

[Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; Matt. 5:13-16]

Once upon a time, there was a mother mouse who decided to teach her children about the world. So she gathered all of her little mice and set out for a walk. They walked down the hall and turned to the right. Then they went down the hall and took another right. And suddenly they found themselves in front of the family cat dozing in the sunlight. The mother mouse was scared. But she didn't want to give in to her fright. Just as she was about to get past the cat, the cat's eyes popped open and the cat raised its paw.

The little mice were petrified. What would their mother do? Well, just as the cat's paw started to come down, that mother mouse looked the cat right in the eye and started barking like a dog. And do you know what? The cat was so startled and frightened that it jumped up and ran away! The mother mouse, wiped her brow, shook a little and then turned to her little mice and said, "Children, I hope you learned a valuable lesson. Sometimes it's good to know a second language!"

It's the same way with us. It's good to know a second language. Salt and light are the language of God; the language of Grace; the language of hope and love. And when this language is translated into action it becomes the most beautiful language ever spoken. We're called to be salt and light and to speak the language of God as we live our faith. We're called to live the Word.

Things are better when we take care of one another. Things grow worse if we don't. That is nowhere truer than in today's Scripture readings and in our families. Loving and purposeful families grow together and yield abundant dividends in loyalty, mutual encouragement, and assured welfare. Careless, neglectful, or abusive families reap sorrow and hostility that winds through the years and spreads the malignancy further.

What's true for families is true for communities. Communities that care for their weaker members thrive in peace and well-being. Communities cut off from the fate of their disadvantaged ones will harvest division, unrest, and violence.

Follow this simple formula through a single nation, or to all nations – even ours -- and its truthfulness continues. Hebrew prophecy proposed an answer as simple as the problem: Share your bread. Shelter your homeless. Clothe the naked. Don't turn your back on your own. Watch your speech. The nation that cares for its afflicted will be a beacon to the world. And woe to the nation that doesn't. It's as simple as that.

This weekend, we have present members of the Stephen Ministry, who provide a listening ear and Christian compassion to those who are going through spiritually trying times. We also honor Boy Scout Sunday, and the good example and work they provide for our community.

Jesus is also a fan of simplicity. We would find our hearts curiously free of obstacles to becoming the people we want to be, happy and fulfilled. If we love, if we forgive and if we serve. We would also supply the salt to our communities so that everyone around us would lead richer lives simply because they know us, harvest our love, and are illumined by our example. When we live in the light and become the light ourselves, we discover our true purpose.

Saint Paul understood that when he made his startling resolution to keep his gospel plain and simple. He stayed close to the cross.

Isaiah says that if we feed the hungry and shelter the oppressed, our light shall break forth like the dawn, God will hear us, and our wounds will be healed. Who in this congregation each Sunday isn't presented with some kind of wound of mind, heart, or body? Isaiah's point is openness and participation in God's generous love, moving us to generosity and to justice, and brings us healing.

"One night at the end of a special Saturday night worship service," writes Warren Hudson of Ontario, Canada, "a thunderstorm unleashed a bolt of lightning that plunged the church into darkness." With the congregation seated in total darkness, the pastor found some candles and handed out the candles to everyone present.

Persons lit their candles in much the same way as many churches do on Christmas Eve, each person lighting the candle of the person next to them. The

worshippers then made their way through the church's winding hallways to the front door.

"Peering out, we could see the rain coming down in sheets," Warren remembers. With traffic snarled, people were running for the nearest shelter.

Looking around, they realized that the entire city was in darkness. "There in the darkness we stood," Warren writes, "a little band of Christians, each clutching a light, not sure whether to venture out into the storm or to stay inside the church, in hopes that the storm would soon blow over."

There in the darkness, the light of truth struck him. In this most dramatic way he realized what it means to be the "light of the world."

He writes, "It occurred to me then that this is the temptation I face every day. It is easy to play it safe and be a good Christian in church. It is a lot harder to venture out in faith into the storms of the world."

May we never fail to carry our light – the light of faith, the light of hope, the light of loving service – here in this sacred space, and then, with courage and determination, into the darkness of the world. AMEN!

[Readings: Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Matt 5:17-37]

(Prepared but not shared because Deacon Marion preached this weekend.)

One of the more heart-wrenching funerals I have served in my priesthood took place not in church, but in the funeral home. A father was being buried that day, and one of his sons who was serving a sentence in the county jail, was escorted by two county sheriffs to his father's casket. At the eulogy, the son spoke about how great of an example his father had been to him, and then spoke of his regret at choosing to do something wrong which brought shame to his family, especially to his father.

"If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you." The readings this week exhort us to keep the commandments but also tell us that doing so is not as simple as it may first appear. Fortunately, Scripture gives us guidance in the sometimes complex call to "follow the Law of the Lord."

