

[Wisdom 9:13-18b, Psalm 90; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33]

Do you have what it takes to be a disciple? Don't panic: You don't have to "hate" your family. Remember what I said a couple of weeks ago: The word "hate" which Jesus uses in the context of this Gospel translates as "to love less." First priority, requiring our greatest love and attention: God. How do we get to God? Through His Son, Jesus Christ. By making time and giving the effort to get to know Him, fall in love with Him and serve Him.

Second priority: your relationships. Love them less than you love God.

Frankly, it's awkward no matter when we read this teaching. I mean, how many of us really hate our families? Sure, certain family members get on our nerves once in a while. We have falling-outs from time to time for all sorts of reasons: political or religious differences, lifestyle choices, insensitive remarks made in the heat of an argument, as well as real injuries suffered at the hands of those who can hurt us deeply because we love and trust them the most.

But even when a spouse, parent, child, or other relative disappoints us terribly, the majority of the time we still don't find it in our hearts to hate them. Something in us still yearns to be reconciled and reconnected. There is no peace until the mending of bridges starts and the healing has a chance to begin. Even if it isn't possible to receive that person back into our lives again, we know we need the balm of divine forgiveness to close the wound that remains between them and us. Because, at the end of the day, no matter what that other person did or failed to do, we're still family, and that is the strongest bond in the world.

Third priority: your material and financial possessions. That means being ready to "renounce" your possessions. In classic spiritual language, it is called "detachment." You put your material possessions in proper priority.

Fourth priority: you! It's been said that we find out who we are, we learn what we are called to be, and we discover that in taking care of ourselves, in reaching out to our families and to those in need, and putting all of our financial and material possessions at the service of the Lord, we learn that God is there the whole time. Love God, love others, and love yourself. God is in the other.

Jesus is up against tribe-and-clan mentality, people who put blood ties ahead of any and every concern. Love, and avenge your people, and regard warily everyone else. Two thousand years later, this translates into a different language, but with the same bigotry and racism: You don't want to marry HIM; he's Italian. You don't want to date her, she's German. You're bringing home a goim, a shicksa? (a non-Jewish man or woman).

How can you be a Republican? How can you be a Democrat? You know what they say about Muslims... What do you mean they're not Catholic?

Brothers and sisters in Christ do not have the luxury of defining their loyalties so narrowly. So, of course, love everyone as a Son or Daughter of God, or as a Brother or Sister in Christ. Consider it your starting point for the love of all people to follow. Doing all of this just might be the Holy Cross that God is challenging us to pick up and to carry with His Beloved Son.

Perhaps we might even have to die on that Holy Cross as He did. But we know that this is not the end of the story.

Jesus does not teach hate and self-loathing. Jesus is commanding us to put ourselves and our relationships all at the disposal of the will of God. What does that mean? It means: how can I bring my family members and other relationships closer to God? How do I myself draw closer to God and to God's will for me and for my family?

That is a good starting point. Every morning, when we first awake, ask ourselves while standing, sitting or kneeling, "Lord, here I am. What is it You want me to do to be closer to you? What do you want me to do and to say to bring my loved ones closer to you?" Being a disciple of Jesus is no small or easy task. It will take standing apart from family ties. It will mean denying your very self. It will mean rejecting materialism. It may mean being rejected by others.

September 8 is traditionally observed as the Birthday of Mary, Mother of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus entrusted His Blessed Mother to us, making us all family, all related, all sons and daughters of God.

We hear in the Book of Wisdom, our First Reading today: "Who can know God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends?" The saints did and

still do. Some of our ancestors did. They gave bold witness and made bold choices and made bold proclamations in the name of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. This weekend, Pope Francis canonizes one of our contemporary women as two years ago, he canonized two men who are of our lifetime: Pope St. John XXIII and Pope St. John Paul 11. The holy woman who was a contemporary of theirs and ours is now called St. Teresa of Calcutta. Certainly these three saints didn't hate their families and DID have THEIR priorities right.

In her lifetime, Mother Teresa was an icon of God's tender mercy, radiating the light of God's love to so many, through the works of mercy, both material and spiritual. From heaven she continues to fulfil her mission as she "lights the light of those in darkness on earth." With her canonization, the Church presents her as a model and intercessor of those who, like her, "long to light the fire of love and peace throughout the world." She can be taken as a patron saint especially for those who are most in need of God's mercy.

By her example and through her intercession, may Mother Teresa inspire many to give their 'hearts to love and their hands to serve', starting with those closest to them. May we all continue to live and deepen our awareness of being in need of mercy and our willingness to extend mercy in our communities, in our families and in our service of the poor.

Commemorative holy cards of St. Teresa of Calcutta are in the back of church near the Sunday envelope offering baskets. Feel free to take one.

Like St. Teresa of Calcutta, let us pray for and fast for and actively work for peace -- peace in our world, peace in our families, peace in our hearts -- in this world and in the next. What a wonderful birthday present that would be Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Blessed Mother. Mary, Queen of Peace, Refuge of the Poor, pray for us sinners now, at our moment of need and at the hour of our death. AMEN! St. Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us! AMEN!

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

We have a guest homilist this morning, Archbishop Thomas Wenski. Archbishop Wenski is chairman of the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

In the annual Labor Day message from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Wenski says that today's "economic and political forces have led to increasingly lowered economic prospects for Americans without access to higher education, which is having a direct impact on family health and stability."

Linking the decline in good jobs to family woes, Archbishop Wenski said, "Over half of American parents between the ages of 26 and 31 now have children outside of a marriage, and research shows a major factor is the lack of middle-skill jobs -- careers by which someone can sustain a family above the poverty line without a college degree -- in regions with high income inequality."

"Divorce rates and the rate of single-parent households break down along similar educational and economic lines. "Financial concerns and breakdowns in family life can lead to a sense of hopelessness and despair. The Rust Belt region now appears to have the highest concentration in the nation of drug-related deaths, including from overdoses of heroin and prescription drugs." The suicide rate in Michigan due to job loss and chronic unemployment is increasing.

