Paul’s Vision: Our Risen Life

Easter is a lifelong process of uncovering our baptismal identity

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St. Paul is an ideal witness to the resurrection because he is, in many ways, like us. Paul never knew the earthly Jesus. Paul did not witness to the empirical details of Jesus’ return — whether he ate fish, walked through walls, offered his wounds for examination. The Gospel accounts, written decades after Paul, do provide such details, perhaps because believers then felt the need for proof.

Paul saw, knew and believed in the risen Jesus because Jesus personally revealed himself to him with enough force to change the direction of Paul’s entire life.

This essential encounter is available to every believer, in every age. We ought to pray for it, wait for it to happen to us personally. The conviction that Jesus is alive now is the cornerstone of our faith. If we are skeptical about this, then our commitment to the Christian life is still in a conditional state, waiting to begin.

Patrick Marrin

When Paul says that we are saved by faith in Christ, he is describing this first giant step we must take to be “in the game,” to be a player in all that follows from a conscious acceptance of our baptism into Christ. Paul sought Christ, took hold of the one who had already taken hold of him (Phil 3:12).

Paul’s description of this intimate encounter evokes the scene in Gen 32:24 when Jacob grappled with the divine presence. Just as Jacob emerged from that encounter changed man with a new name, and also wounded, Paul was transformed by his encounter with Jesus. From that moment on, Paul was an apostle to the world beyond the initial borders of Jewish faith. He was now so identified with Jesus that he even bore the marks of Jesus’ suffering on his body.

Our risen life is a mystery that is meant to unfold in our liturgical life in community, nourished by Word and Eucharist, then lived.
Paul’s Vision: Our Risen Life

Easter is a lifelong process of uncovering our baptismal identity

By PATRICK MARRIN

The opening scenes of “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” Steven Spielberg’s 1977 classic film about UFOs, draw richly from another encounter recorded in the Bible. The movie opens to a blinding sandstorm somewhere in Mexico. Researchers arrive by helicopter to assess the startling reappearance of several U.S. Navy aircraft gone missing 40 years earlier. The only witness to the occurrence is an elderly Mexican man, whose burned face and ecstatic babbling announce the paranormal nature of his experience. “What happened here?” one of the researchers asks. The man replies, “The sun came out last night and sang to me.”

The biblical precedent for this cinematic moment, I believe, is St. Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. As a theophany, Paul’s close encounter makes all others pale, though they can still serve as metaphors for the desire we all feel to somehow come face to face with the mysterious source of Life. Scholars and artists have tried to explicate Paul’s vision as the earliest recorded human encounter with the resurrection of Jesus, the cornerstone of Christian belief. Paul’s entire sense of reality, replacing one universe with another. Paul would take three years (Gal 1:17-20) to begin to unravel what he learned in a flash before he went up to Jerusalem to corroborate his vision of the risen Jesus with any other witness to the resurrection. Yet, in the first recorded list of such witnesses (1 Cor 15:3-11), he claims last place but equal status with Peter, the Twelve, James, the other apostles and 500 brothers and sisters who saw the risen Christ.

We also need time to absorb Easter. Fortunately, the church provides us with a liturgical season of almost seven weeks to absorb the implications of Christ’s resurrection. It is an astonishing mystery, and by exploring the content of Paul’s vision, we can come to know our Easter faith more deeply.

What did Paul see?

Paul was trained as a devout Pharisee. He knew Torah—the Law—and also the mystical substructures of Jewish law and ritual that led to the heart of the Law, a personal relationship with God expressed in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One. You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and all your strength.” The goal of Paul’s training and the basis for all legal observance was a personal vision of God at the center of reality.

The visionary path mirrored the structure of the Temple: outer courts, inner courts, sanctuary, holy of holies, earth to heaven, physical existence to spiritual existence, a human encounter with the divine presence as described in the call of the prophets.

The scriptural precedents for Paul’s encounter with Jesus are the visions of God’s glory recorded by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and in the Book of Daniel. Common elements in these theophanies are the approach of the seer to the unnamed and ineffable God through the sky-blue curtain of the Holy of Holies, where, amid smoke, lightning and peals of thunder, they see the throne of God’s glory. This is the absolute center of reality, the source and summit of creation. Blinding light emanates from this center, but on the throne the seer is able to perceive a figure. The figure is not that of God, who is invisible, but is, as described in Ezekiel 1:26, “one like a son of man” — that is, an adam. This is not the first Adam, who lost God’s image and likeness in the garden. This is the new Adam, who restoration of God’s creation waiting to be revealed at the end of time. This figure is both an individual and a collective representation of Israel, God’s chosen people.

Paul was trained to pray these
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sacred texts, to penetrate the promise they contained for Israel and every Jew who shared in the covenant by blood, by circumcision, by fidelity to the Law, including laws defining ritual purity and dietary practice. Paul was zealous in persecuting the followers of Jesus because they appeared to flout this magnificent vision of reality centered in Torah and Temple.

Paul is pursuing Jesus’ followers when, on the road to Damascus, he has a vision like the one described above. He is knocked to the ground by the force of it. At the heart of his vision, seated on the throne of God’s glory, is none other than Jesus, who speaks to him personally. In an instant, Paul’s entire worldview and value system are reoriented. Jesus, who was crucified, is alive. Jesus the heretic is God’s chosen one, prototype of the new Adam, the end of history. Jesus is one with his followers; to persecute them is to persecute him. Jesus, not Torah or circumcision or even Jewishness, is the key to Life and the path to God. Paul is called to announce this universal gift of salvation to everyone, especially the Gentiles.

Paul’s conversion put him at loggerheads with not just his Jewish family, his Pharisaic colleagues, but also with the established Jesus movement in Jerusalem, Damascus, Antioch and beyond. For his conviction that Gentiles had equal access with Jews to God’s favor in Jesus, Paul was pushed repeatedly to the periphery of the first-generation Jerusalem church led by James, Peter and John, who were intent on maintaining their faith in Jesus within the Mosaic covenant centered in Temple worship in Jerusalem, where Jesus’ imminent return as Messiah was anticipated.

In one of the great paradoxes of history, Paul’s expulsion by his more cautious Jewish Christian brothers will result in the rapid expansion of the Gentile church in Asia, Macedonia, Achaia and Italy. With the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E., Paul’s missionary churches will provide the framework that absorbs and welcomes the diaspora church thrust into the Gentile world.

What Paul believes

But there is more to be read in Paul’s vision, a truth so astonishing that it often seems missing from contemporary Christian preaching or lost in the theological language about the resurrection.

Paul describes his conversion this way in his letter to the Galatians: “….it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through his grace, to uncover his son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles …” (Gal 1:15-16).

The good news of the risen Jesus for Paul, reflected in the phrase “to uncover his son in me,” and reaffirmed from every possible angle in his letters, is this: Something has happened to Jesus, but not just to him. It has happened to us, too. To be baptized and incorporated into Christ is to share in the glory of his relationship with God. Christ is our new Adam, we are the new creation. Christ is the firstfruits, we are the harvest. Christ is son, but also our older brother, the pioneer of our salvation. By uniting ourselves to him through baptism, we are also sons and daughters by divine grace, by adoption. The gospel of divine life is the good news of Easter. It is the mission of all the baptized to demonstrate and articulate publicly that human maturity has a divine destiny.

Easter, then, is not a Sunday on which we commemorate Jesus’ rising, but an invitation to a lifelong process of celebrating the paschal process of our own dying and rising with Christ. Our baptismal call and mission is to be his body in the world. Our communal liturgical life, especially our participation in the Mass, helps us articulate the life of Jesus as it unfolds in the scriptures and is celebrated in the Eucharist. His life is our own story, the script of our own lives. We are the body of Christ in the world. The same Spirit that animated Jesus now dwells in us. The more we say yes to the Spirit, the more we become our real selves as God sees us in glory. The Christ is uncovered in us, a hidden life that emerges within our human life as we grow, live responsibly, share freely with others the love we have freely received.

Becoming who we are

What metaphors might bring home this mystery we live out in our daily lives, so marked by the trial and error, failure and triumph, pain and pleasure of ordinary human progress toward maturity? The late Faith Smith, a woman of spiritual insight all the more remarkable for its earthiness, once described a vision she had in her kitchen. She was doing the dishes. Her infant son was asleep
in the next room. Jesus was chatting with her, as he did on occasion, and he said, “Faith, I want to show you something. Look over there.” She turned, and there standing in the doorway was a beautiful young man. “Do you know who that is?” Jesus asked her. She said she didn’t. “That is the Christ in your son, John.” The young man was moving his lips, so Faith walked toward him to hear what he was saying. He was saying, “My pants are wet.”

The Christ in each of us, first revealed by the resurrection of Jesus, must emerge through every stage of our human progress toward maturity. Every human experience contributes something to our simultaneous but hidden growth in Christ.

Paul models for us the glory to be found especially in the suffering, rejection and anxiety that are part of everyone’s journey. Everything that happened to him in his life became part of the Christ in Paul. Easter faith invites us to submit our own lives to the same paschal process Paul experienced. In the light of this revelation, we learn how to become who we really are.

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**Resources**

The following resources provided essential perspectives for this article on St. Paul’s views on resurrection.

- **Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus**
  Donald Harmon Akenson

- **Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography**
  Bruce Chilton

- **The Gospel According to Paul: The Creative Genius who Brought Jesus to the World**
  Robin Griffith-Jones

- **Paul: A Critical Life**
  Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, O.P.
  Oxford University Press, 1996.

**Formation: Faith**

**Seeing the Risen Christ**

*Do you recognize the Lord when he appears to you?*

**By Judith Weaver**

Have you ever had an instantaneous recognition that the Lord was present in a situation, a “God-is-in-the-details” moment?

In John 21:1-14, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples after his resurrection, but only one of the seven people of the group recognizes him. It happens like this. Peter and several others go fishing. At daybreak, someone on the shore calls out to them, “Have you caught anything?”

“Nothing,” they reply.

“Put your nets to the right and you’ll catch something,” the stranger tells them.

One more try won’t hurt, so the disciples follow instructions. This time, the lowered nets swell with a big catch. While they haul in the bounty, one of the seven astonished men — John — suddenly announces to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

John, jubilant in this quick recognition of his Master, perhaps connects the dots between the miracle happening in front of him with an earlier appearance of Jesus walking on the water and reassuring everyone, “Fear not, it is I” (John 6:20).

**The beloved disciple**

An early Christian writer noted that John’s ability to know the presence of Jesus was because of his purity of his heart: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). This same “John of the pure heart” is also the disciple who urged the early Christians to “love one another” as a litmus test of their love of God.

As in this post-Easter appearance of Jesus to his friends, we are challenged today to recognize the many ways he comes among us — from his real presence in the eucharistic meal to his real presence in one another and in the events that make up our lives.

Pope Benedict XVI puts the presence of Christ in the Eucharist on a parallel with his presence in the neediest members of his body after we receive the sacrament: “Whoever is nourished with the faith of Christ at the eucharistic table assimilates his same lifestyle, which is the style of attentive service, especially to weaker and less favored people.

“Charity translated into deed, in fact,” the pope continues, “is a criterion that proves the authenticity of our liturgical celebration.”

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta saw the presence of Christ in what she called “his most distressing disguise,” in the castaways, the really hurting members of the human family.

It is one thing to know God’s presence in the contemplative moments of prayer. It is another to believe in and act upon his presence in an intoxicated person who is breathing heavily on us.

Yet, isn’t it in accepting compassion from and showing compassion to those who belie our concept of how God looks and acts that we really affirm God’s hidden presence?

**Learning to see**

A seeker once posed this question to a Jewish rabbi: “How can I know the precise moment when night ends and day begins?”

The rabbi replied, “You will know it is no longer night but day when you can look into the face of every man and woman you meet and see only the face of a brother or sister.”

The story in Gen 32:23-33 tells of
one man’s prolonged wrestling with a mysterious angel. Wrung out, Jacob comes to realize that in this extraordinary encounter he has certainly been engaged with God. “I have seen God face to face,” he proclaims.

Mediated presence

Events as well as persons mediate God’s presence to us. During the French Revolution, a woman of deep faith and courage named Adelaide de Cici saw God in the sick and poor people she served, but also in the way Providence served her.

When Adelaide was confined to bed and unable to minister, she accepted ill health the same way she accepted good health. Often she used the very words spoken by the disciples at Lake Tiberias. When she was given bitter medicine to swallow, she would say, “It is the Lord.”

When was the last time you or I opened the medicine chest, took out an anti-inflammatory medication for arthritis and said, “It is the Lord”? Yet, here is a grace for the taking to be able to do just that.

God sightings

“God sightings” in life’s smallest circumstances and in people whose paths intersect with ours before and after our eucharistic celebrations provide opportunities to validate the love poured out in us at the moment of reception of the Lord’s body and blood.

Then, we can say and mean, “It is the Lord!”

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“It is the Lord” Prayer Service

*Suggested opening hymn:* “We Walk by Faith,” v. 1, 2, 3

*Gospel reading:* John 20:24-29, Jesus appears to Thomas.

*Reflection:* “We have seen the Lord,” the disciples tell Thomas. Jesus says to Thomas, “Happy are those who believe without seeing me.” Today, in faith, let us recognize the Lord in the many ways he presents himself to us. How is God standing in front of you and how do you respond?

*Each person is invited to share a God-sighting from his or her experience. After every sharing, the group responds, “It is the Lord.”*

*Sharing may be along these lines:*

“The person at the drive-through window of the fast-food restaurant I frequent is pleasant despite the minimum wage he’s earning. Next time, I’m going to tip him.”

*Group:* “It is the Lord.”

“My husband received a diagnosis of lung cancer. We are fearful of what lies ahead but we know God will walk with us.”

*Group:* “It is the Lord.”

“The death penalty was commuted to life in prison last week in the murder trial I was a juror for:”

*Group:* “It is the Lord.”

“I’ve tilled the garden space in my backyard and planted vegetables and flowers. Now I wait for God to bring forth new life.”

*Group:* “It is the Lord.”

*Closing Prayer:* We leave this gathering with eyes wide open. Loving God, let us not be thrown off-guard by your many disguises and hidden presences. In the pleasant, in the disconcerting, you are there. Be pleased when we recognize your presence and help us to respond to you with selfless acts of love and kind words. “It is the Lord.”
Our Mystagogical Journey

From Easter to Pentecost, we absorb and enact the riches of our faith

By DORIS MURPHY

A friend of mine works as a receptionist at a large metropolitan hospital. She arranges for and welcomes the 21 translators the hospital makes available for patients and their families. The 21 translators speak 21 languages. While the issue of immigration to America continues to be debated, our parishes, especially in larger cities, are dealing with the reality that congregations are made up of many people for whom English may well be a second or third language.

Pentecost, the birth of the church through the coming of the Spirit, opens the gift of peace to all. The Spirit whom Jesus sends us comes to each one in her own language, from his own culture and experience, and in her own heart.

During the Easter season we hear the comforting words of Jesus: “Peace be with you.” This peace pushes and pulls us through the Fifty Days toward Pentecost and beyond to Ordinary Time. But there is nothing ordinary about peace. In some cases, peace has even become a volatile subject! We are even careful when we discuss peace for fear it may not be politically correct. Can our liturgies, during this season, be a time when we are allowed to “seek after peace and pursue it” by our words, actions, prayers and songs?

On a recent news panel, the host asked a guest if he was a “Beatitude Catholic.” What a great question for each of us to ponder. “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5:9). Peace is more than the absence of war. John Paul II, in writing “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation” (January 1990) about the ecological crisis as a common responsibility, proposed to us that peace will be present when there is a correct attitude toward the universe as a whole. Easter, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi are feasts that draw us into the gentle peace of Christ even as they awaken us to new life. We see new birth in the animal and plant kingdoms, as we welcome longer days of sunlight and warmer evenings to watch the stars on their journeys. “Christ has made all things new.” We recognize our oneness with creation. We begin to see everything in creation as subjects rather than objects. This demands that we care for this amazing universe.

The eucharistic prayer and the preparation of gifts at Mass invite us each week to remember that we are one with the earth. We are not about destruction but are a people of peace building up the Kingdom of God.

Consider the weeks from Easter to Pentecost and the feasts that follow it as an unfolding continuum. The Spirit’s presence in the body of Christ, God as a community in the Trinity, the continuing presence of Jesus in the Eucharist — these feasts empower us for good. We experience in the prayers of the liturgy the Spirit’s unlimited power. This power calls forth diverse ministries from the community. Parishes should make this the time in the church year when members of the community are helped to discern their own gifts. Together we then determine how to use these gifts in and for the parish community.

Pentecost is an expansive festival. Historically, in Jewish celebrations, the 50th day after the Passover was the feast of booths, when all the assembly was sprinkled with water and all prayed for the fruitfulness of the earth. Pentecost is the natural extension of Easter, just as confirmation is the natural extension of baptism. The sprinkling of water reminds us that no matter where we come from or whatever language we speak, we have all “put on Christ” in the common waters of baptism.

The feast of Pentecost provides an opportunity for parishes to acknowledge their diversity, to sing such hymns as “All Are Welcome” or “Gather Us In.” If a parish is not ethnically diverse, it may be a time for us to ask why this is so. How can a parish acknowledge the concerns of the immigrant peoples — those who may be settled in after many years, those who have come more recently, or those who are here because of circumstances beyond their control? Can we put aside our political biases for an hour on Sunday, and truly be the body of Christ?

At the entrance of a church I visited this summer, there was a large bulletin board that said “Welcome” in 28 different languages. In that way, even before entering the actual worship space, all knew they were invited and called to be part of their parish family. Could streamers of various colors or countries be hanging outside the church as we park our cars, walk up the sidewalks and enter the gathering space? Perhaps another part of the church building could host ethnic food booths after Mass. Here all could come to feast together after having already shared the bread of life together.

The time from Easter through Pentecost is all part of the same continuum. We take part in the entire movement from beginning to end. Building on our own faith, we come to know more deeply the Christ, the anointed One. This same Christ calls us to be people of love, people who carry within them the Easter light, people ready to welcome all with the words, “Peace be with you.”

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Mi Iglesia — Nuestra Iglesia

El culto y la vida para el mes de mayo 2006

La palabra de Dios es el lazo que nos une y el alimento que sacia nuestra hambre.

“Mi Iglesia,” escribe San Lucas (el 7 de mayo), está firmemente fundada sobre esa “piedra angular” rechazada, abandonada, que murió en la cruz y que ahora vive en el poder de la resurrección; Jesucristo salva a todo quien busque y encuentre en él sus cimientos y su apoyo. Mi Iglesia, sigue el evangelista, tiene un pastor que escogió ir al frente de su rebaño sacrificando su vida, lo dirige, conoce a cada uno por su nombre, su carisma, sus flaquezas, sus deseos y sus necesidades.

Mi Iglesia, continúa el evangelista, es la comunidad de los hijos e hijas amados de Dios, dignos de ser amados porque Dios les ama. Afi rma el autor sagrado que el amor no es sólo emoción; antes bien, debe ser práctico, voluntario y real porque el amor verdadero se demuestra con obras y no con palabras.

Mi Iglesia es como ese pilar de la comunidad en quien uno puede confiar; como Bernabé (el 14 de mayo) quien no dudó en aceptar a Pablo, a quien todos temían como si fuera un cañón peligroso que podía explotar; este antigo perseguidor de la Iglesia, llegó a ser el gran predicador de la buena nueva y se ganó la confianza de quienes había perseguido.

Nuestra Iglesia es donde el Espíritu Santo sopla libremente sobre Pedro y Pablo, sobre el centurión romano Cornelio (el 21 de mayo), sin discriminar, y da a cada uno y a todos el poder y la gracia para que la comunidad vaya hacia adelante y lleve a los demás su mensaje universal de salvación.

Mi Iglesia es fuerte, como una viña con nudos, plantada firmemente, podada por el sufrimiento, el dolor; la pena y la lucha, cuyas ramas dan abundante fruto mientras siguen firmemente unidas al tronco (el 14 y el 21 de mayo). Mi Iglesia no es ni un club ni una organización con socios; mi Iglesia es la comunidad de quienes se sienten llamados, escogidos a ser comunidad, y enviados por Dios a amar y servir a los demás en nombre de Jesús.

