

[Readings: Genesis 2:7-9; Psalm 51; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11]

How easy it has been to hide behind Adam and Eve, the garden and the serpent and cast blame for our own actions upon someone other than ourselves.

The story of the fall as narrated in our reading from the Book of Genesis has become more an excuse than an explanation of the existence of sin and its evil consequences in the world. Even in the telling of the story itself, one can observe how blame is passed from one person to the other. In verses omitted from today's First Reading, Adam is caught in sin and called to task for it. He blames Eve and, indirectly, God: "The woman YOU put here with me, she gave me the fruit, so I ate it (Gen. 3:12). The woman, in turn blames the snake – and so it goes on and on. The Blame Game.

St. Paul blames Adam as well in our Second Reading. Paul traces human sin to one man and holds that one man, Adam, accountable for the death that came to all human beings. Paul didn't originally intend to shift all the responsibility for this world's evils onto the shoulders of one human being. But St. Augustine ran with that idea and created for us the doctrine of Original Sin. That doctrine says that sin is somehow hereditary, like some horrible birth defect transmitted from one generation to the next. How many times have we heard, "You're just like your father!" or "Don't act like your mother!" My own mom told us kids when we were growing up that the two worst kids in the history of the world are named, "Not ME" and "I don't know!" "Who did this?" "Not ME!" "Who did that?" "I don't know!"

Given this kind of understanding, it becomes quite easy to blame another for what I have done because it would seem that I cannot help myself. When we freely choose to do evil, there is no one upon whom to cast the blame but ourselves. Not Adam, not Eve, not the snake, not even Original Sin can bear our guilt. "The Devil made me do it" doesn't fly!

If peace lives in our hearts, everyone we meet experiences our lack of inner conflict. Each circumstance becomes an opportunity to reconcile dissent when it emerges.

If we're irritated, however, that irritation gets carried from work to home, from the boss to the spouse to the kids, to our useless raving in front of the nightly news. The employer yells at the employee. The employee goes home and yells at the spouse. The spouse yells at the kid. And the kid kicks the dog! All because of what happened at work! So too is our willingness to be a little bit unjust if it's to our advantage.

Our great hope is in Jesus Christ becoming one of us. The love of God has also taken on flesh and dwells with us. Like sin, Incarnation isn't an idea that stands alone. Two truths are declared on Ash Wednesday: We're dust, and we're miraculous. We can repent and believe in the Gospel. Both are true.

What we do with our time, money, abilities, and education is a moral issue. What we do in our relationships matters morally. Whether our resources are used to comfort ourselves or to console others, they draw us closer to the tempter or closer to the saint. We choose.

If we want to be loving, we have to be on the way to love all the time. If we want mercy, we have to offer mercy ceaselessly. If we seek justice, all our relationships must deepen in justice. If we desire peace on earth, a little aggression here and there is no way to arrive at that goal. Jesus rejects the tempter completely. He knows a little evil goes a long way.

St. Paul, in our Second Reading, gives us two important points to remember. First, if we freely choose to sin and we do so deliberately, we are responsible. We are not simply a bundle of uncontrollable compulsion with which we have been saddled because of the sins of others. We may suffer because of the sins of others, but when we sin we have no one to blame but ourselves.

The second point that St. Paul makes is that no matter what we have done, no matter how mortal or venial, God's grace is more than enough to forgive it, to absolve us of it, and to point us to a life of grace.

We don't need to be stuck in the muck of guilt and shame. Jesus Christ pulls us out of the filth into the light.

Matthew, in today's Gospel, gives us the great hope and more good news for this First Sunday of Lent. Jesus Christ is given to us as an example of one who used His free will to overcome evil rather than to give into it. Born into the same environment as we are, subject to the same limitations as we are, lured by the same desires, filled with the same yearnings for fulfillment, security and the respect and the esteem of others, Jesus faced head-on those very factors that could have contributed to His downfall.

