

[Readings: Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; Matt. 5:13-16]

Once upon a time, a mother mouse decided to teach her children about the world. So she gathered all of her little mice and set out for a walk. They walked down the hall and turned to the right. And suddenly they found themselves in front of the family cat dozing in the sunlight. The mother mouse was scared. But she didn't want to give in to her fright. Just as she was about to get past the cat, the cat's eyes popped open and the cat raised its paw.

The little mice were petrified. What would their mother do? Well, just as the cat's paw started to come down, that mother mouse looked the cat right in the eye and started barking like a dog. And do you know what? The cat was so startled and frightened that it jumped up and ran away! The mother mouse, wiped her brow, shook a little and then turned to her little mice and said, "Children, I hope you learned a valuable lesson. Sometimes it's good to know a second language!"

It's the same way with us. It's good to know a second language. Salt and light are the language of God; the language of Grace; the language of hope and love. And when this language is translated into action, it becomes the most beautiful language ever spoken. We're called to be salt and light and to speak the language of God as we live our faith. We're called to live the Word.

Things are better when we take care of one another. Things grow worse if we don't. That is nowhere truer than in today's Scripture readings and in our families.

Loving and purposeful families grow together and yield abundant dividends in loyalty, mutual encouragement, and assured welfare. Careless, neglectful, or abusive families reap sorrow and hostility that winds through the years and spreads the malignancy further.

What's true for families is true for communities. Communities that care for their weaker members thrive in peace and well-being. Communities cut off from the fate of their disadvantaged ones will harvest division, unrest, and violence.

Follow this simple formula through a single nation, or to all nations – even ours -- and its truthfulness continues. Hebrew prophecy proposed an answer as simple as the problem: Share your bread. Shelter your homeless. Clothe the naked. Don't turn your back on your own. Watch your speech. The nation that cares for its afflicted will be a beacon to the world. And woe to the nation that doesn't. It's as simple as that.

Jesus is also a fan of simplicity. We would find our hearts curiously free of obstacles to becoming the people we want to be, happy and fulfilled. If we love, if we forgive and if we serve. We would also supply the salt to our communities so that everyone around us would lead richer lives simply because they know us, harvest our love, and are illumined by our example. When we live in the light and become the light ourselves, we discover our true purpose.

Saint Paul understood that when he made his startling resolution to keep his gospel plain and simple. He stayed close to the Cross. Isaiah says that if we feed the hungry and shelter the

oppressed, our light shall break forth like the dawn, God will hear us, and our wounds will be healed. Who in this congregation each Sunday isn't presented with some kind of wound of mind, heart, or body? Isaiah's point is openness and participation in God's generous love, moving us to generosity and to justice, and brings us healing.

"One night at the end of a special Saturday night worship service," writes Warren Hudson of Ontario, Canada, "a thunderstorm unleashed a bolt of lightning that plunged the church into darkness." With the congregation seated in total darkness, the pastor found some candles and handed out the candles to everyone present.

Persons lit their candles in much the same way as many churches do at the Easter Vigil, each person lighting the candle of the person next to them. The worshipers then made their way through the church's winding hallways to the front door.

"Peering out, we could see the rain coming down in sheets," Warren remembers. With traffic snarled, people were running for the nearest shelter.

Looking around, they realized that the entire city was in darkness. "There in the darkness we stood," Warren writes, "a little band of Christians, each clutching a light, not sure whether to venture out into the storm or to stay inside the church, in hopes that the storm would soon blow over."

There in the darkness, the light of truth struck him. In this most dramatic way, he realized what it means to be the "light of the world."

He writes, "It occurred to me then that this is the temptation I face every day. It is easy to play it safe and be a good Christian in church. It is a lot harder to venture out in faith into the storms of the

world." Want to live in the light? Then do justice, says the Lord. Share your bread, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked.

It's almost predictable how often people return from a simple work of this kind and declare with amazement, "I received so much more than I gave." That "so much more," we could say, is the promised light. And among ourselves, we need to remove from our midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech. That means no more bullying, no more gossip, no more judging one another without knowing all the facts.

When we move into the world's darkness bringing help and hope, we bear the light with us. It's not ours exactly, and it's not us either. Divine justice harbors its own light, and when we surrender to its service, the light has a chance to rise in some of the darkest places around. When we find the courage to touch other lives, the glory of the Lord goes ahead of us, and the gloom can indeed become like midday.

May we never fail to carry our light – the light of faith, the light of hope, the light of loving service – here in this sacred space, and then, with courage and determination, into the darkness of the world.  
AMEN!

