

[Readings: Exodus 24:3-8; Psalm 116; Hebrews 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16, 22-26]

No sound is as sweet to our ears as those three powerful words: "I love you." But as extraordinary and meaningful as those words are, if words are all we get, they can become pretty thin.

Every human exchange has to have more than words behind it. If we want to buy something, there has to be cash or valuables to back up the transaction. If we want to engage an organization, there's got to be paperwork. If we want to clinch the deal, we've got to sign a contract. If we really love someone, we have to produce a ring or a home or a hug or an hour of our time.

Words can be beautiful, but experience teaches us that words are not enough. If we don't see the **signs** that show us the words are for real, then they are no better than lies.

That's how rituals came into being, because of the human need for signs and testimony. We can say, "I love you" -- but are we willing to say it before the priest? We can call ourselves Catholic -- but do we join the assembly when it gathers? We might declare that we saw something at the scene of the crime -- but will we tell it to the judge?

Ritual is the difference between a private word and a public one, between talking and testifying. When we profess our commitments here, in the presence of the faithful, they become more than words. They become signs of our covenant. Covenants, in Hebrew and Christian scripture at least, are pretty simple. They're personal. They're unequal. And, as all three readings tell us today, they are BLOODY!

Blood indeed is what keeps us alive as it courses through our veins bringing in oxygen and taking out carbon dioxide. A simple transfusion of a pint of blood can mean the difference between life and death. Infections carried in the bloodstream can be deadly. How our blood works appears so simple yet is very complex. Exchanging blood made people "brothers" or "sisters." Blessing with blood of sacrificial animals provided strength or purification. Covering oneself with the blood of an enemy was believed to make you stronger.

To say that we become the Body and Blood of Christ takes a leap of faith that many are not able to make. To be transformed into the mysterious source of life that being the Body and Blood of Christ in our world demands is much more than many want to take on. Yet as Christians we must embrace it as we consume the Body and as we bring our lips to the cup and pray "Amen."

Most early covenants were between kings and their subjects. Most biblical covenants were between God and a person in leadership (like Abraham, Moses and David) or the nation as a whole (conducted through God's prophet). In all of these sacred contracts, there was much to be gained for the weaker party if the promise was upheld, things like protection, God's favor, and the good life.

The strong one also gained: in taxes, power, or, in the case of God, the delight of walking with the beloved people in close companionship.

But the breaking of the covenant could lead to bloodshed: The subject could lose his or her life. So, obviously, could the king.

But how could God possibly suffer if we broke faith with the divine covenant? Can God's feelings be hurt? Can God lose anything in glory or dignity or sovereignty? Certainly, when we are unfaithful, God can "smite" us. The Bible has lots of stories of "smiting," and the Christian teaching on judgment reminds us that there are definite consequences to turning away from God's love.

Perhaps a more accurate way of understanding this is to recognize that, in turning from the source of life and love, we "smite" ourselves. Remember that scene in the movie, "Bruce Almighty" when Bruce shakes his fists to the sky and cries out to God, "Smite me, O Mighty Smiter!"

But until the revelation of Jesus, it was hard to imagine that God had anything to lose by entering into covenant with us. God had no flesh to write into the bargain. God had only the divine word to give. When the divine word became flesh, however, the story took a radically different turn. Suddenly, the covenant with creation became deeply personal for God. And yes, there was blood in it.

The truth is, God always had a very personal connection to creation, the kind of love that desires and aches and celebrates and mourns along with the beloved. But, like a lover who is disregarded or whose attempts at love are regularly rejected, God found the pull of sin in our sphere to be too overwhelming for us. God's love for us was veiled like the sun behind a cloud, and soon we stopped believing in it. So God chose to become as visible to us as we are to ourselves.

Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, once came upon a workingman sitting before the tabernacle. The poor man certainly had other places to be and other pressing matters to attend to, so naturally the priest was curious as to why he lingered in church so long. "What are you doing?" Father John asked at last. The man simply glanced back to the tabernacle and said, "I look at Him. He looks at me." That's what we do during what we call Eucharistic Adoration. We look at Him. He looks at us.

For those who don't know, here are some 50 cent words for your "Church talk" dictionary:

Monstrance: from the Latin word *mostrare* -- to show off, to put on display. We have a special container for the priest's communion host which allows more people to see the host because of the size and height of the monstrance.

