

[Readings: Isaiah 66:10-14c; Psalm 66; Gal 6:14-18; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20]

I am half-tempted to call this homily, “What he *meant* to say was...” It seems that every time our beloved Holy Father Pope Francis has an informal press conference during his return flight to Rome from wherever his last pastoral visit was, he manages to say something noteworthy and newsworthy, but always in a way that has his handlers back in the Vatican scrambling to come up with a spin on his remarks that doesn’t contradict traditional Church teachings. We also remember that his words are opinions, not expressed infallible teachings.

Here is a sample of what he said during that flight and earlier in the week: Francis: “MOST marriages are conditional.” Meaning not permanent, temporary. Media: Pope says marriage is temporary. Vatican: Pope says MANY marriages are provisional. What he meant to say was: So many people are conditioned by our flawed culture and have not received sufficient religious learning to know what marriage is, what marriage requires, and how marriage is a sacrament. Because of this, they MAY see their marriage as a temporary relationship.

Francis: “Some couples who live together before marriage, show more commitment and sacramental grace than many who are married for years.” Media: Couples can find commitment and grace by living together before marriage. The Vatican: While couples who live together before marriage may show some sign of commitment and maturity, they do not have the grace of a sacramental marriage to sustain them.

The Pope’s personal secretary, Archbishop Georg Ganswein: Having both Pope Emeritus Benedict and Pope Francis around presents an expanded Petrine Ministry. Francis: There is only one pope. Benedict is a great man of God, but he is not part of the Petrine Ministry. The Media: We have 2 Popes!

The media: Pope opens doors to women deacons. Francis: “This is not

telling the truth of things. Women's thought is important because they approach questions differently than men. One cannot make a good decision without listening to women. A study of the history of women in the Early Church shows the value of the contribution of women in the Church and in society."

The media: Pope says Church must apologize to gays. Francis: We make a distinction between the homosexual persons, who are entitled to respect and non-discrimination, and practice – the acting out which is always considered a serious sin, like the other sexual sins. We need to apologize for those situations where homosexuals were treated by Church officials with no respect for their human person and dignity. AND...

The Church must also apologize and ask for forgiveness from the poor, too, for women who are exploited, for children who are exploited for labor. She must also ask forgiveness for having blessed so many weapons.

There will always be good and bad Christians in the Church, like the parable of the wheat and the weeds, says Pope Francis. All of us are saints, because all of us have the Holy Spirit. But we are all sinners, he concludes, and I am the first of all sinners.

Pope Francis added during his trip to Armenia to call the bloodshed at the hands of the Turks what it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: a genocide. But it is not to be seen as ONLY a genocide, but also an act of Christian Martyrdom. Genocide is a political term he says; Christian martyrdom is a religious one.

Speaking of things political, this weekend, we celebrate our freedom, our religious freedom, our freedom of conscience, and the birth of our nation. What ARE the duties of an American citizen toward their country?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: A citizen must love their

country, be sincerely interested in its welfare, and respect and obey its lawful authority. So it comes down to love, interest, respect and obeying LAWFUL authority. There is a conditional phrase and a descriptive adjective here. I'll say more about this on Monday.

The Catechism goes on to say that a citizen shows interest in their country's welfare by voting honestly and without selfish motives, by paying just taxes, and by defending their country's rights when necessary. We must respect and obey the lawful authority of our country because that authority comes from God, the source of all authority. I'll say more on THAT on Monday, too!

Finally, the Catechism says that we are obliged to take an active part in works of good citizenship because right reason requires citizens to work together for the public welfare of the country. The public good is another way to call it.

With the current political situation in our country, we indeed are being sent by Jesus like lambs among wolves. The call to be a good Christian and a good Catholic is consistent with being a good American citizen. Let us pray to truly identify ourselves and work to become "one nation, under God." AMEN!

[Readings: Is. 57:15-19; Ps. 85; Phil. 4:6-9; John 14:23-29]

Today, we celebrate our political freedom, our religious freedom, our freedom of conscience, and the birth of our nation. What ARE the duties of an American citizen toward their country? Especially Catholic citizens?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says this: A citizen must love their country, be sincerely interested in its welfare, and respect and obey its lawful authority. So it comes down to love, interest, respect and obeying LAWFUL authority. There is a conditional phrase and a descriptive adjective here. We have the right and the responsibility to study what our administrative, legislative and judicial branches of local, state and federal governments are doing. Is what they are doing consistent with our Judeo-Christian ethics and morals upon which our country was founded?

The Catechism goes on to say that a citizen shows interest in their country's welfare by voting honestly and without selfish motives, by paying just taxes, and by defending their country's rights when necessary.

We must respect and obey the lawful authority of our country because that authority comes from God, the source of all authority. It is either God's active will or God's permissive will that we have the political leaders we have.