[Readings: Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Matt 5:17-37]

One of the more heart-wrenching funerals I have served in my priesthood took place not in a church, but in the funeral home. A father was being buried that day, and two county sheriffs escorted one of his sons who was serving a sentence in the county jail, to his father's casket. At the eulogy, the son spoke about how great of an example his father had been to him, and then spoke of his regret at choosing to do something wrong which brought shame to his family, especially to his father.

"If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you." The readings this week tell us to keep the commandments but also tell us that doing so is not as simple as it may first appear. Fortunately, Scripture gives us guidance in the sometimes-complex call to "follow the Law of the Lord."

Rule Number One: Realize that you have a choice. God sets before you "fire and water," Sirach says -- life and death, good and evil. You'll get what you choose. God is not going to compel you one way or the other.

Number Two: It's about more than just following the rules. We hear Jesus say that the key to keeping the commandments is the state of your inner self. When it comes to the things of God, the important direction is inside-out, not outside-in. Our bodies, our sexuality, our talents are to be used responsibly.

While many dress codes have gone the way of all flesh, Christians should never ignore one dress code. It comes from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful" (Col 3:12-15).

Rule Number Three is the really good news: You don't have to go it alone. You can lean on God's wisdom.

"Immense is the wisdom of the Lord." God sees all and understands all, and though that wisdom is mysterious, it is revealed to all who love God.

Our Responsorial Psalm is not a song praising the Law of Moses or the Commandments. The Law is more properly understood as a "word to the wise." Have you ever heard that expression: "Here is a word to the wise?" That's where it comes from: Psalm 119.

This weekend, we celebrate World Marriage Sunday. I want to wish a special blessing and prayer to all married couples, especially those celebrating special jubilees this year: 1<sup>st</sup> year, 5<sup>th</sup> year, 10<sup>th</sup> year, 25 years, 50 or more.

Do you know what is the best definition of marriage I have ever heard? Your vocation, your call, is to make Jesus Christ real and present in and through each other. To be Jesus Christ to each other, as Jesus is Christ to His Church.

To get each other into Heaven!

What a time and what a need we have for genuine examples of a loving, mature, and faith-filled couple – one man and one woman – choosing to live out their lives as a married couple. They create a "union" of man and woman, and are open to the new life given and entrusted to them by God, the Creator of Life and the Author of Love.

One thing I learned late in life is that marriage is NOT about falling in love and staying in love. It is about CHOOSING each day to stay with your spouse and children. To commit yourself to your spouse and family. In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, until death do you part.

An author recently wrote this about four stages of marriage, and I think it makes sense. His idea about the four stages of love are these:

PREPARING FOR LOVE... As a single person before marriage, develop the skills needed to be a loving, mature and faith-filled individual and couple.

PRACTICING LOVE... While dating, after you are engaged, and after you are married, do those big and little things that renew and confirm your love and your appreciation for each other. And do this in front of the kids so they can see what a loving, mature, faith-filled couple looks like.

PROTECTING LOVE... Provide a “safe house” for your family where they know they are always welcomed, affirmed and loved as children of God, and as sisters and brothers in Christ. Where discipline is done with love, not abuse.

PERFECTING LOVE... What love means to you and what you do to show love changes over the years. It is ongoing journey – and an ongoing adventure – to the perfect love shown by Jesus Christ for His Church, the perfect love shared with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is this love, once reached, that will get you both into Heaven!

Marriage isn't for everyone, and current trends may point to a declining appeal. But for those who have said, “I do,” the rest of us say, “Thank you.” Your bold act of commitment and perseverance offers all of us insight into the joyful and sorrowful mysteries of divine love and the nature and power of God, who is love. Whether or not you're married, do what you can do to support the marriages in your midst -- today, on this World Marriage Day, and every day.

When I was a young boy in grade school, I entered the kitchen of my home and saw my Mom preparing a recipe for a chocolate cake. On the counter was a HUGE chocolate bar with a familiar brown and white wrapping around it. It had a familiar name on the wrapping: HERSHEY'S. I wanted a bite of that bar.

Mom warned me: “You won't like it. It's baker's chocolate. It isn't sweet.” I begged for a piece anyway. Have YOU ever tasted baker's chocolate? YUK!

This, my friends, is the moral life in a nutshell, a chocolate-flavored nutshell. God says this to us about sin: “You won't like it. It ISN'T sweet.” It may be very attractive and alluring, even seductive. But once we have tasted the bitter consequences of our sin and the effect it has on us and on others, “it isn't sweet.”

