Sharing the Word: Sermons Based on Weekly Lectionary Readings, v. 2

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Sharing the Word: Sermons based on Weekly Lectionary Readings
Volume II: Pentecost through Proper 29

By Rev. Leonard S. Gross
Edited by Janice G. Comfort
Day of Pentecost, Year A

FIRST READING: Acts 2:1 - 21

PSALM: 104

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 12:3b - 13

GOSPEL: John 20:19 - 23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
Are you ready for a couple of questions? Have you made any promises lately? And, if so, are you keeping them? If we’re making promises… and keeping them… we’re in good company. God has been doing this for a long time… even by His standards… century after century.

The Bible is filled with promises. A group of editors recently put together a thick pocket-size volume of 180 pages which they call The Bible Promise Book. They didn’t comment on the promises, they only listed them. I didn’t actually count the promises, but if they averaged four per page… multiplied by 180 pages… we’d be talking about 720 promises. That’s a lot of promises… even for God. I don’t know any political figures who have made that many promises. Nor can any children, parents, or grandparents compete with God. When it comes to making promises, He’s way out in front. And the same is true when it comes to keeping them. Sometimes we keep our promises… and sometimes we don’t. But God always keeps His promises.

Speaking of promises… I’m reminded of a man who lay dying in a hospital bed. As he was breathing his last, he had something special to tell his wife. “Mary, I have but one regret as I pass on,” said he. “I hate to leave you behind in all your loneliness. But should you wish to remarry, you have my blessing. But will you promise not to let your new husband wear my old clothes and remind you of me?”

“Of course, Bill, I’ll promise you that. I wouldn’t think of doing such a thing. Besides… all your suits are too small for George, anyway.”

The greatest of all the Old Testament promises that God made is the one He gave to ABRAHAM: He promised that he would give Abraham a son and would make of him a mighty nation, so that all the nations of the world should bless themselves by him. Quite a promise… particularly when Abraham was almost 100 years old at the time and his wife Sarah was about 90.

The promise to Abraham is directly linked to God’s later call of Moses to lead His people from Egypt toward the Promised Land. It was also declared to all the people at Horeb, and they affirmed it as their charter. It was this promise that guided them during their long, weary pilgrimage. It was also the source of their endurance and the object of their rebellions.

This promise to Abraham and Moses… as celebrated in song and saga… was proof of God’s steadfast love… of His readiness to forgive and His determination to bring them to a good end. (Numbers 14:13-25).
After the children of Israel were settled in the Land of Promise, their history received its continuity through this same promise. The assurances given to David were both a fulfillment and a link with future generations. God’s covenant with Abraham continued to cover His dealings with “a thousand generations.” (Psalms 105:7-11). To each of David’s successors, God gave specific pledges covering the duty and the destiny of each. Even so, each pledge was oriented toward the initial vow to the patriarchs and toward all generations yet to come. Some good examples would be three promises given to Solomon:

1—That he would receive wisdom from God (I Kings 5:12)
2—That he, Solomon, not his father, David, would build God a house (I Kings 8:15-25)
3—That God would establish His royal throne over Israel forever, as He promised Solomon’s father, David (I Kings 9:5)

Now... let’s continue this train of thought into the New Testament. We find that Paul’s understanding of the promise center in the person... the figure... of Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus Christ that all of God’s promises are affirmed as true. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul tells us (1:20) “for all the promises of God find their yes in Him.” “For all the promises of God find their yes in Him.” And further... “That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the Glory of God.”

It is through Jesus Christ that all who believe become sons of Abraham and heirs of God. And through Him as a servant of Israel, God confirms His promises to the patriarchs by bringing Gentiles within the covenant. Paul tells us in Romans (15:8) that Christ became a servant to the uncircumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.”

Paul tells us further, in Ephesians, that those who have been “strangers to the covenant of promise” now become its heirs in Christ. That’s quite a change, and one that’s guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (3: 14).

Why all this talk about promises? And why go back to Abraham? In the first place... I want to remind you of how seriously God takes His promises... and to what lengths He will go to fulfill them. But what does all this have to do with us here today? A great deal. A great deal.
In our gospel lesson today Jesus tells us: “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it.”

I would say that Jesus has made two tremendous promises… to those who believe in Him… during His days on earth… and now. First, we will do what He did. That’s heavy. But that’s not all. We will do even greater works. Wow! Now that’s a challenge: Doing greater works than Jesus! And it’s Jesus Himself who makes this promise. It’s enough to stagger our imagination. One Biblical commentator, in telling us that Jesus’ promise is true, makes this interesting addition: “And half the world has come to know that it is true. Once one has come on Jesus Christ and learned to know Him he cannot think of God except in terms of Christ. Everything else has become superseded and hopelessly inadequate.”

It’s not that everyone will do great things. Obviously some won’t. They may not even try. They may be too tired. Or too lazy. But because Jesus went to the Father… this three-fold relationship will enable His followers to do such works as Jesus has done through the Father who dwells in Him.

When we do what we can, and call on Jesus for help… we can do some amazing things. In fact, we can do things that… of our own strength… we’re not capable of doing. That’s when we’re inspired.

One of the reasons Jesus’ disciples can do greater things than He did centers around the fact that Jesus has been freed from the physical limitations of His life on earth. In His earthly days, Jesus had never preached outside Palestine. Only a small part of the world had ever heard the Gospel. He had never personally met the moral degradation of a large city… He had never seen an inner city. Even those who opposed Jesus were, for the most part, religious people. They revered and practiced purity of life.

Sin and vice flourished in the world that the early Christians entered. They won this world for Christ. He was not physically present… but His spirit was mightily at work in the lives of those who were preaching the gospel… loving the unlovable… healing the sick… and changing the world.

As we know, healing the sick was a most important aspect of the ministry of Jesus. The story of the Church’s healing ministry begins in the Book of Acts which records the healing work of St. Paul and St. Peter, to whom multitudes flocked. Acts tells us that “many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands
of the Apostles... and more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.” (Acts 5:12-16). They expected to be healed... and they were not disappointed.

Through the writings of early Christians we are able to follow closely by means of eyewitness reports the history of healing in the Church through the first three centuries after Christ. During these 300 years the healing of the body was an important function of the Church. These writings contain meticulous records, prepared by intelligent and highly educated theologians. They had to substantiate their findings... otherwise they would probably have been exposed to merciless investigation by the Roman authorities.

Irenaeus, Tertulian, Origen, Justin Martyr, and numerous others have collected an impressive body of evidence on spiritual healing in the early church. Tertulian, a Christian convert, cites numerous physical healings in his writings. His On the Flesh of Christ, written about 200 A.D., give accounts of healings of leprosy, blindness, and palsy, and makes frequent mention of the raising of the dead.

Origen—teacher, writer, and one of the greatest thinkers of the early Christian Church—offers convincing evidence of the prevalence of physical healings in his work... Against Celsus. One of the greatest sources of information about miraculous healings is found in a treatise, Against Heresies, written by the eminent theologian Irenaeus, who was born in Asian Minor and Later became bishop of Lyon in Gaul. He deals at length with the healings “which occur daily” of blindness, leprosy, and deafness, as well as the raising of the dead.

By the beginning of the Fourth Century, St. Augustine began to refer to the miracles as being must unusual and apparently becoming increasingly rare. Emily Gardiner Neal... who spent many years in Pittsburgh and who died about two years ago... wrote several books on spiritual healing. Concerning spiritual healing in the early Church and in later years, she wrote: “Reflecting on the recorded events of that period, I believe that the decline is attributable to increasing controversy within the church and to the church’s position of conflict with emerging medical science. The once-united church had become split by controversy and was not longer steadfast in the faith. Much as it is today, it was floundering in the morass of conflicting opinion, and inevitably there
occurred a weakening of spiritual power and of the people's faith. It became a vicious circle; as the Church's faith weakened so did the power of healing; and as healing declined, the faith that remained was further weakened."

Now... taking a giant step forward in history... from the Fourth Century to 1992... we find that many churches... especially Episcopal churches... hold healing services regularly. And, I'm pleased to say, healings do take place.

Mrs. Neal was an unlikely person to be involved in spiritual healing. A reporter and feature writer who specialized in scientific articles, she started going to church healing services on less than a positive note. She wanted to prove or disprove the validity of some of the many healings being claimed. She privately suspected widespread fraud and misrepresentation. What started out as a modest low-key project developed into one of major proportions. After a while she learned that miracles of physical healings were, in fact, taking place... and then she felt impelled to learn the "hows" and the "whys" of them. She made it a point to discuss the healings with the attending physicians of those healed. Some would admit, reluctantly, that their patients were miraculously healed. Others didn't want to pursue the subject. And quite a number of them... including famous specialists... wanted to hide behind an excuse of "faulty diagnosis." When Emily confronted them with the exceptionally high number of "faulty diagnoses," they agreed, some grudgingly... to discuss these healings more candidly. It is true that the healing ministry that Jesus began continues in Church settings... but not everywhere.

However, it is true that... more and more... we seek the healing of the entire person—body, spirit, and soul. This is something that Jesus was doing regularly two thousand years ago. He who believes in me will also do the works that I do... and greater works will he do because I go the Father.

Jesus has fulfilled His promise.

In His second promise in today's lesson from John, Jesus says that any prayer offered in His name will be granted. Not all prayers that we make... but those made in His name.

Not selfish prayers... but only those that will advance His cause and enhance God's glory. Nothing that meets this criteria is too big for Him to do for us. That's Christ's promise to us. And... like God the Father... Jesus continues to keep His promises. Amen.
Day of Pentecost, Year B

FIRST READING: Acts 2:1 - 21

SECOND READING: Romans 8:22 - 27

GOSPEL: John 15:26 - 27, 16:4b - 15

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning."

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned."

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."
Our Church Calendar tells us that today is the Day of Pentecost... and also that it is Whitsunday. Now the two terms are not in conflict with each other... but they both deserve an explanation. And when we speak of Pentecost, we should be aware of the fact that there was a Jewish Pentecost before there was a Christian Pentecost. Are you confused? You needn’t be. There’s a simple explanation.

Pentecost, in Greek, means the 50th day. This name was first given to the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which fell on the 50th day after the first day of Passover. As a Jewish thanksgiving feast for the harvest, it was called the Feast of the Firstfruits (Exodus 23:16) or the Feast of Weeks (Shabuoth) (Lev. 23:15-21). This feast could also be called the Jewish Pentecost. In later times, the giving of the Law to Moses was commemorated at this feast.

Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Christian Church occurred on this day, according to Acts (2:1), Christians re-interpreted its meaning in terms of this glorious event. So you could say the Christian Pentecost dates back to that great day... 50 days after the Resurrection of Jesus and 10 days after His Ascension... at which time Acts tells us the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles.

Are you still with me? There’s more. From at least the Second Century, Christians have celebrated Pentecost on the seventh Sunday after Easter as one of their three greatest feast... of which Easter is obviously the most important... the greatest. Christmas is our other great feast day.

How did Whitsunday get on our church calendar on this day... the Day of Pentecost? That’s another story... and the answer should be of interest to all Anglicans and Episcopalians because it’s part of our heritage, which we should pass on to our children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews.

As most of you probably know, the weather in England is often cool and damp at Easter time. We can relate to that; can’t we? We often have the same situation. Apparently because of the inclement weather, it became more common to delay baptisms in England from Easter until the Day of Pentecost. The newly baptized wore their white robes on that day, later referred to as “White Sunday. The English are very good at condensing words... so “white Sunday” became Whitsunday. So that’s the story... from a Jewish Pentecost to a Christian Pentecost... and then a later development in our branch of God’s Holy Catholic Church to Whitsunday. Today... the Day of Pentecost... Whitsunday... is also the birthday of the Christian Church... and it’s important to us for that reason also.
The various New Testament writings agree that shortly after the Resurrection, the Christian community "received the Holy Spirit." However, there is more than one tradition concerning the circumstances and the timing of the gift. Today's lessons reflect that difference. According to the Gospel writer John, the Spirit was bestowed by Jesus Himself on the Day of Resurrection. This is how John expressed it: "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:22).

But our lesson from Acts tells us that the Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost, which is 50 days after Jesus' Resurrection and 10 days after His Ascension. Both the traditions agree and bear witness to the fact that as a result of the Resurrection, the disciples became conscious of a new inward power that transformed their entire outlook. They attributed this to their possession by the Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... which we now refer to as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. And the dramatic changes in the lives and attitudes of the disciples were obvious to all who saw and heard them. Just before the Crucifixion of Jesus, we would have been hard-pressed to find any of the disciples. Even Peter, who talked a good fight and pledged eternal loyalty to His beloved Lord Jesus, denied Him three times and was so distraught that he disappeared. Yet here he is, a few days later, very visible and boldly preaching the crucified Christ on the Day of Pentecost. Quite a development! Miraculous is probably the only word that would adequately describe his dramatic turn-around. Peter's sermon was so moving that 3,000 were converted on that day. Acts tells us that the people were cut to the heart... They asked Peter and the other Apostles: "What shall we do?"

Peter had the answer to their question, didn't he? Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Not only did Peter touch their hearts... but he knew what the people needed to save their souls.

A few days before Pentecost, Peter wouldn't have been the least bit bold. He wouldn't have had this insight into the spiritual needs of these people. And he probably wouldn't have known the formula for salvation: Repent and be baptized. But he does now. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, Peter's life has been transformed. He will never be the same. And neither will these people who had failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah... and who had guilt feelings about the Crucifixion. They repented... they were baptized... and they received the Holy Spirit.
And they also went on to do some amazing things as the infant Church used this newly received power to spread like wildfire.

Today’s lesson from Acts tells us that they... the disciples... the church community... were all together in one place... then suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance. This is one of the passages that has given modern interpreters problems. Why? Because what is written is not always an accurate description of what actually happened, but is a compilation of what happened, along with the presumptions, reflection, and judgment of the next generation. For example, most scholars are in agreement that the “speaking in tongues” in today’s passage originally had nothing to do with speaking a foreign language. What was it all about? It was viewed as a kind of religious ecstasy which exceeded the bounds of rationality and was described and deplored by Paul. It was the consensus that the “speaking in tongues” refers to the excitement and fervor of the occasion... and was viewed a generation later as a prophetic foretaste of that event.

No one can say with certainly exactly what happened on the first Christian Pentecost. But they were together... this large gathering of people who may have had only one thing in common... their love of Jesus Christ... and they have been coming together in His name to worship Him ever since. And they’ve been doing this for almost 2,000 years.

So... these believers who celebrated the first Christian Pentecost were united... in spite of their obvious ethnic and cultural differences. Their Pentecostal experience was a unifying experience that overcame all possible barriers of nationality and language. They were conscious of their unity... not their diversity.

Today... we Christians are probably more conscious of our diversity than of our unity. But who says we can’t have both? And we can point with pride to that divine disturbance on the first Christian Pentecost. Something wonderful happened on that day... the birthday of the Church... when Christians experiences a powerful bonding... a divinely inspired unity. May we continue to enjoy such unity... along with our diversity. Amen.
And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. The Pharisees were saying to Him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?” Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”
In today’s gospel lesson...the Pharisees showed that they were alert... that they noticed everything that was going on... and that they knew what was permitted on the Sabbath... and what was not. So it should not be a surprise to anyone that when they saw Jesus’ disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath they called this violation to Jesus’ attention.

What the disciples were doing was permitted on an ordinary day... so long as they did not use a sickle to cut the grain. Plucking the grain was all right. But such was not the case on the Sabbath. Hundreds of rules and regulations governed what one could or could not do... mostly could not... on the Sabbath. For example, all work was forbidden. It came under 39 different classifications... and four of them applied to what the disciples were doing: Reaping, thrashing, winnowing, and preparing a meal. So... technically at least... they had broken all four and were law-breakers. To the Jewish rabbis, what they had done was a deadly sin, and a matter of life and death.

What was Jesus’ response? He called to the attention of the Pharisees the time... recorded in the First book of Samuel (21:1-6)... when David was fleeing from Saul, and his life was in danger. David went into the tabernacle at Nob and demanded bread. They had none except for the shewbread. The shewbread is what they called the 12 loaves placed on a table three feet long, 1 1/2 half feet wide and 1 1/2 feet high. The table had been placed in front of the Holy of Holies as an offering to God. Each week the 12 loaves were removed and replaced with 12 fresh ones. The loaves that had been removed became the property of the priests. And only the priests were permitted to eat this bread. Yet the hungry David ate of that bread and gave some of it to those who were traveling with him.

So Jesus told the Pharisees that human need takes precedence over human law... and divine law as well. Said Jesus: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” This is not the answer the Pharisees expected... nor is it a principle that they were willing to accept. But Jesus gave them a good, reasonable answer... one that included a biblical precedent.

Jesus’ remarks about the Sabbath should make us take a look at other institutions. What about the law? What about the government? Do they exist to serve mankind? What about religion in general and Christianity in particular?
If we extend to these other institutions what Jesus has said about the Sabbath we realize that no institution is sacred in itself. It's the people who are sacred. Any authority and sanctity that an institution has comes from its service to the wide variety of human need. You have heard about the sanctity of the law... but the law must serve human need or it doesn't meet that criterion. It must also adjust to changing conditions and expanding needs or it isn't doing what it should do.

Over the centuries... government has not lived up to the high standards that Jesus is suggesting it do. How can a dictatorship serve the needs and interests of the people? It would be difficult to imagine this happening. It would require an enlightened dictator and these would seem to be a contradiction of terms.

In a republic or democracy, the people would appear to have a better chance of their needs and interests being looked out for. And yet, I'm sure there are times when we question the actions... or the motives... of our elected officials. What about religion... more specifically Christianity? Have our church leaders been noted for their service to others? Have they ever been known to look out for the interests of the institution of the church? And perhaps even for their own self-interests?

