

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

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

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

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

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

We support our parish financially as a sign that we're members who value what happens here. Here to speak to us about our parish's financial past, present and future is the chairperson of our Parish Finance Council, Mr. Mike Garcia...

FINANCIAL CONDITION OF SMDP PARISH
by Mike Garcia, Chairperson, Parish Finance Council

My name is Mike Garcia, and I am the Chairperson of the Parish Finance Council. I would like to thank you, Fr. Nick, for allowing me a few minutes to briefly talk to our parishioners about the financial condition of the Parish, and to dispel any fears, rumors, or misconceptions as to the ability of our church to carry on its holy and divine mission to both our parishioners, and to the community at-large.

Let me start by saying: the financial condition of our Parish is stable. We have a balanced budget, we have banked sufficient funds to meet virtually any unanticipated need, and we are well positioned to serve our Parish community for years to come.

But getting to this place of stability was not easy, and was not achieved without a number of difficult decisions that had to be made over the past few years. Unfortunately, those decisions fell on, and weighed heavily upon, the shoulders of our dear Pastor. And I can tell you, those decisions were not made without a lot of discussion, consultation and, most importantly, prayer. In all decisions, the guiding framework was to preserve, continue, and grow the mission of the church.

Let me tell you three (3) key financial trends of our Parish over the past five (5) years. First, total revenues from all sources have declined nearly 30%. That is an average decline of about \$41,000 per year. Second, when we look at the offertory side of things, weekly giving from our parishioners has declined nearly 22%. That is an average decline of about \$22,000 per year. As of the close of our fiscal year this past Friday, we are about \$47,000 below our total revenue budget target.

Third, we have seen, over the past two years, out of control inflation increase the cost of our utilities, insurance, and supplies. We have all felt the effects of record inflation in managing the finances in our own household.

The precipitous drop in revenue, as Fr. Nick has mentioned time and again, is evident to us all. As an aging parish, we have lost a substantial number of giving parishioners. They have either passed away, are too ill to attend church, have moved out of the area, or are now living in an assisted living facility, or living with extended family members. Over the past few years, our church has averaged 60-70 funerals per year.

Also, look around you. The lockdowns, fear, and perceived harm caused by COVID 19 has given many of our parishioners a reason not to come back to church. Our weekly Mass attendance has stabilized at about 60% of pre-pandemic levels.

For this and other reasons, people are just not coming back to church. This is not unique to our Church but is endemic to all denominations nationwide.

People who do not come to church, for the most part, do not give to the church.

Now, I am sure that you are asking yourself, Mike, with the news that you have just given us, how can tell us that the financial condition of the church is stable, that it is able to pay its bills, and carry on its pastoral mission?

Let me tell you how....

1. Our department heads are nothing less than fantastic at managing their budgets. They are always looking for ways to save money, and they never exceed, but often come in under, their budget.
2. Our employees took a 10% pay cut during the chaos of COVID 19. Thankfully, we were eventually able to restore that pay cut.
3. The finance committee was able to obtain federal COVID relief funds and tax reimbursements to bolster our cash holdings and to keep our employees on the payroll. Because of this extraordinary work, we did not have to lay off a single employee during the COVID debacle. Many parishes, who did not have the expertise to obtain such funds, were forced to lay off staff members.
4. We realigned certain employee benefits, as well as eliminated programs and supplies that were deemed unnecessary to the church's core mission.
5. To lead the ongoing belt-tightening, both Fr. Nick and Deacon Marion donated portions of their income stipends back to the Parish.
6. The generosity of several monetary donations allowed us to take care of some critical facility needs and further bolster our cash holdings.
7. In analyzing our parishioner giving patterns over the past year, we have determined that our offertory giving is stabilizing, is now more readily predictable, and easier to align with expenses.