If you read the Old Testament and New Testament history of political leaders of countries and provinces, you will find that most had a checkered or sinful past. Few were virtuous. The Assyrian King Cyrus was the most ruthless of all Old Testament emperors, yet because of him, the Jews were liberated from their captivity in Babylon and allowed to go back to their homeland, where they rebuilt their Temple and worshipped the one true God.

You need not go beyond the Gospels in the New Testament to be reminded of rulers like King Herod, Pontius Pilate and Caiphas. Yet God was able to work good and bring good out of the evil of all these men.

We can be neither apathetic nor cynical about our government. We are called to action. Only by acting and getting involved can we make a difference.

The Catechism says that we are obliged to take an active part in works of good citizenship because right reason requires citizens to work together for the public welfare of the country. The public good is another way to call it. As Catholics, we have the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy to get us started.

In our First Reading, Isaiah prophecies about the improper use of the power, the politics and the blessings which God lavished on the people of Israel for generations. And while many, if not most of God's Chosen People responded with gratitude and stewardship, others used the power of force and immorality for their own personal gain and pleasure.

Our Second Reading shifts our focus not on the powerful but on the powerless. We need to discover again "whatever is just" – taking concrete steps to promote justice in our neighborhood, in our state and in our nation. Contacting politicians on every level – those we voted for and those we didn't vote for – to make sure that the laws that they pass and enforce are just, based on the common good and on the dignity of the human person.

The Michigan Catholic Conference reminds us every year of the major issues that we need to prayerfully consider when we vote and act as citizens.

They are: religious freedom, human life, children and families, education, health care and economic justice and regulatory policies.

We also need to discover "whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious," returning to a culture of decency and respect, not vulgarity and abuse. You and I can keep on doing what we have learned and received from our parents, grandparents and ancestors who called this land "home."

Jesus tells us that the truly Chosen People are those who love God and keep God's word. Jesus actually promises to take up residence within such people. So many corners of our neighborhoods and our nation are rotting from within. They have lost God. They have lost faith. They have lost hope. You and I must be that light that rekindles belief in God and hope for our country's future. The Holy Spirit has been given to all people of good will. AMEN!

[Readings: Ecces. 12, 2:21-23; Ps. 90; Col. 3:1-5, 9-11; Lk. 12:13-21]

I have been in six parish assignments so far, and in each parish, when today's Gospel passage comes up, I ask the parishioners, "If you had only 24 or 48 hours to live, how would your life be different? What would you do differently?"

The answers are usually the same. The older parishioners usually say, "I would put my affairs in order. I would make amends and peace with God and with any people who are estranged from me. I would visit my family and friends. I would give buckets of money to my parish." (I added that last one!)

The younger people, especially students in the parish grade school or high school also have the same universal answer but with a different take: "Party on! Eat, drink and be merry! There are no worries about finding a job, having a mortgage, or any other responsibilities!"

A young student was asked by his teacher what he wanted to be when he grew up. Without thinking the student said, "I don't know." "Well," said the teacher, "what do you want to do when you finish high school?" "I'll go to university." "And then what?" "I'll get a job." "And then what?" "I'll make lots of money." "Then what?" "I'll buy a house and a car." "Then what?" "I guess I'll get married." "Then what?" "Maybe have a family?" said the student, not quite sure of it himself. "And then what?"

The student thought some more and then said, "I'll make more money, maybe buy a bigger house, get a new car. Maybe buy a boat or a plane . . ." "Then what?" asked the teacher. Enjoying the prospects of future prosperity, the student was excited now. "Then I'll retire and spend all my time traveling and enjoying my money and success." "And then what happens?" asked the teacher one last time. After a short pause the student responded, "I guess then I die." Nodding, the teacher agreed, "Then you die."

In the parable of the rich man who stores up his wealth, Jesus warns us not to get caught up in the acquisitions game. Life might end at any moment for any of us. What do *you* want to do with your life? What do you want to do with the rest of your life? And the things of your life?

In today's Gospel, Jesus refuses to arbitrate an estate squabble between two brothers; a quarrel born of greed that has become a wedge between siblings who should value their love and family unity above their possessions.

Quoheleth pretty much says the same thing in today's First Reading. The Greek translation of the name Quoheleth is Ecclesiastes, which means a gatherer of students or a "collector of wisdom." Wouldn't that be wonderful to have that as one of our goals in life? To collect wisdom as we age. What is the saying, "Wisdom comes with age?" But sometimes age comes alone! "Too soon old and too late smart!"

Poor Quoheleth can't seem to find anything in this life worthy of honor. He takes a skeptical look at money, fame, pleasures and earthly possessions. There is nothing new under the sun, even in an election year!

Contemporary philosophers carry the same contempt. Look at the some of the men philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were called "nihilists," which comes from the Latin word, "nihil" or "nothing" -- people who had a gloomy look at life with no hope in the future. Some once wrote on a wall that famous quote from Nietchze: "God is dead." Signed, Nietchze. Underneath that, someone else wrote in a different hand: "Nietchze is dead." Signed, God. Yet in spite of the darkness of his message, Quoheleth writes as a man of deep faith.