Luna: from the Latin word for moon. It's a glass and brass, see-through orb holding the priest's communion host. It looks like a full moon.

Exposition: from the Latin word *exposare* – to expose, to bring out. The priest brings out the Luna, places it inside the monstrance, and puts the monstrance on the altar.

Adoration: self-explanatory. We look at Him and He looks at us. We adore each other.

Benediction: from the Latin word *benedicere* – to bless. At the end of the period of adoration, hymns are sung. The priest or deacon lifts up the monstrance from the altar and blesses the people with it. After that, the Divine Praises are sung, and the Luna is put back inside the tabernacle. Some call this the Reposition or “placing back” of the Luna in the tabernacle.

We have private adoration with the Luna in the tabernacle on Monday afternoons. We have Exposition, Adoration and Benediction on the First Friday of every month from 12 Noon to 3 PM. First Friday is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and recalls His 3 hours suffering and dying on His Holy Cross.

When Jesus became one of us, humanity had the chance to look God in the eye and to see God looking back at us. When we contemplate the image of Jesus on the cross, in the Sacred Heart, or many other wonderful artistic portrayals, we are assisted in making that same connection. But Jesus left a more eloquent and vital testimony of his love behind for us. “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Your death, O Lord, until You come again.” We take part in a covenant of God’s love for us that speaks its commitment again and again.

Through this great covenant, we encounter God in ritual, but the encounter doesn’t end here. We **incorporate** – we take into our own bodies -- God’s life and love and **become** that Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity for others.

How is what I do aimed at liturgy, especially the celebration of the Mass? How does what I do flow from liturgy? How can I avoid making liturgy merely another thing I do?

In what ways do I find myself renewed by the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist? What is my understanding of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? How do I enter into that sacrifice, and how does it open up into the rest of my life? How can I lead others into it?

The root of the word *liturgy* comes from Latin for “work of the people.” And what is work? *Work* has its roots in the Greek word for “activity.” Thus the liturgy – the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass -- is the activity of the people. It is something we are charged to do. We must take, eat, and remember Christ’s life. That’s half of the job. The other is take it from “in here” to “out there.” This is each Christian’s responsibility. As Christians there’s no getting out of this work, but those who’ve been at it for a while say the benefits are worth it. AMEN!

[Readings: Genesis 3:9-15; Ps. 130; 2 Cor. 4:13 – 5:1; Mark 3:20-35]

If you expose yourself to the news today, you'll learn the same thing Genesis warns about. That there's trouble in Paradise. Things aren't as they should be, and someone (or lots of someones) will pay a bitter price.

So, what does this trouble look like? In the original story in our First Reading, God calls, and Adam hides. We're not surprised by this early game of Hide-and-go-seek. Because you and I are familiar with the dynamics of a fraying relationship. When we're in the wrong, you and I become notoriously hard to find. We hide when we're ashamed of what we've done or failed to do. We become invisible when we have secrets we have no intention of sharing. And we go on the lam when we're afraid of being found out.

And we may do all this while remaining in plain view. Adam ducked behind a bush. But you and I often hide behind words: what we say or withhold. We wear disguises: a false smile, a cold silence, even a smokescreen of relentless chatter that keeps everyone away from the truth we're protecting. All the while, we may be seething with resentment, covering a gaping wound, or wracked with fears we dare not express out loud. We don't want anyone to see how vulnerable we are. Or, like Adam, we're not going to expose our private selves in public.

That's Part I of the trouble: Unpleasant truths get put under wraps.

Part II of the trouble is the opposite, as Saint Paul describes it in our Second Reading: Good news may remain unseen. What we CAN see is often overwhelming: war zones, too many school shootings, epidemics, yet another leader proving to have clay feet. Not long ago I got a panicked email from a friend about an *E. coli* outbreak: *Don't eat the lettuce! Throw it out, now!* I was eating pre-sliced melon at the time, then I saw the news! It's a tough world when you have to fear your food! I eating heart-smart at time, and it could have killed me! Back to White Castle!

Paul encourages us not to limit reality to what's tangible and temporary, but to make room for the unseen -- which has the advantage of being eternal. Media assures us daily we're one step from the apocalypse. The end is near!