One of the problems with the Hebrew religion in Jesus' day was its emphasis on following a long list of rules and regulations... most of which were negative in nature. There were extensive compilations of acts which the individual was not to do. Mankind was created long before the Sabbath law came into being... and it was unique with the Jewish people. Man was not created to be the victim and slave of Sabbath rules and regulations. In the beginning they were created to make life better... fuller, more fulfilling. As Jesus points out, mankind is not to be enslaved by the Sabbath. The Sabbath exists to make life better.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus has confronted us with some truths that we must take seriously. For instance, being a Christian is not following a list of rules and regulations. There's much more to Christianity than going to church on Sunday. It's important but requires little time or effort. We're called on to love God and our neighbor seven days a week. How often are we to forgive others? Seven times? No... Jesus says 70 times seven. In reality... that means there's no limit to the number of times we should forgive others. Forgiveness and mercy and love and service to others are at the heart of Christianity... and if we're caught up in rules and regulations, we're on the wrong track.
The greatest claim on us is to be sensitive to human need... even if such sensitivity takes us away from worship. If our religion keeps us from helping others, ministering to their needs, our religion isn’t really religion. People are far more important than ritual. The best way to worship God is to look out for the needs of His people. The best way to use sacred things is for the benefit of mankind. The shewbread was put to the best possible use when David used it to feed men who were starving. Which is the better way to use the things we have access to? Love, not law, should dictate our course of action. We should have compassion for others, be considerate of them because of love... not because that’s what the law demands.

Jesus’ statement that the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath also must have raised the eyebrows of the Pharisees. There’s a great deal of history, tradition, and custom behind observance of the Sabbath. The Book of Genesis tells us that God created the heavens and the earth in six days... and rested on the seventh day. Because our Lord God had brought the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt they were to have no other God but Him. He was to have first place in their lives... and they were to set aside one day each week for God’s claim on their time. They were also to give the same rest from labor to the people who served them, to others dwelling with them, and even to their livestock.

By the time of Jesus, what had started as a rather simple observance had become an institution... and following a long list of rules and regulations had made observance of the Sabbath a very complex matter indeed.

First... the Sabbath was a memorial of creation. The Jewish Sabbath was a memorial of deliverance out of Egypt... and the Christian Sabbath is a memorial of Chris’s rising from the dead. We observe it on the first day of the week... rather than the sixth day of the Jewish observance.

When Jesus said the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath... it proved to be a prophetic statement. It may have seemed boastful at the time. But now it seems modest... a tremendous understatement. Not only is Jesus Christ the Lord of the Sabbath... He is also the Messiah over all human existence in every age. He is also King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
Trinity Sunday, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a

PSALM: 8

NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Corinthians 13:11 - 13

GOSPEL: Matthew 28:16 - 20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
The Church Calendar and lectionary tell us that today is Trinity Sunday. Is there another way we know this is Trinity Sunday? Yes. Trinity Sunday comes one week after we celebrate the Day of Pentecost. Last Sunday we celebrated the Day of Pentecost... so today must be Trinity Sunday.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God exists in three Persons and One Substance. There is one God. We worship one God. He exists in Three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The word “Trinity” was first used in its Greek form by Theophilus of Antioch in 180 A.D. Don’t look for the word “Trinity” in the Bible. It’s not to be found in the Bible... but the concept of the trinity is.

We’re probably most familiar with the expression of the concept of the Trinity in the baptismal formula. First, if you recall, comes the presentation and examination of the candidate or candidates. Then we join with those who are committing themselves to Christ and renew our baptismal covenant. Then there are prayers for the candidate or candidates and the thanksgiving over the water. And then the officiating priest says: I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

These words come from a passage in today’s lesson from the Gospel According to Matthew. They are a part of what has long been called the Great Commission, which Jesus gave to the remaining 11 disciples after His Resurrection. He told them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

So the sacrament of Holy Baptism is administered in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with Christ’s command in this verse. Again... we need to understand God as a Trinity, not a mere unity, and certainly not as three separate persons or gods.

All the members of the Trinity are deity, and each has an office which He uniquely fills. God the Father sent God the Son. God the Son sent the Holy Spirit, who seals, sanctifies, and in-dwells each believer. Salvation is the work of the Trinity... Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... as stated in Titus (3:4-6) and in Second Thessalonians (2:13-14). There are other Scriptural passages that are looked upon as reference to the Trinity. However, when we go about the matter of explaining concepts, we could easily get bogged down. Simpler might be better when we try to explain the Trinity. Otherwise, all of us are likely to get confused.
St. Patrick is said to have used a shamrock to explain the Trinity. Each leaf represents a personhood of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the shamrock itself, the Trinity, the Unity. The cross can be a good symbol of the Trinity—if we use only the top three parts. Using the bottom part would give us one more part than we need for our illustration.

Let's not pass up an opportunity to discuss the Great Commission which Jesus gave the remaining 11 apostles... and us. It is not only the Apostles who are charged with making disciples of all nations... baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, “teaching them all that I have commanded you.” This commandment applies to us... to you and to me... as well as it did to the 11.

We hear the words “one world” and perhaps we think they apply to an idea someone had a few years ago. But this is not the case. Almost immediately the Early Church headed in that direction. The apostles were a small group. They had no great leadership abilities... they were not well-educated. But they were committed to their Lord and Master... and they took His commandments seriously. What began modestly in Palestine has now circled the globe. The apostles had missionary zeal. So did their successors. If not, you and I might never have learned of Christ. And there certainly wouldn’t be more than a billion Christians... found in virtually all parts of the planet earth.

As Christians we are disciples of Jesus Christ. And, as such, we share the gift of salvation that we have received. Do we feel gratitude? Do we experience joy? I would like to think we are grateful and joyful... and that we’re happy to share these feelings with others.

If we are willing to share our Christianity with others... well and good. But... in any event... we’re called on to spread the Christian message. Regardless of our personal attitudes—and our shortcomings and sometimes what we see as our lack of abilities—we have our marching orders: Go... therefore. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach.

Now we’re back to the words of the Great Commission. We can’t escape them. Making disciples is the method. Baptizing and teaching are the parts of the main task.
How does a congregation grow?

1. By individual members becoming more devout
2. By being of greater service to others
3. By adding new members.

How does a congregation add new members? One way is to have children… bring them into the world. Then have them baptized in the church and taught there and at home… And after a few years they become members of the congregation. But more than likely when they grow up, they’ll move away. And it’s too late for their parents to have more children.

Then what? Then comes the time when the congregation will realize that if it is to continue as a community of faith… its members will have to… go therefore and make disciples. One of the few church statistics that means anything to me is that 70 per cent of the people who worship in the Episcopal Church attend because someone invited them. That statistic came from a Gallup Poll of a few years ago. I think it’s significant. It says that 7 out of every 10 persons who attend the Episcopal Church today do so because somebody invited them to do so. Oh, sure, some people never get around to doing that. But… on the other hand… others are taking our Lord’s Great Commission seriously. Why shouldn’t we go and do likewise?

We may not be comfortable talking to others about God. But if we don’t feel strongly about our faith… and if we’re unwilling to talk to others about God… perhaps He isn’t important to us. Perhaps we have little to talk about. And if others don’t see anything Christ-like in us… it would be impossible to attract them to Him. We still have our orders: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Proper 5, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 1 Samuel 8: 4 - 11 (12 - 15) 16 - 20 (11:14 - 15)
PSALM 138
NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Corinthians 4: 13 - 5: 1

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

GOSPEL: Mark 3: 20 - 35
Proper 5
(meant to be the Sunday closest to June 8)

preached September 13, 1970
8 a.m. service Trinity Church, Morgantown

If eternal life follows death—and certainly most Christians believe this—why do we fear death? And why don’t we prepare ourselves for death? We all know that even those who can avoid taxes in this life cannot escape death. Death is the vital link between earthly life and eternal life. Our bodies must die in order that our souls may have life eternal. So death is the transfer point between physical life and life everlasting, which is spiritual in nature.

Do we fear death because of the suffering it brings? Most people endure more suffering and pain as a result of accidents or illnesses than in death. Do we fear death because it means separations? Life has far more tragic separations than those associated with death.

We fear death because it is the opposite of life. So we cherish life and shun death. We try to ignore death, as if it might go away. But if life continues through death and after death, we shouldn’t think of life and death as contradictory. If we really believe in immortal life, we should welcome death—and not fear death. Death is not the end of the line—but rather a transfer point.

Christ’s gift of eternal life, for which He died on the cross, means quality as well as duration. Eternal life means life from above, which includes vital fellowship with God. Christ possesses it in full measure and imparts it to all who accept Him and enter His kingdom.

We read in the gospel according to St. John: “For as the Father hath life in Himself; so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.” (John 5:26). We read also in the gospel of St. John: “For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:14).

Eternal life—or everlasting life—is something that begins now and continues into eternity. “We know that we have passed from death unto life” is a passage from the first Book of John. (I John 3:14). It distinguishes between spiritual destitution—death—and living fellowship with God—eternal life.

Some of the early Christians were criticized for thinking too much about the beauties of heaven and not enough about the human needs of this world. Does this give us an excuse to wander off in the opposite direction?

We should do more to prepare ourselves for death. Death is a fact of life. It’s inescapable. We can’t ignore it. Death is not a calamity. It’s part of a continuous process, an experience beginning here and continuing hereafter. And we must die in order that we may have everlasting life in His nearer presence.

(Burial of the Dead, page 324 in the Prayer Book)
Proper 6, Year A


PSALM: 116

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 5:1 - 8

GOSPEL: Matthew 9:35 - 10:8 (9 - 23)

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."
As today’s gospel lesson begins, Matthew tells us that Jesus is teaching in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and healing all sorts of diseases and infirmities. First, He is acting in His role of herald. A herald is someone who brings the message of the king. Jesus is bringing the message from God. What is the chief duty of a herald? The duty of a herald is the proclamation of certainties.

We live in an age of uncertainty. Have you noticed many people around us seem uncertain about almost everything? As the herald of God… Jesus came proclaiming the certainties by which mankind lives. We need to know… we must be able to say whom we have believed. Jesus knew who He was and who had sent Him. He knew what He believed. He knew what He was called to do, and He did it.

A second role that Jesus was playing in today’s lesson was that of teacher. Proclaiming certainties is important… but it’s not enough. The proclaimer… teacher and preacher… must be able to show the importance of these certainties for life and for living. How do we teach Christianity? By talking about it? No… by living it. Taking our cue from Jesus Himself, it is not our main duty to discuss Christianity with others… although some discussion is necessary… but it’s more a matter of showing others what Christianity is.

A good example of this is told by a writer who lived in India. He reports on a British battalion of troops stationed there. Like most soldiers, these men paraded because they had to, and they went to church because it was expected of them. They sang the hymns they liked but not those they didn’t. They listened to the preacher if they considered him interesting. And they never gave God or the church much attention from one Sunday to the next. But the rescue work they did at the scene of a terrible earthquake so impressed a Brahmin that he demanded immediate baptism. Why? What did he see that made such a deep impression on him? He was convinced, said the Brahmin, “that only the Christian religion could make men behave like that.” What was it that taught the Brahmin what Christianity was like? Christianity in action. Pure and simple.

Today’s gospel lesson speaks of a third role that Jesus was playing… that of healer. The gospel… the good news… that He brought did not stop at words. He translated it into deeds. He spent far more time feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and comforting those who were experiencing sorrow than He did talking about God. He turned the words of Christian truth into deeds of Christian love… action. Our Christianity falls short until our
beliefs are translated into Christian action. How different this concept is from what the religious leaders of Jesus’ day saw, heard, and did:

The priest would have seen religion as consisting of sacrifice. To the Scribe... the Law was the most important aspect of religion. But to Jesus... religion consists of love.

Did you take note of the response that Jesus made to the crowds? They weren’t riff-raff... or undesirables... or nobodies... to Him. They obviously weren’t important to others... but they were to Jesus.

Matthew tells us Jesus had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

Despite its great power, the Roman Empire couldn’t –or wouldn’t—do anything for these vast crowds of people. They weren’t worth anything to the government officials. They were nobodies... and they had no reason for being. They may not have even been taxpayers. Society gave status to somebodies... to those with standing in their communities. What did the Jewish religion do for these crowds of people? Nothing. Most of them didn’t keep the Law... so there wasn’t anything available at the Temple or the synagogues for them. Would they have attracted any attention? No. It’s as if they didn’t exist.

When Matthew tells us that Jesus had compassion for the crowds... can you relate such compassion for the crowds to the people in our cluster communities? What’s our reaction... our response... to the crowds that attend the Forest Festival in Elkins? The Strawberry Festival in Buckhannon? The Mother’s Day festivities and Memorial Day parades in Grafton? And doesn’t the Italian Heritage Festival spill over into Bridgeport? And what about these Civil War re-enactments in Philippi?

How do we view the people who come to these events? Are they caught up in a circus-like atmosphere in search of pleasure? Are they wandering aimlessly because they don’t seem to belong anyplace? Are they ignored in their communities and neighborhoods? Are they people who need basic necessities of life? Food, clothing, shelter? Do they have additional needs... perhaps some that are more complex? Is their mental or emotional health an issue? Are their lives in harmony with God and those around them? Especially their own families? Do they need medication or other forms of medical attention? Do we see them at all? Are we open to their needs?
Or, are we oblivious of their presence among us? What would we do if some of them confronted us with their problems?

Would we take the institutional approach? After all, there are state programs for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the emotionally disturbed, and people with other problems. Of course, all such programs don’t work to perfection. Many people aren’t reached. Others have problems that are very real but don’t qualify for state help. And… don’t forget… there are numerous people who need help but don’t want anything to do with government. And that applies to federal, state, county, and local varieties. So… is it any wonder that government falls far short when it comes to ministering to the needs of people? For a variety of reasons… there are increasing numbers of people that government can’t help.

Remember what I said earlier… that as a herald… Jesus came proclaiming certainties. As His followers, we need to know whom we have believed. While living the Christian life it’s up to us to show others what it’s all about. We don’t spend a lot of time talking about religion or living the Christian life… we’re more concerned with living it out. Being open to the needs of others… ministering to them with Christian love and compassion… these are two of the most important duties of Christians everywhere… whether we’re speaking of individuals or congregations or larger groups.

Jesus shows us the way. He was not overwhelmed when He saw the crowds. He viewed these people as sheep without shepherds and had compassion for them. Sometimes we may seem overwhelmed by the needs of the people with whom we come in contact. We might not know what to do… or how to do it. But we do know who our model is… we do know He will help us in our dilemma… as well as coming to the rescue of those in need. And, when in doubt, we should err on the side of Christian love. We can be certain that is what Jesus would do. After all, He is the one whom we should emulate… He is the source of the love that we are called on to demonstrate… and He is our ever-present companion as we seek to discern and to do His will. We are to live out our faith. There’s no substitute for Christian love in action.
Proper 7, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 21:8 - 21

PSALM: 86

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 6:1b - 11

GOSPEL: Matthew 10:24 - 39

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they malign those of his household!

"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven."

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."
As we have just heard… in today’s gospel lesson from Matthew… Jesus immediately gets our attention when He says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” A sword? Did we hear this right? Yes, we did… and they’re strong words.

Is the Prince of Peace promising to take up a sword? Certainly, family tensions run high at times… but is this called for? No. We shouldn’t take these words literally. Jesus is not turning His back on the Sermon on the Mount. A similar passage from Luke (12:51) will give us some insight into the meaning of the word “sword” as Jesus used it here. Here’s how the passage from Luke reads: “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division.” Division is the key word here. We should expect divisions and disagreements… even among those most dear to us. Division, yes… but, we pray, not warfare or bloodshed.

What are some of the issues that divide us? What are some of the disagreements that come between fellow Christians? What matters sometimes separate us from other members of our families? When there’s a strike… like the coal strike we’re now experiencing… don’t we find good friends, even close relatives, on opposite sides of the issues? There’s often a quick taking of sides… and no discussion on the merits of the situation. Naturally, some people favor labor’s point of view, and others are in the corner of management.

What about taxes? Taxes aren’t very popular at any time… unless, of course, they miss us and are collected from someone else… or some other group. Then there are athletic events like football games… horse races… and so forth. They’re certainly divisive. Some people get far more emotional about football than about their religion. We can also hear more than one point of view on how we should look out for the poor… how we should minister to the homeless… and the hungry. Different answers from equally devout Christians.

There are those who couldn’t care less… but some people take elections seriously. Good friends with different opinions on which candidates should be elected often get involved in violent arguments… even fisticuffs. That kind of political action isn’t recommended… but it happens.

Abortion is one of the issues that divides Christians throughout the U.S. … actually the world… these days. Christians are also divided in Northern Ireland… but certainly not on theological grounds.
There are some issues so divisive that fathers still disinherit their sons because they have the wrong lifestyle or fail to live up to expectations… the father’s expectation. Some mothers still disown their daughters for picking the wrong mate or “throwing away” their lives… in the opinion of the mothers.

There are still people today who literally have to give up everything when they decide to follow Christ. This is an especially costly move for Moslems and Brahmans who forsake the ancestral faith for Christ. They often lose not only their families but any contact whatsoever with people who were near and dear to them since childhood. They sometimes lose their very identity. It takes great courage for some people to become Christians… and for others to live the Christ-centered life. Chances are, we won’t have to make such a difficult decision. But, on the other hand, we might.

One who made a difficult decision for Christ was John Bunyan. His imprisonment meant separation from his wife and children. He worried about them. What was to happen to them? He wrote: “The parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place, as the pulling of the flesh from my bones; and not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great mercies, but also because I should have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries, and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides. O the thought of the hardship I thought my blind one might go under would break up my heart to pieces… But yet, recalling myself, thought I, I must venture you all with God, though it goeth to the quick to leave you; O I saw in this condition, I was a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children; yet thought I, I must do it; I must do it.”

