

[Readings: Acts 15:1-1, 22-29; Psalm 67; Rev. 21:10-14; 22-23; John 14:23-29]

“Because there arose no little dissension.”

“The angel took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit... will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.” “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”

Each of these lines from our Sacred Scripture readings today teach us something about Jesus, about His people, the Church, and about ourselves.

How many of us have had arguments with each other? What were those arguments about? What is frustrating sometimes is when both sides think that they are right. Then you have a problem. Who is right? The one who is right is the one who searches for and finds and shares the truth.

How do we handle things when we disagree with the Catholic Church about our teachings and practices? I used to struggle with that myself, even as a young priest. But I learned two things: First, Momma is never wrong. Whether that Momma is my Momma, the Blessed Mother whom we honor this month of May, or Holy Mother Church. Second, I pray, “Holy Spirit, help me to understand why the Church says what She says and to submit to Her authority.” That’s what happens in today’s First Reading.

There was a problem in the early Church about an issue. So the people who had the argument went up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and to the elders, to help them solve their problems. All submit their will, their intellect, their heart and their conscience. This is no blind obedience; it is an act of humility. As mature Christians with a well-formed conscience, we search for the truth together.

Once we work out our problems, together our Guardian Angels lead us up the high mountain of this very altar of sacrifice and they show us the holy city of Jerusalem, this side of Heaven. When we receive Jesus in Holy Communion, this is the closest we are going to get to Heaven on this side of death. Imagine! Jesus is coming to you in His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. He comes to visit you in the house of your body. And He stays there until He dissolves and becomes one with you. How awesome is that? Yet only 44% of people who claim to be Catholics believe in the real presence of Jesus in Holy Communion.

That’s one of the reasons why Jesus says He has to leave His friends in today’s Gospel. Jesus is limited to what He can do and where He can go as long

as He is on earth. But once He goes up to Heaven, He promises to send us the Advocate – the One Who speaks on our behalf – the Holy Spirit. That is the Holy Spirit that is here, right now, in this church on this holy ground, in this people.

But not all are with us. One of the sad realities in this 21st Century of Catholicism is that most adult children of practicing Catholics have left the Catholic Church. Especially in this country and in western Europe. Sacramental celebrations have gone down 50% in most parishes and in most cases. Regular church attendance, which is twice a month or more, is at 25%. The only constant is the Catholic Funeral Masses.

It makes such a difference when adult children of aging parents still practice the Catholic Faith. At the Funeral Mass, they know the responses to the Mass prayers. They sing the hymns. Oddly, though, at almost every Funeral Mass, everyone puts down the kneelers and raise the kneelers quietly, knowing that kneelers are our friends! I cannot explain this phenomenon.

But when the only people responding at a Funeral Mass are the organist and the Daily Mass people, it sounds really, really sad. The person in the casket isn't the only dead thing in church! To learn about Jesus Christ and the Church He founded is a blessing. To stay in the Church is an act of the mind and of the will. Like love, it's a choice. And some of you made a deeper choice yesterday.

Yesterday, thirty-eight brave souls in this parish gathered together to share their faith stories and faith journey. We attended a parish dialogue session in preparation for the Synod to be held in downtown Detroit come November. We shared how we have encountered Christ and through whom we have encountered Christ. We shared how we are growing in our faith. We reflected together on how we witness to others and bring them to Christ.

Spoiler alert: How do we encounter Christ? Usually, through other people. Often, through the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Mass.

How do we grow in our faith? Intelligent and inspiring homilies. Music that moves our soul. Stepping outside of our comfort zones in ministry and service. How do we witness? Simply by being the best version of ourselves that God created us to be.

Before the start of the parish dialogue session yesterday, one of the parishioners came up to me privately and asked, "You're not going to turn me into an Evangelical, are you?" I said, "that's my hidden agenda!" At the end of the session, when I asked for folks to join the Evangelization Committee, which currently has only four members, she came up to me and said, "Sign me up!"

When we take our faith seriously, it is a big and awesome job. But we do not live it out alone. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, is there to help us. Call on that spirit and pray for the peace which only He can give. Learn, read, pray. Then you and I can understand and teach and guide others to Christ. To be that role model to advise and counsel and bring comfort, support and safety to others. I and the staff of St. Martin's are here to help you in your role as evangelizer. You are not alone. Be at peace.

The word that Jesus uses to speak about "peace" isn't just the absence of arguing and shouting, or the absence of war and violence. The word that Jesus uses, "shalom" means, to understand yourself and your relationship with God. And when you have that understanding, that's all you really need. But you have to learn, you have to read, you have to pray to get to that peace.

In that Spirit, I wish all of you "peace." "Shalom." AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Eph 1:17-23; Luke 24-46-53]

You are standing in the airport terminal, looking up as the plane rises. You are on your front porch, waving to the taxi as it pulls away. You look out the review mirror as you pull away to see your new college student looking homesick already. You are the last person walking away from the casket as you leave the cemetery chapel. You might think to yourself, “Great! What are we gonna do NOW?” Have you ever had that reaction to someone who has left us, who is going to be away from us for a while, who might even be away from us for good?” We needed that boss, that pope, that bishop, that pastor. We needed that dad, that mom, that child. That brother or sister. I needed that job. I needed that employee. “Great. What are we gonna do NOW?”

