

[Readings: 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16a; Psalm 89; Rom. 6:3-4, 8-11; Matt 10:37-42]

One of my favorite classic musical movies is "Fiddler on the Roof." The basic premise of the movie is how Tevye, an Orthodox Jewish milkman living in a small, forgotten Russian village in the early 1900's, watches his world of "tradition" be challenged on every side. His three eldest daughters get married during the course of the movie. But all three do so outside of the established "tradition" of the matchmaker. Tevye bends for the first two daughters, but cannot with the third. He puts his faith and his religion above family.

Today's readings ask us to evaluate our lives in light of the crosses that life throws at us. Jesus makes specific reference to the crosses we are facing right now. The initial reaction for us when we are asked to take up our cross is to see it as a burden. But before we jump to that initial reaction, think for a moment about THE cross. The cross -- because of Jesus -- is not a burden, but a sign of victory and love. So, if we then think about Jesus telling us to take up our symbol of victory and love and follow him and serve others, then it is not such a burden. Our lives of service to God and others should never be seen as a burden. It may be challenging, but it is never a burden.

In our first reading, the challenge faced by the woman in the story seemed like a burden, until she was encouraged to do it in faith. The result was that the situation worked out better than she planned. Her approach to the situation was filled with faith and courage. She was promised that all would work out and it did and so it can be for us. Our problem is when we view our lives only as filled with insurmountable challenges. We see everything as if we are being burdened and inconvenienced. The result is that we react that way. We never approach things with joy, but an exhaling of air in exasperation. That's when we are challenged to respond with loyalty. Loyalty to God, to our faith, to God's Plan.

Loyalty is a quality we value highly. We want our friends to be loyal. We expect our families to be. We hope for some modicum of reliability from bosses or employees. Even the President expects loyalty.

In fact, every meaningful relationship involves loyalty to be viable. We pledge allegiance to the flag, acknowledging our citizenship.

We support our parish financially as a sign that we're members who value what happens here.

We “like” certain brands, books, groups on our Facebook page as our personal testimony of their worth. We cheer for our team, follow our favorite band, wear the t-shirt of the cause we care about.

Pledging allegiance and choosing loyalties is another theme of our Readings. A woman of influence and means informs her husband that she'd like to make an investment in a certain Hebrew prophet. As a citizen of Shunem, this is an irregular alliance. The woman remodels her house to make room for a seer she hopes to have as a frequent guest.

In another century, Saint Paul assures us that our Baptism unites us not only with Christ-life but also with Christ-death. Here's an allegiance we might not knowingly be pledging. Loyalty to Christ provides astounding benefits, including resurrection from the dead and newness of life. But we get there by way of surrender, un-spelled-out suffering, and death to self-will. We are warned!

Jesus tells his disciples plainly: No love can be higher than your love for Me. Not even family love -- a teaching that upsets most of us, since we really do love our families and hold this bond as quite sacred. Even dearer: We're told we can't hold our own lives as more precious than the loyalty we owe to Jesus.

Once upon a time, the great emperor Constantine was given a vision. He was shown a cross in the sky and was told by the Lord, "by this sign you will conquer"; and he did. It is by the same sign that you too will conquer over every challenge you face in your life.

Pick up your sign of victory and love and head into the day. With this sign, you can overcome personal and professional problems. You can overcome money issues and you can overcome fear or addiction issues. You can put your illnesses and limitations in perspective.

We pick up our crosses to find the strength we need to bring light to the darkness of the world and to provide hope to the hopeless. We simply can't be good ministers and servants of the Gospel unless we take up the cross, the sign of victory and love. AMEN!

[Readings: Is. 57:15-19; Ps. 85; Phil. 4:6-9; John 14:23-29]

Patriotism is considered a virtue in the Christian and the Catholic tradition. But it is a virtue that is hard to get "just right." The goal is to find that elusive balance between the exclusive love of one's country and the inclusive, global perspective of the Gospel. The prophet Amos ran into that when God told him to preach at the royal sanctuary. Prophecy and unthinking patriotism often conflict.

What might make America cease to "be good?" In reflecting on the downfall of another great country, an empire, in fact, Edward Gibbon wrote this about the Roman Empire. See if any of it sounds familiar:

"There were five causes for the fall of the Great Roman Empire:

- 1) The rapid increase of divorce, the undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis of human society;
- 2) Higher and higher taxes and the spending of the public monies for free bread and circuses for the populace;
- 3) The mad craze for pleasure, sports becoming more exciting and brutal;
- 4) The building up of armies to fight external enemies when the deadliest enemy -- the decadence of the people -- is within;
- 5) The decay of religion -- faith fading into mere form, losing touch with life and becoming impotent to guide it.

So how can we continue to be "good?" Put religion and spirituality back on top. The insane decision of a California court in declaring the Pledge of Allegiance "unconstitutional" because it contains the words, "under God," is a prime example of distorted thinking.