Most will never be called on to pay the terrible price that Bunyan did… but, again, some might.

Jesus also talks of taking up the cross: “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” And further: “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

The cross was more than a figure of speech to the disciples… whether or not Jesus was hinting at the way He was to die. When the Roman general Varus broke up a revolt engineered by Judas of Galilee, he crucified 2,000 Jews and put the crosses along the road to Galilee. In ancient times, the criminal actually carried the cross beam of his cross to the place of crucifixion. And those to whom Jesus spoke had seen people struggling under the weight of their crosses and dying in agony upon them.
In a similar passage in Luke (9:23), Jesus speaks of a follower taking up his cross daily. This may seem to tone down Jesus’ command. But it also adds a new dimension. Is it easier to die once, or to die daily? If it’s more difficult to die daily, no longer can we be the center of attention. The will of God, as discerned through Christ, must take the place of our will. In denying ourselves we obviously will be putting our emphasis on the needs of others. Our new approach would put God first, others second, and ourselves third. Quite a difference… moving down from No. 1 to No. 3. And we’re not to assume this new role from time to time… or once in a while… but all the time. Every day. Daily.

Jesus goes on to say that he who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. Saving your life, to me, sounds like putting a safety net around all you do… or perhaps not doing much of anything with your life… keeping it in reserve in case you want to try to do something big… something dramatic… for others… at some future date, of course.

When does a grain of wheat bear fruit? When it reaches full growth and ripens? No, says Jesus, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit (John 12:24).

The same applies to us. We don’t bear fruit unless we die to self… give up our selves… our very lives… to the service of others. When we lose our life for His sake, says Jesus, that’s when we find it. We don’t let our life rust out… No. We wear it out… in service to others.
Anyone thinking about becoming a Christian should read, re-read, and then meditate on today’s gospel lesson from Matthew. I say this in all honesty. Jesus is not trying to talk anyone into following Him. He may not be telling prospective followers what is going to happen to them...but He is laying out a scenario that may happen to them or could happen to them. And, of course, it’s one that has happened to countless others throughout the centuries. Jesus is not pulling any punches in inviting us to join Him.

What does the world offer us? A bed of roses? Perhaps. Comfort, ease, a soft life, advancement, houses, boats, automobiles, glamorous vacations, stock options and so forth. These are inducements the world tosses out. Of course, such promises don’t always materialize.

Always the adventurer, Pizarro offered his little band of followers a safe haven or an opportunity for adventure, fame, and fortune in Peru. He used his sword to draw a line on the sand from east to west. “Friends and comrades,” said he, “on that side are toil, hunger, nakedness, the drenching storm, desertion and death; on this side, ease and pleasure. There lies Peru with its riches; here, Panama and its poverty. Choose each man what best becomes a brave Castilian. For my part I go south.” Then he stepped across the line. And 13 men who were to gain great fame and fortune chose adventure with him.

After the siege of Rome in 1849, Garibaldi issued this proclamation to his followers: “Soldiers, all our efforts have been unavailing. I have nothing to offer you but hunger and thirst, hardship and death; but I call on all who love their country to join with me.” And they came by the hundreds.

Remember what Sir Winston Churchill offered the British people after the troop withdrawal from Dunkirk?: “Blood, toil, sweat and tears.” And the people were up to the challenge.

I don’t know what your expectations were when you became a Christian. But I doubt that you look upon that day as the time you reached your life’s goal and settled down in retirement...having accomplished what you set out to do and being prepared to lie down to pleasant dreams.

If this is the case, I must inform you that God has a great deal more in store for you. After all, the Christian life should not be a drag. It should be an adventure. And if we’re unwilling to commit ourselves to something greater than the minimum we can get by with by doing...we have little to look forward to.
Do you remember the day when you stood up... possibly right here in this house of worship... and boldly promised God that you renounced Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against Him?

You don’t remember? Why not? Were you baptized as a child? If that is the case, your parents and godparents stood up for you and they made that promise... and others... on your behalf. And later... if you have been confirmed... you renewed the covenant God made with your sponsors at the time of your baptism. If you have been confirmed, you accepted these responsibilities at that time.

What else did you do at your baptism? You renounced the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

You renounced all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God.

What else did you do? You made at least three solemn promises: 1—you promised to turn to Jesus Christ and to accept Him as your Savior. 2—you promised to put your whole trust in His grace and His love. And 3—you also promised to follow Jesus Christ and to obey Him as your Lord.

So... how are things going? Have you found the Christian life to be challenging? Remember... we didn’t promise to do a lot of great things... being responsible... doing what’s right. Standing up for someone who is being maligned. Protecting someone who can’t look out for himself or herself. Perhaps that doesn’t add up to a long list of achievements. But it shows who you are... whose you are... and where you’re coming from. And such Christian action inspires others to go and do likewise. It also encourages those who are down... showing them that somebody out there cares for them... looks out for their interests.

Not very dramatic... you say. True. But the Christian life is far more than a few dramatic moments. It’s living each day... trying to do what’s right... trusting in God... and looking toward the next day, confident of God’s love and His interest in you.

There’s a certain excitement about living the Christian life... and who knows what impact you might have on others. Such influence is not limited to the great deeds of the most famous of saints. Everyday garden variety saints who also do wonderful things and help and influence others. A little girl named Ashley (Brodie) lives with her mother in a decaying government-subsidized housing project in Washington, D.C. She prayed to God... asking Him to provide a playground for the children of the neighborhood. Some places... that would be a modest
request. But in this case there were some difficulties. Many of her low-income friends and neighbors would have to provide volunteers, and donations of money and equipment if this project were to succeed. Several people in authority assured Ashley that they wouldn’t get a cent and that the number of volunteers would be minimal. But they hadn’t reckoned with Ashley… who drew up her own set of plans and spread the word throughout the community. Nor had they reckoned with the power of God.

Ashley and others lined up more than 100 volunteers for the first day of construction. The work force kept growing for the next four days. On the fifth and final day… 500 volunteers finished the project. Quite an accomplishment. The housing development children had their park… and Ashley had been a major contributor. To Ashley, this was her dream park… and also the answer to her prayers. So… never underestimate the power of prayer… or the influence of a determined child with a mission. And I must say this was quite an adventure for a seven-year-old! Who can imagine what she might do next? And please don’t tell her that there’s no adventure in living out the Christian faith… or that there’s no room for children in God’s scheme of things.

There’s more to the Christian religion than making promises and following creeds. The gospel is good news. But Christian truths must be translated into Christian love… Christian action. This concept is far different from what the religious leaders of Jesus’ day saw, heard, and did. To the priest, religion consisted of sacrifice. As far as the scribe was concerned, the Law was the most important aspect of religion. But to Jesus… religion consists of love. And Christian love calls on us to put our faith in action. Who knows where the Spirit of God might lead us? Therefore, we should be receptive to whatever God has in mind for us. Who knows… it might turn our life into a great adventure.
Today’s gospel lesson is a continuation of last week’s… in which Jesus told His followers what they might expect if they agreed to become messengers of the king. Like the other great leaders, Jesus did not try to convince anybody that things would be easy. He leveled with those who would consider following Him. In fact, it might appear that He was trying to dissuade them. On the other hand, none would be disillusioned. Jesus had warned them, and only those who were willing to face a series of obstacles were encouraged to follow Him. But let’s not forget that the spirit of adventure and the possibility of greatness have tremendous appeal.

In today’s lesson, Jesus offers some additional insight into what following Him could mean. When He said He did not come to bring peace… but a sword… he didn’t mean in a literal sense. He was speaking of the sword as an instrument of persecution. And it was an ever-present possibility. Luke’s version gives us the meaning of the word “sword:” “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you nay; but rather division. Division.

Even in those days… division of families was developing. And it was uncomfortable for all concerned. It’s as if some families were choosing up sides. There may be one or more Christians among them… but the others continued in their Jewish faith… or remained pagan. Those who renounced Judaism might be disowned and disinherited by their families… so it would be difficult to become a Christian in such a situation. It’s still not easy today… even though we like to think we live in a world where we’re more considerate of the religious beliefs of others. But the problems associated with becoming a Christian are no less real today than they were in Jesus’s days on earth.

Becoming “too devout” or “too good a Christian” is another matter that can divide families. There was a young Nobleman in Italy named Frances Bernardone (1181-1226). He had lived his first 25 years in ease and comfort… in dissipation… and without purpose. He was confronted with a mysterious voice he heard in his sleep; That voice told him to return home and there it would be revealed to him what he was to do. Later… the figure of Christ, on a wooden crucifix, parting its painted lips called him by name and said, “Francis, go repair my house, which is falling in ruins.”

Francis thought he was being called on to repair a badly deteriorating chapel. So he took a large supply of expensive cloth from an area where his wealthy father had stored it and sold it to customers in a nearby town.
He also sold his horse... and walked home. He took the money and tried to give it to the priest at the neglected chapel. But he wouldn’t accept the money. Neither would his bishop, who called on Francis to give it back... to appease his father.

Gladly, my Lord,” replied Francis. “I will do still more.” He then went into the bishop’s palace and disrobed; carrying his clothing he re-appeared, almost nude, before a crowd of people. “Listen to me, everybody!” he cried. “Up to now, I have called Peter Bernardone my father; but now that I propose to serve God, I give him back not only this money that he wants so much, but all the clothes I have from him!” Then Francis threw everything on the ground. “From now on,” he added, “I can advance naked before the Lord, saying in truth no longer: my father, Peter Bernardone, but: our Father who art in Heaven!”

That is how St. Francis of Assisi dramatically made the transition from rich nobleman to poor beggar... from a man of the world to a man of God.

A beautiful, rich, and cultured young woman named Clare di Offreduccio also fled her family and renounced her fortune to join the order of “Poor Ladies” founded by St. Francis. In addition, she turned her back on a host of wealthy and influential would-be suitors. St. Clare devoted her live to the religious order sometimes called the Poor Clares in her honor. Clare’s two younger sisters later became nuns, so her family was greatly torn because of the religious zeal of their three daughters.

Clare’s switch from riches to rags was also dramatic and abrupt. She left home and family and dressed as a bride. When she arrived at the monastery, her friend and father in God, Francis, cropped her beautiful hair and inducted her into the Poor Clares. Her family visited her and tried to get her to change her mind... to no avail. Clare’s sisters joined her in rejecting their inheritance... which later passed on to strangers. What a bitter pill this must have been for her rich and noble family.

Francis and Clare would probably have gotten along well with their families... if they hadn’t become so devout... if they hadn’t taken their Christianity so seriously. But the world around them... in fact, the entire world... is a better place because of what Francis and Clare did. Not only that... but both of them have inspired countless others through the centuries to take their Christianity seriously. Besides that, their stories are no less
inspiring in our day. We could certainly use a few Francises and Clares; couldn’t we? Do you think we could work with them in the North Central Cluster? Another question comes to mind: Did Francis and Clare take their religion too seriously?... or do most of us take our Christianity too lightly?

In today’s lesson Jesus says “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

In this passage... Jesus is not minimizing the importance of natural affection. He does not say we are not to love our parents, our siblings, our children, and other members of our families. In fact, He honors our love of family. He Himself respected His earthly family. But He tells us that He is to come first in the allegiance of His followers. He is to have no rivals. He is No. 1. Others in our lives are to be No. 2. And we individuals... you and I... are to be No. 3.

If natural affection comes between Christ and us... it should be sacrificed for His sake.

As a man, He didn’t love His own life more than truth. Otherwise He couldn’t have given it upon a cross for God’s sake... and for the sake of the world. Jesus had strong ties to the home, but the call of the kingdom was a higher calling.

What will be the result of our carrying the cross? It will lead to life... like wheat that has been sown. Safety first is a good policy in the workplace. Safety first is a good policy in other situations. But safety first is a terribly policy in the Christian life. Ease and comfort, security and accomplishment of personal desires don’t give us fulfillment. They never will. Why? Because we are called to serve God and our fellow man...and if we don’t expend ourselves, we have wasted our lives... losing all that makes life valuable to others and worth living for ourselves. The way to true happiness is to spend our lives selflessly. In that way we will find life here and now... and in the hereafter. It is by dying to self that we live for others. Or, as Jesus says (John 12:24), “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, if bears much fruit.”

Unless and until we give ourselves to the service of others... die to self... we don’t bear fruit. But if we do what we’re called on to do...we bear much fruit... like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies.
That’s losing our life for Christ’s sake. That’s finding life. That’s living a life that has meaning.
Proper 7, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4 - 11, 19 - 23) 32 - 49

PSALM 9

NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Corinthians 6: 1 - 13

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

GOSPEL: Mark 4: 35 - 41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"
Two points stand out in today’s epistle lesson from Second Corinthians. “... If anyone is in Christ,” says Paul, “he is a new creation (or a new creature); the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” So... a Christian is a new creation. Does that make him or her a special person? It certainly does!

Let’s talk more about a Christian being a new creation. In our Baptismal Service... in the Thanksgiving over Water... Page 306 in the Prayer Book... the celebrant prays: “We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

And then the celebrant touches the water and prays: “Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.”

Paul’s definition of a Christian is “a man in Christ”... or a “person in Christ.” If we are “in Christ,” are we improved over what we had been? Yes, but to say we are improved doesn’t go far enough. Being in Christ is far more than being improved. It’s far more than being reformed. It’s far more than being altered or changed. It’s far more than being changed in any external way. A Christian is re-made. A Christian undergoes a radical change. Or, as Paul says, the old has passed away... the new has come. We have been born again... re-born... born anew. We have experienced a spiritual rebirth.

Remember the situation involving Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews? Something was bothering him, and he came to Jesus... by night... during the darkness... because he was a member of the Sanhedrin and he didn’t want to be seen with this teacher who had no standing with the Jewish establishment. But being a seeker after the truth, he wanted to talk with Jesus. When Jesus told him that unless one is born anew... from above... he cannot see the kingdom of God... (John 3: 1-15)... Nicodemus couldn’t understand. Jesus was speaking about what we would call spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus was hung up on the physical... perhaps even the practical. “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked Jesus. “Can he enter into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus’ answer was simple and to the point: Unless one is born of water and the Spirit... unless one is reborn spiritually... he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
The point Jesus was making... and the one Paul makes in our lesson today in our lesson from Second Corinthians... is this: If we're ever going to be able to live a new life... a new spiritual life... we must become a new creature... completely new... built up in a new way. A little change here or there... or now and then... doesn’t get the job done. Such a temporary change lets us revert back to our old ways.

Of ourselves we’re incapable of changing. But God can make us new... radically different from what we were. And there’s a need for a supernatural birth so we’ll have “power to become children of God... born not of the will of the flesh... but of God.” All this redemptive work to transform us, Paul reminds, is from God. We don’t deserve it... we can’t earn it... and we can’t take credit for it. Christ doesn’t do it apart from God the Father’s action and direction. God does it all through Christ. God reconciled us sinful and undeserving people to Himself through Christ... not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us, Paul tells us, the message of reconciliation.

This is where Paul calls us ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. So we are called on to build the bridge between mankind and God and between each other. Being an ambassador for Christ is quite an honor. It’s also a big responsibility. But just think how important we Christians are! Not only are we agents of reconciliation between God and mankind... and between fellow Christians... we’re also ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador must know and present his or her nation’s point of view... assert her rights... and create an atmosphere of harmony. So it is with a Christian... serving as Christ’s ambassador. We represent our Lord. We speak for Him... whether we realize it or not. On reflection... I have a feeling that there are many times when we’re not up to the task. But it’s our duty... even though we need all the help we can get... especially divine help... God’s help.

However... we’re not responsible for the message... only for communicating it rightly. We talk of how important the Christian is because he or she is an ambassador for Christ. And I don’t want to downplay this role. But there’s even more in store for us. The Old Testament tells us Moses was the servant (or slave) of God (Deu. 34:5). In Greek, the word is Dulos. It is not a title of shame. In fact, it’s a title of highest honor! Very few people in the Bible attained that title. Moses, Joshua (24:29), and David (Ps. 89:20) were proud to be called the slaves of God. Paul considered it an honor to be called a slave of God (Titus 1:1). So did our Lord’s brother
James (1:1). Even so... Jesus speaks of a higher role for those who love Him. He calls those who love Him “friends.” “No longer do I call you servants (or slaves),” says Jesus, “for the servant (or slave) does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”

It’s great to have friends. We don’t always know who our friends are on earth. And there are times when we thought someone we thought was our friend... but he wasn’t. We usually learn who our friends are when the going is tough... when it really counts. An old Italian proverb says it very eloquently: A true friend is a treasure. A true friend is a treasure.

So don’t forget... Jesus has called us to be His friends and friends of God. That’s a higher calling than a king or an emperor could ever offer us. We don’t have to think of God as a distant figure... we don’t have to gaze longingly at God from afar off. We are not like slaves who can’t enter into our Master’s presence. No longer is Jesus a distant stranger. He is our close friend. In reality, He has called us to be His partner. This is a role to which a slave could never aspire. A slave was defined in Greek law as a living tool. A slave’s master never shared his life, his hopes, or his dreams with him. He told the slave what to do and he did it. The master didn’t tell the slave why, nor did he explain how. But Jesus is telling us that we are not His slaves... that we are His partners. He shares His mind with us. He shares Himself... His life... with us. Of course, we can decline to be His partner. He doesn’t force us to accept this role of being a partner in the work of leading the world to God. But don’t you think He would be sadly disappointed in us if we turned Him down?