What do we do when our plans, our security, our lives suddenly change, and we realize it will never again be the same? We welcome, we receive and we are open to the Holy Spirit that Jesus promises us He will send us. That promised Spirit will show us the way, give us strength in times of weakness, hope in times of fear or anxiety, and deeper meaning to life in all situations.

Believe it or not, Jesus was limited here on earth by His physical body. After His ascension into heaven and the sending forth of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ can be and IS with us today – in the Seven Sacraments, in the way WE proclaim the Gospel, and in the myriad of ways we give witness to Him by our actions, our ministry and our service.

Remember that before He returns to His Father, He commissions all those around Him to be His active disciples. He is no longer a One Man Show. Of course, if we believe in the Holy Trinity, He never was. Because Jesus is ascended into Heaven, He has no hands but our hands, no voice but our voice.

Pope Francis reminds us that the Ascension does not point to Jesus’ absence, but tells us that He is alive in our midst in a new way. He is no longer in a specific place in the world as He was before the Ascension. He is now present in every space and time, close to each one of us” (Pope Francis, General Audience, April 17th, 2013).

In His farewell, Jesus leaves His truth and His power to the Apostles, because the Ascension was not a departure but a way to intensify His presence everywhere. It really is not a *farewell* but the *promise and the certainty* of a continuous presence to the limits of time and space: Jesus promises us: "I will be with you always until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20) In fact "farewell" comes from the Latin "ad Deum", towards God. This is what "*Adios*" means in Spanish, and what *Adieu* means in French. "I commend you to God."

On this Mother's Day, we think of that one Blessed Mother who lived out the Christian calling perfectly and with perfect love. We honor and thank Mary as the mother of the entire human family. We thank those women who gave birth to us, who cradled us and raised us by their loving example. We pray for those mothers who are now taken up from us, but who continue, like Mary, to intercede for us with Jesus Christ.

My mom's mother's house in Detroit was torn down for urban renewal in the 1960's. My father's mother's house near Hamtramck was recently torn down after years of sitting abandoned and neglected. The house I grew up in on the east side was ransacked, torched and eventually torn down. The places that I called "home" are no longer. The neighborhood Catholic church is Baptist now, and the Catholic school has been closed for forty years.

Where is "home" for me now?

Then I realized that "home" for me now is where my fellow believers are, you men and women and young people who give me life and hope and who deepen my faith in humanity and in the Church. Thank you for being father and mother, brother and sister, uncle and aunt to me! You bless me with your lives.

Every time we go to Mass, every time we experience the blessing, we can exit from church and go into the world as blessed individuals and not as poor abandoned human beings. Hands that bless are hands that offer and pray.

“Taken up,” the word that we translate as “Ascension” comes from the Greek verb *anapherein* (to go up, to be carried up) which suggests a progressive action, but is in the passive form. That means that someone else is doing it, and it’s still going on right now. God is doing it. And it’s happening to us right now!

So, “What are we gonna do NOW?” May you and I be in a constant process of being “carried up” into heaven by the Father Who loves us, by the Son Who teaches us, and by the Holy Spirit, for Whom we await a great outpouring of grace on Pentecost Sunday. May we realize that the glorified Jesus is not away from us, but beside us, and within us, leading us to our Eternal Home. May Mary, the Blessed Mother and our mother, intercede for us with her Son as Queen Mother, and spread her mantle of love, protection and peace around us. Happy Mother’s Day to Mary and to all mothers! AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104; 1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23]

The poet William Blake wrote a poem about Pentecost. Part of it says: Unless the eye catches fire, God will not be seen. Unless the ear catches fire, God will not be heard. Unless the tongue catches fire, God will not be named. Unless the heart catches fire, God will not be loved. Unless the mind catches fire, God will not be known.

Since last Pentecost, Archbishop Allen Vigneron has challenged us to “Unleash the Gospel” – to unleash the Gospel in our hearts, in our homes, in our parishes, and in our cities and towns. There is no greater need for us to be on fire than right now! In that Spirit, I present my first ever State of the Parish message. I share with you my observations, my hopes and my vision for us.

At the Amazing Parish Conference last month, we were told that what happens here at Mass is the centerpiece of what happens outside these walls. So much rests on what happens at our Sunday Experience of the Eucharist.

Here at St. Martin de Porres, there is more reverence as we are aware of what we do; more participation in song and in responses; a rotating choir schedule, with both the adult choir and the contemporary group enhancing our liturgies. We also reviewed our procedures and training for altar servers, ushers. Lectors and EMHC’s, and revised the way we distribute Communion at mass.

We purchased two nativity sets to replace the ones lost during the Great Flood of August, 2014, turning one of them into an evangelization tool as we decorate the outdoor stable for Christmas, Lent and Easter. We continue to replace any flood-destroyed items as time goes by.

Our funeral services include an expanded wake service and scriptural rosary, and a participation sheet to encourage more participation at the funeral home. Fr. Michael Sullivan led us in a Fall retreat, and we updated our Mass prayer cards with the Gloria and the Creed, and updated the contemporary songbook. The Ushers purchased electronic song boards and are revising their procedures. Three of the old, unused confessionals have been converted into much-needed storage closets. Mine is still available for confessions!

