood or misrepresented. What does it truly mean to love? Are there human words that can express true love? The ancient Greeks had six words that described the many forms love can take. They ranged from self-love to playful love to passionate love and even to deep friendship. In this modern-day digital age, filled with netspeak and emojis, we have even adopted twenty-first century abbreviations for love. We write "I luv you" in emails and texts to express that informal and non-committal type of love we feel for a person. But that is not the type of love Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote about, and that is not the depth of love expressed in our scripture reading this morning.

Today's Gospel records two events that take place at the Sea of Tiberias after the resurrection. In the first (vs. 1-14) the apostles are broke and hungry. Since many of them were fishermen, they did what comes naturally, they went fishing. Sadly, after spending the whole night on the water they caught nothing. At daybreak the Risen Jesus makes his presence known to Peter and his fishing companions by calling on them to cast their nets off the right side of the boat. Despite their doubts and frustrations, they do as Jesus instructs, end up with an incredible catch, and as John's Gospel notes, their nets did not tear. When we act out of love, when we put aside our own fears and expectations for the sake of others, when we seek to imitate the selfless compassion of the Risen Jesus, we will discover how strong and indestructible our own "nets" are, and that we can realize a "catch" of good things despite the hopelessness of the night, the fear of the unknown deep, and the weight of the burdens we struggle to haul on shore.

The second event (vs. 15-19) is a familiar one, but no less miraculous. When the apostles came ashore, they saw that the Master was preparing their breakfast. He was toasting bread and roasting their freshly caught fish over a simmering charcoal fire. After the meal, sitting by the fire he had made, Jesus reaches out to Peter and lovingly lifts him from his despair. Jesus looks through Peter's betrayal on the night he was captured, passed the broken and bewildered heart, and sees the powerful leader that is masked within the discouraged fisherman. "Do you love me?" he asks; "Feed my sheep." Peter responded, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." That was true. Jesus knew that Peter loved him. So, Jesus said, Feed my lambs. Then Jesus asked again, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me (v. 16). Peter said again, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said, Tend my sheep. Then, Jesus asked again, do you love me (v. 17). And Peter responded, Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you, Jesus said, Feed my sheep."

Peter was able to rise above his own human weakness and self-doubt. He was entrusted with the care of Jesus' flock, his church, on the banks of Tiberius that morning. It was a moment of re-creation and rehabilitation for Peter. Today, this same Jesus encourages each one of us to rise above whatever limits us, blocks our way, or holds us back from the fullness of life he wants us to have.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks us today. "Feed my Lambs."

"Do you love me?" he asks us again. "Tend my Sheep."

"Do you love me?" he asked a third time.

Will our answer be the same as Peter's was that morning on the shore of Tiberias? "Lord, you know everything," you see me like no one else does. You penetrate the masks that I wear, to shield my inmost self, and you see my true heart; "you know that I love you." If that is our answer, his response will be the same as it was for Peter; "Feed my Sheep."

To this band of disciples who abandoned him on Good Friday, the Risen Jesus renews his call to them and to us, to become "fishers" of humanity: to seek re-birth rather than condemnation, to rejoice in reconciliation rather than to dwell on the sins of the past, and to accept one another as brothers and sisters rather than to isolate those who are different in some way. "Tend my Sheep," Jesus says to us this morning; the Good Shepherd is passing onto us the role of shepherd to his flock.

He wants us to become his arms, his legs, his voice, and to follow the example of his servant heart. Do You love me Jesus asks? What will our answer be? Amen?

4th Sunday of Easter

John 10: 27-30

"Do we know the shepherd?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

There is a story told about everyone's favorite psalm, the twenty third. At a family gathering, a youngster stood up and recited it from memory. It was beautiful. His family applauded enthusiastically and asked him to do it a second time. But before he could begin, grandpa stood up from his easy chair, and in a voice seasoned by the years, he began, "The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want..." The family sat hypnotized, and when he finished and returned to his chair, they were too overwhelmed to applaud. Through the silence the young boy's father finally spoke up. "Our son knows the psalm," he said, "but grandpa knows the shepherd."

What about you and me? Do we "know the shepherd?" In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Jesus offers himself as a guide who brings us into green pastures filled with abundant life described in the 23rd psalm. Can we hear the Good Shepherd calling our name, or are we too buried in the busyness and distraction of our demanding lives? Do we hear his voice? Are we listening to it?

Christ the Good Shepherd calls us to listen consciously, deliberately, and wisely for his voice in the depths of our heart. He asks us to listen for his voice in the love and joy, the pain and anguish, the cries for mercy and justice of those around us; the Risen Christ assures us that we are always safe and accepted in the loving embrace of God. In turn, as his disciples we become the voice of Christ and the embrace of God for one another in the compassion, peace, and forgiveness we humbly offer through the Spirit that fills us.

In the midst of our noise-filled lives, hampered by the expectations made of us to secure the lifestyles we desire for ourselves and our families, the voice of Christ the Good Shepherd speaks to us in the depths of our hearts, in the pull of our conscience, in the emptiness of our spirits. Do we hear him? It is his voice we hear asking questions we don't want to confront, inviting us to places we would rather not go, warning us of the dangers that lie ahead. To hear the voice of Christ demands that we come out of the isolation of our own interests and listen deliberately and intentionally to the struggling, the poor, and those in crisis. To hear

the voice of Christ is not easy; we must first be willing to listen for it with both attention and intention. It is in hearing and responding to the voice of the Good Shepherd that we begin to live lives of purpose and meaning; we begin to mend the brokenness of our hearts, we begin to experience the Easter Promise that the dawn will come for us even after the darkest of nights.

Christ speaks in many voices, including our own. We can become the voice of Christ's compassion, comfort, forgiveness, and peace in even our smallest and simplest acts of kindness and selflessness. To hear the Good Shepherd demands that we let ourselves emerge from the isolation of our own fears and disappointments, our resentments, and expectations, and hear Christ speaking to us in the plight of the poor, the needs of the helpless, and the cry of the persecuted. In turn, the Risen One asks us to be his voice to them in the compassion, support, and forgiveness we extend in the Spirit of Easter peace. In acts of generosity, love and forgiveness offered in his name, we echo and give voice to the Risen Christ and the good news of hope and grace that is the Easter Promise. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Let us respond to Jesus' call in the words of the old hymn:

*"I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus, No turning back, no turning back."*

Amen? Amen!

5th Sunday of Easter

John 13: 31-35

"Love One Another"

By Rev. Liz Miller

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another." What does that mean and how can we love everyone? A commandment to love is not only difficult to follow, but also almost impossible to enforce. How can you require someone to love someone else? How can you force someone to love another person especially when that someone is not very loveable? I have experienced this in my life by people who have truly hurt me or blamed me for their issues. Even though I know those people are mentally ill, how do I love them? Is God asking the impossible? At times like this there is conflict with my love of God and what he is asking. My prayer then becomes, Lord, give me the desire to want to forgive and help me in my struggle. For me, this usually takes time, it is a process.

I know It is only in response to the offer of love from the Risen Christ that this can make sense, and that we can forgive. Love of neighbor is the requirement. Today's Gospel story takes place in the upper room on the night of the Last Supper. Jesus has just completed the dramatic washing of his disciples' feet and has further shocked them with the warnings of Judas' role in the events to follow. After Judas leaves, Jesus addresses his dearest friends and leaves them a new commandment: "As I have loved you," Jesus tells them, "so must your love be for one another." What is new about this commandment is that Jesus leaves his disciples the example of his own selfless, sacrificial, forgiving love as a model to follow. Jesus gives this new commandment as a standard for all human relationships. It is that concept of unconditional love that distinguishes us as people of faith, as true disciples of the Risen Christ.

Love, for Jesus, involves action more than feeling. Jesus says, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you." (Matthew 5:44). Listen to the action verbs. Bless, do good, pray. We might not be able to feel warm and fuzzy for other people, but we need to act in kind and loving ways toward them. Even if we do not feel it in our heart, we can start out by praying for that person.

In the end, it is only when working with the grace of God that we can love our neighbor as ourselves in this new way. It is only by living every day with Jesus that we can love our neighbor as ourselves. Can we live our day in such a way that we are in communion with Jesus in some way all day? It is only by living our day with Jesus that we can love

as he loved. It is only by living close to Jesus that we can love as Jesus asked us. If not, we will be relying only on our human efforts alone, and we will love with some other type of love but not the unconditional love Jesus asked for when he said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you."

What really matters in the end is whom you have loved and who has loved you. Love always demands the best from us and brings out the best in us. Being loved gives us surprising energy and courage. Love makes us fruitful, productive, strong, and constant in doing good. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, famous for her work on the stages of dying, has written: 'Love is the flame that warms our soul, energizes our spirit, and supplies passion to our lives. It's our connection to God and to one another.' Love is giving of self and has power to heal ourselves and others. To love is to heal, both those who receive and those who give it. To decide to love is to be fully open to life. It is choice and not just feeling. When we choose to be loving, caring, healing, helping, and forgiving persons, we grow towards what our life is meant to be. There's no other way. So, Jesus insists, very strongly: 'Love one another, as I have loved you.' Jesus leaves us a new standard of love, a standard that can transform the earth we live in into a world driven by the compassion and justice of God. It is the legacy of the cross and the legacy of the empty tomb. It is the legacy that Christ passed on to us and it has become our very identity as his disciples. It is a legacy centered in such complete and constant love that our faithfulness in imitating the Risen Jesus is lived out through our willing spirit to love selflessly, completely, and unconditionally.

Jesus the Healer and Reconciler, Jesus the Foot washer, Jesus the Crucified, Jesus the Risen One entrusts to us as his disciples of today, this new standard and understanding of love: love that places others first and the common good before our own. It is not an easy legacy to accept or live, it is not an easy path to follow, but Christ holds out his nail scarred hands and asks you and I to take up our cross and follow him; to carry on his legacy to this generation and beyond.

"As I have loved you," Jesus says to us today, "so must your love be for one another." It is both our commandment from the Risen Christ and our legacy of love. Let us embrace this love! Let us live it each day!

Amen? Amen!

"Legacy of Love"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In the world as we know it, a commandment to love is not only difficult to follow, but also almost impossible to enforce. How can you require someone to love someone else? How can you force someone to love another person especially when that someone is not very loveable? It is only in response to the offer of love from the Risen Christ that this can make sense. In order to be part of the new heaven and the new earth, to be in the kingdom of God, love of neighbor is the absolute requirement. And so, for those who love God, for those who profess to follow in the footsteps of Christ, we obey, as best we can, the commandment to love.

Today's Gospel story takes place in the upper room on the night of the Last Supper. Jesus has just completed the dramatic washing of his disciples' feet and has further shocked them with the warnings of Judas' role in the events to follow. After Judas leaves, Jesus addresses his dearest friends and leaves them a new commandment: "As I have loved you," Jesus tells them, "so must your love be for one another." What is new about this commandment is that Jesus leaves his disciples the example of his own selfless, sacrificial, forgiving love as a model to follow. This same new model of love is how the world will identify its disciples. To those who profess to follow him, from the original disciples to us, and from us to the very last generation who will inhabit this earth, Jesus gives this new commandment as a standard for all human relationships. It is that concept of unconditional love that distinguishes us as men and women of faith, as true disciples of the Risen Christ.

As a community we accompany one another through our life-journey. We support one another through all the joys and sorrows, and in doing so, become the very image of Christ to one another. Our identity as disciples of the Risen Christ is centered in the joy and optimism of our love for others as God's children and as

brothers and sisters to one another; it is the love that unites God the Father and God the Son to us, and in turn, unites each of us to one another.

Jesus leaves us a new standard of love, a standard that transcends legalisms and measurements, a standard that renews and re-creates our relationships, a standard that can transform the earth we live in into a world driven by the compassion and justice of God. It is the legacy of the cross and the legacy of the empty tomb. It is the legacy that Christ passed on to us and it has become our very identity as his disciples. It is a legacy centered in such complete and constant love that our faithfulness in imitating the Risen Jesus is lived out through our willing spirit to love selflessly, completely, and unconditionally.

Jesus the Healer and Reconciler, Jesus the Foot washer, Jesus the Crucified, Jesus the Risen One entrusts to us as his disciples of today, this new standard and understanding of love: love that places others first and the common good before our own. It is not an easy legacy to accept or live, it is not an easy path to follow, but Christ holds out his nail scarred hands and asks you and I to take up our cross and follow him; to carry on his legacy to this generation and beyond.

"As I have loved you," Jesus says to us today, "so must your love be for one another." It is both our commandment from the Risen Christ and our legacy of love. Let us embrace this love! Let us live it each day!

Amen? Amen!

6th Sunday of Easter

John 14: 23-29

"Shalom!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In his Last Supper discourse, Jesus leaves his followers the gift of peace and the promise of the Spirit. It is a pledge that after his death and resurrection the Father will send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, in his name.

This promised Spirit is instrumental in bringing about the peace that Jesus promises to give us. It is not the peace that the world gives, which is often the mere absence of conflict and transitory; more illusion than substance. It is much more than a "spiritual tranquilizer," as Thomas Merton called it, or a mental and emotional barrier we construct to protect ourselves from unpleasant situations. Jesus promises us real peace, a feeling of contentment, wholeness and being in complete harmony with God and one another. That is what the Hebrew word Shalom means. It is the Spirit of forgiveness given us by the Risen Christ that makes this kind of peace possible. It is by his death and resurrection that Jesus can give us these great gifts of the Holy Spirit and lasting peace; to say to us Shalom.

In today's Gospel, Jesus promises that he and his Father will make a permanent home in our hearts. He promises to dwell within us if we promise, in return, to keep his teachings of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation alive. In Sacrament, in Scripture, in Community, in our living the Gospel in our everyday lives, we welcome the Risen Christ into our hearts. Even our smallest act of selfless kindness reveals the presence and peace of the Easter Christ in our time, and in our world. A peace that is centered in our selfless love for others, and the comfort that is found in realizing God's presence in the love others extend to us.

The peace of the Easter Christ is the awareness of God's presence in every moment of our lives, the confidence that our hope in the things of God will be realized, the assurance that the love of God is ours. Christ's peace should be the driving force behind all our actions, behaviors, and values. To live Christ's peace is to understand our responsibility to the common good. To share the peace of the Risen Christ is to recognize and honor God's hand in all things, protecting and unifying the world we live in.

God is present no matter where we travel on this earth. I'm reminded of the beautiful words found in Psalm 139 (my personal favorite).

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, and your right hand hold me fast."

God is ever-present; God is found in every city and town, at work, in school, and at the grocery store; every room of our homes is the very dwelling place of God. Our kitchens and living rooms, our bedrooms and dens, our garages and backyards become the very kingdom of God Jesus revealed. There is no place where God's compassion and peace are not realized. Wherever we find ourselves, whatever the circumstances we find ourselves involved in, God makes his presence known in our love and care for one another.

May our hearts mirror Jesus' teachings of love, forgiveness, and healing, enabling others to also become the dwelling places of God's peace and joy. It is the promise of the Easter Christ; it is his great commission handed down through the generations to you and me. "Peace I leave with you; my Peace I give to you," Jesus says to us today, let us keep this peace alive, let us open our hearts and welcome his presence within. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, let us become, as the Prayer of St. Francis would suggest, a channel that carries the real peace of Christ to a hurting world.

Let us all say, "Shalom!"

7th Sunday of Easter

John 17:20-26.

“One in the Spirit, One in the Lord”

By Rev. Liz Miller

Most of us have or had a favorite aunt or uncle, grandparent. We could talk to them about anything. Their love was unconditional, their support total, and their advice honest. They may have taught us to do things we still cherish gardening, baking an old family recipe, sewing, embroidering, and painting; the list goes on. Our lives have been blessed by these special people and their experience. At the Last Supper, Jesus gives thanks for their blessing to us and their families.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for and exalted all the family members and friends and teachers and mentors in our lives who have instilled in us the values of the Gospel. In John’s account of the Last Supper, after his final teachings to his disciples and before the events of his passion begin, Jesus addresses his Father in heaven. He begins by praying for himself, that he may obediently bring to completion the work of redemption entrusted to him by the Father. Next, he prays for his disciples gathered with him in the upper room, that they may faithfully proclaim the Word he has taught them. Finally, in today’s message scripture, Jesus prays for the Church of the future; those who teach, reveal, and proclaim God’s love in our midst, and those of us whose lives have been blessed and enriched by their witness. Jesus was thinking about us, even then. It is that love of God that binds us together as a Church and makes us not just an association of good people but a family of faith; “One in the Spirit, One in the Lord.”

In Jesus’ prayer, we have a connection to his Church. Christ exalts those who strive to create that sense of unity and calls us to work for that connection with one another and with those who follow us by honoring the essential dignity that everyone possesses as a child of God.

Jesus’ deathbed prayer was that we Christians might be one, even as Jesus was One with the Father, that we might also be one, so that the world might believe. It has been two thousand years, and the prayer is only partly answered. The church, the body of Christ, is still divided. What can we do?

As Christians Jesus’ prayer for unity means that we need to be looking for ways to bring all who are disciples of Christ together into one. If we do this, then we will be

ready to accept the gifts of the Spirit, which make of the many languages of the world a single voice to praise God; we truly become “One in the Spirit, One in the Lord.” There are many ways to do this.

In his prayer, Jesus pleads with the Father that the unique sense of “oneness” that exists between the God the Father and God the Son might exist among us, as well. Christ calls us to strive for that sense of “oneness” that sense of “kinship” and “harmony” within our own Church by recognizing and honoring the birthright every one of us possesses as children of God and in seeking ways to tear down the barriers that divide and alienate us from one another.

Christ’s prayer the night is that we realize his hope for the Church he leaves behind: a Church of welcome and acceptance that refuses to define one another by labels and categories, a faith that seeks to find and honor what unites and binds us together as the people of God. Today, in a special way, let us embrace our connection with each other and God as well. When we do, we are truly “One in the Spirit, and One in the Lord.”

Let us pray this week that the love of Christ connects all people and unites us and brothers and sisters through the love of God. Let us be filled with the Spirit of Christ and go forth spreading the Good News that we are made one Body and one Spirit in and through our relationship to one another in Christ Jesus. For if we do, we will have become, “One in the Spirit, One in the Lord.” Amen!

Special Liturgies

The Ascension of the Lord

Luke 24: 46-53

"Follow my footsteps - Carry-on"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Jesus' Ascension is both an ending and a beginning. His physical appearances in human form were now at an end; his personal teaching was complete; the promise of the Messiah was now fulfilled. The Ascension also marks the beginning of the disciple's role in spreading the Good News to a waiting world, teaching what they had learned and sharing what they had witnessed.