8. To eliminate a residual gap between predicted revenues and expenses in the new budget year we had to, unfortunately, say goodbye to two of our beloved part-time employees, Larry Lage and John McGovern. There are not enough thank you's that we can bestow upon these two gentlemen for their decades of service to our parish. Even though they both retired more than two years ago, we were grateful that we were able to benefit from their skills, knowledge, and insight as part-time members of our staff. Please offer prayers of thanksgiving for their love and commitment to our parish.

In helping to manage our parish finances through this time of transition, I thank the Holy Spirit for the inspiration and guidance given to us. I am thankful that we can start the new budget year with a stable, balanced budget, with fund resources to meet nearly every contingency, a staff that is excited to be on Christ's team and to give themselves to Christ's mission, and for parishioners who never let us down in our time of need.

Thank you, and God Bless you.

Fr. Nick: Thank you, Mike. I echo Mike's words of deep gratitude and hope, especially the words of hope. We pick up our crosses to find the strength we need to overcome personal and professional problems. To meet our financial challenges and to overcome fear or addiction issues. To put our illnesses and limitations in perspective. To bring light to the darkness of the world and to provide hope to the hopeless. Let us take up the challenge of the cross with faith. As Jesus says, "Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." AMEN!

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

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

The little granddaughter was not speaking in a way that Grandpa could understand. She was almost speaking in riddles. Why would Jesus do that? First, He wants to know that His audience is listening. Secondly, He wants to know if they are clever enough to read between the lines. Jesus' first parable speaks of waste and failure. Two thirds of the seeds of faith sown by Him fail to take root. Two thirds! At first, there was lots of popular excitement at the wise teachings and the miraculous cures; later, growing signs of hostility and rejection, which eventually led to condemnation and death. Jesus' efforts, like the farmer's efforts for the harvest, seemed to end only in waste and failure.

But Jesus knows that in spite of all the waste and failure, an abundant harvest, a mega-harvest, is certain to happen in the hearts and in the lives and in the families and in the communities of those

who believe Him, who believe IN Him and who believe in His faith community.

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

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

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

Today's Gospel parable reminds us that much of life does not turn out all right. Much of what we do, in fact, may look like failure. But God makes fruitful and abundant the hope and the grace that His sons and daughters are willing and able to accept.

We wonder: will you and I ever make any real progress?

If you read the great spiritual masters of the Church, you may discover two sure paths to holiness and these paths may converge at times and, if they do not, they are certainly related. The two paths to holiness are love and suffering. Love and suffering. Both paths are found in every human life and according to many of these enlightened

teachers of spirituality, they can lead us into holiness.

Love can be self-focused. It can make us possessive, controlling, and lustful. Suffering can make us bitter, angry, revengeful, and unforgiving. But love and suffering are powerful enough to break our ego strength and stubbornness and make us vulnerable, and that vulnerability can open us up to God.

You become more focused, less distracted. These two human experiences can transform us, and help us to realign our priorities and change our hearts.

Is it any wonder that the model of holiness in the Christian Church is the crucifix? There is no greater love than that, but to lay down one's life for one's friends. In the cross of Christ, love and suffering meet and it becomes a pattern of our own holy living.

St. Paul in the Letter to the Romans invites us to see creation in this way. There is a glory that awaits the created order. God will be all-in-all. But right now, creation is groaning. It is awaiting the fullness of redemption. We are awaiting the fullness of redemption.

The groaning of creation is an invitation to deeper conversion, to a commitment to the Gospel.

Life isn't going to come easy to us. Life ISN'T easy for us. But when God's Word becomes effective in our lives, it is worth the pain and suffering. So, how do we know that God's Word is taking root in us, that we are becoming "holy?"

Share Your Time -- Visit people who are alone, especially those who are isolated due to age or sickness. Teach what you know to a neighbor or younger sibling. Be present with the people in your life, especially your family. Offer to help. Practice saying "yes."

Share Your Talents -- No one else can do exactly what you do. Whatever you do well, is meant for sharing. When used generously, the good they provide is immeasurable! Seek opportunities to participate here in your faith community. We need you!

