

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

I have some good news. After a successful back surgery on Wednesday, our beloved Deacon Marion came home from the hospital on Friday. He is in good spirits and he thanks us for all the love and prayers we have sent his way. He will be out of commission for at least two weeks while he recovers with physical and occupational therapy. Thanks be to God. AMEN!

When confronted with this particular Gospel text, I am tempted to hum the theme song from the TV game show “Family Feud.” Once, 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? Aren’t THEY feuding with each other?” He replied rather quickly, “They’re probably 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, Africa, North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, Russia and Ukraine – Pope Francis is calling it “World War Three in small bits and pieces.” Scores of people – many innocent bystanders – are killed and hundreds are wounded. Businesses, schools, hospitals, places of worship and places of government are all ablaze.

Anger and violent responses can be seen in this country not only on the streets of our inner cities, but also in some of our own homes and neighborhoods, and among people calling themselves “Christian” and behaving like anything else BUT “Christian.” There are radical fanatics among Christians and Jews, 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. In our First Reading, 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! He survived the cistern, but eventually would die by stoning at the hands of his former friends. Jeremiah was “on fire” with God’s call to repentance, conversion and commitment to discipleship.

That’s kind of like what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel. 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? We were given those gifts at our Confirmation. Most of the messages the true prophets spoke were unpleasant to hear: repentance, judgment, impending destruction, sin and the displeasure of God concerning His people's behavior. Jeremiah is an enduring prophet who experienced suffering because of his total commitment to God. Jeremiah lost family, friends and fellow compatriots because of that commitment.

Jeremiah was a great prophet and felt alone most of the time, but he kept going. He gave up his whole life to be a servant of the Lord. He knew that his purpose was great, but that doesn't mean that it was easy. Jeremiah's only joy had to be that which was found in his Lord.

Today's Second Reading reminds us that pain and suffering come to all of us, whether we are good or bad, rich or poor.

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."

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. If we search for beauty, for truth, and for goodness, we will find that too.

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.

Our Second Reading 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 to the Faith, while children wander away from it. One spouse embraces the Way; the other is skeptical, apathetic or even antagonistic. In our Domestic Church and in our world-wide Church there are found passionate commitment, simple sincerity, hesitation and doubt, and half-hearted membership.

Where are YOU on the spectrum? Passionate commitment? Simple sincerity? Plagued by hesitation and doubt? 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. So, burn, baby, burn with a "Hunka-Hunka burning love" of Jesus Christ! AMEN!

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

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. As Jesus Christ is the New Adam, Mary becomes the New Eve. 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. This is what she and St. Joseph taught her son; this is what you and I can learn.

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]

Those who love us tell us the truth. Even if the truth hurts. Jesus loves us with a great bounty of truth, but we can be sure not everyone receives such love with gratitude. Our readings challenge us to widen the door of mercy and admittance to many who've been -- or perhaps felt -- uninvited and unwelcome. In our homes, in our church, and in Heaven Itself.

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 actually could 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 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 now. 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.

Some of us here believe that divine admittance is based on "If you go to church, you'll go to Heaven." What's the 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 will 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 and children: 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. The best way to deal with this is to ask ourselves what professors ask students, "What is the lesson to learn here?"

Discipline does train us: the discipline of sports; the discipline of studies; the discipline of learning a new job; even the discipline of prayer and learning how to love. Thinking of our education in discipline, I appreciate Pope Saint John Paul II's description of love in his book, "Love and Responsibility." He writes:

"Love should be seen as something which, in a sense, never just 'is' but is always only 'becoming.'" Our relationships are evolving, becoming what they should be. Even with the best of discipline, though, Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that only a few will be saved. Who WILL be saved?

Episcopal Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, one of my favorite 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]

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

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 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.

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. We are a unique parish in that folks with great resources do give generously to our parish, especially when there is a special need. You have grateful hearts and a servant spirit. I know whenever I have asked for additional financial help, as I do in my column this weekend, you always comes forward to provide it. [CSA,... CSA,... CSA!...]

Today's Gospel dinner is tense. Luke tells us "the people there were observing Him carefully" (Lk 14:1). For a while now, some had been trying to "catch Him," a slip of the tongue, perhaps, or a slight infraction of law (Lk 11:53-54). In the verses before today's Gospel, Jesus heals a sick man on the Sabbath. By this time, too, the rumor was that Herod was out to get Him (cf. Lk 13:31). The tension surrounding Jesus was palpable. It wasn't a relaxing dinner at all; people were watching Jesus' every move. Sometimes this happens to me as well when I attend a public banquet. People keep an eye on me – where I am sitting, with whom I am sitting, and, especially, what I put on my plate at the buffet table! As Jesus draws nearer Jerusalem, things will get only more tense, until it all breaks into violence — the arrest, the scourging, the death.

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.

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. As busy as his pastoral schedule is, he always sets up one dinner with the poor and the outcast.

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 did with our annual Warming Center. I marveled at the intelligence, thoughtfulness and genuine holiness of our guests.

The banquet referenced in today's Gospel points to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and the Ultimate Eternal Banquet in Heaven. The guest list includes the poor. The crippled. The lame. Those who can't repay, who can't use their importance to increase our status. The banquet, as it turns out, is pure gift, pure joy, pure delight.

This is the banquet that the Church hosts each week. It is the banquet of the Eucharist, the mystery of Christ's body and blood. We invite the entire Church to eat at the Eucharistic altar, to discover a love that comes as pure gift. There are no places of honor. There are no places of prestige. Several years ago, I attended a function at a prestigious Episcopalian church in a very wealthy suburb. I was engaged in a conversation with one of their parishioners who was very wealthy and held a prominent role in the community. As we talked about theology, I said to him, "You pretty much agree to what we Catholics believe. Maybe you should become Catholic." His response floored me. He said, "At this church we have designated seating for people depending upon their social standing and economics. If I switched to your faith, I might end up sitting next to the man who fixes my car." I suggested that he stay put in his church!"

Those who dine at this banquet should learn the logic of this most peculiar of banquets and it should pass over into our homes. We welcome the hungry child, the lonely friend, the neighbor in need. We offer this hospitality because we have learned to assemble our guest list from Jesus Christ. It is a guest list of the lost, the lonely, the hungry, and the thirsty. We welcome these guests not in bitterness, not in the sense of our self-righteousness.

Your reflection questions for this week:

How do I maintain a sense of healthy humility? Who helps me keep my head on straight? What do I do to avoid the twin pitfalls of self-promotion or self-loathing? Can I accept that I am a "good-enough" human being?

In the banquet of life, am I more likely to simply enjoy the feast, or do I get trapped into not enjoying myself until I see who's got the place of honor and learn where I fit in the pecking order? What keeps me from simply being present for the "festal gathering"? Take a risk. Rearrange your table tonight or sometime this week. AMEN!