Christ places the future of his Church in the care of a collection of fishermen, tax collectors, peasants, and ordinary folks; people much like you and me. It was not a very promising or educated bunch, and yet, what began with that early group of men and women has grown and flourished through the centuries to become this very gathering of believers; our own community -- our parish family.

The Church Jesus left to us is not rooted in buildings or wealth, in formulas of prayer or systems of theology. It is based on a faith nurtured in the human heart, a faith centered in joy and understanding that is empowering and liberating, a faith that gives us the strength and freedom to be authentic and effective witnesses of the Risen Christ; our Savior who is still present in the world today through the lives we lead in his name.

In our Gospel reading, the words Jesus addressed two thousand years ago to his disciples on the mountain of the Ascension are also addressed to you and me today. We are called to teach, to witness and to heal in our own small corners of this world, to hand on to others the story that has been handed on to us about Jesus and his Gospel of love and compassion.

Saint Margaret of Yorkshire was martyred in 1586 at the age of 33 for harboring priests and celebrating Mass in her home. This was illegal in 16th century England when priests were hunted down, arrested, and executed. To shelter a priest, to teach the Catholic faith, to provide any aid or support to what Parliament deemed an "outlaw religion," was considered treason, and punishable by death.

From her prison cell the night before she died, Margaret made a final request: she left her shoes to her eldest daughter, Anne, who was 12 years old at the time. The message from mother to daughter was clear: *Follow in my footsteps - Carry on.*

On the Mount of the Ascension Jesus left us his "shoes." Jesus asks us to follow in his footsteps -- to carry *on* his Gospel of healing, compassion, reconciliation, and hope. Having given his life to reveal the love of God for all of us, he entrusted the continuation of that work to you and me. He commissions us to be his witnesses even though we are faced with risks and despite all our doubts and fears. The work of building his church requires humility, respect, and patience; it asks us to let go of our own interests and wants and to open our hearts to the service of others. In baptism, every Christian takes on the role of witness to all that Jesus did and taught. We are his witnesses in this day and time; not only in our sharing the powerful words of the Gospel but in the quiet, simple, but no less powerful expressions of compassion and love that we share with others; expressions that mirror the same compassion and love of Almighty God who is Father and Son and Brother and Sister to us all.

"Be my witnesses," Jesus asks of us today. "Follow my footsteps and carry on my work of redemption." What will our answer be?

Amen? Amen!

Pentecost Sunday
John 14: 15-16, 23-26
"Image of the Spirit"
By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our churches, especially Catholic churches, there is no shortage of images, mostly statues, paintings, or stained glass. Images of Jesus, Mary and the saints are most common. There are also images of some Old Testament figures like Abraham and Sarah, or Moses and Miriam. There is a long tradition of images within the church, beginning with the paintings in the Roman Catacombs. The Holy Spirit, whose feast we celebrate on Pentecost, does not lend itself easily to imagery. The traditional image of the dove is drawn from the scene of the baptism of Jesus. But the language in that passage is rather vague; the Holy Spirit *descended like a dove*, or in the way that a dove might descend. There are two other images of the Holy Spirit in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Luke says that all who gathered in one room heard *what sounded like a powerful wind* from heaven; he goes on to say that something appeared to them that *seemed like tongues of fire*. Just as the evangelists do not portray an actual dove at the baptism of Jesus, Luke does not say that the wind and fire at Pentecost appeared. The Holy Spirit is impossible to visualize because the Spirit cannot be such. Yet the Holy Spirit is *profoundly real*.

Many things in our universe are real even though invisible to the naked eye. What we see with our eyes is only a fraction of our physical world. The Holy Spirit belongs to the spiritual world, and it naturally cannot see the Spirit with our eyes. Yet, there are helpful ways of *imagining* the Holy Spirit. St Paul uses an image drawn nature when he says that the Spirit "bears fruit." Paul is talking about the visible effect of the Spirit on one's life. We may not be able to see the Holy Spirit, but we can see the effect of the Spirit in our life, just as we cannot see the wind but can see the effect of the wind on people and objects of various kinds. Paul is saying that wherever we find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control, the Spirit is there at work. The Spirit becomes visible in and through these qualities and virtues. The person who most of all had those qualities was Jesus because he was full of the Holy Spirit, full of the *life of God*. The Holy Spirit, then, can be defined as just that, the very life of God, and since God is define as the "God of Love," then that life is a life of love. It is that divine life, that divine love, which was poured out at Pentecost, initially on the first disciples but

through them on all who were open to receive this powerful and wonderful gift. Paul expresses it simply in his letter to the Romans, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'. It is that Spirit of God's love we have received who bears the rich fruit in our lives that Paul speaks about in today's 2nd Reading. The Spirit is constantly at work in our lives, making us more like Jesus. The ordinary, day to day expressions of goodness and kindness, of faithfulness and self-control, of patience and gentleness, are all manifestations of the Spirit that has been given to us by God. We can recognize the Spirit's presence in the common happenings of everyday life. The spiritual is not something other-worldly; it is humanity at its best.

Humanity is at its best in today's first reading. Pentecost brought about a wonderful bonding of people from all over the Roman Empire. They were united in admiring and praising the marvels of God; they became one voice of praise and thanksgiving; one Body and one Spirit. Despite differences of language and culture there was a real communion among them. Wherever communion of heart and mind exist among people of different backgrounds, the Holy Spirit is at work. Unity in diversity is the mark of the Spirit. Jesus points out another manifestation of the Spirit: the pursuit of truth. Only the Spirit can lead us to the complete truth. If someone is genuinely seeking truth, and willing to engage in good works with others, there the Spirit is at work. Fullness of truth and love is always beyond us; but the Spirit is given to lead us towards the complete fulfillment of truth and love, in all its height and depth, and all we must do is to open the door to our hearts and let the Spirit abide within us. In doing so, we become the visible evidence, the testimony of hope, showing a broken world that the Spirit is real, and the God of Love continues to live among us.

Amen? Amen!

"Come, Holy Spirit, Come"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Pentecost is Greek for fiftieth and represents Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, the Jewish harvest festival. It is celebrated 50 days after Passover to commemorate the giving of the Ten Commandments; the birth of Judaism. For us, Pentecost marks the birth of God's Universal Church and the dawn of a new era. Until the events

described in today's scripture began to unfold, God had bestowed his Spirit on only a few favored individuals. But this Pentecost marked the start of the new age in which God began to pour out the Spirit on all humankind.

Pentecost was a feast of pilgrimage so there were as many as 180,000 Jews and converts to Judaism in Jerusalem. It was the perfect time for God to intervene, to give the Spirit to the believing community.

After Jesus' crucifixion the apostles had gone in hiding. They had failed in many ways. They had sinned. They had doubted and they were weak. Jesus' resurrection brought them new hope and purpose, but they waited quietly after his ascension for the Spirit to come. Jesus had told them, "...stay in the city, until you are clothed with the power from on high." (Luke 24:49) Now the time had come. The heavens roared, with a sound like a rushing, mighty wind, and then tongues like fire appeared on each person. The apostles went from living in fear to proclaiming the gospel regardless of consequences. Jesus responded to their weaknesses by sending the Holy Spirit to give them hope and strength. The Spirit that filled the apostles is the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism. Jesus began his ministry Spirit filled, and now the fledgling church would begin in the same way.

When the sound was heard the multitude came together and were bewildered because everyone heard the apostles speaking in their own language. People were amazed and astonished because they regarded Galileans as unsophisticated and different. Remember the calling of Nathanael? When Philip told him of Jesus it was Nathanael who said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Most Jews did not expect much from Galileans, certainly not mastery of a foreign language, yet they were preaching and everyone there, no matter their nation or tongue, understood what they were saying.

Peter was the preacher on this momentous occasion. The same Peter who only seven weeks earlier had denied Christ three times. The Spirit was the power behind his sermon. The Spirit was responsible for the crowds overwhelming response. As Peter preaches, he is still addressing the Jews and his vision is not as broad as his words suggest. Soon the Holy Spirit will inspire him to throw open the church doors to all humanity, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women alike.

When Peter preached it was not a gentle sermon. Peter told the crowd that they had killed the Messiah. Luke tells us the people were cut to the heart. They wanted

to know what they could do. Peter told them to repent and be baptized...three thousand were baptized that very day. They received the Holy Spirit and became new people. This did not make life any easier, but it aligned them with God's plan and sheltered them in God's grace. These three thousand people returned to their homes and told others about Jesus. The church began to grow and spread throughout the known world. Pentecost marked the birth of the Universal Church, the salvation of the world was at hand, and those who were present played an important role in spreading the Good News.

It is no different for us today. When we become Christians and the Holy Spirit lives within us, our decision to follow Jesus does not guarantee an easier life. We too become apostles and are sent out. God breathes the Spirit into our souls so we may live in the light of his life and love. God ignites the fire of the Spirit within our hearts and encourages us to seek God in all things. The Holy Spirit lives within us, frees us from sin and death, makes us sons and daughters of God, helps us in our weakness, and intercedes for us with God. Only through the power of the Spirit can we believe in the unbelievable, find hope in our darkest hour, and see the glory that waits beyond the grave. All because of God's grace that is freely given, and the filling of our hearts with a love beyond comprehension.

Today we are sent into the world to be witnesses to the truth. Sent into a world filled with temptations and a society blinded by greed and self-satisfaction. We are asked to share peace and joy that only Jesus can give. We are asked to show kindness in the face of selfishness and evil, goodness in the face of anguish and pain, and gentleness in the face of suffering and death. Jesus' faith becomes our faith, and the Spirit reaches out to the world through us.

This is the same Spirit who filled the first Christians on our very first Pentecost. God's promise is this: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17 NAB). The Spirit comes to everyone and draws our attention to what is valuable and true. With the fire of the Spirit within us, we will be transformed, and we will help to transform our world. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle them in the fire of your love.

Trinity Sunday

John 16: 12-15

"Spirit of Truth"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

A story from the 5th century has it that St. Augustine was taking his summer holiday along the North African seashore. Walking along the water's edge on a delightful day, he was pondering the mystery of the Trinity. All this genius was getting for his efforts was a severe headache. Finally, he thought he was coming close to breaking the code of the mystery. He was about to shout, "Eureka!" Suddenly at his feet was a small boy. Augustine asked him what he was doing. The youngster replied, "I am pouring the whole ocean into this small hole." Augustine replied, "That's nonsense. No one can do that." Unintimidated by the towering giant above him, the child replied, "Well, neither can you unravel the mystery of the Trinity." Then he disappeared. Whether this story is mythical or not, I leave to your good judgment. But I think we all get the point. The Trinity will remain a mystery forever and then some.

Today's celebration of the Trinity [which originated in France in the eighth century and was adopted by the universal Church in 1334] focuses on the essence of our faith: the revelation of God as Creator, the climax of God's creation in Jesus the Redeemer, and the fullness of God's love poured out upon us in the Sustainer Spirit.

In his final words to those gathered at the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples, "The Spirit of truth will guide you to all truth." We may ask the question, as Pontius Pilot did when Jesus stood before him, "What is truth?" To be a person of authentic faith means to seek out and face the truth regardless of the consequences, regardless of the cost to our egos or wallets, regardless of our doubts and fears. To live our faith means to live the truth about God's love, justice and forgiveness with integrity and conviction; to live our faith in word and deed.

Defining truth is an ongoing process. God is not a silent God who ceased to reveal himself on the last page of Scripture; God continues to be present through the Spirit dwelling within us and within each community of believers. Our faith begins with realizing the Spirit of God is breathing life into all that exists; faith then compels us to continue the creative work of God, to embrace and be embraced by the love of God that envelopes every wonder of nature and every expression of

compassion. This is the truth we seek: we are men and women, created in God's image who strive to live in God's love and grace.

Today's Feast of the Holy Trinity celebrates the many ways in which we discover the love of God in the simple beauty of compassion, reconciliation, and hope around us: God the Father, the author of love and all that is good; God the Son, the love of God made human; God the Spirit, the love of God that binds us to God and to one another as spouses, as family, as friends, and as a church. The love of God that transcends our labels and stereotypes of race, nationality, gender, and creed.

The "Spirit of truth" that Jesus promised does not set up barriers or define differences. God's Spirit wants us to understand that all men and women are children of God, sons and daughters who are loved and protected. Today's feast of the Holy Trinity calls us to embrace the vision of God the Father, revealed by the Son and realized in the Spirit: the truth that the love and justice of God breaks down every barrier we erect and transcends every condition or qualification we set. The Spirit of Truth enables us to see one another as God sees us, to realize the love of God in our midst, and to behold the love of God in every one of his sons and daughters.

May God give us the wisdom to become a faithful and hope-filled people, using the love we have experienced to transform our world in God's life and love. May we embrace the ideal of love and reconciliation mirrored in the life and teachings of the Risen Christ. May the truth we discover help us to become the reflection of God's love in the life we live, the compassion we express, and the faith we hold. Like moral to the story of the small boy and St. Augustine, we should accept that the Trinity is and will remain, a mystery. And, instead of dwelling on the mystery, let us become the evidence of a loving and Triune presence walking in our midst today; let us become the "Spirit of truth" Jesus promised.

Amen? Amen!

"Spirit of Truth"

By Rev. Liz Miller

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Amen? Amen!

Body and Blood of Christ Sunday

Luke 9: 11-17

"We Become What We Receive"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In today's Gospel reading we find Luke's account of the feeding of the five thousand; the only miracle of Jesus found in all four Gospels. Interestingly and almost by design, Jesus uses the gestures of blessing, breaking, and distributing to accomplish the miracle of the loaves and fish, just as he does at the Last Supper during the very first Eucharistic celebration.

As Catholics, we believe that the Eucharist is more than a symbolic gesture as other faith traditions believe. Unfortunately, that is not entirely true. A poll revealed that only one third of Catholics believe the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ. A shocking revelation I would suppose, but in truth, it really doesn't matter what we believe about the Eucharist. What matters is what Jesus believed. As he blessed and broke and distributed the elements of that first Eucharist in the upper room, he clearly says, "This is my body; this is my blood."

Today, using the same gestures and words and through something we call transubstantiation, the bread and wine are blessed and consecrated in the name of Christ. In this miracle they take on a dual-nature and become the Body and Blood of Christ for us. And as we consume them, we become what we have received, we give to others what has been passed to us, and the communion we share becomes a community embracing the love of Christ with everyone who is gathered at table together. In this one miraculous act we continue the memory of Christ's gift from generation to generation. Jesus told his followers that each time you do this, each time you share the bread and wine, remember me; remember the love I have shown you, and remember to share that love with one other. Therefore, the Eucharist is the heart and soul of our faith, the core of our belief.

In sharing the Eucharist, we are transformed from a collection of diverse, disconnected souls into a community of faith. We come to this table with our struggles and doubts and pains and sorrows and, if the Eucharist is what Jesus intended and believed it to be, we find support and compassion from those who join us at the table of the Lord. Thomas Aquinas wrote that in this sacrament, one becomes "both shepherd and pasture." Today's feast reminds us that we are called

by this same Jesus to be both guest and servant, participant, and host in the banquet of God. We come to be fed and nourished but at the same time, we are compelled to become the Eucharist for others; to make the limitless and unrestrained love of Christ a reality for everyone through our own acts of love and kindness.

Today's feast of the Body and Blood of Christ celebrates his gift of the Eucharist to us. It is the source and summit of our life together as his Church. In our sharing of the body and blood of Christ, may we truly become what we receive, and in doing so become what is beautifully expressed in the inspiring words of the Bob Frenzel hymn:

"One bread, one body, one cup, one call, one faith, one Spirit present in us all. One prayer, one blessing, one hope, one peace, one church, one people, one love released."

Amen? Amen!

"We are all one in Christ Jesus"

By Rev. Liz Miller

This reading from Galatians is most dear to my heart. It brings out the true meaning of the Gospel and what it really means to be followers of Christ. We are all children of God. Through our baptism we have been clothed with Christ. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus. And if we belong to Christ, then we are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise." This verse states that we are ALL God's children and has become one of my favorite verses.

There was conflict in early church history. The Jewish people felt they were the chosen people, but many Gentiles had joined the Jewish community to worship their God as they had come to know him through Jesus. This caused many problems. We all know how discussions about religion can become very heated because everyone believes they have the right answer. This new crowd of recent converts from paganism overwhelmed a small group of old-timers with a heritage of loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because their rather relaxed attitudes to Jewish customs and law. As you can imagine there was division.

They all worshipped the same God, but these converts believed Jesus was the Son of God with a new spirit, which opened the community to all people, no matter their ethnic heritage or social standing. As Paul wrote earlier, in the spirit of Jesus, and as the verse states there is no distinction, we all belong to Christ. This was hard to take...In a world divided between Jews and non-Jews, slaves and freemen, men and women, a world where everyone knew his place and dare not leave it, was a new community of the Spirit of Jesus that was trans-cultural, that saw all men and women, children whatever status and blood, as first of all children of one Father.

It was not the pious of Jerusalem who showed up. It was these crazy heretics, strangers from a pagan land, whose way of life violated everything the good Jew believed in. It was they who were welcomed by Jesus. Jesus opened his arms to all, from the very beginning, no matter how strange, or different. Despite the differences the people who embrace the spirit must find room in their hearts for all God's children. And so, it was a community that grew like wildfire, attracting especially women and slaves. Attracting the poor and dislocated that wandered the growing urban centuries. Here is a vision of one people, transcending all the secondary sources of identity and history.

This continues to be a major problem in our world today. Look at all the divisions we have in our world, our schools, gangs, and racial groupings. Do we feel we are the ones with the right answers, without allowing the Spirit to work in us? Is it self-interest or God's interest?

What happens when we seek as a religion to capture and control a spirit like that of Jesus, organize it with hierarchy and rules that separate and exclude? Do we not tend to become just one more among many? The church has not escaped the temptation. We seek to win the world in the name of Jesus but have not yet demonstrated that the world would be much different.

This Spirit God is in Jesus who led to changes in slavery and enabled the role and independence of women and children, however haltingly, however slowly. As you know I am for equality of all of God's people. God made humankind not to exploit, control or undermine each other but to be helpmates to each other. We cannot rid the injustices of the world, the sin of sexism and exploitation along with the abuses of others until we all grow in the Spirit on God and allow the Spirit to breathe down on us and change us. We need respect and compassion for all of God's people and

when that happens the world will be changed, and we will look on everyone regardless of gender, nationality, education, or station in life. We will look at everyone as valued and precious in the eyes of God.

I would like to share the following story of a change of life.