Mi Iglesia sigue siendo construida día a día y marcha hacia adelante con quienes esperan la vuelta de su Señor. Mi Iglesia son quienes, en vez de seguir mirando al cielo esperando a que su Señor baje, se responsabilizan de la misión de Cristo y proclaman el evangelio a toda criatura (el 28 de mayo).

En mi Iglesia, en nuestra Iglesia — como en mi Sur — los vecinos cuidan los unos de los otros, comparten sus alegrías y sus penas, y reparten gratuitamente su sopa de cebolla. La familia tiene un papel fundamental. No importa el color de la piel. La palabra de Dios es el lazo que nos une y el alimento que sacia nuestra hambre. Mi Iglesia, nuestra Iglesia, es el pan vivo, bendito, partido y da a cada uno y a todos el poder y el alimento para el camino y sustento hasta la eternidad. Mi Iglesia es usted y yo y nosotros y ellos y todos los que el amor ilógico e incomprensible de Dios ha reunido para que demos testimonio del poder del amor y de lo que nuestro amor puede hacer en el mundo.
Patricia Datchuck Sánchez and Rafael Sánchez Alonso

Chef, author and restaurateur Robert St. John has gained a reputation over the past quarter century not only for his fine cuisine but also for his willingness to welcome others to what he affectionately calls “my South.” In his recent book, My South (Bryan Curtis, ed., Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville, Tenn.: 2005), St. John invited “spoken-word artists” from throughout the South to articulate and celebrate their identity in these pages. From St. John himself we learn that my South is color-blind. In my South we don’t put a premium on the color of one’s skin. In my South, the only person who has to sit in the back of the bus is the last person who got on the bus.

According to another Southern poet, Stacey Smallwood, my South is where your nearest neighbor may be two miles away, but the moment you sneeze or strain to breathe, they hear it and rush to your door with the salve to soothe and onion soup — because onion soup cures everything.

In my South, insists word-artist Ashley Pope, your word is your bond. My South, writes Erica Dunlap, is a place where I learned to slow down in order to keep up. We are still good neighbors in the South, says Chuck De Varennes. If you go away for a couple of weeks, we’ll pick up your mail, feed your dogs, water your garden and, when the kudzu swallows your house, we’ll all pitch in to pull away the vines. My South, shares Tiffany and Ashley Pope, your word is your bond. My South, insists the epistolary writer on each of May’s Sundays, is a community of God’s beloved children made lovable by God’s love, made capable of loving by God’s love. But, insists the ancient letter writer, this love is not mere emotion; it must be practical, deliberate and real. Love in deed and truth, says our devoted elder brother; don’t merely talk about it!

Mine is a church where a trusted pillar of the community like Barnabas (May 14) can take a seeming liability and a “loose cannon” like Paul under his wing and help the former persecutor to become a preacher of good news and to earn the trust of those he persecuted. Ours is a church where the Holy Spirit breathes freely on a Peter and a Paul as well as on a Roman centurion like Cornelius and all his household (May 21) without discrimination, giving each and all with the power and grace that moves the community onward and outward with the message of universal salvation.

My church is a strong and gnarled vine, firmly planted and frequently pruned by suffering, sorrow, pain and struggle, yet fruitful inasmuch as each branch remains firmly and unfailingly attached to the one vine (May 14, 21). My church is not a club or an organization constituted by those with a notion to join its membership; rather, my church is a community of those called, chosen and commissioned by God to love and serve all others in Jesus’ name.

My church is a work in progress, daily moved forward by a people who await a returning Lord. But my church does not simply peer up into the heavens in search of him; it is comprised of those who are willing to be responsible for the continuance of Jesus’ mission by proclaiming the Good News to all creation (May 28).

In my church, like “my South,” neighbors tend to one another’s joys and griefs, and onion soup flows freely. Family is of paramount importance, and pigment matters not at all. God’s word is the bond in our church as well as the food that feeds all our hungers.
A Letter from Prison

Easter faith is proclaimed by the risks we take in living it

By GABE HUCK

No wonder that the church constantly cries out: ‘Come, Holy Spirit.’

Other homilies in this series have dealt, as this one does, with the Easter season and may be helpful in mystical preaching during the Easter season in 2006. The homily below is for the Ascension of the Lord, celebrated in most dioceses of the United States on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 28, 2006. Note that the text presumes the assembly has heard Ephesians 4, the reading for Year B, and not the second reading from Year A, which the Lectionary allows in any year of the cycle. The statistic on life sentences is from Human Rights Watch (NYC) and was given in the January 2006 issue of Harper’s Magazine. Page 11.

Years ago, but not all that many, there were two church organists who loved the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, for it brought a twinkle to their eyes. One of them, playing during the collection, would subtly work in just a little bit of a then-popular song whose words included “Up, up and away, in my beautiful balloon.”

The other, more of a traditionalist perhaps, would play something meditative after Communion, but those who listened closely on Ascension Day would detect here and there the melody of the old song “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.”

One saw Jesus taking off from the earth. The other saw Jesus going home. Both made people smile, as did the homilist who would always bring to this day’s sermon the wonderful quote from the escaped slave named Sojourner Truth. Once asked about death, she had answered: “Die? I ain’t gonna die! I’m going home like a shooting star!”

“He ascended into heaven,” or so we claim in our recitation of the creed. We generally don’t let it bother us that the different accounts of Jesus’ ascension in our Bible are not only quite different, but at odds with one another. Yet the story is the story and of course there will be different ways to tell it after so many years. And the geography? Sure, we modern people know that heaven isn’t “up,” and what’s more, in a universe of suns and planets and galaxies and who knows what, even “up” isn’t up and “down” isn’t down. The Easter stories bring their reminders of how little all this has to do with physics: “Do not cling to me,” Jesus says to doubting Thomas. So while we may well begin the scripture reading today with the very first verses from the Book of Acts, even there the last words are a rebuke to the literal-minded disciples: “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” The poor disciples still didn’t understand. And neither do we most of the time.

All of Easter’s days and Sundays with their scriptures and their songs, their sprinkling of blessed water and their honoring of the great candle lighted at the Vigil liturgy, all of this has brought us to these last days of Ascension and then Pentecost. Stories of Jesus talking with and eating with disciples after the crucifixion fill the early weeks of Easter season. We are every Easter striving to know: What does it mean that we have died and come to new life in the waters of baptism, this year or years ago the same? What does it mean that we have put on Christ? What does it mean that we have come through those waters and now on the Lord’s Day we seek out that conversation with the Lord, that table companionship with the Lord? What does it mean that we do this not as individuals but only as the church, this very assembly?

As the Fifty Days of Easter continued, we moved from those stories of meals and conversations to some beloved texts like the Good Shepherd and to puzzling, hard texts — a little vague perhaps — about vines and branches, about the commandment to love one another as the sum and substance of it all. And in the first readings each Sunday we’ve been hearing snippets from how the church remembers its infancy and tells it in the book of Acts. We never hide the fact that even in the beginning it was a mess, as it still is today. We heard, for example, of Paul’s early days as a Christian. Newly baptized in Damascus and now come to Jerusalem, both cities under the heel of the Romans, he gets introduced to Peter and others who wonder what this ball-of-fire and their former enemy is up to. And we heard another story about Peter and how his own views had to change when he saw that God’s Holy Spirit wasn’t bound by Peter’s very convenient way of fencing in the church. It is an old story but we need to tell it again and again.

So we have come again into these final days of the Easter season. A late Easter this year has put us already at the end of May, Memorial Day weekend, when we finally tell of the Ascension. In the second reading, we heard a paragraph of Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, a city in what is now the nation of Turkey. That reading, the one that had nothing to say about skies and clouds and angels, is today sandwiched between the stories of Jesus’ ascension. The writer of the letter wasn’t expecting Jesus to come back any time soon. The writer wanted the church to come to grips with what it might mean to live day by day and year by year, a whole lifetime, as a baptized person.
It isn’t clear whether Paul himself wrote this letter or if it was some disciple of Paul’s. Today we heard this opening line: “I, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received.” A prisoner for the Lord. Whether Paul wrote the letter or not, the writer almost casually indicates that being held in prison by the powers-that-be, as Paul was, is not unusual for a follower of Jesus, but also is not without importance. Reminding the readers of the letter that it comes from a prison cell should have told them as it does us: There should be nothing surprising to any of us about a follower of Christ being in jail. Nothing surprising, but still something to be pondered. Fifty years ago Christian preachers in America often went on and on about how Christians were being put in prison in communist nations. Then one day the leaders of America’s Christian churches were forcefully addressed by a letter written to them by Martin Luther King Jr. not from a prison in Russia but from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama. Don’t you see, he was saying, that doing what the Gospel tells us right here will likely get us locked up?

In the life’s work of a Christian, one occupational hazard is being sent off to prison. In this very year; in this very nation, there are Christians who are prisoners for the Lord, locked up for months or years, like Paul and like Martin. Some of these prisoners for the Lord today are doing time for trespassing. They walked across some forbidden lines and denounced the deeds that are being done there. Some have trespassed where our government stores our weapons of mass destruction, nuclear or chemical. Some have trespassed where our government teaches effective ways of repression and even torture. These prisoners for the Lord challenge the rest of us as Paul challenged the early churches and Martin challenged the church in the 1950s and 1960s: What is your baptism about? What are your Sunday assemblies doing? Are we building up the body of Christ when we close our eyes and close our mouths and accept so quietly the way the world is being militarized and the very life of planet earth threatened so that a tiny minority — ourselves among them — can continue to live in the present manner?

There is such irony in Easter. Will we proclaim that Christ burst the bonds of death and trampled on the powers of evil? Will we then strive, as Paul writes today, to ourselves achieve together as church “the full stature of Christ”? What is that stature? What does that Christ look like? The bonds of death are still pretty strong around the world. The powers of evil try to work out of sight, but really it isn’t so hard to see what’s going on if we tear away the distractions they toss daily in our paths. What we renounced at baptism is not the stuff of fairy tales. We renounced, every one of us, the everyday ways that evil pokes through our lives, the everyday ways we so easily get used to taking care of our own agendas and comforts and barely notice what violence has to be done to keep the food on our shelves, the gas in our cars, the electricity in our appliances, the clothes on our backs.

When this church assembles on the Lord’s Day, what is to become of us as we do our work here? What can hearing and pondering the scripture week-in and week-out make of us? What happens to a church that pours its whole energy into intercession? What becomes of a church — that is, ourselves — that gives loud and intense thanks to God whose love was found in the crucified Jesus, whose mercy is manifest in every new morning? What sort of people are we then when at last we eat and drink at this table one cup and one bread, this food and drink, this body broken for us and this blood poured out for us? Are we still standing here gazing up into the heavens, without a clue?

Let us bring ourselves down to earth and look at just one of so many needs that summon us to get about the tasks we accepted when we were baptized.

We heard today from Paul in his prison. Have we thought about, prayed for, written to, listened to those in prison now; not just those like Paul or Martin who went there for the Gospel, but those who went there because our society has made prison an industry, because we have decided to keep two million people there day after day and punish them? Do we accept responsibility for being the nation that keeps in prison a larger part of the population by far than any other nation in the world? Here is one of many numbers we could ponder: In the United States there are 2,225 persons serving sentences of life in prison for crimes committed while they were juveniles. Live all your life in prison and then die? The bonds of death are still pretty strong around the world. The powers of evil try to work out of sight, but really it isn’t so hard to see what’s going on if we tear away the distractions they toss daily in our paths. What we renounced at baptism is not the stuff of fairy tales. We renounced, every one of us, the everyday ways that evil pokes through our lives, the everyday ways we so easily get used to taking care of our own agendas and comforts and barely notice what violence has to be done to keep the food on our shelves, the gas in our cars, the electricity in our appliances, the clothes on our backs.

What is to become of us? We ask that as we try to see what it would mean to live in the Easter mercy of God. What is to become of us? We ask that as we open our eyes to see for ourselves what deeds are being done around us and even in our name. If this ascension story has one simple meaning it must be that Christ leaves us here to do the Gospel work. No wonder that the church constantly cries out: “Come, Holy Spirit.”

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Our ‘Other Kids’

The rewards of mentoring

By CAROL LUEBERING

My friend Jane called me with exciting news. Cathy and Pat, her “other daughters,” are coming to visit — and Pat is bringing the new honorary grandchild! Jane first knew this pair when they were very young and worked with her years ago. Somehow she became their soft shoulder, supporting their career aspirations, listening to dating woes and complaints about coworkers, agonizing with them through their men troubles and helping one learn to balance income and outgo.

Now Jane is retired and the young women are living in distant cities. They have kept in touch over the years, and every few years the younger women come to visit. That kind of relationship can sprout wherever young people are mentored by their elders, and it is immensely rewarding for everyone involved.

I have “other daughters” myself: the seven sisters who lived across the street from us as kids. Because there were a lot of girls on the street whose mothers didn’t sew, I set about teaching the older kids on the street while their moms ran herd on my young tribe. When the first one married, her sisters made their bridesmaids’ dresses. One of them is now a fashion designer.

Two were especially dear to me: Cathy, the oldest, and Suze, the second youngest. In college, Cathy majored in music. Her parents, both educators, assumed that of course she would teach, but that didn’t appeal to her. Listening to her vent her frustration on my patio one day, I blurted out that I’d consider prostitution before teaching — and clapped my hand over my mouth in horror at what I had said. It proved to be a liberating moment for her, though; she became a music librarian.

When Cathy was killed in a traffic accident a year or two after her marriage, Suze began to pick my brain about the work of our parish bereavement committee, of which I was a founding member. Before long she had organized a grief support group through her high school.

At a baby shower for Suze, her sisters all greeted me warmly. One sister showed me pictures of the splendid Halloween costume she made for her teenage son. Would you believe she turned him into an anatomically correct cow? Another’s husband thanked me for teaching his wife to sew and save all that money. And their mother said what I already knew: I was like another mother to them.

I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection they expressed for me. Mostly you go through life and never get to know what a difference you made. And when you discover it, all you can do is breathe an immense “Thank you!” toward heaven.

The people you visit surely talk about their “real” children. If they ever hint at other people a good many years younger than themselves whom they hold dear, make an effort to explore those relationships. Ask when and how they met. Did they work together, live close by each other? Did the elder teach, train or coach the younger?

Encourage your companion to talk about the younger person and the joy he or she has brought over the years. Are they still in touch? Does she speak of the younger woman as “almost like one of my kids”? Does he take an almost paternal pride in the achievements of the young man he mentored?

That word “mentor” is a lovely concept. It connotes not only guiding someone but even more: being a wise and trusted counselor. Mentoring is, in psychologist Erik Eriksson’s famous study of the stages of the life cycle, the task of the middle years, and its goal is generativity. It is what we attempt to become as our own children are growing up, as well as in the relationships we strike up with other young people. And it is deeply rewarding — so much so that I would rate it the pleasantest of all his stages. (It certainly beats that famous adolescent identity crisis!)

No one needs to tell us who have been there of the joy the relationship with those “other kids” has brought to us. But we often don’t see the other side. That’s why discovering what I mean to those girls was such a precious gift.

Give that gift to the elders you are visiting. Ask about the people — parents and family outsiders — who served as mentors to them, and explore what difference those people made in their own lives. What life choices did they influence? What were the most important things they learned from them? What was the greatest support they offered?

Then turn the conversation back to those “other children” and encourage them to reflect on the extent they had the same influence on those young people. How might they have influenced and enriched those lives? What good choices did they gently lead these young folks toward?

And, of course, weave that reflection into the prayer you share. Linger over thanking the God who empowers us to use our divinely inspired gifts to shape young lives. Give praise to the Spirit of wisdom who abides in us.

Carol Luebering co-authors The Reflecting Community, one of the resources in our Pastoral e-SERIES. Contact her by e-mail at jcluebering@juno.com.
The Practice of Gratitude

‘Gratitude is an antidote to pain and a catalyst for change’

By RICH HEFFERN

The practice of gratitude has long been recognized as an important spiritual discipline. Meister Eckhart, 13th-century German mystic, preached: “If the only prayer you ever said was ‘thank you,’ it would be enough.” Gratitude has been re-emphasized in recent decades and given a central place in Christian spirituality.

Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast wrote in his 1984 book Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer: “Ninety-nine percent of the time we have an opportunity to be grateful for something. We just don’t notice it. We go through our days in a daze.”

Steindl-Rast continues: “The gifts or blessings of life are always there but if we are not aware of them, they don’t do much for us. That is where gratefulness comes in. Gratefulness makes us aware of the gift and makes us happy. As long as we take things for granted they don’t make us happy. Gratefulness is the key to happiness. Practicing gratitude is central to my spirituality.”

Steindl-Rast emphasizes that gratitude is a form of mindfulness, a way of appreciating the present moment, of not living too much in the past and in the future.

Jesuit Fr. Charles M. Shelton, a psychologist at Regis University in Denver, has studied the effects of gratitude on people’s lives.

Fr. Shelton points out that Jesuit founder St. Ignatius of Loyola considered ingratitude to be the most horrible of sins and the wellspring for all other sins. “Gratitude is an antidote to pain and a catalyst for change,” Fr. Shelton says. He offers seven good reasons to recognize and to cultivate gratitude in our lives.

1. Gratitude enriches love and enables us to draw forth the potential of love in our lives. “When we love with gratitude we find the fullest expression of that love.”
2. Gratitude is a positive experience.

“From gratitude is derived the most felicitous of human feelings.”
3. Gratitude helps communities as well as individuals. “It is a building block of a civil society.”
4. Gratitude helps fight negativity. “Research in psychology shows that negativity demands more attention from us. We are more apt to dwell on shortcomings, failings, areas where we feel deprived than we are to dwell on our strengths, accomplishments and gifts.”
5. Gratitude relieves stress. “The components of gratefulness are the capacity for awe and wonder. These emotions are effective stress releasers.”
6. Gratitude limits selfish desires. “Grateful people place less emphasis on material goods as a basis for happiness.”
7. Gratitude increases our capacity to return the gifts we have received by giving back to the world around us. This quality is the key to the leaven effect of gratitude in our lives. Shelton defines gratitude as a positive experience of feeling gifted that, in turn, leads to a desire to give back. Feeling grateful increases the amount of good in the world because our gratitude leads directly to good actions as we try to return the favors.

What’s more, he says, gratitude is really a new way of seeing, through the lens of appreciation. “I can be grateful for paying taxes,” he says, “because it means I am employed; or for paying high heating bills because it means I am warm in the winter. This way of seeing turns what seem like negatives into positives.”

What are some obstacles to gratitude, according to Fr. Shelton? “Feeling entitled, a consequence of being self-absorbed, a kind of narcissism, that’s a big one. Also, a sense of being a victim, a too energetic sense of rugged individualism, the kind of unbridled self-sufficiency that never lets us feel dependent upon anyone else, too much emphasis on suffering, lack of reflection, never having time to just sit and ponder things. These are all things that block feeling grateful.”

Shelton identifies some situations that evoke or foster gratitude: “Family interactions, experiences with friends, another person’s kindness, escape from harm, success in some endeavor, awareness of one’s fortunate situation relative to others and suffering severe setbacks. All of these are grist for gratitude’s mill,” he says.

The other gratefulness expert, Brother David Steindl-Rast, points out the key role that liturgy and celebration play in cultivating a grateful heart.

“Rituals make us mindful. Every ritual — graduations, funerals, weddings — has something to do with gratefulness. The Mass or Eucharist in the Catholic tradition literally means ‘thanksgiving.’ In the Hindu tradition a puja, or sacrifice, is a grateful acknowledgement of a gift. Offering the first fruits of the harvest is a ritual. You lift up a part of what you have received to the source from which you received it. This is an expression of gratefulness.”

Cultivating gratitude is a way to mindfully live in the present. It’s a liberation from envy. It’s a way to recognize the love of God in everything God has given us.