What is a Christian? A Christian is a new creation...a new person. He or she is not improved...but radically changed... completely re-created. What else is a Christian? A Christian is an ambassador for Christ. We represent Him. We speak for Him. So we must take our role seriously. It’s a great responsibility.

Jesus tells us that if we love Him... we will do what He tells us to do. If we do that, we become His friends... friends of God. Jesus shares Himself... His mind... His life... with us. This permits us to become His partners... sharing with Him in winning the world to God.

Who says being a Christian isn’t exciting? Who says it isn’t challenging?

And even though God takes the initiative... we are ultimately responsible for what we do... or what we don’t do. Amen.
Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."
Who do the people say that I am? But who do you say that I am? These are questions Jesus asked His disciples in today's gospel lesson. What did it matter at that time? What difference does it make now? It made a great deal of difference then... and it still does.

By the time our gospel episode took place Jesus was a public figure. Even though the area in which He lived, preached, taught, and healed was rather small—and isolated—He was widely known. Multitudes came to see and to hear Him. Others came to be healed. Still others were moved to worship Him. On the other side of the coin... numerous others, including people in positions of power and authority avoided direct contact with Him. But they knew about Him. To them... Jesus could only be identified with the old: John the Baptizer. Or Elijah. Or one of the old prophets. Some thought highly of Him... perhaps as a great prophet or a great spiritual thinker and teacher. Or as a leader who stood up for the interest of the poor and powerless. To those in power, Jesus was increasingly becoming a force to be reckoned with.

These words answer, in part, Jesus' question about who the people said He was. But let's not ignore the second question Jesus asked His disciples: But who do you say that I am? Before we proceed... let's realize how important this question was to the disciples.

To Mark... Jesus is the center of interest. But He is no longer a public figure... but rather the suffering Messiah who sets out to prepare His disciples for the days ahead... the events of His passion. Does Jesus think of His mission in terms of the Messianic expectation?

When Peter said of Jesus that “Your are the Christ of God”... the words provide the true answer as Luke understands them. But Peter and other disciples did not understand the true meaning of the answer. So Jesus tells them not to use the words until after His death and Resurrection. Then they will really know who He is. Only one who has witnessed the suffering and Resurrection of Jesus will be able to know who He is and what He has done. In the words of one commentator: “Only those who have been reconciled to God in Christ can know that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (II Cor. 5:19). He was the Christ of God—God’s Christ, not ours.

“Most of the Messiahs—as conceived and occasionally appearing—were soldiers of kings dedicated to the national purpose; Christ, in the sense in which Jesus was the Christ, was the gift of God for our redemption,
not from human foes, but from sin and death. This redemption can be fully known only in the Kingdom of God, which lies beyond history, but a foretaste is already available in the Church, the “colony of heaven,” and in the Spirit, the earnest of our inheritance.”

I’ll rephrase a question that Jesus raised: Who is He to us? Who is He to Polycarp, an important Second Century Christian figure in Asia Minor who had known John and others who had seen the Lord? To him, Jesus was my kind and savior.” And he made this statement during an extremely traumatic experience near Smyrna. Polycarp had been deceived and taken before the proconsul in the stadium, where a crowd was assembled for the games. The proconsul urged him to deny or give up his Christian faith. “Take an oath by the emperor’s guardian spirit,” he urged. “Curse Christ.” Polycarp’s answer: “I have served him for 86 years and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king and savior?” He refused to yield to the proconsul’s threats, and the people yelled for the blood of the man “who destroys our gods.” So Polycarp was ordered to be burned alive. As the fire was kindled. And, according to an eyewitness, “the flames made a sort of arch like a ship’s sail filled with the wind, and they were like a wall round the martyr’s body; and he looked, not like burning flesh, but like bread in the oven or gold and silver being refined in a furnace.” Then the executioner was ordered to stab Polycarp to speed up his death. He was faithful to his king and master under the most difficult situation we could imagine. He was faithful to the end and has been an inspiration to Christians throughout the centuries.

Who was Jesus Christ to Francis of Assisi? He was Francis’ role model. One writer had this to say of Francis, sometimes called “everybody’s saint:” “He was a man of tremendous spiritual power, those consuming love for Jesus Christ and redeemed creation found expression in all he said and did.”

Who was Jesus to Moses the Black, a desert monk in the Fourth Century? Before his conversion to Christianity, Moses, an Ethiopian, was a man of great physical strength and of low moral character. He was a servant in an Egyptian household, from which he was dismissed for stealing from his employer. He later became the head of a gang of robbers. History doesn’t tell us how this Moses was converted, but he was... and he later joined a group of monks in the desert. He had relapses... but he persevered. Later he was ordained a priest. As
he stood clothed in white after ordination, the bishop said to him, “Now the black man is made white.” “Only outside,” said Moses. “God knows I am still black within.”

This Moses met his death when the monastery was raided by Berbers, and he refused to defend himself. Monks still live where St. Moses is buried. Any way you look at it, Jesus was truly his savior... his redeemer. We don’t know how such a miracle came about. But it did. This scoundrel Moses made a turnabout of the full 180 degrees.

We have a good idea of the role Jesus played in the lives of the Apostles and the saintly Polycarp. His influence is obvious in the lives of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Moses the Black.

Closer home... who do the people in and around Grafton say that Jesus is? More importantly who do you say He is? This is a question all of us must answer. We may be ready to do so now... or we may need more time. Don’t answer out loud. But I am going to ask you the question: Who is Jesus? Who do you say He is? Who is Jesus to you, <named parishioner>? Who is Jesus to you, <12 named parishioners> and the rest of you here today?

Don’t think your answers aren’t important. How you respond will determine the direction this congregation will take for the next several years. They will help you keep things in perspective. Spiritual and secular matters can’t be separated. We need to decide how important Jesus Christ is... what His role is... in our lives... and how we can live out our love for Him in this family of faith.
Proper 8, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 2 Samuel 1: 17 - 27

PSALM: 130

NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Corinthians 8: 7 - 15

Now as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you--so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something--now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has--not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

GOSPEL: Mark 5:21 - 43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You
see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.
Perhaps we’re more familiar with the times... the incidents... when the apostle Paul is either defending or expounding a doctrine of the Church or is responding to a pressing problem in one of the congregations with which he has been deeply and emotionally involved. Today’s lesson from Second Corinthians does not fit that pattern... but it speaks eloquently of Christians’ concern for other Christians. As this particular chapter opens, Paul says that the grace of God has been demonstrated in the churches of Macedonia. Thy have been involved in a spiritual miracle. Or, more specifically, through God’s grace, the Macedonians have experienced... and learned... the blessing of giving. These three churches—at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroia—have come through a very difficult time. First, they suffered persecution for their faith. Then Rome levied high taxes against two of its principal natural resources—timber and minerals. So the Macedonians have suffered greatly. And they are by no stretch of the imagination wealthy congregations. So it’s all the more amazing that they have responded so generously to Paul’s plea to help the Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul is praising the Macedonian Christians for their liberality. And for good reason. They were not giving merely according to their means... what was expected of good Christians. They were doing far more than that. They were giving more than Paul could ask or expect. They were giving sacrificially... and they were doing this because they wanted to give... to help their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. They never felt under any pressure to give... they gave liberally out of love of God and love of their fellow Christians. What this amounts to is poor Christians in Macedonia helping the Christians in the mother Church in Jerusalem... who also happen to be poor.

But is this a surprise? When it comes to giving... haven’t you seen instances when those who had little contributed the most? I have. And often I’ve noticed that it’s usually those who talk the least who give the most.

What is the “grace of God” that Paul sees at work in the lives of the Macedonian Christians? The grace of God is the freely given undeserved favor and goodness that God offers through Christ to those who will accept it in faith. It is something bestowed or given. This means it’s never a human achievement. Therefore, we human beings can’t take credit for it.

Paul says that first in time and importance was the Macedonians’ willing offering of their entire lives in faith and active devotion to God. And then the giving of the money was the inevitable expression of their attitude
toward God and His people. Giving themselves implies costly giving. That’s the same phrase found in Paul’s
letter to the Galatians. (1:4). It refers to the supreme sacrifice that our Savior Christ made for us.

Divine grace is certainly at work in the churches in Macedonia. It is acted out and otherwise expressed in
the lives of the people in these three congregations. What an expression of grace and faith and love!! No wonder
Paul is so moved by these people.

First and foremost, these poor, persecuted Christians gave themselves. They did this in a complete,
costly, and sacrificial dedication to the Lord, Paul tells us. And they went even further. They dedicated their
entire lives... in loyalty to Paul and his close associates. Their gift of money, though significant, was only part of
their offering.

I wonder: Do we ever see the grace of God at work in our lives? After all, it was for us that Christ died.
We certainly have experienced the love of God... the grace of God. How are we going to repay this debt? We
can’t... can we? But there is something we can do: We can show our gratitude. How? Perhaps we can learn
from St. Francis of Assisi. He’s widely and lovingly known for his love of God and his fellow man and, in fact,
for all of God’s creatures. He saw the Christ to whom he owed everything in all me. Do we? If we do, how can
we be less than generous in supporting the mission of the Church... here at St. Barnabas... and beyond? The
North Central Cluster? The Deanery? The Diocese of West Virginia? The national Church? The Anglican
Community? Has the sacrificial giving of the poor persecuted Christians of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroia
made an impression on us? Have we experienced the blessing of giving? Have we ever experienced a spiritual
miracle... as the Macedonian Christians did?
Proper 9, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 24:34 - 38, 42 - 49, 58 - 67
PSALM: 45
NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 7:15 - 25a
GOSPEL: Matthew 11:16 - 19, 25 - 30

"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon;" the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
Both our epistle and gospel today are about the law, sometimes called the Law of Moses, even though part of it pre-dated him. Concerning the law, Paul says it is good... and he believes his true self to be on the side of right... and consequently on the side of God. But his physical nature had become a realm in which a foreign power took control and he was incapable of overthrowing it. At one point, Paul says: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” And further: “I can will what is right but I can not do it.”

We have the same problem; don’t we? But Paul learned that he is not left alone in his moral conflict. He doesn’t have to depend only on his own strength. Loyalty to and fellowship with a risen Christ supply Paul with undreamed of resources of power. The same applies to us. We have fellowship with the same risen Lord... and we call on Him to supply the strength... the power... that we need to overcome the difficulties we face along our Christian journey.

The role of the law among early Christians was often clothed in ambiguity. The claims of the law were recognized... but rejected. In the earliest days, according to Acts, Christians continued to “practice Judaism” but were more concerned with declaring that Christ was the Messiah than with what their attitude should be toward the law. Eventually there was a compromise among leaders of the Church: That salvation was by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that Jesus implied... and possibly recognized... that the law as understood by Judaism no longer regulated the ways of God with men... that Jesus had taken over the place the law had held. The gospel writers said “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached.” (Luke 16:16, Matt. 11:11-13). In other words, the coming of Jesus had initiated a new order in which the law is superseded.

Toward the end of our Gospel lesson today from Matthew...when Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” he is talking to those who labor to do the works of the law and are heavy-laden with the burden that the scribes put on them. Then Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lonely in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
To the orthodox Jew, religion was a serious matter and it was filled with burdens. Of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said: They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with their finger.” And He said further (also in Matthew): “They do all their deeds to be seen by men.”

Someone has pointed out that a man who overloads a horse is chargeable before the law. But what of a man who loaded 613 commandments on “the people of the land” who had no religious training? Laying the law on them was terrible... but it was even worse to do nothing to help them, even though that was part of a teacher's duties. But what if a man didn't then obey all these commandments, even without the help of his teacher? Was he given any relief? Was he absolved of any responsibility? No. On the contrary, even if he didn't know what to do... and his teacher made no effort to tell him... he was further humiliated. He was then branded as a godless man.

The same religious leaders who let down the people whom they were entrusted to teach were very visible in praying on street corners, in wearing symbols of holiness on their robes, in seeking the best seats in the synagogues, and they delighted in being called “rabbi” or “my great one.” Some teachers took great pride in being recognized as a teacher or rabbi.

A parable attributed to a rabbi named Korah shows how demanding... how ridiculous... how burdensome... how impossible... it was to keep the law. It goes this way: There was a poor widow who had two daughters and a field. When she began to plow, the law of Moses said, “You must not plow with an ox and an ass together.” When she began to sow, he said, “You must not sow your field with mingled seed.” (You must keep the various types of seed separate.) When she began to reap and make stacks of corn, he said: “When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field you shall not go back to get it (Deut. 14:19), and you shall not reap your field to its very border (Lev. 19:9). She began to thresh, and he said, “give me the heave offering, and the first and second tithe.” She accepted the ordinance and gave them all to him.

What did the poor woman then do? She sold her field and bought two sheep, to clothe herself from their fleece, and have profit from their young. When they bore their young the priesthood of Aaron demanded the first-
born. So she complied. When the time came, she sheared the sheep. The priesthood of Aaron demanded the first of the fleece of the sheep (Deut. 18:3). Then she thought, "I cannot stand up against this man. I will slaughter the sheep and eat them. Then Aaron came and said, "give me the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach. (Deut. 18:3). Then she said, "Even when I have killed them I am not safe from you. Behold they shall be devoted." Then Aaron said, "In that case they belong entirely to me." (Numbers 18:14). He took them and went away and left her weeping with her two daughters.

The people whom Jesus was addressing were also ready for some relief from the law. It was so demanding that they found themselves in a lose-lose situation. They wanted to do right... but that was impossible. And if they failed to obey even one obscure part of the law... while complying with the rest of it... they still were in violation of the law. That was what the Law was all about. It was a set of rules and regulations that seemed to be endless. They dictated every aspect of a person's life. The Jews used the term the yoke for entering into submission to. They spoke of the yoke of the Law, the yoke of the commandments, the yoke of the Kingdom, and the yoke of God.

If the yoke of the law is a burden... how does the yoke of Christ differ from it? First, the yoke of Christ is a voluntary yoke. Take. The yoke of Christ is easy. Christ himself tells us that. One of the meanings of the Greek word for yoke (chrestos) is well-fitting. The yoke of Christ is not necessarily easy to carry...but it is laid on us in love. It is meant to be carried in love. And love makes even the heaviest burden light.

Do you remember the stamp that Boys Town mails out? It features the drawing of a young boy carrying another boy almost as big as he is. And his comment is: "He ain't heavy, Father. He's my brother."

As Jesus says: "Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
Proper 9, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 2 Samuel 5:1 - 5, 9 - 10

PSALM: 48

NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Corinthians 12:2 - 10

GOSPEL: Mark 6:1 - 13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.
I want to call your attention to an incident that happened shortly after the year of 1900. A young man was riding a train that was heading toward Parkersburg. He wasn't just any young man. He was a courteous young man. And he was from Bridgeport. What distinguished this young man from several others of a similar age who were on the train? He saw a well-dressed man who must have been at least 40 who was standing. Whereupon the young man rose from his seat and invited the older man to sit down. He did. Later they talked and the older man offered the young man a job, which he accepted. And, as they say, the rest is history.

Do any of you here today know who that courteous young man from Bridgeport was?

He was Michael Benedum, the legendary oil wildcatter who amassed a fortune and gave large monetary gifts to communities and institutions in West Virginia and elsewhere. In case his name doesn't register with some of you... he died many years before the North Central Cluster of Episcopal Churches was founded.

Now that we've talked about a widely known Bridgeport native, perhaps we should give some time and attention to Grafton. At least three sports figures who used to live in Grafton made names for themselves at home, and some of them, far away. Clair Bee was once one of the most widely known and respected basketball coaches in the country. He also wrote books about the sport. To people in the Grafton area he may be best known for coaching there. But to others... his days as basketball coach at Long Island University in New York were highlights.

Scotty Hamilton didn't look like a basketball player—he was rather rotund, not very tall, and not very fast. But he could certainly lead the fast break on the basketball court. He had a great deal to do with WVU's winning the National Invitational Basketball tournament in Madison Square Garden, New York, in 1942. (Joe Warder and John Efaw remember all about that.)

Charles Francis “Mickey” McDade made a name for himself as coach of basketball and football at Charleston Catholic High School. He was also widely known as a basketball official.

What sort of a reception did these men... Michael Benedum, Clair Bee, Scotty Hamilton, and Mickey McDade... receive when they came back to their old home towns? I understand that Mr. Benedum had the Methodist Church completely renovated. And also air conditioned... one of the first in the area. My guess is that he would have been well-received when he returned. I don't know how Messrs. Bee, Hamilton, and McDade
were treated by the townspeople... but I have a feeling they were greeted warmly. However, such was not the case when Jesus returned to His home town of Nazareth. We know that Rodney Dangerfield often complains that “I don’t get no respect.” Jesus could have made the same complaint... but He didn’t. However, the people certainly didn’t speak highly of Him. He was under no delusion. He knew it was difficult to be accepted in one’s home town. He even went so far as to quote a familiar proverb and apply it to Himself. “A prophet,” said Jesus, “is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.”

Jesus seems to have accepted the truth of the statement. He didn’t show any self-pity or complain about how unfair or unjust such an attitude was. He went about his duties of teaching. Mark doesn’t elaborate on Jesus’ teachings at Nazareth... but he does point out that Jesus could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And He marveled because of their unbelief.

The townspeople let it be known that they knew Jesus and His family. They knew all about Him... and they weren’t impressed. Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to Him? What mighty works are wrought by His hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Simon, and are not His sisters here with us? They knew all the facts about this man who grew up in Nazareth... but they didn’t know Him. And they didn’t seem to want to know Him.

Would the people in our old home town... or the town in which we now live... treat us kindly if we went among them preaching or teaching or doing good works? Would we be welcome? Would they invite us into their homes?