Jesus refuses to abuse His power; He refuses to allow another to replace God in His life. Jesus relies on the Word of God to get Him through the desert. In that Word, and in His relationship with His Father, Jesus finds the strength needed to stand up to evil and not to be bowed by it. He stands out as one with strength of will and character. He takes responsibility for Himself. He could have given in to temptation; instead, He faces them down. He blames no one for His struggles, for the ordeal that would become His ministry; nor for His innocent death. He is the ultimate steward of life and death.

Christian stewardship is the commitment made in response to God's generosity -- to live a life of gratitude, to make daily decisions to glorify God, and to share ourselves and our gifts generously as circumstances and talents allow. A life of gratitude is the first mark of a Christian steward. God has endowed His followers with more gifts than we can imagine -- life and faith, time and relationships, health, talents and skills, and material and financial goods.

Everything we are and have is a gift from God, and a Christian steward thanks God daily for these blessings. Stewardship means making daily, conscious choices that glorify God. These decisions reveal a person's priorities. The axiom, "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are," holds true. There are such things as self-glorification and the exaltation of wealth, social status, success, power, peace of mind, and security.

We should be recognizable as a Christian disciple by the place God has in our daily life. Christian stewards regard success, a high standard of living, and the accumulation of material objects as secondary to loving God and a life of generosity, hospitality, and the primacy of personal relationships. In making

these decisions, we turn culture's values upside down.

The best way to respond to God's loving generosity is by reflecting that generosity day by day. Take time for prayer; to nurture relationships with family and friends; to participate in the worship life of the communion of Christians; and to act out of loving concern on behalf of others in the world with what we have.

What God does in Jesus' human life is a much magnified version of what happens when our personal schedule is rearranged to be with someone who is lonely or despairing, or when creative ways are devised to volunteer talents for the parish, or when family budgets and spending habits are reprioritized in light of the Gospel. The stewardship question is not, "Should I do these things?" but rather, "How much should I do?" That is the difference between a parish volunteer and a parish steward.

Ultimately, stewardship comes down to personal decisions about how each of us lives, and how each of us will respond to God's gifts based on our experience, our self-knowledge, and the call of God's grace. There is the paradoxical truth, made holy in the New Testament, that by giving ourselves to someone or something beyond ourselves, we discover our own best self: *"He who loses himself for My sake will find himself"* (Matthew 10:39).

Living as Christian stewards should bring a deeper and more solid joy and confidence about being disciples of Jesus Christ. Though Christians, we have not seen Christ, but we are assured -- by faith truly lived and generously practiced -- the joy, the peace, and the life that comes to those who dare to believe and to trust in Him. AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 33; 2 Tim 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9]

When Bernard Hebda was in eighth grade, he thought he had an idea of what God was calling him to do, but he wasn't sure: God either wanted him to become a priest or a bus driver. Confused, he spoke to his parish priest, who in turn spoke to Bernard's parents. "When he learns how to clean his room, he can become a priest," they said. Apparently that was enough to dissuade him from the priesthood, at least for a while. But he didn't become a bus driver either. After high school and college, Bernard went to law school, and although he still wanted to become a priest, he had student loans to pay off, so he went to work as a lawyer. But not for long.

Like the disciples who didn't always understand what Jesus was telling them, Bernard prayed for the wisdom to know what God wanted, and he kept listening. He finally got it: God simply hadn't been ready for him yet, and then eventually he was. And that's when Bernard started his path to priesthood. He's now the Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

What identifies a steward? Safeguarding material and human resources and using them responsibly is one answer; so is generous giving of time, talent, and treasure. But being a Christian steward means more. As Christian stewards, we receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord.

Let us begin with being a disciple -- a follower of our Lord, Jesus Christ. As members of the Church, Jesus calls us to be disciples. This has astonishing implications:

- Mature disciples make a conscious decision to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.
- Christian disciples experience conversion -- life-shaping changes of mind and heart -- and commit their very selves to the Lord.
- Christian stewards respond in a particular way to the call to be a disciple. Jesus calls us, as His disciples, to a new way of life -- the Christian way of life -- of which stewardship is part.