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Easter season in the Rocky Mountains is snow season. Even when Easter falls in April, as it does this year, people will walk into church, shrugging off down parkas and woolen scarves to reveal their Easter clothes, the linen suits and cotton sheaths we deem suitable for the season, if unsuitable for the weather. The faithful huddle around the Easter fire as the presider struggles to shield the flame from the cold wind and falling snow. We stand at the foot of Pikes Peak and shiver as we imagine Jesus ascending into that frozen heaven.

We American Catholics have internalized a cinematic calendar — think “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “Easter Parade” — that dictates snow for Christmas and sun for Easter. Our decorations and menus and clothes and dreams keep to this calendar, even when the church doesn’t ask it and nature doesn’t allow it.

I know something of keeping Easter at the snowiest time of the year, and I’ve always wondered how it would be to keep Christmas on a tropical beach under a blazing sun. I came close, traveling to Haiti in January three years ago. I remember flying into the Port Au Prince airport. It was hot there — though the Haitians found the mild winter weather refreshing — and humid. As we taxied to the terminal, I saw it, still standing, on top of the main building: A red-coated Santa in a sleigh pulled by leaping reindeer. It was strange, but no stranger; really, than a woman shaking the snow out of her summer sandals as she walks into the Easter liturgy. And it was certainly no stranger than plastic snowmen in Miami. In Port Au Prince or Miami, Santa would be shedding his woolen coat as he searched in vain for working chimneys. And the reindeer? They’d have died long before in the heat, melted, like snowmen in the sun.

But it was Christmas in Haiti, that land of poor families seeking shelter and of beloved babies born even though the whole world cries, “No room.”

It’s hard to remember that God has no script and no director. There are no sets and no pageants when the people of God gather to worship. Still, we are a visual people and our vision is shaped less by the church — for whom neither the new wardrobe nor the outdoor Easter egg hunt is part of the season — than by television and movies.

We have an Easter in our heads that is almost never the Easter we are given. I think of this each year as we meet and come to know the catechumens, who become the elect, who become the neophytes in our parish.

We have an Easter surprise for you. They come from so many places, led to the church along so many ways. I wish that young man would stop wearing sweatpants and his Broncos shirt to Mass. I know nothing about him, but it just doesn’t “look right,” or, at least, not how I imagine an eager neophyte would look. (The fact that he looks uncomfortably like my son slumped and wrinkled in the pew beside me may have something to do with my dis-ease.) I sometimes want to tweak their stories, edit their witness, taking it in and letting it out just a bit here and there to fit my notion of how or why they (should) have come to the church.

Every year I have to fight my disillusionment when I realize that their shining faces, dripping wet from the font and shining in Easter candlelight, belong to people much like me: cranky when the doughnuts run out after Mass and liable to behave badly in the parking lot when the spaces fill up before Mass. We are pilgrims who all complain of sore feet.

But then I recall the Blessing of Water from the Easter Vigil. The words tell us of a God free to act against our expectations. We hear how God made the waters of the great, destroying flood “a sign of the waters of baptism.” God turned the devouring waters of the Red Sea into a freedom road for the children of Israel. God acts, in every place, in every time, in every climate. We are not God’s stage managers. We are God’s witnesses.

We will likely have snow this season, with wool caps as Easter bonnets. May we give thanks and praise. May we receive with open arms the brothers and sisters God has chosen to give us this Easter. May we receive with open hands the Easter mystery, however God chooses to make it known.

Melissa Musick Nussbaum lives in Colorado Springs, Colo. Her e-mail address is mmnussbaum@adelphia.net.
Participation, Not Performance

Cantor and choir function to lead the assembly in song

By J. MICHAEL McMahan

The sight of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir is nearly as impressive as its magnificent sound. The choir is positioned in Salt Lake City’s Mormon Tabernacle in a way that demands the visual attention of the audience even as the voices blend and the sound fills the hall.

The placement of choirs and other musicians in an auditorium or concert hall usually entails some relatively simple decisions that allow the audience to see and hear clearly.

Placing the choir and other musicians in a church is far more complicated and needs to take account not only of acoustical and visual considerations, but also liturgical and ministerial factors.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal provides norms for the place of various musicians. All of these directives are based on the principle that liturgical action demands the conscious participation of the entire assembly, and that the singing of the assembly and of the various ministers is an integral part of the liturgy.

There is no audience as such. Sometimes all sing together, while at other times people participate by singing back and forth with the priest, deacon, choir or cantor, and at still other times by listening attentively.

The choir should be situated so that the members can participate fully in the liturgy as members of the assembly. They should be able to see and hear clearly and especially to participate in the Communion procession.

The placement of the choir should also allow it to fulfill its unique role in the liturgy of leading the song of the assembly, singing in dialogue with the people (for example, the verses of the Communion song), and of singing by itself at certain appointed times during the liturgy. The ministerial role of the choir requires an acoustically favorable location in the church, where it can be heard and seen clearly without dominating.

The cantor is designated to lead the assembly’s song and in the absence of the choir to sing in dialogue with the entire assembly. The leadership role of the cantor requires a place where he or she can be seen easily without competing with the action taking place at altar, ambo or presider’s chair.

Since the cantor is often called to lead the assembly when the choir is also present, a stand for the cantor is often placed near the area for the choir. In older churches where the choir is best placed in a rear gallery for acoustical reasons, it is very important to establish a suitable place for the cantor in the front of the church where the entire assembly can see.

The psalmist ordinarily proclaims the responsorial psalm from the ambo, the place from which the scripture readings and homily are proclaimed.

This demand should be kept in mind when designing a space for choir and cantor, since a cantor or choir member is often called upon to serve in this role and should be able to move without having to travel too great a distance to reach the ambo.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal provides norms for the place of various musicians. All of these directives are based on the principle that liturgical action demands the conscious participation of the entire assembly, and that the singing of the assembly and of the various ministers is an integral part of the liturgy. There is no audience as such. Sometimes all sing together, while at other times people participate by singing back and forth with the priest, deacon, choir or cantor, and at still other times by listening attentively.

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May 2006

J. MICHAEL McMAHON

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 7, 2006
Psalm of the Day: Ps (117) 118

The Stone Rejected by the Builders
(Alstott) BB p. 157
The Stone Rejected by the Builders
(Guimont) RS 161/GC2 989/
LPMG 50
The Stone Rejected by the Builders
(Hopson) PRM B60/PMB 623/
WS 136
The Stone Rejected by the Builders/
La Piedra Que Desecharon los Ar-
quecitos (Krisman) SS 450

This Is the Day the Lord Has Made
Songs for the Liturgy
A Banquet Is Prepared (G) GP 509
A Living Hope (2) CBW 613/PMB
*A Single Unmatched Stone (1) WOR
574
Abundant Life (G) RS 636/GC 710/
GC2 703
All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name (1)

WOR 494,495/GC 484/GC2 490/
RS 632/WC 699/JS 482/MI-BB
735/GP 421/PMB 368/WS 517/
SS 719
Amen! (G) LMG 170
At That First Eucharist (G) WOR 733/
LMGM 134/RS 922/GC 852/GC2
840/WS 608/GP 511/PMB 292/
WS 469/SS 891
At the Name of Jesus (1) WOR 499/
CBW 427/MI-BB 739,742/JS
400,424/GP 424
Baptized in Living Waters (2) PMB
386/WS 737/WS 535
Baptized in Water (2) WOR 720/RS
903/GC 798/GC2 797/CBW 614/
JS 542/PMB 286/WC 593/WS
435/SS 874
Because the Lord Is My Shepherd (G)
JS 725/MI-BB 471/GP 627
Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation
(1) WOR 617/CBW 430/WC 741/
RS 778/GC 662/GC2 642/JS
780/PMB 384/SS 797
Christus Paradox (1,G) RS 699/GC2
825/SG 64
Come, Taste and See (G) JS 818/GP
526/MI-BB 318
Come to Us (G) GP 537/GC 743/GC2
740
Easter Alleluia, v 4 (G) GP 424/GC2
447/RS 592/SS 678
Eyes Has Not Seen (2) MI-BB 467/

May 7, 2006
Gift of Finest Wheat (G) WOR 736/
CBW 603/LMG 136/GP 525/
MI-BB 337/RS 912/GC 815/GC2
816/WC 620/JS 803/PMB 300/
WS 452/SS 896
God Is Love (2) CBW 473/LMG 241/
MI-BB 421/RS 744/GC 629/GC2
608/JS 749
Good Christians All (G) RS 586/CBW
386/PMB 262/WC 553

His Name Is Wonderful (G) LMG 87
I Am the Vine (G) WC 816/GC 672/
JS 355/MI-BB 379/GP 953/PMB
436
I Know That My Redeemer Lives --
Hatton (2) WOR 445/MI-BB 601/
WC 703/LMG 63/GC 430/GC2
454/JS 131/RS 582/GP 388/
PMB 363/WS 510/SS 688
I Lift My Eyes to the Quiet Hills (G)
CBW 484
In the Arms of the Shepherd (G) PMB
449/WS 834/WS 614
Jesus, Shepherd of Our Souls (G)
WOR 649/GC 725

Like a Shepherd (G) GP 708/CBW
490/MI-BB 623/GC2 325/GC2
332/JS 648
Lord, Who At Your First Eucharist (G)
MI-BB 356/JS 826/GP 511
My Shepherd Will Supply My Need
(G) WOR 606/RS 761/JC 732/
WC 833
O Christ, the Great Foundation (1)
WOR 618/RS 781,782/GC2 646/
CBW 527/SS 792

KEY: * = Quotes or makes direct reference to one of the scripture readings or antiphons. E = Related to entrance antiphon. 1 = Related to first
reading. Ps = Related to responsorial psalm. 2 = Related to second reading. G = Related to Gospel. C = Related to Communion antiphon. Canadian
G.I.A. Publications, Inc. (GIA), 7404 S. Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638: CCS=Cantor/Congregation Series; GC=Gather Comprehensive (1994);
GC2=Gather Comprehensive, second edition (2004); HG=Hymns for the Gospels (2001); LMG=Lead Me, Guide Me (1987); LPGG=Lectionary
Psalms: Grail/Gelineau (1998); LPMG=Lectionary Psalms: Michel Guimont (1998); PST=Psaltery (1990); RS=Ritual Song (1996); SI=Songs of Israel
Collegeville, MN: BFW=By Flowing Waters (1999); PFS=Psalms for Feasts and Seasons (1990); P=Psalms for the Journey (1991); SS=Sacred
edition (1997); JS=Journeysongs, second edition (2003); LP=Liturgy Psalter; John Schiavone (2003); MI=Music Issue (2006); PSC=Psalms
Park, IL 60176: PMB=Peoples Mass Book (2003); PRM=Psalms and Ritual Music, Years C and A (2000); SO=Singing Out (1994); WC=We Celebrate
(2004); WS=Word and Song (2006).
PREPARATION: MUSIC

O Lord, You Are My Shepherd (G) WC 832
One Bread, One Body (G) GP 499/LMGM 139/MI-BB 349/RS 915/GC 830/GC2 813/WC 626/JS 820/WS 450
One Bread We Bless and Share (G) SS 898
Our God Reigns (Ps,G) WC 888/WS 660
Priestly People, vss. 10-11 (G) PMB 383/WC 735/WS 537
Ps 23, The Lord Is My Shepherd (G)
*Ps 33: The Earth Is Full (E)
Pues Sí Vivimos/If We Are Living (1,2) RS 727/GC 666/GC2 650/PMB 408/WS 782/WS 568/SS 799
Santo, Santo, Santo/Holy, Holy, Holy (1,Ps) GC 563/RS 672
Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us (G) LMGM 47
Shepherd Me, O God (2) MI-BB 472/RS 756/GC 636/GC2 23/WC 371/WS 285/SS 490
Shepherd of My Heart (G) GC 641/GC2 624/SS 780
Shepherd of Our Hearts (G) GC 829
Sing Praise to Our Creator (2) RS 620/PMB 376/WC 729/WS 532
Take and Eat, v 3 (G) RS 910/GC 831/GC2 812/CBW 611/WC 637/WS 466/SS 897
*The Earth Is Full (E) PSL 59/SS 300
The King of Love My Shepherd Is (G) WOR 609/MI-BB 477/RS 766/GC 635/GC2 631/WC 798/JS 733/GP 632/PMB 427/WS 590/SS 777
The Living God My Shepherd Is (G) CBW 690/WOR 611/MI-BB 478
*The Lord Fills the Earth (E) GP 198
The Lord, Jesus Christ, v 1 (G) CBW 436
The Lord, My Shepherd, Rules My Life (G) CBW 489
The Lord’s My Shepherd (G) CBW 488
*The Mercy of the Lord (E) IH 25
This Is My Body, v 4 (G) PMB 318/WS 611/CBW 580/WS 456
This Is the Day – Deiss (Ps) PMB 269/WC 563
We Will Rise Again (G) GP 603/MI-BB 447
With a Shepherd’s Care (G) RS 738/GC 654/GC2 628/SS 779

Without Seeing You, v 4 (G) GC 844/GC2 842
You Are Mine (G) RS 762/GC 649/GC2 627/MI-BB 466/WC 839/WS 612/SS 775
You Have Looked upon the Lowly (G) CBW 624

5TH SUNDAY
OF EASTER

May 14, 2006
Psalms of the Day: Ps (21) 22
*I Will Praise You, Lord/El Señor Es Mi Alabanza (Alonso) SS 451
*I Will Praise You, Lord (Guimont) RS 41/GC 28/GC2 893/LPMG 53
*I Will Praise You, Lord (Kogut) PCY10
*I Will Praise You, Lord (Reagan/Gelin-)
*I Will Praise You, Lord (Guimont) RS 159
*I Will Praise You, Lord (Schiavone) JS 931/LP 75
*I Will Praise You, Lord (Warner) PRM B61/PMB 626/WS 138
Lord, You Are the Song of My Praise (Chepponis/Black) CBW 101
You Are My Praise PSL 84/SS 304
Suggested Common Psalm: Ps (65) 66
Let All the Earth Cry Out

Songs for the Liturgy
*A New Song (E) PSL 83/SS 303
Abundant Life (G) RS 636/GC 710/GC2 703
All the Ends of the Earth -- Dufford (1,Ps) GP 633/MI-BB 569/GC 520/GC2 526/JS 595
Christians, Let Us Love One Another, v 5 (G) CBW 595/MI-BB 428/JS 751/GP 646
Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life (2,G) WOR 569/RS 717/GC 577/WC 797/JS 693
*Come, Taste and See, v 2 (G) JS 818/GP 526/MI-BB 318
Dwelling Place (G) GP 591/GC 594/GC2 582
Faithful Family (2) GC 413/GP 365
Go Make of All Disciples (1) WOR 628/RS 798/GC 687/GC2 666/JS 828/PMB 479/WC 868/WS 635
God Is Love (2) CBW 473/LPMG 241/MI-BB 421/RS 744/GC 629/GC2 608/JS 749/GP 647
God’s Blessing Sends Us Forth (1) PMB 473/WC 864/WS 643
I Am the Bread of Life -- Englert (G) PMB 321/WC 617
*I Am the Vine (G) WC 816/MI-BB 379/GC 672/GP 545/PMB 436
I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say (G) WOR 607/LPMG 41/MI-BB 470/RS 768/GC 646/GC2 622/WC 838/JS 729/GP 633/PMB 452/WS 613/SS 781
*I Received the Living God, v 2 (G) WC 605/GC 851/WOR 735/RS 913/GC2 809/JS 815/PMB 312/WS 468/SS 890
*I Will Be the Vine (G) GC 726/SS 769
*I Will Not Die (G) JS 658/MI-BB 605/RS 771/GC 657/GP 716
*Jesus, Bread of Life, v 5 (G) PMB 295/WC 615/WS 465
*Joyfully Give Praise to God (E) GP 242
Keep Me, Every Day (G) LMGM 124
Love One Another (2) RS 745/GC 630/JS 752/GP 645/MI-BB 420
Make Me a Blessing (2) LMGM 278
*Make Your Home in Me (G) PMB 400/WC 770
*Many Are the Light Beams, v 2 (G) RS 841/GC 736
*New Songs of Celebration (E) WOR 533
No Greater Love (G) RS 753/GC 628/GC2 607/CBW 599/GP 362/BB 146/SS 772
Now the Green Blade Rises (2,G) WOR 453/CBW 403/GC 444/GC2 456/WS 551/JS 443/BB 166/GP 382/PMB 260
Now We Remain (G) WC 628/RS 813/GC 694/GC2 696/MI-BB 513/WS 463/SS 812
*O Blessed Spring (G) PMB 414/WC 788
*O Living Bread from Heaven -- Hom-mering, v 4 (G) PMB 546/WC 979
*O Sing a New Song (E) IH 26
*Priestly People, v 13 (G) PMB 383/WC 735/WS 537
*Psalm of Hope, Easter vs (Ps) RS 730/GC 589
Pues Sí Vivimos/If We Are Living (G) RS 727/GC 666/GC2 650/PMB 408/WC 782/WS 568/SS 799
Seek Ye First (G) WOR 580/WC 811/
6TH SUNDAY
OF EASTER

May 21, 2006
Psalm of the Day: Ps (97) 98
The Lord Has Revealed (Alstott) BB p. 161
The Lord Has Revealed (Guimont) GC2 967/LPGM 56
The Lord Has Revealed (Joncas/Ge-lineau) WOR 849/RS 137/LPGG 853
The Lord Has Revealed (Proulx) CCS 2306
The Lord Has Revealed (Schiavone) JS 934/LP 78
The Lord Has Revealed/El Señor Reveal-a a Los Naciones (Schiavone) SS 452
The Lord Has Revealed (Smith) JS 78/ GP 243/MI-BB 796/SR 48
The Lord Has Revealed (Warner) PRM B62/PMB 639/WS 140
The Lord Has Shown (Alstott/Fowler) CBW 104
The Lord Has Shown (Colgan) GP 244/SPS 52
Songs for the Liturgy
All the Earth (1) PMB 484/RC 878/ MI-BB 440/WS 659
All the Ends of the Earth -- Dufford (Ps) GP 683/MI-BB 569/GC 520/GC2 526/JS 595
Christ Is Alive (1) WOR 466/CBW 384/ RS 601/JS 441/PMB 258/RC 540/SS 685
Christians, Let Us Love (2) CBW 595/ MI-BB 428/JS 751/PR 464
Come Down, O Love Divine, v 3 (C) WOR 472/MI-BB 404/CBW 407/ GC 465/GC2 471/WS 758/JS 461/RS 617
*Come, Spread the News (E) IH 27
Faith, Hope and Love (2) GC 624/GC2 609
Faithful Family (2,G) GC 413/GP 365
*God Is Love (2,G) MI-BB 421/CBW 473/LMG 241/GC 629/GC2 608/JS 749/GP 647
*God Is Love! The Heavens Are Telling (2) CBW 560
I Am the Vine (G) GC 672/WC 816/JS 355/MI-BB 379/GP 545/PMB 436
I Come with Joy (G) WOR 726/WC 848/CBW 424/RS 854/GC 806/ GC2 799/PMB 320/WS 470/SS 870
*I Have Loved You (2,G) GP 710/MI-BB 616/RS 641/GC 504/GC2 504/JS 649
In Christ There Is No East or West (1) WOR 569/GP 565/MI-BB 416/ CBW 529/LMG 301/WS 749/RS 836/GC 738/GC2 726/JS 850/ PMB 391/WS 543/SS 827
In Perfect Charity (2,G) JS 757/MI-BB 429/CP 547
In This Place (1,G) GP 533/MI-BB 309
Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You (2,G) WOR 525/GP 693/MI-BB 557/LMG 197/RC 890/RS 669/GC 528/ GC2 520/CBW 511/JS 617/PMB 497/WS 657/SS 743
Laudate Dominum (G) WOR 519/JS 660/GC 525/GC2 528/JS 598/ MI-BB 577/SS 733
*Let Us Be Bread, v 4 (G) RS 929/GC 816/GC2 808
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (2) WOR 588/GP 640/MI-BB 431/RS 743/GC 622/GC2 613/CBW 625/ WC 808/JS 746/PMB 431/WS 585/SS 770
Love Is His Word (2,G) WOR 599/WC 621/RS 750/PMB 299
Love One Another (2,G) RS 745/GC 630/RS 645/WS 752/MI-BB 420
Lover of Us All (2,G) GC 633/GP 645
*New Songs of Celebration (Ps) WOR 533
*No Greater Love (G) BB 146/RS 753/ GC 628/GC2 607/CBW 599/GP 362
Now the Green Blade Rises (G) WOR 453/CBW 403/BB 166/GC 444/ GC2 456/RC 551/JS 443/CP 382/PMB 260
Now We Remain (G) WC 628/MI-BB 513/RS 813/GC 694/GC2 696/ WS 463/SS 812
O God of Every Nation (2) WOR 650/ RS 834
One Bread, One Body (1,G) GP 499/ MI-BB 349/LMG 139/RS 915/ GC 830/GC2 813/WC 626/JS 820/WS 450
One Bread We Bless and Share (1,G) SS 898
One Is the Body (G) GC 846
Peace (G) WC 845/MI-BB 495/JS 741/ GP 649/PMB 462/WS 623
Receive in Your Heart (G) WC 636
*Serving You (G) GC 410
Shout for Joy (2,G) GC 559
*Shout to the Ends of the Earth (E) PSL 86/SS 306
Sing a New Church (1,G) GP 572/MI-BB
THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