Take a hint from the Bible: Every generation is apocalyptic. Humanity is always poised on the brink of disaster. I'm not denying it; I'm saying it's nothing new. You've lived in fear of the apocalypse your whole life and are no worse for the wear. Your own apocalypse will happen the day you die and stand before Jesus Christ on Judgement Day!

Jesus is poised on the brink in today's Gospel, with accusations all around. His family thinks he's crazy. Enemies call him possessed. Jesus roots himself down in the fabulous unseen: his Father's love, abundant life, a new family composed of spirit and truth. We can trust the trouble, or trust the Lord. Because God is always calling. We can choose to hide or choose to come forth.

A psychologist explained something fascinating about shame: No one can put it inside us without our consent. Shame doesn't enter from the outside but responds from the inside. Those seeking to embarrass us are frustrated if we refuse their attempt to impart shame with the slap of a hand or a word. If we accept shame, it's because deep down we're already carrying it.

So Adam, guilty of disloyalty to God, is shamed by his newfound nakedness. Yet Jesus, insulted, beaten, stripped, and humiliated, remains clothed in honor at the cross. Got shame? We've got a sacrament for that. It's called Confession, Penance, and Reconciliation.

Two other points about today's Gospel which strike up a spirited discussion. What exactly is that "unforgivable sin" that Jesus speaks about? And, more importantly, did I commit it? Right? Am I going straight to Hell when I die because I have already committed that unforgivable sin?

There are two schools of thought about this. The first understanding is the more popular one. It says that whatever sin I committed, it is so awful, so terrible, so horrifying, that God could never forgive me of it. Do you know what's wrong with this way of thinking? It puts the power of our most horrible sin ABOVE God's power to forgive.

The second understanding is that when we die, one visionary says that our soul will stand before Jesus Christ who will ask us not once, but twice: "Will

you truly repent of your sins and accept Me and My love? Will you accept My forgiveness and eternal friendship? The visionary, and our Catechism of the Catholic Church say, if we decline that invitation, if even after the moment of death, we still reject Jesus Christ, we condemn ourselves to eternal damnation. Failure to repent, and failure to trust in God's forgiving love for us when we die is the "unforgivable sin."

My final observation is the reference in the Gospel to "brothers and sisters of Jesus." This was discussed as part of our prayer experience at last week's Parish Pastoral Council meeting. Before I could even explain the concept, the most senior member of the Council shouted, "I know, I know! They were not His biological brothers and sisters; they were His extended family." More important is what Jesus Christ says about it. YOU are my mother and my brother and my sister if you do the will of God."

This past weekend, we celebrated the feasts of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on Friday and the Immaculate Heart of Mary on Saturday morning. What would it be like to have an "immaculate heart"? Might it be to love unconditionally? When we are honest about it, we tend to love only those who love us in return, who treat us well, and who respect us. "I will love you only if you love me."

Can we open our hearts a bit more to embrace those who do not return our love in equal measure? Can we go so far as to love our enemies? A tall order, but one worth striving for – one who loves unconditionally, as a good parent loves an imperfect child, as Mary loves her perfect Son.

Practice loving without conditions this week. Who does it better than Mary, the Mother of God? Now THAT is someone whose opinion of us we should care about! AMEN!

[Readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 90; 2 Cor. 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34]

Recently, I came upon this reflection from Father Jonathan D. Kalisch, OP Director of Chaplains and Spiritual Development for the Knights of Columbus. I share this with you as we honor all fathers on this Father's Day weekend.

Every man -- even those who don't have children of their own -- is called to fatherhood. His fatherhood consists of nurturing the vocations of those for whom the Lord has given him care and responsibility. In his recent apostolic exhortation on the call to holiness in today's world, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), Pope Francis highlights the central importance of the grace of discernment which "seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us" (170). A father plays a key role in showing his children the love of God the Father, through which they experience, on a supernatural level, the knowledge of the unrepeatability of their own unique lives.