The Great Commission that Jesus gave His disciples... and also gives us I this community of faith... calls on us to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have told you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

When are we going to develop a plan of action to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout this community? If people don’t want to hear Jesus’ message of redemption from us, should we back off? Or should we persist, like Jesus did? Jesus tells us that “He who receives anyone whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me.” (Luke 10:16).
These words should encourage us when we’re out in the vineyard doing God’s work. Also when we’re worshipping and studying. So should these words, which Jesus also uttered: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” (Luke 10:16).

We’re called on to live out our faith, not only where we worship... but where we live and work and in the world around us. If the people receive us, they also receive Jesus and God the Father. If they don’t respond affirmatively, they have a serious problem: They have rejected God.

Are we uncomfortable speaking to others about God... about Christ? Or is it that we’re more concerned with being accepted by those around us, regardless of their beliefs... or lack of belief? If people take offense at us... as they did with Jesus... what are we going to do... fold up our tents and withdraw? I’m convinced that we’re often more concerned with being looked up to by others than with pleasing God. Pleasing our peers... or keeping up with them... is a waste of time. But loving God and doing what He calls us to do gives focus and meaning to our lives. If we who live in this community are unable... or unwilling... to talk to others about our faith... who will? Can we hire someone to do this? Can we send a substitute? No. It doesn’t work that way.

Remember God’s call of Isaiah? (Isaiah 6:8). Scripture tells us that Isaiah “heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’” Then he said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” God can... and does... draft people to serve Him. But I commend Isaiah to you. He volunteered... and God used him mightily.

Unless we volunteer ourselves... by offering our time, our spiritual gifts, our skills, and our talents to God for the spread of His kingdom and for the service of His people... not much is going to happen here now or in the near future. Realistically speaking... what does the long-term future of this community of faith look like? What is likely to happen? Unless there are some radical changes... fewer and fewer people are going to be doing less and less... for the spread of the Kingdom of God... and to minister to the needs of His people. However, a few dedicated and committed men, women, and children could change all that. But first, we must offer more and more of ourselves to God... and we must do it voluntarily... and with a smile.
Proper 9, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: 2 Kings 5:1 - 14

PSALM: 30

NEW TESTAMENT: Galatians 6: (1 - 6), 7 - 16


After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.”

"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."
I don’t know about you…but every time I read or reflect on today’s gospel lesson from Luke, a passage from Matthew…the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20)…immediately comes to mind. To me…the two seem to be closely related. And why not?

The Great Commission tells us what we as a community of faith…and as individuals…should be doing to proclaim the gospel (the Good News) of Jesus Christ. And today’s gospel lesson from Luke describes an early evangelistic mission in which Jesus sent 70 of His disciples to minister to the people and to proclaim that the Kingdom of God had come near to them. It also serves as a training exercise for future missionary adventures.

In the 28th Chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells the 11: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always. To the close of the age.”

Not only is Jesus telling the 11 what they are to do…but what He applies to His present day disciples…you and me. We should also be carrying out the Great Commission. And if we don’t do what He calls on all of us to do…we’re letting Jesus down. We’re not obeying Him.

And what about today’s gospel reading from Luke…in which Jesus sent out the 70? It was really and truly a brief…emphasis on brief…evangelistic trip into a nearby community. Not only were the 70 disciples going on a short missionary journey but at the same time they were being trained for the days ahead…after Jesus’ Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. They would be missing His presence and His leadership. There would be periods of inactivity, lack of organization, insecurity, and doubt before there was any forward movement by Jesus’ scared and demoralized followers. But it’s not difficult to visualize the 70 disciples going out together…two by two…on a mission. And doesn’t it make good sense for them to team up? They were not experienced evangelists at the time. As individuals they may have been reluctant to tell others the good news of the Gospel. In fact, they may have been uncomfortable in doing so as a team of two. But, now as then, the presence of another believer gives each of them…each of us…strength and courage…and immediate support.
Moving our calendars ahead some two thousand years... are you aware of the fact that some sales organizations have been known to send out two-person teams to call on customers and prospective customers? Such a policy makes good sense... and pays off.

Back in the days when circuses took their acts from town to town by rail they had to do something special to stir up interest in their performances. That’s when they sent their advance man ahead of everybody else... to whip up enthusiasm for their show and to tell the newspaper editors and any groups of people they encountered... and other individuals... all about the greatest show on earth. Perhaps without knowing it... the advance man was using some of the techniques Jesus had called on the 70 to do.

Alas... we have few circuses left... and they’re mostly small. We have little access to railroads. Most of them are gone. And who has a need for an advance person... man or woman? People with such qualifications or interests are either unemployed or have changed their occupations by now. Too bad.

Of course there are Christian groups who go on the road regularly to preach and teach, to give their testimonies... and to play musical instruments. Quite often great emphasis is on music. Imagine... if you will... a team of lay witnesses and/or evangelists, preachers, and musicians going to a town a few hours away from home... by car, van, or truck... on a Christian mission. It would probably require several vehicles to haul all their musical instruments and sound equipment. Will they have enough guitars? There may be a piano at the hall where the services will be held... but they’d better take a keyboard... just to be sure. Will one amplifier be enough? They want to be certain the music is loud enough. Will those who will be speaking and the musicians have spent enough time together? They’ll probably stay at different households when they arrive at their destination and they will have little time for rehearsal. Who is staying where? And they will all be concerned about the food and lodging. Will they be to their liking? If not, there’s not a great deal they can do about it. In a pinch, perhaps they could sneak in some hamburgers. Or a pizza. But it’s unlikely they could move from one place to another. How would such a missionary journey measure up to the mission of the 70 Luke writes about in today’s gospel lesson?
One of Jesus' instructions to the 70 was: Travel light. Travel light. Somehow I doubt if such concern about musical instruments and sound equipment would meet this criteria. And yet we know there are numerous people who respond favorably to music... and obviously music should play a role in Christian worship. Sound equipment is important in musical presentations. But sometimes music seems to be louder than necessary... unless you're sitting a great distance from the instruments or are hard of hearing. Eating and drinking what the hosts provide adds much to hospitality. It's often a good introduction to local delicacies... liquid and solid.

What about the messages that the speakers and musicians are to give to those assembled? Have all the proclaimers, including the musicians, spent time in prayer to God prior to the services? Another question also arises: Is what they're saying what God wants them to say... or are they injecting their self-serving thoughts into the message? This is certainly a time when egos need to be kept under control. Are they projecting God's message... or are they impressed by their own eloquence? This frequently is a problem. The idea is to make disciples of Jesus Christ... not of Evangelist So and So or a pastor or a teacher or a musician. Whose message are they proclaiming... God's or their own?

Some congregations would never think of trying to extend the kingdom of God by taking the Christian gospel to groups or individuals, to other parts of the community, or to other cities and towns. They like things where they are and how they are. After all, they reason, they have a beautiful Gothic place of worship. Their pastor attracts flocks of people to hear his sermons. Their church school facilities are first class and they have a good Christian education program... the best-sounding organ downtown... and their choir sings beautifully. But what are they doing to spread the word of God? ... to expand His kingdom? To tell... and show... others about the love of God? Actually... they work hard to pass on the Christian gospel and to live in peace and harmony with their neighbors. But... first... those they influence must come to their place of worship. All their thinking and actions are predicated on this approach.

Does it ever occur to them that some people aren't interested in worshiping in Gothic buildings... no matter how beautiful? Many aren't attracted to a congregation to hear its pastor, or its choir, or the pealing of its majestic organ. Some worshipers are more comfortable in white frame buildings... or store fronts. To them a guitar, or a keyboard, or a piano, would be more appropriate for playing hymns of praise. Some don't need...
don’t want... musical accompaniment at all. Unlike John Wesley... who was not welcome to preach in the stone churches in England... they’re not excluded from such worship center. But if you invited them to services at stone or brick churches they would never accept your invitation. Never.

Yet another group of Christians meets regularly, does most of the things they are expected to do... but they seem to lack at least three things:

--Commitment to God
--Enthusiasm in their worship
--And a willingness to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others

Where are you, I ask, when it comes to proclaiming or sharing your faith? Do you feel at home in a congregation filled with evangelistic zeal like the first group I mentioned? Or the one that makes the right moves but with little or no enthusiasm? Or the one that seeks to attract followers of Jesus Christ to an isolated group of worshipers who seem oblivious to those who don’t worship with them? Or a combination of the three?

As a congregation... and as individuals... we need to be doing our bit to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to attract others to Him. We can do this in a variety of ways... depending on our gifts, skills, and talents. But there’s plenty of work for all of us. Isn’t it interesting that a survey of a few years ago indicated that 80 per cent of those who attend church do so because someone invited them.

Reminds me of a story. Two good friends worked in the same office. One golfed on Sunday mornings. The other regularly attended church. The golfer frequently invited the churchgoer to play golf. For several weeks he repeated his invitation. But the churchgoer said no on each occasion. Finally the churchgoer told the golfer, “I’m not interested. And will you please not invite me to go to church with you again on Sunday morning?”

The golfer was taken aback. He was disappointed and said so. “I invited you to go golfing at least four or five times,” he noted. “You were always going to church. But you never once invited me to go to church with you.” You never once invited me to go to church with you.
 proper 10, year a

old testament: genesis 25:19 - 34

psalm: 119

new testament: romans 8:1 - 11

gospel: matthew 13:1 - 9, 18 - 23

that same day jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. and he told them many things in parables, saying: "listen! a sower went out to sow. and as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. but when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. let anyone with ears listen!"

"hear then the parable of the sower. when anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. as for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. as for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. but as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."
There may not be any farmers in our congregation today, but that doesn’t mean the words of Jesus in our gospel lesson from Matthew don’t have meaning. Jesus was very good at finding teaching aids that were practical. Some commentators are convinced that while great crowds were gathering around Jesus, as Matthew tells us in today’s gospel lesson, that a sower was busily at work nearby. And while the sower went about his work of sowing seeds within their view... Jesus noticed him and used him in His teaching. These same commentators are of the opinion that other people who figure prominently in the parables of Jesus were also close by... near enough to be seen and talked about. You’d have to be a good story-teller to see someone at work and immediately make him a central figure in a parable. Obviously... Jesus was a good story-teller. We already knew that. But perhaps He was even better than we realized.

You’ve probably known at least one person who could include about anyone in a poem or song he or she composed in a few minutes. But seeing a sower at work in a field... and immediately making him the central figure in a parable is not a routine matter. However, Jesus seems to have pulled it off. Not only was the sower used in a story that was developing around him... but he had a key role in illustrating a religious truth that people have been talking about for 2,000 years. This is a story that not only contains truth... it also gives life... flesh and bones... to a teaching of religious significance.

After focusing on the sower... Jesus turns His attention to the soil. It’s the soil He closely describes... not the sower. The parable is aimed at the hearers of the word and the preachers and teachers of the word. The parable speaks first of the seeds that fell along the path. The birds devoured some of them and others couldn’t grow. There’s about as much chance of the word gaining entry into the closed minds of some people as there is for seed to grow along the ground that has been beaten hard by many feet. Various prejudices erect barriers that prevent the word of God from breaking through. Some minds... and hearts... are inflexible. Pride, fear, and unwholesome attitudes leave little room for change... so the possibility of the gospel of Jesus Christ having any impact on the lives of such people is nil. We don’t write them off... but we really don’t expect any change in their lives. They have shut their minds to such a possibility.

The parable speaks also of the seeds that fell on rocky ground, where there was not much soil. Immediately they sprang up, since the soil had no depth, but when the sun rose they were scorched and because
they had no roots they withered away. Palestine had lots of fields like that. So does West Virginia, especially some of our hillside farms.

The seeds that fall on shallow ground have a myriad of difficulties. Have you ever seen anyone who has to do or try everything new that comes down the pike... but who never sticks with anything for more than a month? Some people hear of a new program... or a new way of doing something... and they’re off and running. In a few weeks, they’ve given it up and moved on. Emotional reactions don’t last long. We need an intelligent faith. We need to use our minds while we’re on our Christian journey. We don’t leave our brains behind and go off the deep end.

Christianity makes demands on us. We must meet them before we can really be of service to Christ or to those around us. Sudden burst of enthusiasm, followed by long periods of inactivity, don’t get the job done. Sure... we need enthusiasm... but we also need staying power. The race does not always go to the swift. Remember the tortoise and the hare. There’s something special about being a plodder. As Jesus said (Matt. 10:22), He who endures to the end will be saved. Some hearers of the Word have so many interests in life that often it’s the more important things that get choked out... as weeds choke out vegetables or grains or flowers. We can become too busy to pray... or too busy to study God’s word. We can be so busy with weekend recreation that we don’t have an hour to spend at public worship on Sunday. We can get so wrapped up in doing good works that we don’t have any time to spend with God... the source of love and service. We can also neglect our families. Service to others should not preclude time with our wives, husbands, children, and grandchildren. We’re to love people and use things... not love things and use people.

You may not have thought of yourself in this light, but all of us... at various times and in various ways... are sowers. We aren’t necessarily sowing oats or wheat or barley or carrots or beets or cucumbers or pansies or nasturtiums or morning glories. But let’s look at ourselves in this way: We come in contact with others every day. What we do and how we do it, what we say (verbally and otherwise) are important... and influence others around us. This influence can be good or bad... positive or negative.

There seems to be a reluctance these days... to admit that we’re role models. Whether we want to be or not... we are role models. There is no escaping it. Whether we’re a store clerk or a laborer, a banker, a lawyer, or
a teacher. Whether you’re a grandparent, a parent, a brother, a sister, and uncle or an aunt, a niece or nephew... what you say... how you live... what you do... will be seen by others. And, in many cases, your actions... for better or worse... will be duplicated or imitated. Doesn’t that matter? It certainly should matter to any responsible person... and especially a Christian.

There was a lonely old man named Thomas. He had outlived all his church friends, and hardly anyone knew him. When Thomas died, a man who knew him slightly felt an obligation to go to his funeral. His feeling was that someone ought to follow him to his final resting place.

There were no other mourners on this windy and rainy day. When the funeral reached the cemetery, there was a soldier waiting. There was no rank visible on his raincoat, but he obviously was an officer in the British Army. He went to the graveside for the ceremony. When it was over he stepped forward and before the open grave gave Thomas a salute that might have been given to a king.

The other man and the soldier walked away. As they walked, the wind blew the soldier’s raincoat open to reveal the shoulder badges of a brigadier, or what we Americans would call a brigadier general. The brigadier said to the other mourner:

“You will perhaps be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago Thomas was my Sunday School teacher. I was a wild lad and a sore trial to him. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am to old Thomas, and today I had to come to salute him at the end.”

Don’t tell me Thomas wasn’t a role model! Don’t tell me you’re not role models! Thomas never knew what he was doing. No teacher or clergy person... or store clerk, or laborer, or banker, or lawyer, or grandparent or parent, or aunt or uncle, or niece or nephew or brother or sister... ever does. We only sow the seed. The rest is up to God.

When we sow seed... we must not look for instant results. It may take a long time. We sow in patience and hope. How long it takes the seed to germinate is up to God. So is the final result. Amen.
The parable that Jesus told the people in today's gospel lesson probably had more meaning to those who heard Him than it does for us. After all, they were close to the soil... but most of us aren't. It has been suggested that Jesus was using the boat by the lakeside as a pulpit... and that a farmer was actually sowing seed nearby. If this were the case, Jesus told a parable with real live visuals... while the sower was actually illustrating His remarks. What a wonderful way to open their minds to eternal truths!

Obviously there are many ways of accepting the Word of God. The fruit which it produces depends on the heart of the person who accepts it. In a similar way, the success or failure of a joke or story depends more on the reaction of the hearer than the speaking skills or qualities of the teller. A sourpuss...someone with no sense of humor...probably won't laugh regardless of how funny a story is...because he has decided in advance that he won't.

What makes a comedian or clown or story-teller successful? Their success depends heavily on those in the audience. Do they hear clearly? That is an important part of it. But attitude is probably more important. Are they prepared to hear? Do they want to hear? Are they favorably inclined toward the speaker—whether he is a lecturer, a preacher, or a comedian? Why do you think some comedians work best with studio audiences? Isn't it because the audience has been conditioned to hear the message with a favorable attitude... to hear it and react in a way that would bring acceptance of and confidence in the speaker? Besides... if the reception isn't as good as expected... applause, laughs, and giggles can be dubbed in.

Some hearers have a mind like the shallow ground Jesus spoke of in the parable. I'm sure you've seen people like this. They take up a hobby, join a club or a work team or a study group with enthusiasm... but they don't think things through. And before long they abandon their new interest. Later they move on to another group, club, or project and repeat themselves. Some approach their religion faith this way; don't they? They run hot and cold... forgetting that our faith places some demands on us. Yes, it's a privilege to be a Christian. But, more importantly, it's a responsibility.

Jesus also saw that some people who heard the gospel message had so many interests that even the most important things could get crowded out of their lives. Do you know anyone who is too busy to pray? Do you know anyone who can't find time to study the Scriptures... or to worship? Or is too tired to do anything except
what his employer requires? Such a person often has good motives... to no avail. Unfortunately, God gets
crowded out of his life. Sometimes his family gets crowded out, too... because of his job, his meetings, his
committee work. He has no time for Him from whom all love and service come.

In all the previous examples Jesus spoke of...the results were negative. Fortunately, other seeds fell on
good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty. Isn’t it great that some people
are like good soil! Their mind is open. They are willing to study, to practice, to learn. They are also prepared to
hear. They’re not too busy or too proud. They learn what the message is... and what it means to them. It might
take a great deal of prayer and meditation to understand... but they finally do. They are prepared to accept it...
and to act on it. They translate their hearing into action. They produce the good fruit of the good seed. Such a
hearer listens, understand, and obeys.