Thursday, May 25 or Sunday, May 28, 2006
Psalm of the Day: Ps (46) 47
God Goes Up with Shouts PSL 90/SS 310
God Goes Up with Shouts (Affley/Murray) CBW 106
God Mounts His Throne/Dios Ascende (Alonso) SS 453
God Mounts His Throne (Alstott) BB p. 163
God Mounts His Throne (Chepponis) SS 521
God Mounts His Throne (Guimont) GC2 926/PMB 631/PRM 636/LPMG 58/WS 142
God Mounts His Throne (Haugen) GC 53/GC2 36/PCY1 51/RS 80
God Mounts His Throne (Hughes) CCS 2029
God Mounts His Throne (Inwood) GC 453/GC2 467/RS 606
God Mounts His Throne (Kogut) PCY10 21
God Mounts His Throne (Kreutz/Gelineau) LPGG 856
God Mounts His Throne (Proulx/Gelineau) WOR 851/RS 79/LPGG 1075-12
God Mounts His Throne (Roberts) LMGM 522
God Mounts His Throne (Schiavone) JS 936/LP 80
God Mounts His Throne (Weckler) PBC 151/WC 388/WS 297
God Mounts the Throne (Willcock) PCY10

Songs for the Liturgy:
*Praise Him As He Mounts the Skies (G) GC 853/GC2 827/WS 655/GC 454/RS 578
*Alleluia! Sing to Jesus (2) WOR 469/GC 453/GC2 467/RS 606
*Alleluia! Go and Teach All People (G) CBW 106
*Lord, You Give the Great Commission (G) WOR 469/GC 453/GC2 467/RS 606
*Let the Earth Rejoice and Sing (2) CBW 508/RS 781/SS 698
*Let Us Go to the World (Ps) CBW 508/RS 781/SS 698
*Go Out to All the World (G) CBW 508/RS 781/SS 698
*Sing a New Song to the Lord (Ps) CBW 508/RS 781/SS 698
*Sing a New Song – Schutte (Ps) CBW 508/RS 781/SS 698
*Sing a New Song – Brown (Ps) GP 642/MI-BB 616
*Sing a New Song – Weigott-Wood (Ps) GP 642/MI-BB 616
*Sing a New Song (Ps) CBW 508/RS 781/SS 698
*Sing a New Song (Ps) GP 642/MI-BB 616

PREPARATION: MUSIC

Spirt-Friend (O) GC 467
Take and Eat (G) RS 910/GC 831/GC2 812/CBW 611/WS 637/WS 466/SS 897
There Is a Love (G) WC 804
*This Is My Commandment (2,G) WOR 603
*This Is My Will (2,G) WOR 590/HG 122
*We Have Been Told (G) MI-BB 509/WC 805/RS 815/GC 699/GC2 694/WS 581/SS 813
What Wondrous Love Is This (G) WOR 600/GP 642/MI-BB 432/WC 709/RS 749/GC 627/GC2 614/JS 755/PMB 253/WS 404/SS 768
Where Charity and Love Prevail (2,G) WC 801,806/MI-BB 422/RS 747/GC 625/GC2 610/JS 756/GP 644/PMB 424,429/WS 584,586/SS 773
Where There Is Love (2,G) GP 464/WS 569/MI-BB 655
Wonderful and Great (1,Ps) PMB 499/WC 904

THANKS BE TO GOD
716/JS 478/GC 487/GC2 493/RS 627/PMB 355/SS 721
*Sing We Triumphant Hymns of Praise (1,G) CBW 391/JS 448/WC 570/ PMB 275/WS 420/SS 695
Take Christ to the World (G) GP 549/JS 836/MI-BB 374
Tell It! Tell It Out with Gladness (G) GC2 518/HC 92
The Church of Christ in Every Age (2) WOR 626/RC 910/JS 843/RS 803/GC2 665/SS 808
The Church’s One Foundation (2) CBW 526/GC 661/JS 779/GP 573/ PMB 385/WC 739/WS 533/MI- BB 400
The Head That Once Was Crowned with Thorns (2) WOR 464/RS 591
*Vayan al Mundo/Go Out to the World (G) MI-BB 368
*Why Stare into the Sky? (E) PSL 89/ SS 309

7TH SUNDAY
OF EASTER

May 28, 2006 (unless Ascension is celebrated today)
Psalm of the Day: Ps (102) 103
The Lord Has Set His Throne/El Señor Puso en el Cielo Su Trono (Alonso) SS 454
The Lord Has Set His Throne (Altstott) BB p. 166
The Lord Has Set His Throne (Guimont) RS 142/GC2 972/LPMG 60
The Lord Has Set His Throne (Haugen/ Gelineau) WOR 853/RS 141/LPPG 858
The Lord Has Set His Throne (Hillert) PRM 64/PMB 633/WS 144
The Lord Has Set His Throne (Schia- vone) JS 938/JP 82
Suggested Common Psalm: Ps (46) 47
See suggestions for Ascension, above.
Songs for the Liturgy
Alleluia! Sing to Jesus (G) WOR 737/ CBW 426/GP 419/MI-BB 741/ LMGM 67/WC 696/RS 914/GC 853/GC2 826/JS 477/PMB 352/ WS 507/SS 727
Anthem (1) GP 578/Mi-BB 510/GC 690/GC2 681/JS 761
As We Celebrate (2,G) GP 569
At That First Eucharist (G) WOR 733/ LMGM 134/WC 608/RS 922/GC 852/GC2 840/GP 511/PMB 292/ WS 469/SS 891
Before the Sun Burned Bright (1) GP 577/CBW 504
Bread of Life – Farrell (G) MI-BB 316/ GC 821/CBW 597/JS 819/GP 498
Christ, from Whom All Blessings Flow (G) CBW 525
Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation (G) WOR 617/CBW 430/WC 741/RS 778/GC 662/GC2 642/JS 780/ PMB 384/SS 797
Christians, Let Us Love (2) CBW 595/ MI-BB 428/JS 751/GP 646
Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life (G) WOR 569/RS 717/GC 577/WC 797/JS 693
**Come,” Says My Heart (E) PSL 92/ SS 312
Draw Us in the Spirit’s Tether (1,G) WOR 731/RS 917/JS 797/MI-BB 305
Dwelling Place (2) GP 591/GC 594/ GC2 582
Faith, Hope and Love (2) GC 624/GC2 609
Faithful Family (2,G) GP 365
Father, We Thank Thee (G) WOR 558/ CBW 528/RS 705/GC 568/GC2 547/PMB 316/WC 607/WS 446/ SS 758
For All the World (G) HG 34
Gather Us In (G) WOR 665/Mi-BB 302/ WC 853/RS 850/GC 744/GC2 743/CBW 587/WS 629/SS 831
*God Is Love (2) CBW 473/LMGM 241/ MI-BB 421/RS 744/GC 629/GC2 608/JS 749/GP 647
How Good It Is (G) GC 727
I Sing the Mighty Power of God (Ps) WOR 502/Mi-BB 438/RS 633/ CBW 541/JC 635/JS 668/PMB 351/WC 908/SS 727
In Perfect Charity (2) JS 757/Mi-BB 429
Let All on Earth Their Voices Raise (1) WOR 716/CBW 452
Let Us Be One (G) PMB 388/WC 748
Life-Giving Bread, Saving Cup (G) RS 920/GC 822/GC2 821/SS 888
Lord, Who at Your First Eucharist (G) CBW 605/Mi-BB 356/JS 826/GP 511
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (2) WC 808/WOR 588/Mi-BB 431/RS 743/GP 640/GC 622/GC2 613/JS 746/CBW 625/GC 622/PMB 431/ WS 585/SS 770
*Love One Another (2) RS 745/GC 630/JS 752/Mi-BB 420/GP 645
Lover of Us All (2,G) GP 643
Many Are the Lightbeams (2) RS 841/ GC 736
*My Heart Declares to You (E) IH 29
One Bread, One Body (G) GP 499/ LMGW 139/Mi-BB 349/RS 915/ GC 830/GC2 813/WS 626/JS 820/WS 450
One Bread We Bless and Share (G) SS 898
One Is the Body (G) GC 846
One Lord (G) Mi-BB 643/GP 453
One Love Released (G) JS 814
Pan de Vida (2) Mi-BB 341/RS 909/GC 848/GC2 811/WC 625/JS 813/GP 500/WC 457/SS 876
Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven (Ps) WC 907/WOR 530/RS 684/ GC 551/GC2 531/CBW 565/GP 685/JS 612/LMGM 198/PMB 492/Mi-BB 565/SS 735
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty (Ps) WOR 547/WC 906/GP 686/CBW 564/LMGW 196/BB 200/RS 695/ GC 527/GC2 536/JS 597/PMB 500/WS 653/SS 746
Seed, Scattered and Sown (G) Mi-BB 370/RS 918/GC 834/GC2 830/ CBW 604/JS 811/Mi-BB 344/GP 516
Shout for Joy (2) GC 559
Something Which Is Known (G) CBW 393
Spirit of God within Me (G) WOR 480/ RS 610/GC 468
The Broken Body (G) GC 737
The Spirit of God (1,G) WC 761/GC 458/PMB 399/WS 564
This Is My Commandment (2) WOR 603 This Is My Will (2) WOR 590
Ubi Caritas (2) WOR 598,604/CBW 67,376/Mi-BB 335,424,425/ RS 746,752/GC 408,631/WS 800,807/GC 430,568,603/ JS 753,754,805/GP 364/PMB 428,430/WS 583,588,589/SS 774
Where Charity and Love Prevail (2) WC 484,485/Mi-BB 421/RS 747/GC 625/GC2 610/WS 801,806/JS 756/GP 644/PMB 424,429/WS 584,586/SS 773
You Are the Way (G) CBW 441/WS 701/PMB 365/WS 505

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**Praying Broadly for Vocations**

*Fr. Lawrence Mick*

This Sunday, with its image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, is a natural day to focus on prayer for vocations. The continuing decline in the number of priests and religious in the church means that there is a real need for these vocations. At the same time, we should not think too narrowly about vocation and ministry.

A recent meeting of the Coalition for Ministry in Daily Life pointed to the problem of parishes focusing too exclusively on internal church concerns. Here’s a quote from a report on the meeting published in the online newsletter of the National Federation of Priests’ Councils: “Three examples are given: a Catholic parish, seemingly well informed in Vatican II, sponsors a ministry fair to attract volunteers. All well and good. But neither on that ministry weekend nor at any other time does the parish have a fair about worshippers [outside] jobs. Second example: parish catechists and its grammar school teachers are commissioned at a Mass in late August. Teachers from public and non-Catholic private schools are left in the pew. Third example: an RCIA team exposes its participants to the full life of the parish by inviting representatives from parish groups, including outreach ministries to RCIA gatherings. A business executive who daily wrestles with fairness in the marketplace was never contacted. The RCIA participants, like other Catholic worshippers, are left with the impression that the full Christian life means getting involved in internal parish ministries.”

Most members of the church live out the ministerial responsibilities of their baptisms beyond the boundaries of the parish property. While the work that the church does through its parish ministries is important, it is critical that church members recognize their responsibility to bring the Gospel and its values to bear on their everyday lives.

This could suggest a whole range of parish efforts to lift up vocation awareness among parishioners. For liturgy planners, though, the first focus might be on the way we speak and pray about vocations within the liturgy. Could you develop a list of vocations/occupations carried out by members of your parish? You might even put a tentative list in the bulletin and ask parishioners to add to it so that no one’s life work is overlooked. Then think about praying for those who serve the Lord in all those vocations in the Prayers of the Faithful. Some could be grouped, of course, like those who serve in vocations of public safety (police, fire, EMTs, etc.). You might start such petitions today and continue them through Pentecost. Even beyond this season, remember to include prayers for those serving in such vocations along with “religious” vocations throughout the year.

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

*Paige Byrne Shortal*

**INTRODUCTION**

Today is called Shepherd Sunday because the Gospel is about Jesus the Good Shepherd. Jesus tells us that sheep will not heed a stranger’s voice. There are many strange voices in our world today. Let us pray for ears to hear the voice of the true shepherd.

**PENITENTIAL RITE**

Loving God, you sent us Jesus to be our savior, our shepherd and our guide. Quiet our minds and enlighten our hearts so that we might hear his voice.

Lord Jesus, you are the true shepherd, calling us to follow you: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you guard us against the stranger’s ways: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, protect us from all that would separate us from you: Lord, have mercy.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 Peter calls those who rejected Jesus to repent and be baptized.

1 Pet 2:20b-25 Christ suffered, left us an example.

John 10:1-10 Sheep do not heed the stranger’s voice.

**PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL**

Presider Loving God, you sent us Jesus to be our savior, our shepherd and our guide. Quiet our minds and enlighten our hearts so that we might hear his voice amid the many voices of this world. Hear our prayers this day as we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
## Scheduling First Communion

**Fr. Lawrence Mick**

The Second Sunday of May is designated as Mother’s Day in the United States. While this is not a liturgical observance, planners would be foolish to ignore it. Remember mothers in the general intercessions today. There are suggested intercessions and a prayer of blessing for mothers in Chapter 55 of the Book of Blessings.

In some parishes, Mother’s Day has been the day for first Communion, which no doubt pleases some mothers but also raises some questions. Is this the best day, or does combining the two celebrations dilute the focus on the importance of mothers in family life and/or the importance of first Communion? Does linking first Communion with mothers denigrate the role of fathers in the faith life of their children? Is there any good reason, other than simple sentimentalism, for celebrating first Communion on Mother’s Day?

All of this raises broader questions about the appropriate time and manner of celebrating this sacrament of initiation. A key basis for good decisions is to remember that first Communion is about initiation. This makes the Easter season an appropriate time for celebrating it, and from that perspective any of the Easter Sundays are appropriate. If your diocese or parish celebrates Confirmation and first Eucharist in the same liturgy, then Pentecost Sunday or the Sunday before Pentecost might be best, since the readings focus more on the gift of the Spirit at the end of the Fifty Days. On the other hand, with school and religious education programs often ending near Pentecost, it might be valuable to schedule first Communion on one of the earlier Easter Sundays, so that there is time for mystagogical catechesis after the sacrament has been celebrated with the children.

Seeing first Communion as initiation into the worshipping community also reminds us that it is best celebrated at the regular parish Masses. The children are being initiated into the ongoing sacramental life of the parish. The parish should be part of this celebration and it ought to look and feel much like a regular parish Mass. In larger parishes, this might best be accomplished by multiple celebrations at different parish Masses and over several Sundays. If there is a desire for a group Communion celebration, this could be held after all have made their first Communion (perhaps near Pentecost), and group pictures could be taken then.

If your parish is used to a separate Mass for first Communion on Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon, it will take considerable catechesis to help parents understand a shift to regular parish Masses. This effort is worth it, because it helps the whole parish to better understand the meaning of first Communion and of the Eucharist itself.

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

**Paige Byrne Shortal**

**INTRODUCTION**

My friends, we want a life rich in meaning, a life that matters, that will be remembered when we are gone. In today’s Gospel we hear that those who remain faithful will bear much fruit. Faithfulness is hard work. Let us pray today for the grace to meet the challenges of the faithful life.

**PENITENTIAL RITE**

Lord Jesus, you are the vine and we are the branches: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, the branches who remain on the vine will bear fruit: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, help us to cling to you so that we may live fruitful lives: Lord, have mercy.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**


1 John 3:18-24 His commandment is that we should love one another.

John 15:1-8 Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit.

**PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL**

Presider Brothers and sisters, let us together pray for our needs and the needs of the whole world.

Minister We pray for the church … for communities of Christians gathered all over the world … for each individual man and woman who seeks to know God’s will for them today … we pray.

- We continue to pray for peace … for peace in the Middle East and in all those areas of the world torn by violence … for peace within our communities and families … for peace within our hearts … we pray.

- Let us pray for all mothers on this Mother’s Day … and for stepmothers, grandmothers, Godmothers, and all those women who nurture and care for us … we pray.

- For those women who are pregnant and afraid to be mothers … for the encouraging word and support they need and for friends and family who will help them with their new responsibilities … we pray.

- We pray for the sick … for the very old … for those living with Alzheimer’s Disease and those who love them and struggle as they witness their loved one’s diminishment … we pray.

- We remember those who have died … (names).

For children without mothers and for mothers who mourn the loss of their children … for those lost to disease, poverty and war … for every mother’s child … we pray.

Presider Loving God, hear our prayers this day and bring our needs and the needs of the whole to the fulfillment your love intends. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Celebrating First Communion

Fr. Lawrence Mick

Last week we spoke of the value of scheduling first Communion celebrations as part of the regular Sunday Masses in a parish. This makes it more apparent that the children are being initiated into the ongoing life of the church. Separate first Communion Masses often gave the impression that receiving Communion was a once-in-a-lifetime event, like a baptism or wedding. Dressing the girls in white dresses and veils also contributed to this imagery.

Another common pattern at first Communion celebrations is to have the children carry out the ministerial roles at Mass, serving as lectors, leading the petitions, bringing up the gifts, and performing a song (with gestures) after Communion. This has often led to efforts to find enough “special roles” so that every one of the communicants has a special ministry.

This approach to planning the celebration does violence to some basic principles. One is that the primary way each of us participates in the Eucharist is by carrying out the ministry of the assembly. The push to have the initiates take over special liturgical ministries betrays a lack of recognition that the role of the assembly itself is crucial to the liturgy. It is into this ministry that the first communicants are being initiated. They are taking another step into their identity as full members of the order of the faithful. They are not being initiated as lectors or choir members but as members of the worshipping assembly.

Their first Communion is an occasion for the parish to minister to them. The usual parish liturgical ministers should carry out their usual roles. If there are family members who normally serve as lectors or Communion ministers or ushers or cantors, there is no reason that they could not serve in these ways for the first Communion Mass, but putting the children in those roles for one day only suggests a school production rather than a parish liturgy. You can see this in the reaction of parents and relatives when the children “perform.” It is very much like what happens at the school play or a dance recital or a talent show.

Perhaps the most important reason to avoid this approach, however, is that it takes the focus away from the central point of the day — the children sharing for the first time at the eucharistic table. This should be the high point of their experience. Giving them other ministerial roles distracts them from the real meaning of the day and shifts the focus of their families and the whole assembly away from the main event.

First Communion is a significant moment both for the initiates and for the whole parish. It’s a time for the whole assembly to welcome these children to the table of the Lord. Everything else points to that central fact.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Paige Byrne Shortal

INTRODUCTION

My friends, Jesus knew he would one day leave the disciples to carry on his ministry and promised to be with them — and with us — by sending the Holy Spirit to guide, inspire, encourage and strengthen us. Let us pray for hearts and minds open to the Spirit.