The chief difference between today's messages from the First Reading and the Gospel, and our Second Reading from St. Paul is that Paul offers a clear alternative to the things of this world that he says lead to futility and meaninglessness. Paul tells us that things of this earth don't sustain us and don't endure. How long did it take before we were completely bored with that game or toy or gift that we absolutely had to have for Christmas or for our birthday?

Baptism and our journey of faith point our gaze upward, to the things of eternal and everlasting life. The corrupt things of this life only lead to destruction.

The world doesn't see this. Sometimes we don't even see it ourselves. This is that life that is "hidden in Christ" so that when Christ comes back, we too will appear with Him in glory.

St. Paul sees our earthly sins like a cancer – a fatal spiritual disease that

leads only to eternal death: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires and “the greed that is idolatry.” We can be so obsessed with what we have on earth, that they possess us as some alien God. And we know what HIS name is, don’t we?

Thus it will be for all who store up treasures for themselves on earth but are not rich in what matters to God: faith, family, hope, and Heaven. Seeing to the needs of others as we see to our own needs; generous acts of service and stewardship of what we do have and possess, all put at the service of our God, like our parish mission pilgrims who are on their way to Kentucky this morning. We blessed and commissioned them at the 5:00 Mass this weekend. We promised them our prayers throughout the coming week.

St. Paul reminds us to keep our focus on what is above while we are on earth: faith, family, hope and Heaven.

So... What do YOU want to do with YOUR life? What are you doing with YOUR things? How can you fill your days with what is truly important? The best things in life... aren’t things! The Hebrew word for *vanity* literally means “breath” or “vapor”: something fleeting and lacking substance. Let us work for what is truly lasting, “what matters to God.” AMEN!



[Readings: Wisdom 18:6-9; Ps. 33; Heb 11:1-2, 8-19; Lk. 12:32-48]

The first verse of today's Gospel was used by my very first spiritual director when I returned stateside following my seminary formation in Rome: "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock," while the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen," even for all who, like Abraham and Sarah, "died in faith" well before that hope was fully realized in Christ. They saluted it from afar, which I imagine as them standing on one side of a great plateau looking at another plateau with a deep crevice separating the two. My idea of Purgatory, Hell and Heaven, with Jesus Christ as the bridge between Purgatory and Heaven!

One of those witnesses saluting from afar was Fr. Jacques Hamel, 86, a diocesan priest who was killed in his church in Normandy, France on July 26 by two men who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. He worked for interfaith reconciliation during his life, and France's Muslim council, the CFCM, urged Muslims to show "solidarity and compassion" after his murder. "We are all Catholics of France," said the head of the CFCM.

Muslims in France and elsewhere attended Catholic Mass last Sunday in a sign of solidarity following the brutal murder. More than 100 Muslims were among the 2,000 parishioners who filled the pews of the Cathedral of Rouen. "We're very touched," said the archbishop of Rouen, "It's an important gesture of fraternity." Earlier in July, 84 people died in an ISIS-inspired attack in Nice, France when a truck was driven into a crowd celebrating Bastille Day.

Muslims in Italy also attended Mass last Sunday. Three imams sat in the front row at Santa Maria Trastevere church in Rome. "Mosques are not a place in which fanatics become radicalized," said Mohammed ben Mohammed, a member of the Union of Islamic Communities in Italy. "Mosques do the opposite of terrorism: they spread peace and dialogue."

Some of the Muslims sat in the front row, across from the altar. Among the parishioners was a nun who was briefly taken hostage at the church when he was killed. Outside the church, a group of Muslims were applauded when they

unfurled a banner: "Love for all. Hate for none." A particularly moving moment occurred during the sign of the peace. Archbishop Lebrun used the moment to step into the congregation and greet Muslim leaders attending.

"May your kindness, O Lord, be upon us who have put our hope in you," prays the psalmist. Kindness seems in short supply when we listen to the news these days. But when we unplug the mass media and look around us, we see acts of kindness and solidarity all around us. When confronted with violence and evil, instead of responding in kind, let us respond with kindness.

We hear so much about what divides us in our nation and our world. The news cycle thrives on division, whereas gestures of solidarity and union too often go unnoted. Our Christian faith calls and challenges us to build bonds of solidarity and understanding that ignorance and hatred cannot destroy.

Deacon Marion's medical surprise reminds us of another great truth.

You and I are sometimes caught off guard, unprepared. Being clueless is one thing. But sometimes we know better and still fail to take responsibility for the obligations that are ours. What Jesus teaches today pivots on three ideas: suddenness, accountability, and responsibility.

*Sudden:* because we can't put our death on the calendar for future reference. As a kid, I often prayed the Lord to tell me my date of death, so I could plan my life accordingly. He never told me!

*Accountable:* because our lives don't belong to us, we're merely stewards of time, and God alone will judge our stewardship.

