

[Readings: Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13; Psalm 146; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Matt 5:1-12a]

Timothy P. O'Malley is the director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy. He has a creative take on today's Gospel. He says: We Christians often count our many blessings: family, a nice home, friendships that enable us to flourish. But it is the strange Christian who says, I count as blessing poverty, mourning and the existence of persecution. Yet, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus reveals to us the strangeness of blessing in the kingdom of God.

Matthew 5 begins by locating Jesus' preaching geographically: "He went up a mountain" (Mt 5:1). For us modern readers, this may seem like an unimportant detail. But in the history of Israel, God reveals things on mountains. In the Book of Exodus, Moses receives the Law on the mountaintop.

Jesus speaks this Law anew in the midst of a reconstituted, remnant people. The Law was never merely a series of commands that led Israel to fear. Instead, the Law is that which sets Israel apart as the chosen people who walk in the way of the Lord. Through the Law, Israel becomes a remnant in the world. Thus, what now we refer to as the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew serve as the foundation of this remnant identity as citizens in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit. Give up any reliance upon yourself, becoming a beggar before God in prayer. Attend to the poorest of the poor, who are favored by God throughout the Old Testament.

Jesus says blessed are the mourners. Our Lord is not speaking only about the general experience of mourning the death of a loved one, but about the way that we must become like the Israelites who weep over the sins of Zion, longing for God's final redemption of the world.

Jesus says blessed are the meek. The meek are the poor in spirit, who do not seize power but like Jesus reign out of the humility of love itself.

Jesus says blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. God is the source of all justice in the world. To hunger for righteousness is to long for God's justice to reign, to commit ourselves to the radical self-emptying love revealed in Jesus. If we want peace, we must work for justice!

Jesus says blessed are the merciful, for they have become missionaries of mercy. They have let their hearts be wounded by divine love, offering in consequence this love to the world. Jesus says blessed are the pure in heart. The pure in heart are those who can approach Mt. Zion, offering the sacrificial offering. These pure in heart have let the law of divine love infuse every dimension of their being, becoming a living sacrifice in the presence of God.

Jesus says blessed are the peacemakers, for they will become like angels in heaven seeing God. They abide by the peace of the kingdom and not the violence of the earthly reign. Jesus says blessed are those who are persecuted, who dwell in a world that refuses to understand that the kingdom of God is not about power and prestige.

These Beatitudes are not simply a matter of behavior modification. For Jesus alone is the one who can live these Beatitudes as the Word made flesh, the splendor of the Father, the King of Peace. Jesus reveals in the Sermon on the Mount what we must become to belong to the Church. We must become like Jesus, our very Lord. We must receive a strange blessing indeed! It is much easier to worship Jesus Christ than to become like Jesus Christ!

It's been said that in most Catholic parishes in the United States, there are five primary areas of ministry, outreach and service: Worship and Liturgy, Christian Service, Faith Formation, Administration and Stewardship, and Evangelization. Archbishop Allen Vigneron, our Chief Shepherd of this Archdiocese of Detroit, has missioned us to "Catch the Fire," to "Unleash the Gospel," and to move each parish from "maintenance to ministry." I want to do that here. But it takes a great parish with people involved in ministry, not simply doing jobs. It takes a people of the Beatitudes. With that, here are my visions, dreams and hopes for St. Martin de Porres Parish in the coming year:

*Worship and Liturgy:* We will continue to serve up Mass reverently and with a sense of humor. In a few of Christmas cards I received last month, people have expressed their gratitude that at St. Martin de Porres Church, "you make us laugh and then you make us think." I thank you for that observation.

Because that's what I'm trying to do: give you the message in a light-

hearted way and to help move the message from your head to your heart.

Some of you have expressed gratitude at bringing the music ministry closer together. To blend all of our choirs and musicians into a harmony of unity. I am excited to explore the possibility of introducing more Praise and Worship music into our Mass and into our various prayer services.

*Christian Service:* I am impressed and inspired with what we do with Christian Service here at St. Martin de Porres. This is because of three powerhouses: Our Christian Service Director Renee Heileman, the army of parish stewards (committed Christian volunteers), and the sponsors who provide the prayer, financial and material donations to make it all happen. We are the envy of many parishes, and I see us moving into the New Year with continued generosity. Gratitude is what motivates generosity. More about that later.

*Faith Formation:* We do a good job educating and forming our school age children, our teens and our young adults, and preparing them for the sacraments. But there is always room for improvement.

I have said in many homilies how every household needs a copy of the Catholic Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. But a handful of parishioners have challenged me, "Who is going to explain these books to us?"

My vision, my dream, my hope is to expand our Education/Faith Formation efforts to make available adult catechism and adult bible study in the morning, in the afternoon and in the evening, whatever is convenient for those interested. I also would like us to try RENEW, Living Room Dialogues and the Little Rock Bible Study. But we need good facilitators. I need you to come forward and introduces yourself to me. I especially extend this invitation to those who are recently retired, or new parishioners who have experience in these areas.

*Administration and Stewardship:* All stewardship begins with an attitude of gratitude. As we await the results of Synod 2016, I want to introduce this parish to the program "Called by Christ, Gifted by the Spirit." It starts with reflecting upon God's Word, applying it to our daily lives and living it out in the areas of prayer, family, outreach through parish ministry and service and that scary and

foreboding concept of financial support. OMG! He's going to talk about money! Yes, and to teach you that God cannot be outdone in generous giving!

There will be homilies, bulletin articles, web site items and personal testimony at Sunday Mass. Again, I need folks who are already committed to these areas of time for personal prayer, time with their family, parish stewardship of talent and generous support for the Church and charity. I need you to come forward, identify yourself to me, and share your witness with your parish family.

*Evangelization:* This is where all of you need to become involved. Since September, I have been inviting you, challenging you and asking you to broaden your brain, open your heart, and let the Holy Spirit make the connection and the transition between both! Our Evangelization Committee has doubled in size and we are excited about sharing with you the good things the Lord has done to us.

At Synod 2016, caught up in the emotion and religious fervor of the moment, many prayed, "Please, Lord, help me to spread your word." At the time we didn't know what the prayer may have fully meant, or where it would lead us.

That will be revealed in time. And that is the beauty of Jesus' call. Rather than assign specific jobs to each of us, Jesus accompanies us on our journey and shows us how our desired vocation can serve God's reign. Open to the Holy Spirit, we discover where Jesus wants us to be and what Jesus wants us to do.

And who does He call? St. Paul tells us in today's Second Reading: God calls not the powerful and those of noble birth. God calls the foolish, the weak, the lowly and despised to give God's wisdom in order to do the work of the Kingdom. How many of us fit that bill? I'm one of them!

As one biblical commentator put it: "He invites carpenters to build his temple, physicians to heal immortal souls, merchants to invest in pearls of great price," and fishers to become fishers of souls in service to God.

As we grow in faith, our daily work doesn't necessarily change but our intention and purpose do. Like the spirit-filled first disciples, we strive to spread God's word in whatever we do.

This is my vision, my dream, my hope for each one of you. It is ambitious, it doesn't include everything, but it is enough for one year: to re-discover and to

deepen our beautiful Catholic faith, to celebrate what we have, and then to share what we have with others. To strive, to celebrate and to serve. Are you with me??? AMEN?

I close with a prayer composed by St. Thomas Aquinas, whose feast day is this weekend:

“Grant me, O Lord my God,  
a mind to know you,  
a heart to seek you,  
Wisdom to find you,  
conduct pleasing to you,  
faithful perseverance in waiting for you,  
and a hope of finally embracing you.”  
AMEN!