Share your Treasure -- Part of your allowance or paycheck can help our parish provide more services for our community. Decide to give a certain percentage of money to your parish each week. As you live with this decision, you will grow into a lifelong habit of generosity.

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

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

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

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

God, as we hear in today's First Reading from the Book of Wisdom, is a lenient and patient teacher Who allows time for repentance to take root and to bring about growth in grace. Always merciful and gracious, always slow to anger and abounding in kindness, always good and forgiving, God listens and waits. God responds, lavishing grace and fostering growth on those who groan for it.

God realizes that conversion is possible at any time in our lives, and wants to give us every chance to make things right in the areas where they might have gone wrong for us. Only when we refuse, do we experience God's "tough love."

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

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

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

St. Paul uses a rare word here, which means to "intercede" or to "plead." It also means "to share responsibility." St. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit in courtroom terminology. The Holy Spirit will plead on our behalf, like a defense attorney. The Spirit will later be called by Jesus the *Advocate*, the One who speaks on our behalf. The Holy Spirit shares the task with us.

For Matthew, faith is never stagnant. If there's faith, there's growth: good seed planted in a field, a tiny mustard seed growing into a mighty bush, yeast making the dough rise and turning wheat into wholesome bread. If I'm alive in God, there should be plenty of signs of growth in my life.

- ! How can you make more of an effort to temper your sense of justice with mercy, and mercy with justice?
- ! What do you find most difficult about prayer? How can the Holy Spirit bear your prayer up? What are the "small seeds" that can grow into great trees in your spiritual life? Where in your life do you see signs of life growth?
 - ! How do you handle the "weeds" in your own life? Do you let their presence choke the growth of the good wheat?

Today is the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. In 2021, Pope Francis established the celebration of the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly on the fourth Sunday of July, near the liturgical memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, the grandparents of Jesus (July 26).

The theme for the 2023 celebration selected by the pope is "His mercy is from age to age" (Lk 1:50), taken from Mary's Magnificat. The U.S. bishops transferred the celebration of World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly in the U.S. to the first weekend after Labor Day in September. This coincides with the secular observance of National Grandparents Day in the United States, as many local communities, schools, and parishes have celebrated for some time.

We join grandparents and the elderly as they thank the Lord for the comfort of His presence, which provides hope and confidence even in moments

of loneliness. We express gratitude for the gift of the family and long life, for life's joys and difficulties, and for helping in the realization of their life's dreams and of those that are still to come. We pray that grandparents and the elderly will be channels of God's grace. That God will teach them to embrace those who suffer more than they do, and to keep dreaming and narrating His wonders to the coming generations. We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors in faith!

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

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

God is just and right. God wills to be the master of might who judges with "clemency" and "lenience." These two divine attributes are the seeds from which Kingdom comes. The God who desires the good harvest is merciful about the weeds for the harvest's sake. So let's not turn our back on our children, grandchildren or any children, who fail to produce the perfect yield. We, too, are given every opportunity to participate in and cultivate the fruits of the Kingdom. Justice is fundamental, and kindness is nonnegotiable. AMEN!

[1 Kgs. 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119; Romans 8:28-30; Matt 13:44-52]

Remember the story of *The Wizard of Oz*? Four characters -- the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and of course Dorothy -- are in search of what they believe will make them complete. The Scarecrow wants a brain, the Tin Man needs a heart, the Cowardly Lion seeks courage, and Dorothy just wants to go home. Together they make a perilous journey to the Land of Oz where they encounter a wonderful wizard who shows them that everything they desire is already in their possession.

To awaken them to this truth, the wizard gives them outward signs of their inward realities. The Scarecrow gets a diploma, the Tin Man a testimonial, the Cowardly Lion a medal for bravery, and Dorothy finds out that home is where her heart is.

Like our four heroes, we are all in search of the treasure of life, the priceless pearl of fulfillment. It is for this reason that God made us. "I came that you might have life," Jesus says, "and have it to the fullest" (John 10:10).