As we grow older and are able to handle more complex explanations, we do have a right to know the “why” of our religion's rules and regulations. And after over forty years of priesthood later, I am just now beginning to understand more fully, why and how the Church teaches what she teaches. May YOU also grow in that faith, reason and perseverance. AMEN!

[Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 3:16-23; Matt 5:38-48]

Two groups of men stand ready to fight each other. The leaders of the groups are standing toe to toe against each other. The first man says, "Give it your best shot." So the second man delivers a right hook on his left cheek. When the first man recovers, in the spirit of today's Gospel, he offers the other cheek. So the second man delivers a left hook on his right cheek. The first man recovers a second time, stands up straight, faces the second man, and delivers an upper cut, which sends the second man flat on the floor. The first man's friend asks, "Why did you do that?" The first man replies, "I ran out of cheeks!"

One cold stare invites another. Insult is traded for insult. One punch follows another. Somewhere down the road, there's an exchange of gunfire. Wearying cycles of violence and vengeance spiral through history, each side seeking to deliver the blow that leads to decisive victory. But there's no victory. There's not even a chance of even-stein. Retaliatory justice is never just, because trading pain for pain, loss for loss, never heals anything. Violence only gives birth to more of the same. As Jesus reminds us, "those who live by the sword will die by the sword."

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" sounds like a good proposal. It seeks to bring equity into the game of reprisal, keeping a lid on how far one might go to achieve satisfaction in revenge. I wonder what percentage of mass murderers in our country, our city, our state, end up taking their own life. You can't take more from the other guy than he took from you. It sounds right. The mass murderer realizes his sin and executes himself. How does a hurled stone discriminate between a tooth and half a jaw? There's no strict sense of justice in the land of loss, no measured steps to take in the wild territory of retribution.

Most of us, of course, won't be reaching for rocks or firearms in our attempts to get even with those who wrong us. We'll find the shaming word, the scorching secret, and hurl that out in the open. We'll start a lawsuit, or just a vicious rumor. We'll steal from the tight-pursed employer, which hurts the boss a little but turns us into thieves.



Even if we do nothing, or say nothing, just carrying the smoldering desire for vengeance in our hearts poisons our capacity to love, to forgive, and to be human. It poisons us.

What would Jesus have us do in the face of the real wrongs perpetrated against us? Jesus expects us to retaliate against wrong -- with good. Ignoring evil isn't the way to fight it, Jesus says. We must overcome evil with the stronger spirit of love. If you're offended, don't return an offense but remain both innocent and vulnerable. If detained unfairly, stay twice as long and strive to make the oppressor a friend. Be generous without keeping a record of what's owed.

Respond to haters with love, and to curses with blessings. This method of reply may sound like madness, entirely out of the question. Where's the justice in it? The reply is that there's no human justice in it, if that's what you're seeking. But there is divine justice in it. Because this is how God deals with us. This is how God deals with us.

This is not an easy task! When our spirits are rattled, when we ourselves are testy because of a difficult situation, and when we fear the anger, retaliation or withdrawal of the person we are concerned about, confrontation takes a lot of courage. And it takes much thoughtful and prayerful preparation.

In today's First Reading, we find a key to effective conversation. Do not do it out of an inner spirit of hatred, or to gain revenge, or out of some grudge that you keep in your heart. Compassionate love recognizes that we ourselves have our own faults and weaknesses and imperfections.

What injustice in your own life keeps you from an open heart? What keeps you stuck in resentment? St. Paul reminds us that we belong to God, and with God's love our heart has the capacity to let go and to move on.

Which brings us to the key commands of two of our readings: "Be holy" and "Be perfect." Once again, the English translation is lacking. In the original Hebrew, the verb is not a perfect imperative: "Do this, right now, and be done with it!" It is not something done once and for all.

It is an active progressive verb. It begins in the present and progresses into the future. The same thing with the command of Jesus when He says:

“Become perfected (in the original Greek) as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” It is an ongoing action.

My mantra last year was “I delight in my imperfection.” I could not say this five years ago. I blame all the meds I am taking to excuse my imperfection!

We also remember that while we are correcting ourselves and reproving one another, that there is a delicate balance between enabling one another (which is dysfunctional) and empowering one another (which is virtuous).

We sing in our Responsorial Psalm, that the Lord is “kind and merciful,” “gracious,” “slow to anger and abounding in kindness.” Can we not be the same when we correct one another? Kind and merciful. Slow to anger. Rich in mercy.

