

[Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63; Romans 12:1-2; Matt 16:21-27]

Our country was rocked last weekend by the horrific devastation brought about as a result of Hurricane Harvey in Texas, Louisiana, Tennessee and other places along the Gulf Coast. People's lives and livelihood have been turned upside down. People of faith have asked, "Why would God allow this to happen?" Other people of faith respond, "Because it gives us people of good will a chance to respond." We pray for our brothers and sisters and help as we can.

It also reminds us of the need to respect our planet, to respect the laws of nature and weather, and to remember September 1 as our World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, started by the Orthodox Church in 1989, with Pope Francis adding his endorsement most recently in 2015.

Jeremiah faces devastating challenges in his prophetic ministry, summarized in today's First Reading. Of all the major prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah has suffered physically, spiritually and emotionally the most. His message falls on either deaf or rebellious ears. He has been assaulted physically and verbally so many times, it's hard to keep count.

He has now reached a point in his ministry when he says, "Enough! I give up!" His words which we hear today come from a despairing soul in prison. He has lost any of his worldly power, influence and wealth. He has nothing.

And in that dark despair he says, with wistfulness, maybe some anger, but also with a tender love: "You duped me, and I let myself be duped!" How many of us have fallen under the spell of love in a romantic relationship, in the depth of a close friendship, in the fellowship of fellow believers? We are "duped!"

We say things like, "You had me at 'Hello!'" "I'm so glad to have you as a friend." "Thank you for nurturing my faith-life." "I couldn't have done this without you." That's what Jeremiah says to the Lord. "I couldn't stop from witnessing to Your truth, O Lord, or to Your message of faith, hope and love, even if I wanted to. When I say, 'I'm going to be quiet in this situation. I will not speak up,' Your Word sets my heart on fire. I can't hold it in! I cannot endure that!" Wow!

St. Paul, no slouch to suffering himself, says pretty much the same thing

in our Second Reading. Look at HIS track record: arrested, beaten, stoned, in prison, shipwrecked, rejected. And yet he has the divine audacity to speak of the “mercies of God” and to tell those listening to his letter to offer what they do in this life as a living sacrifice. Go to work! Go to school! Go and shop! But let your every act be a statement of faith. Preach with the words of the way you live, beginning with respecting your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit!

My friends, this world doesn't have a clue as to how to live. Don't give into it or be seduced by it. Have a successful career, but gain it ethically and morally. Make money, but remember where that money came from and return to the Lord and to the human family a generous and grateful portion of that financial blessing with a humble and grateful heart. Accept the authority and power that have been given to you, but let it reflect the Divine Authority and Power that guides your lives. Listen to the divine authority and power that comes from the Church.

This world sings, “I haven't got time for the pain.” Jesus Christ says, “Take up your cross and follow in the way I walked.” The world teaches, “Look out for Number One – YOU!” Jesus Christ says, “Deny yourself and follow me.” The world says, “Turn over an obscenely big profit!” Jesus Christ says, “What does it profit you to gain the whole world at the cost of your immortal soul?” How radical and counter-cultural is THAT! 2000 years old and STILL timely!

Students and teachers are returning to school for another program year. I challenge every student and every teacher listening to me to make THIS Priority Number One: the search for truth. Religion and science are not in opposition to each other. The truth is the truth, and both religion and science can and do teach each other. Who is God creating me and calling me to be? Priority Number Two: Never back down from the truth. Search for it, find it, and embrace it. Priority Number Three: Share it! At home, at work, in school, and yes, even in the church parking lot! Let God's truth renew your minds, that you may discern what is of God, what is “good and pleasing and perfect!” AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 1:26-2:3; Ps. 90; 1 Thess.4:1b, 2, 9-12; Matt. 6:31-34]

When you think about it, the first “Labor Day” happened at the time of this morning’s First Reading. God as Creator of the universe, “labored” for the symbolic six days of creation and then, the God “who neither rests nor sleeps” “rests” on the seventh symbolic day to admire His handiwork.

Again, we need to remember the importance of what is called, “biblical numerology.” The Sacred Writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, use special numbers to convey the importance of their subject matter. One signifies the One True God, and the unity that is found in the Holy Trinity. 2 signifies the Old and New Testaments, the union of a man and wife, the relationship between God and the human family, the two natures of Jesus Christ.

The Number 6 symbolizes man and human weakness, the evils of Satan and the manifestation of sin. Man was created on the sixth day. We are appointed 6 days to labor. Without God in our lives, we are “close, but no cigar.”

Seven is the number of completeness and perfection (both physical and spiritual). There are 7 days in a week and God's Sabbath is on the 7th day.

God sits back, looks at a job well done, and pronounces His best creation, the human person, “very, very good.”

