

Parish 55<sup>th</sup> and Time and Talent Festival of Ministries

[Readings: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25; Philippians 2:1-11; Matt. 21:28-32]

How often have we asked ourselves or others, “Why did God do this? Why is God punishing me? Why does God allow wars, hurricanes, forest fires, earthquakes, car accidents and sickness and disease or anything else that causes us to suffer? Why did I lose my job? Why am I losing my home?” Are we being punished for the sins of our ancestors, as the people asked Ezekiel in his time? It is very easy to blame God for our suffering, but the reality is that *God has nothing to do with any of the bad things that happen to us usually good people.* It is either the consequences of nature, the evil deeds of others, or our own poor choices, messed up priorities and just plain stupid mistakes.

God’s will is not that we suffer, but that we be converted. Indeed, sometimes hitting rock bottom is the only way we can rise up in God’s grace and loving care. God teaches us, through the words of Ezekiel, that “corporate guilt” -- the guilt of the many -- is important, but not as important as the moral life and choices of each individual. When we want to cry out, “The Lord’s way is not fair!” we need only look at our own individual lives and choices to find the insight and the truth that we long for.

We cannot live in solidarity and service if we are not aware that every choice we make with our time, talent and treasure has an impact on others and on our world. How can we cry the Gospel from the rooftops with our lives if we are not aware of others? St. Paul uses a small but important word in his letters: the word “if.” IF we truly turn our whole selves to Jesus and follow His lead, we must freely choose to do so. IF we want to become more complete and fulfilled in this life, we must live accordingly, turning from all else to be focused on Christ.

“IF there is any encouragement in Christ, IF there is any solace in love, IF there is any participation in the Spirit, IF there is any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.” It’s that simple! We have been doing that here at St. Martin de Porres Parish for 55 years! Living and growing in the Holy Spirit and in faith!

We continue to grow in stewardship awareness here at St. Martin de Porres. You have the chance now this weekend to take the next step. Which of the two sons in today's Gospel will we imitate: the son who says "Yes, I will help" but doesn't? Or the son who says, "No, I won't, I can't" but later does what they are called to do? Doing what the Lord is asking us, calling us to do, is a wonderful, inspiring and good start to turning our attitudes around toward God.

Jesus shows us in today's Gospel passage how believers like you and me can cultivate our relationship with the Father. We learn that even if our initial response to God's invitation is not what it should be -- "No, I won't, I can't!" -- we can change our minds and give in to God's will for us. We also learn that a verbal "Yes, sir!" to God without a lived out follow-up is no response at all.

One way to think of obedience is in terms of "listening"; in fact, "to hear" is at the root of the word *obey*. What is more, repentance, one of the themes of this week's readings, could be seen as a matter of obedience, of listening to -- and doing -- the ways of the Lord and the voice of the Church. Where do YOU do obedient listening? How do you act on it?

What sacrifices do YOU make for the good of your Christian community? How can you connect them to the Easter Mystery in which Christ "emptied himself"? What is your definition of humility? How do you practice humility?

Here in the Eucharist, we tell God many good things. We say we are sorry for our sins. We say that we believe. We offer ourselves with the gifts of bread and wine. We wish each other peace. We sacrifice time, talent, treasure.

Today, let's mean what we say we believe. Let's really offer ourselves. Let's wish each other peace from the heart. Let's show it by how we live. Come to the parish center after this Mass to our Festival of Ministries. "Come and see" how we have been a witness to life in Christ, in the work of the Church and join us in our mission to become "joyful, missionary disciples" of Jesus Christ.

Let's be responsible stewards and go out into the vineyard to do the work our heavenly Father asks of us. To paraphrase St. Anthony of Padua:

"May our words be few and may our actions speak for us." AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Philippians 4:6-9; Matt 21:33-43]

Did you pay attention to the very first verse of today's First Reading? "Let me now sing of my friend, my friend's song concerning his vineyard?" You and I are not that familiar with the images used by Isaiah and Jesus. Do YOU accept or do YOU decline? That's the musical message of today's readings. Do YOU accept the invitation to be a good steward and disciple of the Lord?