But Jesus does not call us as nameless people in a faceless crowd. He calls us individually, by name. Each one of us -- clergy, religious, lay person; married, single; adult, child -- has a personal vocation. God intends each of us to play a unique role in carrying out His divine plan.

The challenge, then, is to understand our role -- our vocation -- and to respond generously to this call from God. Christian vocation entails the practice of stewardship. In addition, Christ calls each of us to be stewards of our personal vocations, which we receive from God.

People who want to live as Christian disciples and Christian stewards face serious obstacles. In the United States and other developed nations, a dominant secular culture often contradicts religious convictions about the meaning of life. This culture frequently encourages us to focus on ourselves and our pleasures. At times, we can find it far too easy to ignore spiritual realities and to deny religion a role in shaping human and social values.

It is essential that we make a special effort to understand the true meaning of stewardship and live accordingly.

How much faith does it take to follow? How much risk are we willing to take? God asks Abram, "Do you love me? Then move out of the state, out of the country. Do you love me? Then sacrifice your child to prove your loyalty to me. Because Abram said yes, he was given land. He was given a great nation. He was blessed. This didn't mean an easy life would follow.

Whether he or we fully comprehend or cooperate, the divine plan moves ahead, and Abram, in faith, agrees to trust what he could not know and hope in what he could not yet see. Because of his faith and hope, Abram would become Abraham, the father of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The Second Reading for the Second Sunday of Lent from 2 Timothy says that you and I need to take risks and to bear our share of hardship for the Gospel "with the strength that comes from God" alone. The closer we get to Jesus, the more we profess our love for Him, the more change becomes a way of life.

What kind of hardship does Paul endure? Imprisonments, beatings, attempts on his life. I would hazard a guess that OUR hardships might be more insidious. Medical problems. Mental anguish. Daily pressures and anxieties. Family problems. I don't think any one of these is any greater or any less than the sufferings of St. Paul. And what is his remedy for what ails him? Grace. Grace is that "equipment" that comes to us in baptism. Grace is available to us now and always. All we require is the humility and the courage to tap into it. Grace is power, power to conquer all that pushes us against God and goodness, power to go on living and loving. Power to be Christian in every way when being so seems impossible. That is what grace allows us to do!

The Transfiguration moment found in today's Gospel is indeed a "graced moment" in the lives of Jesus, Peter, John and James. It is a mystical experience that changes them forever. We may have just such experiences in our own families. With our parents, with our children, with our spouses, and yes, even our in-laws.

After Jesus, we look to Mary as an ideal steward. As the Mother of Christ, she lived her ministry in a spirit of fidelity and service; she responded generously to God's call. We must ask ourselves: Do we also wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ and Christian stewards of our world and our Church?

Central to our human and Christian vocation, as well as to the unique vocation each one of us receives from God, is that we be good stewards of the gifts we possess. The Holy Spirit shows us the way. Stewardship is a part of that journey. Here to speak about stewardship in the vocation of married life are:
5:00 Mass: Mark & Cindy Zapinski / Sunday Masses: Dan & Debbie Waring.

When in your life has an event so changed your understanding of the world that you don't know what to do or who to trust? God tells you again; listen to my beloved Son. Where woundedness can be refined into beauty, a wonderful transfiguration takes place (John O'Donohue). When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed (Maya Angelou). AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42]

We probably all have a friend like this: the one who says, "Let's talk" -- and promptly proceeds to do all the talking. It's tough to have a one-sided conversation. The root word "converse" means both "to associate with" and "to turn around." Conversing implies getting together and passing the talking stick from one to the next. Genuine conversation is also a far cry from chitchat. As the point of view revolves around, ideas grow and change. Information is shared and increased. New awareness becomes available to all in a spiral of ascent.

Jesus has such a conversation with the Samaritan woman. Such conversations are rarely recorded in the gospels. When Jesus is recruiting followers, He doesn't waste words: "Come," he says, and they either do or don't.