*Responsible:* because what we do on this earth, every decision, matters. What we do and fail to do, as we say at Mass. It won't do us any good to claim we didn't know, we weren't expecting this; that, with more time or a little advance warning, we could have done something together. Too late for that.

So how do we handle the tremendous pressure of being totally responsible to God for every choice we make, with a deadline we can't exactly plan for? Trust in God is the key to getting it right.

Jesus says: Don't be afraid to sell your belongings to give alms. Hanging onto stuff is unimportant; helping your sister and brother in need is critical.

Getting ready for death is not about what we do in the final hours before we go, but what we do all along the way.

Treat every interaction with your fellow human beings like it's the last, with all the tenderness and kind attention you daydream of bestowing on those around your deathbed.

After Mass on Friday morning with Deacon Marion, he was getting to read the Upper Sacristy but wanted to tell me a story. He said, "Have I told about so-and-so?" I held up my hand and said, "Five times already!" Thank heavens that wasn't the last thing I said to him before he went into the hospital. My last words to him were: "Thanks for everything, Deacon!" Make your last words to each other tender and kind.

If you hope to be a saint one day, be a saint today.

If you intend to forgive someone eventually, forgive them now.

Christian death is easy.

Die to yourself in every minute, and you've got it made. AMEN!

[Readings: Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Psalm 40; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53]

I have some good news and some bad news. First the good news. After only one week following his triple bypass surgery, our beloved Deacon Marion came home from the hospital yesterday. He is in good spirits and when I spoke with him on the phone yesterday, he sounded healthy. But after only two minutes of conversation, he was winded and his voice sounded tired.

His doctors ask that for the next several weeks, Deacon Marion have no visitors or phone calls so that his body can heal and his heart can mend. He thanks everyone for all of the love, cards, prayers and notes of support. If you would like to send Deacon Marion a card or note, please send it to the office or drop it in the collection baskets in the back of church. Now the bad news.

At tomorrow's Mass for the Feast of the Assumption, we will pray for those who are planning a blasphemous Black Mass which is scheduled to occur publicly at the Civic Center in Oklahoma City. Afterwards, another satanic blasphemy and sacrilege will be perpetrated against the Blessed Virgin Mary in the same place. According to news reports, this satanic ritual called "***The Consumption of Mary***" will include pouring ash, sulfur and blood on a statue of Our Lady.

With satanic invocations, a 'reverse' exorcism will be performed to 'cast the Holy Spirit' out of her. In reparation for these horrific blasphemies, His Eminence Raymond Cardinal Burke, the highest ranking American bishop in the Vatican will celebrate Mass and pray a Rosary on Monday in honor of the Assumption of the Glorious and Blessed Virgin Mary. Please join us for recitation of the Rosary here tomorrow at 9:10 AM and for Mass at 9:30 AM. If you are not able to join us tomorrow morning, at least join us in prayer throughout the day, and pray a Rosary for those committing this great sin.

When confronted with this particular Gospel text, I asked a priest friend of mine, "Jesus hits all of the intergenerational family feuds except one: Where are the fathers-in-law and the sons-in-law?" He replied rather quickly, "They're in their man-cave having a beer and watching the Big Game!"

The words of Jesus ring like an ominous prediction. The world IS ablaze right now. The pot of war and conflict in the Middle East – Pope Francis is calling it “World War Three in bits and pieces” – is boiling over. Scores of people – many innocent bystanders – are killed and hundreds are wounded. Businesses, churches, mosques, places of government are all ablaze. Anger and violent responses can be seen in this country on the streets of our inner cities, in some of our own homes, and among people calling themselves “Christian” and behaving like anything else BUT “Christian.” There are “jihad” religionists of every ideological stripe – among Christians and Jews and not just among Muslims.

In the time of Jeremiah, 600 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the City of Jerusalem and all of Israel were threatened by its neighbor, Babylon. When Jeremiah wisely suggests that the King Zedekiah surrender before a most likely invasion (which indeed happened), Jeremiah is labeled a traitor to his country and to his people. Those in religious and political authority persuade the king to torture Jeremiah and put him into a huge clay pot, partially filled with mud, and leave him for dead. If YOU'RE having a bad day, think of poor Jeremiah!

In the early 1910's the novelist Franz Kafka wrote in his journal, “A book should be an ice pick to break up the frozen sea within us.” That's kind of like what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel. Our faith should be an ice pick to break up the frozen soul of our culture, our society. Are you on fire with your faith? Prove it! Do something about it. Jesus is calling us to the “violence” of justice over complacency, holy zeal over indifference, unwelcomed prophetic speech over the status quo. Do we have the wisdom, the courage and the strength to challenge the status quo in our lives, knowing that it will lead to division?

Today's Second Reading reminds us that day-to-day living can be for us an endurance test in which the Christian virtues are severely examined. We know that pain and suffering come to all of us, whether we are good or bad, rich or poor.

One author, M. Scott Peck, in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, says: “Life is difficult.” Then he goes on to say, “Once we accept that life is difficult, it's

not so difficult.” It IS more difficult for those who think it shouldn’t be so.

