

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

In recent years, celebrity poker games from Las Vegas have become popular on TV. The famous and well-to-do gamble with somebody else's money. The winner has a big donation made in their name to a charity of their choosing.

The drama occurs when a bet forces a player to bet all of his or her chips. That means they'll win a large hand or be out of the game completely. If you watch it long enough, you learn that it's easy to bet everything when you have a great hand, much harder if you are struggling. Or if you think your opponent is bluffing, you have a tough decision to make. But quite often, skill has nothing to do with the outcome. Everything depends on the draw of the cards.

We have done nothing in and of ourselves to deserve the faith that God has given us. It is a true gift and blessing from God. We are supposed to play the hand that we are dealt. The prophet Habakkuk cries out for more faith even though he has enough. The apostles ask for an increase in faith, and Jesus tells them that they have more than enough.

When the chips are down (so to speak), do we believe our faith is strong enough to win or do we back off, asking for more? It is precisely when we are "all in" and place our trust in God that our faith makes us winners, no matter the outcome. **NO MATTER WHAT THE OUTCOME!**

"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. Even in select towns in our own country. 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?

In the pastoral letter to Timothy, a church leader is reminded that the flame of the Spirit is already given to the Church. We don't have to wait on anything to make us more prepared to do what God calls us to do in this world.

The power is available, the love is within us, and self-control is the discipline that guards and guides its progress. But it's important to recall that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, not an exercise of our puny wills. (Ask the Twelve Step crowd how "Higher Power" works.) These attributes are gifts from God sitting on our doorstep ready for action. All that remains, is for us to plant our seed of faith into the soil of the world and begin the cycle of growth and new life.

One seed is all we're given. And one seed is enough. But any gardener knows that a seed that is not planted will not produce anything. That's why the Church encourages us to make an *act* of faith, a *choice* for faith, a deliberate bow of the will to God. After that, you might want to duck. Flying trees can be a hazard, and you never know where they'll end up.

In Sunday's first reading, Habakkuk offers a remedy: Wait on the Lord. He says that those who fail to focus on the Lord will inevitably lack integrity. They're like people looking at themselves in a shattered mirror. Their lives are fragmented and disconnected. It may seem hard to wait -- in prayer, meditation, or simple awareness. Yet Habakkuk promises that God "will not disappoint."

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 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 98; 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, and 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 sing some of those words in the 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 next week. 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.

Pope Francis has called this month of October an “Extraordinary Missionary Month” and entrusted this year’s World Mission Sunday to Pope St. John Paul II, whose new feast day is celebrated on October 22nd. He said, “I urge everyone to live the joy of mission by witnessing the Gospel where each one lives and works.” Sounds like the Pope is calling all of us to become “joyful, missionary disciples!” We, indeed, all of us are “Sent on Mission.”

The Pope further says, “We are called upon to support with affection, concrete help and prayer, the missionaries who have gone out to proclaim Christ to those who still do not yet know Him.” We do this with our annual collection for World Mission Sunday is next Sunday. There should be special envelopes at the sides of the offertory boxes.

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.” As I have said before, I start every morning by saying, “Thank you,” seven times, because in biblical numerology, seven is the perfect number. Like Naaman washing seven times in the Jordan River. I am thanking God the perfect number of times.

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?

Here is an example of a **WRONG** answer. A dear parishioner in my last parish, late 30's, early 40's, with young children, was dying of cancer. The parish held her up in prayer for months, years, and the prayer group surrounded her home in a prayer chain. When the husband came out to tell the group that his wife had passed on, on the people in the group said, "Well, she must have not had enough faith." Do you think that husband came back to church after her wife's Funeral Mass?

The parable in today's Gospel from Luke 18 points us toward a real 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."

God is coming to your rescue! In this Sunday's Gospel reading, God promises to secure the rights of His faithful ones who seek His justice. When we're abused, neglected, rejected, abandoned, or falsely accused, God comes to our rescue.

And speedily, He says! What? He's not helping you fast enough? Is He breaking His promise with you?

The real question is not "Where is Jesus?" nor "Why doesn't He care enough to help me sooner?" The question that matters -- for the healing of our souls -- is stated in the last sentence of this Gospel passage: As He's arriving to help us, do we greet Him with faith? Or is fear spinning our minds in such turmoil that we don't see Him as he stands right next to us offering a helping hand?

If we're not living by faith, we inadvertently expand our problems.

We all have adversaries. Jesus is wielding His sword of truth against the spirits of darkness who are working against you; He is driving them away. But if we reject the truth He wields, his sword is of no help to us. What about the troublemakers who continually annoy you? When our eyes are on them instead of on Jesus, we miss the healing embrace that He's offering to us as vindication.

When we live by faith, we experience God's vindication every day, even while injustices continue. We experience it in our hearts as we receive His peace and His patience and His endurance.

Our questions for this week's reflection: What injustices are frustrating you today? What evil is being done against you? What will you do right now to be a faith-filled follower of Christ? What action will you take to conquer your fears and choose to give God your trust?

Paul advises Timothy to persist in doing the right thing despite how he feels in a given moment. We remember that our spiritual journey should not be gauged simply by our emotions, but by the deepest recesses of our hearts. Emotions are one thing; dedication is another. Is faith inconvenient? You bet it is. So, 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]

When we first encounter the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable, we are at once given enough information about them to jump to all the usual conclusions. A Pharisee is by definition a person with a rigorous commitment to God, the law, ritual, and the moral code. A tax collector is a traitor to his country and his religion, making a buck off his fellow citizens by collaborating with a foreign oppressor. Which person would you expect will gain a hearing from God?