Before a man is ever a spouse or a father, he himself is first a beloved son of God the Father. Knowing that he is a beloved son of the Eternal Father gives a man ordered priority to his life and relationships: first God, then his spouse and, finally, his children. Pope Francis reminds us that God's unique plan for each of us "involves more than my earthly well-being, my satisfaction at having accomplished something useful, or even my desire for peace of mind. It has to do with the meaning of my life before the Father Who knows and loves me, with the real purpose of my life, which nobody knows better than He" (170).

Over the past several decades, for many reasons, men have been suffering an identity crisis. Whereas in former days, a son would clearly have grasped his father's instruction, "Show yourself a man," today such a curt instruction might not be so readily understood. The messages our culture broadcasts about what it means to be a "real man" are inconsistent and confusing. In movies and on television, images of men vary widely from violent, take-no-prisoner pseudo-superheroes, to smooth-talking, machismo-driven womanizers, to sheepish and vulnerable women-fearers who seem to want to be one of the girls more than one of the guys.

If you've ever tuned in to Family Guy or American Dad or Two and a Half Men, you know what I'm talking about. Today, men, in their role as husbands and fathers, are often portrayed as stupid, insensitive to their wives, and the worst possible role model for their children. These and other factors tend to make men feel powerless. Professional sports figures often leave men and boys empty of genuine role models, too.

Rare is the positive image of ordinary, hardworking men who are faithful to God, faithful to the Church, Faithful to their wives, and faithful to their families and friends. Thank you to those men in this parish who are such men. Thank you for your witness.

Within the Church, as well, it is not as easy as it once was for men and boys to find living examples of what it means to be a “man of God.” Does man’s God-given mission differ from woman’s, and if so, how? Are there any role models men can turn to in order to learn how to become the men their Father in heaven calls them to be? How can men today arm and defend themselves against the cultural phenomena that are weakening their identity and diverting them from their God-given tasks?

To read more about the challenges of forming Christian men today, check out Catholic Information Service’s *Becoming a Real Man of God* (#322), a part of the *Building the Domestic Church Series*, at kofc.org/cis.

Our readings today speak of planting seeds, protecting the crops and carefully yielding the harvest. What we say and what we do are like seeds planted in the hearts and minds and spirits of our children. Jesus makes it very clear that often times it’s the smallest things which make the biggest difference in our faith. The same can be said about parenting. They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Your children will not only imitate you, but in many ways, they will grow up to be like you simply because you’re their parents. I cannot tell you how many times growing up as a kid and a teen, my mom looking at me with love and saying, “You’re just like your FATHER!” Or my dad saying, “You’re just like your MOTHER!”

We walk by faith and not by sight. Let us please our Heavenly Father whether we are at home or away, so that when we stand before His judgment seat, we may receive our recompense for our good parenting and not our bad. AMEN!

[Readings: Is 49:1-6; Psalm 139; Acts 13:22-26; Luke 1:57-- 66, 80]

Believe it or not, the Gospel of Luke doesn't begin with Jesus. It begins with the birth of John the Baptist, an event nearly as stunning, almost as impossible as the Incarnation of Jesus Christ himself. Elizabeth and Zechariah are righteous and barren (Lk 1:6-7). Like Abraham and Sarah, they should not be able to conceive a child. They are beyond the age at which children are born to couples.

One can only imagine the pain that both Elizabeth and Zechariah experienced. The Psalmist promises that the one who fears the Lord will have many descendants (Ps 112:1-2). How often they must have cried out to God together, asking for descendants. Praying for a son. A child-less couple was considered a curse from God for some personal sins they may have committed.

God has something else in store for Elizabeth and Zechariah. Performing his priestly duty in the Temple, Zechariah is visited by the angel Gabriel.

Gabriel not only promises that Elizabeth and Zechariah will have a child. This son will be a source of "joy and gladness" (Lk 1:14), he will be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:15), and "he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (Lk 1:16). In the Gospel of Luke, the words "joy and gladness" is evidence that the moment of salvation is near. John is chosen by God to be a prophet, to turn Israel to God. To prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah cannot believe. He cannot "know" this truth, perceive it with his own eyes. Who could? And he is thus made silent, waiting for the birth of John.

In the meantime, more wondrous events unfold in Nazareth. The same angel Gabriel appears to Mary, inviting her into an even more wondrous birth. Mary, too, wonders how this is possible, since she has not "known" a man (a word pertaining to sexual intimacy).