PENITENTIAL RITE

Lord Jesus, you died for us that we might live:
Lord, have mercy.
Christ Jesus, you rose to new life and promised that we, too, will rise: Christ, have mercy.
Lord Jesus, forgive us our sins and send your Holy Spirit to guide us: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

1 John 4:7-10 God is love.
John 15:9-17 Love one another as I have loved you.

Note: When the Ascension of the Lord is celebrated next Sunday, the second reading and Gospel from the Seventh Sunday of Easter may be read today.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider Confident in the promises of our risen Lord to be with us always, let us pray for our needs and the needs of the whole world.
Minister For the church ... for strength to preach the Good News and carry on the work that Jesus came to do ... we pray.
❖ For the voice of the church in the world ... for those who are speaking words of peace, justice, compassion, love of our neighbor and love of our enemies ... we pray.
❖ For those preparing for marriage and for all married couples ... for those who are happy and content in their relationship and for those who are struggling to love ... for families who are living with divorce ... we pray.
❖ We pray for the sick. Let us remember today those who suffer with ailments of the heart: for those with heart disease, those facing surgery and those who are forced to the quiet life because their hearts will not allow them strenuous activity. And also for those whose hearts are hard, those who are without compassion. For the healing of our hearts ... we pray.
❖ We remember those who have died ... (names) ... and for all those who mourn the passing of a loved one ... we pray.

Presider Good and gracious God, hear the prayers of your people this day. Send the Holy Spirit to inspire and strengthen us this week as we strive to live according to your Gospel. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.
Christ’s Priestly Prayer

Patrick Marrin

Today’s Gospel (John 17:11-19), excerpted from Jesus’ “Priestly Prayer” at the end of the long Last Supper discourses, provides an occasion to look at the nature of the priesthood. What kind of leadership did Jesus envision for his followers?

Jesus prays on behalf of his apostles: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.”

As he sends them into the world, Jesus consecrates his apostles. To consecrate someone is to set them apart, make them sacred.

Composed at the end of the first century, the fourth Gospel is known for its “high Christology,” the presentation of Jesus as the divine Logos in human form. This contrasts with the synoptic Gospels, Mark in particular, in which the human Jesus is pre-eminent. John’s Jesus is self-consciously divine, and his words have an otherworldly tone, his deeds are all “signs” of deeper mysteries accessible only by faith. The fourth Gospel shows strong Greek influences as well, like the use of the Greek term logos, Greek literary forms such as long dialogues, and Greek distinctions between spirit and matter, light and darkness, ideas taken up by various gnostic sects in this same time frame, groups who saw themselves as separated from and transcending the world. So it is not surprising that John’s Jesus is intent on keeping his followers uncontaminated by the world, the flesh and the devil.

Yet, John’s Gospel is also insistently on the truth of the Incarnation, namely that Jesus was truly human, body and spirit, in the world to transform it. “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son … not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved” (John 3:16-17). During the church’s first centuries, which witnessed both gnostic tendencies to deny Jesus’ humanity and then Arian challenges to his divinity, the fourth Gospel provided canonical stability for the inseparability of Jesus’ divine-human identity.

This “both-and” rather than “either-or” approach is true of the priesthood. Jesus consecrates his followers in truth, but does not take them out of the world. Just as Jesus’ own Incarnation encompassed a full range of human experience, including the ordinary joys and pains of human existence, priests are most effective as ministers of the Gospel when they share the common human lot, and they are least effective when they withdraw into lives of ritual practice and abstraction.

A spiritual director once told me, “You will never know the Son of God unless you first know the son of man.” Jesus is both. His priests find holiness when they also seek wholeness. Their capacity to perform their sacred duties is inseparable from immersion as pastors in the world.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Paige Byrne Shortal

INTRODUCTION

Today is the last Sunday before Pentecost. Let us pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and for open minds and hearts to what God wants for us this week.

PENITENTIAL RITE

Lord Jesus, you died for us, rose, and ascended to the Father: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you promised to be with us always: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, send us your Holy Spirit: Lord, have mercy.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26 Matthias is chosen.
1 John 4:11-16 God is love: Abide in love and God will abide in you.
John 17:11b-19 Father, may they all be one.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider My friends, as we anticipate the Feast of Pentecost, let us remember the promise of Jesus to be always with us and offer our prayers for those in need.

Minister We pray for peace. On this Memorial Day weekend, let us pray for all efforts to solve conflicts among peoples without war. For those who work as diplomats, mediators and ambassadors for peace … we pray.

❖ For the church … for those charged with special responsibility within the church … for those who struggle with teachings and practices of some members of the church community … for dialogue among those who disagree … for faith, steadfastness and perseverance to preach a loving God to this needy world … we pray.

❖ For those who most need our prayers … for the very sick, the very poor; the very old and the very young; for all victims of violence and all those whose lives are threatened … we pray.

❖ We remember those who have died … (names) … and let us remember all those who have died in service to our country and those who mourn their passing … for all victims of war … we pray.

❖ Let us pray quietly for a moment for the grace of the Holy Spirit in our lives where we are most in need … (pause) … for all that we need to become the holy men and women God intends us to be … we pray.

Presider Creator God, you who formed and made us and know the thoughts and motives of our hearts, mercifully fill your people with your Spirit, that we may cast aside our differences and serve you in all that we do. We make this prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
In most parishes in the United States, this Sunday is the feast of the Ascension of the Lord. In some dioceses, Ascension was celebrated on Thursday. In either case, we find ourselves today among those to whom Christ has entrusted the mission of carrying on his work. Christ has not left us behind, but his presence in the world after the Ascension is primarily through the members of his body, the church. As we look toward Pentecost and the end of the Easter season, we are called again to accept responsibility for the ongoing work of the church.

This commitment to mission is an integral part of our identity as members of the baptized. This time of mystagogy for the neophytes reminds them that Christ called them to share in the mission of those who have died and risen to new life in the Lord. The readings in the last weeks of Easter repeatedly focus our attention on the missionary dimension of our baptismal commitment.

This might be a good time, then, to hold a “mission fair” after all the Masses. Many parishes have a Stewardship Sunday in the fall to increase donations and to ask for volunteers for various ministries. Why not focus on ministry at this time of the year, when we are all reflecting on what it means to be baptized members of Christ?

Either Ascension (or the Seventh Sunday of Easter) or Pentecost provides a solid context for such efforts. It should be easy to include ministry and mission concerns in the preaching and prayers for either Sunday.

If you normally have a post-Eucharist celebration of all those initiated throughout the year on Pentecost, this Sunday might be a better day for a mission fair so as not to overload one day. On the other hand, it would be easy to link such a celebration with the commitment to mission if you prefer to do it on Pentecost.

A mission fair is frequently set up with all of the various ministry groups of the parish staffing tables with posters and handouts to explain their work. Sign-up sheets can encourage people to make a commitment on the spot or a general card listing various possibilities could be offered, to be returned the following Sunday.

Be sure, however, to include some focus on the way that the baptized carry out their mission at home, in the workplace, and in the neighborhood. (See this column for May 7 for more on this.) This could be done, perhaps, with a continuous slide show or PowerPoint presentation that presents various people engaged in activities that bring Christ’s love to bear in daily life. The commitment card or sign-up sheet for this booth could list ways that workers, shoppers, parents and students can evangelize their world by their actions and invite a written commitment to embrace such efforts.

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**Feast of the Ascension**

**Paige Byrne Shortal**

**INTRODUCTION**

Before Jesus ascended he told the disciples to proclaim the Gospel to every creature. This is the calling of every Christian, to proclaim the Gospel by our lives and by our words. Let us ask God to forgive us our failure to witness to the Good News and to give us the Holy Spirit so that we might be faithful to our Lord’s command.

**PENITENTIAL RITE**

Lord Jesus, you died for us, rose and ascended to the Father: Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you promised to be with us always: Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, send us your Holy Spirit so that we might know your presence among us: Lord, have mercy.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Acts 1:1-11 Jesus was lifted up.

Eph 4:1-13 Live in a manner worthy of your calling.

Mark 16:15-20 Go into the world and preach the Gospel.

**PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL**

**Presider** My friends, on this Feast of the Ascension let us remember the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit, and let us pray to be open to the Spirit’s action in our lives.

**Minister** Jesus commanded us to preach the Gospel: for the courage to witness to the Gospel whether convenient or inconvenient ... we pray,

◦ Jesus commanded us to baptize in his name: for faithfulness in living out the promises of our own baptism and to raise our children in the faith ... we pray,

◦ Jesus commanded us to receive the Holy Spirit: for hearts and minds open to the Spirit’s promptings ... we pray,

◦ Jesus commanded us to love one another: for the grace to love without counting the cost ... we pray,

◦ Jesus commanded us to pray for what we need: for the poor, the sick, the burdened; for those in the path of war and all those whose lives are threatened; for those who most need our prayers this day ... we pray.

**Presider** Creator God, hear the prayers of your people this day. Help us to know your Son, Jesus; to do as he would do; to be like him; to preach his Gospel; and to live out our lives faithful to all of his commands. We pray always in Jesus’ name. Amen.
May Weddings

An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have; the older she gets, the more interested he is in her.  
— Agatha Christie

By all means marry. If you get a good wife, you’ll be happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher. — Socrates

If you are afraid of loneliness, do not marry. — Chekhov

To keep your marriage brimming  
With love in the marriage cup,  
Whenever you’re wrong, admit it,  
Whenever you’re right, shut up. — Ogden Nash

Marry not a tennis player. For love means nothing to them.

He who knows nothing, knows nothing. But he who knows he knows nothing knows something. And he who knows someone whose friend’s wife’s brother knows nothing, he knows something. Or something like that.

If it’s true that girls are inclined to marry men like their fathers, it is understandable why so many mothers cry so much at weddings.

God looked down and saw that Adam was all alone, while all the animals had companions. So God decided to create a companion for man. God came to Adam and said, “Adam, you are my greatest creation and, therefore, I am going to create for you the ultimate companion. She will worship the very ground you walk on. She will long for you and no other. She will be highly intelligent. She will wait on you hand and foot and obey your every command. She will be beautiful, and all it will cost you is an arm and a leg.” Thinking for a few moments, Adam replied, “What could I get for a rib?”

Q: When was the longest day in the Bible?  
A: The day Adam was created because there was no Eve.

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Julie Lonneman is an artist and graphic illustrator in Cincinnati. Contact her at: jlonneman@cinci.rr.com. These Sunday graphics are repeated in smaller versions as illustrations in the scripture commentary section of this same issue. Celebration subscribers are free to copy these into their bulletins and parish newsletters. For your convenience, you can also download and print these each month in pdf format. See the insert in this issue about getting Celebration online. Lonneman’s “Clip Art for Sundays and Solemnities,” 190 images in a booklet and on CD-ROM, is now available for $20 from Liturgy Training Publications. 1-800-933-1800.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

“I know my sheep and mine know me.”
John 10:14

“Whoever remains in me will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.”
John 15:5

“Love one another as I love you.”
John 15:12

We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.
1 John 4:16

Good Shepherd Sunday, spring
A Word Carefully Chosen

Our message of the Gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

1 John 3:18-24 (Fifth Sunday of Easter)

A niece wrote of her uncle, a monk, “He sounds happy and he seems to be getting younger, despite all the pains, aches and problems of advancing years.

“To me, he is wonderful human evidence of what it means to be a religious.” Eighty-eight and less able than in the past, Father Regis continues his journey.

Easter assurance fires each believer: “He has risen; he is not here.” “He is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.”

English teacher, writer, chaplain to Sisters, Father Regis gave thoughtful expression to his faith in Jesus Christ, choosing words as carefully as did the Father himself.

Fifty-plus have been his years as religious and as priest; an abbey and college man, humble, “at home with the Lord.”

For years a hospice leader, helping others at the last, expecting the best is yet to come, assured and with full conviction.

‘You are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled.’ Why do we seek the Lord? If we have ulterior motives, we may be fooling ourselves, but we can’t fool God. Jesus sees that the crowd follows the food, not him. He doesn’t dismiss them. He challenges them. Yes, this is a discourse on the bread of life, not a chastisement for shallow faith. Yet if our faith is based on what we’re going to get, then we need to reconsider. Do we practice our faith to be saved? Salvation is a gift. We don’t earn it. We must simply follow Jesus to do the “work of God” as a sign that we “believe in the one he sent.” That we may have abundant faith.

Tues., May 2: Acts 7:51 — 8:1; John 6:30-35

‘What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you?’ The question is mind-boggling. Jesus is the ultimate sign; he stands before the crowd, yet they ask for more. With our smug recognition comes the gnawing reality that we, too, constantly look for signs when we’re standing in the Lord’s presence. In our weakness, it somehow doesn’t seem enough to know what the Lord has done in the past; we keep seeking yet another indication of God’s power. So God sends us additional signs of his saving grace and forgiveness every day. We must remove ourselves from the crowd looking past Jesus and profess that we accept him as the only sign we need.

Wed., May 3: 1 Cor 15:1-8; John 14:6-14

‘If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it.’ There’s comfort in the promise that our prayers will be answered. Somehow, though, people are reluctant to place their needs before the Lord. They think they are troubling God with trivialities. Worse yet, they believe that they should only ask for God’s help when they have exhausted all other options or when the need overwhelms any other means of relief. God doesn’t keep a tally. We aren’t limited to a finite number of requests. We can surrender our lives to the Lord and know that our needs will be heard. We aren’t being pests; we’re recognizing the integral part that God plays in every aspect of our lives.


‘I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.’ It seems so simple: Believe and have eternal life. But there’s nothing simple about that kind of conviction. When we truly believe, that’s just the first step. Those who truly believe don’t sit quietly in their conviction and await the pleasure of eternal life. There’s much to do before that joyous time; there are many with whom we want to share this amazing message so that they too can believe and can share in it. When we truly believe in the one God sent, we have no choice but to proclaim the glorious gift of eternal life that is offered to all. That we may all share in the Kingdom.


‘Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.’ We are uniquely linked to the Lord through the Eucharist. By accepting that Jesus is the bread of life, the food that endures, we are forever one with the Lord. Jesus compares this bond to the one that he has with the Father. Just as Jesus’ life and mission were possible because of the Father, our very being is feasible because of the sacrifice of Christ’s body and blood. The Lord is our sustenance and our strength. In gratitude for the gift of the Eucharist, we pray.


Jesus then said to the Twelve, ‘Do you also want to leave?’ Living a life of faith isn’t
easy. Many disciples returned to their former lives. We face conflicting messages daily. What is just and good isn’t always obvious. We can grow weary of the effort necessary to do what Jesus asks of us. Each time we are confronted with tough choices, we are, in essence, asked the question that Jesus poses to the Twelve. When we falter, we walk a little farther away, and the farther away we get, the easier it is to leave entirely. Few people choose to abandon their faith; sadly, they just drift away without realizing that it’s toward the Lord that we should go when we struggle. That we may choose to follow the Lord in good times and bad, we pray. PR

Fourth Week of Easter

‘They will not follow a stranger.’ If only we could be as smart as sheep that recognize the true voice and refuse to heed the stranger. But life is complicated and there is a cacophony of voices. Peter knew the rules pretty well — eat this, avoid that; embrace these people, avoid those. But his world is turned upside down by a Jewish rabbi who turns out to be God, and not only that, but God of all people. What can we let go of? What must we hold on to? So many out to be God, and not only that, but God of all people. There is a cophony of voices. Peter knew the rules pretty well — eat this, avoid that; embrace these people, avoid those. But his world is turned upside down by a Jewish rabbi who turns out to be God, and not only that, but God of all people. What can we let go of? What must we hold on to? So many around us are letting go of religious practice, of the church community, even of Christian faith. Others are clinging to what for them is non-negotiable, sometimes serious matter and sometimes what seems to be quite petty. Let us pray for wisdom and charity: for discerning minds and hearts as we choose our life’s path and for patience with those who go by a different way. PBS

‘If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.’ In today’s account from Acts, large numbers of Greeks are flocking to the Lord. In the Gospel, the Jews are disbelieving. Why did so many of the Jewish people not recognize Jesus as the Messiah? How did we become a religion for Gentiles? Others are clinging to what for them is non-negotiable, sometimes serious matter and sometimes what seems to be quite petty. Let us pray for wisdom and charity: for discerning minds and hearts as we choose our life’s path and for patience with those who go by a different way. PBS

Blessed Damian Joseph de Veuster of Moloka’i, priest
‘Sent forth by the Holy Spirit ...’ The Holy Spirit calls Barnabas and Saul and they go. Period. In the Gospel, Jesus explains that those who ignore his words are not condemned by him, but by the very Word they ignore. When God calls us we are haunted by that call. There is a Word within us that we must speak, no matter the cost, no matter the consequence. And so Blessed Damian hears the call of Jesus to minister to those no one wants, to bring light to one of the darkest places on the earth. He cannot escape the call of the One who pronounced the poor as blessed. He cannot escape knowing that these least ones are each Jesus to him. Let us pray for ears to hear the voice of God, for minds to discern his Word, for hearts to embrace his call ... today. PBS

‘No slave is greater than the master.’ Jesus washed feet. Jesus served. Jesus healed the sick, favored the poor, taught all who would listen. Jesus told the truth, knowing that the truth would lead to his death. This is who Jesus was. This is who Jesus is. ‘If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.’ Jesus doesn’t choose grand. He doesn’t choose comfortable. He doesn’t choose safe. I wish he did. Because then I could. I like grand, comfortable and safe. But a life that is grand, comfortable and safe without Jesus is an empty vessel, a whitened sepulcher, a darned boring existence. There is a lot of good company among those who choose Jesus. There’s joy and purpose and excitement every day. It’s not all serious business. But there is the cross for each disciple. Let us pray for the courage to follow Jesus, to bear our crosses and to pray every day, ‘Jesus, help us be like you.’ PBS

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled.’ These are the words of Jesus to his disciples as he explains that he will be killed. There are those who bless us with their untroubled hearts as they face enormous difficulties — chronic illness, constant pain, unimaginable losses. I admire them, rest in them, count on their prayers and wish I could be more like them. Let us pray today to heed the words of Jesus, to live confidently with untroubled hearts, trusting in the life that follows every death. PBS

‘If you know me, then you will also know my Father.’ Jesus shows us what divine looks like. The Gospels are our viewfinder. Lord Jesus, guide our reading of your holy Gospel so that we may come to know you and your Father God, Creator of all. PBS

Fifth Week of Easter

Mon., May 15: Acts 14:5-18; John 14:21-26
St. Isidore
‘The Holy Spirit ...will teach you everything.’ Paul and Barnabas must flee Iconium to avoid being stoned by Gentiles and Jews alike, but in Lystra, they must firmly resist the efforts of the locals to worship them as gods. When we seriously embrace our vocation to witness to the risen Christ in all situations, we may find ourselves facing similar extremes, perhaps without the stones and sacrificial oxen. In today’s Gospel, Jesus reaffirms his promise that God — Father, Son and Spirit — will dwell within all who keep his word. We can claim and count on the guidance of the Spirit in the challenging, even bizarre, circumstances in which we are called upon to witness to the Lord. Lord, when I am alone and afraid, please remind me that you dwell within me always. MEW
Tues., May 16: Acts 14:19-28; John 14:27-31a
‘My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give …’
Paul and Barnabas must have often claimed this promise of Jesus during their adventures in Lystra. We too must remember that speaking, living and believing the Gospel message will almost never win us any popularity contests. In fact, if it does, we should check to be sure we have not compromised the message in the interest of gaining the world’s “peace.” If my words and deeds conform to the revealed will of God, I can rest secure in the knowledge that any hardships that come my way because of fidelity to the Gospel are contributing somehow to the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Dear Lord, teach us to seek only to do your will. MEW

‘A branch cannot bear fruit … unless it remains on the vine.’ How often do we Christians, when alienated by scandals or dissensions within the church, attempt to justify our alienation on the grounds that “things weren’t like this in the good old days”? Not so, as we see throughout history, even from apostolic times. The church is the living body of Christ; therefore it will grow and change under the impetus of the Spirit. Even an apostle of Paul’s stature, faced with a serious question, seeks to confer with Peter and the other apostles within the Spirit-filled community of the mother church in Jerusalem. Controversy need not be feared as long as we remain united as branches to the True Vine, who is Christ. Dear Lord, prepare our hearts for your Spirit, that we may live and grow. MEW