The Pope Pius X Council of the Knights of Columbus coordinated and partially sponsored the new Stations of the Cross, which once hung at St. Leonard Parish in Warren. With the financial assistance of the ACWC, we purchased funeral vestments, communion cups and a new papal flag. We have also installed new handrails in the church sanctuary and are in the middle of upgrading and expanding our church restroom facilities.

We also installed new parish center doors, and upgraded the sidewalks at the parish center. We are working on having handicap automatic door openers installed at the main entrance of the church and over at the parish center. We also plan to upgrade and stripe our parking lot this summer.

At the Amazing Parish Conference, we were advised to evaluate three important elements that impact our Sunday worship: the quality of our liturgical music, the quality of the means and the message delivered through the homily, and the quality of our hospitality to all who come to worship. We will do this.

Then at the conference, we were challenged to identify a "Rallying Cry" that makes us unique as a parish. The mission is kind of the same for every parish, but we have summarized it here at St. Martin de Porres in three words: Strive, celebrate and serve. Please commit these three words to your memory.

Everything we propose, everything we do, everything we decide: how does it affect our parish mission statement to strive, to celebrate and to serve?

I am grateful for the warm and open welcome I have received here as your pastor. My friends, my family and my cardiologist all say that they have never seen me so much at peace in any of my prior parish assignments. I thank you for that. It is that openness and warm hospitality that has also embraced those who came over to St. Martin de Porres Parish after their parishes were closed and merged, especially those from St. Sylvester Parish. Would you please raise your hand if you have joined us after your prior parish was closed or merged?

To those of you whose parishes have closed, I share your grief at the loss of your parish. It is as if you lost a family member, isn't it? Yet, your trust in the Lord and the strength of your faith have helped you find a new parish home here.

I also admire the folks of St. Martin's for your openness and welcome, and for the openness to the Holy Spirit for those who are in transition between parishes. Over 300 of our households within the past three years are in transition from other parishes. I marvel at the number of families and parishioners we have here who were founding members of the parish. Would those of you who were here at St. Martin's since the early 1960's please raise your hands? Thank you for your faithfulness.

We are in the process of preparing a parish pictorial directory so that everyone can put names with faces. It should come out in 2017, which is the 55th anniversary of the founding of our parish, and the 50th anniversary of the dedication of this church.

We have recovered totally from the Great Flood of August, 2014, which occurred shortly after my arrival as your new pastor. Most of the items that were damaged beyond repair have been replaced so far without costing us a cent. We received a generous compensation check from the insurance company.

I met with each employee at St. Martin de Porres to get their take on their position on the staff, their ministry in the parish, and the needs of their specific department. We are addressing those needs in a slow but deliberate process.

The chief concerns expressed by the staff are: meeting the needs of our aging parishioners; finding and welcoming younger families and youth to our parish; a thirst for educational and inspiring homilies at Sunday and weekday Mass; and adult formation opportunities to grow in our Catholic faith, including reading material. I also believe that our staff earns and deserves a livable wage, especially if they are the prime sources of income for their families.

Many of these concerns are already being addressed. We are reaching out to the unchurched and the fallen-away Catholics with gifts at Christmas and Easter: Gus Lloyd's A Minute in the Church, volumes 1 and 2, and two of Matthew Kelly's books: "Rediscover Christ" and "Beautiful Mercy." We have developed a web site and keep it current. Check us out at smdeporres.com!

Upcoming funerals, notices and events are posted on the front page of the

web site, along with a seasonal message from me.

We increased the number of adult education and formation opportunities with Bible study and a series on Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Our Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Council and all commissions are now functioning fully and expanding in their membership and in their vision of evangelization/outreach. We added faith-sharing and ongoing formation topics at each meeting, so that it is not just about agenda items and reports.

We updated our parish policy on baptisms, weddings and funerals. We are updating our parish handbook – still a work in progress -- and have created more efficient budgets and financial accountability and transparency in all of our departments of service and ministry. We tithe a percentage of our parish income as our outreach. We provide now an annual financial statement. Our financial support of outreach charities is both staggering and inspiring.

In addition, I have tried to improve communication between pastor and parishioners and among the parish staff. My weekly column is the most frequent avenue of communication, to keep you aware of what is happening. And I am trying by means of e-mail, personal contact and monthly pastoral team meetings to rely on their input, expertise and wisdom.

Thank you to our parish staff. You, and the parishioners who pray for us, are the wind beneath my wings! Yet, in spite of all this, we still need to develop and improve a more efficient system of communication among ourselves.

All of these great things have happened through the blessing and grace of God, the patronage of St. Martin de Porres, and your prayerful and financial support. Thank you for being responsible and generous stewards!

The overall emphasis this year has been on Evangelization. Why are we losing people in our parish to non-Catholic churches? How can we better evangelize ourselves and our families so that we can evangelize, bring the Good News of Jesus Christ, to others? How can we move from Evangelization to Stewardship, to move people from the pews to action, to ministry and to service?

In this Jubilee Year proclaimed by Pope Francis, we are being challenged to be agents of mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing.

