

[Readings: Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8; Psalm 138; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11]

He was a music teacher. For decades he taught in classrooms and gave private lessons. He himself could play the piano, accordion, trumpet, and other brass instruments. He had a mellow tenor's voice and was good but not spectacular in any of those areas of performance himself. But he had the hallmark all good teachers possess: He found in his pupils that inner core that allowed them to experience and utilize their God-given talents as fully as they were capable.

Most carried memories of performing better than they ever thought they had been capable of. This teacher used what's known as Beginner's Mind. Clean like a blank page. Open and receptive and eager to learn something new, to go in whatever direction becomes available.

At his funeral, there were no tapes of his music-making. He made it clear that he wanted his students to provide the hymns and melodies. Many had not played publicly in years and there were a few missed notes. But no matter. The funeral slowly morphed into a celebration of thanksgiving for what he had helped them find in themselves and would never lose.

More than skill or talent, he had helped them find confidence in themselves and an appreciation of what they could do. It became a celebration of a life well lived, a melody well played, lessons well taught and, so, well learned.

This is how it was for Simon Peter that day at the lake. The Sea of Galilee was also called Gennesaret, "the Lake of the Garden of Riches," because it was surrounded by fertile land and a prosperous community that inhabited nine major towns. People who worked hard did well around there: fishing, farming, stone-masonry, or carpentry. But Peter isn't doing so well that day. A whole night given over to fishing and yet his nets are empty in the morning. He must have been tired and disappointed.

Then a preacher from over in Nazareth asks to use Peter's boat as a platform from which to teach. Why not? It was certainly no use fishing with it.

Peter could have hunkered down in his boat that morning, closed down his heart, and surrendered himself to his failure the night before. He could have relived every hour – every useless throw of the net -- every wrong decision made: location, direction, bait. He could have blamed his wife for sabotaging his attitude -- or perhaps his sick mother-in-law, whose medical condition distracted him.

He could have taken that poison pill marked “yesterday” and let it kill his spirit. Then Jesus asks him to take the boat out again and lower the nets. If Peter was focused on yesterday, he would never have done it. If past failure was huge within him, he wouldn’t have the courage. But Peter said no to yesterday, and yes to today, placing all his hope in Jesus. It was a good decision!

The readings this week say: God does it. In our First Reading, Isaiah gets to see God -- and live -- and receives his call directly from the heavenly court. In our Second Reading, Jesus Himself appears to the last person to whom you would have expected: His ugly ex-persecutor Paul. In the Gospel, Peter, along with the other two of the “Big Three” apostles, Peter, John and James, accept their mission straight from Christ.

Despite their protestations of inadequacy, these three are actually quite privileged and -- as it turned out -- ready to follow God completely. Three figures this week protest they are unworthy. Isaiah: “I am a man of unclean lips.” Saint Paul: “I am the least of the apostles.” Saint Peter: “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” Nonetheless they are chosen to witness God’s glory and advance God’s mission. Whoever you are, however unworthy you may feel, God has something important for you to do. What is it? And what is holding you back?

The call of God in our lives is at once a call to the most profound and to the most practical. Though the invitation of God is to give our whole selves, the manner of our response is typically focused on small, specific actions -- right where we live. To what in my life do I need to say, “Here I am, Lord”?

To the child who’s having a rough time in school or with friends, and could use loving attention?

To the lonely neighbor who could use a kind friend to listen patiently to the details of his or her life?

To letting go an old resentment that is poisoning my heart?

To the challenge of forgiving someone who hurt me; or to the task of apologizing to someone I have hurt?

To a distant relative who would love to get a cheery letter, card, or e-mail?

To a situation I've been procrastinating about that needs me to be strong and courageous?

To the inner voice of creativity that feels stifled?

To a recurring habit of sin that I need to bring into the light of God's merciful and forgiving love?

No one is "fit to be called an apostle," Paul recognizes in today's Epistle. But by "the grace of God," even a persecutor of the Church, as Paul once was, can be lifted up for the Lord's service. In the Old Testament, humanity was unfit for the divine -- no one could stand in God's presence and live. But in Jesus, we're made able to speak with Him face-to-face, and taste His Word on our tongue.

Like Isaiah, Paul, and Peter, we all feel unworthy to the task God calls us to. But we are not alone. With God's help, we can do whatever we are called to do. Be not afraid.

By the grace of God, you are what you are, and God's grace in you has been effective. Whether you are preparing for First Eucharist, journeying through the R. C. I. A. or well on your journey of faith. So do not be afraid, because from this present day forward, you will be bringing people to the Lord, starting with yourself. Leave your physical, spiritual and emotional baggage behind. Pray, reflect, discern, choose, respond... and follow HIM.

"Here I am... Send ME!" AMEN!