Earlier in Matthew, when he wrote about Jesus’ calling of the 12... there was no question that they were
making the appropriate response. They quickly shifted their attention from their jobs and their families to
following Jesus and becoming doers of the word. The word fell on receptive ears... their hearts were attuned to
receive the gospel and to act on it... even though Judas later fell by the wayside.

In today’s cluttered world...God often has difficulty breaking through the barriers with His message.
We’re so busy...or at least we’re wrapped up in our busyness. There are countless activities to interfere. Our
households are bee hives of activity. The television set or radio or record-player seems to be blaring all the time
we’re home. And, of course, we’re always tied up on the job. That doesn’t leave much time for conversation
with God... unless we take charge of our schedule and set aside a block of time... preferably each day... for this
purpose. Otherwise God might have to take extreme or extraordinary measures. And, I assure you, He’s capable
of such action. He tailors His approach to fit the situation. For instance, He found a way to get the attention of a
young Italian nobleman in an obscure village in the early Thirteenth Century. Francesco di Bernardone was
living a life of dissipation. Nor did it have any purpose. Later he became involved in warfare that was common
in Italy in the early 1200s. It’s not surprising that he ended up in a local army because warfare was all around
him—emperor against pope, prince against king, village against village, and burger against noble. Francis’ side
lost, and he and several others were captured. Because he was a nobleman, Francis was freed after a year in captivity. He was then in his 23rd year.

About this time he became seriously ill and realized that he had a great barrenness of soul. Even as he convalesced he was aware of this but returned to his old worldly ways. Or, as one of those who wrote about him tells us, "he trod the same life as before his sickness. The only difference was that he had no enjoyment now in the life he led. So... Francis was vulnerable. Soon God was able to get His message to him... and it was received and acted on in a very positive way.

An attack of fever forced Francis to take to his bed, and as he lay there between sleeping and waking, he hears a voice asking him where he wanted to go. "To Apulia to be a knight," was his answer. "Tell me, Francis. Who can benefit you most, the Lord or the servant?" "The Lord," answered Francis in astonishment. "Then why do you desert the Lord," repeated the voice, "for the servant and the Prince for his vassal?"

Then Francis knew who it was who spoke to him, and in the words of Paul cried out, "Lord, what do you wish me to do?" The voice answered, "Go back to your home; there it shall be told you what you are to do. For the vision you saw must be understood in another way." By now Francis had begun to pray earnestly to God... sometimes for hours at a time... to find out what God's will was for him. One day when he was praying before a wooden Byzantine crucifix, he heard these words, "Now go hence, Francis, and build up my house, for it is nearly falling down!" Now you know about whom we're speaking: St. Francis of Assisi.

Those who have written about St. Francis don't agree on exactly what happened at the time. Some say the lips of Jesus on the crucifix moved as Francis heard these words. Others say the words could only be heard within his heart. In any event, Francis went about the work of renovating a dilapidated country chapel. He had heard the message loud and clear... and responded with faith, energy, and enthusiasm. It was not until later that Francis realized Jesus had meant for Francis to build up the Church—the Body of Christ—not just the little virtually abandoned chapel where Francis began his ministry. Francis heard the words clearly... and immediately began to do what he felt called to do. He didn't flinch at all when he realized the enormity of his assignment. He
started with the chapel at San Damiano... and soon a large number of brothers and sisters who also embraced poverty joined with him to serve the Lord while living the monastic life.

Joan of Arc (1412-31) first heard her famous voices when she was only 14 years old. They told her to save France from the English. She had difficulty in getting the co-operation of military and political leaders. After some of her predictions came true, they finally took her seriously. She enjoyed some military successes... but then things turned sour. She was deserted by the French military and turned over to the English. After being imprisoned she was tried for witchcraft and heresy by the court of the Bishop of Beauvais. Not unexpectedly, she was found guilty and burned at the stake. When her case was re-opened 20 years later, a commission appointed by Pope Callistus III quashed the verdict and declared her innocent. She was later beatified and canonized. Joan of Arc is not venerated as a martyr but rather as a virgin who responded with complete integrity and courage to what she believed to be the revelation of God’s will for her, and endured persecution and death with heroic fortitude.

The Burgundians, the French and the English authorities let Joan down. And the Church was far from blameless concerning her political murder. But there was no doubt in her mind that the voices she heard were revelations of God... and she acted on them obediently and with all her energy and enthusiasm. God’s word had been sown on good soil. It bore good fruit in spite of all the obstacles placed in Joan’s path.

What sort of reception has the Word of God received in our lives? Has it been accepted with great interest... later reaching a low ebb because of a lack of cultivation? Has it been crowded out of our lives because it has to compete with so many other aspects of life that we don’t have time and energy for God?

Or has it been sown on good soil? That is, has it been received... understood... accepted... and acted on with conviction... with energy... and with enthusiasm? This is the response that God is looking for... and, fortunately for us, He has great patience.
Proper 10, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 2 Samuel 6: 1 - 5, 12b - 19

PSALM: 24

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 1: 3 - 14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

GOSPEL: Mark 6:14 - 29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and
danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.
In today’s epistle, Paul lists four great Christian virtues that result in a fifth. He calls on the Ephesians “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called… with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The Ephesians are to stand back… and take a hard look at themselves… at their lifestyle. Perhaps we should do likewise. How are we measuring up to our calling? At our baptism and Confirmation we also accepted an obligation… a responsibility… to live a certain lifestyle. We promised to turn to Jesus Christ… to accept Him as our Savior… and to put our whole trust in His grace and love… and to follow and obey Him as our Lord. These are lofty goals… and we, like the Ephesians and other Christians, are expected to live a life that reflects of Christian beliefs.

The first of these Christian virtues that Paul mentions is humility. This is a word that the Christian faith coined. There was no word in Greek that was appropriate. Why? Because before Christianity, humility was not considered a virtue. In fact, according to translator William Barclay, the ancient world looked upon humility as something to be despised.

In our wildest dreams, we sometimes see ourselves as the center of the world around us. We see ourselves as the greatest in whatever field of endeavor we are involved. We imagine all sorts of great things happening because of us. But reality sets in when we look at ourselves in the mirror… when we see ourselves as we really are. What do we see? We see weaknesses and faults that our blindness has hidden… we see prejudices that we would like to keep from others… we see failure in various forms. We see often chaotic existence… we see unkept promises… we see unrealized potential… shattered dreams.

When we look at ourselves, do we see humility? When we set our lives beside the life of Christ we quickly see perfection in Christ and imperfection in ourselves. We don’t measure up. When we put ourselves beside second bests, we do rather well. But when we compare ourselves with perfection… we see how poorly we are doing the work that God has given us to do.

The Christian standard is Jesus Christ. Paul said of Jesus in his Letter to the Philippians, (2:5-8): “Though He was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (or slave), being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human
form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” This is how Jesus showed us what humility really is. Who could possibly be more humble than He?

The second of the great Christian virtues of which Paul speaks might be termed meekness or gentleness. Take your choice. Which term do you prefer? Aristotle saw virtues as being the mean between two extremes. Using this measuring stick, the person who is gentle (meek) would always be angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time. Also a gentle person would be kindled by indignation at the wrongs or sufferings of others… but would never be angered by the wrongs and insults he himself has to bear. Can we claim possession of this Christian virtue? If so, we will have every instinct, every passion under perfect control… we’re obviously under God’s control. Someone who is God-controlled is always angry at the right time… but never angry at the right time.

A third Christian virtue is sometimes defined as long-suffering. You and I might prefer the word patience. This is the spirit that never gives up. There’s a Greek word (makrothumia) that views this virtue as patient with men… patient with mankind. It is said to be the spirit that has the power to take revenge but never does. So… is it any wonder then that the New Testament repeatedly uses long-suffering or patient with men as qualities of God? Peter speaks of God’s patience while waiting in the days of Noah (I Peter 3:20). He further says that the forbearance of our Lord is our salvation. Paul speaks of the perfect patience of Jesus to him. (I Tim. 1:16) and asks the unrepentant sinner if he despises the patience of God (Romans 2:4).

So God is known for His patience. Most human beings aren’t. Americans, in particular, are known more for their impatience. But as Christians what should our attitude be? We are to have the patience toward our fellow men that God has shown toward us… toward them. Looking for a challenge? Try patience.

The fourth Christian virtue in today’s epistle is love. There are four Greek words for love, but the one used in this context is agape: the love of God or the love of Christ or the love of Christians for one another. Someone has said that if we regard a person with agape, nothing he can do will make us seek anything but his highest good. Agape love compels a Christian never to feel any bitterness, any desire for revenge but always to seek the highest good of everyone, no matter what. Even if we don’t like someone, we want the very best for him or her. That’s how we demonstrate agape love.
The four great Christian virtues that Paul has been writing about—humility, gentleness, patience, and love—lead to... result in... a fifth. Peace. Such a peace has been defined as right relationship between man and man. That’s what living in a community of faith is all about. We are called on to love one another... to seek the very best for each other... and have a right relationship with each other. There’s only one way to attain a right relationship, peace, or oneness. And that is through the elimination of self.

All four of these Christian virtues that we’ve talked about require the removal of self from the center of things. Otherwise, we can never experience oneness. Self dominates the secular society in which we live. No wonder it’s a collection of individuals and groups of people often at odds with one another. But when self dies... when we die to self... then Christ can come to life within our hearts. Then come peace... right relationships... oneness... which are characteristics of the true church.

How can we give up self? How can we live a life worthy of our calling? Paul told the Galatians (Ga. 2:20): “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the son of God, who loves me and gave himself for me.” The old Paul is dead. The new Paul lives by faith in Jesus Christ who died for him. Have we, like him, been able to die to self?

What is the oneness about which Paul speaks? What is oneness? What is the basis on which Christian unity is founded? First, there is one body. Christ is the head, and the Church is the body. We must share a common love of Christ... and a unity in the Church is necessary to do the work of Christ.

Second, there is one Spirit. The Greek word for spirit (pneuma) also means breath. To be alive, the body must have breath... and the Spirit of Christ energizes the Church.

Third, there is one hope to our calling. As Christians, we have the same goal. Our organization, our methods, and perhaps some of our beliefs are different, but we are all seeking a world redeemed in Christ. There is one Lord. In the early Church, the phrase Jesus Christ is Lord, had special importance. As Christians, we all have one Master and King. There is one faith. We Christians are bound together because we surrendered our lives to the love of Jesus Christ. We have our differences, but we share a common faith.
There is one baptism. In the early Church most Christians were baptized as adults because they had been heathens who decided to follow Christ. So the first step all of them had to take was to be baptized publicly... to make a public confession of Jesus Christ.

There is one God. He is the Father of all. The Christian idea of God begins in love. He is above all. He is in control of all. He is involved in all. God created the world. God controls the world. God sustains the world. And the world is filled with His Presence... His influence.

So... let us celebrate our oneness—one Body, of which Christ is the head; one Spirit; one Christian hope of a world redeemed in Christ; one Lone; one faith; one baptism; on God and Father of all. And let us strive... with God’s help... to be humble, gentle, patient, and living... and to be in a right relationship with each other. Amen.
When we speak of worship and other aspects of church life, we’re used to gathering in a certain building in a certain city or town... perhaps at a certain time on a certain day. We come/her for worship. We come/her for dinners. We come/her for Vestry meetings. We come/her for Bible study. We come/her for rummage sales or other fund-raising or social activities.

We didn’t initiate this way of doing things. That’s the procedure those who came before us followed. After all, this was a central place. It was convenient. And those who were involved knew where it was and how to get there. It was natural to say, “Come to church”... or “come here to church.” That’s what we did... and we invited others to join us. That’s where we did other things... and we invited others to join us. It was natural to do this. Come. Come here.

The word “come” was very important in the life and ministry of Jesus. He seemed always to be inviting someone to approach Him. That isn’t surprising for He was always available... ready and willing to help others. He had time for everyone. “Come to me,” said Jesus, “all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest; for I am gently and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30).

“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” These were Jesus’ words to the Pharisees. (Matt. 12:13b).

Because of His friendliness and openness, Jesus was saying, in effect, to all who would listen: Come and hear me out. Listen to me. Do as I do, and command you to do, and your life will have purpose and meaning.

After Jesus assured the disciples it was He who came to them during a storm... Peter said: “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water. He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. Then Peter became afraid and began to sink before asking Jesus to save him.” (Matt. 14:28-31).

On another occasion, Jesus warned His disciples: “Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.” (Mark 13:5-6)

These are just a few of the instances that the word “come” or its past tense “came” figure in incidents of quotations in which Jesus is the central figure. In today’s gospel lesson from Mark (6:17)... Jesus continues in this context. Mark says He called to Him the twelve. Come here, says Jesus, I have something very important for
you to do. And do you know what happens next? Jesus shifts the entire emphasis of His life and ministry. No longer does He tell His disciples to come. He does the opposite. His work takes on a new meaning...a new emphasis... a new direction. He sends out the human carriers of His divine message. And the key word when it comes to delivering the message is: Go... go.

Do we feel at home... comfortable... within the confines of this building? How often have we scheduled meetings or other gatherings here? How often have we invited others to come and join us here? Have we ever voluntarily decided to reach out... leave the friendly confines of this building... and offer a service to others? Have we ever made it a point to go... and visit new families who have moved into the neighborhood? Did we take them a bulletin? Did we stop by to say “hello” and then, if the opportunity presented itself, tell them that we are Christians and that we worship regularly at ____ Episcopal Church? Did we invite them to join us? Did we go visiting among our neighbors tow by two? That’s the standard Jesus set... and it still has merit. It provides checks and balances. Ig gives confidence to the timid person and helps the talkative person show restraint. Just being there sometimes makes the person who doesn’t have much to say the strong and silent type.

What happens when one of us invites another to church... and he or she accepts? Do we welcome the visitor with Christian love? Or do we resent a newcomer in our midst? It isn’t always easy to be assimilated into a congregation.

In today’s gospel lesson... when Jesus sent the disciples out two by two... we know that they were going on a short trip. They were to dress simply. They were to take only what they needed. No fancy equipment or paraphernalia. No bread. No bag. No money. They were to go out as witnesses. The main thing was the work they were doing... and the message of hope and salvation they were delivering.

Actually they were carrying it on their lips and in their hearts and in the lives they were leading. What would have happened if Jesus’ disciples hadn’t gone out into the world and spread the Good News? Nothing. And it’s unlikely that they would have been heard of again. What happens to a congregation that doesn’t reach out? It disappears.
How do we… you and I… figure in the ministry of the North Central Cluster and its four congregations? We find our marching orders in the Catechism on Pages 855 and 856 of the Prayer Book.

Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?
A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all of its members.

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?
A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?
A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and His Church; to bear witness to Him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given to them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

Q. What is the ministry of a priest or presbyter?
A. The ministry of a priest is to represent Christ and His Church, particularly as pastor to the people; to share with the bishops in the overseeing of the church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments; and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

Q. What is the duty of all Christians?
A. The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.

By what authority do we minister to others? And why do we invoke the name of Jesus Christ? At our baptism, we promised… with God’s help… to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ… to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself… and striving for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

In closing… I am going to repeat some comments I made earlier: What would have happened if Jesus’ disciples hadn’t gone out into the world and spread the Good News? Nothing. And it’s unlikely that they would have been heard of again.

What happens to a congregation that doesn’t reach out? It disappears.
Proper 10, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT:  Amos 7:7 - 17

PSALM:  82

NEW TESTAMENT:  Colossians 1:1 - 14


Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."
And who is your neighbor? Or who is your neighbor? Or who is your neighbor?

In answering the Jewish lawyer's question, Jesus uses a parable... in which a Samaritan is the hero. It's a story that gives us great insight into spiritual truth. But it must have been disconcerting for the Jews to listen to a story in which a Samaritan is the leading character... because the Jews of Jesus' day despised the Samaritans and had no dealings with them. The Samaritans were looked upon as non-persons by most Jews, including their religious leaders.

To a Jew, his neighbors were his fellow Jews. That's why I asked you who your neighbor is... or who your neighbors are. We've had almost 2,000 years to advance from Point A, which says that our neighbors are other people like us. How far have we advanced? How far have we moved toward viewing our neighbors' needs as our needs? How willing are we to open up ourselves to the needs of others? Are we willing to be vulnerable? This is what today's Gospel lesson is all about.

Today's lesson also reminds us of the story of the rich young ruler, also in Luke (18:18-30). Both the rich young ruler and the lawyer in today's lesson are showing a great interest in eternal life. Each of these leaders asks Jesus how he may inherit eternal life... and in both cases, Jesus appeals to what the Law says.

When the lawyer asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asked him what is written the law? How do you read? And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus complimented him on his answer. You have answered right; do this and you will live.

Then came the lawyer's further question: And who is my neighbor? ... followed by Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. Afterward... Jesus asked the lawyer who it was who proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers. Obviously he couldn't say the priest or the Levite, both of whom refused to minister to a fellow Jew. He also was unwilling even to mention that a non-Jew, a despised Samaritan at that, had compassion on the robbery victim. So he said: the one who showed mercy on him is the one who was neighbor to the injured man.

What the Samaritan did was to go far beyond the rules. He had loved with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. His is the love that fulfills the law... and fulfills it in several respects. It has been said that such love
goes not only **beyond** the rules, but **between** the rules, and **under** the rules. This love is not concerned primarily with **acts**... but with **motives**. And, in the case of the Samaritan, they were all pure and unselfish.

In the summary of the law Jesus said: Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

In this context, let’s look at what the response of the Samaritan to the victim of robbery and assault. The man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho was presumably a Jew. After he was beaten and robbed, two Jews—a priest and a Levite—ignored him by passing by him on the other side of the road. But when a Samaritan came to where the beaten stranger was, he had compassion on him. He poured oil and wine on the man’s wounds. In those days, oil and wine—two very costly items—were used to treat such injuries. The Samaritan provided the very best treatment possible for this stranger. Nothing was too good or too expensive. He spared no expense. After treating him, the Samaritan put the patient on his own beast... while he himself walked... and took him to an inn. He stayed and took care of him.