St. John I, pope, martyr
“We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.” No action of our own can save us, regardless of how diligently we obey the rules. The temptation to entitlement, to regard our reward as our due because of what we do for God, is as old as God’s people, possibly as old as humankind. We can’t bear the thought of not being in charge. Yet God’s completely free gift of eternal life does not imply undefined freedom to do as we please. (We’re still not in charge.) The Gospel reminds us that by obeying the commands of Jesus we remain organically united to the source of our spiritual life. Dear Lord, teach me to love as you love us, without exclusion or thought of personal gain. MEW

Fri., May 19: Acts 15:22-31; John 15:12-17
‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ Jesus loves us all, calls us his friends and — incredibly — demands that our love for one another be no less radical, total and life-consuming than his love for us. ‘Who me, Lord? You’re exaggerating, right?’ Nope — he means it. Furthermore, this seldom involves the call to a glorious (and quick!) martyrdom. Together with the vast majority of Jesus’ beloved followers, I must ‘lay down my life’ daily in the mundane, often irritating and tedious service of all those who are placed in my path. I see each one in Christ; I see Christ in each one. Dear Lord, teach me to be generous, to serve you as you deserve. MEW

St. Bernardine of Siena, priest
‘If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.’ Rarely do contemporary American Christians experience overt persecution. Yet we certainly find ourselves, followers of Jesus, at odds with the culture of materialism and consumerism in a world crying to heaven for justice and an equitable distribution of the world’s goods. Today I might reflect prayerfully on the complex problems of the world’s poor, and what practical, effective and countercultural steps I might take to simplify my lifestyle and to share our national glut of abundance with those in need, in spite of ever-present peer pressure. Dear Lord, grant us courage to bring our lives into more perfect conformity with the Gospel and to resist temptations to compromise our fidelity. MEW

Sixth Week of Easter

‘The hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God.’ The Johannine community, grieving over its expulsion from the synagogue, must have been horrified and mystified to realize the depth of the animosity it faced. We wonder still today: How can people kill in the name of God? Can the zeal that prompts horrific acts of violence be anything but a perversion of true religion? Can the fervor of those who favor extreme reactions be inspired by the Lord of Life? The world today is a place of great confusion, pain and despair. Let us work to uncover and defuse these difficulties; let us respond to the world’s pain with compassion and courage. For true religious zeal, tempered by humility and prayerful discernment, we pray. ECW

Tues., May 23: Acts 16:22-34; John 16:5-11
‘But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go.’ Shock, sorrow, anger, the beating up of one’s self — nobody likes the stuff of grief. But those who have been through enough of it know that it signals opportunity. On the other side of grief lies growth and renewal, perhaps even marvelous transformation. Jesus’ disciples cannot imagine life without him because they have not yet experienced the power of his presence through the Advocate. As we move through the cycles of life, inevitable changes and the grief that goes with them, let us seize the opportunity they present to open our hearts more fully to the Holy Spirit of Jesus. For comfort in our sorrow and strength in our weakness, we pray. ECW

‘But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.’ The more we know, the more we realize the vastness of our ignorance. But Jesus promises us that we will be guided into all truth and he calls us to the only way that can happen: openness to the Spirit. The gift of reason will take us far, but going the distance means learning to rely, more and more, on the mysterious power of love modeled for us.
in the Trinity. The Spirit of truth is the Spirit of intimate union with the Father and Jesus. Let us pray for the Spirit to come to us anew. For a deepening experience of union with our God ... for love that surpasses all understanding, we pray. ECW

The Ascension of the Lord
‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?’ Even while the apostles are still watching Jesus ascend into the clouds of heaven, angels appear to chide them for their dumbfounded idleness. The program has been laid out! Get with it already! Two millennia later, the call to proclaim Jesus as Lord to the ends of the earth is still urgent, perhaps more so than ever before. May today’s feast embolden us to live more fully and prophetically as those who have been baptized in Christ Jesus. Let us pray today especially for those whose faith inspires us, that their zeal for the Lord will always remain strong. For the newly baptized and all faithful witnesses to the risen Lord, we pray. ECW

Fri., May 26: Acts 18:9-18; John 16:20-23a
‘She no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world.’ Childbirth is often both exhausting and excruciating; intense muscular contractions, tissues and ligaments stretched to their limit, frightening pressure all merging to create profound pain. Indeed, a dramatic transformation comes with the safe delivery of the baby. Within seconds, the throes of misery give way to joy, wonder, immense relief and an overwhelming sense of blessedness. So too with crises of faith, we find that doubt, loneliness, fear and confusion converge to create immense pain. Let us cling to the hope Jesus offers us today, trusting that we will be born anew in his Spirit, believing that suffering will give way to joy. For courage and trust, we pray. ECW

‘Amen, amen, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you.’ We know that Jesus’ name is not some sort of password for getting favors from the Father. We hear it used as an expletive and see it emblazoned on bracelets and billboards, too; yet we know it is neither a curse nor a lucky talisman. The name of Jesus, spoken with love and longing, connects us with the person of Jesus. In this we realize the power of the holy name. Spoken with earnest love, the name itself is prayer. May we make better use of this simple prayer tool, the name above all names, as we approach Pentecost. For greater intimacy with Jesus and a new outpouring of his Holy Spirit, we pray. ECW

Seventh Week of Easter

(Memorial Day — U.S.)
‘In the world you will have trouble, but take courage. I have conquered the world.’ The cold reality is that in order to experience the glory of the Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus first had to endure the agony of the Passion. Jesus indicates that the disciples share in his Passion and all followers will suffer. While this can be unsettling, Jesus assures us that there’s no need to fear. Today is Memorial Day and we remember those who have fallen in war. During wartime it does indeed seem that goodness is gone from the world and evil has triumphed. It is at these times that we must cling to our faith that life comes from death and good from evil. We pray for all those in the path of war — for soldiers, for the innocents who are in harm’s way, for our enemies, and for an end to war. PR

‘I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do.’ What a fitting image for Jesus to offer the disciples who will continue his earthly ministry. John continually reminds us that our call is to believe in Jesus and to do the work of God. Jesus exalted the Father in accomplishing the mission before him. We, too, give glory to God by following this example. There is much work to do, and we may grow weary, yet we can take heart and find strength in knowing that our good works continually glorify the Lord. That our words and our actions may profess the greatness of God, we pray. PR

Visitation of the Virgin Mary to Elizabeth
‘Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.’ Mary’s acceptance of God’s will is a model for us all. It would be wonderful if everyone were blessed with such faith. Her profound and unwavering belief was a constant throughout her life. Yet, Mary was not without doubt and fear. The difference, of course, is that she did not allow her misgivings to confuse her faith. In fact, she and Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah asked similar questions when the angel Gabriel appeared to each of them. Mary was reassured and comforted while Zechariah was struck temporarily mute for his incredulity. But there is comfort in Zechariah’s story too. His prayers were answered, even though their initial fulfillment was met with disbelief. We don’t have to have Mary’s immense faith to realize that nothing is impossible with God. That our faith may be an inspiration to those who falter, we pray. PR

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A tourist on vacation in Scotland was walking along a pleasant and picturesque country road when, all of a sudden, a storm came up. Snow began to fall and the wind howled through the highlands. As he made his way to shelter, braced against the sudden cold, he noticed that several sheep were emerging from the hollows and from underneath the trees, going out to stand on the bare hillsides, facing the storm. A little while later, he met an old and weather-wizened shepherd and exclaimed to him, “Aren’t sheep the most foolish of all creatures? Here is a storm coming on strong and instead of remaining in the shelter of the hollows, there they are, courting the full fury of the bitter blast. If I were a sheep, I should remain in the hollow!”

To this, the shepherd replied, “Sir, if you were a sheep, you’d have more sense.” Then he explained that down in the hollows, snowdrifts came, and with them, death. Instinctively, the sheep knew that their only safety was on the open hills, facing the storm.

In the Gospel for this Sunday, the Gospel wherein Jesus declares the extent of his love for his sheep — “for these sheep I will give my life … I lay down my life freely and I have power to take it up again” — the praying assembly is invited to realize anew the strength that is ours by virtue of our being Jesus’ beloved sheep. Like the sheep that did not retreat to the hollows, Jesus risked his life for those he loves. His risk is an enabling one and an empowering act that summons his followers, his sheep, to a similar ethic of self-risk.

Today’s first reading from Luke illustrates that Peter and John accepted the challenge of risking their lives to prove they belonged to Jesus, their shepherd. Unwilling to “retreat to the hollows,” i.e., unwilling to keep silent or to remain hidden so as to be safe and secure, the apostles had openly healed a crippled man in Jesus’ name and boldly declared that they had done so through the power of Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead. Despite the firestorm their words and deeds provoked, Peter and John’s relationship with their risen shepherd enabled them to withstand the hostility of the authorities. They stood alone and in the open, braced against the dangers inherent in being Jesus’ disciples. Yet, they knew that they were not alone; they knew themselves to be graced with the power and presence of the risen Jesus, their good and loving shepherd.

Others throughout the history of the church have also relinquished the safety of the hollows of this world to risk their lives for the sake of the Gospel. Athanasius (296-373), as Bishop of Alexandria, was denounced five times by four Roman emperors and spent 17 of the 45 years he served as bishop in exile because he dared to speak out against the Arian heresy: Reformers of their respective communities, Bernard of Clairvaux (France, 1090-1153) and Teresa of Avila (Spain, 1515-1582) were courageous in bringing their fellow religious back to the way of life and holiness their founders had intended. Despite the dangers to themselves that their reforms provoked, both Bernard and Teresa dared to uphold the ways of Jesus in a world jaded by materialism and selfish concerns — as did so many others: Dominic, Francis of Assisi,
May 7, 2006

Easter
Fourth Sunday

Out of the Hollows

Isabella Baumfree, better known as Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), described the experience that compelled her to leave the relatively safe but often cruel hollows of her life as a slave in order to become an itinerant preacher and advocate for human rights and freedoms. She explained that God revealed himself to her with all the suddenness of a flash of lightning, showing her in the twinkling of an eye that he was all over and that there was no place where God was not. Inspired by that assurance, Baumfree began what would be a lifelong sojourn to speak the truth that God had given her, to whoever would hear it. That truth and her devotion to it yielded many consequences, both good and bad. She was beaten; she met Abraham Lincoln; her arm was dislocated by a racist streetcar conductor — and yet she would not be silenced. In her efforts, in her zeal, in her willingness to suffer for the sake of the truth, she closely resembled Peter and John, whose experience of Jesus-risen and whose openness to the gift of the Spirit empowered them to leave the hollows of the upper room and boldly to preach and heal in Jesus’ name.

As we pick up their continuing story today, as told by Luke in Acts, Peter is delivering the truth of God’s word to listeners who had previously rejected that word as well as Jesus, the cornerstone of God’s plan of salvation (Acts 4:11, quoting Ps 118:22). Psalm 118, placed here on Peter’s lips by Luke, was also quoted by the Lucan Jesus (20:17) and included in 1 Peter 2:7, where it is linked with other similar “stone” sayings.” I. Howard Marshall (Acts, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, UK: 1984) points out the proverbial quality of this citation: a stone thought to be useless by the builders (elders) was rejected, but as it happened, that very stone proved to be so necessary as to become the cornerstone of the entire edifice. In its original context, however, Psalm 118:22 referred to the position of Israel in the eyes of the nations or of the king as the leader of the nation. As illustrated here, the early believers in Jesus applied it to his messiahship, rejected by the elders or builders of the Israelite nation but vindicated and established by God as the means whereby salvation comes to sinners.

As those who know the rest of the story will recall, the leaders of the people were hard-pressed to know what to do with the likes of Peter and John. No one could dispute the fact that a great deed had been accomplished at their hands; a cripple could now walk. But if the authorities tried to clamp down on the leaders, reasons William H. Willimon (Acts, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1988), they knew there would be trouble among the people because, after all, the establishment must at least appear to exist for their benefit. The leaders took what Willimon says is always the first step by any authoritarian leadership; they ordered Peter and John to be quiet. By suppressing a truth they did not want to acknowledge, the authorities hoped to relegate to the hollows the message of Jesus and his disciples. But, one cannot contain what will not be contained, and the good news could not be quashed. Just as Peter and John refused to be silent in the service of this truth, so must we speak the message of salvation with our words, with our works, with our lives.

1 JOHN 3:1-2

While never alluding to the term, the author of this Johannine letter remains true to the fourth Gospel’s tradition of realized eschatology. “See,” he exclaims, “by virtue of the love that God has bestowed on us, we are (present tense) children of God. What we shall later be (future tense) has not yet come to light.” The ancient author was aware that the joys of the eschaton are both a present reality that will be fully realized and one that will be experienced in eternity, and he repeatedly invited...
respondent affirmed that it is only
to do what is right (3:8-10).

In verses that will follow this text,
and shall forever
is that those who are children
not of God but of the devil are, by
virtue of that belonging, unable to
do what is right (3:8-10).

In his book The Magnificent De-
feat (HarperCollins, San Francisco:
1966), Presbyterian pastor and au-
thor Frederick Buechner explained
faith as “the word that describes
the direction our feet start moving
when we find that we are love. Faith
is stepping out into the unknown
with nothing to guide us but a hand
just beyond our grasp.” Faith is
exactly what the Johannine Jesus
is describing in this Gospel when
he speaks of the sheep that will fol-
low the voice and reach out for the
hand of one who laid down his life
and took it up again for their sake.
Because the relationship between
shepherd and sheep is grounded in
their trust in his care, the sheep move
in whatever direction Jesus moves.
They will step out into the unknown
because their shepherd leads them
there and the shepherd has never led
them wrongly or left them alone or
unprotected.

If such is the tenor of the relation-
ship between Jesus and his disciples,
it follows logically that this same
tenor must characterize the relation-
ship between Jesus’ disciples and all
those who are entrusted to their care.
Like Jesus, those who care for others
in his name are to put the safety and
well-being of their charges ahead of
themselves and ahead of their own
safety and well-being. Rather than
further one’s own interests or pro-
mote one’s own agenda, the pastor
must be primarily concerned with
the interests of others.

To mirror Christ as the ideal
pastor or shepherd, explains Roland
Faley (Footprints on the Mountain,
Paulist Press, New York: 1994), is to
manifest availability and a true sense
of service, as scripture says, when it
is convenient or inconvenient. Good
pastors know their people, their
needs, their concerns, their joys,
sorrows. Good pastors take to
heart the triple directive with which
the risen Johannine Jesus would
challenge Peter: “Feed my lambs,
tend my sheep, feed my sheep” (John
21:15, 16, 17). Good pastors, as the late
John Paul II once noted, help others
to understand their own mystery
by becoming someone before whom
another is not afraid to reveal his
or her true self. But how does one
become such a pastor as is so needed
in our church and in our world today?
Only by daily choosing to follow the
lead of the One who knows his sheep
and is known by them. Only by being
willing to lay down one’s life as he
did, only by believing and working
forward the realization of one flock,
comprised of all this world’s differ-
ent and disparate peoples ... only by
being willing, as Jesus was, to leave
the safety of the hollows and stand
in the open for truth, for justice,
for love.

Sermon Starters

Dick Folger

Students at the parish school were learning about Jesus and his role
as the Good Shepherd. They were given a month to memorize Psalm 23,
which they would have to recite at a school assembly with the pastor
and all the parents attending. When the big night came, the first student
ervously stepped up to the microphone and began, “The Lord is my
shepherd.” Then his mind went as blank as a wall. The parents waited
while he struggled to remember the next line. Finally, in desperation,
he said, “And that’s all I need to know.”

At first there was silence, and then the applause began. The claps
came slowly at first, finally building to full, thunderous ovation. The
child was right; that is all we need to know.
Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA [John] “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep, and they know me.”

HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIAL APPROACH THE READINGS It’s another nice saying Jesus made, and I’m grateful that he died for us and opened the gates of heaven, but it would be nice if he could also make the midterm easy and fix things with my girlfriend/boyfriend.

STARTER Ask if anyone has ever met, talked with or even seen a real, live shepherd. (Probably not.)

“Contradict” by pointing out the Latin meaning of the word “pastor”—“shepherd.” (Hopefully, they will at least have seen their pastor.)

LEADING QUESTIONS * In what ways are we quite unlike literal sheep and in what ways are we (like it or not) very similar to them? * If setting permits the homily to be interactive] What images might Jesus use today (“I am the good ______”), and how would they illustrate his relationship with us?

DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE * Unlike real sheep, we have the freedom to deliberately wander into danger and refuse to be rescued. * Praying to be led, rather than always asking for support with what we have decided on our own. * Genuine appreciation for Jesus’ laying down his life for us (as distinct from, “Yes, I know; that was real nice of him.”) * We are the body of Christ today. Whom are you called to be a shepherd to, in a Jesus-like, non-domineering way? * We are called to lay down our lives for others in many small (and sometimes not so small) sacrifices. * Whose voice do we routinely listen to and follow?

MEDIA LINKS * In the book and the film version of C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Aslan, “the Good Lion,” lays down his life for “the Sons of Adam and the Daughters of Eve.”

QUOTATION “It is the part of a good shepherd to shear his sheep, not to skin them” (Latin proverb).

HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

Alive to God

The Father loved Jesus because Jesus laid down his life. Jesus understood that his death was not the worst moment of his life but the high point of his life. Therefore, he lived a certain way in order to die a certain way. That is why he always did the will of his Father.

I think the biggest handicap to Christian living is that we have reduced the Gospel to our way of life instead of adjusting our way of life to the Gospel. Instead of asking, “How should I live in light of the Gospel?” We ask, “How can I adjust the Gospel to the way I live?”

Let’s briefly compare our view of life and death with that of the first Christians. They lived short, rugged lives smattered with incurable disease and ordinary suffering that ended at age 35 for the average person. They coped by repeating: “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die.”

No wonder Jesus’ promise of eternal life was very attractive! Since they expected all this to happen soon, they even acted as if they were not married or did not own anything. Their basic attitude was: “I’m going to meet God—and by the way, I will die.”

That generation died without the return of Jesus, and succeeding generations got accustomed to disappointment. They still expected to see God after they died, but it had little effect on the way they lived. And that was mostly negative. They strangely reasoned that the more they suffered in this life the more pleasure they would have in heaven. Their wager was: “I’ll suffer now and see God later.”

Then people discovered that the resurrection was the focal point of our religion, not the crucifixion; that Christianity was a religion of life, not death. The Gospel taught us that everlasting life did not begin in heaven but here on earth—and now.

Advances in science and medicine prolonged life and decreased suffering. Some began to wonder why we should suffer at all, and even insisted that death should be drugged painless. The hope of heaven lingered, but the overarching attitude was: “I will die—and, by the way, I will see God.”

This life has become so pleasant and painless that another kind of life is less attractive. We can solve problems but we cannot handle mystery. Therefore, we reduce eternal life to a boring repetition of events and God to a doting grandfather. But if something is beyond our understanding or control, we push it to the edge of consciousness. Heaven and God become some vague possibilities that we will deal with when we have to. We think: “I’ll live, then I’ll die, then I’ll see God.”

What’s wrong with that thinking is that it is precisely backward. If God is the primary fact of reality, then God should be our first consideration. We should think: “I am living with God now, then I will see God face to face—and, by the way, I will die to do that.”

Death will always be ambiguous because it separates two kinds of life. We have experience of one but not the other; one is now, the other later; the other is better, but still just a promise. We ought to be torn apart by the dilemma, as Saint Paul was. He said he would rather die and be with God, but was willing to live longer to serve God on earth.

If God were a real factor in our life, we would enjoy this life in God’s invisible presence while being anxious to see him face to face. Death loses its sting. We should think: “I am on my way to see God. Death is just a speed bump.”
A Challenging Image of Church

In his series of written lectures against heresies (1568-1593) and in reaction to the protesting reformers, Robert Bellarmine defined “the one and true church” as “the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff.” This definition, as Avery Dulles (Models of the Church, Doubleday, New York: 1987) has pointed out, is comprised of three elements: profession of the true faith, communion in the sacraments and submission to legitimate pastors. By applying these criteria, Bellarmine was able to effectively exclude all those whom he thought did not belong to the true church. The first criterion rules out pagans, Muslims, Jews, heretics and apostates; the second rules out catechumens and the excommunicated, while the third rules out schismatics. Thus, only Roman Catholics remain.