Both Isaiah and Jesus tell the same parable. Rather than repeat the stories, let me translate them for you. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B. C., Isaiah chastises his listeners (in song!) because they had the opportunity, in light of a pending invasion, to align themselves with the covenant of God instead of a contract with political neighbors. They chose their neighbors. They were invaded anyway!

Victory and prosperity would have been theirs, but they chose defeat and domination. God had prepared a special nation for Himself, and that nation chose a culture of death to embrace and to infuse into their daily lives.

Fast forward to the year 30 A. D. The Jewish leaders still have not learned their lesson. Money, status, power, politics, these were the false "gods" that people were chasing. And some among us still do that to this day.

God is looking for justice (*mishpat*, in Hebrew) but found only bloodshed (*mispah*). God is looking for righteousness (*sedakah*) but was disappointed with outcry (*se'agah*). God had planted choice grapes (*soreq*) but was given sour and stinking, rotten grapes (*sorek*). Isaiah's song ends in heartache; Jesus' parable ends in disappointment. If you decline my invitation, he says, I'll offer it to someone else!

Look back on the hopes you had in the past. Think of the hopes you have for the future. A wedding and a marriage. Starting life all over again. Putting hurts behind you. Losing a job or taking another one. Moving to a new city, starting from scratch. It could be any time the world seemed new and fresh, and life would yield great results.

But for all the work – the clearing, the digging, trying to start fresh – there was no harvest. We don't have to be farmers to know the experience of withered

hope. That is the fate of the culture of death.

Last week there was a terrible incident in Las Vegas. 50 people were killed and more than 500 were injured. Another act of violence in our world with no rhyme or reason. We have a serious problem in our country with the ever-increasing level of violence and hatred and there seems to be no solution.

We have allowed anger to become a staple of our society in the way we speak to people we disagree with, and we have fostered a rationale to strike out at political opponents with pure contempt. After this latest attack, what will be our national response? There will be expert after expert talking about what they believe causes such things to happen and of course there will be the call for prayer from the very people who spend their time trying to demean the notion of God and call all who believe in God as unenlightened and bigoted people.

In the face of such events, we fail to see how hatred is feeding the minds and hearts of so many in our country and we are not addressing the roots of hatred. We have calls to be "kind" and to stop being "mean", but we fail to root out the vices in our society that feed sin; we are not even able to talk about sin. The evil in our world comes from our refusal to see the clear difference between what is good and what is evil.

There is a difference in believing in God and not believing in God. There is a difference in building a home on prayer and the Christian values of love, forgiveness and compassion from the home that is built solely on secular wants and desires. For a person with faith in God, you are never alone; no problem is too great to overcome and there is a support system of people called the Church. When people cut God and the Church out of their lives, they leave off an important part of creating a good life. People often fail to recognize the importance of a church community and a close relationship with God under the guise of not needing to go to Mass or belong to a denomination.

This is not to say that people who go to church have no problems or that they do not sin; far from it. But people who pray and go to church, who have a growing faith, are able to find a new perspective to life and find new ways to resolve difficulties. Is there any doubt why the Bible talks so much about

forgiveness and conversion? Is it any wonder why the Bible teaches us about compassion and mercy?

Jesus proclaims a message of a world built on peace and justice; where we treat those with the greatest needs with the greatest of love. Simply stated, the world we live in is not the world which Jesus came to teach us as God's plan. God does not want us to live in fear and with hatred in our hearts. God does not want us to live in the midst of sin and vice.

Our Second Reading says it all, and I wish this was the motto or mission statement of every parishioner and every household: "Have no anxiety at all. Make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

"Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you."

So, we pray for conversion in the hearts of all those who have rejected God and for our community, to regain a balance in life by putting God first. We pray for the repose of the souls of all who die by violence, for strength in their families and for peace in our country.