The Apostles and our Blessed Mother once were huddled in fear but now are in prayerful expectation of the coming of the Advocate, the Consoler, the Holy Spirit. When that Spirit finally arrives at Pentecost, they are filled with peace and power.

Duke University did a study on "peace of mind." Factors found to contribute greatly to emotional and mental stability are involved in action.

These factors will help us in our vision for the future and in our mutual cooperation, and bring us the peace of the Risen Lord, the peace of His Holy Spirit, and the peace of mind we crave as individuals and as a community.

These factors include the absence of suspicion and resentment. Nursing a grudge is a major factor in unhappiness. Not living in the past. An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression.

Not wasting time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change. Cooperate with life, instead of trying to deny it, fight it or run away from it.

Refusing to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal. Accepting the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune.

Cultivating the old-fashioned virtues of love, humor, compassion, loyalty.

The Holy Spirit speaks through broken people to a broken world, using a language that every broken heart can hear and understand. Because we know what it is like to be broken, we can speak of the healing love of Christ's sacrifice. We can witness the healing hope of Christ's forgiveness. We can speak of the healing faith in Christ's promises. We are like the bread that is broken, like the wine of our lives being outpoured in sacrifice and charity as we do the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy.

So we can say this with confidence: "For all that has been, we thank You Lord; for all that will be, we say YES!"

Let's catch the Spirit. Let's catch the Fire. Let's catch the power! Let's unleash the Gospel! Happy birthday, to us, the Church! AMEN! ALLELUIA!

[Readings: Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Luke 9:11b-17]

“The Lord has sworn an oath He will not change/You are a priest forever/a priest like Melchizedek of old...” This line from the Church’s Solemn Sunday Evening Prayer is either recited or sung by millions of Catholics and some Christians throughout the world. But who is Melchizedek? The name itself can be translated two different ways. Since there are no descriptive verbs in Hebrew, it literally translates as “king” and “righteous.” So the name could loosely be translated as “The King is Righteous,” meaning God, or “the righteous king,” referring to a political human figure.

Tradition holds out that Melchizedek is one of the first kings of Salem, the city that would eventually become Jerusalem. The word, “Salem” means “peace,” shalom! So, Melchizedek is “the Righteous King of Peace.” He is the king referred to in our First Reading, in the Responsorial Psalm, and later on by Jesus in New Testament. Even St. Paul refers to him in the Letter to the Hebrews. Melchizedek blesses Abram from God. Then he blesses God from Abram.

We come here to give thanks for other’s mercies as for our own. Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, is the new Melchizedek, the Mediator both of our prayers and praises, who not only offers up our prayers and praises, but He offers His own for us.

So, Abram gives Melchizedek one tenth of all that Abram has. With that, we have the first and earliest example of tithing, giving back to God one tenth of all that we have. When we have received some great mercy from God, it is most fitting that we should express our thankfulness by some special act of generous charity.

Jesus Christ, our great Melchizedek, is to have homage done to Him, and to be humbly acknowledged as our King and Priest.; not only the tithe of all, but all that we have, must be given up to God, or at least dedicated, all of it, for God’s use through us (Gen.14:21-24). Lord, how can what I have be used to give You greater glory and praise? And what of the miracle in today’s Gospel, which prefigures the Eucharist? Saint Luke calls the Eucharist “the breaking of the bread.” Saint Paul calls it “the supper of the Lord.” Jesus says it is “the new covenant in His Body and Blood.” Most of us use the words “Holy Communion” or “Most Blessed Sacrament.”

However you describe it, Eucharist is the centerpiece of the Catholic Christian

experience. Especially as the Real Presence of Jesus. WHAT is the “Real Presence? That means that Jesus Christ is really and truly present in the Eucharist in His body and blood, humanity and divinity, under the forms of bread and wine. Really! Someone – an atheist – once said, “If you Catholics really believe in the Real Presence, you would come up and receive Communion on your hands and knees!” He has more of an understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist than some of us!

There are other special words that speak of what we do when we have Eucharistic Adoration. The words are defined in my column last week and this week. But I would like to take the words common to Adoration and apply them to what happens AFTER we leave here, WHEN we encounter one another, HOW we become, how we bring and how WE can be the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in our world.

First, Exposition. We expose ourselves for who we really and truly are. Psychologists say that we are an emotional Holy Trinity: the public person we display to others; the private person we display to our more intimate family and friends, and the person we are afraid to show to anyone for fear of guilt, shame, or misunderstanding.

When we expose ourselves in our vulnerability, when we let others see us as God sees and knows us, we can acknowledge that we are all of one family and are all redeemed, saved, by the merciful peace and righteousness of God.

Second, Adoration. Picture it. The Golden Girls. Dorothy is gazing with love in her eyes at her mother. She just sits and stares. Finally, Sophia says, “What are you doing?” Dorothy says, “Nothing, Ma. Just looking at you and loving you.” And Sophia says, “Well stop doing that. I’ve been wanting to pick my nose for the last five minutes!”

Parents, do you look lovingly at your children on a regular basis? One parent does it every night, but only when they are asleep so they don’t know it. Spouses, do you still look at each other with love in your eyes? That’s adoration. So many couples have admitted to looking at only the positive things about their mate while they were dating and engaged, then once they are married for five, ten, twenty years, looking only at the negative and pointing them out and then whining about it to their spouses.