Unfortunately this definition of the church remained generally in use until the Holy Spirit began to blow through the opened windows of the Second Vatican Council and the church returned to its earliest roots to re-identify itself as “all the people of God.” In his opening address at the second session of the council, Pope Paul VI declared the church to be “a mystery, a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.” This exploration and search for its true identity prompted the church to return to those revealing images or models offered in the Christian scriptures which are, as Dulles has noted, “extremely luxuriant” in their ecclesiological imagery.

The people of Israel regarded the vine and its branches as an apt symbol of themselves and their relationship with God, which is evidenced quite clearly in the Jewish scriptures (Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15, 19:10; Hos 10:1; Ps 80:8). During the period of the Maccabees, the vine was featured on Israel’s coins. One of the glories of the temple, explains William Barclay (“The Gospel of John,” The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1975), was a great golden vine upon the front of the Holy Place. Many an Israelite counted it as an honor to donate the gold that would mold a new bunch of grapes or even one new grape to that vine.

Fully aware of its traditional meaning and significance for his contemporaries, the Johannine Jesus called himself the true vine and invited his followers to find their life, their true selves, their relationship to God and to one another as well as their growth and fruitfulness in him. But however apt a symbol the vine proved to be, it was and is certainly not without its challenges. Remaining one with and attached to the true vine who is Jesus requires a central focus, an all-inclusive union of mind and heart and regular care, sometimes of a radical nature.
Jesus described this radical care in terms of pruning and being trimmed clean. Pruned vines do not look beautiful; in fact they look almost dormant or even dead. As difficult as it seems, however, the severity of the pruning produces the finest-quality and most abundant fruit at harvest time. Henri Nouwen (Jesus, A Gospel, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 2001) once suggested that Jesus’ words about pruning in today’s Gospel may open a new perspective on growth and suffering and discipleship for us. It helps, said Nouwen, to think about painful rejections, moments of loneliness, feelings of inner darkness and despair and the lack of support and human affection as God’s pruning.

When disciples of Jesus welcome the pruning hand of God, then they can enjoy the intimacy and connectedness of communion. Then they draw their sustenance and strengthen from no other vine than Jesus; then they will also become accepting of those other branches that shall be grafted into the vine in order to enjoy the same life, the same union, the same possibilities for fruitfulness. Then the Word of Jesus will find its home in us (John 15:7) and we shall be the true vine, the one, universal and true people of God whose very existence and authenticity of witness constitutes fitting praise and glory for God.

ACTS 9:26-31

The Acts of the Apostles, one of the earliest accounts of the church’s birth, growth and development, clearly illustrates that the church is a vine that can support a variety of different branches grafted upon it so as to produce a diversity of fruits. Home to Peter and Andrew, James and John, the vine of the church could also support Saul, who became Paul with the help and encouragement of one who lived true to his name — Barnabas (in Hebrew, “Son of Encouragement”). Described by Luke in Acts (11:24) as a “good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith,” Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus (4:36-37), a leader in the early church, and was the one who introduced Saul/Paul to the apostles and reported to them the details of his conversion. The apostles and others in Jerusalem were fearful and distrustful of the one who not long before had persecuted the followers of Jesus, and they were initially reluctant to welcome Saul. Yet they did so based upon the testimony and recommendation of Barnabas.

Barnabas, as William Barclay (“The Acts of the Apostles,” The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1976) has explained, invites readers of Acts to follow his lead in two things. He insisted on believing the best of others despite the suspicions of others. Barnabas was willing to believe that Saul could change. For that reason, Barnabas did not hold Saul’s past against him but chose to believe that through God’s grace even a persecutor could evolve into a preacher and witness to the good news of salvation.

Barnabas’ support enabled Saul to move freely about Jerusalem, but even that support could not protect Saul from the consequences of his actions. Because of his complicity in the death of the Hellenist Christian Stephen, Saul in his new preaching role provoked the anger of other Greek-speaking Jewish converts, who tried to kill him. This necessitated Saul’s speedy departure. Smuggled out of Jerusalem to Cæsarea by the brothers, eventually he made it home to his native Tarsus.

If one compares this Lucan account of Paul’s initial efforts for the church to Paul’s own version (Gal 1:18ff), one will read two rather different recollections of the same period in the great apostle’s life. Paul’s account emphasizes his independence of the Jerusalem apostles and his desire to cooperate as their colleague in the service of the Gospel. Luke, however, was intent upon portraying every aspect of the apostolic endeavor as taking place under the auspices of the Jerusalem community and the Twelve, including all of Paul’s efforts. An appreciation of the Lucan intent will help the reader to resolve the seeming conflicts between Paul’s account and that of Luke. The church welcomes and is home to a host of different people with their varying ideas, and knowing this fact helps believers to attest to the power of grace and the Spirit of God to hold all together in a cohesive and cooperative community — one vine with many branches.

1 JOHN 3:18-21

Although many scholars contend that this passage is difficult to summarize, it seems (to this writer) that the Johannine author has done precisely that in his very first sentence: “Let us love in deed and truth and not merely talk about it.” Make love real, live your love for one another.

C.H. Dodd (The Johannine Epistles, Hodder & Stoughton, London: 1946) has suggested that this passage is made difficult by the fact that the ancient author seems to have thrown together several different points that he has not yet had time to develop. Nevertheless, Dodd has identified six of these: 1) only through our love for one another are we assured of the authenticity of our Christianity; 2)
if we continue to remain uncertain in this regard, we should remember to trust that God knows us better than we know ourselves; 3) if our conscience is clear; we are thereby free to live a life of prayer, obedient in all things to God’s commandments; 4) God expects us to believe in Jesus Christ and to translate that belief into love for one another; 5) the truest external “test” of our union with God (mutual indwelling or remaining in God and God in us) is our obedience to the commandments of God; 6) the truest internal “test” of our union with God is the gift of the Spirit.

Given these six points and the clarity with which each is set forth, readers of this letter cannot help but be impressed by the ancient author’s success “in holding together things which are often separated from one another in our thinking. Faith and works, belief and obedience, the prayer of union with God and the love of the brethren. It is not a matter of either/or, but both/and” (Reginald Fuller, Worship, 1971-1974).

This holding together of faith and works, belief and obedience, etc. was of particular concern for the Johannine community, whose unity was being threatened by those who wished to secede from its membership. These secessionists, as Raymond E. Brown (The Epistles of John, Doubleday, New York: 1982) has explained, disputed certain aspects of the tradition of the fourth Gospel in that they negated the importance of Jesus; did not acknowledge that Christ had come in the flesh and in blood; diminished the Gospel’s emphasis on moral behavior; regarded themselves free from sin and free of any obligation to love the brethren. Eventually, they parted ways with the Johannine community, but not before the author of 1 John had made every possible effort to convince them otherwise. In this particular passage, his argument is not simply a plea for the secessionists to practice sincerity rather than hypocrisy. As Brown has noted, they were not hypocrites who preached one course of procedure and followed another; rather, the secessionists taught that their actions or deeds were not salvifically important since they already possessed eternal life through faith in Christ. This is the position the author was attacking when he insisted that love must necessarily manifest itself in deeds. From this obligation, no one is or ever shall be exempt, not in this world or the next.

**JOHN 15:1-8**

Just before this “I AM” declaration concerning the identity of Jesus as the vine and the nature of the relationship of his own to him as branches that draw life from the one true vine, the Johannine Jesus had declared “Get up, let us go” (14:31). This statement evokes all manner of suggestions from commentators about literary relocation and context; however, in the narrative itself, Jesus’ words are a call to get moving. As Charles Cousar (Texts For Preaching, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky: 1993) has explained, there, within the context of his last discourse, the Johannine Jesus indicates that his message concerning the mutual indwelling of himself and his own is not intended for a community at rest, doing business as usual. Rather, his words are spoken to a community engaged in service, a community whose distinctiveness from the world will surely evoke the world’s distrust and hatred (15:18-19). In any other context except that of mission, insists Cousar, the wonderful, powerful imagery of the vine and branches loses its relevance.

As an image of the relationship between Christ and the believer, the vine and branches also affirm the notion of corporateness. “Live in me as I live in you” (v. 4), says the Johannine Jesus, who then goes on to explain that any possible fruitfulness the branches may enjoy comes from him. “No more than a branch can bear fruit of itself, apart from the vine, can you bear fruit apart from me” (v. 4). This statement, points out Cousar, is in the first place directed to the church, whose communal life and ministries of teaching, preaching, healing and social justice are no more than branches to be tossed into the fire, apart from the indwelling Christ.

But how does the branch live a life attached firmly to the vine, and how do believers live in Christ and allow Christ to live in them? Jesus answers this by bidding his own to let his words stay a part of them. These words constitute a daily challenge to love, to rejoice, to abide and, when necessary, to submit to the pruning that is inherent in discipleship. Just as pruning bushes and trees often results in what appears to be a near-death experience, one that leaves the pruned plant looking bereft of any breath of life, so also those life experiences that knock us to our knees and leave us gasping for breath are the very experiences through which God will make us more fruitful.

There is also challenge in our belonging to Christ. Do we dare remain in him and he in us? Shall we live in him and he in us? If so, there shall be pruning, but with the pruning shall come fruit — fruit that will last.

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**Sermon Starters**

*Dick Folger*

Australian gardening guru Sabrina Hahn recommends listening to Tchaikovsky when pruning grapevines: “There are two main methods of pruning — cane and spur, and both require you to remove the majority of growth, so it’s in with the sleeves rolled up and the 1812 Overture playing in the background!”

At first, such vigorous cutting may seem excessive, but this is necessary for a bountiful harvest. But it’s not just randomly whacking away. There is an almost surgical science about where and how to cut. That is the real art of pruning that first must be patiently learned and then continually practiced.
Completing the Circle of Love

Every culture has to have some version of “do unto others as you want done to you.” Add love to this and it becomes “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The complication in the commandment is the condition “as yourself.” We are to love them as we love ourselves. Many books have been written to explain how this is possible. I have read lots of them and I think they miss the point. Because I think we do not love ourselves in the usual meaning of the word “love.” I rather think that we take care of our self, we defend our self, we sustain our self, we look out for our self. And we can take care of others, sustain others, preserve others — that is, love others, in the same way and degree that we do ourselves. That is a wonderful thing in itself, since without it there would be chaos instead of culture. But it is only human; even pagans do this.

The Christian difference in loving our neighbor goes back to God. The Father loves the Son Jesus, who in turn loves us with God’s love and gives us God’s Spirit to enable us to love not only God but fellow humans with that same God’s love. Our merely human love of our neighbor is transformed into divine love of neighbor. And most amazing of all, God counts our love of neighbor as loving God.

Our sacred scripture traces the pattern of love this way. Jesus said: “As the Father loves me, so I love you. Now you love one another as I love you.” The circle of love is complete.

Almost. It’s a nice theory, but how do we know if it really works? It’s easy to tell if we love our neighbor. Love is as love does. But how do we know if we really love God? What can we give God who has everything; what can we do for God who needs nothing? Scripture itself asks: “How can you love God whom you cannot see if you don’t love your neighbor whom you do see?”

The question answers itself in reverse: If you love the neighbor you do see then you love the God you cannot see. But we don’t have to figure it out. Jesus put it in lowly terms: “If you give a cup of water to anyone, you give it to me.” Jesus did not say, “I count it as done to me.” He said, “It is done to me,” so intimate is the bond of love among Jesus, you and everyone else.

It gets better. As John said, “It is not that we love God but that God loves us.” But let’s put the whole thing in context. God is love. God does not do love, God is love. God also creates and judges, but God is not judge and creator. No, God is love, so everything God does is loving. God creates and judges lovingly, as an expression of love.

And a short history of loves goes like this. God lovingly created a world and people with the capacity to be en-loved. Jesus activated that love and tried to include everyone. It was called the Kingdom. Some people refused the offer of love, so the Kingdom was deferred. But not disbanded. God still insists that his love will eventually conquer the whole world and every human.

And it will. Because it is the essence of God to love. And it is also our nature to love. Once we conquer the hatred of others and the loathing of self that strangle the spontaneous flow of love.

— and starting — black players. (The unheralded team pulled off the biggest upset in NCAA history.)
One evening, the renowned Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) was spending some time relaxing with a group of his closest friends. In the course of their conversation, Barth—whose insights concerning the Word of God continue to exert significant and far-reaching influence on believers in Jesus—was asked by one of those present: “What is the most profound thought that ever entered your mind?”

After a few moments of reflection, Barth replied, “The most profound thought I have ever known is the simple truth: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” This simple truth lies at the heart of every scripture text and is emphatically affirmed in our proclamation this Sunday.

Continuing to appeal to the God-given and graced goodness of his readers, the Johannine author of today’s second reading (1 John) reminds us once again that God’s love has been revealed in our midst through the sending of Jesus. Through his offering, sins are forgiven and God’s life and love are experienced. In the same vein of thought, the Johannine Jesus, in today’s Gospel, will describe the depth and extent of God’s love. God’s is a formative love that creates friends of those loved and empowers the beloved to fruitfulness. God’s love enables someone to lay down his life for the beloved.

Today’s first reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows that the disciples of Jesus had, in the wake of his death and resurrection, begun to love others with such a love. Loved by God, loved by Jesus, the disciples learned to love a non-Jew like Cornelius, who was also a Roman centurion and as such one of the key figures of the enemy occupying forces. Nevertheless, the love that was inherent in being a follower of Jesus made the disciples loving and Cornelius lovable. This outgoing, self-giving love that Jesus inspired in his own was once described by Augustine, bishop of Hippo, in this way: “It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has the eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of others. This is what love looks like.”

But, as is well known, Augustine did not learn to express this quality of caring Christian love until later in his life. Only after turning to God repentant and in search of forgiveness did Augustine discover the love that enabled his conversion and his reconciliation with God as well as his future service to the church. In his Confessions, he celebrates that love while encouraging us, his readers and fellow sinners, to continue in our quest for that experience:

“Late have I loved you, O beauty, so ancient and so new; late have I loved you. For behold, you were within me and I outside; and I sought you outside and in my ugliness fell upon those lovely things you have made. You were with me and I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all. You called and you cried to me and broke in upon my deafness; you sent forth your beam and shone upon me and chased away my
blindness; you breathed fragrance upon me and I drew in my breath and now I pant for you. I tasted you and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me and now I burn for your peace.”

Whether we discover the love of God for us and our subsequent gift for loving God and others early in life or late; whether we surrender immediately to that love and allow its power to direct our every word and work, or whether we flee from God as from a hound who relentlessly tracks our every step and measures our every pace — God’s inexorable love never leaves us unloved or unlovable. Recall the 19th-century poet Francis Thompson’s experience of trying to flee his unfeeleable Lover:

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from Him, and under running laughter: Up vistaed hopes I sped; and shot, precipitated, adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, from those strong feet that followed, followed after: ... (For, though I knew His love Who followèd, yet I was sore adread lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.) ... Still with un hurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instance, came on the following Feet, and a Voice above their beat — ‘Naught shelters thee who wilt not shelter Me’” (from “The Hound of Heaven,” Francis Thompson, 1859-1907).

Whether we prefer the words of Augustine, or whether we remain with the words of Luke (Acts) or those of the Johannine writers (1 John, John), we can all affirm what the great Karl Barth stated with such simplicity: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

**ACTS 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48**

“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will discover fire.” Teilhard de Chardin wrote these words in Beijing in 1934. Today, as the first reading from Acts is proclaimed, the praying assembly can see these words come alive in the actions of Peter welcoming and loving Cornelius as his brother in Christ. Today, the praying assembly is also challenged to consider whether these words continue to come to life in our world through our love for all others in Christ Jesus.

The conversion story of Cornelius represents a landmark event, for not only does it portray a Roman soldier’s welcome into the church and the official beginning of the gentile mission, it also teaches us that conversions or stories about vocation are, as William H. Willimon (Acts, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1988) has explained, stories about the gifts of God. God is the chief protagonist in all Lucan conversion accounts, and even the smallest details are attributed to the workings of God. Cornelius’ conversion was not the result of persuasive preaching; in fact, and as the story reflects, the church (Peter in this instance) had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the plan of God. Recruitment efforts, strategic and calculated planning by the community aimed at church growth — these are nowhere to found. Conversion comes to Cornelius and all his household as a surprising and unexpected act of God’s grace. Once Peter realized this, he acquiesced to a plan, a mind, a will and a love that was infinitely more inclusive, more thoughtful, more powerful and more generous than his own. From then on, he tried valiantly not to get in the way of God’s plan or God’s saving gift, which were clearly intended to include and be enjoyed by all people.

Peter’s words to Cornelius reflect the fact that Cornelius was not the only one who was enjoying God’s gift of conversion. “I begin to see that God shows no partiality.” These words (v. 34) disclose the enormity of God’s gift to Peter. He had indeed begun to see others as God sees them and to welcome them as God would welcome them, freely and fully. Peter’s conversion challenges us to discover similar possibilities for growth and responsiveness to God’s will and God’s ways in ourselves.

**1 JOHN 4:7-10**

How do human beings, asks Beverly Gaventa (Texts For Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1993), learn the nature of love? How do men and women, boys and girls learn to love? Many may answer these questions in psychological terms, citing the family as the primary setting in which love is (ideally) initially experienced, modeled, nurtured. Some may point to the larger society as the venue in which attitudes toward love are shaped and reshaped. But if we pose these same questions to the author of 1 John, we find an answer that is neither psychological nor sociological but theological, and that answer is quite clear and unequivocal. Love is of God, from God and because of God. Love is God.

(v. 8), is probably the greatest single statement about God in the entire Bible. It is also amazing how many questions this one simple statement answers. “God is love” explains: 1) creation as an expression of God’s love; 2) human free will to love or not to love; Love is the free response of the heart. In order to love truly and freely, humankind must be endowed by God with free will; 3) providence whereby God continually cares for humankind and all the created universe; 4) redemption and the fact that God’s justice is meted out with mercy and love for sinners; 5) eternal life as the gift of unending love.

In addition to answering these essential questions, this text, as Barclay goes on to explain, also affirms certain truths about Jesus: that Jesus is: 1) the bringer of life. Jesus offers human beings a goal for which to live, the strength by which to live and the peace in which to enjoy life; 2) the restorer of our relationship with God. By being the offering for our sins, Jesus has reconciled sinners with God; 3) savior of the world in whom alone there is salvation; 4) Son of God sent into the world to enable sinners to become beloved sons and daughters of God.

So many questions are answered in Jesus; so many truths are affirmed in him and through him. When he put these answers and affirmations before his readers, the author of 1 John hoped, no doubt, that a renewed awareness of God’s love for them might inspire them not only to a renewed love for God but also for one another. Recall that his was a community rocked by a schism that threatened its very existence. If he could draw the various factions together once again and unite them in God’s love and their love for God, perhaps they might rediscover the grace that would enable them to love one another once again. That same grace continues to be available to the church today to help us to remain one in God, one in Christ, one with each other in love.

JOHN 15:9-17

Throughout the course of the fourth Gospel, the Johannine Jesus has called his followers by many names. First he called them disciples and invited them to come to him, to see where he lived and to stay with him (John 1:35-40). Then he called them his beloved sheep for whom he would lay down his life (John 10). Last week, Jesus called his own branches growing upon the one true vine; i.e., himself. He also spoke of pruning and trimming them clean so as to make them fruitful branches. In today’s Gospel, the name by which Jesus chooses to call his own is a very intimate one. “I call you friends,” says Jesus. “I no longer speak of you as slaves … instead, I call you friends” (v. 15).

The word “friend” is a term that does not always convey its true meaning in our society, wherein such words are often cheapened by abuse and overuse. It was once very aptly defined by another Jesus (ben Sira) in the second century BCE: “A faithful friend is a sure shelter; those who find one find a treasure. A faithful friend is beyond price, no sum can balance their worth. A faithful friend is a life-saving remedy, such as those who fear God find. Those who fear God behave accordingly and their friends will be like themselves” (Sirach 6:14-17).

