

[Readings: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25; Philippians 2:1-11; Matt. 21:28-32]

How often have we asked ourselves or others, “Why did God do this? Why is God punishing me? Why does God allow wars, hurricanes, forest fires, earthquakes, car accidents and sickness and disease or anything else that causes us to suffer? Why did I lose my job? Why am I losing my home? Why did that relationship break down?” Are we being punished for the sins of our ancestors, as the people asked Ezekiel in his time? It is very easy to blame God for our suffering, but the reality is that *God has nothing to do with any of the bad things that happen to us usually good people*. It is either the consequences of nature, the evil deeds of others, or our own poor choices, messed up priorities and just plain stupid mistakes.

God’s will is not that we suffer, but that we be converted. Indeed, sometimes hitting rock bottom is the only way we can rise up in God’s grace and loving care. That happened to my father, who struggled most of his life with alcoholism. When he got sober in 1973, he enjoyed 17 years of sobriety and showed God his gratitude by becoming a permanent deacon for the Archdiocese of Detroit. His “No!” became his “Yes!”

God teaches us, through the words of Ezekiel, that “corporate guilt” -- the guilt of the many -- is important, but not as important as the moral life and choices of each individual. When we want to cry out, “The Lord’s way is not fair!” we need only look at our own individual lives and choices to find the insight and the truth that we long for.

We cannot live in solidarity and service if we are not aware that every choice we make has an impact on others and on our world. How can we cry the Gospel from the rooftops with our lives if we are not aware of others? St. Paul uses a small but important word in his letters: the word “if.” IF we truly turn our whole selves to Jesus and follow His lead, we must freely choose to do so. IF we want to become more complete and fulfilled in this life, we must live accordingly, turning from all else to be focused on Christ.

“IF there is any encouragement in Christ, IF there is any solace in love, IF there is any participation in the Spirit, IF there is any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.” It’s that simple! We have been doing that here at St. Martin de Porres Parish for 61 years! Living and growing in the Holy Spirit and in faith!

We continue to grow in stewardship awareness here at St. Martin de Porres. You have the chance now to take the next step. Which of the two sons in today’s Gospel will we imitate: the son who says “Yes, I will help” but doesn’t? Or the son who says, “No, I won’t, I can’t” but later does what they are called to do? Doing what the Lord is asking us, calling us to do, is a wonderful, inspiring and good start to turning our attitudes around toward God.

Jesus shows us in today’s Gospel passage how believers like you and me can cultivate our relationship with the Father. We learn that even if our initial response to God’s invitation is not what it should be -- “No, I won’t, I can’t!” -- we can change our minds and give in to God’s will for us. We also learn that a verbal “Yes, sir!” to God without a lived out follow-up is no response at all.

This past week, a need arose with which three of our parishioners could help me out. I told each of them privately what the need was, and without hesitation, they said, “Yes, I will.” And they did it! They put today’s Gospel into action! I will be asking more parishioners to help me out, to help out our parish.

One way to think of obedience is in terms of “listening”; in fact, “to hear” is at the root of the word *obey*. What is more, repentance, one of the themes of this week’s readings, could be seen as a matter of obedience, of listening to -- and doing -- the ways of the Lord and the voice of the Church. Where do YOU do obedient listening? How do you act on it?

What sacrifices do YOU make for the good of your Christian community? How can you connect them to the Easter Mystery in which Christ “emptied himself”? What is your definition of humility? How do you practice humility?

Here in the Eucharist, we tell God many good things. We say we are sorry for our sins. We say that we believe. We offer ourselves with the gifts of bread and wine. We wish each other peace. When we leave this sacred place,

we practice sacrifice time, talent, treasure.

Today, let's mean what we say we believe. Let's really offer ourselves. Let's wish each other peace from the heart. Let's show it by how we live. "Come and see" how we have been a witness to life in Christ, in the work of the Church and join us in our mission to become "joyful, missionary disciples" of Jesus Christ. I haven't said those words in quite a while, but they bare repeating.

Let's be responsible stewards and go out into the vineyard to do the work our heavenly Father asks of us. To paraphrase St. Anthony of Padua:

"May our words be few and may our actions speak for us." AMEN!

[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?" 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 8th 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" 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.

There is a difference in believing in God and not believing in God. There is a difference in building a home on prayer and the Christian values of love, forgiveness and compassion as opposed to the home that is built solely on secular wants and desires. For a person with faith in God, you are never alone; no problem is too great to overcome and there is a support system of people called the Church. When people cut God and the Church out of their lives, they leave out an important part of creating a good life. People often fail to recognize the importance of a church community and a close relationship with God under the guise of not needing to go to Mass or to belong to a denomination.