Our Second Reading mentions how you and I participate in God’s creative work. Pope Francis outlines it specifically in his encyclical, “Laudato Sii – On Care for our Common Home.” St. Paul exhorts us to conduct ourselves properly with trusting faith, unflinching hope and with mutual charity. Jesus echoes this in today’s Gospel when He says “Do not worry.” This is easier said than done, when one is unemployed, underemployed, employed in deplorable working conditions, or unable to work because of disability.

When you think about it, who wants to work? Nobody in their right mind. Of course, plenty of people in our society will be working right through this holiday weekend so the rest of us can relax and tend to our barbecues. They make the sacrifice; we get the benefit.

Most of us will go back to work eventually, never fear. Even retirees have tasks to perform that properly fall under the title of labor: yard work, laundry, housekeeping, volunteering, caring for family members. Even children have work to do. It's September, isn't it? That means back to school; let's hear a collective groan of sympathy for the kids. And a small cheer of freedom from the parents!

There's no escaping the many responsibilities that come with being alive. We have to see to basic hygiene every single day, like it or not. We have to maintain our health by moving our bodies and saying yes to non-processed food. We have to use and feed our minds, too: Start a list today of new books to read before the end of the year.

Why all this talk of work on Labor Day? Because work is good. The work we do to maintain ourselves, or for the sake of those we love, or to make a livelihood are all vital to what it means to be human. Daily, you and I produce something: maybe it's a meal, a clean-shaven face, or a 10-page report on the present economy. Maybe we bathe children -- or elders. We may teach, take an order, preach a decent homily, plant seeds, and pick vegetables. We give our time and attention to people who need it: family members, coworkers, sometimes strangers. We give our "living sacrifice of praise" to God -- yes, our prayer is considered a form of work. The word *liturgy* means public work. We work when we "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." To live a morally right life, walking in the laws and the path of God.

President Theodore Roosevelt once said, "It is only through labor and painful effort, by grim energy and resolute courage, that we move on to better things." This is true in work. This is true in life. This is true in our journey of faith. Lord, give success to the work of our hands. AMEN!

[Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95; Romans 13:8-10; Matt. 18:15-20]

Once upon a time, there was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. I underscore that it did not take place here! In fact, the names of the hymns that follow will show that it was a Baptist church!

As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, "Jesus Paid it All."

The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, "I Love to Tell the Story." With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, "Oh Why Not Tonight?" As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

In his book *The Great Divorce*, the famous Catholic theologian and writer C. S. Lewis draws a stark picture of hell. Hell is like a great, vast city, Lewis says, a city inhabited only at its outer edges, with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle. These houses in the middle are empty because everyone who once lived there has quarreled with the neighbors and moved. Then, they quarreled with the new neighbors and moved again, leaving the streets and the houses of their old neighborhoods empty and barren.

That, Lewis says, is how hell has gotten so large. It is empty at its center and inhabited only at the outer edges, because everyone chose distance instead of honest confrontation when it came to dealing with their relationships. "Look, she's the one who said that about me. Let her come and apologize!" "We may go to the same church, but that doesn't mean I've got to share a pew with that so-and-so!" "It'll be a cold day in July before I accept his apology."

That's all well and good, I suppose... if you don't mind living in hell.

Are we really so willing to give up our relationships with others -- relationships that have come about and been forged by our desire to follow Jesus? Nowhere, and I do mean nowhere, in the New Testament Gospels will you find Jesus saying that the first order of things is always to be right. But He does have a great deal to say about forgiveness, about relationship, about reconciliation, about service and humility and vulnerability.

Paul says something remarkably rather simple today. In Romans, Paul shows off an idea as clear as water: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." We owe each other love and nothing less. Where have we heard this before? Jesus summarizes the law and prophets in similar terms. Love God and each other. Whatever else you say about Christianity, it's not rocket science. A Ph.D. in theology won't get us closer to the ideal, and even a child (especially a child!) can show us how it's done.

Keep this in mind when applying today's readings with our daily living: how to deal with those who harm us, offend us or sin against us. Too often we approach this scenario as bringing vengeance on the wrongdoers. Jesus gives us a different approach. First, confront them privately, one on one. Next, bring backup witnesses to the offense. Today, we call this an intervention. If all else fails, then you can take it public. If collective shaming doesn't do the trick, release them and be done with him/her!

The Jesus method of conflict resolution is not about applying pressure to the situation until your opponent confesses that s/he did you wrong. It's based on winning back your brother or sister. Jesus actually uses the rabbinical term "gaining" them -- a term employed in missionary conversion. It's about restoring an intimate relationship to rights, not wringing justice from an enemy by turning up the heat.

In all matters of interpersonal conflict, then, we begin with that love Paul says we owe each other. We are motivated by love and concern for the wrongdoer. If the injurer persists, separation is the fitting response to one who fails a relationship.

