

[Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Philippians 4:6-9; Matt 21:33-43]

Did you pay attention to the very first verse of today's First Reading? "Let me now sing of my friend, my friend's song concerning his vineyard?" Why sing a song that is depressing and ends in tragedy? I had a flashback to an episode of "Cheers" where Rebecca rents an Irish band for a St. Patrick's Day party at the bar. Every time she requested a peppy jig, they played an Irish dirge about death! You and I are not that familiar with the images used by Isaiah and Jesus. Do YOU accept or do YOU decline? That's the musical message of today's readings. Do YOU accept the invitation to be a good steward and disciple of the Lord?

Both Isaiah and Jesus tell the same parable. Rather than repeat the stories, let me translate them for you. In the 8<sup>th</sup> Century B. C., Isaiah chastises his listeners (in song!) because they had the opportunity, in light of a pending invasion, to align themselves with the covenant of God instead of a contract with political neighbors. They chose their neighbors. They were invaded anyway!

Victory and prosperity would have been theirs, but they chose defeat and domination. God had prepared a special nation for Himself, and that nation chose a culture of death to embrace and to infuse into their daily lives.

Fast forward to the year 30 A. D. The Jewish leaders still have not learned their lesson. Money, status, power, politics, these were the false "gods" that people were chasing. And some among us still do that to this day. The readings this week deal with rejecting God and repenting of that rejection. At what moments have you turned away from God? What has been or should be the way you turn back?

Look back on the hopes you had in the past. Think of the hopes you have for the future. A wedding and a marriage. Starting life all over again. Putting hurts behind you. Losing a job or taking another one. Moving to a new city, starting from scratch. It could be any time the world seemed new and fresh, and life would yield great results.

But for all the work – the clearing, the digging, trying to start fresh – there was no harvest. We don't have to be farmers to know the experience of withered hope. That is the fate of the culture of death. We have allowed anger to become a staple of our society in the way we speak to people we disagree with, and we have fostered a rationale to strike out at political opponents with pure contempt.

In the face of such events, we fail to see how hatred is feeding the minds and hearts of so many in our country and we are not addressing the roots of hatred. We have calls to be "kind to each other" and to stop being "mean", but we fail to root out the vices in our society that feed sin; we are not even able to talk about sin. The evil in our world comes from our refusal to see the clear difference between what is good and what is evil.

Jesus proclaims a message of a world built on peace and justice; where we treat those with the greatest needs with the greatest of love. Simply stated, the world we live in is not the world which Jesus came to teach us as God's plan.

God does not want us to live in fear and with hatred in our hearts. God does not want us to live in the midst of sin and vice.

Our Second Reading says it all, and I wish this was the motto or mission statement of every parish and every household:

“Have no anxiety at all. Make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

“Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.”

Here are three stories that show what a crazy world this is...

A person from Grand Forks, North Dakota robbed the First Community Bank in Fargo. After he left with the money, police were called and upon reviewing the ransom note, they realized it had been written on the robber's bank deposit slip, complete with his name and address.

A person walked into a liquor store with a shotgun and demanded all of the money from the cash register. After the cashier put the money in the bag, the

man asked for a bottle of Scotch from behind the counter. The cashier refused because he did not believe the young man was 21. The robber swore he was and handed over his ID to prove it. As soon as the robber left, the cashier was able to give police the robber's name and address.

And from today's Gospel: A group of tenants killed their landlord's son believing that the dead man's land and inheritance would go to them. REALLY?

The moral of all these stories: Crime doesn't pay. Our divine inheritance will not come by hook or by crook, but by good and faithful service to God.

Our hope in Christ is the foundation of our outreach as responsible parish disciples and stewards. On Him we build our own lives and the lives of those in need. With Jesus as the capstone rejected by the builders. Will you accept or will you decline the challenge not only to believe, but to speak out and to act? Today is Respect Life Sunday. This month is Respect Life Month. Will you let YOUR voice be heard? The choice to accept discipleship and stewardship in your life is up to you. AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 25:6-10a; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20; Matt 22:1-14]

The parables of Jesus, to the attentive listener, are often haunting.

Jesus is drawing on the rich image of the wedding banquet in the prophet Isaiah. The wedding feast that will unfold on the mountain of the Lord includes guests from all the nations. There will be wine and food. All that divides the nations will be destroyed. Every people and nation will be united in their adoration of the living God. Then Jesus gives a well-known story a twist ending.

