

[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 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!"

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! Everything is "vanity," which is translated from the Hebrew and Greek as a "vapor" or a breath, something that dissipates. Something that is transitory, short-lasting.

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,

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]

There's a good deal of modern liturgical music that celebrates the arrival of God's justice. In these hymns, we tend to call out for God's justice to descend. We sing it happily, joyfully, with pep and vigor, unaware that when this justice arrives, it might be directed at US.

Yes, we know that there is evil in the world. Yes, we know that not everyone loves God and neighbor. But, surely WE do! Surely WE are among the righteous.

This attitude is behind Peter's question to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus exhorts the disciples to sell everything. They are to give alms, storing up treasure in heaven. Nothing they have received is their own.

Jesus concretizes this exhortation through a parable. Disciples are like servants who await their master's return from a wedding. Their lamps are lit. They're ready to serve the needs of the master. In this readiness, there will be a great reversal. The master will instead serve them. They will be called to the wedding banquet. Why the role reversal? The commentaries suggest that after three days of wedding celebration, the master returns home drunk!

Jesus then introduces another motif to the parable. Part of the responsibility of those servants is to make sure that no one breaks into the master's home. Here, we have the introduction of evil, the possibility of danger. Someone could break into the house, wreaking havoc.

After Jesus has preached, has spoken this parable, Peter asks his question, "Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?" (Lk 12:41). We must admit that we don't know the precise motive for Peter's question. Perhaps he was confused, unable to determine the meaning of Jesus' preaching. We see a lot of that in the Gospels – Peter not getting the message right!

At the same time, it's possible that Peter understood exactly what Jesus was saying. We could imagine the disciples talking among themselves, "Are we really servants? Aren't we part of Jesus' chosen band?"

If justice is coming, it's going to be directed at the Roman city state, to the hypocrites, to the sinner! Surely not us!"

Jesus, as He often does, doubles down. He recognizes the leadership provided by the apostles: the earliest disciples. If you're in charge, get ready. If the Master comes and finds you being unjust, not distributing bread, there will be a severe punishment. To the one who has been given much, much will be expected. To those who have been given even more, more will be expected.

The disciples know God's will. They have dwelt in the presence of Jesus. They have been given much. If they don't share it, if they're not vigilant, they will be the ones judged. Of course, Jesus' preaching is not only directed at disciples who came long ago.

Since it is the living Word, active and alive, it is directed at you and me. We also know the will of God through Jesus Christ. We have the sacraments, Scripture and the teachings of the Church. We have been given even more than the disciples, because we know the end of the story: that Jesus Christ has come to redeem the world.

I enjoy the verses from our Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews that speak of our Old Testament ancestors in faith standing and looking from a distance and saluting us from afar. They did not see the arrival of the Messiah before they died, but they had faith that it would come to pass.

It reminds me of our own ancestors who came to this country from Europe, Asia or Africa. What courage and faith they must have had in leaving their familiar homelands, with their own ancestors standing and looking from a distance as they left the comforts of home looking for the American Dream.

When I was a student in junior high school, the Civics teacher gave us the homework assignment of asking our parents where our ethnic ancestors came from and why they wanted to come to America. My Mom's grandparents came from Poland, and my Dad's parents came from Poland.

When I asked them why they came here, my mom offered her answer first. I learned after her passing that she was prone to exaggeration when she relayed family stories. She said, "Your great-grandfather had a wanderlust. He

travelled all over the country. He was present when they pounded that gold spike that joined the western and eastern railroads.” When I saw my great-grandfather’s tombstone, it showed that he was born five years after the spike! But he did settle in Detroit, built five houses in the Poletown area where St. Hyacinth Parish is, and lived off the rental income from those properties.

When I asked my Dad why HIS parents came to America, before he could open his mouth, my Mom blurted out: “Because they were being chased by the police!

So, let’s ask ourselves, “Are we ready?” Are we ready for the coming justice of God? Are we servants of the Word of God, or do we distribute our own bureaucratic, technocratic regulations? Is our parish a place of vigil, where we await the coming of Our Lord in the Eucharist and in the Scriptures? Or do we live as if God is not present among us? Is our parish a space where the hungry and thirsty and those on the margins are treated as the living, abiding presence of Jesus Christ?

Have you experienced God as trustworthy, or do you keep your guard up?

How would your life be different if you didn’t have faith in God?

How would your life be different if your faith in God was absolute?

Through baptism, we are servants of the living God. Better get ready and recognize that the coming judgment may be directed toward us. The reward, if we’re ready, is the greatest wedding we’ll ever attend: the heavenly Supper of the Lamb. AMEN!

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

Many years ago, a priest friend asked me, which occupation will be most represented in Hell? He said, dentists, because of all the grinding of teeth! We hear elsewhere in the Gospel that 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, size. Dimensions.

Luke's Gospel pursues the theme that for some, 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 actually be 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 do not belong to us; they belong to God and 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.

A dear friend of mine was mostly confined to her home because of her many illnesses. Her medications, especially the steroids she was taking, has swollen her body, making movement difficult. She spent most of her time on the couch or in bed. But from there, she was an advocate for almost all of her neighbors in her coop subdivision, where rent was based on poor income. She was constantly on the phone, advocating for funds and services for her poor neighbors. Yet in spite of her generosity of spirit, time, and talent, she told me her heartbreaking fear was that on Judgement Day, she would stand before Jesus and be told, "I don't know you. I don't know where you come from."

I do not see Myself in you." I told her, "Honey, if YOU don't make it into Heaven, there is no hope at all for ME!" My dear Mother told me that she had read a book about a visionary who said that the road to Hell will be paved with the heads of all the unfaithful, sinful and evil priests of the world. I don't want to be one of those pavers!

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. This was the origin of the expression: "Go to Church, Go to Heaven!"

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. Listen to who is going to be admitted ahead of us: 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: 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.

"Keep your nose clean," my dad and my first pastor used to say, "and you'll have nothing to worry about." That was his version of "Strive to enter through the narrow gate." It is good advice but not easy to follow.

Once in a while, I allow the little stresses of a day to get the best of me. Unlike Paul, I have a hard time seeing my trials as a form of discipline that builds character. I fall more in the "O woe is me" or the "please pass this cup from me" camp. I make halfhearted attempts to feel grateful and see the joy all around, but my resolve is weak and I end up snapping, whining, and complaining.

Anything to get my point across that I am not happy with the way things are going on a given day and it's everyone's fault but my own. You too?

Just when the chances of my making it through any of God's gates are nearly exhausted, someone shows up to assist in my salvation.

Recently it was a prayer at Mass: "Let us view the complexities of life with gratitude." I guess that's another way of saying, "Do not disdain the discipline of the Lord." Or as my dad would say, "Quit your bellyaching."

Discipline does train us: the discipline of sports; the discipline of studies; the discipline of learning a new job; even the discipline of prayer.

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. Trials can be rich opportunities on our spiritual path if we see them as "discipline," that is, training in new ways of seeing and living. Can you name a recent trial that helped you be a better disciple?

Ego lowering is a big part of spiritual development. Do you take trials and disappointments as wounds to the ego that you defend against, or as ways to lessen your ego and rely more on God? How so?

The narrow way that Jesus points us to demands awareness and choice. It also demands patience with ourselves and with God. What in our behavior right now indicates we are choosing the narrow way? THAT is the ultimate question! AMEN!