Many years ago, in India, a group of men traveling through desolate country found a seriously wounded man lying beside the road. They carried him to the Christian mission hospital and asked the physician who met them at the door if a bed was available. The physician looked at the injured man and immediately saw that he was an Afghan, a member of the warring tribe. "Bring him in," he said, "For him we have a bed." When the physician examined the man, he found that an attacker had seriously injured his eyes and the man's sight was imperiled. The man was desperate with fear and rage, pleading with the doctor to restore his sight so that he could find his attacker and extract retribution. "I want revenge," he screamed. "I want to kill him."

The doctor told the man that he was in a Christian hospital and that Jesus had come to show us how to love and forgive even our enemies. The man listened unmoved. Revenge was his only goal, vengeance the only reality. The doctor rose, saying that he needed to attend to other patients. He promised to return to tell the man a story, a story about a person who took revenge.

Long ago, he later began his story, the British government had sent a man to serve as Ambassador to Afghanistan, but as he traveled to his new post, he was attacked on the road, and thrown into a shabby makeshift prison. There was only one other prisoner, and the two suffered through their ordeal together, poorly clothed, badly fed, and mistreated cruelly by the guards. Their only comfort was a copy of the Book of Common Prayer, which had been given to the Ambassador by his sister in England. She had inscribed her name along with a message of goodwill on the first page. The book served not only as a source for their prayers, but also as a diary, as a place to record their daily experiences. The margins of the prayer book became a journal of their anguish and their faith.

The two prisoners were never heard from again. Their families and friends waited for news that never came. Over twenty years later, a man browsing through a second-hand shop found the prayer book. How it got there, no one can say. But,

after reading some of the journal entries in the margin, he recognized its value, located the sister whose name was in the front, and sent it to her.

With deep heartache she read each entry. When she came to the last one, she noted that it was in a different hand. It said simply that the two had been taken from their cell, publicly flogged and then forced to dig their own graves before being executed. At that moment she knew what she must do. She was not wealthy, but she gathered all the money she could and sent it to this mission hospital. Her instructions were that the money was always to be used to keep a bed free for a sick or wounded Afghan. This was to be her revenge for her brother's torture in the hands of Afghans and his death in their country. "My friend," said the doctor, "you are now lying in that bed. Your care is her revenge."

This is a pretty dramatic example, but I think God challenges us to love all people the way that he loved us and that all are precious. Does he not say that we need to look beyond the differences that might put us off, and with respect and care we see and care one by one, one human being, one child of God. God is inviting all of us, even in our brokenness and faults to a new form of unity, a place where we are one with God and one another. The goal in our world is not just at the table where we gather today and not just this place but also at the banquet and to serve one another. Let us embrace that call. Amen?

Christ the King Sunday

Luke 23: 35-43

"Jesus, remember me!"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The *good thief*, as he is called, was a nameless criminal until the 4th century. He had made a career of robbing anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, but in our scripture, today, the time had come for him to pay for his life of crime. Although he was probably not a religious man, his words from the cross have touched the lives of faithful people for centuries.

All four Gospels record that Jesus was crucified between two other men, but only Luke tells us about the brief conversation they had with Jesus that day. As the three hung on crosses atop the hill called Golgotha, Dismas on Jesus right, and the other thief called Gestas on his left, they couldn't help but notice the sign Pilate had the soldiers nail over Jesus' head. Written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, were the words, "This is the King of the Jews." The crowds mocked and jeered for Jesus to prove himself a king, the chosen one of God. "Come down off that cross," they yelled, "he saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ." Even Gestas, the condemned criminal to Jesus left joined in, telling Jesus to save himself and those who were crucified with him if he were who he claimed to be. In all the chaos around him only one small voice spoke up on Jesus' behalf. Not those who just a few days before had welcomed him into Jerusalem with palm branches and shouts of hosanna. Not those who marveled at his teaching in the temple and witnessed his miracles. Not even those who had walked by his side during his ministry years. Only Dismas spoke up from his cross at Jesus right side. Only Dismas rebuked the crowd and his fellow thief, and in doing so, recognized Jesus for who he truly was. In his final moments of life, Dismas showed every generation that followed the pathway to forgiveness and personal salvation. First, an awareness of our own sinfulness, followed by repentance, and finally the acceptance of Christ as the promise of eternal life. And in his final words, Dismas humbly asked of Jesus what generations upon generations of hopeful converts have asked; what you and I ask of Christ today, "Jesus, remember me."

We too must face our own need for healing just as Dismas did, our own need for forgiveness, our own need for the love and peace that comes only from Christ. The one crucified with Jesus, the one we call the *good thief*, recognized that need in

himself and called out, "Jesus, remember me." And in the last, painful moments of his own life, Jesus responded to Dismas with compassion and hope; Paradise was opened to him.

With Dismas we call out today, "Jesus, remember me." In acknowledging Jesus as the Christ, in recognizing our own need to forgive and be forgiven, to love and be loved, to give and be ministered to, salvation is ours; Jesus' promise of Paradise is fulfilled.

Such is the transforming and redemptive love of Christ. From the crosses and crucifixions of our world, the reign of God takes shape when we imitate the humble selflessness of Christ in bringing his spirit of hope and reconciliation into the lives of those around us. This is our challenge as we face the dawn of a new Advent. Let us acknowledge Jesus for who he truly is, the King of Kings and Lord of Lord's, the Alpha, and the Omega, the Bright and Morning Star, the True Son of the Living God. And if we do so, Jesus promises that he will remember us, throw open his arms and the doors of heaven to welcome us. Paradise will be ours.

Amen? Amen!

Ordinary Time

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 2: 1-11

"Empty Glasses"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Most scholars divide the Gospel of John into two main parts; the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. Our story today is the first of seven "signs" most theologians recognize. Others name two or three additional events that should be considered as "signs" or evidence of who Jesus was. Does the number of 'signs' in John really matter? John, himself shows the fallacy of trying to arrive at a specific number in chapter 20 (vs 30) where he writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book."

Notice that John doesn't say that Jesus did 'miracles' or 'marvels.' He calls them 'signs' because they are gestures that point toward something deeper than what our eyes can see. More specifically, the signs that he performs tell us something about Jesus as an individual and describe his life-giving power. What happened in Cana of Galilee is the beginning of all these signs. It is the model of those that will follow throughout his earthly ministry. In this act of 'changing of water into wine' we find the key to understand the type of saving transformation that Jesus works and that we, as his followers, must continue to work in his name.

It all happens in the context of a wedding feast, the party of parties in Jesus' day. Marriage remains as the most passionate symbol of love, and the best image in the biblical tradition of expressing the relationship of God with humanity. The salvation Jesus offers must be lived and offered to all, especially when living falls short of expectations and is without fulfillment and joy; when the glasses of life are empty.

It's a sad fact that many people today do not find the ministry of organized religion life-giving at all. On the contrary, they need desperately to see signs of an open, friendly, and life-affirming Church in order to discover in Christianity Jesus' own capacity to alleviate the suffering and the cruelties of life. Liturgical celebration all too often leaves people wanting, and uninspired preaching bores them. Who wants to listen to something that does not seem to be the "Good News" everyone talks about, especially if the Gospel is proclaimed in an authoritative and threatening tone? Jesus came to provide a way to love and a reason to exist, an example of how to live sensitive and joyful lives. If people today are only exposed to a religion filled

with rules and restrictions, condemnation, and judgement, and can't taste something of the festive joy that was spread by Jesus, many will continue to drift away and stay away.

At the wedding feast in Cana, the water could be tasted as wine only after it was 'drawn out' that is, transferred from the large stone water jars to the waiting empty glasses. Religion that is written on stone tablets is devoid of color and taste. It contains no living water, capable of purifying and satisfying our human needs. Religion needs to be freed by the love and the life that Jesus communicates. For his followers to proclaim the transforming power of Jesus, words alone are not enough; gestures of service are also needed. Spreading the Good News isn't just about talking, preaching, or teaching; even less is it about judging, threatening, or condemning. We need to make our own the example and joyful style of Jesus himself. Church today should be a place of joy and celebration, where people can feel welcomed, surprised, and fulfilled, just as it was at the wedding in Cana all those years ago.

Paul writes in our reading from Corinthians that God gives spiritual gifts to each of us; we are in a sense, Gods stone jars of water. Our challenge is to let those gifts be 'drawn out' and offered to the service of God, neighbor, community, and family. In this way the Good News of Jesus ministry continues to bring joy and love to a world chock-full of empty glasses. God has no need for stone jars filled with lifeless potential. The miracle of Cana shows us that Jesus can turn our lives into a living and nurturing testimony to share with those whose lives are filled with emptiness. Let us become the water turned to wine, 'drawn out' and given as a sign of God's love for all. Let the celebration begin anew!

Amen? Amen!

"Let it Be"

By Rev. Liz Miller

John Lennon and Paul McCartney wrote the lyrics to *Let it Be*, a moving song about the wisdom Mary imparts to all who find themselves in times of trouble, in their hour of darkness, broken hearted, and all who are seeking the answers to many of life's questions.

When Mary was just a young teenage girl God spoke to her, and she said, “yes!” All she knew was that God was asking something of her. She put her trust in him. Jesus was born in a stable. A mighty king was afraid of her child, so the Holy Family had to flee. They settled in Nazareth, and she watched Jesus grow into an adolescent, a young man and all the while discovering who he truly was, as she held all these things in her heart. These were not always easy, and her journey was painful, but she trusted in her God. Like us, she went through some stressful times. Jesus was missing for three days, and they frantically searched for him; 12 years earlier Simeon had predicted that a sword would pierce her heart. It must have been wonderful for Mary to see the people who accepted Jesus and all the good things he was doing but it must have been heartbreaking to see people rejecting him, especially when friends and relatives said he was mad. Finally, a friend, a follower betrayed him; he was whipped and crucified. She heard him cry to his father. Mary cradled the body of Jesus when he was first brought into this world and now, she cradled his body as death had taken him from her. She must have been in agony at the foot of the cross. Did she know that he would stand before her again in three days at the resurrection? Yet, she continued to listen to God and say, “Let it be with me, as you say.” Mary was faithful and followed Jesus from the beginning of his life to the end of his life and she continued saying yes to her God.

*"And in my hour of darkness, she is standing
right in front of me, speaking words of wisdom,
let it be"*

In today's Gospel, Jesus, Mary, and some of the apostles were invited to a wedding feast. They had run out of wine. In those days that was very serious, and it would have been extremely embarrassing for the bride, groom, and family. It would have followed them the rest of their lives. Mary had compassion for the family. She simply said, “Jesus, they have no wine.” Jesus said, “what does that have to do with you and me?” Jesus wasn’t quite ready to let people know his identity yet, so Mary was asking more than she realized.

I don’t’ know what Mary expected but she knew that Jesus would do something. She told the servants, “Do what he tells you.” This was the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and his first sign or miracle.

I think the significance of this miracle is the insignificance. It was so small compared to the rest of his miracles. We know that God chooses unlikely candidates to do his work and unlikely places to reveal his glory. Mary listened to God's word and did it. We too, are called to listen to God's word and continue to say yes, as Mary did. This is not always easy. When I was called to the priesthood, I had a whole list of reasons of why I should not become a priest. The list was long, and I felt the reasons were good. I listened, I struggled, and I prayed. Finally, I said yes. It is a lot easier when God's word is my word and when I hear what I want to hear. We all need the faith of Mary, with her trust and her love. When God called, he did not give me the full scenario of my journey. He told me only enough for me to put my hand in his hand and say, "Let it be.

And so, it must be with all of us. For some of us what God wants is somewhat clear; for others he is still speaking. God calls each of us and sometimes he will take us places we never dreamed of; but oh, what a journey, as we say yes and give him the lead. With uttering these words ... do as he says we will be living the Gospel. Remember we have a God who is on our side. Even if we fail, he is faithful. Our God delights in us, and he wants to see us grow and change and become what we are destined to be.

"When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me.

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be"

Scripture presents Jesus as being human and so much like us. Mary encouraged him to do his work, but he didn't think he was ready. Mary was confident in his ability, so, *speaking words of wisdom* she says to the servers, "Do whatever he tells you to do. She knows he can do it. Isn't it just like a mother to give us the push we need?

Are we listening? God knows we can do it. God is already on our side. His power can work through us. We just need to do what he tells us. Our challenge is to believe that God's power can work through us.

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 1: 1-4; 4: 14-21

"Today's Vision is Fulfilled"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Galilee was insignificant. It was a nowhere place as far as the religious elite were concerned. However, Jesus grew up in Galilee. He will carry out the major portion of his ministry in Galilee. His ministry was well underway before he visited his hometown as an adult.

Jesus was deeply rooted in Jewish religious tradition and was faithful to the synagogue and Sabbath observance. He entered the Synagogue. He stood and read the book of the Prophet Isaiah, that was handed to him.

Jesus spoke with authority. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. He then sat down and looking at them intently said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

Can you almost hear the commotion in the Synagogue? Jesus grew up there, what was he saying? While Israel longed for a Messiah who would lead them to victory and vindication, Jesus comes with a much different message; one of humility, reconciliation, compassion, and forgiveness. Luke's gospel calls us to embrace rather than shun, to lift-up rather than condemn, and to serve rather than a life filled with self-satisfaction and self-righteousness.

How does that affect us today? We live in a world where our young people feel entitled. We live in a "me" world and as one professional put it, a narcissistic world to serve self-first. Some blame others instead of themselves for the bad that happens or had happened in their lives. These people continue in their blindness, never accepting their own fault. Our politicians are not for the people but for themselves. Money has become their God. As we read these words from Isaiah, we must remember that poverty, captivity, and blindness have both a physical and spiritual dimension. It is bad to have an empty wallet, but much worse to have an empty soul. Many are struggling to free themselves from drugs, a true slavery.

Despite all this the message of Jesus is one of salvation, not judgment. Jesus calls each one of us to love the unloved and to serve the undeserving. At times it is not a comfortable discipleship. How do we relate to the drunkards, those who steal and lie, who are hypocrites because they never seem to change, who tell us to our face they have changed but continue to sin? How does one love the unlovable? They, like the people of Nazareth insist on preserving their narrow vision. I don't think we can do this alone but need the help of God. Jesus opened the door, at the beginning of his ministry.

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a world transformed and reconciled in God's peace and justice. God sent Jesus to bring good news to the poor. He also sends us. In our own weakness, he sends us. Jesus gives us his grace and spirit of his compassion. Because of Jesus we have the strength to take on the work of fulfilling Isaiah's vision of healing, justice, and reconciliation in our own day and time. This vision becomes a reality in every act of hope we make happen; in every kindness we show is prompted by God's grace.

All of us have wilderness experiences, grief, or some other adversity. It is part of life. We are seldom ready for a wilderness experience. We do not have time to prepare. It will all depend on our readiness at the moment the challenge comes. In some cases, our very lives, spiritual and physical, will be at stake.

We inherit the spirit of God's call to bring glad tidings and to proclaim the Lord's favor to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed, and the helpless. Whatever, gifts and graces we possess can work great and wondrous things when done in the Spirit of God. If we do this, then we can boldly proclaim as Jesus did so many years ago: Today, Isaiah's vision becomes reality, today Isaiah's vision is fulfilled in your hearing.

"The Spirit of God"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

As the author of this year's cycle of Gospel readings, Luke is a "second generation" Christian; Greek by birth and a physician by profession. He was a traveling companion of Paul, and through that association met Mark and Peter. He writes his Gospel mainly for Gentiles like himself: for Luke Jesus fulfills all of humankind's hopes for wholeness, holiness, and a loving relationship with God.

Luke's Gospel reflects a historian's precision in locating dates and places; but he also exhibits an interest in people rather than ideas. Luke's account of Jesus public life celebrates his compassion for the outcasts of Jewish society. To Luke, Jesus reveals a God who is approachable and present to us in all that is good and right and loving around us.

While Israel longed for a Messiah who would lead them to victory and vindication, Jesus comes with a much different message; one of humility, reconciliation, compassion, and forgiveness. The "good news" of Luke's Gospel calls us to embrace rather than shun, to lift rather than condemn, and to seek the humble way of servanthood rather than a life filled with self-satisfaction and self-righteousness.

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a world transformed and reconciled in God's peace and justice. In the Messiah, God's Christ, the Anointed One, Isaiah could see a God who re-creates us and our world in the light of his grace and the spirit of his compassion. Through our own baptism, we take on the work of fulfilling Isaiah's vision of healing, justice and reconciliation in our own day and time; our own civilizations. We make Isaiah's vision a reality in every act of hope we make happen; in every kindness we show that is prompted by God's grace. As witnesses of Christ's resurrection, as baptized disciples of his church, we inherit the Spirit of God's call to "bring glad tidings" and "proclaim the Lord's favor" to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed and the helpless. Whatever gifts and graces we possess can work great and wondrous things when done in the Spirit of God.

In his book *The Winning Factor*, Dr. Peter Jensen writes about the "igniters" and "extinguishers" in life; those who inspire others to success, and those who seem to fizzle out and bring others down with them. The difference lies, according to Jensen's research, in tapping into a sense of self-direction, self-awareness, and self-responsibility that is shared by winners all over the world. He tells a story of a young Olympic swimmer who lost faith in herself and began to doubt her abilities. In doing so her performance levels declined and almost ended her career. Through his help this young swimmer was able to silence her negative thoughts of not being good enough and made it possible for her to compete in the Olympics.

All of us, at one time or another, face the self-doubt experienced by the young swimmer. We don't think we can measure up to the expectations of others. We struggle to make sense of our lives. The words of the prophet Isaiah read by Jesus

in today's Gospel are an image for us to hold on to that we are grasped by the Spirit of God, that the Spirit of God leads us to the other side of doubt, that the Spirit of God enables us to see a life and world worth living for. Jesus realizes his identity in that Spirit. Through our baptisms we find our identity in that same Spirit as well. This realization does not make things easier; it does not lighten the hard work of becoming the people God calls us to be, but the Spirit of God opens our hearts to the possibilities of creating his kingdom in our midst: helps us through his grace to become "igniters" rather than "extinguishers," bringing glad tidings to the poor, giving sight to the blind and light to the lost, justice for the oppressed, and inspiring a time of peace and fulfillment for all of us. If we do this, then I can boldly proclaim as Jesus did so many years ago: Today, Isaiah's vision becomes reality, today Isaiah's vision *is fulfilled in your hearing*.

Amen? Amen!

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 4: 21-30.

"Faith, Hope and Love"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today's Gospel continues last Sunday's account of Jesus' teaching in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. After proclaiming the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of the Messiah, Jesus sits down and teaches that God's chosen one did not come for Nazareth alone but for every race, culture, and nation; every place and age.