Archbishop Wenski quoted from Pope Francis' address to Congress during the pope's U.S. visit here last September: "I would like to call attention to those family members who are the most vulnerable, the young. For many of them, a future filled with countless possibilities beckons, yet so many others seem disoriented and aimless, trapped in a hopeless maze of violence, abuse and despair. Their problems are our problems. We cannot avoid them."

The pope added, "We live in a culture which pressures young people not to start a family, because they lack possibilities for the future. Yet this same culture presents others with so many options that they, too, are dissuaded from starting a family."

Archbishop Wenski said, "When our leaders ought to be calling us toward a vision of the common good that lifts the human spirit and seeks to soothe our tendencies toward fear, we find our insecurities exploited as a means to further partisan agendas. Our leaders must never use anxiety as a means to manipulate persons in desperate situations, or to pit one group of persons against another for political gain."

In touting the "sanctity of work," Archbishop Wenski said, "Dignified work is at the heart of our efforts because we draw insight into who we are as human beings from it." St. John Paul II, in his encyclical "*Laborem Exercens*" ("On Human Work"), "reminded us that human labor is an essential key to understanding our social relationships, vital to family formation and the building up of community according to our God-given dignity.

"As we engage with our neighbors and our communities, we quickly find ways to deepen solidarity in a broader way, and to act on the structures and policies that impact meaningful work and family stability. Simply put, we must advocate for jobs and wages that truly provide a dignified life for individuals and their families, and for working conditions that are safe and allow for a full flourishing of life outside of the workplace."

"Unions and worker associations, while imperfect, remain an essential part of the effort, and people of faith and goodwill can be powerful leaven to ensure that these groups, so important in society, continue to keep human dignity at the heart of their efforts." In 1954, 25% of workers were in unions; that number today is 11%. "Employers are called to respect the dignity of your workers through a just wage and working conditions that allow for a secure family life. Workers are expected to work an honest day's work for an honest day's pay.

"With time," the Archbishop concludes, "we will begin to restore a sense of hope and lasting change that places our economic and political systems at the service of the human person once more." Lord, "Prosper the work of our hands! Prosper the work of our hands!" AMEN.

[Readings: Exodus 32:7-14, Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 5:1-32]

Once in a while, as I am stopped in traffic, I will read the bumper sticker on the back of the car in front of me and get a chuckle. One says, "The Lord is coming... Look busy!" The other one, earthier, says, "Jesus is coming, and boy, is He ticked off!" The struggle between an angry God and a God of mercy and forgiveness is shown in today's readings.

Idolatry seems to be the unrepentant sin in the Old Testament. Consistently, God's people allow this cancer to grow to the point that God seems forced to intervene, like a scalpel-wielding surgeon, to cut out this deadly tumor. Today, we may think of idolatry as those little good-luck charms that bring good fortune to us and bad luck to others.

But idolatry can be more insidious than that. When we make other people or things "gods." The gods of gluttony and drink, the gods of pleasure and pornography, the gods of workaholism and that pet "baby" that is sitting in the garage. The gods of gossip and litigation. The god of toxic relationships. All of these can suck us into the sin of idolatry and suck the spiritual life out of us.

An angry God in our First Reading complains to Moses that the Israelites have "turned aside from the way I pointed out to them." Leaders of many faith traditions fear that some of the American people are being persuaded to turn away from the value of religious tolerance, especially when it comes to Muslims. This is a sensitive issue considering the dark fifteenth anniversary we recall this weekend: the largest terrorist attack on American soil when hijackers at four different locations killed over 3000 people on September 11, 2001.

Since that awful and tragic and traumatic day, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders have come together to denounce what they called the "derision, misinformation, and outright bigotry" aimed at American Muslims. "This is not America," said Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, the emeritus Roman Catholic archbishop of Washington, "America was not built on hate."

At a time when religion seems to be tearing people apart rather than uniting them, some religious leaders in Jerusalem, the home of Judaism,

Christianity and Islam, have been working to create a temporary interfaith gathering place where people of all faiths can come together to pray and sing in their own traditions alongside one another -- and even argue -- while learning about the faith traditions of other people.

The initiative "Amen -- a House of Prayer for All Believers" is the culmination of two years of work and study among religious leaders and their communities, with the joint study expanding and taking on more intensity over the past six months. They have no illusions that their initiative will create a "revolution." The joint house of prayer is just one tiny step, but if they touch the heart of even one person who may not have otherwise come together in prayer or discussion with another of a different religion, then they will have succeeded.

Father Rafic, one of the founders, said. "But it is better to be doing something than nothing. We have to do something humble, and we can't know what it will bring, but I think God is there, and He will do His part, and we will do ours. This does not belong to us; it is bigger than us." Can we do the same in Manhattan, or in Michigan, where the largest concentration of Muslims lives?

In our First Reading, when we hear that God wants to unleash His divine wrath to blaze up and consume the people, more than likely it is MOSES who is upset and God Who is observing the hissy fit! When the Lord "relents" it could be MOSES who realizes that violence and hate are not the answer to sinful situations. Moses challenges God not to renege on His promises. God relents because it is in God's nature to do so.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul uses the experiences of his own life to persuade others to a more faithful life in Christ. He didn't start out right. He started out arresting, jailing, bullying, persecuting and even killing those former Jews who were beginning to follow a new "Way." The Way of Christianity. Hiding nothing, St. Paul freely admits his past, and expresses his gratitude that God chose him of all people to become one of His second-generation apostles.

Or, as St. Paul humbly calls himself, a "Super Apostle!" And in today's reading, the worst of all sinners, treated with mercy by Jesus Christ.

The lesson to learn here is that even in those circumstances in our lives that can have us hiding in shame, we can find God's grace at work. And from this insight comes a great truth: Jesus came to save people like him, people like us. Sinners can be so mired in the muck of their lives that they are hopelessly stuck and need a savior to extract them from the mess of their own making. You and I need that Savior as much as St. Paul did.