[Readings: Jeremiah 17: 5-8; Psalm 1; 1 Cor. 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26]

We talk a lot in this church about vocations. Here in the parish, we pray regularly for an increase in vocations. We encourage parents to talk to their children about considering life as a priest or brother or a sister.

But this Sunday, I'm going to talk about a vocation that doesn't get as much attention – but should. It's one that has affected every man, woman and child in this church today. And it's one that many here are living out every day – maybe without even realizing it.

It's probably the most visible vocation in the world. I'm speaking, of course, of marriage: the vocation of being a husband or a wife.

This Sunday marks World Marriage Day and so the Church takes this opportunity to celebrate this sacrament — to bless men and women who have made this commitment to one another and to remind ourselves of what it means to be married.

Though this takes place just before Valentine's Day, those who are married know: it's not all chocolates and roses. Sometimes, it's sour grapes and poison ivy. It's socks on the floor and dishes in the sink and diapers that need changing and meetings with teachers and paying bills and fixing the car and snoring at three in the morning. It's not always easy. But nothing of value is.

Being married isn't just a lifestyle choice, or a living arrangement that has tax advantages and can result in two or three little deductions.

No. Marriage is something else. Something more. Something deeper. Something greater. Something that should inspire awe and wonder.

It is, in fact, a vocation. But how many of us treat it that way?

How many of us – even the most faithful Catholics – look on this sacrament as something like Holy Orders?

How many of us realize that those of you who are married are a part of something sacred?

How many of us understand that the life of a married couple is – like the life of a priest or religious – a calling? And that it is a daily, deliberate choice?

It is. Make no mistake: those who are married have been called to this way of life. God has spoken to us, just as he has to priests and religious, and He has summoned us to live our lives in a radical way – putting the interests of another person, or even the interests of an entire family, ahead of our own. He has asked us to do this for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for a lifetime. Share this mission with me, He says. Offer your life for this great adventure: to be a spouse, to begin a family, and continue My work of creation in the world. That is His calling to us.

It is a wonder, and a mystery – and a summons that can't help but leave us feeling humbled. Married life is God extending Himself through time, continuing what began when He first called forth light and life. The creative work of the Creator continues, through every husband and wife, who then strive to bring light and life into the world. It's a holy covenant. It's a sacrament.

And yes: it is a vocation. A symbol of Christ's love for His Church. He is the Divine Bridegroom. We, the Church, are His Bride.

And like any vocation, it requires an ongoing dialogue with God. And it is something to be done, a way of living that should give glory to God.

Paul writes: "Brothers and sisters, whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." That includes the ordinary, everyday, mundane acts of married life. Give glory to God with every dish you wash, every bill you pay, and every sock you toss in a hamper instead of leaving on the floor.

Make of your marriage a prayer. It's so important to pray. Separately and together. Because God knows the strengths and weaknesses of the other person better than you do. You need His help.

Every marriage does. Every vocation does. No priest or brother or sister or deacon can last long without an active prayer life. And so it is with this vocation of marriage. It requires what the Church has so beautifully described as "the domestic church" – each couple, each family living and praying and sharing together, finding communion together. It is something beautiful. And holy.

It is a vocation. And as I tell couples in my wedding homily: the great goal, the highest goal, of any marriage is to try to make your spouse a saint. To get

each other into Heaven. Imagine what might happen if we honestly, sincerely treated marriage that way -- and treated it as a vocation.

Parishes would have regular marriage vocation fairs.

There would be a marriage novena to Mary and Joseph, asking their intercession to call forth more good husbands and wives.

There would be prayers offered regularly to Saints Louis and Zélie Martin – the parents of St. Therese of Lisieux.

There would be an ongoing effort, in every family, in every parish, in every diocese, to pray for holy marriages, just as we now pray for holy priests.

If we began to have that kind of a mindset, more of us might then come to see this sacred calling as, indeed, a calling that is sacred. A marriage wouldn't just be 50 or 60 years following a big overpriced party with a dress you only wore once. I thank God that so many of you married couples in this parish truly witness to the presence of God in your marriage. Every day.

See your marriage as a kind of daily prayer – an offering to God, and an offering to one other person. An offering made once. And forever.

Imagine what it might mean if we all thought of marriage that way.

Imagine how that might change our Church – and change our world.

Here are a few ideas to show your trust in God as a couple: Receive the sacraments regularly. That means frequent Mass and Communion and regular participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Practice forgiveness both in the giving and receiving. Lose yourself serving others. Pray daily, early and often. Offer hospitality to each other. Share your faith with each other and with your children and grandchildren. Open your heart to grace throughout your day. Take God's hand and walk together. This is how we trust. And how it will keep your marriage green and growing. AMEN!