His explanation is met with skepticism and anger. Many Jews of the time were so convinced that they were God's special people that everyone else was despised. They could not accept Jesus' idea that others; a widow from Sidon or a Syrian slave, Gentiles! were as loved by God as they were. But Jesus came to proclaim the Good News of God's love, offering to all, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, God's healing and liberation, freedom, and grace. The poor, the contrite of heart, the oppressed and marginalized, who were always God's favorites throughout history, would now become the focus of the Messiah's ministry on earth.

Standing up for what is right, speaking out for such things as fairness, ethics, and justice, are the call of the prophet in any age and time. To be a prophet demands the courage and conviction to risk isolation, ridicule, and persecution for sake of the justice and mercy of God. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus prayed, reflected, and searched constantly for the truth. We are called to be seekers of truth as well. We are called to speak the prophetic truth ourselves in our homes, workplaces, and classrooms; anywhere God gives us the opportunity. The Good News of the Gospel is the revelation that God became what we are so that we can better understand who God is and what God is all about. God is love, God is forgiveness, God is compassion, justice, and peace. God cares about all creation, not just a select few.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus praises the faith of those outside the Jewish community and proclaims that all men and women of every race and nation are loved by God. They too are the children of God; they too possess the dignity of being made in the image of God; they too worship God by their own works of generosity and peace. The very idea shocks the people of his hometown of Nazareth, and they consider Jesus' words as blasphemy and a betrayal of their

faith. But their blindness to God's truth prevents them from embracing the kingdom of God that Jesus has come to reveal: a kingdom that welcomes all as sons and daughters of God; a kingdom where the gifts of both Gentile and Jew are honored and welcome; a kingdom where every act of kindness and generosity, no matter how small, is encouraged, recognized, and honored.

Paul writes in our second reading of the three greatest spiritual gifts; Faith, Hope and Love. Faith calls us to realize the presence of God in unexpected places, to recognize God in faces we are unaccustomed to seeing. Remember, we see God in the beauty of the world, a sunrise or sunset, the smile of another person or just a whisper. Hope enables the goodness of God to become the work of reconciliation and justice, compassion, and grace, administered by people of good will. Remember we are the hands and feet of God. It is just being present for the person who is in pain from a loss and can't seem to move on. It is not trying to make a person to think as we think, or to give our opinion on what they should do but to just be there, with love, comfort, and care. Through our active care and concern for one another we can become reflections of God's love in our midst. Everything we do in this life is meaningless unless it is done in and through the love of God. Our late Bishop told me to do everything in love and I would never get in trouble from him. Love then, as Paul declares, is God's greatest gift to us; a gift that we are expected to express toward others, no matter who they are and no matter how difficult they may be to love.

Let us share that gift today; let us tell someone that God loves them. And then look in the mirror and tell your reflection that God loves you as well. Love is the greatest spiritual gift; the greatest gift we can receive and the greatest gift we can share.

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 5: 1-11

"Here I am, Lord. Send me"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

What does it mean to be called by God? We know that through our baptism we are all called to serve, but what's that all about. How do we know that God is calling us? When we do hear God's call, it seems that we are often caught by surprise. Our first reaction is one of shock, even disbelief. Why me? What is God thinking? Then we feel like Peter did that morning on the lake. Our sinful nature, our short comings and failures come to mind, and we feel unworthy; as if God would be unable to overcome our real or perceived weaknesses. Funny thing is, God never seems to be concerned about what we think of as obstacles. God's purpose for us is not dependent on our being a righteous person. God does not wait for us to become worthy before calling us to a share in his loving service to others. Indeed, our very sense of unworthiness creates an opening for God to work in and through us.

Last Sunday we read about the call of Jeremiah, and today we have the vocational stories of Isaiah and the apostle Peter. One might ask: "What was so special about these guys?" They were just ordinary men. But, their call, and ours for that matter, is not inconceivable for a God who is full of surprises. Abraham became a new father in his old age; Moses had trouble speaking but still took on Pharaoh, a young shepherd named David was chosen as king, and Saul the persecutor of Christians became Paul the apostle. Why not us?

History is filled with examples of people who were afraid, who seemed in the eyes of the world to be weak, but it is these same people who God called to carry on his plan of salvation. And we are part of that plan. We are called to help in the work of building the kingdom of God in our time in history.

God has a job for each one of us to do. God has plans for the gifts we've been given, plans for us to proclaim the Good News, and minister to the people entrusted into our care. We become the very reflection of God for others; the evidence of God's presence in our world today, no matter how insignificant we may think our gift or calling is. God needs listeners, compassionate souls who can hold the hands of those in need, comfort those who are sick and lonely, and God needs those whose gift is prayer. God needs prophets in every age.

It is normal for us to question God's call, to wonder if we are good enough to serve. We are not alone in this. Isaiah didn't think he was good enough at first. So, the angel touched Isaiah's mouth with the ember, and he was made clean. Hopefully that will not be necessary for you and me. I don't know about you, but kissing embers is not something I would be excited about. In the second reading Paul reminds us that he started off by persecuting Christians. But despite this Jesus transformed Paul into an apostle who proclaimed the Good news to many communities throughout the known world. In our Gospel reading Peter wants Jesus to leave him alone because he is aware of his own sin; his own unworthiness. But Jesus shows Peter that he has work for him to do despite his low opinion of himself. "You are a good fisherman," Jesus seems to be saying, "but from now on, Peter, you will be gathering people into the net of God's kingdom."

We are called in this life to point people toward God. Whatever it is that we do in life has meaning and purpose if it is done in service to our Lord. We can become beacons of hope for those who are seeking a relationship with the Lord. We can become the light of the world; the salt of the earth. Not through our own efforts, but through the indwelling Spirit of God working in and through us.

God said, "Whom shall we send? Who will go for us?" Isaiah responded, "Here I am, Lord. Send me."

We have work to do. We have been called by the same God who called Isaiah, the same God who empowered Paul, and the same God who made Peter a fisher of people's souls. Can we respond to God's call today? Can we answer with Isaiah, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!" Let us respond to God's call. In every act of kindness, in every gift of mercy, in every contact and interaction, let us become the evidence of God's very presence in our midst; God's hands, God's voice, God's feet, and God's love for all.

Amen? Amen!

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5: 1-12

“The Blessed of Christ”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Next to the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount is the most quoted section of the Bible. While the one relates a series of evils we must avoid in daily life on earth, the message of Jesus is one of humility, charity, brotherly love, and transformation of the inner person. In our reading this morning, Jesus presents the eight Beatitudes in a positive sense, virtues in life which will ultimately lead to reward in heaven; guidelines for a way of living that promises salvation and brings peace amid trials and tribulations.

For over twenty centuries, the followers of Jesus teachings have struggled to practice those Beatitudes. Some have done well in achieving the goals set by Christ; most of us have struggled a bit.

The Beatitudes are portions of a longer talk Jesus gave on a hillside located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Today the place is known as the Mount of Beatitudes, and there is a beautiful eight-sided church located on the site. There is also a terrace on the hillside just above the ruins of the old church that was built in the 4th century. It is on this level place that many believe Jesus taught that morning so many years ago. Biblical scholar Peter Walker commented that the serenity of this beautiful place in no way means that Jesus' words were calm and soothing. They were in fact, “radical, demanding, authoritative, revolutionary, and countercultural. Jesus was calling Israel to a new way of life.”

The Beatitudes describe the person of Jesus himself. Jesus was detached from material things, caring and compassionate, humble, and merciful, centered his life on God and was a true peacemaker in every sense of the word. He was, above all else, the one who was persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Jesus was and is and will ever be the Blessed One of God, the living example of the Beatitudes we strive to embrace.

In mirroring the love of Jesus in our daily lives we become the “blessed” who seek God's way of compassion, who live in humble gratitude for the gift of life, who imitate the mercy and consolation of God, the “blessed” who by their very lives embody the Beatitudes in today's Gospel reading.

There is a story told about a woman who came to Jesus saying, "I can give you nothing but myself." Christ replied, "Then you have given me everything."

When we tell Jesus "I can give you nothing but myself," we become the "blessed" in the Sermon on the Mount; the *poor in spirit* who are detached from material things, the *ones who mourn*, who value caring and compassion, the *meek* who show a true humility that banishes all pride, those *who hunger and thirst for a justice* that incorporates all of humanity, *the merciful* who have the ability to see things from another's perspective, consider another's feelings, and share another's joys and sorrows. We become *the pure in heart* who center their life on God, and *the peacemakers* who know that real peace is not merely the absence of discord but a positive condition that strives for humanities highest good. In following Christ by giving ourselves totally to him, we may also become *the persecuted*, ridiculed for the faith we hold and the devotion we show.

Let us pray for the strength and courage to put God first in our lives and commit our very being to follow God's will in all that we do. Jesus, who transformed the world through the love of God, calls us to do the same in every kindness we extend to others in his name. Let us strive to live the Beatitudes today and every day. Let us be like that woman before Christ and offer him the greatest gift we can offer, and then let us proclaim to all who would listen that the love of God gives our lives' purpose and meaning, a new perspective in determining what is good and right and just in our world, and a new understanding of the holiness that dwells within every person who has been made in the very image and likeness of God. Let us become the blessed ones of Christ in our time and place.

Amen? Amen!

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 5: 38-48.

“Be a Lighthouse for All”

By Rev. Liz Miller, M.Div.

A little history! Written nearly 4000 years ago, the code of Hammurabi (haw-moo-raw-bee) is one of the oldest writings in the world. The Babylonian document contains 282 laws, many of which are the basis for some of our laws today. The most well-known of Hammurabi's (haw-moo-raw-bee's) law is # 196. “If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye.) If one breaks a man's bone, they shall break his bone. From this ancient writing the Old Testament law found in Exodus 21 (23-25) of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” was born.

Law # 196 has often been cited as justification for violence, and by those who support capital punishment. This life for life concept was never intended by law # 196, the object was to limit revenge, not to provide a reason for its use. In effect, Law #196 says that if you give me a black eye, I may do no more than give you one right back. I may not do more. Before Jesus came along, Law # 196 was quite an advancement in legal and personal ethics.

It is natural to want to reciprocate, to help those who help you and hurt those who hurt you. Do unto others as they do unto you was simple justice.

How does this relate to us today? Jesus wants to make changes. Despite what has been done to us Jesus asks us to take the first step of forgiveness. That is not always easy. What about the person who murdered a child or hurt someone we love? What about the person who has wronged us? That's impossible, how can we forgive someone who hurt us. Yes, it is impossible on our own, but God can help. Our unforgiveness hurts us more than the other person. Our hate will fester and cause so much unhappiness. I remember, the first time someone wronged me, and the pastor told me I needed to forgive. I was a young teenager and thought this was all wrong. However, I asked forgiveness from this person. No, we did not become great friends, but I was able to let my anger go. I think forgiveness can be a process at times. My prayer one time long ago was, “Lord, help me to want to, want to, want to forgive. When I was finally able to forgive that person, it was so freeing.

Pray for the person who has wronged you. As followers of Jesus, we must take that first step towards reconciliation: to love the unlovable, to reach out to the alienated, to dismantle whatever walls divide and isolate people.

The real challenge for you and I is not in loving some designated political, sociological, or economic group. Today's gospel is asking you and I to love the people we live and work with, the people we struggle with and the people who really annoy us. One pastor has called this the human toothache. It is difficult to love the person who day after day pushes our buttons. Sometimes I ask God to help me learn the lesson he wants to teach me so I can move on. We need to remind ourselves often that Jesus came to serve those who needed him the most, and gave his life for everyone, saint, and sinner alive. As his followers how can we do any less or restrict our love.

To truly love our enemies in the sense of today's gospel, is to create and maintain an atmosphere where reconciliation is always possible, and actively sought. Jesus is trying to instill in us a vision that sees beyond stereotypes, and appearances; a vision that recognizes the goodness in every human being. The love that Jesus asks us to show means that no matter how much our enemies hurt us we will never let bitterness close our hearts to that person or seek anything but good for their lives. This is our challenge of discipleship: to lift-up our love for humanity we all share, as children of the one true God.

Love is a powerful word and an even more powerful emotion. The word love appears in scripture more than 500 times. God's love is the most powerful of all and unites all men and women. Martin Luther King Jr. perhaps said it the best, "Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; Love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it." Let us choose to love today and be in harmony with all of God's creation. Let our light shine so that it becomes a beacon for others to follow.

For nearly 1800 years Law #196 served as a mediator of justice. Jesus changed things and is calling you and I to do the same. Let us respond to God's call and become ministers of God's forgiveness and healing grace, despite the hurt we endure.

On the cross Jesus said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Perhaps, we should say once more with feeling and thought, forgive us our trespasses as we

forgive those who trespass against us.” Christ meant those words to be spoken with feeling and truth.

When Jesus called us to love our enemies, to act in loving ways towards them he was not calling us to accept evil in our midst. He was giving us a powerful strategy for countering evil. The old law about an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. An eye for an eye appears in scripture only three times. Mercy and reconciliation appear 3000 times. Choose love, let your love pour forth like the light of a lighthouse and shine with the love of God. **Amen!**

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 6: 24-34

"Consider the Lilies"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

In our readings, today we find some of the most comforting words in all the Bible. There is a common theme: trust in God's immeasurable love above all else. In our Gospel passage Jesus encourages his followers to align their priorities properly: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God" and everything else will find its proper place in your life.

The reading from Isaiah was written during the Babylonian exile six centuries before Jesus was born. The people of Israel found themselves in bondage with no hope of ever seeing their homeland again. Their greatest fear during this ordeal was that God had forgotten them. In this short passage, Isaiah first echo's their cry of anguish and then proclaims that God will never forget his children no matter what. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb," Isaiah writes, and even if that were possible, "I will never forget you, says the Lord."

There are times in each of our lives when we have the feeling that we've been forgotten that God is somehow separated from us. Some crisis hits our family or that of a friend. Perhaps a marriage is in jeopardy, or a close friendship starts to fall apart, and we ask, "Where is God in all this?" Isaiah's words tell us that God is here and that we are loved by our Creator more than we can imagine. God loves each one of us. God is not putting off his love until we accomplish some great deed or right some wrong, God loves us right here, right now just the way we are. Perhaps Rhett Massey said it best in writing, "God knows everything there is to know about you, good and bad, and still loves you! It may be hard to believe, but yes, it is true! God loves you for you, warts, and all."

In what is possibly the most beautiful section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points to the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field, and tells us that if God cares for them, how much more will God care for us. Don't let anxiety over such transient things as food and clothing take control your life, Jesus is saying, God knows what you need; trust in God's love.

Worry and anxiety is a cancer of the soul that strikes both the rich and the poor. The rich person is anxious to increase their wealth while the poor person is anxious

about keeping a roof over their head and food on the table. But Jesus tells us that anxiety over such things is not productive. It will not add a day to our lives and, in fact, could lead to illness that will shorten our days on earth. Consider the lilies Jesus says, look at the birds of the air. They are free of anxiety and God takes care of them.

"Worry is the opposite of faith," Ruth Graham Bell writes. "Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its trials, it simply empties today of its joy." What we should fear being without is the assurance that we are loved and the realization that our lives have purpose. Jesus does not deny the reality of basic human needs for food and clothing and shelter, but to displace the holiness of God with worry over the perishable things of this world is the ultimate human tragedy.

Jesus warns that all too often we become the servants of our fears rather than the masters of our lives: our worry and anxiety over things we cannot control tends to push aside the possibility for goodness, joy, justice, and reconciliation. Jesus is telling us that we have nothing to fear before a God who has proven that we are loved unreservedly despite our imperfections; yes, a God who loves us "warts and all."

Consider the lilies of the field, look to the birds of the air, and take comfort in the fact that the God who provided for us yesterday can meet our needs today and continue doing so into our tomorrows. Let our souls find rest in God alone who is our constant provider and companion. Consider the lilies and be at peace.

Amen? Amen!

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 7: 11-17

"Christ's first-responders"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Jesus' raising of the widow's son in the village of Nain appears only in Luke's Gospel and underlines the extraordinary love and compassion Jesus held for the poor and destitute. Jesus is portrayed as the great fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic hope when "the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

The little hamlet of Nain is located at the foot of Mount Moreh and just off the main highway traveled by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. The cemetery is about a ten-minute walk from town. This poor woman had already buried her husband there. This time her only son would join him. One can only imagine her sadness. She was now alone in a culture not known for its kindness toward women even in the best of times. She faced an uncertain future filled with desperation, grief, and tears.

Jesus is deeply moved at the sight of this once wife and mother. The theologian William Barclay tells us there is no stronger word in the Greek language than the one used by Luke to describe the compassion Jesus was feeling. The word literally means that he was stirred from the deepest depths of his being. Jesus takes the widow's work-scarred hands into his own and tells her soothingly, "Do not weep." He then steps forward, gently touches the coffin, and commands the young man to rise. At this the lad sits up and begins to speak; everyone is filled with fear and joy. Jesus' miracle proved that day that he is both the Lord of life and the master of death.

God's compassion is a constant in our lives, even and especially when we face tragedy, or feel most distant or abandoned by God. When the two bombs exploded at the finish line of this year's Boston Marathon, not only police and first responders but exhausted runners and their families and friends became first responders themselves. Despite the horror around them, they instinctively ran toward the smoke and devastation to help.

When an explosion turned the fertilizer factory into a fireball that destroyed homes and businesses in a small town in Texas, farmers and welders, car salesmen and

funeral home directors, students and retirees jumped into fire trucks and emergency vehicles to fight the blaze and rescue the missing.

In cities and towns across America's Midwest, the heavy spring rains caused rivers to rise and overflow. Community after community came together to take on the flood waters, filling sandbags and constructing temporary barriers and levees. These are but a few of recent events that show people working together to protect their towns, their homes, and showing compassion for what they share with their fellow human beings.

Compassion is defined as the ability to put oneself in the place of another: to see the world from their perspective, to see what frightens them and to embrace their pain. Compassion literally means "to suffer with." By having compassion, we can take on the despair and brokenness of another, transforming their pain and struggle into hope and healing. Christ calls each one of us to be ministers of his compassion and the means through which healing can begin in our own families and communities; our own small hamlets like Nain. By God's grace, we, too, can run toward the smoke, head for the fire, and take on the floods that find their way into our life and the lives of those close to us. By God's grace we can become Christ's first responders in a world full of hurt and need.

Christ challenges us today to be moved by the same sense of compassion and love that he expressed toward a grieving widow and mother. He asks us to bring hope and healing to others, without condition or reservation, and driven by one simple motivation: they are our brothers and sisters, sons, and daughters; fellow adoptive children of the same Creator. It is through his grace that we are compelled to act. Let us respond to Jesus' call; let us embrace the sacrament of Christ's compassion.

Amen? Amen!