After 51 years of marriage, Deacon Marion and Yvonne still adore each other!

Speaking of Adoration, one thing I would ask is that if you are going to participate in Eucharistic Adoration between the 8:30 and 11:00 Masses today/tomorrow, please

offer some of your prayer time for the spiritual success of the Synod 16 in November of this year. Pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the Unleashing of the Gospel in our hearts, in this parish, and in this Archdiocese. What do you do during adoration? Sit quietly and let the Son shine in your soul. Have a silent conversation with the Lord. Pray your favorite prayers. Bring to mind all the blessings you have and give thanks.

Finally, Benediction. Blessing. We are blessed by the monstrance, which is a holder for the Blessed Sacrament. The word monstrance means to display, to show. In our case, it means to make real what we celebrate within these walls. Pope Francis says the simplest ways we do this is when we perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. Here are some other ways to do it: in public, in our homes, in our communities, in our country. In all of these ways, WE become a benediction, a blessing, to all those around us. That's one of the reasons why we have Eucharistic Processions in neighborhoods: to bring the Body of Christ into the world.

Once upon a time, all the people of a village decided to pray for rain. On the appointed day that they gathered for prayer, only one boy came with an umbrella. That's FAITH. When you throw babies up in the air, they laugh because they know you will catch them. That's TRUST.

Every night we go to bed without any assurance of being alive the next morning, but still we set the alarms to wake up. That's HOPE. We plan big things for tomorrow in spite of zero knowledge of the future. That's CONFIDENCE. We see the world suffering, but still we get married and have children. That's LOVE.

On an old man's colored t-shirt was written these words: 'I am not 80 years old, I am sweet 16 with 64 years of experience.' That's THE RIGHT ATTITUDE. An attitude of gratitude, of thanksgiving.

Come and receive Christ. Come and become Christ. Then go and be Christ for others and for the world. Be Eucharist. Strive. Celebrate. Serve. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 57:13-19; Psalm 85; Colossians 3:12-15; John 14:23-29]

On this Memorial Day, how do we reconcile the reality and the genuine need for military service with the response of nonviolence? The Catholic Caucus of Southeast Michigan, a Catholic lobby group, says that both can be reconciled.

On the one hand, doesn't Jesus say, "Put away the sword" on the night he is betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on Holy Thursday?

The words and the life of the nonviolent Jesus are considered by many to be unrealistic. The world relies heavily on weapons; individuals arm themselves; and violence spirals upward to where it may destroy us. There is an alternative. One that can work hand in hand with our need to be prepared and to defend ourselves militarily. Military service and nonviolence are compatible. It's not a case of "either/or" but of "both/and."

We may be ignorant of the successes of nonviolence. Nonviolent resistance has played a much more significant role than is generally acknowledged by historians. Gandhi's campaign against British colonial rule; Martin Luther King's civil rights struggle; the overthrow of the dictator Marcos in the Philippines; the displacing of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and the resistance that even worked against the Nazis in Norway and Berlin are just a few examples. Yes, both Gandhi and King were assassinated, as well as countless unnamed others. So they join the ranks of our beloved martyrs.

We who dream of peace, who struggle for justice, and who want to follow the way of Jesus, should take on this challenge to pursue the possibilities of nonviolence as first alternatives, and violence as a last alternative both for our world and for our own lives. We realize also that the patriot's blood is the seed of freedom's tree. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. Both share something in common. Some would sacrifice America's ideals to protect America. Some would deny Jesus Christ and the Church He founded to save their lives, but end up losing their souls. Today we honor those who did not. We honor those who died faithful to their God, to their Church and to their Country.

The dead soldier's silence sings our national anthem. Uncle Sam looking over the headstones at Arlington National Cemetery and weeping: too many nephews. Too many nieces. We could add: too many husbands and wives, too many sons and daughters, too many sisters and brothers; too many friends and comrades and co-workers; too many students and teachers.

We come here to remember them, to praise them and to return them to the Lord. Our lives of freedom and peace have been brought to us by a soldier. Every day is Memorial Day wherever our military is stationed. It takes a family to defend a nation.

They were three brothers, born just a year apart. They grew up on the edge of a Midwestern city, graduated from high school, and had all of life ahead of them. Then the war came. Frank, the oldest, the one with the poor eyesight, managed to talk his way into the Air Corps as a technician. He was good with wires at a time when radios were tubes and coils.

Fred was in the Army and served on the west coast and then in the Pacific -- a place he never even dreamed of seeing when he was in high school. John ended up becoming a mechanic in the Air Corps and was shipped out to England and went on to serve at bases in the Netherlands and France.

Frank was killed in a storm during a training mission over Kansas.

Fred and John returned at the end of the war, married, started families, and lived a long life. They, along with other buddies, started a VFW post named after Frank and two other high school friends who had died in service. A year after John died, his son found a stack of letters written by the three brothers to relatives and sent during the war. Letter after letter from each of the brothers always ended with "I hope I'll be seeing you soon" -- the constant refrain of a soldier or sailor overseas -- "I hope I'll be seeing you soon."