[1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38]

If Christianity had to be boiled down to one word, a leading contender would be *unity*. We celebrate “one Lord, one faith, one Baptism.” Of the four special marks of the Church, the list of “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” begins with our fundamental oneness. This explains why the deepest wounds in the history of the Church have been inflicted by division, and why the very notion of faithful dissent is a foreign language in Rome.

The primacy of our unity isn’t hard to understand. Judaism was founded on the principle of allegiance to the God who is One, even though God is three Persons in that Unity. Jesus has two natures but is not schizophrenic. Jesus Christ is the power that reconciles all the great divisions of human reality: Heaven and Earth, Jews and Gentiles, women and men, slaves and masters. The Church is described as one Body in Christ. What room is there, in this elegant vision of total communion, for division?

If Christianity is the ultimate expression of unity, then why is it so divided and so divisive a force in the world? This is the question we as the Church need to ask ourselves. The religion of reconciliation comes all too often not in peace, but with a sword. Our division has split us into 40,000 different Christian denominations in this country alone.

Years ago, on the Solemn Feast of the Easter Vigil at the Basilica of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, three separate sects tried to do their Vigil service at the same time. A fight broke out among the priests and monks. Candlesticks were thrown and used as weapons. All this at the very site of our faith! The video of the fight went viral, with the audio playing, “They Will Know We are Christians by our Love!”

Among the most disturbing aspects of Christian unity is the idea that we can’t hate anyone, not even our enemies. Maybe if the Church could get this right, we could get the whole thing right. But like the secular community that encompasses us, we who belong to the Church find it easy to manufacture and distance ourselves from those we identify as enemies.

What is an enemy, after all? Someone who doesn’t think like us, act like us, or have our best interests at heart. The enemy is perceived as hostile and even harmful. These persons or forces threaten our security, well-being, or quality of life.

In a crush-or-be-crushed world, we feel compelled to strike out against the enemy before we ourselves fall victim. I'm thinking of the situation with Russia and Ukraine. The teaching of Jesus about loving the enemy seems preposterous.

There is only one way out of the spiral of hatred, violence, and fear. That way is the way that Jesus taught. We have to love our enemies: unilaterally, vulnerably, and without exceptions. We have to look into the eyes of the one who lies and betrays, even the one who crucifies, and say only, "Father forgive them," from the bottom of our hearts. Until we are prepared to do that awful, Christ-like act, then we'll continue to suffer the world as it is and much worse.

Our First Reading couldn't be more blunt about the choice put before us. Here's Saul, the mighty king with an army of 3,000 men in pursuit of David. Saul intends to kill David, make no mistake. He's said it and he means it. David is a threat to his kingdom and his way of life, and therefore David must die. Meanwhile, here's David, with a band of only 600 loyal men playing hide-and-seek in the desert. It seems impossible that such a ragtag group could prevail, and yet David is smart and clever. On one fateful night, he manages to get the upper hand. He finds Saul sleeping and unguarded and could take his enemy's life with one thrust of the spear. Just one thrust and his fugitive days are over. David doesn't do it.

This is such a crucial story in Samuel that it's told twice, once in chapter 24 and again in 26. By this incident, David's character is revealed to us. He's got a very real, very dangerous enemy who means him deliberate and imminent harm, but David won't kill him. Saul will later die by his own hand, and David will ascend to the throne, but neither knows that for certain now.

The decision made in this hour is pivotal for both men -- for Saul, because he'll live to see another day, but also for David. David gains his freedom in this hour, to walk into the dawn with no blood on his hands and no guilt on his soul. Saul remains king for now, but David becomes, through his choices, kingly.

Today's lesson is transparent: God will reckon with Saul, as surely as God will care for his servant David. Even if Saul had risen up and slain David on the spot, that would still be true. Either we believe that, or we do not believe in the God of promises.

We can't control the behavior of others, but that doesn't matter, because we're only responsible for our own behavior.

When people argue against "doing unto others" according to the principle of Christ's love, the premise is that it doesn't work. It does, actually; although we may have



to adjust our idea of what we mean by “work.” It doesn’t necessarily get us what we want and it might even get us killed.

Are there people in your life you have considered to be your enemies?  
If so, how have dealt with them?

Have you been able in some way to treat them in a loving way, despite what they may have done to you? Are you carrying any resentment, bitterness, or ill-will toward them? If so, what can you do to let go of the negative feelings?

Daily life offers countless opportunities to put this Sunday’s Gospel into practice. Can I think of one clear-cut example from the past week in which I’ve loved an enemy or done good to someone who hates me? How about a recent time when I failed to do that?

Loving others does not mean being available for abuse. What have I learned in my life about being loving in the midst of conflict?

Doing unto others is about remaining faithful to the spirit of Christ, our reconciliation with God and others, our fundamental unity in love. It works every time; we do not lose ourselves; we gain every promise in eternity. And such strong, simple, unyielding love does change the world and is the only thing that can save it. Such is the testimony of the cross. The only way we, too, can grow and expand in grace and knowledge of the ways of God is to practice them. Let’s not pray for God to forgive us as WE forgive, but to forgive as GOD forgives! AMEN!