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 7: 36 - 8:3

"Redemption at the feet of Christ"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Abigail Van Buren, commonly known as Dear Abby, once wrote: "There are two types of people in the world. Those who walk into a room and say, 'There you are!' And those who say, 'Here I am!'" Both types of individuals are featured in our Gospel lesson today. Simon the righteous Pharisee and the unidentified "woman of the city, who was a sinner." The lesson for us is to know which one is which; and why.

This wonderful story is one of only a few shared in some form by all four gospels. While the essentials remain the same, the details of time and place, the characters and events, the message and lesson the story offers, differ dramatically from writer to writer. Luke gives us a different message than the other three. Matthew, Mark, and John seem to concentrate on Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointing Jesus' feet out of love and in preparation for his impending death. Luke's account seems different.

Jesus knew this woman's sordid past but didn't focus on it. Rather, he focused on her actions and her willingness to make herself vulnerable. She did that by falling at his feet, washing them out of love, and offering her only gift, her alabaster flask filled with precious oil. Isn't that exactly what Jesus wants from you and I, our willingness to offer him ourselves, our lives, and the very best we have. The woman speaks no words, nor does she presume to touch Jesus' head, though it needs anointing. Rather, she washes his dirty feet with her tears and perfume and then dries them with her long hair.

Christ must have been aware of the contempt Simon held him. After all, he had not given Jesus the traditional welcome kiss on the cheek, nor had he offered any water to wash his sandal-covered and dirty feet. Simon had not poured perfumed olive oil on Jesus' perspiration covered head either. These were things a host would offer an honored guest. As Jesus sat down to supper, he must have felt physically uncomfortable and unclean. But he kept his silence.

The woman's intrusion into Simon's dinner party was a risky thing to do. Her washing of Jesus' feet was embarrassing to Simon, but it was also an act of

extraordinary faith in the compassion of Jesus to forgive her sins and make her whole again. Her attitude stands in stark contrast to the calculated reserve of the Simon the Pharisee, who believes that Jesus has disgraced himself by acknowledging this pitiful display; but Simon fails to understand everyone's need, including his own, for forgiveness and reconciliation with those we hurt and who hurt us. We all need forgiveness, but we are often too blind to our sinfulness or too afraid or too proud to ask for it.

Our love for Jesus should drive us to give what is most costly, the whole of our selves. Just as this unidentified woman broke open the alabaster jar to pour out the oil, our faith should prompt us to pour ourselves out fully, releasing all our God given gifts. But most of all, Jesus wants the very part of ourselves that is the most difficult for us to give. He wants our will so he can guide us to find his will for our life journey.

The story of the woman who washes the feet of Jesus at the home of Simon is a lesson in both humility and gratitude. Pharisee and sinner both stand as equals before God. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be reconcilers, not judges; we are called to forgive, not keep score; we are called to welcome back those who want to return and to enable them to put their life back together, not to set up conditions or establish tests to prove their worthiness and sincerity. Just as Jesus transformed the lives of those who were marginalized, forgotten, and used by society, so we are called to do the same: to welcome and honor the poor and struggling, the lost and broken in our midst, and to realize, in all humility, how we are all in need of forgiveness that we can only find at the feet of Jesus.

Amen? Amen!

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 9: 18-24

"We are all one in Christ Jesus"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today I want to talk about our second reading, not to drive my husband crazy because he already planned the music but because the second reading is most dear to my heart the true meaning of the Gospel and to be followers of Christ. We are all children of God. Through our baptism we have been clothed with Christ. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for we are **all** one in Christ Jesus. And if we belong to Christ, then we are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise." This verse states that we are ALL God's children and has become one of my favorite verses.

There was conflict in early church history. The Jewish people felt they were the chosen people, but many Gentiles had joined the Jewish community to worship their God as they had come to know him through Jesus. This caused many problems. We all know how discussions about religion can become very heated because everyone believes they have the right answer. This new crowd of recent converts from paganism overwhelmed a small group of old-timers with a heritage of loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because their rather relaxed attitudes to Jewish customs and law. As you can imagine there was division.

They all worshipped the same God, but these converts believed Jesus was the Son of God with a new spirit, which opened the community to all people, no matter their ethnic heritage or social standing. As Paul wrote earlier, in the spirit of Jesus, and as the verse states there is no distinction, we all belong to Christ. This was hard to take...In a world divided between Jews and non-Jews, slaves and freemen, men and women, a world where everyone knew his place and dare not leave it, was a new community of the Spirit of Jesus that was trans-cultural, that saw all men and women, children whatever status and blood, as first of all children of one Father.

It was not the pious of Jerusalem who showed up. It was these crazy heretics, strangers from a pagan land, whose way of life violated everything the good Jew believed in. It was they who were welcomed by Jesus. Jesus opened his arms to all, from the very beginning, no matter how strange, or different. Despite the differences the people who embrace the spirit must find room in their hearts for all

God's children. And so, it was a community that grew like wildfire, attracting especially women and slaves. Attracting the poor and dislocated that wandered the growing urban centuries. Here is a vision of one people, transcending all the secondary sources of identity and history.

This continues to be a major problem in our world today. Look at all the divisions we have in our world, our schools, gangs, and racial groupings. Do we feel we are the ones with the right answers, without allowing the Spirit to work in us? Is it self-interest or God's interest?

What happens when we seek as a religion to capture and control a spirit like that of Jesus, organize it with hierarchy and rules that separate and exclude? Do we not tend to become just one more among many? The church has not escaped the temptation. We seek to win the world in the name of Jesus but have not yet demonstrated that the world would be much different.

This Spirit God is in Jesus who led to changes in slavery and enabled the role and independence of women and children, however haltingly, however slowly. As you know I am for equality of all of God's people. God made humankind not to exploit, control or undermine each other but to be helpmates to each other. We cannot rid the injustices of the world, the sin of sexism and exploitation along with the abuses of others until we all grow in the Spirit on God and allow the Spirit to breathe down on us and change us. We need respect and compassion for all of God's people and when that happens the world will be changed, and we will look on everyone regardless of gender, nationality, education, or station in life. We will look at everyone as valued and precious in the eyes of God.

I would like to share the following story of a change of life.

Many years ago, in India, a group of men traveling through desolate country found a seriously wounded man lying beside the road. They carried him to the Christian mission hospital and asked the physician who met them at the door if a bed was available. The physician looked at the injured man and immediately saw that he was an Afghan, a member of the warring tribe. "Bring him in," he said, "For him we have a bed." When the physician examined the man, he found that an attacker had seriously injured his eyes and the man's sight was imperiled. The man was desperate with fear and rage, pleading with the doctor to restore his sight so that

he could find his attacker and extract retribution. "I want revenge," he screamed. "I want to kill him."

The doctor told the man that he was in a Christian hospital and that Jesus had come to show us how to love and forgive even our enemies. The man listened unmoved. Revenge was his only goal, vengeance the only reality. The doctor rose, saying that he needed to attend to other patients. He promised to return to tell the man a story, a story about a person who took revenge.

Long ago, he later began his story, the British government had sent a man to serve as Ambassador to Afghanistan, but as he traveled to his new post, he was attacked on the road, and thrown into a shabby makeshift prison. There was only one other prisoner, and the two suffered through their ordeal together, poorly clothed, badly fed, and mistreated cruelly by the guards. Their only comfort was a copy of the Book of Common Prayer, which had been given to the Ambassador by his sister in England. She had inscribed her name along with a message of goodwill on the first page. The book served not only as a source for their prayers, but also as a diary, as a place to record their daily experiences. The margins of the prayer book became a journal of their anguish and their faith.

The two prisoners were never heard from again. Their families and friends waited for news that never came. Over twenty years later, a man browsing through a second-hand shop found the prayer book. How it got there, no one can say. But, after reading some of the journal entries in the margin, he recognized its value, located the sister whose name was in the front, and sent it to her.

With deep heartache she read each entry. When she came to the last one, she noted that it was in a different hand. It said simply that the two had been taken from their cell, publicly flogged and then forced to dig their own graves before being executed. At that moment she knew what she must do. She was not wealthy, but she gathered all the money she could and sent it to this mission hospital. Her instructions were that the money was always to be used to keep a bed free for a sick or wounded Afghan. This was to be her revenge for her brother's torture in the hands of Afghans and his death in their country. "My friend," said the doctor, "you are now lying in that bed. Your care is her revenge."

This is a pretty dramatic example, but I think God challenges us to love all people the way that he loved us and that all are precious. Does he not say that we need to

look beyond the differences that might put us off, and with respect and care we see and care one by one, one human being, one child of God. God is inviting all of us, even in our brokenness and faults to a new form of unity, a place where we are one with God and one another. The goal in our world is not just at the table where we gather today and not just this place but also at the banquet and to serve one another. Let us embrace that call.

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 9: 51-62

"Haw or Gee?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Today's Gospel story begins with Jesus traveling through a hostile Samaritan village on his way to Jerusalem. Most pilgrims making the long journey from Galilee avoided the territories of the Samaria because of a long standing and mutual feud that dated back more than eight centuries. Jesus, however, proceeds through Samaria, and regardless of their inhospitality, he responds to their bitterness with tolerance and reconciliation.

Along the way, three would-be disciples ask to join Jesus. In Luke's account of the encounter, the three are unnamed. Matthew (8:19), on the other hand, tells us that the first was a scribe but the names or professions of the three are unimportant. In response to the first, Jesus asks if he clearly understands the cost of discipleship; Jesus urges the second not to find excuses or rationalizations for avoiding the call of God; and to the third, Jesus reminds him that discipleship demands a total dedication and commitment to seeking God in all things.

At first glance, Jesus' response may seem a bit harsh to excuses that appear reasonable. After all, they only wanted to take care of a few personal and family matters before committing to a life of discipleship. Is Jesus telling this trio and us that there can be no "but first's" or "in a minute's" when we feel the call of God? Or is he telling us and them that we cannot second-guess, or look back with regrets or doubts? When it comes to decisions about discipleship, we can't be confused about where to Haw or Gee. What? Haw or Gee? Hey, Jesus brought up the art of plowing in this story, not me. "No one who sets a hand to the plow," Jesus says, "and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God." If you've ever plowed a field with a tractor, you know about keeping your eyes fixed on a point up ahead. Turn to look behind you and you're not going to plow a straight furrow. Who would want to plant seeds in crooked rows?

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, tractors were scarce and expensive. Farmers used horses to plow the fields and used the commands Haw and Gee to turn the team to the left or right. When farmers ran into folks who had trouble making up their minds about something, first leaning in one direction and then the other, they were

said to be 'Gee Hawin' around." At least that's what Nelson Greenleaf told me. He was an old country preacher I knew some years back. It was Nelson who explained the fine art of the horse and plow to me. When someone is unsure about which way to turn, or struggling with a major decision in life, Nelson would say, they just don't know whether to Haw or Gee. Or maybe they just don't hear God's commands clearly, or they are confused about what is the right thing to do; maybe they don't have a clear idea of the destination God has in mind for them, or worse, they just don't care.

Maybe Nelson, and Jesus too for that matter, was thinking about that verse in Deuteronomy (5:32-33) that tells us to "... do as the LORD, your God, has commanded you, not turning aside to the right or to the left, but following exactly the way prescribed for you by the LORD ...". But how can we know the will of God in our lives with any certainty? Maybe we won't know and that's where faith and trust come into play.

If today's Gospel was to take place here and now, I wonder what kind of responses Jesus would hear to his call to "follow me." Consciously or unconsciously, we let so many agendas, interests and activities monopolize the focus of our lives; Jesus' call to discipleship, however, demands a total, focused commitment to the Gospel that affects every moment, every decision, every relationship of our lives. The Gospel of forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and peace is a spirit-centered attitude and perspective to which we commit our lives. We cannot be disciples by being mere spectators of God's presence. Authentic discipleship calls us to become involved in the hard work of making the presence of God a reality in our world, regardless of the cost, regardless of the difficulty, regardless of the sacrifice we may be called upon to make.

"Follow me," Jesus is saying to us today. What will our answer be? Maybe it's time for us to stop "Gee Hawin' around," step forward with faith and trust, put our "hand to the plow," follow the Spirit's call in our lives, and decide to follow Jesus.

Amen? Amen!

“Don’t Look Back!”

By Rev. Liz Miller

As our Gospel story begins, Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51) We all know what will happen when he gets there: He’ll be confronted by the religious leaders and within days even the masses will turn against him. Before the week is up, he will be crucified. His decision to go to Jerusalem marks the beginning of the end. This is the gravity of the situation underlying Luke’s words when he says, “...*he is determined to go to Jerusalem.*” Jesus was determined to obey God’s will regardless of the costs. Just as Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, so God calls us to set our sights on Christ and his kingdom and forsake all else for the sake of the Gospel. When we do, we taste the first fruits of eternal life.

This is the starting point of a life of faith – to seek God’s will over all else. Contrast that with the world in which we live. The world tells us, “Weigh the pros and cons. Keep your options open. Stick to your plan.” Jesus taught his disciples, “*But seek first God’s Kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well.*” (Matthew 6:33)

In this spirit, our prayer is not just a formality; it’s a way of life. That’s the spirit of putting God first – trusting that God not only has a plan for your life, but that God’s plan is good and perfect in every way, even when things don’t turn out as you had hoped. It makes all the difference. The more you let go and let God lead the way, the more you experience inner peace and lasting joy and true accomplishment.

Luke says they reached a Samaritan village, but the Samaritans wouldn’t receive him. It wasn’t that they were inhospitable. Luke makes this clear. Jesus wanted to get to Jerusalem. He didn’t have time to stop and visit. There was work to be done and a mission to accomplish.

We can all learn from this: There are times when we ought to kick back and relax, and there are times when we need to dig in and exercise greater urgency about proclaiming the Good News of the gospel.

What about today? Is there something you urgently want to accomplish? I know that in preparing for Jacks surgery my list of things to get done is long, and my focus is on that.

There are times when we need to step up and share our faith openly and honestly with others and let the chips fall where they may. There are those who are eager to hear what you have to say. The Samaritans weren't rude. It's just that Jesus didn't have time to stop and visit. So, he moved on. On the way he was approached by three would-be followers. The first said, *"I want to follow you wherever you go, Lord."* (Luke 9:57) He meant well, but he didn't understand what he was saying. Jesus told him, *"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."*

Christian discipleship is not for the faint of heart. Neither is it for those with a dual allegiance. The second wanna-be told Jesus, *"Lord, allow me first to go and bury my father."* (Luke 9:59) Jesus answered, *"Leave the dead to bury their own dead, but you go and announce the Kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:60)

That sounds cruel until we realize that Jesus was not talking about funeral services, but divided loyalties. God must come first in our lives. In one of the really hard words of the New Testament, Jesus said, *"If anyone comes to me, and doesn't disregard his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he can't be my disciple."* (Luke 14:26)

I don't know about you, but that's not a passage we dwell on. Translating it in a positive way, what it says is this: Put God first and let others find their rightful place in your life.

The third wanna-be said, *"I want to follow you, Lord, but first allow me to say good-bye to those who are at my house."* (Luke 9:61) But Jesus said to him, *"No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."* (Luke 9:62)

Don't look back. To look back is to invite regret, foster nostalgia and live in retrospect. It's to lament the fact that life changes and the good ole' days are a thing of the past. It's to second-guess yourself and wonder, "Did I make the right decision?" And to play the what-ifs: "What if I'd done this? What if I hadn't done that?" How many of us look back with regret? We must let it go and move on.

To look back is to hold on to a memory rather than claim a promise. It's to deny the possibility that what's important is not only what has been, but what will be. Most importantly, to look back is to avoid living this day to the honor and glory of God.

A life of faith is all about setting your sights on Christ and his kingdom and moving toward it, one step at a time; not letting the chaos of the world distract you, or the temptations of the world entice you, but striving by the grace of God within you to live after the example of Jesus, day by day. Jesus is our rock.

Jesus looked towards Jerusalem. He was bound and determined not to allow anything to stand in his way. In so doing, he fulfilled God's plan of salvation: He laid down his life for the sins of the world in order that we might be reconciled to God.

We should set our sights too; set our sights on Jesus. We should seek his kingdom of love and righteousness above all else. We should turn from the sinfulness of the world and follow his example. And above all, we should not look back. In the words of the old hymn,

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.”

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10: 1-9.

"The Peace of Being Sent"

By Rev. Liz Miller

We are all sent out by God, as disciples. God said he would be with us, but he did not say it would be easy. Jesus says, "the harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few. Jesus does not limit the ministry to himself alone. He needs his followers and appoints them to meet the increasing demands of a growing ministry. What that means is that each person is called, and that call is important. It doesn't matter if a person is a garbage collector or holds a high office. It is all equal in the eyes of God if we but say yes.

The work we share as a Christian is not always easy. There are difficult times in life as we all know, that take us to the deepest depths of unbearable pain. We also experience the joys of life that are very full and rich. We have all experienced both. The danger during the painful times is that we lose hope, or trust in a God who is good, a God who has promised to be with us. Have you been there? I have, a few times. I had lost all hope and I needed to make a choice. Was I going to mope around and feel sorry for myself or was I going to do something in my life? I got involved. In order to get out of the rut I was in. I chose to live to the fullest and face whatever obstacles might be in the way.

In the reading from Isaiah, we hear the words that Jerusalem has been a source of great comfort and life to its people. Those words were spoken to people who had watched Jerusalem as it was destroyed. The words of God came to them and reminded them that they needed to change their way of looking at things. They were discouraged and depressed. They needed to trust that in everything, both the good and the bad, that there was comfort and life coming to them. It is difficult to believe and to trust when we are in pain and suffering.

In today's gospel, Jesus says, "The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few." Jesus sends us out. The job is enormous and at times seems to be bigger than we can accomplish. Our task is to go into that work recognizing that we have a partner, recognizing that God is within us and making a difference. I am sure that at times when you worked you experienced frustration with your work. Jesus told his disciples to go out and take care of this job, but don't expect to do it all. Many times,

if things don't work out, it is not about you or what you said or did, but more about the other person and their history. Remember too, that alone we can quickly become discouraged, but with community around us we are more likely to persevere. We need each other.

Jesus is inviting us to imagine there is real satisfaction in just being a part of a marvelous process called life. We go with the process. How it all turns out is not our responsibility. We can shake the dust from our feet where we could not do much and turn it over to God. We can let God take care of what needs to be done. Jesus says, "Trust in me, because I am with you." Yes, we are like lambs amid wolves, and we are vulnerable but if we trust in the power of God, we can accomplish everything. No enemy is stronger than God. God is in control.