"Separation of Church and State" does NOT mean taking religion and spirituality out of our government. When that happens, our country loses its soul.

Bring back respect and manners. No one "owes us" anything, so let's stop acting like it. And didn't someone once sum up the Law and the Prophets by saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?" "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him."

Bring back the dignity of the home, however that is shaped: original or blended, single-parent or both parents, senior citizens and singles. The way we treat one another in society begins with how we treat one another at home.

Second, put our money where our faith-mouth is. If God is first in our lives, that should be reflected in how we use our money. Take a look at the entries in your checkbook, and that will tell you who or what you are living for. And what you love.

Third, bring sanity back to sports, especially on the children's level. Play sports for fun, not just to win. And remember: it's only a game!

Check your own life and your own lifestyle to see if you are part of the decadence or part of the virtue of American society. Do we want or own big, bigger and biggest? Do we want more, more, more? Are decisions made by power over others, back room politics or beneficial loyalties?

Become a political activist. Cast ballots. Join political parties. Contact legislators. Bring the social and moral message of the Gospel and of our Catholic faith tradition to the public debate. You can do that. We who are official Church leaders cannot go where you can go and make a difference.

What are the policy issues of concern to the Church? Religious freedom. Human life. Children and families. Health care. Education. Economic Justice and policies that are shaped by moral principles.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, give time and talent to the Lord. Think of creative ways to pray, to meditate and to show thanks to God for our country, for our freedom, for our very lives and livelihood.

The marriage of Church and State is wrong; but a citizenship faithful to the Gospel is not. Pope Benedict said in this very country: "Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel." This is still the greatest country in the world. We still can be a healthy and active, positive part of it! God bless America! AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65; Romans 8:18-23; Matt 13:1-23]

Grandpa was babysitting his eight-year-old granddaughter. Out of the clear blue sky, she screams out, "Grandpa, I know how to make babies!" Now, Grandpa doesn't know what to do about this. "Making babies" is a beautiful thing. To tell her not to talk about it might traumatize her. LETTING her talk about it might traumatize GRANDPA! So he decides after all to let her speak. "OK, honey, tell me how to make babies." "Simple!" she bursts with a knowing smile and a twinkle in her eye. "You take the word 'baby,' drop the letter 'y' and add 'i-e-s!" Now Grandpa knows how to make babies! And thanks to Holy Scripture, we know how to understand the parables that Jesus tells the crowds.

The little granddaughter was not speaking in a way that Grandpa could understand. She was almost speaking in riddles. Why would Jesus do that? First, He wants to know that His audience is listening. Secondly, He wants to know if they are clever enough to read between the lines. That's why we now begin that section of Matthew's Gospel which deals with the parables of Jesus.

Jesus' first parable speaks of waste and failure. Two thirds of the seeds of faith sown by Him fail to take root. At first, there was lots of popular excitement at the wise teachings and the miraculous cures; later, growing signs of hostility and rejection, which eventually led to condemnation and death. Jesus' efforts, like the farmer's efforts for the harvest, seemed to end only in waste and failure.

But the story's conclusion brings a sudden contrast. Some of the seed yields thirty, sixty, even a hundred times the crop. Twenty-fold was seen as a "bumper crop" in the time of Jesus, so thirty, sixty and a hundred-fold was an unbelievable amount of plenty and success! Jesus knows that in spite of all the waste and failure, an abundant harvest, a mega-harvest, is certain to happen in the hearts and in the lives and in the families and in the communities of those who believe Him, who believe IN Him and who believe in His faith community.

How did He know this? How could He be so certain in us frail and fickle human beings? Listen to Isaiah in today's First Reading: My Word shall not return to Me void, but shall do My will, achieving the end for which I sent It."

God's Word IS effective. "Then God said, 'Let there be light... And so it was. Let there be land and water... And so it was. Let there be every living plant and animal and flying thing... And so it was.'" "And the Word became flesh and found His dwelling place among us." When God speaks, all creation obeys.

But there are voices in our world that speak words other than those of God. That is why St. Paul needs to remind us in our Second Reading of creation, incompleteness and the pangs of labor during birth. Life isn't going to come easy to us. Life ISN'T easy for us. But when God's Word becomes effective in our lives, it is worth the pain and suffering.

Today's Gospel parable reminds us that much of life does not turn out all right. Much of what we do, in fact, may look like failure. But God makes fruitful and abundant the hope and the grace that His sons and daughters are willing and able to accept. We wonder: will you and I ever make any real progress?

Perhaps we get down on ourselves because we have elements of all four kinds of soil within us: hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground and fertile ground. We are not simply black and white. We are shades of gray and black and brown dirt. Throw in a few shades of red and orange clay, too.