In applying this special name to his own, Jesus was inviting them to enter into a relationship of intimacy and reciprocity. But, asks Charles Cousar (Texts For Preaching, Westminster-John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky: 1993), what does it mean to be a friend of the Johannine Jesus? First we are assured that those whom Jesus calls “friend” are loved to the extent that Jesus will lay down his life for them. Therefore the friendship that disciples enjoy is rooted in the very sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Second, those befriended by Jesus are chosen by him (v. 16), and with that choosing comes the grace to respond to him by keeping his commandments (vv. 12, 17) and loving as he loves. Friends of Jesus are also “in the know” because it is to his friends that Jesus makes known all that he has heard from the Father (v. 15). Elsewhere in the Gospel, it would become clear to Jesus’ friends that their relationship with him would include challenges as well as blessings. Like Jesus, who came to serve, so also would his friends be called to serve all others. Like-Jesus, for whom suffering would be the path to life and glory, so the friends of Jesus would learn that suffering would be an inherent aspect of their belonging to him. Yet through all the service and the suffering, Jesus also promised that his friends would bear enduring fruit and that they would know the same joy that he himself had known, and that they (we) would know that joy completely. Something of that joy is hinted at in the words of poet Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote: “So long as we love, we serve; so long as we are loved by others, I would almost say that we are indispensable; and no man is useless while he has a friend.” Our Friend is Jesus. Can there be any greater joy?

Sermon Starters

Dick Folger

1967 was the “Summer of Love” and the beginning of the peace movement. The flower children came to San Francisco by the tens of thousands, making the v-shaped peace sign and wearing garlands in their hair. They wanted love, not war. But that brief summer is now over and the world is back to business. The yoke of Jesus’ command to love one another still chafes at our necks. The killing continues in Iraq while we watch the news from our easy chairs. The face of global poverty stares back at us. We resent the influx of other peoples invading our space and demanding their share of our wealth. Today’s Gospel says to us, “Love one another.”
**Preaching to Youth**

*Jim Auer*

**KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA**

[1 John] “...not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins.”

[John] “It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit.” Internalizing and trying truly to feel the reality of being chosen by our immensely loving God and then responding as God asks.

**BACKGROUND NOTE**

Even by their early teens, youth have heard countless messages about love in every medium and venue, including what might be called standard “God loves you” homilies, and may have acquired a certain immunization to that message. Be willing to be creative and fervent in order to break through that partial immunity.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS**

See above. Also: In spite of catechetical endeavors to the contrary, the notion — or at least the vague underlying feeling — that we need to “be good and act right” in order to gain God's love is still widespread.

**STARTER**

Begin with a personal reminiscence of a time when you were thrilled to have been chosen — for a role in a play, on a team or in a group; by someone who asked you to a prom or dance; by a boss for a promotion. (If you were an “unlikely” choice, all the better.) Invite each of the assembly to reminisce in a similar manner. Use as a springboard into the theme.

**LEADING QUESTIONS**

* Why are you thinking something and deeply feeling something often two very different experiences? *Why is it difficult to feel personally chosen by God?*

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE**

Taking God at God’s word — truly believing scripture as a personal reality (as distinct from “it’s a nice saying”). * How we might feel and act if we completely internalized the words of today’s readings — the “fruit” Jesus spoke of that we might bear. * Things that stand in the way of this internalizing — guilt, spiritual failures, perceived mediocrity and a host of voices that seem to talk louder than God.

**MEDIA LINK**

On television’s “Everwood,” Hannah found it extremely difficult to believe that “stud” Bright really was choosing her and resisted the idea for some time.

**QUOTATION**

“It’s not what you are that holds you back, it’s what you think you’re not” (Dr. Denis Waitley).

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**HOMILY**

*Fr. James Smith*

**Love Is Also A Verb**

To say that “God is love” is an amazing statement. It is almost incomprehensible, since it contains the two deepest profundities of life: the human mystery of love and the super-human mystery of God. Therefore to say that “God is love” means at least two things.

First, love is in a sense a definition of God, an analysis of God, a description of God. It means that God is essentially love, that love is a necessary part of divinity. It means that love is so central to the being of God that love is another name for God.

But love is not just a noun, the nature of God; it is also a verb, an action of God. If God necessarily loves by his nature, God also freely loves by choice. Of course, it is the nature of a creator to be involved with all of his creatures, to sustain them in existence, to care about them, to guide them to their goal. Otherwise, why create at all?

If love is a choice, even with God, then love has to be chosen over and over; therefore, God’s love has a history. And if love requires a loving response to be personal, God’s love depends on human response. Sacred scripture is the story of that tumultuous love.

God always loved people in general, but one day God chose to love one particular person, Abraham, with a personal disclosure of God’s divinity. Abraham believed that God loved him personally, and thus became the parent of all future lovers.

God always loved all of his people, but God freely chose to love a particular person as his own family on earth. The Jews believed that God loved them personally and thus furthered the divine-human love affair through the centuries.

Through their loving relationship with God, the Jews came to believe that God would reveal ever more of himself, that God would someday come so close to earth that earth would be a kind of heaven, that God himself would establish some kind of divine rule.

Then came Jesus, the perfect lover of God, the perfect expression of God’s love for humans. The Jews expected God to send a divine governor to rule, but God sent his own Son instead.

And therein lies the paradox of love. If God is love both by nature and by choice, then we can respond to that love in two different ways. We can love God as a kind, merciful, generous Master by obeying his commands as faithful servants. Or, we can believe that God chooses to love us personally, and so we can choose to love God as our Father.

That is a tremendous decision, fraught with danger. What are the intentions of Absolute Power! It is only by the example of Jesus that we dare to presume that the Lord of heaven and earth would love us. Only by God’s Holy Spirit are we able to believe that the divine Lover loves us not only as creatures but as persons, loves us not only as a community but one at a time, not only wants us to be happy but casts his own happiness in with ours.

It takes great faith to believe this, great love to take such a risk. But that is exactly the way God believes in us and takes a risk with us.
Whether your congregation is celebrating today the feast of Ascension or the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the essential message is the same: It is the inherent responsibility of the disciples of Jesus to continue his mission. This responsibility is enunciated by the Marcan Jesus, who tells his own, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation” (Gospel, Ascension). Further affirmation of the church’s mission is included in the Johannine Jesus’ high priestly prayer, “As you, Father, have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Gospel, Seventh Sunday of Easter). Further affirmation of the church’s mission is reflected in the question of the two messengers dressed in white on the mount of Jesus’ ascension (Acts): “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up at the skies?” Rather than stand there searching the heavens for the first glimpse of the returning Jesus, the disciples went down the mountain and into the fray of the human experience. The readings for this Sunday attest to the fact that the disciples of Jesus were not sent into the whole world with the good news of salvation without the support and “equipment” necessary to accomplish their purpose. The Johannine Jesus prayed that his disciples be protected and guarded from evil while at the same time being consecrated in truth. The ascending Jesus promised the power of the Holy Spirit to guide and empower his own for mission. Anglican pastor and missionary John R.W. Stott reminds us that “before Christ sent the church into the world, he sent the Spirit into the church. The same order must continue to be observed today.”

From the author of Ephesians (Acts, Ascension), disciples are given the added assurance that each has been endowed by God with wisdom and insight, hope and strength. Over and above these gifts, insists the Johannine epistolary writer (Seventh Sunday of Easter), disciples are continually renewed and strengthened by the very presence of God dwelling within us: “God dwells in us and God’s love is brought to perfection in us ... when anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him and he in God.”

To maintain the integrity of the Twelve, as Luke tells us in Acts (Seventh Sunday of Easter), the community nominated two of their company to take the place of Judas. Then they prayed to God to indicate which of the two should join their ranks. Slowly but surely and always under the auspices of the Holy Spirit, the numbers of the followers of Jesus grew to include people of every race, of both genders, of all ages, of every culture and socioeconomic background. Maintaining such unity in diversity continues to challenge the disciples of Jesus. Shall we welcome all others as Jesus did, or shall we pick and choose and thereby render our belief in the universality of the church a lie?

For Jesus’ first disciples, the scope of their missionary efforts was well delineated: ‘They were instructed to be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, into Samaria and then onward to the ends of the whole world (first reading, Gospel, Ascension). Just as the earliest
disciples were itinerant preachers and teachers of the good news, so have others through the centuries followed this lead, leaving behind their home and homelands to carry the message to faraway places. The Alsatian native Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), who earned four doctorates (in philosophy, theology, medicine and music) as well as the 1953 Nobel Peace Prize, once wrote of his own experience: “I gave up my position of professor in the University of Strasbourg, my literary work and my organ playing in order to be a medical doctor in Equatorial Africa. I had read about the physical miseries of the natives … from missionaries and the more I thought about it the stranger it seemed to be that we … trouble ourselves so little about the great humanitarian task which offers itself to us in far off lands.” Schweitzer did more than “trouble himself”; he succeeded in funding and building a hospital at Lambaréné, western Gabon, where he worked for 40 years, ministering and spreading the Good News in word and deed.

For most of us, however, the venue of our missionary efforts will probably be closer to home but no less vital. If each of us were to bring the energies, dedication and perseverance of Jesus, Peter, Paul, John, Luke or Albert Schweitzer to bear upon every aspect of our lives and to every venue into which life leads us, how much more compelling might the Good News of Jesus Christ become?

ACTS 1:1-11


By the time these works were written, almost six decades had passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the eager expectation of his return was becoming tempered by the delay. Therefore, the disciples of Jesus needed instructions so as to be able to wait and watch for his second coming while getting on with the business of the Gospel. Their service to the Good News in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth would constitute the proper preparedness for welcoming the returning Christ. For us who continue to watch and wait, the agenda remains the same.

ACTS 1:15-17, 20-26

In this excerpted text about the leadership and chain of authority in the early church, it is understandable that the popular tradition about the death of Judas (vv. 18-19) has been omitted. However, the verses immediately preceding this pericope, had they been included, offer a truer picture of the early community of believers. In verses 13-14, the 11 remaining disciples are mentioned by name as being in the upper room. Also present with them were women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. All these, says Luke, devoted themselves with one accord to prayer. This was the atmosphere in which the decision to replace Judas was made — by the whole community of Jesus’ first followers, women and men. This inclusion of women in the roster of the community, explains William H. Willimon (Acts, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1988), would not have been missed by an early Gospel reader, who would recognize it as an indication that the emerging community was a group that broke barriers.

Peter’s speech, also intended to break barriers, is comprised of two parts. Each is set off by a favorite Lucan term, dei (“it is necessary,” vv. 16, 21), in order to illustrate that everything that occurs does so in accord with God’s plan and as a fulfillment of scripture. Even the betrayal of Judas and his replacement by Matthias are known to God. Therefore, the followers of Jesus can continue to find serenity in the fact that all the church’s struggles, its sufferings, its failures as well as its achievements all unfold under the watchful eye of a loving and merciful God who, through the power of the Spirit, remains present to the church in all its wonder and woundedness.

1 JOHN 4:11-16

If ever a follower of Jesus needed motivation, she could discover it in this text from the Johannine letters. God’s love for us and ours for God inspires — no, compels — us to love one another, and in that loving to testify to the good news of salvation. Such love of others becomes possible because in those who love God truly and faithfully, God abides. Can there be any greater mystery? Does not the early Christian writer draw us into the mystery of God’s love and cause a sense of profound wonder to arise in us? This writer believes that was precisely his purpose.

Because love is of God and because Jesus incarnate, crucified and risen is the most eloquent expression of the love of God (John 3:16), those who love God must also believe in God’s gift of love, Jesus. Unfortunately, the secessionist Christians within the Johannine school denied the necessity of Jesus’ saving mission
and presumed a relationship with God aside from Jesus’ mediation. Impossible, taught their caring correspondent. Faith in God meant faith in Jesus, and that faith was to be translated into love of others.

**EPH 1:17-23**

In this beautiful text, the author of Ephesians has also offered his ecclesiological insight: the church is the body of Christ. Christ is the head; we are the members of the body. As Ralph P. Martin (Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1991) has pointed out, this designation of the church goes back to 1 Cor 12:12-26 and Rom 12:4-5; however, contemporary scholars recognize a new dimension of meaning in Ephesians. Paul’s teaching was mainly expressed in functional terms (as in the church as a body of many members with each carrying out the task that has been assigned it by Christ), and this same idea is expressed in Eph 4:7, 16, but there is also present in Ephesians a new idea. In verse 23, the ancient writer depicts the church as complementing Christ, its head, and as seeming to enjoy a status and a relationship that some scholars call ontological. This does not imply that Christ and the church are identical. Indeed, Christ as head remains in authority over all church members. But Christ and the church are, insists the Ephesians author, inseparable. Even though he is risen and has ascended to God’s right hand, Christ’s fullness remains in the church (v. 23). Therefore, believers may go about their ministries and missions in full confidence, knowing that they are the very body of Christ, the body of him whose glorification derives from the very power of God.

**MARK 16:15-20**

This text is part of the so-called “longer ending” of Mark (16:9-20) that is considered canonical despite the fact that it was probably composed and appended to the Gospel in the second Christian century. This unit, explains Lamar Williamson (Mark, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1983), should be regarded as secondary to and dependent upon the other Gospels and Acts due to its later date. Also to be noted is the fact that this text expresses an understanding of signs and miracles that stand in a certain tension with the rest of the Marcan Gospel, e.g., mention of snakes and poisons; use of signs to illustrate or prove the truth of the message.

Belief in the Good News, insists the risen Jesus, will lead to baptism and to salvation, whereas unbelievers will find themselves condemned. Having just upbraided his own for their lack of belief (v. 14), Jesus nevertheless in his next breath commissioned the same disciples to “go and proclaim the good news” (v. 15). The deepest wonder of this text, explains Williamson (op. cit.), is not the list of wondrous signs but that the Lord entrusts the saving message to messengers whose faith is questionable, at best. He doesn’t wait for their faith to bloom fully but sends them out so that they too might be convinced by the power of the message they carry forth. In their obedience to Jesus, faith is born, and in the course of their mission, it shall be affirmed.

**JOHN 17:11-19**

Part of what has been called Jesus’ high-priestly prayer by commentators, this prayer constitutes what might be understood as a series of reports whereby Jesus renders to God an account of his saving mission. Along with his reports, the Johannine Jesus includes in his prayer petitions to God for those from whom he will soon depart. Jesus’ saving mission, as Charles Cousar (Texts For Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1993) has pointed out, was spent in revealing God. Just as the eternal “I AM” was revealed to Moses before he began his mission of leading Israel out of Egypt (Exod 3:14), so have the divine name and will of God been disclosed by Jesus to his disciples as his witnesses to the world.

Such revelation, insists Cousar, resulted in the establishment of a community that receives Jesus’ words, knows their truth and believes that Jesus is sent by God. For this community, Jesus petitions the Father for 1) protection from the world, i.e., from the totality of life that has rejected Jesus and, with him, God; 2) a oneness among their members such as what Jesus shared with God (v. 1); 3) a complete and fulfilling joy (v. 13) that derives from the good news that Jesus has spoken among them; 4) holiness such that those who belong to Jesus are consecrated, i.e., set apart to serve the truth.

Contemporary followers of Christ can find courage in that Jesus continues to pray to God for all we need to continue his mission until he comes to take us home with him forever.

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**Sermon Starters**

*Dick Folger*

A man was speeding down the freeway, keeping pace with a dozen other speeding cars. When they passed a speed trap, the man got nailed by an infrared speed detector. A highway patrol car took chase and soon pulled him over to the side of the freeway. After the usual ticketing procedure the officer handed the man a citation, received his signature and was about to walk away when the man asked, “Officer, I know I was speeding, but I don’t think it’s fair — there were a dozen other cars around me that were going just as fast, so why did I get the ticket?”

“Ever go fishing?” the policeman asked.

“Yes,” the man replied.

The officer grinned back. “Ever catch ‘all’ the fish?”

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**Preaching to Youth**

**Jim Auer**

**KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA [Acts]**

- “...you are to be my witnesses...”
- “Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking up at the skies?’ ” Realizing that we already have the message, the good news; now is the time for our response.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS**

Some may initially be a bit sidetracked by the references to handling snakes and drinking deadly poison without harm in Mark's much-discussed "longer ending" (Seventh Sunday). This can produce a "But that doesn’t happen, so how can we be sure of all the other stuff?" reaction, which may need to be dealt with briefly.

**STARTER**

If you’ve ever (probably as a child) lain on the grass and looked up at the clouds to “see” bunnies, stars, monsters, etc. in their shapes, what’s the most unusual thing you “saw”?

**LEADING QUESTIONS**

* Is this cloud-gazing a waste of time? (Not in itself.)
* Could it be a waste of time? (Yes — if we cloud-gaze to excess when we have obligations to fulfill... or wait to find further evidence of what we already really know.)

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE**

* Like the apostles, we have a commission from Jesus. * Like the apostles, we sometimes gaze up at the sky waiting for Jesus to come and do the work he has given us. * We have what we need to do that work, including Jesus’ promise to be with us always.
* Taking seriously the commission to spread the faith (as distinct from “That's for priests and nuns”). * Like some early believers (e.g., the Gnostics), some Christians today look for further, hidden knowledge about the meaning of life, beyond or even apart from the essential Good News. Youth are vulnerable to such things.
* Balancing reliance on God with our own responsibility to act.

**QUOTATION**

“We should pray as if everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on ourselves” (Saint Augustine).

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**HOMILY**

**Fr. James Smith**

**What’s Left To Do?**

Today, Jesus comes full circle. Thirty-three years ago he descended from heaven; 33 years later he ascends back to heaven. We are not privileged to know what he thought on this day, but if I were he, I would have three questions about his earthly experience: What did it mean? What did it accomplish? What now?

What did those earthly human years mean, this new life with a body in time? The Son of God descended from knowing all things intuitively to learning everything bit by ignorant bit. The One who had created all things by simply saying the word now painstakingly forced wood into a chair. That perfectly peaceful person in complete control of divine desire descended to the depth of roiling human passion.

Of course, Jesus was still God, so he retained a few divine perks, but what did that amount to since it was confined within human limits? He forgave a few people, but sinners abound. He healed a few people, but not everyone. So, except for raising a couple of people from the dead — who then had to die again — the day-to-day life of Jesus might have been pretty much like our lives. And like all of us intelligent people, he must have occasionally felt ill at ease with ignorant villagers; he might have soared like an eagle except for those turkey disciples. If only the religious leaders knew more scripture and if the civil leaders were not leftovers from the royal court, if he hadn’t been born in the wrong time at the wrong place, he might have succeeded more.

Second question: What did all those years accomplish? Jesus saw the world as a battle between his Father and Satan. So, he spent a lot of time and energy exorcising demons. That looks like a strange strategy to us. His main message was the Kingdom of God. But he wasn't dead a few years before that project was put on the back burner by his first followers. They had their own agenda of survival in a secular culture. And his followers are still doing the same thing.

Jesus thought of himself as dying for his friends in faithfulness to his Father. Later theologians have tried to explain how one person's death could make up for all of humanity's sins and what it might mean to be reconciled with God. But whatever the life and death of Jesus meant to his Father, to us it means that God has experienced our pain and joy and dreams and disillusionments. God now realizes what complex, improbable lives we lead.

Last question: What now? Jesus could have decided that he had done what he came to do; that whatever he did or did not accomplish was a matter for the records; that he had done all he could do, and the rest was up to God. Pretty much the way we feel.

But not entirely. Most people have a desire to leave some kind of a legacy: a family, a foundation — some continuation of their life that would somehow vindicate their existence, carry on their project. Jesus had that same desire, magnified to divine intensity.

But if the sin of the world has been forgiven, if humankind has been reconciled to God, what is there left to do? Ah, there’s still that pesky Kingdom of God that keeps getting tabled because of more pressing business. When will we learn that the Kingdom is our agenda? If we pursued that, everything else would fall into place.