Zechariah cannot "know" this truth because it cannot be perceived. Mary "knows" the possibility of truth, even if she herself has not been "known."

Mary and Elizabeth encounter one another, two women pregnant with divine possibility. Jesus and His cousin John greet one another in the womb,

joyfully aware of the mysterious salvation happening in hidden Judah. Some theologians say that this is when John was “baptized” – at this encounter with Jesus while they were both in the wombs of their mothers.

While Zechariah remains silent, Mary speaks. Her soul magnifies the Lord. She proclaims the mercy that has come to visit her people. The moment of judgment is at hand, the time for divine possibility. Her song of praise is called the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

Could Zechariah have heard these wondrous words of Mary? Was it her witness that led him to know the unknowable?

And then, at last, John is born. When Zechariah writes his name upon the tablet, fulfilling the prophecy of the angel Gabriel, he can once again speak. And his first words bless God. His song of praise is called the Benedictus: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel...”

John’s first renewal of Israel begins with his dad, who comes to rejoice in the salvation made present here and now.

Filled with the very Spirit of God, Zechariah now offers his own parallel song to Mary’s. He sees his son for who he is -- the prophet of the Most High, the one who comes to announce the presence of light in the world.

The births of John and Jesus are both announced by angels: the first to a priest-father who doubts and will be silenced, the second to a mere girl who believes and springs into faith-based action. While Elizabeth hides herself away to escape the public eye, Mary runs into the Judean hills to share her news at once. When Mary appears, Elizabeth’s unborn son acknowledges the presence of the “blessed fruit” of her womb before she even has a chance to sing her Magnificat. This hymn is prayed every evening during the Church’s solemn evening prayer; Zechariah’s Benedictus hymn of praise is prayed every morning.

So today’s a good day to remember the importance of people who are seldom in the spotlight, whether others or ourselves. Recognize that even small actions and choices are significant; they either build up the community of faith or they do not. The power of the Gospel in action can be the “loosening of the

sandal strap” that may seem unimportant to everyone -- except of course to the person whose feet are tired and hurting.

Also, think about your own name. The family of Zechariah and Elizabeth murmur that they have chosen to give their son a name which no relative has – quite uncommon and disrespectful at that time. The name John means “beloved of God” or “favored by God” or “given grace by God.” What does YOUR name mean? How was your name chosen by your parents? Were you named after a special relative, or some then-current celebrity?

My mother’s father was named Nicholas. He was born on the feast of St. Nicholas – December 6th – so I guess that’s why HIS parents named him that.

My mother’s father died just when my mom was getting ready to graduate from the eighth grade. To honor the memory of her father, I was named after him. I would also guess that whenever she called out my name, it reminded her of HER mother calling out to her husband.

Parenthetically, whenever my mom and her mom would be over the gossip fence talking about the latest events of the family in English, and they would see me approaching, they would say, “Maly Uszy” (MAH-wee OO-shee) – “Little Ears” – and the conversation would switch to Polish. I was 14 years old before I realized that my first name in Polish was NOT “Maly Uszy!”

On the feast of John’s nativity, we should allow ourselves to be conformed to the prophetic wisdom of Jesus’ cousin. Like John, we are called to be witnesses to the one who witnesses to the love of the Father. “Joyful, missionary disciples!” We are witnesses to the joyful resurrection of the beloved Son.

And like the last prophet of Israel, St. John the Baptist, we must announce to the world the good news: The Most High is here. We are not him.

Come with us. And meet the source of joy and gladness.

Finally, I ask you to spend some time in quiet prayer and reflect on today’s Psalm 139, which is prescribed for today’s feast day. Realize what God thinks of you. Like John, you are beloved. This is my favorite and most consoling psalm in the entire Book of Psalms. If you are having a good day, and especially if you are having a bad day, open up the Book of Psalms to Psalm 139 and let God

console you and uplift you. “I thank you, Lord, for I am fearlessly, wonderfully made.” These are the words that make up the song, “Yahweh, I Know You are Near.” Where does God or your faith “amaze you? Be courageous proclaimers. Come out from the shadows and proclaim to others, all that God has done for you. You may be surprised at whose sandal straps you loosen, and whose feet – and lives – you will touch and help to heal! AMEN!