But the intent remains the same. Remember this: How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He ate with them. He conversed with them. He welcomed them. He kept the door open. And so, as Jesus ate with tax collectors and Gentiles, we need to keep the door stays open to win back the person back who injures and offends us. AMEN!

Confirmation Enrollment/Catechetical Sunday/ACWC 40th

[Sirach 27:30-28:7, Psalm 103: Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35]

Today's readings offer an uncomfortable, but clear challenge to us: the challenge of forgiveness. The first reading from the Book of Sirach reminds us to release or turn over to the Lord our anger and desire for vengeance, for it is God's role, not ours, to punish those who have done evil. We are not to be vengeful; we are to forgive. "The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail," Sirach writes. But as for us, we must forgive: "Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven."

It is important to remember, however, that forgiving another does not mean absolving them of responsibility. To forgive another is to confirm that they have done wrong and are in need of forgiveness. Mercy does not cancel out justice or the need for conversion, but it does open up a path of charity that encourages and promotes conversion and justice. For the Christian in the world, we live in mercy and we long for justice, but we entrust final justice (final conversion) always to God. As long as we believe in the power and mercy of God, we always hope for this.

I'm reminded of what a friend said to me recently: "I'm not in the revenge business. That's not in my job description. That's in God's job description!"

Note that the reason given for why we should forgive, both in Sirach and in the Psalm, is that none of us are free of sin and guilt. We are all sinners, we have all done wrong. Yet, God forgives us, and so we must forgive others. The Psalm proclaims that God "has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our deeds deserve." God treats us with forgiveness, love and compassion, and we must do the same. Remember what we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Another person told me, "I don't have the time and energy to invest in hate and resentment. It takes too much out of me."

In some ways, forgiveness frees the one who forgives from carrying that burden. We can let it go and entrust the other to God, Who is better able to deal with them. The teaching on forgiveness is about being like God, Who is merciful. It is about recognizing something of ourselves in those who commit the greatest evils, for no one is free of sin. Finally, this teaching on forgiveness is about being able to live with the peace of love instead of fear and hate, which tears and destroys.

Today, throughout the country, is Catechetical Sunday. Some catechists tell me that it's the hardest job in the world, like being thrown into the lion's den every week as a parish steward. Do you know what a parish volunteer is? One person describes it as someone who couldn't get away fast enough from a swirling drain of need and got sucked down. Others describe it as a blessing, delving deeper and deeper into our relationship with Jesus and with the beauty that is the Catholic Church. The gift of teaching our children and preparing the future church that will one day replace us all.

One catechist said, "Like most catechists, I plan careful lessons, spend far too much time creating original props I can't find in any catalog, and watch each week as plans to teach the heck out of some religious concept get derailed by factors beyond my control. I've finally determined the only good lesson plan boils down to One Big Idea. If I just say one thing across the hour -- write it, say it, make them repeat it, sing it, dance it -- with any grace it may stick, and students will learn it by heart.

[5 PM Mass only] This weekend we enroll our young people preparing for Confirmation. You who are candidates, this is a challenging time in your lives. Too old to be cute little kids and too young to be considered adults. And – Spoiler Alert – Confirmation doesn't make you an "adult" in the Church! If it did, you would be able to vote, drive a car and join the military! Confirmation is your personal choice to be, to become and to live out the Catholic faith.

I challenge you this year to discover two important things: who you really are, and what God wants you to be when you grow up! Spoiler Alert Number Two: You are called to become a servant of the Lord. Our Second Reading says that when we live, we live for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord. Find your place in the Church now! Today!

[11 AM Mass] Last, but not least, I address the members of the Active Christian Women's Club of our parish. Some of the original founding members in 1977 are still here and active in the ACWC. Their mission is threefold –

Spiritual: to grow personally in their relationship with the Lord, with Our Lady and with the Church. This is done through personal and group prayer, retreats and days of recollection;

Service: to be a parish steward in the countless ministries and services this parish provides; and

Social: to build up the Body of Christ by being Christ for each other when they gather for meetings, for fund-raisers and for social gatherings.

Since 1977, the ACWC has sacrificed hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars for the support of our parish ministries and services, as well as participated in the support of Archdiocesan, national and international Catholic charities and outreach. They have purchased items for our church and for the parish center. Thank you and God bless you, ladies, for being such a spiritual powerhouse in our parish and beyond!

Confirmation candidates, catechists, and the ACWC 40th anniversary: What a great day to celebrate the living out of our call to be “joyful, missionary disciples!” AMEN!

Time and Talent Festival of Ministries Invite

[Readings: Isaiah 55:6-9; Psalm 145; Philip 1:20c-24, 27a; Matt 20:1-16a]

My favorite line of today's Gospel is the last one: "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." Throughout my youth and young adulthood, we were always lined up according to height or alphabet, so guess who always was the "caboose?"