A middle-aged man was pushing an older man in a wheelchair into their synagogue for their Sabbath service. As he was pushing the wheelchair, he himself suffered a stroke. How many people do we know who are the primary caregivers, sacrificing most of their life and comfort for another, only to take ill themselves or die before their loved one does? Once he recovered from his stroke, an effort that took several weeks, he said to his rabbi, “No good deed goes unpunished.”

A journalist interviewed two bricklayers at different locations of a job site. She asked the one man, “What do you do all day?” He said, “I’m just an underpaid, overworked bricklayer wasting my time piling bricks on top of one another.” The she went over to the other man and asked the same question. His response? “I’m the luckiest person in the world. I get to be part of great and important projects. I help turn single bricks into magnificent structures.”

It’s all about the attitude, isn’t it? We see in life what we want to see. If you want to find ugliness, you will find plenty of it. If you want to find fault with life, you will find plenty of it.

But the opposite is also true. Most days, I feel like I’m on top of the world as a priest and as a pastor; other days, I feel like saying, “move over, Jeremiah, and make some room for me!” What makes the difference?

Faith. That’s what brings you here every Sunday. You humble me and you inspire me by your presence here for Mass each week. I know some of your stories and the burdens that you carry that test your faith. Yet you still come.

We echo the words of the Psalmist in our Responsorial Psalm: “The Lord heard my cry. He drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp... He made firm my steps and he put a new song into my mouth, a hymn to our God... Many shall look on in awe and trust in the Lord.”

You look on in awe at the mystery that takes place when God’s Word is proclaimed and its message preached. You look on in awe at what happens at the altar when God Himself is called down on humble bread and wine to become Jesus Christ, real and present. A second grader, after making his First Holy

Communion, said to me, "Every time I go to Holy Communion, I can feel the grace of Jesus going up and down my body in my blood." When was the last time you and I felt that after having received Holy Communion?

Our Second Reading also reminds me of one of my most favorite images. Did you know that every time we gather for Mass in the Catholic Church, the whole Communion of Saints is with us? Imagine the Big House in Ann Arbor attached to the gathering area of this church. Imagine us walking through these church doors after Mass into the playing field of life, with hundreds of thousands of saints, and the souls of our faithful relatives who have gone before us cheering us on. You do not journey alone. Thousands are at your side and behind you.

We are indeed "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" cheering us on to persevere, to keep the faith, and to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

Households continue to be divided by the gospel today. Parents may commit themselves, while children wander. One spouse embraces the way, the other is skeptical, apathetic or even antagonistic. The household of Church itself – the larger Church of the world and the Domestic Church of the home -- is a cornucopia of passionate avowal, simple sincerity, hesitation and doubt, and half-hearted membership.

We're not all on the same page. In the matter of faith above all others, free will remains paramount. The fire is blazing. Not all will choose to be kindled by it. The choice to believe or not believe, to act or not to act is yours. AMEN!

[Readings: Rev. 11:19a; 12:1a-6a, 10 ab; Ps. 45; 1 Cor 15:20-27; Lk. 1:39-56]

Today, the 15th of August, Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a blasphemous Black Mass is scheduled to occur publicly at the Civic Center in Oklahoma City. Afterwards, another satanic blasphemy and sacrilege will be perpetrated against the Blessed Virgin Mary in the same place.

According to news reports, this satanic ritual called "*The Consumption of Mary*" will include pouring ash, sulfur and blood on a statue of Our Lady. With satanic invocations, a 'reverse' exorcism will be performed to 'cast the Holy Spirit' out of her. In reparation for these horrific blasphemies, His Eminence Raymond Cardinal Burke will be celebrating Holy Mass and praying a Rosary on Monday in honor of the Assumption of the Glorious and Blessed Virgin Mary. This the official message from Cardinal Burke:

*My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am outraged and most profoundly saddened by the news that a public sacrilegious Black Mass is scheduled to take place in Oklahoma City on the 15th of August, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I have also been informed that, after the horrible sacrilege of the Black Mass, a further blasphemy will be perpetrated directly against the Blessed Virgin Mary. All of this is being done with the official sanction of the legitimate authorities.*

*For this reason, let us turn to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, through the recitation of the Holy Rosary, to storm Heaven with our prayers to make reparation for these sins and blasphemies that further provoke God's just wrath upon our beloved Nation. It is the fundamental obligation of every faithful Catholic to stand up for the honor and glory of God and the honor of the Mother of God. In this critical hour, may we not fail to fulfill our obligation of love and devotion toward Our Lord and His heavenly mother. I ask and beseech each of you to unite with me on this day as I offer Holy Mass and pray a Holy Rosary in reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Let us also pray for the poor souls that are perpetrating these blasphemies.*

*Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke*



This is a banner year for our Franciscan Fathers, Brothers and Sisters. Last week, they marked 800 years of what has come to be known as the "Portiuncula Pardon." In July, 1216, St. Francis was praying for the forgiveness of all the sins of humanity in the little church of the Portiuncula, now encased by the Major Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels in Assisi. In great splendor Jesus and Mary appeared to St. Francis in the midst of a dazzling cloud surrounded by a multitude of radiant angels. Jesus said to him: "Francis you are very zealous for the good of souls. Ask me what you want for their salvation."