He is saying, "Look at the shameful, immoral and sinful things I did. Yet God chose ME to bring His Good News to the nations. If God could show mercy to one like me, why would you even question that He could be merciful to YOU?"

Sometimes we even need to forgive not only ourselves, but God Himself. Terrible things happen in our human lives, and that is part of being human. But we unfortunately and unfairly blame God, spending years with unforgiveness in our hearts. As with any anger or resentment, if we carry it around with us long enough, it only eats us up inside, even leading to heart attacks. It drags us down and destroys our peace of mind. We have to learn to be patient with God as God is patient with us.

Someone once said that our children, regardless of their age, are God's punishment for us for being made in His image and likeness and not listening to Him or following His ways. Think about it. If we ever complain about our children, we need only look in a mirror and think of what God could be thinking and saying about us!

Then we come to the Gospel. I could spend an hour on this alone. The heads of the audience are spinning, listening to Jesus tell this parable. Here is what THEY would like to hear. "Dad, I wish you were dead. Give me the money I would normally get after you kick the bucket." The father would say "Don't you DARE speak to your father in this way! You have insulted me and my house. You are no longer my son. Get out of my house and never come back!" The older brother, the reliable son would say to his sibling: "Nanny, nanny, nanny!"

When the young son returns, the older brother can't wait to tell Dad. "Guess who's here, looking as filthy as a pig?" Dad remains in his "chair throne" – you know, his Archie Bunker chair – and says to his younger son, "You're

pathetic. Kneel, kiss my feet, and beg forgiveness. After that, go and take your rightful place with the lower ranked servants who care for the pigs!”

Now you know why the audience’s heads are spinning. The father’s response to the return of the younger son is what nobody would expect. First, he gives his son his inheritance. Next, when the son returns, he doesn’t sit stubbornly in his Archie Bunker chair. He leaps out of it and runs **DOWN THE ROAD!** Could the father have been looking out for his son every night he was gone and going to bed with a broken heart? Perhaps. We learn here that our God meets us where we are. God loves us where we are. God does not expect perfection, before we are lavished with God’s generous forgiveness and reconciliation.

We often think of repentance as absolute, of turning away from our bad habits and actions as being necessary **BEFORE** God forgives us. How many priests have warned us about imperfect contrition during Confession? Don’t I have to have it all together before I can expect God to forgive me, or for me to forgive myself? We take upon ourselves God’s job, and that could be the greatest sin of all. The Dominican Sisters at Holy Name School in Detroit taught me the Act of Contrition that ends: “I firmly resolve... to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.” Many years later, the IHM Sisters at Holy Cross in Marine City taught me this ending: “I firmly resolve... to do penance, to confess my sins, and to amend my life.” Which seems the more likely for us to do?

The call to repentance is not that we are to be perfect and sinless before God can love us. It is the realization that we are precious in God’s eyes right now. We also realize that all are offered God’s forgiveness, but that not all embrace it. You and I can choose to come home, or to stay in the far country. You simply have to say “Yes” to the God Who has found you, Who has brought you home and Who, through this Eucharist, gives us all new life. **AMEN!**

[Readings: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13]

“Beloved: First of all, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity.” (1 Tim 2:1-2)

It seems that at no time in our history as a nation has there been such a great need for “supplications, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings,” right? Two of our most cherished rights – the right to life and the right of religious freedom – are being eroded, sliced and diced.

I wonder what our Founding Fathers and Mothers would have to say if they could see what our political and social culture have become.

A recent report from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) report, "Peaceful Coexistence: Reconciling Nondiscrimination Principles with Civil Liberties," is a shocking example of the war against religious freedom in America. One critic calls it "a shameful anti-American and anti-God document that trashes religious freedom." (Mat Staver, Founder and Chairman of Liberty Counsel.)

The report says that the words "religious freedom" and "religious liberty" have become merely code words for intolerance, Christian supremacy, racism, sexism, homophobia, and Islamophobia.

The focus of the "Peaceful Coexistence" report states that granting religious exemptions to nondiscrimination laws "significantly infringes" on the civil rights of those claiming civil rights protections on the basis of "race, color, national origin, sex, disability status, sexual orientation and gender identity." The report calls for laws that eliminate exemptions or accommodation for religious convictions. Two members of the Commission dissented from the report. Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, responded to the statement. It is called, **Faith and the Full Promise of America.**

Archbishop Lori writes “For the current Chairman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, religious liberty is reduced to ‘nothing except

hypocrisy,' and religion is being used as a 'weapon... by those seeking to deny others equality." He makes the shocking suggestion that Catholic, evangelical, orthodox Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim communities are comparable to fringe segregationists from the civil rights era. These statements... are reckless.

"People of faith have often been the ones to carry the full promise of America to the most forgotten peripheries when other segments of society judged it too costly. Men and women of faith were many in number during the most powerful marches of the civil rights era. Can we imagine the civil rights movement without Rev. Martin Luther King, Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel? In places like St. Louis, Catholic schools were integrated seven years before the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Jesus taught us to serve and not to count the cost.

"Today, Catholic priests, religious and laity can be found walking the neighborhood streets of our most struggling communities in places abandoned by a 'throwaway culture' that has too often determined that quick profits matter more than communities. We are there offering education, health care, social services, and hope, working to serve as the "field hospital" Pope Francis has called us to be.

"We do not seek to impose our morality on anyone, but neither can we sacrifice it in our own lives and work. The vast majority of those who speak up for religious liberty are merely asking for the freedom to serve others as our faith asks of us. We ask that the work of our institutions be carried out by people who believe in our mission and respect our Christian witness.

(Parenthetically, there is legal action underway to force churches to have bathroom facilities for transgendered people at social functions or risk having those functions – like pancake breakfasts and pasta dinners – forbidden!) Archbishop Lori concludes: "In a pluralistic society, there will be institutions with views at odds with popular opinion...