The next day the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two denarii, which was a generous amount of money. He told the innkeeper to take care of the stranger to whom he had ministered. And, he added, whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back.

What love! What compassion! What liberality!

What has the Samaritan done? He has done everything possible for this stranger whom he found... robbed and badly beaten along the road... and left for dead. He ministers to his every need... even pouring expensive wine and oil on his cuts and bruises. He puts him on his own beast... while he himself walks. When he takes him to an inn... he takes care of everything... asking the innkeeper to look after the stranger. But he doesn’t stop there; does he? No. He tells the innkeeper to take care of him... and whatever you spend I will repay you when I come back... not if I should happen to be back in the neighborhood.

What do you think of the Samaritan? Hasn’t he done a good thing? Yes... actually an entire series of good things. Has he done his duty? **Duty**? What’s that? The Samaritan doesn’t have any concept of what duty
is. He has long ago surpassed any duty he might have had. He doesn’t recognize duty. What he has done is to demonstrate what the New Testament concept of love... agape... is all about.

The Samaritan’s only wish... his only desire...his only motivation... is to do all that he can to minister to the needs of the badly beaten stranger. And he is extremely liberal... generous... caring... not only in his relationship with the robbery victim... but also with the innkeeper, whom he pays at the time for any services rendered. And he also anticipates possible future needs and pledges to pay for them... generously, no doubt.

Why is he so liberal with his time, his money, and his skills, gifts, and talents? Because he has found someone in need... and gives the very best he has to offer.

Never mind that the robbery victim is not one of his countrymen. In fact, he is a stranger. And probably a Jew. Never mind that Jews would have nothing to do with him. He helps the stranger because he is a man... a person... a human being.

Never mind that he will not be repaid. Never mind that he was what some might call foolishly extravagant... lavish... liberal. He has gone the second mile... and then some. He has loved and showed compassion on someone who would consider him his enemy... or the next thing to it. He might be compared to the liberal employer who gave all his laborers full wages for a day’s work... although some of them worked only one hour. He might be compared to the loving father who, when his unworthy son returned home after throwing away his inheritance, rewards the errant son with gifts—a ring, denoting sonship, and a great feast. Why?

Because of love.

When you’re generous to yourself... is it because of duty? Certainly not. You do so because you want to. That’s the same reason the Samaritan acted the way he did to the stranger. He wanted to do this. He loves his neighbor as he loves himself.
Before discussing the Good Samaritan... let’s take a close look at the opening words of our gospel lesson today: Then turning to the disciples, He said privately, “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”

This passage comes after the return of the 70 whom Jesus had sent on a short missionary assignment. Going ahead of Him, they traveled in pairs and went into every town and place that Jesus was to visit later. In His words, Jesus sent them out as lambs in the midst of wolves. They carried no bag, no sandals, and were told to go to one house and stay there, eating and drinking what the people provided. They followed the plan and, Luke tells us, the disciples returned with joy, saying even the demons are subject to us in your name. However, Jesus told them not to rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. Rejoice because you are God’s... be aware of the fact that you belong to God in Christ... that you have received God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus also reminded the disciples of how blessed they were in seeing what they had seen and hearing what they had heard. Jesus is the one whom all the prophets and the saints and the kings looked forward to and for whom they longed. As translator and commentator William Barclay wrote: “Jesus was the peak to which history had been climbing, the goal to which it had been marching, the dream which had ever haunted men of God.”

The blessedness of the Christian is not restricted to the disciples, to whom Jesus spoke privately, but it is something for them to share with others... with all others, in fact. After all, we are not supposed to keep the good news to ourselves. It’s not a secret. We’re called to share it. The great news of the Gospel... that God sent His Son Jesus into the world to reconcile the world to Him... is too good to keep to ourselves. To do so would be to take a selfish approach. It isn’t ours to keep. It’s ours to share... to pass on. To keep it... to protect it... would go against God’s wishes. Besides, it doesn’t need to be protected.

Another point that should be made is this: Not only had the disciples received God’s forgiveness and mercy... they had also received a generous portion of His love. God’s love was a basic ingredient in their successful missionary visit. It was made manifest... demonstrated... in the reaction of the people they visited. God had prepared the hearts of those they visited to receive His love through His obedient servants. The disciples
were the conduits through which God’s love was transmitted to those whom they visited. Wouldn’t you say the disciples demonstrated love of God and neighbor in this Scriptural passage? They were plugged into God’s power… and their love of God in Christ took them into the highways and by-ways. The people with whom they came in contact responded with enthusiasm.

Love of God and neighbor is also reflected in the rest of our Gospel lesson today. An expert in the law tried to put Jesus in an embarrassing position when he asked him, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Then Jesus responded to him with a question, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” Not unexpectedly, the lawyer knew the right answer, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus responded, “You have answered right. Do this and you will live.”

But the lawyer still tried to put Jesus on the spot by asking Him who is my neighbor? To which Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus seems not to have answered the question… who is my neighbor?... but rather who is a true bestower of neighborly love? Later… He indirectly answers the lawyer’s question, who is our neighbor? Anyone in need. And our good will should go out to him or her.

The scene of the story of the Good Samaritan is an exceptionally dangerous road. Jerusalem is 2,300 feet above sea level (about the same as Kingwood)... and the Dead Sea, near which Jericho stood, was 1,300 feet below sea level. This means that the road dropped 3,600 feet in less than 20 miles. It was narrow and had a number of sudden turns. It was dangerous to travel on this road. Many travelers had been robbed, beaten, and even murdered over the centuries. In fact, some have met such fates as late as the Twentieth Century.

Now let’s look at the cast of characters: The traveler seems to have been reckless or naïve. He may not have been very smart. He should have realized what a dangerous trip he was taking and that traveling alone was a no-no.

The priest… if he had touched the body of a dead man… would have been unclean for seven days. To touch the man, if he were dead, would also mean losing his term of duty at the Temple. He put ceremony above charity. The Temple liturgy meant more to him than his neighbor’s pain and suffering.
The Levite was unwilling to take any risks.

There was a possibility that the injured man was a decoy... and his friends might overpower the Levite. The Levite was unwilling to help someone... if he had to take a risk.

The Samaritan... may not have been a Semite by race. He was one whom all the good orthodox people despised. He may have been a heretic and undoubtedly was a breaker of the ceremonial law. But he had the love of God in his heart.

How would you define the Samaritan’s love of his neighbor? Not only did he want the very best for him... but he supplied it. Not only did he help a stranger... but he was extravagant in the service he provided. Pouring on oil and wine. Binding up the man’s injuries. Setting him on his own beast while he himself would have to walk. Takin him to an inn. Taking care of him. Paying for his care, and if more expenses were incurred, he would pay them, too. Did he do his duty? Yes... and far more than that. Duty doesn’t seem to be in his vocabulary. But service to others certainly is.

The passages of Scripture from which the love of God and neighbor are summarized are from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Deut. 6:14 tells us, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your might.” (See also Deut. 11:13). And Leviticus 19:18 says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The rabbis sought to define who one’s neighbor was. Some of them were so narrow in their definitions to confine the term neighbor to fellow Jews. Some sent so far as to teach that it was illegal to help a Gentile woman during childbirth because it would only bring another Gentile into the world.

We shouldn’t be surprised that Jesus broadened the definition of neighbor to include any man, woman, child, or nation who is in need. We are even called to help the person who brought trouble on himself... as the traveler on the Jericho road did. We’re to provide practical help... not feel sorry for those in need. Our help should be as wide as the love of God.
Proper 11, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 28:10 - 19a

PSALM: 139

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 8:12 - 25

GOSPEL: Matthew 13:24 - 30, 36 - 43

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"
An active and apparently dedicated churchman had been treasurer of a congregation in Connecticut for more than 20 years. What a shock it was to learn that he had embezzled a sizeable amount of money that had been entrusted to his care. How did most of the members of the congregation learn about this betrayal of trust? By letter. He wrote each family, confessing what he had done, telling them how sorry he was, asking the congregation to forgive him and not to prosecute him. He is being prosecuted, although the last word I heard on the case is that it hasn’t yet come to trial.

In 1632, Galileo (1564-1642) published his masterpiece, *A Dialog on the Two Principal Systems of the World*. It summed up his life’s work as an astronomer and physicist. He immediately was summoned to appear before the Holy Office of the Roman Catholic Church. Church officials forced him to say he gave up his belief in the Copernican theory and sentenced him to an indefinite term in prison. Instead of imprisoning Galileo, Church leaders confined him to his villa in Florence, Italy. Fifty years after his death, the city of Florence erected a monument in his honor at the church.

John Bunyan, whose best known work is *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, was not an Anglican. He belonged to a non-conformist church in Bedford, England. He soon began to preach there. Not being an Anglican and preaching in a non-conformist church undoubtedly had a great deal to do with his being arrested for preaching without a license. He was jailed in 1660 and spent most of the next 12 years in jail. However, he was allowed outside some of the time. He later was returned to jail, where he wrote some of his best known works.

John Huss was ordained a priest in 1401 and became an influential preacher. Huss read the writings of John Wycliffe, who attacked the worldliness of the clergy and the interference of the church in political matters. Wycliffe’s writings stirred up a storm of protest and Huss distributed them in Bohemia, where he taught. The University of Prague forbade Huss to discuss Wycliffe’s writings. Huss was later imprisoned and put on trial by the Council of Constance for his views. Although he was not allowed to defend himself in open debate, the Council found Huss guilty of heresy, and he was burned at the stake. His ashes were thrown in the Rhine River.

Attila, the King of the Huns (406?-453), was known as the scourge of God. He led a large band of warriors who were feared throughout Asia and Europe. Though considered barbaric and ruthless by Romans and Christians, he often was fair and merciful to his enemies, and he ruled his own people with considerable ability.
and justice. Attila invaded Italy and plundered many cities. Pope Leo I begged him to spare Rome. For reasons that are not clear, Attila did not destroy Rome.

What does all this have to do with today’s parable? What does it have to do with us? It has been said that the parable of the wheat and the tares... of the good seed and the bad... was one of the most practical parables Jesus ever told. It teaches us a variety of lessons. First: There is always a hostile power in the world. It’s always seeking an opportunity to destroy the good seed. No matter how dedicated to Christ... how devout... a Christian is, there is no guarantee that he or she will be able to resist all of life’s temptations. There are good and bad influences at work in the world in which we live. Fortunately, there is the influence that helps the seed of the word to flourish and grow.

Apparently the church treasurer was learning and growing in the faith. And then... the influence that seeks to destroy the good seed... appeared on the scene. He yielded. At times, we also yield to the bad influences on our lives. Even though we know God will forgive our sins when we confess to Him... and when we’re truly sorry... we must always be on our guard. The enemy is ever ready to sow bad seed in our lives.

Our parable today also teaches us how difficult it is to know who is in the kingdom of God and who isn’t. Some people appear good... but they’re really bad. And someone may appear to be bad... and actually have admirable qualities and do good works. Sometimes we’re too quick to label another a good or bad. Quite often we don’t have access to all the evidence. No wonder we’re frequently wrong. Remember... one of the descriptions of Attila the Hun was “The Scourge of God.” Although he was considered barbaric and ruthless by Christians and Romans alike... he is said to have often been fair and merciful to his enemies. Is that barbaric? Is that ruthless? History also tells us that Attila was just with his own people... that he ruled his people with considerable ability and justice. We don’t know what his motives were... but Attila decided not to sack Rome. So was Attila really “The Scourge of God?” Was he as bad as some have pictured him?

Today’s parable teaches us that we should not be quick to make judgments. All of us will face judgment... but not for a single act or one stage of our lives. No. We will be judged by our entire lives... at the end. We all make mistakes... sometimes big ones... but we can redeem ourselves... and by the grace of God... we can get back on track and lead an exemplary life.
On the other hand, we can also live as we should and, late in life, fall into sin and dishonor. Fortunately it is only God who can decide out fate. And you and I need to be careful that we don’t try to usurp God’s role.

We often see the wicked prosper… and we can’t seem to understand why God doesn’t do something. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like bringing such things to God’s attention? As if He never noticed! We must sometimes hold our tongues… restrain ourselves.

Of this we can be certain: Judgment does come. The sinner may seem to escape. But there’s the next world… that all of us must face. God’s judgment is not hasty. But it does come at the end. And it is final.

It is only God who has the right to judge. Only He is wise enough to see all the good and the bad in a person. It is only He who knows someone all his life. Individual Christians… and the larger church… have… over the centuries… had difficulties in dealing with numerous people. Unlike God… we don’t know the hearts of people. Unlike God… we can’t tolerate someone who is different. Unlike God, we don’t know what appears to be a radical thought today might become a great blessing in the future. The name of the astronomer/physicist, Galileo, was mentioned earlier. The Church felt a need to act on his thought, his beliefs, his writings. This it was ill-equipped to do. But… in the final analysis, what the Church actually did was to “judge” him.

Did John Bunyan deserve prison for preaching without a license?

Was John Huss guilty of any crime for disseminating the writings of Wycliffe who attacked the worldliness of clergy and interference of the church in political matters? What were the crimes… the sins…of Galileo, Bunyan, and Huss? Were they guilty?

Oops… we’d better not answer that question. We might judge them. And that’s not for us to do. Only God has the right to judge. We must be concerned only with our own situations… and leave the judging to God. Not only is He far wiser and more knowledgeable about His people than we are… but He has never called on us to help Him. Amen.
It's good that Jesus explains today's gospel lesson... because we don't deal with tares and wheat on a daily basis. In fact, some of us would have difficulty identifying a wheat field from some other crop. And we probably never saw a tare. But, even though we're not acquainted with these two crops—the grain wheat and its look-alike enemy—we can understand the symbolism and the points of Jesus' parable.

So... let's look more closely at His explanation... and illustrations... so we will understand what He is talking about. Who sows the good seed? The Son of Man. What is the field of which Jesus speaks? The world. And to whom does the good seed refer? The Sons of the Kingdom. Whom do the weeds represent? The sons of the evil one. Who is the enemy who sowed the bad seed? The Devil. What does Jesus mean when He speaks of the harvest? The end of the age. And who are the reapers? The angels of God.

Biblical translator and commentator William Barclay quotes from a book, The Land and the Book by an author named Thomson, in writing about wheat and darnel. He had this to say: Quote "In their early stages the tares so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to distinguish them; but by that time their roots were so intertwined that the tares could not be weeded out without tearing the wheat out with them." End of quotation.

Tares... also called bearded darnel... looked so much like wheat or barley plants that distinguishing them was impossible. Soon the roots would be so intertwined that those working the fields could not remove them without ruining the wheat or barley crop. So... the grain crop could not be separated from the tares when both were growing. They had to be separated later because the grain of the tares (or bearded darnel) was also slightly poisonous. In addition, it had a bitter and unpleasant taste. The tares would have to be separated from the good grain after threshing. The gain of the darnel could be easily identified then by its gray color.

The people to whom Jesus spoke about wheat and tares understood His remarks. I hope His symbolism has not been lost on us. What are some of the lessons this parable about the tares and the wheat teach us? We can say with certainty that there is always a hostile power in the world... and it is always ready and willing... and quite likely able—to destroy... the good seed. Both these influences—the good and the bad—act on our lives. One helps the seed of the word of God to flourish and the other seeks to destroy the good seed before it can produce fruit. So... we must always be on our guard.
This parable also reminds us how difficult it is to know who is in the Kingdom and who is not. Appearances are often deceiving. Some who appear to be good are later found to be bad. Those who give the appearance of being bad sometimes turn out to be good. And what is our tendency? Quite often we classify others as good or evil on the spur of the moment... before we have had time to learn all the facts.

Now let us return to the section of the parable in which the servants asked the householder: “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?” He said to them, “An enemy has done this.” The servants said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he said, “No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat among them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

How does this section of the parable apply to the church? Can we have a “pure” church, one in which there are no sinners? This is a matter that came up in the early church. Paul reminded the Corinthians (I Cor.4:5) that it is the Lord who judges. “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.”

So... some do good, and some do evil. Who is doing which? You don’t know. I don’t know. God knows. And His decision on everyone will come at the end of their lives... not today or not next week. He will make no premature judgment like you or I might do. But He will judge all of us. The fate of others is not up to us... and that’s good. We don’t know enough about others to make a judgment about them. But God... in His wisdom... does. He knows who is in and who is out of His Kingdom.

I hope that reflection on today’s parable will help us to stay clear of making quick judgments. Judgment will come at the end. But it will come. And God will be the judge. I also hope that today’s parable makes it clear to us how difficult it is to distinguish between those who are in the Kingdom and those who aren’t. And that we human beings aren’t capable of deciding who belongs where. Besides, it isn’t up to us. Judgment is God’s.

Not only does God determine who is in His Kingdom and who is not... it is only He who can provide the increase or growth in His Kingdom. All that mankind can do, Jesus tells us, is sow the seed. In a passage in Mark (4:26-29) Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground and should
sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain of the ear."

This passage is meant to teach that man can only sow the seed, while God gives the increase. The Kingdom of God has multiplied many times in the centuries since Christ died and rose again. Such growth has not always been apparent... but God knows how to bring forth abundant growth from the gospel seed that has been planted.

Paul also makes the point that only God gives the increase in the growth of His Kingdom. In his First Letter to the Corinthians (3:6-9), Paul tells us, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; You are God’s field, God’s building."