Our hope in Christ is the foundation of our outreach as responsible parish disciples and stewards. On Him we build our own lives and the lives of those in need – the weak and the marginalized, the poor, the homeless and the innocent, the unborn, the frail and the elderly, stone upon stone. With Jesus as the capstone rejected by the builders. Will you accept or will you decline the challenge not only to believe, but to speak out and to act? The choice to accept discipleship and stewardship in your life is up to you. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 25:6-10a; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20; Matt 22:1-14]

"I really don't want to go to this lunch," Bill won't mind will he?"

That was the question one friend asked of another. Only problem was, Bill would mind. They were all on holiday in Bill's native country. Bill's relatives had offered to fix lunch for the entire group. And better yet, the hosts were going to bring lunch to the group so that no one would have to leave the beautiful house on the sea where they were staying.

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good idea. I think Bill's feelings will be hurt."

"But I want to go to the national park." "Can't you go after lunch?"

"I'd prefer to go before lunch. I won't be missed."

"You will be missed. The invitation went to all of us. But, of course, the decision is yours."

Lunch was a glorious feast of specially prepared meats and cheeses, locally grown vegetables, crisp salad, homemade bread, and fresh-baked blueberry crumble. Drinks and conversations flowed freely. Everyone had a magnificent time, including the national park-goer who decided to delay her trip. She was overheard telling others weeks later that lunch with Bill's family was the highlight of the trip. Some invitations just shouldn't be passed up.

It's only a wedding. At a wedding everyone knows that some invited guests won't be able to make it. It's disappointing. But burning down a village is rather extreme, to say the least! It's only a wedding. So maybe one of the guests shows up in blue jeans and a baseball cap. Is that any reason to call in the bouncers? Not even Miss Manners' book on "Painfully Proper Weddings" suggests outer darkness or wailing and grinding of teeth for someone who missed the memo that this is a black-tie event. After all, it's only a wedding.

You and I receive two invitations every Sunday. It isn't just a wedding. It's not just a matter of showing up. It's not even a matter of what we wear, although fifty years ago women and girls wore dresses and men and boys wore ties.

It's also a matter of what we do. What we do with our relationship with God and His Church. What we do with the members of our family.

The invitation starts with grace. God's grace-filled invitation is for each one of us to come to see Him, to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him.

All of us are invited. Whether we are upright or immoral, everyone receives the

Divine King's invitation. God doesn't care if you have more skeletons in your closet than a Halloween supply store. The King wants people to this feast of "juicy rich food and pure, choice wines!" Come to the mountain! Come to the feast!

What does it mean when we are not dressed properly in the right "wedding garment?" In baptism, each one of us received a baptismal garment, whether it was a christening outfit or a white colored dress or suit. St. Paul says we are to be clothed with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, and above all, love." THIS is the kind of outfit you and I are to "wear." It isn't enough to sit in church to make us holy, any more than sitting in a garage makes us a car! Putting on the robes of Jesus Christ is risky. It means laying ourselves open to being made new and changed to look like Jesus Christ Himself. Are YOU ready to take the risk? To be Christ for one another and to do His work?

Accepting God's invitation to come to Church and to come to know Him more deeply is not only for our spiritual refill and renewal; it's also to allow God to shape and mold us into the people God calls us to be. We cannot be self-centered and make excuses for not accepting the invitation. God won't be ignored unless we choose to ignore Him. Make the right choice.

Jesus is commissioning all of us as his modern-day disciples. We are to preach repentance, which literally means, a new way of thinking. A new way of looking at things. Knowing Christ means seeing our world differently.

Jesus calls us His "witnesses," martyrs in Greek. Are you willing to risk knowing Christ and giving witness to Him, even to the point of broken relationships, rejection, injuries, setbacks, tragedies, abuse and crimes against you? "I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me" says St. Paul in our Second Reading today. During His life on earth, Jesus Christ was accused of eating with sinners. He still does that every Sunday with us. We are the sinners He eats with. Talk about a "Happy Meal!" AMEN!