"We respect those who disagree with what we teach. Can they respect us? We advocate for the dignity of all persons, a dignity that includes a life free from violence and persecution and that includes fair access to good jobs and

safe housing. People of faith are a source of American strength. An inclusive and religiously diverse society should make room for them.” Looks like our government is now at war with organized religion! Like Pope Francis said, we are in World War Three, only in small doses.

Our First Reading and our Gospel today speak about people who con others with their words and actions. Amos says the same thing about his world 2,900 years ago. He judges the political and religious leaders of his day and warns of the collapse of the Northern Kingdom of Israel because of inward corruption and outward military attack. He condemns them for enjoying a wealthy and comfortable life at the expense of the general public, and for the neglect and abuse of the poor. Jesus tells a parable today about a man whose ethics were certainly out of whack, but his sense of survival was kicking in at full speed. He was taking a risk, of course the risk that his boss would have him thrown in jail. That’s what could have happened. But the amount he cut off on the debtor’s bills was HIS commission, not his boss’s! So the boss calls him clever.

This weekend, we commission and bless our catechists on this annual Catechetical Sunday. We thank them for taking the risk to share their faith with others in the parish. We bless our parents, grandparents and guardians who are called to be the first and best teachers of the Catholic Faith for their children. And we accept the promises made by our Confirmation candidates to grow and learn their Catholic Faith and to put it into practice for the rest of their lives.

One commentator suggests that Catechetical Sunday should be elevated to a solemnity. The color of today’s vestments would be red, because religion teachers are the unsung martyrs of the church. Pope John XXIII understood this when he advised the young man who insisted he wanted to sacrifice his life for the Gospel: The pope said, “Don’t be a martyr. Be a teacher. It’s much harder.”

May we never tire of learning, teaching and proclaiming our Catholic faith!

[Readings: Amos 6:1a. 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31]

One comic strip that I am particularly fond of is Garfield the Cat. There is a great humor in those sarcastic witticisms of his. I like his take on depression. It is a four-panel cartoon, which only has him resting on his arms, looking out to the viewer. In the first panel, he sighs and says, "I'm down." Second panel: "I'm really down." Third panel, "Down, down, down." Fourth panel: "Down doobie-doo down down..." (from the song "*Breaking Up is Hard to Do*").

A second strip points to our Gospel today. One cold winter night, Garfield is sitting on the living room couch, looking out the window. He sees Odie the Dog peering through the window, nose pressed against the glass, scratching to get in. Garfield thinks to himself: "This is horrible. Here I am in the comfort of a warm house, well fed, and there is Odie outside begging to get in, cold and hungry. I can't stand it anymore. I just can't stand it. I've got to do something." So he goes over to the window...and closes the curtains.

Rather than dealing with the poor, some of us have simply chosen to close the curtains. All of the rich people in today's readings lose their futures not through their riches, but by the lack of concern for others less fortunate, which ultimately results in lack of concern for their own eternal fate. Where can YOU be more attentive to others, especially those most in need now, before it's too late?

"Charity begins at home," the saying goes. That's also where it ends, for folks who draw the circle of responsibility with a short radius. Some of us terminate our focus of concern on only our own. Others may extend it briefly to include elder relatives, close personal friends, or grandchildren who are in financial need. For those with a cultivated sense of community, generosity might be extended through the neighborhood, parish, village, or tribe. We reach out very generously here at St. Martin's to the poor. Thank you all for that. And for being an example to others of generous stewardship.

In this regard, the rich man at his sumptuous dinner didn't owe poor Lazarus a thing. By Jewish law, it was Lazarus' own relatives who should have been seeing to the needs of this misfortunate fellow.

Lazarus was like that homeless person rattling his Styrofoam cup at us for our spare change as we pass them by or are waiting at a red light.

Weren't there agencies to which he could appeal? Or like that bloated little girl in the magazine photos: Her own government should do better by her, not ours. Those refugees streaming across Europe may well be victims of bad politics, warfare, economic mismanagement, or bigotry. Maybe all of the above. But how does any of that imply that their dire plight is ours to solve?

Most of us like to find ways like these to wash our hands of the suffering that lies beyond our realm of perceived responsibility. The rich man in the story is no different. The rich man knew Lazarus by name, which makes his sin even greater as he chose to walk by him, walk over him, and ignore him as he went back and forth from home.

He is arrogant in life, but even more so in death as he dares to order around both Father Abraham AND Lazarus in the next world! What cheek! All too soon, the rich man will learn to his dismay that Father Abraham is the father of Lazarus as well.

How far is our love and compassion obliged to go? More to the point: How far is our obligation to *do something* about human suffering expected to go?

St. Paul writes to Timothy: pursue righteousness, patience and gentleness. Not only with the folks we know, but with the folks we don't know.

A common penance I give to people who judge, people who discriminate, or people who confess their bigotry is this simple reflection and request: Lord, let me them through YOUR eyes, as You see them.

Jesus takes down our walls of bias brick by brick with teachings about loving enemies, blessing those who curse us, returning good for evil, and forgiveness for injury. When Jesus forgives his murderers from the cross, there's nowhere to hide from the truth: We can't wash our hands of anyone. Charity may begin at home, but it can't stay there.

Our humanity makes us one. Our humanity gives us dignity. Our humanity gives us the right to a voice. Together we seek the common good: closing the

great chasm between Lazarus and us. Here, in this world, while we still have the time to do it before we die.

A Sunday school teacher told his class today's story about the rich man and Lazarus. He pointed out how one man went to hell and the other man went to heaven. He also pointed out how rich one man was and how poor the other man was.

After the teacher taught his lesson he said to the class, "Now which would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus?" One clever boy raised his hand and said, "Well, I'd like to be the rich man while I'm alive, and Lazarus when I'm dead!" Whatever decision you make today, when you die, you will live with its consequences for all eternity.

Choose wisely, choose well, and open those curtains. AMEN!

[Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Psalm 95; 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14;6:11-16; Luke 17:5-10]

“How long, O Lord? I cry for help, but you do not listen! I cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not intervene. Destruction and violence are before me.”