Reading all the letters on Memorial Day again was a reminder of how much they had given, even the ones who survived the war and returned home.

These returning veterans especially need our attention and our prayers. They make up a significant percentage of our homeless citizens. So many left their jobs to defend their country and return to a country that has no jobs for

them. They came back with physical and emotional wounds that need healing and find that they are without medical insurance. Some have even taken their own life, saying, "I've gone from the hell of war to the hell of indifference." Did you know that every day in this country 22 of our veterans take their own lives? 22 a day. What can we do for our veterans?

Those who, as Isaiah describes, are "crushed and dejected," who will "heal them and lead them and give them new life?" Our response must be that described by St. Paul to the Colossians in today's Second Reading: we are to seek them out, receive them, direct them to the proper service agencies and minister to them, with "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Sometimes, all we can do and all that we need to do is listen. Give them permission to tell their story.

Secondly, we pray. For those who afflicted with PTSD, alcoholism, drug addiction, loss of limb. Those who cannot leave the war behind. Those who wake up in the middle of the night screaming and ready to fight. Those who cannot forgive themselves for having to sacrifice someone else's life for the cause. Those who saw their comrades die while they themselves survived.

Among the victims of violence was Jesus Christ Himself. He speaks to His disciples, again on Holy Thursday evening, of his vision, his dreams for them all: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our dwelling with them. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." These words find an echo today as we honor the fallen who have given their all. In hope and remembrance, we can say to them, "I hope I'll be seeing you soon." May their souls, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. May God bless our Church. May God bless America. AMEN!

How great is your sin? How great is your faith? How great is your love and your ability to forgive? These are the questions posed in today's Scripture readings. Let's start with our Second Reading from Galatians. What gets us into Heaven? This particular passage, used by a few Protestant denominations, claims that if we just have faith alone in Jesus Christ (*sola fide* is the theology here), then that is enough. Like saying, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior and I am born again." Some would say that this simple declarative sentence is all that is needed to get into Heaven.

Another school of thought says that it is primarily what we DO, not what we SAY, that will get us into Heaven. So I rack up those spiritual bonus points that will earn me a Plenary Indulgence. I will attend Mass as often as I can. I will pray the Rosary every day. I will offer litanies and devotions until my lips are parched. I will make acts of consecration to the Sacred Heart, to Mary, to God. Then God will owe me. I will have earned my place in Heaven.

On Judgement Day, two men are standing in front of Heaven's Gate. One is a Catholic priest, the other is a taxi driver. St. Peter, the traditional door man, escorts the pastor through the gates and walks him over to a nice little cottage near a small lake. The pastor feels that this will make a nice retirement home. Then St. Peter escorts the taxi driver to the better section of Heaven. Curious, the pastor follows. St. Peter says to the taxi driver: "Here is YOUR home."

It is a beautiful two-story mansion, with dozens of rooms and every modern convenience inside. The pastor is confused. He asks St. Peter, "How come my home is so humble? I was a Catholic priest. I celebrated the sacraments, I brought dozens of people to the practice of the faith." St. Peter answered, "Yes, that's true. But when you preached, people slept. When this man drove his taxi cab, people prayed!"

The beautiful Catholic teaching on Heaven is that we get there exclusively because of the loving mercy of God. Only God's grace gets us in the door. But God asks of us a commitment before we arrive. God proposes the marriage of both professing our faith and our putting it into action.

The blend of the two draws us closer in relationship with God and to a deeper commitment of service to one another. How great is your sin? How great is your faith? How great is your love and your ability to forgive?

David's sin in today's First Reading indeed is great. Nathan the prophet reminds King David of the litany of great things God has done for him. And then Nathan hits David square between the eyes with his sin. David has someone murdered in battle, so that David can take the man's wife as his own. BIG SIN.

Something stirs in King David's heart. He repents and is forgiven by God. But this will not be the last time David sins. Isn't that the same with us? We sin, we repent, we are forgiven and we sin again. Pope Francis says that God never tires of forgiving us. It's we who get tired of asking God to forgive us.

The woman in today's Gospel is in a similar boat. The whole town knows that she is THAT kind of woman. BIG SIN. But she looks beyond the looks of the people in the room and goes to a Man she's heard about – a God Man – who Himself is in need. She sees that the careless host of the party, a Pharisee, has neglected the routine protocol of hospitality. He neither greets Jesus with a kiss, nor washes His feet from the dusty journey to the Pharisees home. His faith is cautious – he wants to be what we now call “politically correct.” He doesn't want to commit his faith and offend some of his guests. His sin? Perhaps minor, so minor that thinks he may not experience God's loving forgiveness. His love? Like the others in the room. Minimal. Restrained.

The story Jesus tells next about debtors and creditors makes it obvious that He actually does know "what sort of woman this is who is touching him." But He also sees something, something big, that the Pharisee has entirely missed.

This woman brims with sorrow and with love. Her life is changing, being transformed at the feet of Jesus. The Pharisee, reclining at his own table, betrays no sign of love, only criticism and the smallness of his heart, which shrinks and hardens further and resists all change. Jesus takes the woman's tears, and her love, and places them into a dish to be weighed in the scales of justice and mercy.