So often we find ourselves caught in a tremendous amount of anxiety and pressure. God wants us to have peace. We need to realize that no one person is accomplishing none of this individually. We are like a puzzle and if a piece is missing it is incomplete. We need the support of our God who is with us, but we also need to recognize that the whole work of Christianity is always accomplished in community. I remember when my daughter Marie was 3 years old, she said to me, "me do it, mommy, me do it." Many times, I will say, "oh, I can do it, I am fine but thank you for offering." I find that when I think that I can do everything by myself that I will be filled with anxiety and agitation. Just ask my husband. We all need to be open to receiving help from others. Sometimes we need help through the people that God brings into our lives. These past weeks have been a perfect example. I cared for Jack. Someone came to cut the lawn and weeding. Other people offered to drive or bring food. Many prayers were lifted for us. I find that it is easier for me to give to other people, than for others to give to me. We must be involved in life and share with each other. I cannot begin to tell you how much you all mean to us and how we feel a bond, a connection with each of you. We are all interconnected. I think Jesus is telling us the job is big, but we do it with him and with each other. In letting go of ourselves, and all that we think we can accomplish alone, and giving ourselves over to God, we realize that we need each other we will find the peace that God talks about, the peace that God wants to give to each of us.

We must choose to be a part of God's creation, to live and to love and yes, to be sent out.

Jesus instructs the 72 that he sent out and he calls us today:

- To keep focused on the ways and values of God
- To proclaim God's peace "among wolves."
- To offer hope and healing, not judgment and condemnation
- To find satisfaction not in what they have done in God's name but to rejoice in what God has done through them.

Our mission is not about power but peace; it is grounded not in dominance, but in humble service; we are sent forth not to condemn but to heal and lift. We are to walk among and with those who are also sent to serve. We offer compassion, reconciliation, and hope. In our love for others, God resides in us; in the kindness and care we give to others and the very presence of God is realized.

We are sent to help grow God's garden. Through us God prepares the soil, sows the seed, weeds, waters and finally will harvest. Jesus sends us forth and he gives us his peace. Let us go. Amen.

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10: 25-37.

"What's love got to do with it?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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.

Amen? Amen!

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10:38-42.

“Are you Mary’s heart or Martha’s hands?”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Here is a question for all of us to ponder: are we Mary’s heart or Martha’s hands? Think about that for a few minutes. How do we express our gifts to God? As the heart of Mary or the hands of Martha?

There is a story told about a father who would take a long walk with his teen-age daughter each day after he returned home from work. Their time together meant a lot to him. Suddenly she began to offer almost daily excuses as to why she could not go with him. He missed her company on his daily walks but did not say anything. On his birthday his daughter presented him with a sweater that she had knitted herself. It was then that he realized she had done her knitting while he was out of the house on his walks. He said to her, “I do love and appreciate this sweater, but I value your company infinitely more. I can purchase a sweater from almost any store, but the gift of your companionship is a truly priceless treasure.”

Jesus stayed at the house of Martha and Mary in Bethany many times. The sister’s actions in our Gospel reading mirror the two expressions of how we should share our gifts from God: loving service to others in Martha and prayer and contemplation in Mary. Both expressions are wonderful gifts of joy and love, but as Martha comes to realize, Jesus needed companionship more that day; it was the treasured gift, the “better part.” As Joseph Donders put it (I’m paraphrasing here), “Mary knew Jesus needed company that day. He didn’t need a housekeeper; he needed a listener.”

The work of discipleship requires a balance between hearing the Word and doing the Word. The Book of James makes this clear. We should strive to become Hearers and Doers as disciples, finding a balance between work and prayer, contemplation, and good deeds; being aware that we often fall into the trap of concentrating on one at the expense of the other. American evangelist R.A. Torrey said it well, “If we are too busy to pray, we are too busy.”

We are all like Martha in our own anxiety over details; we all too often worry about the “doing” part of discipleship at the expense of the important and lasting “hearing” part. It is “the better part” embraced by Mary in our reading and

transcends the practical concerns of the everyday work and stress that have overwhelmed poor Martha.

Are we Mary's heart or Martha's hands in our service to the Lord? Either form of devotion is a wonderful gift, but Jesus is looking for a balance of both in our lives. I think the chorus to Jack White's song (that we listened to at the beginning of mass) about Mary and Martha sums up Jesus' expectations of you and I when it comes to expressing our gifts: "I want Mary's heart and Martha's hands; you gotta serve the Lord and do the best you can. I want Mary's heart and Martha's hands, you got to follow, the master's plan."

Are we Mary's heart or Martha's hands? Hopefully, we are the best of both.

Amen? Amen!

"Come Rest with Me"

By Rev. Liz Miller, M.Div.

Today's reading is about discipleship. The contrast is about service and listening.

First, I would like to give a little history. Luke does not name the city, but John tells us that Mary and Martha live in Bethany. It is here that Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead; where Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfume and wipes them with her hair. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will die. Martha is the one who invited Jesus to her house. Luke shows us a woman sitting as a disciple at the feet of Jesus, learning from him. Jesus is acting contrary to Jewish cultural norms that have to do with women. He is alone with women who are not related to him; a woman serves him; and Jesus is teaching a woman in her own home.

Martha busied herself with many tasks, which was a traditional female role while Mary sits at the Lord's feet which was a traditional male role. My homily, however, is not on the two women but on balance, heart and listening.

Today's Gospel brought back a memory. When I was ordained a deacon, a delicious meal was being prepared for the Archbishop and clergy. The table was set with beautiful china and the person cooking the dinner was a woman. I asked this woman if she would like any help and I was told no. I was torn because I wanted to help her, but I also wanted to be able to sit and listen to the rest of the clergy. I was also very uncomfortable while she did all the work. Her husband checked on her a

couple of times, but the men did not offer to help in any way. It was the first time, as a woman, that I was sitting with the men, the clergy. I must admit that I liked not having to serve or be in the kitchen when all the fun stuff was happening in the other room. I understand Martha because I am in that role a lot, but I also understand that we all need to be the Martha's and Mary's in today's world. Both are important.

Martha felt the responsibility to serve. She does her duty, and she prepares the dinner, and she feels the burden of carrying more than her fair share. She is feeling resentment. I think there might also be some jealousy there too. She sees Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and she would like time with him too. Martha has her own agenda and feels Mary should be helping her. She wants Jesus to straighten Mary out and have her do what Martha wants her to do. There is contrast here though, between Martha who tells Jesus what he must say and Mary who listens to what Jesus wishes to say. Martha and Mary need Jesus, and Martha's busyness distances her from him. Martha is focused on the task at hand, but Mary is focused on the relationship.

What are the implications for us today? Our lives are active and at times feverish. I don't know about you, but I find that busyness gets in the way of my prayer life, my family, and my peace of mind. My busyness becomes the enemy because I lose balance in my life. When I worked, I was consumed with work, paperwork and working long hours because that was what was expected of me. I had to be the best I could be, but at what price? When I was working on my M.Div. I was taking too many classes each semester, which robbed me of finding balance and peace in my life, which I so desperately needed. Where do we set the limits that are forced on us? How do we set priorities when our world is filled with busyness, even though what we are doing is good? We are busy with many different things and are troubled and distracted because of that busyness. The danger is a service that has no time for listening to what God might be saying to us. How can we hear when we are so occupied with our busy, non-stop schedule?

I think we need to make a conscious effort to choose the better part. We need to sit at the feet of Jesus in prayer and listen to his direction. There is value in sitting, in listening, in learning, in loving. Like Martha, we think the important thing is doing, but Jesus teaches us to sit, to listen, to learn and to love. That is a lot easier said than done. We must be a doer at times. We have no choice, but in order to have

intimacy with Christ we need to slow down and listen with our heart. Christ is within you; Christ is with you; Christ is a part of you and Christ wants to enter your life. The heart of our message is entering an intimate relationship with Christ. It is a feeling one cannot explain but is something we need to experience. I cannot explain the deep feeling I had when I was ordained. It was a spiritual experience but there are no words to express it. We cannot always explain the experience, at least adequately, that we have when we have a deep encounter with Christ, but those encounters change us, and we are touched by the Spirit in a special way. We cannot reach this kind of intimacy if we are so busy doing... that we cannot hear the Spirit speaking to us in the quiet of our heart. Even Jesus, in his public life, filled with people following him had to take the time to be alone and to pray.

I am not saying we should sit around doing nothing. Hard work is good. What we must do is to discern, to set our priorities carefully, to seek the better thing. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. While we go about the busyness in this world we need to be in touch with our heart and listen. We must be open to new ideas. We must be open to new ways of seeing.

Our challenge then, is how to be open and really welcome the message of Jesus, the message of intimacy with our God. When we open ourselves to God, we will be changed. We don't know where it will lead but we do know we will be transformed. In the quiet of our heart, Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile. Sit with me at my feet and treasure the moment. We live in a Martha world but take time to be Mary for just a bit. Come, rest with me!

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 11: 1-13

"Let us become what we pray"

By Rev. Liz Miller

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. The disciples were not asking Jesus anything unusual here. It was not uncommon for followers of prophets to ask how they would be expected to pray. But the deeper question for you and I is not how we should pray, but what exactly is the meaning of prayer in our lives?

Prayer is defined as a conversation with God, and it can take the form of either an individual or group exercise. But the prayer Jesus gives as an example goes beyond that definition; it speaks to our very personal communication with God. 1 Samuel (1:15) talks about the pouring out of one's soul before the Lord, and in Psalm 73 (Vs 28) we are encouraged to draw near to God in prayer. Real prayer it seems, is more than a dialogue, it is a spiritual communion with God. And much like the communion we share in the Eucharist; it takes the form of an exchange; we become what we receive - we become what we pray. The Lord's Prayer, found in Luke and Matthew, involves a powerful communal experience as we pray together in the words Jesus himself taught us to use.

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is shorter and more concise than the one found in Matthew's (6:10-15), but what is important is not just words themselves, but the attitude of prayer Jesus teaches. We pray not to impose our will on God but to ask God to make us open to his will; in other words, we pray not to change God's mind but for God to change ours.

We often approach prayer as if we are trying to wring gifts from an unwilling God; when in fact, we come before our Creator who knows our needs better than we do ourselves. In Matthew's Gospel (6: 8) we learn that God knows what we need even before we ask. Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome (8:26-27) that God understands our prayers even if we can't find the right words to express them.

Authentic prayer is not a formula or ritual but an awareness of God's presence in our lives, of God's hand acting as sustainer and nurturer of all creation, of God's love giving breath in every moment of our existence.

Prayer is to realize the connection between the compassion of God and the love we experience in our lives, between God's forgiveness and the forgiveness we extend, between the holy creativity of God and the work we do for the daily bread we receive. In expressing the prayer that Jesus taught us, in private or in communion with others, we are praying for God's kingdom to become a reality: a kingdom that knows neither borders nor enemy; a kingdom that exalts humility and compassion over celebrity and wealth; a kingdom that treasures the poor and the sick; a kingdom that is ruled by the love of God, where compassion is the measure of all things. In praying as Jesus taught us, we are promising to be partners with God in creating this kingdom on earth right here and right now.

What is the meaning of prayer in our lives? It is the prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, a prayer that does not center on asking God to do what we want but prayer that asks that we do what God wants of us. A prayer about being ready and willing to make God's will a reality in our everyday life. Prayer worthy of God's ear seeks the grace to do the work God calls us to do, extending forgiveness, charity, and justice in our world, and to become the people God calls us to become; brothers and sisters of Christ, his adoptive sons, and daughters. May the prayer of St. Thomas More become the heart of our prayer life: "O God, give us the grace to work for the things we pray for."

Let us become what we receive, let us become what we pray.

Amen? Amen!

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 12:13-21.

"If I Were a Rich Man"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Play the song *"If I Were a Rich Man"* from Fiddler on the Roof:

In Fiddler on the Roof, the main character is Tevye, a poor dairyman who dreams of a better life. There are two main differences between him and the character in our Gospel reading. First, Tevye dreams of being a rich man, while our biblical character is already a rich man who dreams of being even wealthier. Both share thoughts of building; Tevye dreams of building a tall house with many rooms, wooden floors, a tin roof, and staircases going up and down, and one going nowhere. He also sees a yard full of chicks and turkeys and geese and ducks. Our biblical character dreams of building larger barns to store his increasing wealth.

The second difference between the two is an important one. Our gospel character thinks only of himself and the rest and pleasures his added wealth will bring him. Tevye first thinks of his wife and how his riches would change her life. How she would supervise the household and servants, and even take on the appearance of a rich man's wife, with her "proper double-chin." "Oy," he exclaims, "what a happy mood she's in."

But even more importantly, Tevye believes his newfound riches would allow him time to sit in the synagogue and pray. Maybe even have a seat at the "Eastern Wall," next to the holy enclosure where the scrolls of the Torah are kept. He envisions time to sit with learned men discussing the holy books several hours every day. To him, this would be the "sweetest thing of all," the greatest treasure his riches would bring.

There are lessons for us in the parable of the rich man and the dream of Tevye the dairyman. Lessons about priorities, greed, and the place riches have in our lives. Our bible character thinks only of himself, not his workers, or family, his focus is how he will benefit from his wealth. Tevye dreams of material things as well, but hopes his riches will benefit his wife, and more importantly, give him time to embrace his faith. A luxury he as a poor man lacks, because he must work so many hours to make a living for his family. The rich man stores his treasure in barns, Tevye stores his treasure in family and faith. Where is our treasure stored?

The moral of our parable is often misunderstood. Riches are not the issue in themselves, how they fit into our lives and affect our relationship with our family, our friends and God is. If all things come from God then what treasure we have in this life, in whatever form it may take, is also a gift from God. We are stewards of that gift and God expects us to use it wisely. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

"If I were a rich man," is the dream many of us have dreamed at one time or another. What we must realize is that we are all rich in Christ Jesus, and our treasure is already laid up for us in heaven. In the meantime, we have been blessed in this life with the gifts of the spirit. May we be true stewards of those gifts today. May the riches of blessings received become for us the treasure of blessings shared.

Daidle deedle daidle dumb.

Amen? Amen!

Where is Your Treasure?

By Rev. Liz Miller

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 despite 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.

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 12: 35-40.

“Chirp and sing before the dawn”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet once wrote, *“Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.”* I believe Tagore meant that just as the birds begin to chirp and sing long before sunrise, faith too, senses that there is a light of hope about to arrive. Even though there may be darkness all around, we have faith in God to guide us through the unseen, and into the light of a new day.

Our destiny is bound up with the gift of faith, and our reading from Hebrews makes this abundantly clear. Following the example of Abraham, there is nothing that we have, not even our own future, which God has not given us. It is faith that allows us to find joy in knowing that our whole life is in God’s hands. Just like the bird who feels the light even when it is still dark, in our darkest moments, we can still sense that there is hope, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Faith demands a way of thinking that may be difficult for some to comprehend and requires us to refocus our thought process. Faith tells us that we cannot find the answers to life’s most important questions all by ourselves. We must trust in God. When we are sick, we go to the doctor, and we do what the doctor tells us to do. We take our medication; we get our rest, and we undergo the treatments or therapy the doctor recommends. Still, we must realize that our lives are in God’s hands, not the doctor’s. Live or die, healed or not, we have faith that God is in control, God orchestrates our life journey through all its twists and turns, ups and downs.

Faith is also present when we listen to that voice within us that is our conscience. We follow this voice, trusting that as God found a way for Abraham to be the Father of Many Nations, he will find a way for us to confront and conquer the challenges that life brings our way. We need God’s help to live as a People of Faith. Our faith is often weak, we have fears, we doubt. But our prayer must be like that of the man in Mark 9:24. He asked Jesus to cure his son of epilepsy. Jesus replied, "Do you believe?" "I do believe, the man said, "but help my unbelief." Help those parts of me that don't believe, those parts that have trouble believing, the parts that are weak, the parts that doubt. Our reading from Hebrews tells us that

faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction or expectation of things not seen. True faith is a gift from God.

Today, let us pray for and seek a deepening of our faith. Jesus promises that he will help us with that, help us when we doubt, when we question, when we struggle. In this journey we walk, may God guide each step we take, may God help us to find the answer to each question we have, and may God hear and respond to each prayer we make, that through it all, our faith is strengthened. So that like that bird, we can chirp and sing before the dawn.

Amen? Amen!

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 12: 49-53

"Refined by Fire"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Today's reading is rather difficult to understand. We would prefer to emphasize the words of Jesus that is gentle, kind and forgiving. However, in scripture there are many alarming readings. Today's reading is one of those. We must remember though that to understand scripture one must think about why it was written for the people in that time period and what does it mean for us today. Jesus was using eschatological language that was familiar at that time and not intended to be taken literally. His followers did not consider themselves to be of a different religion but followers of a new and more fulfilling way of practicing Judaism which put them at odds with other Jews, and even members of their own families.

Jesus said, I have come to set fire on earth. Fire can be used as a metaphor for purification. He says that families will be divided because of him. Some will be for Jesus and others will be against him. Jesus has told us that a call to discipleship will not lead to an easy life. Just look at society today. People don't want religion. Many churches have membership that is dwindling. Young people have other interests. Christians are being discriminated against and ridiculed.

I remember I wanted to become a nun and my family was against it. When I decided to become a priest, I had a friend of over 50 years who was against it and has not spoken to me to this day because she did not like what I was doing. She was judging without even thinking of what God might want from me, but in the end would I face her on what I did with my life or face God? Despite how much it hurt to follow my heart and what I believed to be a calling from God I had to listen to God first.

As Christians we know that the road is not smooth, and we will find people opposing us every step of the way. It all comes down to redemption. Jesus came to transform sinners but how many really want to be transformed? Jesus says the first shall be last and the last shall be first. We are called to care for the poor and vulnerable instead of trying to make friends with the rich and powerful. This can cause conflict in our lives.

In the letter to the Hebrews, you must be focused and have your eyes fixed on the goal. The goal is to bring life to people. Christ is our model. He was pierced and

nailed for us to accomplish his work. Christ had such a passion to do the will of God. We need to follow his example and not give up or be discouraged even though our task might be difficult.

During Easter we witnessed a baptism. Baptism is a new birth, a rebirth. In our reading today baptism is compared to fire. The work of Jesus is to bring unity, oneness, and wholeness. However, if Jesus is calling us to a deeper unity, we might not always find peace and unity at first. When things need to change there is division, distrust, and anger. Most of us don't like change. I, for one, need time to think about things. Change happens when the time is right. Today, I celebrate my seventh anniversary as a priest. I am in my seventies. God's grace can work with us a long time to get us to the place where God wants us. God's energy is poured into us. God-energy wants so badly to start a fire, to set things blazing, so that we can be purified.

There is a story of a woman going to visit a silversmith to understand the refining process. The silversmith explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest to burn away all the impurities. She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, 'How do you know when the silver is fully refined?' He smiled at her and answered, 'Oh, that's easy — when I see my image in it.'