Jesus never denied the power of evil or the reality of failure in life, or our own personal failures. Jesus encourages us to have confident hope in spite of it. The parables of Jesus are meant to be understood and to provide knowledge. They are actually proverbs with a story attached to them. Conversely, a proverb is a parable in a nutshell without the story attached to it.

Jesus appeals to His audience's experience and know-how. His parables are based on His observation of nature and of human activities: the Kingdom is like a seed to be sown, like a vineyard, like a small amount of yeast. But above all, the parables of Jesus invite us to discover the Kingdom of God already here, through the very best of human experience: today, it's the generosity and patience of the sower. They challenge us to careful listening and to a generous response. Here is another example:

A woman despaired at the state of the world. She longed for love among family and friends, peace among all nationalities and countries, compassion for

the poor and the forgotten. But everywhere she looked, all she found was turmoil, intolerance, hatred and violence. She could not bear it all; it made her depressed. The self-absorption and cynicism she saw in others left her feeling alone and isolated.

One day she came upon a little shop. She walked in and was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. The woman got up the nerve to speak to him.

"What do you sell here, Jesus?" "Just about anything you might want," He replied. "Feel free to walk around the aisles. Make a list of anything you're interested in and we'll see what we can do for you."

The woman was amazed at the contents on the shop's many shelves. Jesus' store was stocked with "Peace on Earth," "Food for Every Hungry Person," "Clean Air and Water," "Warm Clothing for the Naked," and "Forgiveness." The woman made a very long list in her little notebook.

When she had finished going up and down the aisles, she returned to the counter and gave her long list to Jesus. He looked at the list, smiled and said, "No problem." He disappeared behind a stack of many boxes, reaching His hand in several of them and removing little envelopes. He laid these envelopes on the counter-top. "What are these?" the puzzled woman asked.

"Seed packets," Jesus explained. "This is a catalog store. You see what you like, I give you the seeds, and you go home and plant them and nurture them and help them grow. Someone else comes along and harvests the crop and reaps the benefits." "Oh," the woman said. She paused, and thought for a moment. Then she turned her back to Jesus and left the store without buying anything. The proverb? God gives us the seeds to plant and to nurture.

If we seek peace, have we planted the seeds to realize such peace? If we seek trust and understanding, have we cultivated the ground to nurture such trust?

If we seek a loving and giving family life, have we created the climate of acceptance and forgiveness that makes such love and understanding possible?

Next weekend, we send sowers of the seed to Kentucky, to produce much spiritual and physical fruit in the lives of the poorest of the poor.

I suspect many of our friends in Kentucky, like us, might describe their lives and our lives as tossed among the brambles; or scratched out on footpaths beaten hard by misadventures, and the retracing of our steps. Rocks, weeds? Let us count them. The iffy margins, not the prepared field, are where a lot of us might claim to have encountered the seed of God's Word most effectively -- not to mention, gratefully. Jesus often meets us in the messes of our lives.

And Jesus says: Blessed are the eyes that see, ears that hear, lips that help carry this good news farther. Blessed are shoulders available to be leaned on, sometimes cried on. Blessed are feet that walk well out of their way to do some good. Blessed are hearts broken in quest of a love that lasts. Blessed are elbows that dig, prodding others to straighten up and pay attention: This summons is for you! Blessed are knees that buckle and hands that grow calloused in their service, day after thankless day.

Jesus throws out blessings as cheerfully and wantonly as seed, intending them to fall into unexpected crevices and on less than ideal circumstances. And because he does, tax collectors and prostitutes go to heaven before the righteous. The last get to be first, and the poor inherit a kingdom while the rich are sent away empty. Mad farmers get crazy results. The topsy-turvy realm of God is many things; business as usual isn't one of them. Yes, it's a gamble. But the Lord we follow is a betting man.

We are all sowers of seed, seed of our own choosing and wants and dreams. Christ calls us as His disciples, to be sowers of the things and values of God in order that we -- or others after us -- may reap the harvest of God's final reign. God is not through with us until we have done His Word. AMEN!



[Readings: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Psalm 86; Romans 8:26-27; Matt 13:24-43]

Last week we talked about planting seeds. This week we're talking about pulling weeds. The two go together. Every gardener knows that planting seeds is the easy part of having a successful garden. It is much more time consuming to weed that same garden. And it's hard work. As someone has said: "When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant."

Some of you remember Erma Bombeck, America's Catholic homemaker who wrote: I don't do windows because I love birds and don't want one to run into a clean window and get hurt. I don't disturb cobwebs because I want every creature to have a home of their own. I don't Spring Clean because I love all the seasons and don't want the others to get jealous. I don't iron because I choose to believe them when they say "Permanent Press." And finally: I don't pull weeds in the garden because . . . I don't want to get in God's way!