The universality of the kingdom of heaven is the response of men, women and children to the surprising invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Many are invited. Let us not suppose that accepting the invitation is enough. Every child, woman and man is invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb. What is needed on our part is preparation. We must put on our wedding garment of holiness, of righteousness and justice. It's what's inside that counts.

Dear friends, Jesus speaks to us through this parable today, because the time to wear the wedding garment is now. The king is coming to examine the good and bad guests of this feast. There will be a judgment for each one of us. You may not know that in the time of Jesus, wealthier wedding hosts had closets full of ornate, silk wedding clothes with golden lining and trim for those guests who came unprepared.

If Catholicism has become boring to us — old hat, a series of pious rites we perform Sunday after Sunday — it is time to clean and repair the wedding garment of our desire for God.

It is not enough just to be among those at the wedding. Our sanctification requires us to give up the bitter silence of ingratitude and speaks words of lament and praise to the triune God. The wedding feast is here. Prepare your garment before the wedding, and be prepared to display it after the wedding. Don't keep it hanging in the closet, gathering dust.

You and I receive two invitations every Sunday. It isn't just a wedding. It's not just a matter of showing up. It's not even a matter of what we wear, although fifty years ago women and girls wore dresses and men and boys wore ties.

It's also a matter of what we do. What we do with our relationship with God and His Church. What we do with the members of our family. The invitation starts with grace. God's grace-filled invitation is for each one of us to come to see Him, to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him.

All of us are invited. Whether we are upright or immoral, everyone receives the Divine King's invitation. God doesn't care if you have more skeletons in your closet than a Halloween supply store. The King wants people to this feast of "juicy rich food and pure, choice wines!" Come to the mountain! Come to the feast!

What does it mean when we are not dressed properly in the right "wedding garment?" In baptism, each one of us received a baptismal garment, whether it was a christening outfit or a white colored dress or suit. St. Paul says we are to be clothed with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, and above all, love." THIS is the kind of outfit you and I are to "wear." Putting on the robes of Jesus Christ is risky. It means laying ourselves open to being made new and changed to look like Jesus Christ Himself. Are YOU ready to take the risk? To be Christ for one another and to do His work?

Accepting God's invitation to come to Church and to come to know Him more deeply is not only for our spiritual refill and renewal; it's also to allow God to shape and mold us into the people God calls us to be.

We cannot be self-centered and make excuses for not accepting the invitation. God won't be ignored unless we choose to ignore Him. Make the right choice. Jesus is commissioning all of us as his modern-day disciples. We are to preach repentance, which literally means, a new way of thinking. A new way of looking at things. Knowing Christ means seeing our world differently.

Jesus calls us His "witnesses," martyrs in Greek. Are you willing to risk knowing Christ and giving witness to Him, even to the point of broken relationships, rejection, injuries, setbacks, tragedies, abuse and crimes against you? "I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me" says St. Paul in our Second Reading today. I have this slogan on a pillar candle given to me by a dear friend. It sits in my living room as a daily reminder.

During His life on earth, Jesus Christ was accused of eating with sinners. He still does that every Sunday with us. We are the sinners He eats with. Sinners who have hope for redemption and a seat at the Heavenly Banquet.

Talk about a "Happy Meal!" AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; Psalm 96; 1 Thess. 1:1-5b; Matt 22:15-21]

Some of you who read the bulletin before Mass already know that our Christian Service Director and Parish Nurse, Mrs. Renee' Heileman, after 22 years of dedicated ministry and service as Christian Service Director and Parish Nurse, is retiring. Many outreach programs in our parish were created and developed under her guidance, making Christian Service one of the pillars of our parish and of our community. Renee's retirement begins on Monday.

At her request, and especially because of COVID-19 concerns with our elderly parishioners, there will be no public retirement reception for Renee'. I am asking everyone to write a note to Renee' thanking her for her ministry and service and how she has impacted your life. You can drop off the letters and notes at the parish center, and we will forward them to Renee.'

With this sudden and unexpected news, for now, we will need to suspend all Christian Service activities temporarily until we find the right people to oversee them during this time of transition. Thanks to Mrs. Gerry Kostrzeba, we will try to still have our Thanksgiving and Christmas Holiday Programs. The pandemic and fewer donations will make our HGP look different this year. The pandemic has also put a hold on most of the Christian Service projects already!