The smart money is on the Pharisee, but the smart money is about to go south. Like all too many penitents in the confessional, this fellow is fully prepared to admit the wrongdoings of others and to announce his own personal goodness. In case it has escaped the attention of the Almighty, the Pharisee points out that he is a better breed of person, not like the greedy, dishonest, adulterous folks around him. And then his gaze falls on his fellow intercessor, a public figure everyone loves to hate. The Pharisee assures God that *he* fasts and pays tithes on his whole income -- not like this thief, who profits from the Roman occupation and adds a little for himself on top.

Is this self-adulation and other-directed accusation meant to be prayer? As conversations go, this one seems to be a monologue with its speaker as its object. The only room left for God might be at the conclusion, where it is surely expected God will offer hearty congratulations. But we might wonder if this is the goal of true and sincere prayer -- to gain the divine seal of approval.

These days, the term *tax collector* doesn't carry the same universal disgust as for the audience of Jesus' day. But substitute another profile -- drug dealer, molester, serial killer -- and now imagine the scene paired with a modern figure whose integrity is presumed, if you can name one these days. Suddenly we begin to hear the scandal in this story and how quick we were to judge these characters. We don't expect the drug dealer to have regrets or to accept his guilt. But here we are, faced with his remorse and breast-beating humility before God. It occurs to us that we don't know the first thing about another person's heart, or what potential for transformation lies within. This is the first lesson we learn from today's Gospel: we don't know the first thing about another person's heart, or what potential for transformation lies within.

Once again we have Saul of Tarsus (who will be called Paul of Tarsus) as a handy case in point: himself a Pharisee, zealous for orthodoxy and an inflexible adherence to religious law as it had been handed down.

A living, breathing, organic version of God's will never occurred to him. So he was fully prepared to put to death the "blasphemers" who followed the way of Jesus.

In the same way, the Christian community had Saul pegged as an irredeemably dangerous fellow, to be avoided at all costs. No one saw him as a big fish that Jesus intended to catch -- which is why the first generation of believers never seemed to know what to do with Saul once Jesus and the Gospel had netted him.

As a church song from decades ago reminded Catholics, and as we sang in our Responsorial Psalm, "the Lord hears the cry of the poor." Our Church has taken the stance of "a preferential option for the poor" to reassert the balance of justice by every means necessary. But that doesn't mean God likes poor people better or that they are necessarily morally superior. The tax collector in the story most likely had a fatter wallet than the Pharisee, which could have added to the pious man's disdain. And the tax collector admitted he was a sinner -- no contest in the case of who was more moral.

What made the tax collector justified was neither poverty nor morality, but his willingness to acknowledge his lowliness before God. The Lord hears *that* cry every time. That is the second lesson of today's Gospel: our humility before our God.

A few years ago, my spiritual director ruined one of my favorite pastimes -- judging others and putting them down. I didn't want to acknowledge that's what I was doing. I preferred to call it small talk or dishing the dirt. Some would call it venting, or sharing news. But then my spiritual director cut into my fun, and he did it with just seven words: "If you spot it, you got it."

His point was that when I see some trait in another person that irritates me, odds are that I have that same quality in myself. Not liking it in me, I attack it in others. The faulty hope underlying this strategy is that I can persuade myself I'm better than others. All it does, however, is separate me from others -- and from God.

Reflection questions for this week: God knows no favorites, Sirach tells us. He judges justly and affirms the right. Is that true for you? Does everybody get equal treatment from you? If not, why not?

Do you feel heard by God? Does God hear YOUR cries?

How confident are you of your own salvation? Where do you find yourself stumbling the most in the race to keep the faith? Have you ever found yourself making the Pharisee's mistake of comparing yourself with others to spotlight your own virtue? When have you felt most humbled? Do others see humility in you?

In my last parish, when we hosted the homeless, volunteers were asked to lead prayer each night, and one night Marvin, one of our homeless guests offered to lead grace. I am ashamed to say my expectations were low, unkindly and judgmentally so.

Marvin took his place in the center of the room and with an eloquence born of faith, proceeded with the blessing. There was not a dry eye among us at the end of the prayer as Marvin asked God to give “everyone their greatest hopes and dreams,” this in a room where peoples’ hopes were for a bed for the night, a warm meal, and maybe a day job for tomorrow. When we left the kitchen that night, Marvin slipped each of us a prayer he had written just for us: “Lord God, give them each a gift. Bless them with a great week to come. Let each day be an adventure to them. Let each day count.”

You see, the problem with the Pharisee isn’t that he’s serious. It’s not that he’s rigorous, attentive to the Law. The problem is that he has forgotten that the vocation of Israel is to welcome all humanity to adore the living God. All nations will be called to the holy mountain, to worship the living God. Not because any nation has earned it!

Salvation is always pure gift, not the result of human ingenuity. But that problem is not an exclusive dilemma of the historical Pharisee. The problem is with those who draw boundaries, imagining that they have earned salvation. My group, the in-group, is the only ones who are worthy.

So, we must ask ourselves, “Who is the Pharisee today?”

We must recognize that it is all those who try to limit salvation to their in-group, whoever that in-group might be.

After all, it’s the entire human family called to salvation and to adore at the Eucharistic altar, discovering the God who loves unto the end.

Who is the Pharisee?

The danger of Christian life is that it may not be any of “them” out there.

It could be us! AMEN!