God, as we hear in today's First Reading from the Book of Wisdom, is a lenient and patient teacher Who allows time for repentance to take root and to bring about growth in grace. God is ever hopeful that the children who have been created to be good, will find their center in God and remain rooted in His Divine Goodness. Always merciful and gracious, always slow to anger and abounding in kindness, always good and forgiving, God listens and waits. Then God responds, lavishing grace and fostering growth on those who groan for it.

St. Paul tells us in our Second Reading that we don't know how to pray as we ought to. He speaks again about "groaning." First, in reference to creation, and then to believers. And here in reference to the Holy Spirit.

Paul says that you and I do not know how to pray correctly. I think of Pope St. John Paul the Great, who when he would be in the midst of hundreds and thousands of people, would bow his head, close his eyes and instantly be transported to the very presence of God. It was said that those standing near him actually could hear him groan, as St. Paul describes.

Other times, it is shock, anger, loss, helplessness or guilt that prevents us from praying properly. We don't know what to say; we don't know how to begin our prayer. Sometimes the silence and the tears are prayer enough.

From this we learn that prayer involves both tension and continuity between the desires of creation, the hope of believers, and the intervention of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul uses a rare word here, *entynkano*, which means to "intercede" or to "plead." It also means "to share responsibility." St. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit in court-room terminology. The Holy Spirit will plead on our behalf, like a defense attorney. The Spirit will later be called the *Advocate*, the One who speaks on our behalf. The Holy Spirit shares the task with us.

Jesus never guaranteed that every baptized Catholic would be an A+ member of God's Kingdom on earth. The Church does contain hypocrites: large ones and small ones, ordained and non-ordained, young and old and in between. But Jesus tells us that there is still room in the Church for all of them, all of us.

It would be wonderful to be a Church where all its members, from children right up to the Pope, always practiced what we preached. But creating a completely pure Church is God's work, not ours; and the time for God's final purification is not yet. But it is close. As close as our own death. We can no longer remain superficial, lukewarm, indifferent, imperfect and bored. It IS up to us to make a difference in ourselves and in the world in which we live.

It's rare that a Congressional motion in Washington, D.C. gets bipartisan support. But instituting Parents' Day on the fourth Sunday of July to "recognize, uplift, and support the role of parents in the rearing of children" did just that in 1994. No matter how we vote on Election Day, every day of the year parents deserve our thanks for doing the toughest and most vital job in America: preparing the future.

Any parent can tell you: Raising children involves plenty of plowed earth and lots of sown seed. Parents sow continual lessons of kindness, self-control, unselfishness, and forgiveness, hoping their children will incorporate these same traits. But most parents admit they're guilty of sowing the occasional weed, too.

A sharp word of shaming slips out in an unguarded moment, shattering the expression on a child's face in a way that's unmistakable—and perhaps familiar from how we were raised. Even a good parent may ignore a small negative behavior that blooms into a real problem for the child later on. Our adult vices can't be hidden from our children forever. If we swear, sooner or later they'll hear us do it. If we gossip or get ugly about other groups of people, our children with disturbing accuracy will mirror that kind of talk back to us.

Parents, grandparents, teachers, and coaches -- we who have direct contact with children have a special responsibility to provide them with the right elements of character they need to become "good" people. As the book of Wisdom says, if we want to raise up a just society, our children must understand that "those who are just must be kind," because justice isn't the same as vengeance or mercilessness. It's possible to do the right thing, to stand up for what's right -- and also respect the dignity and humanity of the person who's in the wrong. Of course, if we've yet to learn this lesson ourselves, it's much harder to pass it on to our children.

God is just and right. Those who believe in God claim God as the very source of justice and right-ness. God doesn't have to justify the divine will, as Wisdom points out, since no one is bigger than God to refute it. Simply by willing it, God's will becomes law. So let's be clear on this: God wills to be the master of might who judges with "clemency" and "lenience." Wow. The God who desires the good harvest is merciful about the weeds for the harvest's sake. So let's not turn our back on our children, or any children, who fail to produce the perfect yield. As a community and a nation, let's plow some more, and sow again.

50 years ago, the City of Detroit was the victim of racial and civil disturbance and rebellion. The fallout from July, 1967 is still being felt generations later. The Archbishop of Detroit, Allen Vigneron, has a letter in today's bulletin commenting on that tragic time and what we as believers can do to be a light in the darkness.

We have with this this weekend a dedicated group of parish missionaries from here and from St. Michael Parish in Sterling Heights who are going to be

commissioned, blessed and sent to Kentucky to be “family” for some of the poorest of the poor in our country. To be fruitful seeds to combat the weeds of discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes. We thank you and your leaders, Renee’ and Michelle, for hearing the Lord’s call, for coming forward to serve, and for being a light shining in the darkness. May the Holy Spirit, which guided Our Lady, St. Martin de Porres and St. Michael to serve and to protect those in need, guide your steps, inspire your faith, and deepen your love for the Church and for humanity. AMEN!