Rule Number One: Realize that you have a choice. God sets before you "fire and water," Sirach says--life and death, good and evil. You'll get what you choose. God is not going to compel you one way or the other.

Number Two: It's about more than just following the rules. We hear Jesus say that the key to keeping the commandments is the state of your inner self. When it comes to the things of God, the important direction is inside-out, not outside-in. Our bodies, our sexuality, our talents are to be used responsibly.

Rule Number Three is the really good news: You don't have to go it alone. You can lean on God's wisdom. "Immense is the wisdom of the Lord." God sees all and understands all, and though that wisdom is mysterious, it is revealed to all who love God.

Years ago, my Dad nicknamed my twin sister's husband "Chief Running Dummy." Why? Because every time my brother-in-law would buy something new, the first thing he would do is say proudly, "I know how to do this," and then spend half his time running back and forth between the appliance and the garbage can to find the owner's manual!

Out of deference to my Dad, when Larry bought his first boat – an aluminum fishing boat – he named it “Running Dummy.” On its maiden voyage, Larry lowered the boat at the launch and it immediately began taking on water: Larry forgot to plug the water holes!

When we live this way—start it up and full speed ahead, without considering the rules of the road—it can lead to trouble, treachery and death. We often regard laws as barbed wire designed to entrap our freedom,

Our Responsorial Psalm is not a song praising the Law of Moses or the Commandments. The Law is more properly understood as a “word to the wise.” Have you ever heard that expression: “Here is a word to the wise?” That’s where it comes from: Psalm 119.

This weekend, we celebrate World Marriage Sunday. I want to wish a special blessing and prayer to all married couples, especially those celebrating special jubilees this year: 1st year, 5th year, 10th year, 25 years, 50 or more. Do you know what is the best definition of marriage I have ever heard? Your vocation, your call, is to make Jesus Christ real and present in and through each other. To be Jesus Christ to each other, as Jesus is Christ to His Church. To get each other into Heaven!

Marriage isn’t for everyone, and current trends may point to a declining appeal. But for those who have said, “I do,” the rest of us say, “Thank you.” Your bold act of casting lots together for better or worse until death offers all of us insight into the joyful and sorrowful mysteries of divine love and the nature and power of God, who is love. Whether or not you’re married, do what you can to support the marriages in your midst -- today, World Marriage Day, and every day.

When I was a young boy in grade school, I entered the kitchen of my home and saw my Mom preparing a recipe for a chocolate cake. On the counter was a HUGE chocolate bar with a familiar brown and white wrapping around it. It had a familiar name on the wrapping: HERSHEY’S. I wanted a bite of that bar.

Mom warned me: “You won’t like it. It’s baker’s chocolate. It isn’t sweet.” I begged for a piece anyway. Have YOU ever tasted baker’s chocolate? YUK!

This, my friends, is the moral life in a nut shell, a chocolate-flavored nut shell. Through the commandments, through the teachings of Jesus in today's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, God says this to us about sin: "You won't like it. It ISN'T sweet." It may be very attractive and alluring, even seductive. But once we have tasted the bitter consequences of our sin and the effect it has on us and on others, "it isn't sweet."

When Jesus extends the Law in today's portion of His Sermon on the Mount, He's not doing it to make life harder than it already is. Jesus "builds a fence around the law," as the rabbis phrase it. He tells us that the road to murder begins on the path of anger; adultery's highway has an entrance ramp from lust. Jesus knows that even good disciples can become angry, that they suffer from broken relationships, that they can be tempted.

When we were kids and we asked our parents "Why?" and they didn't want to spend time in virtuous discussion and debate, what did they say as their immediate response? "BECAUSE I SAID SO!" Which then made me think of other authoritarian "parent-isms" that we were not allowed to respond to, such as when your Mom says, "Did you hear me?" (They heard you all the way in China).

Or when my Dad would say "Do I look stupid to you?" (No, I'm not even going there!) As we grow older and are able to handle more complex explanations, we do have a right to know the "why" of our religion's rules and regulations. Almost thirty years of priesthood later, I am just beginning to understand why the Church teaches what she teaches.

I have also learned what the philosopher Sophocles said about the law: No one has a more sacred obligation to obey the law than those who make the law. You can also add: those who enforce the law. That includes popes, bishops, politicians and, yes, even parents. AMEN!

[Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 3:16-23; Matt 5:38-48]

I don't remember the movie, whether it was an action film, a war film, or a western. But two groups of men stand ready to fight each other. The leaders of the groups are standing toe to toe against each other. The first man says, "Give it your best shot." So the second man delivers a right hook on his left cheek. When the first man recovers, in the spirit of today's Gospel, he offers the other cheek. So the second man delivers a left hook on his right cheek. The first man recovers a second time, faces the second man, delivers an upper cut, and knocks the first man flat on the floor. The first man's friend asks, "Why did you do that?" The first man replies, "I ran out of cheeks!"