When He teaches the crowds, there's no dialogue. When other rabbis come to Him with trick questions, few are hankering for a true sharing of ideas. The rarely noted conversations are between Jesus and his faithful disciples. After a public teaching, Jesus retreats with His friends, answers their questions, and explores the deeper meanings of what He's been saying and doing. He'll even suggest what they can expect next.

The gospels don't present these conversations in much detail. We're often merely told that Jesus goes aside with his friends; the rest happens offstage. A few times in John's account, however, a longer conversation goes on the record.

In the gospels, only with the Samaritan woman does genuine conversation take place. She alone, this nameless woman, ascends in understanding as a result of thoughtful time spent with Jesus. Information turns to revelation, and new life comes to many -- all because one woman was willing to talk. In this generation, where are the real conversations happening, and how can we be part of them? I submit that they happen when you are thirsty, uncomfortable, and feeling you don't belong. In today's Scriptures you learn that having a relationship with Jesus satisfies all your thirsts and fulfills your hopes. This experience of being understood and wanting to understand makes you human.

This desire to satisfy your longings is the bridge where Jesus meets you. That is the conversation God wants to have with you so that you may be healed and go on in grace and peace to proclaim what God has done for you.

In every parish I have been assigned, the Number One Concern people share with me is their spiritual hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Their emptiness and loneliness. There is a special place in every human heart that is designed for the Lord alone to enter and to rest: to “pitch His tent” in the center of our life-source.

What prevents Jesus Christ from fully entering your heart? Maybe there is too much Massah and Meribah in our lives. “Massah” means “the place of testing” and “Meribah” means “the place of quarrelling.” Too many times we give in to temptation and to many times we squawk and scream at each other like barbarians.

Interestingly, solitude is the cure for loneliness. People say to me, “aren’t you lonely living in that big house next to the church by yourself?” I say, there is a difference between being alone, being lonely, and being in solitude. I love the solitude after a long and busy day!

When we are afraid of being along, we should go into it. Dive deep into it. Solitude teaches profound lessons, especially about ourselves. Feeling lonely has value. Sometimes we need to turn inward to discover what we need to hold on to and what we need to let go of. Once we turn inward and are at peace with ourselves and with the Lord, we can turn outward as Christian Stewards.

Once upon a time, a master showed two rooms to his two disciples and told them to fill the room with something. The first man tried to fill his room with hay and corn husks, but he couldn’t fill it. The other man lit some fragrant candles and played some melodious hymns in his room. Then the room was filled with fragrance and music.

The master describes these two ways for everyone. We can fill our hearts with either hay or light. Initially, the woman at the well tries to fill her heart with five friendships of chaff (corn husks), but she utterly failed.

Jesus tells her, "You will be thirsty again if you drink from that well where you were drinking." Life comes from water and is purified and glorified by water. This weekend's readings are about living water and new life. The Bible says that Jesus is the living water. Water represents the Spirit of God which comes to us in baptism. That Spirit quenches our spiritual thirst.

St. Paul, in our Second Reading, highlights that Jesus, our savior, poured out the living water into our hearts. The Samaritan woman in our Gospel receives the living water. She was thirsty, even when she had five friendships. Jesus awakens this woman and tells her, "You will be thirsty again if you drink from that well where you were drinking."

The Samaritan woman found the Messiah in Jesus step by step. It transformed her life. This is what happens when we grow in prayer. We start with a superficial level of relationship with the Lord, and in time, it develops into a profound friendship. First, she found in Jesus a thirsty young man in His early thirties. That is why she points out the caste and color of Jesus when He asks for a drink. "How can you, a Jew, ask me for a drink?" (John 6:9). Second, she slowly realizes that Jesus is a little more than father Jacob. "Are you greater than our father Jacob?" (John 4:12)

Third, when Jesus points out her past sinful life, five husbands, immediately she finds in Jesus a prophet. "I can see that you are a Prophet" (John 4:19). So she begs Jesus to be the living water so that she would not be thirsty again. Fourth, when she fully receives the Spirit of God, she loudly proclaims, "You are the Messiah, You are the Christ, the Savior of the world!"