This is not to say that people who go to church have no problems or that they do not sin; far from it. But people who pray and go to church, who have a growing faith, are able to find a new perspective to life and find new ways to resolve difficulties. Is there any doubt why the Bible talks so much about forgiveness and conversion? Is it any wonder why the Bible teaches us about compassion and mercy?

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 parishioner 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.”

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 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.

What is the theme from these two stories and from today's Gospel: Crime doesn't pay, especially if you are a stupid criminal. Our divine inheritance will not come by hook or by crook, but by good and faithful service to God. Our Reflection questions for this week:

Have you ever felt that a message you delivered, perhaps in a homily, met with strong rejection? How do you handle rejection?

Are you able to move beyond rejection and come back stronger? Has it perhaps left some wounds that still need healing? Can you see in it an opportunity for strengthening your convictions?

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? The choice to accept discipleship and stewardship in your life is up to you.
AMEN!

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

It's only a wedding. 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. The "veil" will be lifted. Every question that we have had in life which begins with the word, "Why?" will be answered. Then Jesus gives the story a twist ending.

At a wedding, everyone knows that some invited guests won't be able to make it. It's disappointing. But burning down a village is rather extreme, to say the least! It's only a wedding. So maybe one of the guests shows up in blue jeans and a baseball cap. Is that any reason to call in the bouncers? Not even Miss Manners' book on "Painfully Proper Weddings" suggests outer darkness or wailing and grinding of teeth for someone who missed the memo that this is a black-tie event. It's only a wedding.

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 you do not appear dressed properly for the wedding, it is your own fault. It is your bad choice.

We must put on our wedding garment of holiness, of righteousness and justice. It's what's inside that counts. It is not enough just to be among those at the wedding. We have to prepare

for it. 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.

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.

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. We used to call it, our "Sunday best." Now, it seems, we just grab what is on the floor and put it on!

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. 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. One of my favorite bible quotes. It's all about Him, who strengthens us. And us, who then can do all things in Him!

Think of the times you have ignored or rejected an invitation or opportunity to be part of something positive or worthwhile. Did you later regret your decision? How do you handle celebrations in your own life? Are you comfortable celebrating with your relatives or faith community when the occasion warrants?

So let's be serious; let's not be foolish. Let's say yes to this invitation we have all received or we wouldn't be here this morning. This is a sacred meal set before us each week, a privileged seat at a unique table. We may not be on the original list of invited guests: For all we know, we could be the riffraff invited as a last resort! But whoever we are, we are invited and welcomed to this feast. All we

have to do is come here every week, with bells on, and eat.

During this Eucharistic Revival, we are providing yet another way of coming to the feast. Tomorrow, and for one Monday each month, we will have Eucharistic Adoration here from 6:30 to 7:30 PM. Whether you are coming home from work, or stopping by after supper, Jesus will be here to be with you for a brief or an extended visit. Come and see! Come and add another dimension to your faith journey and your faith development!

During His life on earth, Jesus Christ was accused of eating with sinners. He still does that every Sunday with us. You and I are the sinners He eats with. Talk about a “Happy Meal!” Come to the Feast! AMEN!

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

Israel has plenty of enemies in recent times, but that's nothing new. Biblically speaking, Israel always had some big power to fear. There was Big Egypt, Big Assyria, Big Babylon, Big Persia, and Big Rome. The "Great Satan" has many names and faces but generally one ambition: to exploit a good thing. Truthfully, Egypt just wanted the cheap labor of an enslaved population. But once Israel became a landed population, the bait was even more tempting.

The Promised Land was actually a very promising piece of real estate. Somebody else always wanted those ports, that river, those fertile hills and plains flowing with milk and honey -- and money. The Jews invaded and captured a land occupied and flourishing with Palestinians. And the two groups have been fighting ever since.

In two stories this weekend, separated by some five centuries, we hear that the Great Satan out there is not the problem, is not the enemy we should be afraid of. Isaiah tells us that Cyrus, the great ruler of the Persian Empire, was no enemy to Israel. Astonishingly enough, Isaiah claims that Cyrus is a friend of God no less. Cyrus does not know the God of the Israelites, but is used by Him.

When Cyrus sweeps into Babylon with his armies and becomes the new owner of the formerly Babylonian franchise, Israel is in exile there, wondering what will become of their community.

Yet many -- most Israelites, in fact -- don't take Cyrus up on his offer. If we take the phrase "faithful remnant" seriously, only a very small portion of the exiled population goes home. Before exile, the nation of Judah boasted a community of 75,000 citizens, 25,000 in Jerusalem alone. But only 1,500 people returned to Jerusalem when Cyrus opened the gates of Babylon, and only 4,500 would return in the next decade.