A refiner's fire does not destroy indiscriminately like a forest fire. A refiner's fire does not consume completely like the fire of an incinerator. A refiner's fire refines. It purifies. It melts down the bar of silver or gold, separates out the impurities that ruin its value, burns them up, and leaves the silver and gold intact. God is our refiner's fire, and that makes all the difference.

Pain can either be the most useful or most useless part of your life. It all depends on how much you trust God in it. I know God is still refining me and I suspect we all feel that way, regardless of our age.

When you can look at yourself in the mirror and see the image of God staring back at you, it's an amazing feeling! Everything else just doesn't seem so important

anymore. Let's pray that as we continue this journey that we will become a reflection of God's love and light.

For those of you who feel that you are being tested and refined, don't lose hope. Know that while it can get hot in the center of the fire, just like the story of the silversmith and the woman, Jesus is present and working like never before. Trust the process and keep moving forward. If today you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that Christ will keep watching you until he sees his image in you. Let the fire fall, Lord, let the fire fall.

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 13: 22-30

"Friend, will you be in that number?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

As Liz addressed last week, we are going through some scripture that is difficult to read and comprehend, let alone find an uplifting message to preach. Jesus is on his final trek to Jerusalem and facing a future of ridicule, suffering and death. The end of his earthly ministry. In these gospel teachings, Jesus is reaching out to help us to prepare for our own end times, when our life on earth is over and we confront eternity face to face.

In reading today's lesson, I was reminded of the chorus to the moving spiritual *"The Great and Last Convention."* You won't find it in any hymnal or even on the internet, it is a song passed down from generation to generation with roots in the old South. The chorus asks us, *"Friend, will you be in that number, where they'll be no more goodbyes. In that great and last convention on high."* This sums up the burning realization found in today's gospel story. Jesus replies to a question of how many people will be saved with a challenge for those who profess to be his followers; strive to enter through the narrow gate into God's kingdom, and thus be among those who are saved. Jesus is asking all of us today: *"Friend, will you be in that number?"*

As he walks along the road toward Jerusalem, Jesus warns his audience that a superficial relationship with his life and teaching would not in itself be enough to find the eternal peace we seek. The book of James is very clear on this; our faith alone, our adherence to ritual is insufficient, belief in the One True God is not enough, for the devil himself believes, James writes, and trembles in the presence of God. How then do we enter through the narrow gate? How do we prove ourselves to be true followers of Christ and worthy of safe passage into eternity? How do we become counted among the number that will come from the four directions to eat and drink at the heavenly banquet in the Kingdom of God?

The image of the narrow gate in today's Gospel speaks of a difficult and humble entryway, built on limitless love, unconditional forgiveness, and sacrificial selflessness. The narrow gate of today's Gospel is the honest confrontation of who we are, what we believe, what we have done with our lives, what accomplishments

and horrors we bear responsibility for. The narrow gates we encounter in this life require of us honesty and integrity that cannot be ignored, or faked, or hidden behind outward appearances of piety. As the evangelist Billy Sunday put it, attending church each Sunday does not make us a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes us an automobile. Faith is not a pre-ordained condition nor an all-purpose pass key through the narrow gate Jesus describes. It is not a guaranteed reservation to the here-after either. What is required is a personal, committed response to the gift of grace we each receive through the death and resurrection of God's only Son. To paraphrase the words of James, let us show the gatekeeper of eternity the depth of our faith through the acts of love and mercy we accomplish in this life in the name of Christ. This is the key to the promised banquet in heaven; being hearers and doers, faithful people who serve faithfully.

Our entry into the life of God requires a devotion that does not allow us to justify our self-serving sense of ethics or our obsession with winning at all costs. The narrow gate has no acceptable margin of error, no wiggle room or escape hatch, no path of least resistance. The narrow gate is often difficult to negotiate because it requires you and I to humbly bend our egos and wills to pass through it. But Jesus promises that anyone seeking their way through the narrow gate will find the meaning and purpose in their lives that ultimately leads to an eternal dwelling place in heaven.

We have a choice to make, and we are making that choice every moment of our lives. We are either connecting with God or fleeing God. We are either growing accustomed to the sin in our lives or repenting of it. We are either knocking down or pushing aside others or placing ourselves at the service of those in need. Jesus told the crowd, "Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Our lives are a constant process of conversion, of working to become the people God has called us to become. God's invitation to the banquet of heaven is extended to all men and women of goodwill; it is extended to you and me this morning. God has no numerical limit on the guest list for that final meeting, that great and last convention on high. There is only one question God has for you and me to consider: Friend, will you be in that number?

Amen? Amen!

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10: 21-24

"What is Humility?"

By Rev. Liz Miller

Our social relationships are something that we probably wouldn't expect God to have much of an opinion on, but today's scripture makes it clear that it is part of the great commandment of loving God and loving neighbor; that not only do we need to treat others as we would like to be treated, but we need to go a step further and humble ourselves in social situations. The contrast with our world is obvious, and so how do we find ways to be an agent of change in our society, how we, in small and large ways, make humility fashionable. It may never be the rage or the trending topic on Facebook but placing others above us and working for the betterment of the poor are all things that we can do to get the conversation going in the right direction.

What exactly is humility? When you think of someone as a humble person, what is the image that comes to mind? How about the long-lost acquaintance you meet by chance who can't stop talking about themselves? So much so that they forget to ask how you've been doing all these years. Probably not the image we are looking for. Or what about the person who won a medal for humility only to have it taken away because they wore it proudly.

A good definition of humility from the Urban Dictionary defines humility as "realizing how much more there is than who we are." But what kind of humility is Jesus talking about in our scripture today?

Gospel-centered humility realizes that we are not the center of all things but part of a much larger world. It is a humble 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 may have done to earn it.

Humility is the ability to suspend our own wants and needs in order to seek our place among all people and experiences. A wise man once said, "knowing God makes us humble, knowing ourselves keeps us humble." True humility," Confucius said, "is the solid foundation of all virtues;" 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.

More often than we realize, the “banquet” described in today’s Gospel can be found in a simple offering of support, empathy, and encouragement we extend to a friend or even a total stranger. At God’s banquet table, we are sometimes the guest: we are welcomed and served 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 do here at our own table, each time we gather to pray and worship and partake of communion together.

What is humility? What image comes to mind when you think of a humble 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 look beyond ourselves, to look beyond appearances and labels, class and status, and the politics of our own social relationships, in order to see and welcome one another as brothers and sisters, children of the One True God in whose image and likeness we are all made.

Look at our church bulletin. The words that define us as an open and welcoming community is more than just a catchy phrase, it is our shared mission and purpose as a people of faith. Let us humbly live our shared mission each day in all that we do and say. And if we struggle a bit in finding the level of humility Jesus demands of us, fear not. Life’s challenges, it has been said, are designed not to break us but bend us toward God.

“What is Humility?”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

The politics of our social relationships are something that we probably wouldn't expect God to have much of an opinion on, but today's scripture makes it clear that it is part of the great commandment of loving God and loving neighbor; that not only do we need to treat others as we would like to be treated, but we need to go a step further and humble ourselves in social situations. The contrast with our world is obvious, and so the question that we face today is how to find ways to be an agent of change in our society, how we, in small ways and large, can make humility fashionable. It may never be the rage or the trending topic on Facebook but placing others above us and working for the betterment of the poor in our time and place, are all things that we can do to get the conversation going in the right direction.

What exactly is humility anyway? When you think of someone as a humble person, what is the image that comes to mind? How about the long-lost acquaintance you meet by chance who can't stop talking about themselves? So much so that they forget to ask how you've been doing all these years. Probably not the image we are looking for. Or what about the person who won a medal for humility only to have it taken away because they wore it proudly.

I searched for a good definition of humility and found a pretty good one in the Urban Dictionary. It defines humility as “realizing how much more there is than who we are.” But what kind of humility is Jesus talking about in our scripture today?

Gospel-centered humility realizes that we are not the center of all things but part of a much larger world. It is a humble 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 may have done to earn it.

Humility is the ability to suspend our own wants and needs in order to consciously seek our place among all people and experiences. A wise man once said, “knowing God makes us humble, knowing ourselves keeps us humble.” True humility, Confucius said, is the solid foundation of all virtues; love, compassion, mercy, selflessness, tolerance, and forgiveness.

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Amen? Amen!

P.S. How about this weather? To quote Yogi Berra, that wise old catcher and manager of the New York Yankees, “It ain’t the heat, it’s the humility.”

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 14: 25-33

"Must Jesus bear the cross alone?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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!

Amen? Amen!

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 15: 1-10

"Lost and Found"

By Rev. Liz Miller

The message scripture for this week consists of three parables. The first two are short; the third, and probably the best known, is the story of the prodigal son. The first two parables deal with something lost being found. Their message is 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. Who was 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. And as a teacher, Jesus welcomed every opportunity to explain his mission on earth using his favorite instructional aide, the parable. In using the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, Jesus wants to make it very clear that God is concerned about, searches for, and desires to save the lost by helping them to find a clear path back home. There is an old Hebrew Proverb that says, "Whosoever turns to walk towards God will find God running towards them." Looks like God is very proactive in searching for the lost, closing the gap quickly, helping us to help ourselves return home to God.

Because we have heard one or two sermons about the prodigal son over the years, we 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.

Shepherding demanded toughness and courage, it was not a job for the weak and fearful. Responsible for every sheep in his charge, a shepherd was expected to fight off everything from wild animals to armed poachers. Shepherds often had to negotiate the rugged terrain of the wilderness to rescue a lost sheep. Yet, it was a job that was considered menial at the time, and the shepherd was perceived as

smelly, often shifty, and not really accepted in polite society. In the first parable, we see the shepherd taking a huge risk by leaving the flock to go search for one lost sheep. We would like to believe that he was relying on the cooperation of his fellow shepherds in guarding the remaining sheep in his absence. It was common practice for shepherds to gather their separate flocks together for added protection. It is likely that this is when the shepherd counted his sheep and discovered one was missing. The bond between the shepherd and his sheep is a strong one. For the shepherd to go in search of the one lost sheep demonstrates that bond. Through this parable, Jesus is teaching us that like the responsible shepherd, the same bond exists between God and all humankind, and God will do whatever is necessary to seek out and bring back to his loving embrace every lost soul.

In the next parable the point is made that the woman had ten coins and lost one. Women in Jewish society were 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. Finding a small coin in a dark, dusty, dirt-floored Judean house was nearly impossible, but so great was the value of this coin that the woman would turn her poor hovel inside out in search of such a lost treasure. She 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. God considers the value of every soul is so great, that God will go to whatever lengths necessary to find and bring back the wandering and the lost. Can we do any less?

So, what's the bottom-line lesson in these parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin? What is striking in all three stories in Luke 15 is the joy experienced by the shepherd who finds the lost lamb, the woman who recovers the missing coin, and the father who welcomes home his wayward son. The same joy Jesus tells his listeners will be found in heaven and among the angels, when the lost find their way home to God. 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. Jesus asks us to actively seek out the lost and hurting and help them to find their way back; back home to God. What better carriers of the Good News to the lost can there be than those who have walked the same path; we were lost, and God found us. We are truly God's "Lost and Found."
Amen? Amen!

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 16: 1-13

"Which Wolf Do We Feed?"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

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.

Amen? Amen!

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 16: 19-31

"Lord, that we might See"

By Rev. Liz Miller

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 symbolizes 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 of 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? How demeaning. He must have felt less than human.

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 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 needs 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, 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 liking the priest in the story of the Good Samaritan and "pass by on the other side?" 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.

I've used this story before, but it is another favorite of mine. 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. We have all felt the web tremble with evil when we hear about mass killings at schools or malls. The web touches the rest of us when bad things happen. Lives that were lost will hurt many people for generations. We do not know these people, but the 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 of 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.

I, for one, had difficult times in loving the alcoholic and drug addicts because of personally seeing what it does to a person or family. I saw this firsthand by being a foster parent. It took a long time for me to “see” beyond and become more accepting.

We need to lift our eyes up and see. Lift them above ourselves, beyond what we own. Will we really see the other, see the deprived and degraded, the drug abused and sexually abused, see the disaster to people in any domination, whether male, female, military or financial, clerical, or lay. Only if we lift 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 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. Amen!

“Tracks we leave behind”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

We are fortunate to have some forty parables of Christ, and our reading this morning contains the only one Jesus shared where a principal character is named. The poor fellow is the famous Lazarus, a beggar with oozing sores. His poverty ironically enough has won him more than a measure of immortality. The rich man in our story is without a name. He was dressed in purple; a symbol of wealth as purple dye was very expensive. Also, in that time when common people were lucky if they ate meat once a week, the rich man ate it almost daily. The gate of his mansion also serves as a sign of his wealth and his desire to separate himself from those less fortunate than himself.

But we must be careful not to misinterpret today's scripture. While this parable may seem to be about wealth, it is really about values.

The rich man of today's story was "a winner in this life," says James Tahaney, "and a loser in the next." The rich man was not really a bad person, but a self-centered, complacent one. He eats lavish food and has a luxurious wardrobe. There is no mention of guilt either. He simply ignores the fact that just outside his gate lies a poor man in rags and starving. Even the scraps of food that fell from the rich man's table were not offered to him.

The rich man's sin is his remaining oblivious to the plight of Lazarus at his gate and his blind acceptance of the poverty of so many and wealth of so few like himself as the natural, inevitable order of things. It was not his wealth that kept him from "Abraham's bosom," but his selfish stewardship of what he had been blessed with in this life.

The rich man died, was buried, and wound up in Hades, a place of torment. It's a place that many folks believe does not really exist. That's sadly unfortunate because Jesus believes it exists enough to mention the place about thirteen times in the Gospels. The rich man ends up there not because he was bad or mean, he simply did nothing to help Lazarus. He just stepped over him and ignored him. He allowed poor Lazarus to exist in his misery; he even knew his name. He did not understand that the many blessings we have received from God are given for us to share; to share not out of a sense of obligation but as a joyful opportunity to give thanks to God for his many blessings to us.

Christ calls us to open our eyes to the poor and needy at our own gates and open our hearts to welcome them with compassion and honor. In our busy-ness, in our need for "me time," in our pursuit of our own wants and expectations, we can become quite adept at shutting the world out, not seeing or hearing the Lazarus's in our lives; those who are isolated and in desperate need of love and support and understanding.

There is an old Sioux saying that we will be "remembered forever by the tracks we leave behind." What will be our legacy when we pass from this world, what kind of footprints will our life leave in the sands of history. Amassing large estates and building monetary wealth are not the stuff that true legacies are made of. We will be remembered not for what we possess but for what we give; our legacy will be

what we contribute to make our world a happier, healthier place. That is something each of us can strive to do no matter our status in life, no matter the gifts we have been blessed with, and no matter the size of our bank accounts.

The life that we touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where or in what far-away place and time our touch will be felt. 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 are making footprints in the sands of time, tracks left behind and remembered. Let our legacy be one of love and compassion; let us strive to be a winner in both this life, and the world to come. Let us become a channel of God's blessings in our time and place. Amen!

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17: 5-10

"Mustard Seed Faith"

By Rev. Liz Miller

The apostles asked Jesus, "Lord increase our faith." Elsewhere they asked him, "Lord teach us how to pray" (Lk 11:1). In essence, the two requests were the same. To pray is to focus our hearts on God, to have faith in God's concern for us. Every prayer renews our trust in God, and whenever we turn to God in faith, we are praying.

But what exactly is faith? A good question for each of us to consider. The entire eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is devoted to the subject. The author first defines faith as "the substance of things hoped for," and "the evidence of things not seen," and then gives example after example of faith-based situations found throughout scriptural history. Clearly, faith is not something to be won, bought, or earned. Authentic faith is a gift freely given by God.

In asking Jesus to increase their faith the disciples seem to be acknowledging that their faith was somehow deficient. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt that your faith was not as strong as it should be, or your expressions of faith were lacking in some way? At times, there is a prayer that I utter, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." We all have times like that.

The scripture will help us in our walk of faith. Scripture will continuously draw us to God so that we can develop a powerful faith. In using the example of the mustard seed, Jesus is reminding us that out of any sense of smallness, or emptiness, or nothingness we may have, God's greatness will flower in an astonishing way. Mustard seed 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 among the smallest of seeds, but it can grow into a mighty tree, providing shade and shelter for others to enjoy.

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 a 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.

The mustard seed provides us with a lesson about power: that real power is not a matter of strength or force but the resolve and dedication to use whatever resources one possesses to affect change and accomplish good. Mustard-seed faith enables us to do many more important things than uprooting mulberry trees and transplanting them in the sea. Such faith is the unshakable conviction that every small act of kindness we extend to others can re-create, transform, lift, and heal.

Like the tiny mustard seed, our faith needs to be nurtured or else it will wither and die; but allowed to grow, it yields the greatest of harvests. Stepping out in faith helps us to develop the gift of faith we were given. We grow in faith as we act in faith, no matter how small our seed of faith may seem to be.

Faith, even in small quantities, has great power. It is not our faith that works wonders but the God who stands behind our faith. Our faith has values because God blesses faith and empowers the faithful.

We, too, want Jesus to increase our faith. We want to make a positive difference in our world. We are growing in faith right now, right here in this worship service, singing hymns of faith, listening to scripture, Communion and being with each other, people of faith.

Remember, the disciples were normal people just like us. The Spirit worked in the disciples, but it was only after the resurrection that they had great faith and great power. It is okay for us to ask, as the disciples did that day, for God to "Increase our faith." But don't stop there, take the ball, and run with it. Let us actively use the faith-gifts that God has given us. Through the infilling of God's Spirit and the power of God's 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.

Every day is an opportunity to grow in faith. I think that many times we flounder around, not sure what to do or say. I would like to share a story with you.

After church one Sunday, a parishioner pulled the pastor aside. He was a dedicated member of the parish's ministry to the sick and homebound. Just the day before he had visited the local hospital and discovered that a young couple in the church had just had a baby: a little girl with Down Syndrome. "I didn't know what to say," the man said to the pastor. "We visited for a few minutes. They let me hold her and I told them she was beautiful . . . I didn't know what to say." He went on to

describe how he had prayed with the couple, thanking God for their child, and asking God's peace and blessing on the family.

The pastor assured the man that he had said exactly the right thing and that his words and gestures were appropriate and kind. The pastor said he could not have done better himself.

A couple of weeks later the man again pulled the pastor aside and showed him a note from the young mother. She thanked him for his visit and prayer and then concluded her note: "Thank you for not saying what so many people said and telling us how sorry you were. We are so happy to have our baby. Thank you for sharing our family's joy

"That's great," the pastor said. "But can you imagine people telling them how sorry they were?" the man wondered. "Well," the pastor replied, "I guess they just didn't know what to say."