Renee' thanks all of us for our outstanding financial and material support, and we thank Renee' for her dedication in doing God's work, and for showing us how to be the hands, the feet and the heart of Jesus! Putting faith in action.

AMEN!

Many of us enjoy a good action/adventure movie. Besides giving us the thrill of high-tech special effects, everything is so clear. Especially those movies that were made in the early days of cinema: the westerns. In old westerns, the heroes are exceptionally good, and the villains are wicked to the core. There is little gray matter in between.

But there is a problem: such movies do not reflect the reality of the world we live in. Sometimes the heroes have feet of clay, and occasionally the bad guy can show a spark of humanity and even do something decent.

We see more and more of that in more recent movies.

That's the case of the Persian King Cyrus in today's First Reading. He should be a warning against being too quick to attach labels and to make judgments. Cyrus was the most ruthless and violent king of a pagan nation and therefore one of Israel's enemies. He would be the last person we might consider as a "messiah," but that is exactly what he is called by God in Isaiah's text! At this stage in Israel's history, though, we must remember that "messiah" merely means "the anointed one" and does not imply a savior. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, Cyrus..."

God admits that King Cyrus does not even know God, yet Cyrus is seen as the instrument of God. Why? Because Cyrus defeats the Babylonians and begins to show a begrudging tolerance for religions other than his own. Eventually, he allows the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland to rebuild their nation, their religion and especially their temple. Things couldn't have gone better for the Israelites!

God can and does use many different individuals and groups of people to accomplish His Divine Will. God's Spirit can run in what we would consider to be an erratic path – God writes straight with crooked lines – and sometimes that Spirit comes to rest in some pretty shocking places. Some of God's choices might make us uncomfortable, even outraged.

We might be in profound disagreement with them on many things. We might even feel that God's choices and blessings should stay "in-house" and the closer to us and to ours, the better!

Jesus snares the Pharisees in their own trap in today's Gospel with His brilliant teaching to "render unto Caesar" Their hypocrisy is revealed for all to see. Note that they are inside the temple itself. Only Jews are permitted there. The Herodians are Jews who are selling out their brother Jews by being hired by the Romans to spy and to tattle tale on the Jews. The Herodians have on their person coins with the image of the Roman self-proclaimed god Tiberius Caesar.

It is idolatry for any Orthodox Jew to carry an object with the image of a false or foreign God. Those coins forbidden in the Temple had to be exchanged

for coins minted by the Orthodox Jews for their temple tax. That's why there are money changers in the Temple. So when this this Herodian Jew produces the idolatrous coin, there should have been a collective gasp in the crowd. Jesus proves the man's hypocrisy.

How do you handle hypocrisy when you confront it in others? Are you able to help them see the error in their ways? Think of a time when you found yourself saying something you really didn't believe, perhaps even for less than honorable reasons. How did you handle being confronted with your own hypocrisy? How were you able to learn and grow from the experience?

Today is World Mission Sunday -- a title that may suggest it's time to sit back and tune out for the rest of my homily. Missionary work, after all, isn't about us. It's about those rare characters running around in jungles spooning out rice and saying Mass in straw huts, right? But Pope Francis says that the Church is "missionary by nature." We are that Church. Which means you and I at our core are missionaries. The pope offers three questions that are at the heart of our Christian identity:

As believers, what's the basis of our mission?

What's at the center of our life as Church?

What fundamental approaches assist us in carrying out our mission?

Being Pope, Francis also supplies answers for our reflection. The basis of our mission is Transformation. We become Church to be transformed by our relationship to Jesus. In turn, we set out to transform the world with this same vital encounter. We "unleash the Gospel" as Archbishop Vigneron tells us.

If the mission is transformation, how does the Church foster this? Three ways: in its worship, in the encouragement to a Spirit-filled life, and in preaching the Gospel passionately and creatively. *In its worship, in the encouragement to a Spirit-filled life, and in preaching the Gospel passionately and creatively.*

Jesus is the first great Evangelizer, the bearer of Good News. Which makes our goal to evangelize and to act: to bring Good News and then to demonstrate how good it really is.