One cold stare invites another. Insult is traded for insult. One punch follows another. Somewhere down the road, there's an exchange of gunfire. Wearying cycles of violence and vengeance spiral through history, each side seeking to deliver the blow that leads to decisive victory. But there's no victory. There's not even a chance of even-stein. Retaliatory justice is never just, because trading pain for pain, loss for loss, never heals anything. Violence only gives birth to more of the same. As Jesus reminds us, "those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" sounds like a good proposal. It seeks to bring equity into the game of reprisal, keeping a lid on how far one might go to achieve satisfaction in revenge. You can't take more from the other guy than he took from you. It sounds right. But how does a hurled stone discriminate between a tooth and half a jaw? What if my single bullet, meant to reply to yours, starts a fire that burns down your village? There's no strict sense of justice in the land of loss, no measured steps to take in the wild territory of retribution.

Most of us, of course, won't be reaching for rocks or firearms in our attempts to get even with those who wrong us. We'll find the shaming word, the scorching secret, and hurl that out in the open. We'll start a lawsuit, or just a rumor. We'll steal from the tight-pursed employer, which hurts the boss a little but turns us into thieves.

Even if we do nothing, or say nothing, just carrying the smoldering desire for vengeance in our hearts poisons our capacity to love, to forgive, and to be human. It poisons us.

What would Jesus have us do in the face of the real wrongs perpetrated against us? Jesus expects us to retaliate against wrong -- with good. Ignoring evil isn't the way to fight it, Jesus says. We must overcome evil with the stronger spirit of love. If you're offended, don't return an offense but remain both innocent and vulnerable. If detained unfairly, stay twice as long and strive to make the oppressor a friend. Be generous without keeping a record of what's owed.

Respond to haters with love, and to curses with blessings. This method of reply may sound like madness, entirely out of the question. Where's the justice in it? The reply is that there's no human justice in it, if that's what you're seeking. But there is divine justice in it. Because this is how God deals with us. This is how God deals with us.

This is not an easy task! When our spirits are rattled, when we ourselves are testy because of a difficult situation, and when we fear the anger, retaliation or withdrawal of the person we are concerned about, confrontation takes a lot of courage. And it takes much thoughtful and prayerful preparation.

In today's First Reading, we find a key to effective conversation. Do not do it out of an inner spirit of hatred, or to gain revenge, or out of some grudge that you keep in your heart. Compassionate love recognizes that we ourselves have our own faults and weaknesses and imperfections.

What injustice in your own life keeps you from an open heart? What keeps you stuck in resentment? You belong to God, and with God's love your heart has the capacity to let go and to move on.

Which brings us to the key commands of two of our readings: "Be holy" and "Be perfect." Once again, the English translation is lacking. In the original Hebrew, the verb is not a perfect imperative: "Do this, right now, and be done with it!" It is not something done once and for all.

It is an active progressive verb. It begins in the present and progresses into the future. The same thing with the command of Jesus when He says: "Become perfected as your Heavenly Father is perfect." It is an ongoing action.

My mantra last year was "I delight in my imperfection." I could not say this five years ago. We also remember that while we are correcting ourselves and reproofing one another, that there is a delicate balance between enabling one another and empowering one another. We sing in our Responsorial Psalm, that the Lord is "kind and merciful," "gracious," "slow to anger and abounding in kindness." Can we not be the same when we correct one another?

Most of us know the first part of the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference."

But this is the original version as it comes to us from Reinhold Niebuhr, a German theologian and pastor:

"God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Most of us don't know that this is only half of his prayer. There is another paragraph that goes with it. Here is the rest of it:

"Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, *not as I would have it*, trusting that You will make all things right, *if I surrender to Your will*, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen."

I conclude with another version of the Serenity Prayer which comes from one of my favorite and humorous Jesuit priests, Fr. James Martin, author of *Between Heaven and Mirth*:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, which is pretty much everyone, since I'm clearly not you, God. At least not the last time I checked.

“And while you’re at it, God, please give me the courage to change what I need to change about myself, which is frankly a lot, since, once again, I’m not you, which means I’m not perfect.

“It’s better for me to focus on changing myself, God, than to worry about changing other people, who, as you’ll no doubt remember me saying, I can’t change anyway.

“Finally, God, give me the wisdom to just be quiet whenever I think that I’m clearly smarter than everyone else in the room, that no one knows what they’re talking about except me, or that I alone have all the answers. Basically, God, grant me the wisdom to remember that I’m not you.” AMEN!

Readings: Is. 49: 14-15; Psalm 62; 1 Cor. 4:1-5; Matt 6:24-34]

Some years ago I read the following in a business magazine: Stress management experts say that only two percent of our "worrying time" is spent on things that might actually be helped by worrying. The figures below illustrate how the other 98 percent of this time is spent: 40% on things that never happen 35% on things that can't be changed 15% on things that turn out better than expected 8% on useless, petty worries.