In his heart, the visitor knew exactly what to say even though he didn't realize it. He knew how to speak simple words of gratitude for the gift of this child and speak a word of peace to her family. That is "mustard seed" faith: the conviction that even the smallest act of compassion, done in faith and trust in God's providence, has meaning in the reign of God. May we embrace the spirit of the Gospel mustard seed: that our willingness to be vehicles of God's compassion for the sake of others enables us to overcome our own doubts and self-consciousness in order to plant and reap God's harvest of peace, justice, and reconciliation in our own small corner of the Father's kingdom. "

This story is dear to my heart because when my last child was born, she had a disability and would not develop like normal children. There was one person who kept apologizing to me when her child developed normally. I did not want that. I had worked through the pain of my daughter and her disability. Today, my daughter is truly a blessing. It is hard, at times, to know what to say but have faith and allow the Spirit to lead you. I have been surprised at what has come out of my mouth during prayer.

Let our actions not our words define our faith. Let that be our commitment today. How do we get started? Walt Disney had a good answer when he said, "it's time to quit talking and begin doing." Sounds like good advice. Amen?

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17: 11-19

“Leap of Faith”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Our gospel story begins with Jesus traveling through the region between Samaria and Galilee, on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus enters an unnamed village and encounters ten lepers. Scholars feel this unnamed village was probably Burqin, located about ninety minutes north of Jerusalem. The village still exists and the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George, known as the Church of the Ten Lepers is located there. The church is built over the site where tradition says the miracle took place.

The lesson in our Gospel story is often misinterpreted to be about gratitude. Ten lepers were cured and only one returns to thank Jesus for being healed. But its meaning goes much deeper than one leper being grateful.

There are many parallels between this story and the story of Naaman in our first reading. Both Naaman and the Samaritan leper were foreigners who came to a Godly Jew for healing. Both were asked to perform a small, seemingly irrelevant action before the healing could take place. Elisha, the successor to Elijah the prophet, told Naaman to bathe in the river Jordan seven times. Jesus told the ten lepers to show themselves to a priest, as required by Jewish law. In both stories, healing took place only after they obeyed; only after they took a leap of faith and did what they were asked to do.

When Jesus asked the ten lepers to step out in faith and start down the road to find a priest, I wonder if they remembered the Jewish legend about Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. The legend said that when Moses first lifted his staff and stretched out his hand to divide the sea, nothing happened. Nothing happened that is, until one man stepped into the sea; until one man took a leap of faith.

It was only when Naaman bathed, and the ten lepers walked away that they were healed. It was a leap of faith that made the difference, and in this our lesson is revealed. It is only when we are willing to step out in faith that Christ will lead us to the blessings we seek. Jesus, who is always faithful to us asks us to respond by being faithful to him; faithful in all things both great and small.

It takes a leap of faith to obey Jesus when he tells us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. But when we do that, when step out in faith, we find our lives suddenly changed as the burden of our own bitterness is lifted. It takes a leap of faith to believe Jesus when he tells us that it is more blessed to give than to receive. It isn't easy, but when we try it, when we do give of ourselves instead of serving ourselves, we learn once again that Jesus was right. Once we step out in faith and start acting generously, lovingly, and out of kindness and compassion, we find that the blessings we bestowed on others come back our way.

Reform Rabbi and author Laurence Kushner tells this story. A rabbi asked the prophet, "Where shall I find the Messiah?" He responded, "At the city gates among the lepers." "What is he doing there?" the Rabbi asked. The prophet answered, "he is changing their bandages."

We may not be asked to go to the city gates and change bandages for the lepers there, but Jesus will ask us to step out of our comfort zone as we follow the pathway of service he sets before us. That is difficult for many of us to do. But Jesus assures us that if we have faith and trust in him, we will find the strength, we, like the lepers in our stories, will be healed, made whole, cleansed, and restored to completeness in his hope and love. All we must do is take that first step; that leap of faith.

Amen? Amen!

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18: 1-8

"Hang in There"

By Rev. Liz Miller

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.

Amen? Amen!

“The Persistent Widow”

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Rome wasn't built in a day: No great work can ever be achieved without long and patient efforts. Look at the art of Michelangelo, the Beethoven concertos, the cathedral of Notre Dame. How many brushstrokes did it take to transfer the Last Judgment from Michelangelo's ample imagination to the sanctuary wall of the Sistine Chapel? Not just the world's artists and leaders, but every man and woman, is involved in a work of great significance, needing persevering courage to see it through to a successful conclusion; and that work begins with our own salvation. To achieve it, we must cooperate vigorously with God, and in a sense struggle with God. Today's readings invite us to consider two striking examples of perseverance in prayer, and the final success that this achieves.

Moses, the man of God, stands on the hilltop interceding for his people who are struggling for their survival in the valley below, attacked by the violent tribe of Amalek. His arms are raised in the classic gesture of intercession. When, out of sheer weariness, his arms begin to droop, Israel fares badly in the battle. With the help of friends, he manages to persevere in his mediating prayer, until victory is won. A vivid and prophetic image for Christ, whose prayer continued even when his soul was sorrowful, even unto death. It supports the ideal of intercessory prayer on behalf of others, not however in a superficial way or for petty requests; but for matters of life and death, for salvation, release from sin, recovery from depression, strength to cope with problems, perseverance. And when we pray these things for others, we must do so seriously, with a love that is ready for practical service as well.

The persistent widow of today's Gospel lives among us: She is the poor, the struggling, the ignored, the forgotten; she is the mother and father, the daughter and son, the family and friend of the suffering and dying who care for them and who work for a cure so that other families may be spared what they have suffered through; she is the victim of injustice whose sense of her own dignity enables her to fight on.

Christ promises that God hears the prayer of the Gospel widow, and that her perseverance in faith will one day be rewarded. There is a way to pray with the heart, which reaches out to God, who is sure to answer. To speak from the heart is

also to speak to the heart. God can read the human heart and knows us better than any words we might use; better than we know ourselves. That persevering widow encourages us to pray constantly, for ourselves and for others. We recognize our needs, especially for peace, love, grace, and salvation, and ask for them. Our God is not like the uncaring judge of the parable, though it may often seem that way. We need to persevere and never abandon hope.

May Jesus be that hope in our own struggles and an inspiration to us to become the answer to the prayers of the “persistent widows” among us here and now. For what we often fail to realize is that sometimes we are the persistent widow of today’s parable, seeking what is right and just, trusting in God’s grace in response to our prayers, and sometimes we find ourselves in the role of the judge, who can be the answer to another’s prayer if we stop, listen, and realize that God has given us the power to respond. Jesus challenges us to consider how we use the power we possess. Do we use it in the service of others? Do we use it to create community and to provide for those who are struggling or lost? Only Christ can search the depths of our soul and find the answer.

Amen? Amen!

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18: 9-14

"O God, be merciful to me a sinner"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

Today's gospel story is 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.

Amen? Amen!

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 1: 1-10

“The Love of God is for ALL!”

By Rev. Liz Miller

Jesus was always surprising people. He ate with sinners, tax collectors and, heaven forbid he treated women and other outcasts with compassion and respect. He treated everyone equally. The Pharisees criticized Jesus and the crowd grumbled that he spoke to Zacchaeus. Jesus was not like other holy men they had known.

Zacchaeus was a lonely man. He was a chief tax collector and tax collectors were hated because many collected excessive amounts from the poor and needy. The Jewish people regarded tax collectors as thieves. Zacchaeus was hated and I suppose was miserable despite his riches. He was removed from God and his fellow citizens; he was an outcast among his own people.

Zacchaeus must have heard about Jesus. The preaching, the miracles, the love for outcasts of society; people like him. Zacchaeus just wanted a glimpse of Jesus, but he was short of stature and couldn't see over or through the crowd. So, he ran ahead and climbed a tree just so he could see. He must have looked a little silly up in the tree with all his fine clothes. Was he surprised when Jesus stopped, looked up and said he wanted to stay at his place? Even called him by his name. Zacchaeus was overjoyed. It is interesting that Jesus was not concerned in what Zacchaeus does with his wealth. Jesus' point is that “today” salvation has come to Zacchaeus because he is a descendant of Abraham. He was saved, not because of his good works but simply because Jesus has come to save the lost. Jesus sees in Zacchaeus what others have failed to see. Jesus came to lift the fallen, seek out the lost, give hope to the poor and the forgotten. The love of Jesus was for everyone, even a chief tax collector.

Jesus came to save us as well; every one of us here today. It doesn't matter who we are or what we have done. Every person has much to give. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. That means that he will save someone we can't stand or someone who has injured us. He might save our worst enemy. Sometimes we are like the crowd at the foot of the tree, angry and outraged! How could he??? Why would he??? Doesn't he know??? Does Jesus include street gangs, the Mafia, three-time offenders, people in prison, murderers? We dare not judge any person hopeless.

Remember, Jesus said to love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute us. When Zacchaeus came down from that tree, he was a changed person. He was transformed. Jesus saved his whole household that day and he can do the same for you and me.

We have all sinned and it is sin in our life that separates us from God and from each other. Just as Jesus called on Zacchaeus to come down from the tree, he also calls us to come down. God wants to stay with us, in our house and wants to transform us too. Jesus calls us out of the trees of our sinfulness, and into oneness with him. Maybe we feel our sins are too grievous to be forgiven. Maybe you went after a friend and destroyed their life, got a girl pregnant then dumped her, had an abortion etc. Jesus is more concerned for the sinner than the sin. He looks up in the tree and sees someone who needs him. His mercy, and compassion, and love are infinitely greater, infinitely more powerful than our sins.

Sometimes we are with Zacchaeus in the tree, and sometimes we are in the crowd following Jesus. But Jesus is there for us, calling us away from sin, and calling us in rejoicing over each person who has come into his family.

Jesus' call to the despised tax collector transforms the life of the man in the sycamore tree. We are called by Christ in the same way: to recognize our own gifts and abilities and being willing to use them to bring peace and consolation to others; to allow the "light of our faith" shatter the darkness of hopelessness, and alienation around us; to "make manifest the glory of God within us" in order to transform and reconcile our world in the life and love of God. God's mercy, compassion and love are for all people, all creation. No one is ever excluded from the circle of God's embrace.

We pray today to have the courage to come down out of the tree and to accept his presence into our lives, and in the lives of others for Jesus says to us, "Today, I must stay at your house. Amen!"

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 20: 27-38

"Sons and Daughters of the Resurrection"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

We would think it foolish to set out on a journey without knowing where we were going. In a broad sense, of course, our pilgrimage through life is largely a path into the unknown, a journey towards the destiny God sets for us. But imagine living with no hope other than the reality of this world and this time. What if the faith you embraced was built on only selected passages and a limited vision of God and the relationship God has with humankind? A faith that believes everything ends with your passing with no promise of eternity. Welcome to the world of the Sadducees.

In our Gospel reading today we are introduced to this group of the priests who made up the governing class of Judaism at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. They were very conservative in matters of religion. The Sadducees were completely against innovation in religion and opposed any new thinking. Unlike the Pharisees, the other main group of Jesus' adversaries, the Sadducees dismissed the oral tradition and any doctrinal developments not specified in the Pentateuch. They did not recognize the thousands of detailed regulations and ritualistic practices that the Pharisees embraced. They also rejected the notion of angels or spirits, the idea of a messiah, and denied the concept of an afterlife and a resurrection of the dead.

A trick question was put to Jesus in the form of a cynical riddle. His critics questioned the existence of an after-life by the implausible tale of a woman who outlived her seven husbands, to embarrass Jesus and test his wits. In the afterlife, presumably we will be free of the needs and appetites of our present experience. We will be like children in God's presence, fully content, no longer needing what we need in this world.

Notice how Jesus very cleverly moves beyond the hopeless scenario presented by the Sadducees. Their problem is that they cannot think beyond earthly reality. The afterlife is not merely an extension or imitation of life on earth. Resurrected life is something totally different. We often try to gauge God by our standards, to measure God by our yardsticks, to define God by our systems of reasoning and understanding. In this we too can become a modern-day Sadducee. But the God revealed by Jesus defies our explanations and designs. Our response to Jesus' call

to be his disciples begins with opening our minds and spirits to become what God intends us to be.

To become “sons and daughters of the resurrection” we must embrace the Gospel vision of love of neighbor as brothers and sisters in Christ; all of us as children of God. Resurrection is the promise and hope of our faith as Christians. Resurrection is also an attitude, a perspective for approaching life and sorting out the decisions and complexities of our earthly existence. In dying to our own worst impulses, disappointments, and the overwhelming sense of hopelessness, we can rise to the heights of the life and love God intended creation to experience.

Because God is the God of the living, we encounter God in the presence of all who are in communion with God. Each Sunday in the Eucharistic prayer, we recite “Holy, Holy, Holy” with the Risen Lord and with all who are alive in him. It is an affirmation that our life as God’s children does not end with death. The God taught by Jesus in the Gospel is the God of life, a God whose limitless love put us and all of creation in motion. God will not just love us in this life, but for all eternity. To become “children of the God of life” is to set in place the justice, peace and forgiveness that are the building stones of the Kingdom of God. As Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians (2:9), no human being has ever seen, heard, or even imagined what wonderful things God has in store for those who love the Lord. This is God's gift to you and me; let us embrace that gift.

Amen? Amen!

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 21: 5-19

"Come, Lord Jesus"

By Rev. Liz Miller

There are many interpretations of today's gospel. We need to remember that when we look at this passage, we must ask ourselves three questions. Why was this scripture written? Who was it written for? How does it relate to us today?

Jesus lived in a time filled with conflict. Rome occupied the region, and they were brutal. They imposed excessive taxes, sold conquered armies into slavery, and put to death anyone who opposed their rule.

Herod's temple was built on a hilltop. There was no cost spared when the temple was built. Josephus, a Jewish historian tells us that the entire face of the temple was covered with gold and when the sun was shining you could not bear to look at it. The Jewish people regarded the temple in Jerusalem as the most holy of places. It symbolized their history and tradition. It spoke of Yahweh's covenant with them. If the temple was destroyed it would make them question the very depths of their faith.

What makes the gospel reading difficult is that it often reveals words spoken by Jesus at the end of his time with the disciples. Jesus is talking about the end of the disciples' lives and how they will unfold. He also was talking about the end of the world as we know it. There was expectation that the second coming would happen very soon. However, Jesus taught us not to worry about when it was going to happen but about living in the kingdom now. In 70 AD a Roman general led 80,000 soldiers in a siege of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was leveled and the temple was destroyed. It is reported that nearly 100,000 Jewish people were taken captive and sold as slaves, and more than 600,000 died.

Life is a fleeting moment and all too short. All the material things will one day end. The Jewish people were devastated when the temple was destroyed but our finest religious buildings have no value without the people of God. Do we hide behind hypocrisy and oppression? God does not want empty religious practices. We need to be real.

The people in the time of Jesus became caught up in things that were not essential; the rules and laws, dietary regulations, and the tax structure. This was their goal.

As lovely as a temple was...it was only stone. Temples of stone cannot save us. The more important temple comes from 1 Cor 3:16-17: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells within you? God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

We need to remember that Jesus' imagery is rooted in Old Testament prophecies. Jesus does not promise us a life without pain, but he does offer us unlimited spiritual resources to deal with the pain we encounter. Julian of Norwich, a Christian mystic once wrote that God never promised us a life without temptation, hardship, or affliction, but God did promise that through his grace, we would not be overcome by it.

Jesus said of the end of time, "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." (Mt. 24:36). Jesus tells us not to worry. The end will be a new beginning. It will usher in the kingdom of God in its glorious fullness. Scripture begins with the words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," (Gen 1:1) and concludes with the phrase: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev: 22:20) Christ gives us hope. We are the righteous who will find salvation at last.

When the Lord comes, our joy will know no bounds; for we are the Lord's adoptive sons and daughters. Let us live as if the Lord is coming tomorrow but know that he is with us today, for he will come quietly, invisibly wherever we are. Do not look for him in a cloud or wearing a jeweled crown. Look for him in our gathering together here. Look for him in the preached word, in the host we cradle in our hand and on our tongue. Look for him inside our hearts. Look for him at home, on the faces of our family and friends but also where he told us we'd find him: in the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Each of us is a holy dwelling place for God. Let us keep that in mind today when we say to one another, "The peace of the Lord be with you."

"A Channel of God's Peace"

By Rev. Jack R. Miller

There was an expectation in the early church that the second coming of Jesus would happen soon, maybe within their lifetimes. Many also believed that the end of the world would be signaled by the destruction of the great temple in Jerusalem. That

is exactly what happened in the year 70 A.D. when a Roman general led 80,000 soldiers into a siege of Jerusalem. The city was leveled, and the temple destroyed. Nearly 100,000 Jewish people were taken captive and sold as slaves, and more than 600,000 died. It is against the background of this event that Luke wrote his gospel.

In today's reading, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and adds a list of natural catastrophes that will signal the end of time. But Jesus is not teaching fear and dread here, he is teaching hope. Jesus is also saying that trying to calculate the end of the world is a waste of time; the signs he mentions including war, plague, and earthquakes are present in every age and there will always be self-proclaimed prophets who will use such events to gain notoriety and power. Jesus said of the end of time, "But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." (Mt. 24:36).

Jesus assures his followers that those who remain faithful to the vocation of discipleship will have nothing to fear when the end comes; it will announce the dawn of a new beginning, and usher in the kingdom of God in all its majesty and glory.

Jesus points to the "temples" we build in our own lives and warns us not to become obsessed with the "stones" that will one day collapse and become dust around us. He asks us to seek instead the lasting things of the soul, the things of God.

In the most difficult and paralyzing moments we face, Jesus promises that when we act out of selfless love, reach out to one another in times of dissension and anguish, God will help us to find the words and actions that bring about healing and calm. God remains present to us in the goodness we share and in the caring compassion we offer to others. Despite the wars we fight, the earthquakes that shake our foundations, the disasters that topple the security of our world, and yes, the elections that unsettle and divide our nation, we can always rebuild our lives on the stronger and timeless things of God: compassion, reconciliation, friendship, generosity, unity, and love.

In his short book "Doctor Marigold," Charles Dickens writes: "No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another." Jesus assures us that we are not useless in this world of despair if we find hope in every moment of life that God has given us, and if we use those moments to reach out to one another. Even in times of uncertainty and chaos.

In the words of St. Francis, let us become a pipeline of mercy, a conduit of God's love. Where there is sadness, injury, doubt, despair, division, and darkness around us, let us become a passageway for God to bring faith, hope, light, unity, and joy to our hurting world. Let us become a channel of God's peace.

Amen? Amen!

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