When he regained his courage he said: "Lord, I, a miserable sinner, beg You to concede an indulgence to all those who enter this church, who are truly contrite and have confessed their sins. And I beg Blessed Mary, your Mother, intercessor of mankind, that she intercede on behalf of this grace."

Our Lady at once began to beseech her Son on behalf of Francis. Jesus answered: "It is a very great thing that which you ask Me; but you are worthy of even greater things, and greater things you will have. So I accept your request, but I want you to go to my Vicar, to whom I have given the power to bind and loose in Heaven and on earth, to ask him on My behalf for this indulgence."

With one of his companions, Francis hastened to Pope Honorius III and, prostrating himself before the Holy Father, implored him to proclaim that everyone visiting the church and confessing their sins with a contrite heart would be as pure as they were after their baptism. The Pope granted this petition. This indulgence has been extended to all parish churches throughout the world.

The conditions to obtain the Plenary Indulgence of the Forgiveness of Assisi is (for oneself or for a departed soul) is: Sacramental Confession to be in God's grace (during eight days before or after today; Participation in the Holy Mass and Eucharist; and recitation of The Creed, the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be for the Pope's Intention. This may be done on August 2, August 5 or August 15, today's Feast of the Annunciation. After the homily, we will pray these prayers for the "Portiuncula Pardon." It may be done for yourself or for another.

Once upon a time, a young person asked an older person to explain the story of Adam and Eve. He couldn't get how Adam and Eve could be told and warned not to do something, but they did it anyway. Even more, how Adam could submit to Eve and eat of the forbidden fruit. Perhaps this modern story might help. A woman ran a red traffic light and crashed into a man's car. Both of their cars are demolished but amazingly neither of them was hurt.

After they crawled out of their cars, the woman said; "Wow, just look at our cars! There's nothing left, but fortunately we are unhurt. This must be a sign from God that we should meet and be friends and live together in peace for the rest of our days." The man replied, "I agree with you completely. This must be a sign from God!"

The woman continued, "And look at this, here's another miracle. My car is completely demolished, but my bottle of 75-year-old scotch didn't break. Surely God meant for us to drink this vintage delicacy and celebrate our good fortune." Then she handed the bottle to the man.

The man nods his head in agreement, opened it, drank half the bottle and then handed it back to the woman. The woman took the bottle, immediately put the cap back on, and handed it back to the man. The man asks, "Aren't you having any?" She replies, "Nah. I think I'll just wait for the police."

The story of Adam and Eve is a story of pride and humility. As we make our way along our spiritual journey, we often are confused between healthy pride and sinful pride, and between humility and humiliation. Healthy pride is called self-confidence; unhealthy pride is called egotistical. Humility is learning your place in God's eyes; humiliation is being less than you are called to be.

Parents sometimes are misguided in their comments to their children. One recent college doctoral student was told by his father, "I'm proud of you, son. I always knew you could do it." The son replied, "You never said that to me when I was growing up."

"If you knew I could do it, why did you always put me down and tell me that I would never succeed?" The father replied, "I did that to make you work

harder. My parents used to do the same thing to me.”

Again, the end did not justify the means. We can communicate the same message with different words and still obtain the desired effect. Instead of saying, “don’t squeeze that puppy so hard,” we can say, “You have to hold that puppy carefully.” Instead of saying, “Don’t do it like that!” we can say, “Here, let me show you how to do it.” A simple change of words, but the results are positive, healthy, and help build up self-esteem.

Now, in contrast to the things we promised we would never say to our kids, but did say it to them anyway, we have Mary in today’s Gospel saying things the right way. Her self-confidence is tempered with her humility, because the first thing she says gives credit where credit is due: to God. And because she knows where all good things come from, she magnifies or makes larger and more visible the presence of God within her.

Because of this, Pope Pius XII declared in 1950 these words: “The immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul to the glory of Heaven.” We don’t know if Mary died first and then went to Heaven, or if she was on the verge of death and then joined her Son in Heaven.

The Church Fathers are on both sides of the debate. Pope Pius XII simply said, “When the course of her earthly life was finished.” And this is only one of two teachings of the church which have been declared infallible. The other teaching was that of Pope Pius IX who almost 100 years earlier had defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. So from the first moment of her Immaculate Conception to her Assumption into Heaven, Mary is seen as truly full of grace. And the great hope of today’s feast is summarized in the preface for the Assumption: “Where she has gone, we hope to follow.” We will, if we work for what Mary worked for: love, justice, peace, humility and salvation. So? I close with these familiar words: Listen to your mama! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 66:18-21; Psalm 117; Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30]

Recently deceased Mother Angelica (May her soul rest in peace!) insisted that those who love us tell us the truth. Jesus loves us with a great bounty of truth, but we can be sure not everyone receives such love with gratitude. We've spent this year proclaiming a Jubilee Year of Mercy, widening the door of admittance to many who've been -- or perhaps felt -- uninvited and unwelcome.