All of her transgressions in the opposite dish soar into the air and are flung away. The weight of love and tears dismisses them all. Her many sins are forgiven, for she has loved and forgiven much. And so it is with us. When we have sinned, we can become bitter and sink even more into sin.

Or we can repent, find the love in our hearts, and approach the mercy seat of God, and love much more because we have been loved much by God's mercy. How great is your sin? How great is your faith? How great is your love and your capacity to forgive? Come to the table. Find forgiveness. Forgive each other. All are welcome! AMEN!

[Readings: Zechariah 12:10-11; 13:1; Ps. 63; Galatians 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24]

I remember reading about a man who stopped in the grocery store on the way home from work to pick up a couple of items for his wife. He wandered around aimlessly for a while searching out the needed groceries. As is often the case in the grocery store, he kept passing this same shopper in almost every aisle. It was another father trying to shop with a totally uncooperative three-year-old boy in the cart. The first time they passed, the three-year-old was asking over and over for a candy bar. Our observer couldn't hear the entire conversation. He just heard Dad say, "Now, Billy, this won't take long." As they passed in the next aisle, the 3-year-old's pleas had increased several octaves. Now Dad was quietly saying, "Billy, just calm down. We will be done in a minute."

When they passed near the dairy case, the kid was screaming uncontrollably. Dad was still keeping his cool. In a very low voice he was saying, "Billy, settle down. We are almost out of here." The Dad and his son reached the check-out counter just ahead of our observer. He still gave no evidence of losing control. The boy was screaming and kicking. Dad was very calmly saying over and over, "Billy, we will be in the car in just a minute and then everything will be OK." The bystander was impressed beyond words.

After paying for his groceries, he hurried to catch up with this amazing example of patience and self-control just in time to hear him say again, "Billy, we're done. It's going to be OK." He tapped the patient father on the shoulder and said, "Sir, I couldn't help but watch how you handled little Billy. You were amazing." Dad replied, "His name is Bobby. I'm Billy!"

Today is Father's Day. "Father" is a powerful title in every culture. It refers to the man biologically responsible for your existence. But it's also a term of respect for any male elder or superior in the community. In our society, Father means the man complicit in your coming to life. But it might also include another man who raised you, if that was someone else. In Catholic culture, Father is a title for the men who serve us in sacramental ministry. And in Christianity, it's a name we use for God. Jesus even preferred the more familiar *Abba*, Papa.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading that we all are children of God. NO exceptions. We are all descendants of Abraham. By the way, the TV program, "Who Do You Think You Are?" claims that 98% of the entire human population traces its origin to the Middle East. And that's not all. St. Paul claims that you and I and all of us are heirs... Heirs to the Kingdom of God. That is our inheritance... Eternal Life with God.

The Broadway musical *Miss Saigon* is set in Vietnam. It tells the tale of biracial children left behind by U. S. soldiers, many unaware that they are fathers. The Vietnamese mothers are left alone. One of them is Kim. As troubles intensify, Kim sings a song to her little boy, "I Would Give Up My Life for You." Kim sings: "You, who I cradled in my arms / You, asking as little as you can / Little snip of a little man / I know I'd give my life for you. / Why should you learn of war or pain? / To make sure you're not hurt again / I swear I'll give my life for you" . . . and she will.

Such words may move you deeply, but it's a song. Can they be true? For your child, your spouse, your partner, would you "lose your life"? Today is Father's Day, and we become aware of the many dads and moms who have given up their lives for their children -- either literally, or by way of sacrifice, hard work, and constant care. For most of us, "laying down one's life" takes the shape of *giving* -- over and over, endlessly -- and that is a little dying too.

Listen to Jesus: "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." From your own experience of loving and being loved, you know that Jesus is absolutely right. Christian Fathers in the Middle East have given up their lives because of Islamic terrorism. We have made available Solidarity Crosses in their memory for a donation of \$10 each.

The role of the father is indispensable. Here are the seven secrets to their success:

- 1) *Commitment*: One father would say to his children every night, "See you in the morning. He never said, "I love you" to them. But they knew that "See you in the morning" meant that he would never leave, desert or

abandon them.

2) *Knowing your children*: What are the strengths, their weaknesses? What are their dreams, their hopes? What are they struggling with?

3) *Consistent discipline*: The hardest thing I tell parents at the baptism class is that they were not put on this earth to be their children's buddies; they were put on this earth to be their children's parents. Both parents have to be on board with discipline: establishing boundaries, rules and consequences.

4) *Protecting and providing*: I had a newspaper photo in my prayer book that had become so brittle and frail, I had to finally throw it out. It is a photo of a young dad with his young son on a super water slide. They are in their bathing suits. The dad is a perfect specimen: strong legs, strong arms, broad shoulders, not an ounce of fat on his body. It was like looking in a mirror! (At a fun house!) The little boy was little – skinny arms and legs. But the look on his face was one of power and confidence. He faced the formidable slide because he knew he was cradled in the safety of his father's arms and legs. The father's face shows absolute fear and panic! This photo reminds me of how God loves and protects us and how God provides for our needs.

5) *Loving, or at least respecting their mother*, even in separation situations.