Then she surrenders herself to Jesus and drops her bucket, the bucket of sin, at the foot of Jesus and receives the source of living water and goes away. She goes to the town and proclaims to her people, "I saw the Messiah, the one who is to come." Like the Samaritan woman, we need to allow Jesus to enter into our personal lives. Step by step, layer by layer.

Prayer is the first fundamental aspect of Christian stewardship. A necessary part of the Christian disciple's vocation is to pray. Prayer makes us aware of God and opens us to God's love. Prayer gradually makes us realize our

complete dependence on God. Prayer also makes us realize the great power we have as disciples to use our own gifts in a meaningful way.

The desire to pray is a gift from God. So radical is our dependence on the graciousness of the Lord that we cannot even desire to pray unless God invites us. Spoiler alert! God invites ALL of us! Even the beginnings, the urges to pray, are sheer gift. The desire to pray is a clear sign of God's presence in our lives, for without God's presence, we could not desire God. Pray for the desire to pray if you don't have it yet.

The Gospels are full of occasions when Jesus paused from His public ministry, departed from the crowds, went off to a lonely place and prayed. The work of each day was closely bound up with prayer as Jesus Christ showed us that prayer was the center of his Messianic ministry and paschal death.

Today's Christian makes specific time for daily prayer, pausing during each day to glorify God. By taking time out for prayer, we are following Christ: not only learning to be his disciples, but also sharing our experience of God. That prayer can be not only in church, but in the car or bus during your commute, in your favorite recliner with the TV off, at study hall or while waiting to check out at the supermarket. Tevye from "Fiddler on the Roof" prayed to God as if in conversation with Him as he made the rounds delivering milk to the villagers.

Establish a routine for prayer, as you do for study, sports and entertainment. Pope Francis challenges us this Lent to look at our Bibles each day as often as we look at our cell phones!

If you are already a person who spends time each day devoted to prayer, you understand why it is vitally important that those who are to be invited to Christian stewardship must first learn the fundamental importance of taking time to pray and bless God for all that we have and all that we are. Go to the well! Come to the well! Drink, and never be thirsty again! AMEN!

[Readings: 1 Sam 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a; Psalm 23; Eph. 5:8-14; John 9:1-41]

There are a handful of songs that, when I hear them, I cannot sit still. If it's at a wedding reception, I have to get up and dance. If I'm in the car, I have to sway with the rhythm. One of those songs is "We Are Family," made popular in the 1980's by the group Sister Sledge. The secret of that family staying together is what they call their Golden Rule and their "family jewel." "Have faith in you and the things you do!"

The second fundamental principle of Christian stewardship is, after prayer, nurturing our "family" with time and love. We characterize Christian families as communities whose faith in Christ brings and keeps them together. A Christian family's existence makes sense only because Jesus and his Father are real for its family members. We believe that the Holy Spirit refreshes the faith that brings us closer to God and to each other in family life.

The term, "family" brings a rich dimension to our understanding of community life: whether the reality is that of two-parent families, single parent families, childless married couples, adoptive and foster families, couples whose children are grown and away from home, single and widowed persons in their extended family networks, blended families and men and women in religious communities. All of these constitute "family."

A sad reality is that for the first time in western civilization, the traditional family with the original husband and wife, father and mother and biological children is now less than 50%. They are now the minority, which means a new definition of family and new realities.

Families give us an identity in a community larger than our own personal lives and our work. Thinking of ourselves as members of a family can bring a deeper consciousness of a shared life of permanent commitment. This is especially helpful in a culture today which places less value on permanent commitments to others, especially in times of hardship. Likewise, families also may bring a deeper awareness of shared work in a culture that places more importance on the self and individual pursuits.