Who is the speaker in today’s First Reading? A parent whose child is dying of cancer? A wife awaiting the return of her husband from a fourth military deployment? An elderly person who keeps reading about school or workplace shootings? A young person who is afraid that the next terrorist act is just around the corner? The prophet Habakkuk wrestles with the questions of violence and injustice of his time as we lament ours.

Why does evil occur right before God’s eyes? Why does God not prevent or at least erase the evil done? If God cannot do anything about it, Habakkuk says, spare us who have to look at it!

Later, when God responds to the prophet’s questions, it is not with answers or solutions. It’s with a promise. A promise of deliverance and restitution. Six times after today’s First Reading excerpt, God promises that the vision will be fulfilled. But it will take faith and patience to reach that day. God encourages us to wait in faith.

In our Second Reading, St. Paul exhorts the young bishop Timothy and his people to keep the faith in the face of difficulty. Note that once again, St. Paul writes these words while sitting in a dungeon in a prison. Only the endurance of suffering can embolden us to the point of inviting others to embrace it. What circumstances in YOUR life could give you that audacity? What trials have helped you grow in patience and in faith?

How different would your faith be if simply arriving at Mass this morning, simply being in this church for Mass, could cost you your life? That is the price our Christian brothers and sisters are paying in the Middle East, in India and in Africa. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity in the United States estimates that in the last decade, 100,000 Christians died for simply being Christian.

In their homes, in their schools, in their hospitals, and in their churches.

That's eleven Christians per hour. Violence. Destruction. Discord.

According to the International Society for Human Rights in Frankfurt, Germany, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed not against Muslims, not against Jews, but against Christians. How do we react to those numbers, that reality?

It seems that our own country no longer defends us and our religious freedom; we are placed in the same situations as our Christian, Catholic brothers and sisters in the Middle East, India and Africa. Only we are not being attacked with bombs and bullets; we are being attacked from within by anti-religious government executive orders, legislation and judicial decisions.

We can become frustrated, apathetic and numb to all of this sin, this evil. We also realize that our nation one day will be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable. Evil wins when good people do nothing. What CAN we do?

The month of October, in addition to being the month dedicated to the Most Holy Rosary, is also Respect Life Month. We are invited to pray the Rosary daily. This is where we start. We pray for our country. Next, we are challenged to reflect upon what the Catholic Church calls the "five moral non-negotiables": abortion, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, human cloning, and homosexual unions. Learn why the Church forbids these for moral reasons.

There is also to consider this month, especially as we prepare for Election Day in November, the seven moral principles developed by the United States Council of Catholic Bishops: human life and dignity; marriage, children and families; religious freedom; the preferential option for the poor; health care; immigration, migration and refugees; and education. By extension, it also includes capital punishment, militarism, social injustice and economic injustice. We will be making available to you approved printed materials to help us learn.

Folks, we have about five weeks to get educated, to challenge ourselves to develop a well-formed Catholic conscience, and to vote accordingly.

The very first time when I was preparing to vote at the age of 18, I asked my parents for advice. For them, it was simple: vote for anyone with a Polish last name! Now that may have been *ethnic*, but it wasn't *ethical*! You need to

know where the candidate, even with an ethnic last name, stands on the above five non-negotiables and seven moral principles.

St. Paul tells Timothy, and he says to US: Stir into flame the gift of God. God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and self-control. So do not be ashamed of your testimony as a voting Catholic with a well-formed and informed conscience.

And we'll say, as the servants in today's Gospel parable do, "No big deal: we obey because that's our job." It's also, we might add, our joy and our pleasure. AMEN!

[Readings: 2 Kings 5:14-17; Psalm 981; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19]

This Gospel passage always reminds me of one of the first homilies I ever gave in my ordained ministry. I was still a transitional deacon at St. Mary Our Lady of the Snows Parish in Milford. This was probably my third Sunday homily ever given, in October of 1981. You have to know the commercial jingle for Dr. Pepper which was popular at that time to understand the punchline of this story. Trying to be a little dramatic, during my homily on today's Gospel, I pointed at various spots in the congregation and shouted, "YOU'RE a leper! YOU'RE a leper! YOU'RE a leper!" At the end of Mass, the parish choir filed out of church and sang to me, "He's a leper, she's a leper, you should be a leper, too!"

One of the many delights I enjoy about children is how they respond when I give them something. There is a momentary pause of silence, and then I hear from the grown-up who is with them say – say it with me -- "What do you say?" Then the little one would say, "Thank you!"

Little Sarah was raised well by her parents. When she was two years old, she was extremely active. One day Sarah ran into the kitchen in search of a mid-afternoon snack. Hurriedly, she said to her mother: "Banana, Momma, Banana!"

Jodi, her mother, handed her a banana. Sarah quickly grabbed the banana and turned to rush back out of the kitchen. But before she took very many steps, her mother said: "Sarah, come back. What do you say?" Sarah screeched to a halt, turned back around and said: "Please! Thank You! You're Welcome! God Bless You! And I Love You, Mommy!" Sarah covered all her bases! The only words Sarah's mother was looking for were "Thank you."

Why did only one man cleansed from leprosy return to thank Jesus? Someone has made a list of nine suggested reasons why the nine did not return: One waited to see if the cure was real. One waited to see if it would last. One said he would see Jesus later. One decided that he had never had leprosy in the first place. One said he would have gotten well anyway. One gave the glory to the priests. One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything." One said, "Any rabbi could have done it." One said, "I was already much improved."

Naaman, the main character in today's First Reading, is the equivalent of a four-star general. He also had a skin condition which some thought was leprosy. Elijah the prophet tells Naaman to bathe seven times – the perfect number of times – in the Jordan River in order to be healed. Naaman is offended, because he could have saved himself a long trip to Judah and bathed in the much better waters of his homeland, Syria. But he humbles himself and does what Elijah tells him to do. The results are found in today's words in our First Reading. Naaman was looking for healing; he got that and more: faith.