All that we seek is within us. But to obtain this buried treasure of God's kingdom, it is necessary to divest ourselves of worldly attachments. The seekers of the parable sell all that they have. What good are the wealth, power, security, prestige, pleasure and the comfort of this passing world if we never achieve the real treasure of God's lasting kingdom?

If our treasure chest has any worthless trash, the garbage needs to be tossed away to make room for more valuables.

Some of our treasures have only temporary, earthly value, and ultimately they will be worthless unless they're used for the Kingdom of God.

The Reading from Romans tells us that all things work together for the good of those who love God. As we purge our lives of false pearls and dead fish, we become more like our Lord. We become more useful to the Kingdom of God.

Even the bad things that happen to us, under the creative hand of our all-powerful, mercifully loving God, get put to good use as polishing cloths that brighten our pearls and bring out from us a better shine.

In our First Reading today, Solomon could have asked God for great wealth, power, prestige or pleasure, and he would have received it, but he asked for an understanding heart so that he'd have wisdom to rule the nation well. Even though he ruled imperfectly, his reputation as the wisest king on earth spread throughout the known world and he accumulated great wealth.

This is meant to teach us that when we seek first the treasures of God's Kingdom, then we can safely use the treasures of the earth, because God's wisdom guides us in using them for the benefit of his kingdom. The more we love Christ and follow His ways, the easier it is to identify what's really valuable, separate out the junk that does not belong to God, and use everything else for his purposes.

What treasures are buried within you? What pearls of wisdom have you gained, and what did it cost you to learn these?

Choose one treasure, gift, or pearl that God has given to you -- something that reveals the Kingdom of God. How did you discover it

or gain it? What effect does it have on your daily lives? To inherit this Kingdom means leaving behind our own will, our own desire to conquer, to control others and to possess power.

It is up to us to make Solomon's prayer our own. We must long for the wisdom to know the truth, to do that which is true, and to love the truth.

Everything else must be left behind. Everything. Our grudges, our prejudices, our agendas, some of our wealth, some of our ideas. Everything that keeps us from enjoying the beauty of the Kingdom. Jesus invites us to go on a quest for buried treasure in pursuit of a Kingdom hidden from our eyes. We'll find it buried under the surface of things, lost in the marketplace, waiting to be found at the bottom of the sea of human experience. It will take some doing to discover this Kingdom and will cost everything in our possession to acquire it.

If God made the same offer to you that He makes to Solomon, to "ask for something, anything, and it will be given to you," what would it be? What matters so much to you that you would be willing to pay a great price for it? Would wisdom and an understanding heart make the list?

That is precisely what made Solomon a born king: that he knew what a leader really needs. A king who knows his own mind may seem principled, a person of convictions. This one knows who the allies are and what the enemies want.

Solomon the boy king knew what to ask for. But the grown-up King Solomon ended up squandering his treasure, as prodigal sons throughout the Bible often did. He couldn't stop becoming self-centered, even when he had the only real treasure in his possession.

So he collected wealth to build up Jerusalem and its Temple through brutal taxation, and collected wives from foreign countries to solidify his relationships with other nations. The shrines to the gods of the foreign wives grew in defiance of that same Temple, and the animosity toward his kingship ended up dividing his kingdom, never to be mended. The divided kingdom was vulnerable to other nations and was eventually conquered. Thus ends the unhappy story of the king with the understanding heart. Do YOU understand these things?

Slow down and let go of the jumbled mix that makes up a modern life. Do nothing beyond soaking in the sights, sounds, and smells of life. Then, like a pristine seashell at the beach that grabs your attention, you will stumble upon pearls of divine wisdom, and you will see the way ahead with perfect clarity.

Even if our faith may not be perfect, and even if it is a little nicked or scratched, it is still valuable beyond measure. The appraiser is Jesus. And He is telling us that our faith is a priceless gift. That should bring us all great joy and comfort in these times of unrest. And remember: "Oh, Auntie Em, there's no place like home!" And there's no place like the Kingdom of God! To have life and love and joy to the fullest! AMEN!