As members of a family community, Christians are called to exercise good stewardship by nurturing family relationships. Christian stewardship presumes a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation among family members. It presumes that the family will work at good communication, develop a sensitive imagination and foster loving spontaneity. Where does the need exist in your own family for forgiveness and reconciliation? Do you have good communication in your family? Do you provide a home that encourages imagination and spontaneity? These last three weeks of Lent might be a good time to do something about it.

Christian marriage is a dynamic sign of Christian stewardship because it gives witness to a public expression of deep, personal and spiritual commitment. The practice of authentic stewardship helps us to summon up a great deal of needed patience, effort, sacrifice and determination, especially during difficult times. Guided and strengthened by the exercise of faithful stewardship, marital love thrives in an atmosphere of freedom and trust, where each is allowed and encouraged to grow, to be more creative in their love, and to draw closer to God.

Married couples, how does this happen in your own marriage? When I ask couples celebrating a jubilee wedding anniversary, what is the secret to a good marriage, they say words like: patience, effort, sacrifice and determination. One couple even said "separate vacations!"

Parents exercise stewardship over the gifts of their children, remembering that they are micro-images of God to their children, and that they are, by word and example, the first teachers of the faith for their children. They give their children a genuine sense of trust and security, making their home a safe, welcome place, and giving them a sense of shared responsibility for the family's decisions. They take time to do things together with their children as a family, and they try to be sensitive to their children's own growing needs and skills.

Parents also allow their children to make choices too, and by letting them know that as stewards themselves, they are responsible and accountable. That there are consequences to the decisions they make.

Children, is this happening in your family? Do you feel safe and welcome? Do you share in the duties and responsibilities of home life?

We are the stewards of parents, especially aging parents, encouraging them to feel confident that we consider their lives not only meaningful but sacred.

The Christian family looks beyond its immediate circle to reach out in love to others who come into their lives, as much as is practical, rather than become selfishly absorbed in only their relationship. Stewardship also calls the family to be aware of the needs of their neighborhood, the poor and underprivileged in their area and the outside world. Stewardship encourages families to develop a Christian world-view. Could it be possible today and for the future that the Holy Spirit is working through Christian families to establish a more visible and conscious sign of Christ's presence in the world today?

In my last parish, a family of four – dad, mom, two sons – were the only family that went to church on Sunday in a subdivision of 100 homes. Only their car backed out of the driveway every Sunday to take them to Mass.

Indeed, the Christian family is a counter-cultural sign today. What family members face together rather than individually or alone, nurtures and even insures their commitment to the Lord and to one another. Our Mass Readings tie in the theme of family and God's plan in our lives. Our First Reading has a simple message. Don't judge by appearances. Looks are deceiving. Beware of First Impressions. We can be fooled by hidden agendas. Be honest in how you present yourself. How can I get beyond appearances when meeting and dealing with others? This is particularly difficult among family members, isn't it?

It is not hard to relate to our Second Reading. St. Paul slaps us into reality with his comments. He doesn't say, "Once you were IN the darkness." He says, "Once you WERE darkness." As if our very being was the core of evil. That our very existence was the reason for the darkness in our society and world.

But now, we are children of the light. Like sun-flowers, we turn and follow the sun -- better the SON, the Son of God -- in our daily actions and attitudes.

In today's Gospel, Jesus shows us who is really blind and who is not. The Pharisees are blind because they refuse to believe the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. The blind man's parents are blind because they refuse to admit that their son was blind from birth, less they be shunned by the

community for seeing a healing take place on the Sabbath. Only Jesus and the blind man can truly “see.” The healed blind man says, “I believe!” And Jesus pronounces everyone else blind in their sins.

Imagine for a moment, the most shameless acts you have ever committed. Not pretty. Now imagine them being projected on the walls of this church. To coin a phrase, "we would all just die" from embarrassment, wouldn't we? In Christ, in the confession of our sins, we rise with Christ and walk into the light -- freed and called to be faithful once more. We are freed from our guilt and shame. So, if you have not yet done so, get to confession! And become light for your family, for your family of faith, and for the human family of the world! AMEN!