St. Paul reminds us in our Second Reading that God's Word will not be silenced, regardless of how bad the messenger or the mediator of the Word is, or how badly they would be treated. Despite his own being chained in prison, God's Word would not be chained for the second and third generation of Christian believers. To profess your Christian faith in the first three centuries of the Church's existence meant persecution, imprisonment and probably death.

Some of the words in our Second Reading are believed to be words of the most ancient liturgy known to us. We sang some of those words in our Opening Hymn: "Keep in Mind." The words of that hymn are not sappy and syrupy sweet. They are words of deep faith and a careful warning: If we deny Jesus Christ, He will deny us. If we are unfaithful, Jesus Christ will still remain faithful, pursuing us like a relentless hound looking for his owner.

These words bring up the boldness with which we preach the Gospel in mission territory, a good prelude for the upcoming observance of World Mission Sunday in a couple of weeks. We offer our prayers and our financial support for our brothers and sisters in mission territory. One pastor put this message over each of his church exits. Another pastor put a different message: "Judas left Mass early, too." But the pastor I am referring to has this on his message: "You are now entering mission territory."

Isn't that amazing? The moment you leave this holy place, you are entering mission territory. In your community. In your home. In your school. In your workplace. At the shopping center. You are now entering mission territory.

We do not undertake this mission alone. We are armed by God, by the Church, by the Sacraments. By the teachings of our Church.

Just before takeoff on an airplane flight, the stewardess reminded a much younger champion boxer Mohammed Ali to fasten his seatbelt. Ali protested to her: "Superman don't need no seatbelt! The stewardess replied sharply, "Superman don't need no airplane either!" Ali smiled and then fastened his seat belt. Arrogance sometimes is an invitation to a surprise act of humility, or in this case, humiliation. The lesson here is, we cannot fly solo.

We can't make it on our own. There is no Superman. So we better fasten our seatbelts. And one of the ways to do it is to practice gratitude.

We start with saying "thank you." I start every morning by saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord!" I say "thank you" seven times, the perfect number. Like Naaman washing seven times in the Jordan River.

Next, listen to and watch for those moments that happen throughout the day, where you can say "thank you." The big and small moments of daily life.

A wise woman recently said to me: What if *tomorrow* you woke up with only the things you thanked Jesus for *today*?

So... What do we say to Jesus? "Thank You!" AMEN!

[Exodus 17:8-13; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Luke 18:1-8]

There are so many things in this life that we just don't understand... that we just can't comprehend. For example, we don't really understand disease. Why is a youngster perfectly healthy for 13 years of his life... and then suddenly just happens to be in a place where he suddenly encounters some germ or bacteria that invades his body and destroys it?

And we don't understand accidents. They are so random and indiscriminate. You start out a day that is like any other day... and then something happens in a matter of seconds... and life is forever different. You can never go back beyond that accident. On and on we could go with our list... of things we don't really understand.

-- Why is there so much pain in our world? -- Why do good people suffer?

-- Why do we hurt one another? -- Why can't people get along?

-- And why do some of the best prayers seem to go unanswered?

All of these difficult questions prompt us to raise yet another crucial question: What can we count on from God? When we face the troubles of the world, the heartaches of life, and the tough challenges of this existence, what can we count on from God? This parable in today's Gospel from Luke 18 points us toward an answer. It involves two people: an unjust, arrogant judge and a humble but persistent woman. He gives into her not only because she is persistent, not even because she might hit him, but because it is the right thing to do. Justice.

Jesus is not suggesting that God is like that judge. Jesus is not comparing them; he is contrasting them. This is a "How Much More" parable. Jesus was saying: If a selfish arrogant, unfeeling, unjust judge can help you if you ask, then how much more can God who loves you intensely help you when you ask? This parable means be patient, don't lose heart, don't give up, keep on trusting, because you can count on God... and God will come through for you.

His answer will be one of the following and it may not be the same as ours or the one answer you might be thinking of or expect. God will say: Yes. No. Not yet. No, because I have something better in mind for you.

Although God often seems way too slow, whether it takes months or years, (and it often does) before your problem gets resolved, Jesus is in fact at your side immediately delivering you from despair, in the very moment you cry out to Him. But, Jesus asks, will He find faith? Like Moses in the face of battle, the strength of God helps us to keep our arms raised in victory and triumph. And sometimes that strength of God comes from one another. Like Aaron and Hur supporting the arms of Moses, we need to support one another from time to time.

That is what you folks do best for me and for each other. We support one another with our love, our prayer and our affirmation. That's why we're here.

Are you still feeling miserable after calling out to God for help? Jesus is still at your side begging for your trust. Are you frustrated because God isn't removing the obstacles you're facing? Jesus wants you to follow Him in a direction that's different than where you think you should go. We can still experience God's victory even while the injustice continues.

If you are being bullied in school, God knows about it and God hates it. If you are being harassed in the workplace, for any reason, God hates it. If you are being taken advantage of -- or if you are taking unfair advantage of someone else -- there will be a day of reckoning and judgment. If there is anyone anywhere praying for God to intervene and put an end to their oppression, eventually that prayer will be heard and that which is wrong will be set right.

While you and I are waiting for God to bring in a perfect and just society, you and I are God's answer to the injustice in our world. That's what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus. It's not a comfortable position to be in. It's not popular. But it is Christ's way. As St. Paul says to St. Timothy, "remain faithful to what you have learned and believed... whether it is convenient or inconvenient."

When former Vice President Al Gore starred in the documentary ***An Inconvenient Truth*** in 2006, experts crawled out of the woodwork to debate the arguments Gore presented about the gravity of climate change and our role in it. I like the title; it speaks of many life experiences: an inconvenient truth.

It's lousy to embrace a truth we don't want to hear. No one wants to get wind that their kid is doing poorly in school, their spouse is unhappy, their chosen

profession is about to be replaced by a robot. It's rotten to suspect the world's remaining superpower may be losing its exceptionalism. It's tough to come to the conclusion that someone we love has done something terribly wrong, whether that someone is our parent, our country, or our Church.