6) *Active listening*: Looking at your children and giving them your full and undivided attention when they need to talk to you or you to them. And...

7) *Equipping children spiritually*. You are to be the first and the best teachers of Christian and Catholic faith to lead your children on the path of faith. Gordie Howe did this. His children said he was a saint in the home while a killer on the ice. Gordie modeled fatherhood. It CAN be done, even if imperfectly.

Let us pray for all fathers, that they may fulfill the irreplaceable mission the Lord has entrusted to them. Let us give thanks to God for all those men in our lives who have been "father" to us. Be sure to thank them today. AMEN!

[Readings: 1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62]

Psychologists refer to people who have what is called “termination issues:” They can’t seem to hang up the phone, say goodbye at the door, or leave an email unresponded to. They can’t stop talking or even make room in a conversation for the person who’s forced to endure the onslaught of their words in person or in the land of Facebook, Tweets, and text messaging. For us or for them, it’s not breaking up that’s hard to do. It’s signing off!

We share the pain of young Elisha, who’s minding his own business on the family farm when along comes Elijah, casting his cloak over the boy. This gesture is not made because Elijah thinks Elisha is cold in the field. Putting your cloak over someone else’s shoulder is a sign of passing your authority to that person. I empower you to continue the mission. Elijah claims Elisha for God’s will and plans. Elisha doesn’t ask for this assignment. He was just doing his duty as a son, plowing the fields at home, when all heaven breaks loose.

The poor fellow is forced into what a scripture scholar (Rudolf Bultmann) calls the “Moment of Decision.” Everything in life leads up to this one moment. A moment of decision, in Elisha’s case, with no time to think straight. He blurts out his need to kiss Mom and Dad goodbye. This is an admirable and perfectly understandable expression of love and loyalty. There’s nothing out of proportion about his request. But both the disciple and the prophet have to put their divine call in perspective of earthly things. If this farm boy can’t distinguish between his earthly parents and God Almighty, he’s got some learning to do!

We who experience “termination issues” in every doorway of life can’t help but feel how harsh that is. Why does Elisha have to leave right this minute? And is it strictly necessary to kill and sacrifice off the oxen – part of his apparently very rich family’s income and estate, and surrender all ties to his past life and dreams? Yet he leaves all behind to follow Elijah eventually to condemn the activity of the government of that time and to suffer the persecution that would follow. We can do no less in this time and in this place.

Needless to say, by the time we get to today's Gospel, we're primed for and expecting resistance. Once more, Jesus accepts no excuses or delays when He issues His invitation: "Follow me."

It's more of a command than a suggestion. The person invited can refuse to comply; sadly, most of them do. They all express reasonable objections. Let me establish myself in my profession and put something aside for my family. Let me take care of my parents until their old age and death. But the message is clear: The kingdom won't wait. In one sense, Jesus is saying: turn your back on your past life, on your life of sin and selfishness, and come and follow me. Yes, show respect and concern for your parents and for your family, but make your good-byes, forsake your former way of life, and come and follow Me.

Have you ever had such a "Moment of Decision" when you had to make a life-changing decision? Mine was when the Lord confirmed my discernment to enter the seminary and to become a priest. I haven't looked back since. And it's been the best choice God ever made for me!

A disciple must know when it's time to GO and time to GROW. A true disciple doesn't do everything his or her way; their task is to FOLLOW Jesus, not to write the script of His mission. What is discipleship? "Discipleship" means "student," from the Latin *discipulus*, and originally it described how the Lord was Israel's ultimate teacher through the instructive power of the Law.

In the ancient world, disciples lived with their teachers until they were ready to become rabbis or prophets themselves. This is the concept of modern day seminaries and houses of formation for men and women. So it was startling when Jesus comes along and makes immediate disciples of His followers.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of Jesus' invitation to discipleship was that it took place during the ordinary events of life: at a fisherman's boat, at a tax man's table. Not in a church or temple. It requires an immediate response and then deepens "along the way" with Jesus toward a radically new life.

Today's Responsorial Psalm describes the challenge perfectly: to "set the Lord ever before me." And St. Paul calls us today to a radical love for ourselves and for one another that begins with God and flows out into all of our

relationships. To love one another at the same time as we love ourselves. “The flesh” means anything that draws us away from God: jealousy, anger, selfishness, addiction, quarreling, dissension and inappropriate desires.

Three questions for you today to consider:

How is your Christian discipleship lived out in your relationships? What relationships are toxic, deadly, leading you away from God, and which relationships are healthy, life-giving reflection of your relationship with God?

Where is the Lord leading you where you would rather not go? What are the obstacles that are distracting you and keeping you from going in that direction? Is it fear of thinking outside the box? Is it fear of the transition? At the Amazing Parish Conference back in April, one of the keynote speakers said, “It’s not the change that we fear most, it’s the process of transition.”

Finally, *where can you go to find the help you will need to get to where the Lord wants you?* I’m here. The parish staff is here. God’s Word is available. So are His Sacraments. You have all the tools you need to get to where God wants you.

So, leave all things behind, or at least give them the proper priority, and come and follow HIM – in your relationships, in the new places God wants to lead you, and in the thrilling adventure of the journey. AMEN!