Most of us know the first part of the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference.”

But this is the original version of this prayer comes to us from Reinhold Niebuhr, a German theologian and pastor:

“God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

Most of us don’t know that this is only half of his prayer. There is another paragraph that goes with it. If you haven’t heard it, here is the rest of it:

“Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, *not as I would have it*, trusting that You will make all things right, *if I surrender to Your will*, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.”

I conclude with another version of the Serenity Prayer which comes from a Jesuit priest, Fr. James Martin, from his book, *Between Heaven and Mirth*:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, which is pretty much everyone, since I’m clearly not you, God. At least not the last time I checked.

“And while you’re at it, God, please give me the courage to change what I need to change about myself, which is frankly a lot, since, once again, I’m not you, which means I’m not perfect.

“It’s better for me to focus on changing myself, God, than to worry about changing other people, who, as you’ll no doubt remember me saying, I can’t change anyway.

“Finally, God, give me the wisdom to just be quiet whenever I think that I’m clearly smarter than everyone else in the room, that no one knows what they’re talking about except me, or that I alone have all the answers. Basically, God, grant me the wisdom to remember that I’m not you.” AMEN!

(Readings: Joel 2:12-18; Ps. 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

Most Catholics are not surprised the Church makes feast days such as the Immaculate Conception or the Solemnity of Mary on New Year's Day, holy days of obligation. But they might be surprised to learn that Ash Wednesday is not among these days -- nor has the Church made any day of repentance an "obligation." Interestingly, in most years more Catholics come to church on this day than on any obligatory holy day.

What this fact tells us is that our coming here to begin this season of repentance comes of our own free choice. And that it is good that we are here together on this day of communal repentance, that we express our sorrow together, to receive the mark of ashes. It also means that Catholics like "freebies" like ashes on Ash Wednesday and the palm branches they covet on Palm Sunday!

It seems to me very countercultural that this is so. Not to crave "freebies," but to come together here of our own free will to acknowledge our need for repentance. To "turn around," to "change our direction" away from selfishness and sin, and turn around toward the "other" -- toward those around us -- and to the Most Holy "Other" -- God in all of God's merciful forgiveness.

While we are immersed in a society that by and large denies death and sacrifice, you have all chosen to gather here. The ashes that we have come together to receive on our foreheads will remind us of our return to dust. As we work through the rest of the day, we recall, on our own skin, what all our professional and material achievements will return to: dust, rust, and rags.

Nothing binds us to this practice, but we do it.

It must be that we recognize how our sins have brought about death, not only our own spiritual death, but in some way, also Christ's upon the cross. How you and I may have led someone else to their physical or spiritual death by our bad choices, our pressure and force. We have chosen death in the past, but today we choose repentance from our sins and new, clean life in Christ.

But with ashes, we not only remind ourselves of our shortcomings and our desires to turn our attentions to God, we also communicate this message with one another here. We serve as the image of Christ to one another and thereby support and reinforce one another. We are here as a community so that each may see, not that each may be seen.

Today, then, we draw on one of earth's basest substances – ashes -- to remind us that, for the next 40 days, many of our needs and desires will go unmet. And that is a good thing. The sign of ashes on the forehead goes back to very ancient times, when cleaning up and disposing of ashes from wood fires constituted a major household chore.

When a family member died or another grave event occupied the hearts of the household, the subsequent neglect of this chore meant the ashes would pile up and fill the air, so much so that telltale smudges would be found on the faces of the inhabitants. The ashes, then, represented neglect of domestic needs and vanities in deference to mourning. So by wearing ashes on our faces today, we're saying, "My attention is focused elsewhere, on more important things than the deadening distractions of daily life." And we are not alone.

After we have received ashes, look around to the people who will take the journey of Lent with you. Keep this sight with you over the next 40 days. These days will be a period for contemplation, reflection, and preparation as we join Jesus in his retreat into the wilderness. For as we imitate Jesus we, too, must imitate the isolation He felt while He was alone in the desert.

With the beginning of Lent, we might tend to look inward, to focus on prayer and repentance, on resetting our interior compass in a more God-ward direction. But the three traditional practices of Lent—prayer, fasting, almsgiving (which work all year round, by the way)—point us outward as much as inward. We pray for both others and ourselves. We fast to clear our lives of what prevents us from seeing God in others and the world. And we learn to show more generosity to those around us. So this year don't let yourself get Lenten cabin fever. Practice also in the world. AMEN.