Inconvenient truths are part of life. The first wrinkle shows up in the bathroom mirror, and before you know it, things are growing all over you that didn't used to be there. Hair goes grey or goes away altogether. The belly protrudes. The doctor says you can't eat the one thing you love anymore. Joints ache and the pain turns out to be permanent. Loved ones you thought would be there always age and die, rarely visit or simply disappear.

So when Saint Paul tells Timothy to expect and accept the inconvenience of the Gospel, it should be no surprise. We're to persist in faith and conviction and right action whether it happens to suit our plans or is whether it is extremely uncomfortable to do so. Sometimes it's easy to come to church and sometimes it's hard. Sometimes we feel like praying and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we feel passionate about our spouses, our families, our work, and sometimes they all just seem to be commitments we're obliged to fulfill. Sometimes we want to share our resources generously with the poor. And at other times we want to spend our money on that one thing we don't need but really, really want.

Paul advises Timothy, a new church leader who will soon replace Paul's whole generation of governance, to persist in doing the right thing despite how he feels in a given moment. Emotions are one thing; dedication is another. Feelings come and go but we're free to go higher in our decision-making.

Is faith inconvenient? You bet it is. So, the Question of the Day is: Are you going to be a Catholic of commitment, or a Catholic of convenience? Choose well. Choose wisely. AMEN!

[Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; Psalm 34; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14]

A Pharisee and a tax collector go into the Temple to pray... Sounds like the set up for a joke, right? A priest, a rabbi and a minister walk into a pub and the bartender says, "What is this, a joke?" [Delayed pity laughter followed.]

I'm reminded of a performance put on by two Mennonite actors at my last parish. One portrayed an Old Testament figure, and the other a New Testament figure. Following the performance, at about 9:30 PM on a Saturday night, I had to provide them with dinner at a local restaurant. Then, by about 11 PM, it was on to a recently-built motel for their lodgings which I had arranged by phone. It was a new, clean motel, maybe six months old, and I had never been inside of it.

When we approached the motel entrance, I turned to the two men and said, "A priest and two Mennonites enter a motel..." They asked if they could put that on their blog the next morning.

When we got to the registration desk, the young, perky blonde woman, about in her early twenties, shouted, "Fr. Nick! It's so good to see you again!"

Now, it was kind of her to greet me with such enthusiasm, but the tone of her greeting was such that I thought her next line would be, "The usual room?" Judging by the look on the faces of the two Mennonite men, they were thinking the same thing!

I asked the woman, "How do we know each other?" She said, "You were the priest when I was confirmed in the Ninth Grade!" We hadn't seen each other since then. I was off the hook, and the Mennonites went to their room!

Back to the Pharisee and the tax collector walking into the Temple. The formula would be perfect if the Pharisee and the tax collector had both gone into a bar. But of course a Pharisee would never drink or dine in the same place as a tax collector. Just about the only place these two might meet is on the grounds of the Temple. In fact they don't meet, in any sense of the word. The Pharisee marches up front and begins his sublime self-congratulation performed for God's benefit -- otherwise known as *his* prayer. To himself!

The tax collector stands at a distance, not eligible to enter beyond the outermost court because of his line of work, and offers his confession -- otherwise known as *his* prayer. From far off the tax collector's mumbled words are received gladly in heaven, while the proud announcement of the Pharisee leaves him unjustified in the eyes of God. What happened?

The wise teacher Ben Sirach explains the matter. Living in Jerusalem a century or so before Jesus, Sirach taught young men the essentials of pious living, and he affirms what holy teachers have been saying since the writing of Psalm 34 which we sang as our responsorial refrain: "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." God listens to the humble because, frankly, they're the only ones who listen to God. "The one who serves God willingly is heard!"

You can't have a conversation with someone who does all the talking. While the Pharisee behaves as if he were standing in front of a mirror, engaging in self-promotion, the tax collector in the far corner of the Temple mount is actually the one in dialogue with God. We know this because he knows enough to know he's a sinner, and not only because of his profession, but because he's a human being. It is the best and only way to come to prayer: in the spirit of humility. We are dust, *humus*, humans who come from the soil. If we know who God is -- all-powerful, all-generous, all-loving, and all-merciful -- then we must know who we are: in desperate need of all of the above!

Thirty-four years ago, I selected today's Second Reading as the Second Reading for my own funeral liturgy, whenever that will take place: "I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith." Between now and when I die, I now have to live up to those words! I also have recommended this reading at funerals I have celebrated here at St. Martin's as a testimonial to the many witnesses of faith we have in this community. How many of them fought the good fight and have finished the race while keeping the faith?

So, St. Paul realizing in his captivity as a prisoner in Rome, speaks these tender words to his protégé, the young St. Timothy that the ending of his ministry, much like the beginning of his ministry, rests on the mercy and the grace of God. The difference between St. Paul's bragging and the Pharisee's bragging is great.

St. Paul realizes that any greatness and achievements in his ministry is because of God's grace and will welling up in him and in his ministry; the Pharisee was relying only on his own wits and counting his own accomplishments.

Today's Gospel parable tells us that God knows us as we really are. The parable tells us that God accepts us as we are. Yet God is not angry with us.

For even though God ACCEPTS us as we are, He never LEAVES us as we are. We are always encouraged and challenged to move beyond what we are and where we are; where we have been, to something even better. This requires of us a healthy self-awareness and a healthy pride about ourselves.

Think of those who are less active spiritually or religiously than you. Those people of whom you say "Thank God I am not like them!" Do we grieve for them because of their sins and their possible spiritual blindness? Do we do anything to help them grow closer to Christ? And, perhaps most importantly, do they experience Jesus every time they encounter us?

One man condemns himself by his pride and another is rescued because of his humility. Let's hold close to the prayer that saves: "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." AMEN!