When Jesus tells a parable, he often tells a zinger of a story. Today is no exception. Almost anyone would admit that today's parable is both irritating and puzzling. Why does the landowner pay everyone the same wage regardless of how long they have worked? If I worked the full day, wouldn't I think that I deserved more pay than those who worked only one hour? Wouldn't YOU? Of course, we would! And wouldn't we feel a little irritated and wonder what Jesus is up to, maybe even wonder what He might be teaching us?

Each worker had an agreement with the landowner – one day's wage. Others were told they would get a just wage. If they all had this understanding, why can't the owner do what he wants, pay what he wants, as long as he is just?

Are we irritated because we put ourselves in the place of those day-long workers and think that we are superior and deserving of more because we bore the heat of the day and because the others came later to work? And if this thinking makes US superior, doesn't it make them INFERIOR?

It's never too early. It's never too late. Maybe the thoughts of Jesus are not our thoughts. Isaiah says that in today's First Reading: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." We might be competitive and envious of others. But God isn't that way. God doesn't compete. God does not envy. God's ways are merciful, forgiving and generous.

This parable has nothing to do with work and wages. It has to do with faith. The Jewish people have lived and taught and waited for the coming of the Messiah and the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. They have been faithful to their culture and tradition for thousands of years --"dawn." But many still are

not ready, willing or able to accept the Good News that Jesus brings.

So Jesus offers salvation to the Gentiles – those who have come along at “nine o’clock,” “noon,” “three o’clock” and “five o’clock.” Those who arrive later on the scene. It’s never too early. It’s never too late.

So what do we do? We look to St. Paul in our Second Reading for some help. Living in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ means taking the lessons of the parables of Jesus seriously. This means that God does not depend on what we do, or how much we do, or on our station in life, when God gives us our blessings. God doesn’t follow our incomplete ideas of justice, but gives gratuitously and generously, regardless of our worthiness.

All of us are equally dependent on God’s generosity and love. God’s love and generosity cannot be matched or outdone. Our only response, our only option, once we choose to become a Christian believer, is stewardship. Stewardship is what we do with what we have when we believe. Stewardship is what we do with what we have when we love God as God loves us.

Once upon a time, a judge in probate court was surprised when he read the complaints. Before him sat four people who were the adult children of a recently deceased multi-millionaire. The older two siblings were contesting the will -- a very generous will. What was their gripe?

“We were his children longer than these other two who didn’t come along until 10 and 12 years later. We feel that since we were our father’s children longer, we ought to get a higher percentage of his estate.”

The judge sat and thought that one over for a few minutes. Then, shaking his head, he said, “What, are you goofy? Your father gave you everything that he had. It’s a very generous settlement, with no strings attached and all taxes pre-paid. You all get equal shares of his great wealth and you come in here complaining because one of you was born 10 years earlier than the other?”

God gives us everything in His power to give: Life itself, the ability to learn and grow and love, and eternal happiness in heaven.

And yet we often find it easy to complain because of what we perceive we don't have, or that someone has more than us or should get less. To quote the judge, "What, are we goofy?" It's never too early. It's never too late.

When we stop to think of it this way, there is another twist to the Gospel parable. Some of us were called by Jesus in our infancy and we have been faithful followers. Others were called in our youth, while still others of us received our spiritual awakening or re-awakening in our maturity, even in our old age.

It's never too early. It's never too late.

No matter when Jesus called us to be His disciples, we all know others who were called later on in their lives. Should the reward be any different for any of these disciples of Jesus depending on when they answered His call?

If I lived a sinful and reckless life during the first half of my life and then lived a virtuous life the second half, should I receive less love from the Lord? Perhaps you know someone who lived such a life and now is a faithful Catholic. Should he or she be loved less, have a lesser salvation from God? God isn't like that. "So high are my ways above your ways, and my thoughts above yours."

That is what Jesus is telling us. God's love and salvation are available to all people, no matter when they saw the light, when they sought the Lord for the first time for themselves, when they let go of the ways of the scoundrel and sinner. For it isn't by our own merit that we receive God's mercy and love; it is by the sheer generosity and grace of God's love. It is free, generous and amazing.

Next weekend is our Festival of Ministries. Last celebrated five years ago for our parish fiftieth anniversary. I ask each one of you, not just the person sitting next to you, not the next person who will come to the next Mass, but YOU! YOU: don't stand idle all day. You, too, go into my vineyard." Here to tell us where you can help is Mrs. Renee' Heileman, our Christian Service Director.

This present life may be what gets us to Heaven, if we live it faithfully, generously and with love. Accept the invitation to our Festival of Ministries. "Come and see" what the Lord is calling you to in ministry and service to the Gospel. It's never too early. It's never too late! AMEN!