Evidently freedom's just another word for something more to lose, in many people's minds. They'd have rather stuck with present conditions than risk that difficult and perilous journey back home.

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 or in yourself? 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 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.

Archbishop Vigneron wrote this on October 19:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We have all watched with growing sadness the ongoing violence in the Holy Land—most especially the loss of so many innocent lives. I call on the entire Archdiocese of Detroit—clergy, religious, laity, and all our parishes, schools, and apostolates—to unite with our Holy Father, Pope Francis, for a day of fasting, penance, and prayer for peace on Friday, October 27.

As a people of peace and justice, we implore the intercession of Our Blessed Mother, the Queen of Peace, in calling on Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, to heal the wounded and hardened hearts driving this violence. We also ask Our Lord to offer consolation and healing to all victims and those in harm's way. Thank you, brothers and sisters, for your solidarity in praying for a peaceful resolution to this war and for peace throughout the world.

Sincerely yours in Christ, The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron

Archbishop of Detroit. By the way, the Archbishop turns 75 this year, and is eligible to retire. We pray for him and for Our Holy Father who can accept his letter of retirement, postpone it or refuse it.

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. 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. AMEN!

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

Everybody who goes to church knows the basic rules of Christian living. This does not imply that churchgoing folks can recite the Ten Commandments in order, obviously. But at least they know what's in them, more or less. When asked to list the Commandments, it usually sounds like this: Don't lie, don't cheat, don't kill, don't fool around, obey your parents, and go to church. Well, close enough.

The crucial part that often gets left out is the absolute obligation we owe to God. It's not just about doing what God wants, or not doing what God hates; rather, it's surrendering ourselves to God without reservation. No other power should have dominion over us. Our daily decisions should revolve around God's will just as our whole week should center on the celebration of Sunday Mass. Love God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.

Either we belong to God or we don't. Just as you can't be a little married, you can't give only a fraction of yourself to God.

Now more than ever our society seems to need the laws and commands of Moses like some bright stripes painted down the center of the road so we know which lane we're in, moral or immoral; there seems to be a surprising amount of confusion about which is which these days. We need to have a specific destination in mind. We can't just mosey on down the road of life without a clear sense of where we're headed. The laws of Moses can remind us what to do and not to do on a minimal level, but they are no substitute for knowing where to go. Who we are as well as what we do guides us on our way.

The laws of Moses established a very clear goal of living in right relationship. That included the fundamental relationship to God honored in prayer, worship, and obedience. But it didn't end there. Right relationship necessarily included family members, the neighbor, and the stranger.

When all members of society were in right relationship to each other, the peace of God would be shared by all. Consequently, when any of these relationships were ignored or abused, conflict and violence were guaranteed.

Hebrew law was a highly practical approach to building a community of justice and peace. Show hospitality to the foreigner: the alien in need is an unstable element in your midst. Take care of the needy woman and her children. Otherwise, the needy turn to begging and crime, spread sickness, and can't contribute to society in a constructive way. Don't extort money from a poor person just because you can. When the rich oppress the poor, class rivalry develops and tensions magnify until the eventual social explosion. The religious shorthand for all of these obligations is this: If the poor cry out, God will hear them, and bad times will swiftly follow. Even if you prefer to subtract God from the equation, as a global prescription the logic holds true.

God doesn't command us to do or not to do things because of arbitrary divine whim. Divine law, in other words, is not instituted to keep God happy, but to keep us happy.

"Don't lust after your neighbor's spouse" isn't a commandment because God doesn't like that sort of thing. If you start making eyes

at your neighbor's spouse, all hell will break loose regardless of what God thinks about it.

Divine law, properly understood, isn't about God being a Cosmic Control Freak in regard to the way God would like us to behave. These commandments are presented as gifts, "lamps to our feet," guiding principles for our happiness. Can we acknowledge that God really loves us, for a change? That everything God does is for love's sake and not to keep us in line like the Big Cop in the Sky?

In the century before Jesus, rabbis were already recasting the laws of Moses in terms of an overarching law of love. What's new about the Greatest Commandment is the combination of two earlier instructions into a unified theory about the relationship between God's law and God's love.

We know from our own experience that it does make all the difference whether we act out of fear or love; whether we are motivated by militant obedience to fixed principles or a genuine desire to do what's best for the whole human family. Love creates a better ambiance than regulation every time.

If we are serious about evangelization, we will only attract others to our faith when they look at how we treat God and one another: "See how much they love each other!" AMEN!