This open Door of Mercy is received by the wounded as a sign of God's relentless compassion and care. It's also viewed by the some of us who are self-righteous as an indication that Church standards are at an all-time low, and that cheap grace is being given away at bargain-basement prices. And why not? The Great Sower sows the seed of faith with abandon on His own soil. It's His to scatter extravagantly and even to waste if that's His choice.

Yet today's Gospel message seems to go in another direction. The open Door of Mercy is replaced with the metaphor of a Narrow Gate, through which many will find the way impassable. What's the difference between an open door and a narrow gate? In a word, girth. Size. Dimensions.

Luke's Gospel pursues the theme that accumulating wealth, power, prestige, and even pious appearances acquires us nothing in the Bank of Heaven. Now comes the downbeat of that teaching: Not only does worldly advantage count for nothing useful, it's actually detrimental. It makes us too "big" to pass through the standards of Heaven. The untrimmed ego strives to enter Heaven in vain. Our riches and possessions belong to God; we are its stewards.

The next metaphor is even more devastating: that of the Locked Door! Once the door is barred, size doesn't matter at all. We can vow to go on a strict spiritual program at this point, but it's no use. The time for making the better choices has foreclosed. Even the Door of Mercy can't admit us if we've refused to seek it in the proper season, which is the season of the living, our time on earth.

Jesus tells us the truth in love, but not all want to hear this.

It's especially disconcerting to those who "ate and drank" in the company of the Lord -- a stunning reference to early Church members who thought that fidelity to the Table of the Lord was the be-all and end-all of Christian practice.

"Go to church, go to Heaven." What's that expression? Sitting in a church every Sunday doesn't make you a saint any more than sitting in a garage for an hour makes you a car!" They find themselves treated no better than "evildoers"! Even though they showed up routinely, the Lord treats them like strangers!

What's worse, as we hear in today's First Reading, folks from all points of the compass will find welcome through that same door: foreigners, the unclean, the patently unworthy, sitting at the table with patriarchs and prophets. Oh, how this truth would have shocked those around Jesus! And it still does. If we hope to sit at the Kingdom table, the time to get in shape for that moral passage is NOW!

In today's excerpt from the Letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that the GOOD NEWS is that ALL of us are sons and daughters of God. Every one of us. Having said that, there is a key word that doesn't seem to exist much anymore regarding siblings: Discipline. The word itself means to learn, often the hard way. To be a disciple means to learn the way, how to do something.

I cringe when I hear the next words of our Second Reading: "He scourges every child He acknowledges." Please don't take those words literally. I believe with all my heart that God never does anything evil to the ones He loves. He does not stand with a whip lashing out at all of us. That's not how MY God operates. Life gives us the lashes. Life gives us the problems. Sometimes other people do. Sometimes we bring evil upon ourselves by our own bad choices and actions. Then we have to live with the consequences of those bad choices.

Discipline does train us: the discipline of sports; the discipline of studies; the discipline of learning a new job; even the discipline of prayer. Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that only a few will be saved. Should I ask for a show of hands? How many of you really think you will make it to Heaven after you die?

I'm shooting for a long stint in Purgatory, before that happens.

Episcopal Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, one of my personal heroes, said this: "We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low." Which reminds of a quote by the singer popular in the 1980's named Bette Midler who sued a commercial company for using her music without her permission. She said, "I do have my standards. They may be low, but I do have them." I never thought I would reference God, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Bette Midler all in the same paragraph!

How does this jibe with what Jesus says? What it means is that simply knowing about Jesus is not enough. Would-be disciples are invited to a personal relationship with Him. His message is becoming more urgent: Turn away from your stubbornness and sin while you still have the chance.

Love or at least respect those whom you do not now love. Who is unwelcome in your heart? What will be your Christian response to them? Remember last week, we learned that even family members will become divided if they place God ahead of family. We may need to take a "holy break" from those relationships that are unhealthy, toxic or dysfunctional.

But we also need to remember that people who are hard to love or hard to accept are precisely those who will help make us saints. Why? Because as the saints have taught us, if we can love such people as these, we can love anybody! Then the Great Commandment of Jesus to love God by truly loving others and by truly loving oneself takes root in our hearts, in our lives and in our community.

I close with this meditation, a brief poem. The author is unknown:

"I dreamt death came the other night and Heaven's gate swung wide.

An angel with a halo bright ushered me inside.

And there to my astonishment stood folks I had judged and labeled  
as "quite unfit," "of little worth," and "spiritually disabled."

Indignant words rose to my lips but never were set free,  
for every face showed THEIR surprise -- Not one expected me!" AMEN!