[Wisdom 11:22-12:2; Psalm 145; 2 Thess. 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10]

In today's well-known Gospel from Luke, we need to recognize the touch of humor and personal call within it. Many times in the Scripture, we see Jesus passing by or passing through a certain place, and crowds gathering.

In the town of Jericho, Jesus finds a curious little fellow of small stature named Zacchaeus, literally up a tree. Zacchaeus is a figure of contrasts. Though he is a person "short in stature," he rises above others. Though he is an Israelite and "a chief tax collector," he is an outsider among his people. Though pursuing an "unclean" profession, he is nonetheless the "clean one" (the meaning of the name *Zacchaeus*). In a crowd of grumblers, he voices his faith. Though wealthy, he gives half his money away.

Zacchaeus doesn't really know Jesus, but is clearly in search of Him. Was it curiosity or something deeper? When Jesus takes notice of Zacchaeus and offers His own hospitality to him, this short, clever fellow responds and accepts Jesus, changes his life and comes to experience wholeness and saving grace right in his own home. Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Today I must stay in your house." Jesus says the very same thing to you and to me. Jesus wants to take up residence in our "house," the home of our hearts.

Jesus likewise constantly passes through our lives day by day in one form or another. Will we recognize His presence? Will we unhesitatingly invite Him into the homes of our hearts? Today's Gospel from Luke 19 in a way mirrors what we read in Revelation 3:20: "Here I stand knocking at the door. If anyone hears Me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and sit down to supper with him and he with Me." Remember that classic painting of Jesus standing outside what looks like a small farm cottage? The front is covered in ivy and vines and flowers, and Jesus is knocking on the door. What is unusual about the painting is that the door handle is missing. There is no latch, no lock. When Jesus knocks on the door of our hearts, only we can open the door from the inside!

Are the doors of our lives, our hearts always open and ready to offer Jesus hospitality and welcome? To be really ready, we need to be always prepared to meet Him and welcome Him in any experience.

So often our eyes are not quick or clear enough to see Jesus in our lives. We all have handicaps – prejudices, misconceptions, bad training, spiritual laziness, fears and doubts – which block our view of Jesus.

And we all have short stature: we are much smaller than God and cannot see the goodness that He sees in and beyond our hardships. In our own short-sightedness, we conclude that God has abandoned us, and we feel so very alone. We need fellow believers to remind us of who we are and what we are called to do. On this Priesthood Sunday, we remember and lift up in prayer those priests who have brought us closer to God, closer to the Church and closer to the better version of ourselves.

There were at least five priests who are my priest-heroes. The first was Fr. Leonard Chrobot, now deceased, who served for many years as Academic Dean at St. Mary's College at Orchard Lake. He had a love of knowledge, a skill at speaking and really had the students' best interest at heart. Second was Fr. Donald E. Bartone, also now deceased, who was pastor of Holy Cross Parish in Marine City. Although retired from the Air Force Chaplaincy, Fr. Don taught me that no matter how old you are, or how set in your ways, you are never too old to learn. He went on a sabbatical in his late 50's to learn and grow in the Spirit.

Third was Fr. Ted Blaszczyk, also now deceased, former pastor at Our Lady Queen of Apostles Parish in Hamtramck, who showed me how to appreciate parishioners and always to thank them. Our next door neighbor at the time, Fr. Stan Ulman, now close to retirement age, is a truly wise priest. He taught me to seek the truth and to ask the right questions. Rounding out the Top Five Most Influential Priests in my life is Fr. David Burgard, who was my next door neighbor when I was in New Baltimore and he was in Anchorville/Ira Township.

He is younger than I am, and I am inspired by his personal holiness, his leadership style as a pastor and as a vicar, and the fact that I could make him laugh and blush very easily with my creative humor!

I would like to give an Honorable Mention to my predecessor here at St. Martin de Porres Parish, Fr. Roman Pasieczny. He and I met decades ago. I admire Fr. Roman for the courage it must have taken him to leave his home, his homeland and his culture, and come here not speaking a word of English and adapting so humbly and totally to the American way of life. I am especially inspired the gift he has of ministering to the sick, to the dying, spending hours with them and with those who lost a loved one before, during and after death.

Many people believe that vocations to the priesthood, to the religious life, to the permanent diaconate, and to sacramental marriage must begin with the family and in the home. That is how it should be. I have known people, who like myself, received their calling sometimes in SPITE of their family dysfunction, and not because of it. That is true grace at work!

The Catholic Church and other religions stand to defend the sanctity of life, the integrity of sacramental marriage and the gift of the family. The Knights of Columbus and our Faith Formation staff have put together a “Traveling Holy Family Kit” which contains many helps to bring families closer to their faith, closer to their God, and closer to one another.

Included in the box is the most powerful weapon of all, the Rosary, with a companion prayer book; Dr. Ray Guarendi’s small book, *Raising Good Kids*; a *Handbook for Today’s Catholic Family*; *Prayers for the Family*; and *Building the Domestic Church – The Family Fully Alive*, by the Knights of Columbus.

We also know that families are touched by separation, divorce, death and dysfunction. There is a series of articles addressing specific topics with sensitivity and great care.

Most importantly, there is a personal journal, where each parish family can write their personal reflections on the experience of praying together as a family for a week.

How you use this is entirely up to you! We simply ask that you set aside

one period of time each day to pray together as a family or household. Use the helps as you wish. Then, after a week of prayer, meditation and reflection, return the Traveling Holy Family Kit to St. Martin de Porres Church prior to the 11:00 AM Sunday Mass, so the next family may pick it up.

The sign-up sheet for the Traveling Holy Family will be in the back of church next week. Four families have already sign-up for the month of November. May this spiritual exercise help mend broken relationships, celebrate healthy ones, and build each Catholic household into a true Domestic Church! Who knows, it may event plant the seed of a vocation to priesthood!

May God help each of us to be worthy of His call and complete all that He desires to do for us through faith. Invited or not, Jesus desires to make His home with us and within us. Like little Zacchaeus, let us open the doors of our hearts with longing and welcoming hospitality. AMEN!