Americans have long seen the wisdom in separating the realms of church and state, giving to God and to Caesar what belongs to each. Regretfully, the territories governed by religion and government often overlap, causing an ongoing crisis for those who see government stomping on sacred ground in right-to-life issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, genetic testing, war, services to the disadvantaged, and assistance to the poor. We may give Caesar our money; we must not give Caesar the authority to determine what's moral for people of faith. That authority belongs to God alone.

What Jesus does suggest is that worldly things are subject to worldly laws and governance. But He also insists there are matters higher and more precious, the use of which cannot be arbitrated by human beings. These belong to God, and Heaven help the one who does not recognize this. Remember this when you vote this year. AMEN!

[Readings: Exodus 22:20-26; Ps.18; 1 Thess.1:5-10; Matt. 22:34-40]

In a new documentary film that premiered last week in Rome, Pope Francis expressed his support for legal civil unions between same-sex couples. His comments have generated headlines around the globe.

In “Francesco,” a documentary that explores the teachings of Pope Francis, the Holy Father is quoted as saying, “Homosexual people have a right to be in a family. They are children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out or be made miserable over it. What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered.” This seems to contradict what the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated back in 2003.

The quotes are the clearest comments to date on the subject of civil unions by Pope Francis, who has previously expressed support of the legal rights of same-sex couples. In a book-length series of conversations with the French sociologist Dominique Wolton, published in 2017, the pope defended the traditional institution of marriage while also signaling his openness to civil unions.

“ ‘Marriage’ is a historical word. Forever, throughout humanity and not only in the Church, it's been between a man and a woman,” the pope said then. “You can't change it just like that. It's the nature of things. That's how they are. So, let's call them ‘civil unions.’ ”

On October 23, 2020, the following memo was sent to all priests from the Department of Communications of the Archdiocese of Detroit regarding Pope Francis' recent comments. It reads:

The Holy Father recently expressed his opinion on a matter of policy in a secular society, specifically in reference to legal protections in same-sex relationships. Archbishop Vigneron, along with the Catholic faithful, awaits further clarity and context from the Vatican.

Pope Francis, in fidelity to his mission to guard the deposit of faith, has constantly given witness to the truth of marriage according to God's plan and the Church's teaching on the Sacrament of Marriage, that it is a sacred and “unbreakable union” between one man and one woman who “are no longer two, but one flesh” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 1604).

Further, acts of sexual intimacy outside of marriage as it is established by God are gravely contrary to the virtue of chastity and God's plan for human flourishing (cf. CCC, 2380-2400). In our archdiocese, Archbishop Vigneron joins the Vicar of Peter and all other members of the College of Bishops to affirm these saving teachings of Christ.

As for the experience of same-sex attraction, it was addressed recently by Archbishop Vigneron in his 2019 pastoral note, [\*Imitating Christ's Charity and Chastity\*](#). The archbishop proclaimed Christ's "unfathomable, unsurpassable and invincible love" for people who experience same-sex attraction and affirmed their share in the mission of the whole Church to "hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to put faith and trust in him, and to give witness to the beauty and goodness of a life lived as his new creation." This ends the memo from the Archdiocese.

As Catholics and secular media outlets continue to discuss the comments made by Pope Francis, other bishops across the country have released statements to help put the pope's remarks into their proper context for their confused flocks.

Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco said in a statement that the Holy Father clearly differentiated between a civil arrangement, which accords mutual benefits to two people, and marriage. The former, (the pope) said, can in no way be equated to marriage, which remains unique," Archbishop Cordileone said.

This is what the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said in 2003: *11. The Church teaches that respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions.*

*The common good requires that laws recognize, promote and protect marriage as the basis of the family, the primary unit of society. Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval of deviant behavior, with the consequence of making it a model in present-day society, but would also obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity.*

*The Church cannot fail to defend these values, for the good of men and women and for the good of society itself.*

*The Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, in the Audience of March 28, 2003, approved the*

*present Considerations, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered their publication.*

*Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 3, 2003, Memorial of Saint Charles Lwanga and his Companions, Martyrs.*

And finally, from today's Gospel:

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a scholar of the law tested him by asking,

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him,

"You shall love the Lord, your God,

with all your heart,

with all your soul,

and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

*What would Jesus do? What would Jesus say? AMEN*