And don't you find that the stuff we worried about today somehow took care of themselves?

At the end of the day, I lie in bed and realize that all the drama I had built up in my mind and in my heart was needless; everything turned out OK. Maybe not how I had wanted or expected it, but as God wanted it and expected it to turn out. It was that kind of imagined drama that caused my heart problems. Not my lifestyle, it was my faith-style. Not trusting enough in God.

Given the difficulties of daily life, the advice that Jesus gives us in the Gospel today not to worry may seem naïve and even insensitive. However, the first people to hear this message were, for the most part, even more financially disadvantaged than most of us. So we are challenged to look deeper.

Jesus does not deny that there are basic human needs that must be met if one is to enjoy even a little bit of peace. Rather, Jesus invites us to adjust our priorities. Will God be the One Who guides and blesses our lives? Or will money and the pursuit of money and material things become our God? What more proof do we need of the truthfulness of the words of Jesus today?

The other truth is found in these words from today's Gospel: "Do not worry about your life." "Can any of you, by worrying, add a single moment to your life span?" In one of my commentaries I read this week, I found out that the author of the book, "Don't Sweat the Details" died of a massive heart attack at age 46 from the stresses of his life. That's called "irony." Worry does not add to the quality and the length of our lives – it subtracts and detracts from it!

I have to confess to you that I worry too much. I let little things become big things. I worry about what I've done and what I've failed to do -- more than you do. Trust me. I worry about the workload piling up on my desk. I worry about the people depending on me for prayers and help.

I worry about personal failings that botch up my relationships: the short word to a tender soul or the unanswered phone call that prolongs the heartache.

Yet Jesus doesn't offer His teaching to make us anxious. In fact it's meant to do the opposite: It's a lesson in trust. Don't worry about life, food, clothes, health, and stuff! Jesus says. The antidote to fear is faith. If worry is a problem, then the solution is to fix our attention elsewhere. Seek the Kingdom.

These three words could save your soul and mine a lot of heartache:

Seek the Kingdom. Tomorrow's in God's hands. So is yesterday. What needs to be forgiven is already forgiven. What needs to be healed will be healed.

All that belongs to us is today. All we have to do today is seek the Kingdom. It's a simple thing but no small thing. It's quite grand, as Saint Paul puts it, to be the stewards of God's mysteries.

Do you know what word Paul uses for "steward?" *Hyperetes*. This word originally described the oarsmen on the lower level of a ship's galley. St. Paul reminds us that Christ is the Captain of the Ship, the Church. We move together in synch when we pull the oars correctly.

As stewards, we can move through the miracle that is today, full of authority to recreate the world around us. Free to make responsible choices, to bring about positive changes. Free to be kind, to forgive, to bear joy within us and to give others a reason to share it. If we seek the Kingdom, we find that everything we need is already within us.

Stewardship will be the theme of my homilies during this upcoming season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday with Ash Wednesday. We will walk together as we explore what stewardship means, how it applies to our prayer life, our family life, our time, our talent and our treasure.

As we enter Lent this week, I want to propose three activities that correspond to the traditional three disciplines of Lent: prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Prayer: I especially want to invite everyone to Monday Evening Prayer during the Mondays of Lent at 7:00 PM. The church environment is one of prayerful silence, the other-worldliness of our prayer, song and incense rising to the rafters of the church. Please join us! If you cannot join us in person, how about going to iBreviary and pray with us when you can. Spoiler alert: “Lauds” is Morning Prayer and “Vespers” is Evening Prayer. Know that whether you pray with us in church or privately at home or at work or school, you are praying with “all the saints” in your Catholic Church!

Fasting: In addition to the dietary discipline, how about fasting from gossip, complaining, negativity and rash judgement? I’ll bet the Lord and His Heavenly Father would find this kind of fasting more satisfactory than denying ourselves caffeine, cola, candies and desserts!

Almsgiving: Pray for open ears, an open mind, and open heart to learn how Jesus Christ is calling us to be His stewards. Take the money you would normally spend on treats and add it to our collection for the poor.

Have you ever talked to someone who has been unemployed for an extended period? Worry and anxiety about tomorrow is intense. To those situations Jesus says: Do not worry about your life. Do not toil unless for the kingdom of God. Do not worry about what to eat, what to drink, or what to wear. Do not worry about your life. God remembers you, knows you, and brings light into your darkness. Trust in God and be confident in the life God has given you.

Gratitude is what comes from our soul when we are freed from worry. Seek first the kingdom of God. That is what disciples need to do. The rest, as Jesus says, will take care of itself. Seek the Kingdom. And say “Thank you!” Come to this Eucharist, this “Thanksgiving Meal.” And find food and strength and hope for our Lenten journey and beyond! AMEN!