[Sirach 27:4-7; Psalm 92; 1 Cor. 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45]

I think I am here long enough for most of you to know that I have a sense of humor. Some would call it “creative” and others might call it “bizarre.”

When I hear the Gospel story about the plank and the splinter, I remember a very creative teacher in a parish where I was assigned as Associate Pastor in a parish with a school. The teacher told the children to be creative and to return the next day with props explaining any Gospel parable they would choose. The next day, during Religion Class, one of the clever students stood up with a baseball cap that had been taped to a long, skinny, empty cardboard box with at least a half a roll of duct tape. He went from student to student saying, “You’ve got a splinter in your eye...”

When I hear the words of St. Paul from our Second Reading, “Death, where is thy sting?” I remember that I didn’t hear them first in Church. I actually heard those words for the first time while watching an old W. C. Fields movie. He was a comic star from the 1930’s and 40’s with a distinctive appearance and a tall hat. He spoke out of the side of his mouth with a distinctive voice. The movie scene was at their home. They were sitting around the table having breakfast. W. C. was at one end of the table, his wife was at the other, and sitting alongside were a teenage daughter and a young son, and W. C.’s mother-in-law. She scowled at him and asked, “Isn’t it a bit early to be drinking alcohol?” He sneers at her and says under his breath, “Shut up you old nag.” Then the mother-in-law raises her finger in the air and says, “One day you are going to drown in a vat of whiskey!” “Drown in a vat of whiskey,” repeats Fields. Then, he says, “Oh, Death, where is thy sting?”

Abraham Lincoln said it a little differently than the wise man who composed our First Reading, but it’s the same idea. Lincoln said: “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak up and remove all doubt.” Since the time of ancient Egypt, many have agreed that, compared with most speech, “silence is golden.” And silence earns its glorious reputation because we often use language so badly.

Sometimes we lie; sometimes we just bend the facts a little. We say what we don't know, yet assert it as fact. We speak impulsively and cause irreparable harm. We chatter aimlessly, suffocating our listeners with our prattle. We gossip and ruin reputations. We voice opinions, some of which may reveal how dark our hearts really are. "From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks!"

Of course when we talk, we give ourselves away, despite our best intentions. That's why there's a law that says, "You have the right to remain silent." We might want to exercise that right more often!

All of this might make us more mindful of the words we choose. When you and I speak bitterly as a matter of habit, we harden into cynics. When we think violent thoughts, it's only a matter of time before we indulge in violent actions.

Words take on flesh -- and flesh, words. God's Word of Love becomes the Baby of Bethlehem. The stories Jesus tells of forgiveness become the Man on the Cross in Jerusalem. Words become flesh as surely as a tree produces its fruit -- good or rotten -- with integrity to its inner nature. If we intend gentleness, we must use softer words. If we're not yet ready within to produce loving speech just yet, then it is surely better to remain silent.

And now, for some upcoming events. This Tuesday, we will celebrate Fat Tuesday, or what we call it in Metropolitan Detroit, Paczki Day. The members of the Active Christian Women's Club are providing one free paczek and many more paczki for a free-will offering on Tuesday from 10 AM to 12 Noon. If you are on the Parish Pastoral Council and will miss the paczki in the morning, there will be a fresh box of goodies for you at the PPC meeting!

This Wednesday, we begin another season of Lent. In order to promote silent prayer during this season, we will have silent time just before the start of Mass. We liturgical ministers will be in our places in the sanctuary. Mass will begin with the welcome read by the Lector. There will be no entrance procession or opening hymn. We will simply begin with the Sign of the Cross and go right into the Penitential Rite.

Come join us on Monday nights for Sung Evening Prayer. It transports me into another world. A world of praise and worship, a world of reflection and

prayer. If you haven't experienced Sung Evening Prayer, please join us, beginning on Monday, March 7<sup>th</sup>. It will deepen and enhance your prayer life.

Are you free during the day? We will pray the Stations of the Cross on Fridays at 3:00 PM, the Hour of Divine Mercy. Did you know we have evening Mass on Wednesdays at 7:00 PM? This is followed by Confessions at 7:45 PM. We also have Confessions on Saturdays at 3:00 PM. All of these opportunities for grace can be found in our parish bulletin and on our website.

After Mass today, I invite everyone to take home with you a bulletin and a pamphlet explaining Lent and giving you some helpful hints how to make this Lent a time of prayer, thanksgiving, stewardship and spiritual growth.

Last year's Advent resulted in a radically missionary Christmas. You and I have the power to make this Lent the best Lent ever! And, at the end, for all of us, a radically missionary Easter! AMEN!