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

How many of you love to wait? To wait in line at the supermarket? To wait in line at the Secretary of State DMV? To wait in line at the bank? I think this is the reason why people who have medical problems and seek doctors to help them are called “patients.” You have to be patient for an appointment, sometimes weeks later than the day of your phone call setting it up. You have to be patient as together you and the doctor explore the causes of your illness. You have to be patient as you both try various solutions to resolve the illness.

We have a lot of in-between times in our lives, don't we? Those intervening hours, days and weeks of waiting. It's especially difficult when we feel like we don't know what's coming or what to expect.

Many people face such trials, staring at a screen at an airport looking for an update for a delayed flight, waiting for a diagnosis, standing by for a judge's decision, biding time until a new appointment or job comes up.

And where is God in the in-between times? So often it seems like God has forgotten us. In the in-between times, God can seem reluctant to let us in on what He sees and intends. He's left us behind, or at least it so often feels.

And yet, our God is not a God of only origins and destinations. Our God is all-powerful, all-present. He is not absent from the in-between; in fact, He is the very God of in-between.

What else does Jesus' life show us than that the Father has put even waiting to work in His loving plan? The Son, eternally begotten by the Father, WAITED for the right moment to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He WAITED for 30 years, hidden in Nazareth to begin the preaching of the reign of God. He WAITED to be recognized as the Messiah. He WAITED for His disciples to understand his teaching. He WAITED the long night, as Pontius Pilate and King Herod determined whether or not to put him to death. And He WAITED — the whole world WAITED — on Holy Saturday for His glorious Resurrection from the dead. The Word, the beloved Son of the Father, is present in the in-between.

He lived the long waiting of our humanity. And He remains present with us now, waiting. The in-between is filled with His presence — a fact we see as soon as we stop complaining about the in-between.

In fact, our human condition on this side of eternity is one long in-between. Between the day of our birth and the day of our death. Our hearts were not made for this world, they were made for the next, where tears and night and death are no longer. To live a Christian life is to remember always that we are not there yet, that we await the blessed hope of the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ. So what do we do while we are waiting? We don't sit on our hands and do nothing! Here are **10 Tips for Making the Lenten Season More Meaningful**

**Slow Down** – Set aside 10 minutes a day for silent prayer or meditation. It will revitalize your body and your spirit.

**Read a good book** – You could choose the life of a saint, a spiritual how-to book, an inspirational book or one of the pope's new books. Join us for the "Chosen" videos on Monday afternoons at 1:00 PM.

**Be kind** – Go out of your way daily, do something kind for someone else.

**Get involved** – Attend a Lenten lecture or spiritual program. Our Family of Parishes has two missions scheduled for this Lent.

**Volunteer at Mass** – It will give you a chance to help others. We need lectors, ushers, altar servers and choir members.

**Reach out** – Invite an inactive Catholic to come with you to come to Sung Evening Prayer on Mondays at 7:00 PM, Stations of the Cross on Fridays at 3:00 PM, Confession on Wednesday evenings at 7:45 PM or Saturdays at 3:00 PM.

**Pray** – Pray for people you don't like and for people who don't like you.

**Tune out** – Turn off the television and ear pods and spend quality time talking with family members or friends. In person, not by sending texts!

**Clean out closets** – Donate gently used items to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

**Donate** – Pick a Catholic mission and decide how you can help by sending money, clothing or supplies.

Lent is a powerful expression of Christian life because it is this more than anything else: a declaration that we live in the in-between. We spend these solemn days of Lent trying to rid our lives of the things that hold us back, those things that prevent us from abandoning our own plans and throwing ourselves into His reckless love. We weren't made for the in-between, which is why it can be so daunting and terrible. But God is not missing from the in-between, God is its very Lord and master.

I hope you're all wearing comfortable shoes, because it's a long walk between here and Jerusalem, between Ash Wednesday and the Easter Vigil. Like Jesus did, we take this journey with friends, the community of believers. Like Jesus, we also take this journey with the devil lurking not far behind, biding his time. He knows how to meet us where we are, and to speak our language, and to make a good case for seeing things in a practical, reasonable light. The Evil One, he's a talker, smooth enough to chat with God when the occasion arises, and bold enough to challenge even the divine Son. He makes sin seductive and attractive.

When am I tempted to break my trusting and faithful relationship with God? Where do I go to find strength in those times? What are the choices I face between "life" and "death"? Do I always "choose life"? May Our Lord and Our Lady bless us in our journey of Lent... and the waiting in-between. AMEN!