[Readings: Sir. 3:17-18, 20, 28-29; Ps. 68; Heb. 12:18-19, 22-24a; Lk. 14:1, 7-14]

There is a country-western song by Mac Davis that ties into today's theme of humility in our three Scripture readings. Sing along with me if you know the words to "O Lord, It's Hard to be Humble."

"O, Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way.

I can't wait to look in a mirror, 'cause I get better looking each day.

To know me is to love me, I must be a heck of a man,

O, Lord, it's hard to be humble, but I'm doin' the best that I can!"

(That is another Fr. Nick "first!" Singing country western in a homily!)

We might have a misunderstanding about what genuine humility is. Too often this is misunderstood as being unassuming or being self-deprecating.

Neither of those are actually signs of humility. Humility comes as a result of a **grateful heart** and a **servant spirit**. If a person is not thankful, then they believe that all they have is a result of their own hard work, which is never the case. We are able to accomplish what we do because others are willing to work with us or have done so much before us. Humility starts with a **grateful heart**.

It is kind of like the running back in football who after scoring the touchdown only points to himself. He forgets the men who blocked the players on the other team that allowed him to score; or the person who graduates from school and is not thankful for the efforts of the teachers, administrators, workers at the school and donors who have given them their example of sacrifice.

Being mindful of the contribution of others, especially of God, keeps our perspective in the right place and makes us humble. The same can be said of a **servant spirit** as an attitude to life. Here too, a humble person is able to recognize that greatness comes from my ability to make others great around me rather than simply to make myself look great. Though I may accomplish greatness personally, my positive impact will only affect myself and will end with my death. When I impact the lives of others in a positive way, then the true power of my life is seen long after I have died. The focus on the benefit of others is a key element to true humility.

Sisters Margaret Held and Paula Merrill, both 68 years old were members of a religious community of women and were nurse practitioners who dedicated their lives to providing health care to people in the poorest county in the Mississippi. They were murdered earlier this week. They were noted for their ***grateful hearts*** and their ***servant spirit***. Please keep them and their killer, who turned himself in yesterday, in your prayers.

Once upon a time, a priest gave a parish mission in a wealthy suburb. The pastor arranged lodgings for him with a humble family on the outskirts of town. While glad to meet this remarkable family, the priest was intrigued. As the pastor explained: "At the close of the mission, I want you to acknowledge the hospitality of this family. They are the poorest in our parish, yet they were the only ones who approached me to ask if they could host you during the mission."

How frequently this story is repeated across the Church! Rarely is generosity offered in proportion to possessions. Instead, the most generous are often those with fewer resources. We give, not according to our means, but in response to our gratitude. Too often, the more we have, the more we credit ourselves with our hard work and resourcefulness. Every year, when the Knights of Columbus have their Tootsie Roll Drive, as they stand at intersections and sidewalks, they tell me that they are amazed that the more generous gifts come from the folks who are the poorly dressed and driving in broken down cars.

In a similar way, places of honor in community are often meted out, not according to those who deserve to be honored, but to those who insist on being noticed. In every gathering, there are some who insist on presiding at the table's head, and others who meekly assume the lowest place. You can't tell, from this self-selected pecking order, who's worthy of attention. Often, your best bet for rewarding conversation is to sit as far from the celebrated positions as possible.

Jesus sat at enough tables to know that folks who claim the best seats are normally consumed with themselves and are not inclined to receive anything offered to them. What's the point of such conversation? The self-congratulating don't need a messiah. They are quite capable of



saving themselves, or so they think. Perhaps Jesus secretly wished He could dine at night with the beggars, the outcasts, the sick, and the sinners he met along the way each day. Much like Pope Francis does during his pastoral visits around the world. Now, those conversations would be genuine, open, and revealing! Instead, Jesus, too often dines with the pious, the self-serving, the socially lauded.

At a recent funeral for one of our senior priests at Holy Cross Church in Marine City, I decided not to concelebrate, as it was one of those 95 degree days and the church had no air conditioning. So, instead of wearing the alb and stole, I wore my black suit and clergy collar, and sat with others who were sitting in the pews behind the concelebrating priests before the start of Mass.

Five minutes before Mass, I and the other suited priests were asked to move several pews back to the last pew in that section, as more concelebrants were arriving to sit in the front part of that section. I ended up sitting with non-vested senior priests and priests who were on administrative leave, wearing secular clothing. The conversation with them was definitely unique!

It's easy to throw a dinner party for people you like, admire, and enjoy. People who are like you and share your opinions, values, and style. Imagine hosting the homeless for a week, as we do with our annual Warming Center.

In the two years I have been here for this event, I marvel at the intelligence, thoughtfulness and genuine holiness of our guests.

Take a risk. Rearrange your table tonight or sometime this week. Who's going to sit at YOUR table? WHERE are they going to sit? Sing THEIR praises instead of your own. And be ready to grow in humility and faith. AMEN!