Are we learning from today’s Scriptural passages? Do we refuse to make snap judgments? Do we realize we don’t know who is in the Kingdom of God and who is out? Are we persuaded that regardless of how hard, how long, or how lovingly we have labored for the spread of His Kingdom that only God can provide the growth?

If we can answer “yes” to all these questions, we are making progress. We’re on the right track. But we need to continue our planting. We shouldn’t stop now. In fact, we should intensify our sowing. Perhaps others will want to join us. And don’t forget that there’s always evil in this world... symbolized by the tares. We will always have to face up to this reality and deal with it. It won’t go away.
proper 11, year b

old testament: 2 samuel 7: 1 - 14a

psalm: 89

new testament: ephesians 2: 11 - 22

gospel: mark 6: 30 - 34, 53 - 56

the apostles gathered around jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. he said to them, "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. and they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. as he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

when they had crossed over, they came to land at gennesaret and moored the boat. when they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. and wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.
As today's gospel lesson opens, Mark is tying together what has happened in the immediate past with what he is going to concentrate on next. So there are few details in his transition. He notes that the apostles have returned to Jesus, telling Him what they had done and taught. They had gone out on a brief missionary effort. This came immediately after Herod had had John the Baptizer beheaded and John's disciples had taken his body and buried it.

When Jesus' disciples returned to Him, He invited them to retire to a lonely place and to rest awhile. This was a busy time, says Mark. Many were coming and going. Is this passage speaking to us? How often are we caught up in the hustle and bustle of daily living... and are unable to break away? It doesn't seem to matter where we live or what our occupation is. What about our work schedules? Must we always keep our noses to the grindstone? Are we always rushing from one assignment to the next... without any time for planning or reflection? Are our bodies tired... our minds occupied... with a myriad of duties—real or imagined?

Don't we sometimes need rest in a quiet place? This is what Jesus, the Great Physician, has prescribed for the apostles. Like them, we also need physical rest, emotional rest... time to get away from the stress... the pressures... of daily living. And all our stresses don't involve the office or the factory or the shop or the fields or streams... or the highways. Some of them are at home. Some are at church. Some are at play. But regardless of what causes our stresses... regardless of where they originate... we need time away from the cares of daily living.

Businesses and industries and the professions have come to recognize the value of time away from our usual schedules, when we can concentrate on important matters. So when you're off the job during the week to attend a retreat, it could lead to something worthwhile... something positive. However, there probably will be no spiritual significance to this time in seclusion... even though it might be called a retreat. So don't be fooled by the title of the gathering. Obviously the leaders have a vested interest in such a gathering... and they want you refreshed and rested and focused so you can do more or give more for the company... the firm... the agency... or the department. Even so, such time together can be valuable to the planners and helpful to the group, as well as its individual members. It can be physically and emotionally refreshing. It can also help to put things into perspective. All well and good.
When was the last time we tried to put our spiritual life into perspective? When did we realize that our busy lifestyles left precious little time for us to spend with God? And further, when did we resolve to do something about such a situation? Withdrawal from daily living can give us all what we might call quality time with God. And we might do this individually or with a small group... we may or may not want a leader to keep some semblance of order. We may do all this in silence or permit conversation at certain times and small group discussions on other occasions. I have found that some people have great difficulty with silence. I remember a community service on a Good Friday. We had a period of 15 or 20 minutes of silence during the service... and some people were uncomfortable... uneasy. Quiet time seemed to be very negative to them.

I think most of us see that there should be a balance to our lives. Constant activity is too much. We can’t live without rest. Yet we can’t live a Christian life unless we give time to God. We need to listen for Him... to listen to Him... as well as to talk with Him. Don’t forget... sometimes He has something to reveal to us. First, we need to be still. Then we need to listen... to give Him our attention. We also need God’s strengthening... and we can’t receive it unless we seek His presence in quietness and loneliness.

On the other hand, it’s possible that we can become too withdrawn. Certainly... we are to devote time to God... to have communication with God... but not at the expense of fellowship with other Christians. We need a balance. Noted translator and commentator William Barclay once said: “Prayer that does not issue in work is not real prayer. And devotion that does not issue in action is not real devotion. The rhythm of the Christian life is the alternate meeting with God in the secret place and serving man in the market place.”

The peace and quiet that Jesus sought for Himself and His disciples were not to become reality... even though they had been through a great deal... even though they were exhausted, physically and emotionally. How would we react under these circumstances? Probably not the way Jesus did. Rather than being upset... irritated... Jesus had compassion on these people. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. He was not concerned for His comfort, for His well-being... but always for the needs and interests of others.

His disciples looked at the situation. Here they were at a lonely and quiet place. There was a large crowd that had followed them here... and obviously these people were tired and hungry. Jesus’s disciples picked up on this. They saw what was developing...and came to Jesus. But they must not have given much thought to solving
this problem... to ministering to the needs of these tired and hungry people. Otherwise, they wouldn't have suggested sending them away to buy food for themselves. It would seem that they wanted to get rid of the crowd... and the problems that they brought. Where would they find enough food for that many people in those little villages? And where would the people get the money with which to buy food?

What a shock it must have been to the disciples when Jesus said, “You give them something to eat.” You give them something to eat. In other words, “They’re your responsibility. Look out for them.” Jesus taught them a lesson, I hope, when He forced them to look at their own resources. “How many loaves have you?” Jesus asked. “Go and see.” He didn’t give them an opportunity to feel sorry for themselves... or guilty... because they didn’t have enough food to feed the five thousand. Never mind what you can’t do... what can you do?

The disciples would call on others to solve the problem they faced. This is not the way Jesus planned to resolve the situation. His approach: Their own resources and faith. We shouldn’t be surprised at the attitude of the disciples. Many people today look for solutions from the outside rather than within themselves. Some people seem to make federal aid as the first response to a community problem... with state aid a close second. Some small congregations look to the diocese first for their needs. What is often neglected is their own access to resources. What can they do? Even in the worst of situations, we have something worthwhile to contribute. As today’s gospel lesson points out eloquently... a little, in the hands of Jesus, is much. Jesus multiplies beyond measure whatever of worth is put into His hands. Five loaves and two fish in His hands have been enough in many situations. He took a handful of faithful followers... none with any great gifts, skills, or talents... and turned the world upside down. He has done something remarkable and miraculous with countless others who offered what they had and put it into the Hands of Jesus.

When Jesus was offered a cross... a symbol of defeat, despair, and shame... He accepted it. Then He glorified it forever. He took that symbol of shame and transformed it forever into a symbol of God’s redeeming love.
Proper 11, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT:  Amos 8:1 - 12

PSALM:  52

NEW TESTAMENT:  Colossians 1:15 - 28


Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."
Today’s gospel lesson from Luke focuses on two of Jesus’ friends... Mary and Martha of Bethany... sisters of Lazarus.

If a playwright or a film writer were putting together a dramatic production, it would be very easy for him to pit them against each other. Why? Because they seem to have entirely different personalities and approaches to life. This doesn’t necessarily mean that they are at odds with each other... that they are involved in a long drawn-out conflict with each other... or that they are incompatible. But that would probably be the approach such writers would take because they think conflict, confrontation, and exploiting their different ways of doing things would be necessary to tell the story. Luke doesn’t give us many details... but he does say that Martha was distracted with much serving.

Martha must have taken the ministry of hospitality seriously. She really enjoyed entertaining Jesus, and she worked hard at it... but she felt she needed a hand with the cooking and the serving. She had her own ideas about cooking and serving... and woe be unto the person who didn’t do-operate... didn’t do his or her share. Of course, if Martha were cooking and entertaining... you probably would have to do everything her way. Did you ever know a hostess who acted like that?

If you were trying to describe or identify Martha, one way to do so would be to look upon her as the queen of the pots and pans. Here she was... knocking herself out to offer hospitality and kindness to Jesus. But it probably didn’t occur to her that He didn’t really need what she had to offer. What He wanted... what He needed... what He looked forward to... was some space... some peace and quiet. He was on His way to the cross... and this was no time for a banquet. What he needed was an atmosphere of calm... even for a brief period of time. That is what Mary offered Him... and what Martha—in her eagerness to be the hostess with the mostest—had been, at the same time, destroying. Martha seemed determined to overwhelm Jesus with kindness... her own idea of kindness... not what He wanted or needed... but what she wanted... demanded that He receive. And unless her guests would accept with gratitude what Martha had to offer, she might take offense and would probably complain that she wasn’t appreciated.

After hearing today’s Gospel lesson... and reflecting on it... we might come to the conclusion that it’s better to offer someone a haven of rest and peace than a meal, or hospitality, or entertainment. Although that’s
not always true, Jesus did on this occasion need peace and quiet... which Mary was able to provide. It was the wrong place and the wrong time for Martha’s culinary skills... but the gift of hospitality is important. There’s certainly a place for such gifts, skills, and talents in the Lord’s vineyard. The same is equally true for the person who shares time and space and conversation with friends and visitors. It’s not right or wrong to be a Martha or a Mary. The Lord needs them both.

Why are we spending this time talking about cooking... and serving? And eating? On a congregational level... that’s where lots of the action is. And while such topics seldom lead to theological or biblical discussions... I assure you that they can be very emotional. They can cause jurisdictional disputes... they can cause dissension... cliques... and splits. Sharing food... breaking bread together... can also lead to intimate Christian fellowship which all of us need.

Are you familiar with Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (11:17-22) that deals with a divisive situation that began with a meal? Paul tells us: “But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.”

Apparently at Corinth it was the custom to have a common meal and the Eucharist at the same gathering... and all members of the Christian community could attend the common meal. The sacred rite would take place either at the beginning or the close of the meal. Differences in social status and customs of the congregation led to divisiveness... bad feelings... and other abuses at what was sometimes referred to as the “love feast.”

Perhaps we have learned from what happened at Corinth...when Paul set them straight about the sanctity of the Holy Eucharist. Now parish meals and celebrations of the Eucharist are usually separate entities. But the common meal... the parish dinner... or whatever we call such gatherings... is still important.
How often do we use such a common meal to kick off an Every Member Canvass... to celebrate a Church School milestone... to be part of a Youth Group or Canterbury meeting... or to honor a parishioner? At other times it’s the vestry coming together to eat and to experience Christian fellowship. Over the years... such meals have meant a lot to the people of Trinity. Pots and pans have also played other roles here. At one time the men and women of the church used the pots and pans and dishes and spent much time and effort in selling sausage. The church kitchen became the sales room... and our parishioners... especially the women of the church... gave much of their time and effort to this project. The price was right... and the product was good. Funds from the sale of sausage were also important when it came to paying off the church debt... which seemed astronomical at the time.

At another time... the use of Trinity’s pots and pans let to a full-scale dispute over who would use the pots and pans and china and silverware. It might sound ridiculous now... but it did happen. Rather than behavior at a church meal... as was the case at Corinth... the dispute at Trinity was over who would use or control the church kitchen. Fortunately, these conflicts are in the past.

There has been a deviation from the parish meal at Trinity. And I’m sure many newcomers are pleased with the result of this new development. I’m referring to the bread ministry. It’s an excellent way to share our faith and our friendship with those who have visited us. And the pots and pans at the Trinity kitchen are continuing to be put to good use in serving the community meal six days a week. I doubt that the pots and pans that figured in the controversy of 30 years ago are around anymore. They’re probably worn out now... after having been put to a higher use... the feeding of the needy people of the community.

Returning to today’s Gospel lesson... Martha’s distraction with much serving came when she was preparing and serving a meal to Jesus. She wanted the meal to be a success... but she was anxious.

Now... I ask you: Have you ever been distracted by much serving? Have you ever been so deeply involved in looking out for your favorite cause... or your favorite charity... that you neglected your worship of God in His sanctuary? Have you ever been so busy doing good works that you weren’t even hearing the Word of God... much less acting on it? That you were so busy doing things that you didn’t have time for prayer and
reflection? That you have been so busy carrying out your ministry that you have neglected those near and dear to you ... your family? Have you ever lost the true reason for your work... as Martha seems to have done?

Now... let's look at Mary's situation. Jesus says she has chosen “the good portion” which shall not be taken from her. Where was she when sister Martha was whipping up this great meal for Jesus? John says she was sitting at the Lord’s feet and listening to His teaching. She has been described as a contemplative person. Prayer is central to the life of a contemplative person. At the same time Jesus talked to Martha about her anxiety and being troubled by many things. He noted that one thing is needful... and Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her. What has she chosen that is good... that shall not be taken away from her? The spiritual life... which she lived and which Jesus and others were aware of. A passage in I Corinthians (7:34) will give us some insight into the personalities of Martha and Mary. The gospel writers John (11:2) and Matthew (14:3-9) identify Mary of Bethany as the woman who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped His feet with her hair. Such an act of adoration and devotion would be in keeping with her personality and her approach to life.

Today... let us celebrate the fact that Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus provided the friendship, the food, and the shelter, and the personal contact that were so important to Jesus. Let us also celebrate the differences in the gifts, skills, and talents of those who serve Jesus today... both here and elsewhere.

Some do great things in His name and for His sake... for which we thank God. Others spend large blocks of time worshiping God and meditating on His word. Still others offer themselves with pure and generous hearts. All are needed. All are beneficial. All play a role in the spread of the Gospel... and all help us to remain focused on the kingdom of God.
Do you find anything familiar about today’s gospel lesson? Is Martha and Mary’s disagreement a typical dispute between siblings? Or does it go deeper? How should they treat their guest, Jesus, who is one of their favorites? Martha is head of the household. It includes her sister, Mary, and they have a brother Lazarus. They live in Bethany... and it was there that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Without question... Martha is in charge of hospitality. She wants everything to be “just right” for their guest. And she has some very definite ideas about what should be done... how it should be done... and who should do it. She didn’t think Mary was doing her fair share... and she tells Jesus, expecting Him to referee her spat with sister Mary.

While this is going on, Mary has become an audience of one... listening attentively while Jesus teaches her. So... this family disagreement grows... over the centuries... into a philosophical dispute. Sometimes it’s labeled the active versus the contemplative. Or the doer versus the thinker. Or the worker versus the reflective.

I am now going to ask all of you... women and girls... men and boys... where you see yourself as far as your life in the church is concerned. Are you most comfortable “doing things” for the church... or its members... or others with whom you come in contact? Or do you thrive on worship... on prayer and praise... or on hearing the Word of God... meditating on it... and trying to put it to work in your life?

Brother Lawrence... whose name was Walter Hilton... was an English mystic of the Fourteenth Century (died 1396) who believed that Christian perfection could be achieved in faithful performance of the ordinary duties of everyday life. He once warned the people “not to tend God’s head and neglect his feet.” There’s a poem that seems to say a great deal about Brother Lawrence’s approach to life. It goes like this: <Get props in place>

Lord of all pots and pans and things,
Since I’ve no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things,
Or watching late with Thee,
Or dreaming in the dawnlight,
Or storming heaven’s gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals
And washing up the plates. *
Today's gospel lesson tells us that Mary had chosen the good portion... a concern for the spiritual life. There's no indication whatever that Mary was a women's libber. Far from it. Yet... here she was... sitting at the feet of Jesus. A woman. This was not the place for a woman to be in her day. At that time rabbis didn't have female disciples.

Without realizing it... without making a conscious effort... she had advanced the cause of women. So had Jesus. And they both were closely attuned to God the Father... in loving Him and in serving Him. As Mary sat at the feet of Jesus... a rabbi... it seemed natural to her and to Jesus. He was also ahead of His time... for permitting a woman to share His innermost thoughts, which were not recorded for posterity. Even though Mary and Jesus shared their thoughts on the spiritual life... worshiping and communicating with God the Father... it would be almost 2,000 years until a woman could actually be a rabbi, or a priest, or, heaven forbid, a bishop.

Jesus didn't tell Martha that hospitality is not important. He didn't tell her that food and drink aren't important. He didn't tell her that believers shouldn't provide hospitality to others... or that we shouldn't accept their gracious hospitality. It's true that Martha's timing for knocking herself out to provide Jesus with a big meal was bad... very bad. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem to die. He wanted to get away from the crowds. He was seeking calm. And Martha's hospitality... even though it was well-intended... was not what he needed. A simple meal would have been adequate... and more appropriate. But here was Martha... who excelled at putting on a big spread... doing just that. She was anxious and troubled. And it showed. What she did seemed to defeat her purpose. Meals have to be cooked. Dishes need to be washed. The floor needs to be swept and cleaned. As Christians we realize that we're responsible... at our church or at our homes... for feeding our guests... sometimes physically and sometimes spiritually. Let's not put Martha down. Let's help her to be open to the other needs that people around her have.

When you were growing up... did you ever feel unappreciated as Martha was in today's gospel lesson? Did your siblings stand by and let you do more than your share of the hospitality... the entertaining... or the cooking and serving? Did you ever feel like a martyr?

Martha was sensitive to Jesus' attitudes. And she viewed Jesus' approval of Mary's point of view concerning how they should react to Jesus as His disapproval of her. Whether she saw herself as a suffering
servant... or martyr... or an unappreciated hostess... she was hurt. And she may have been envious of Mary. Have you ever been envious of your siblings?

Now... turning our attention to another aspect of our life together... have you noticed that there’s a declining number of males—men and boys—who are deeply committed to Christ and His church. Some trace this trend to the macho image males try to project. Their attitude: Going to church is all right... for women and children. But it’s not important... it’s not interesting... or challenging... or necessary... for us men.

This viewpoint seems to have filtered down to Trinity Church. When there is a need for Christian service in this parish... who answers the call? Increasingly it seems to be that it’s the women. Where are the men? Many of the parish projects here require no great expenditure of time... effort... or money. It doesn’t matter who does them... men or boys or women or girls. Martha or Brother Lawrence or any who take a similar approach to serving God in everyday down-to-earth... routine... ways... can do so. But few do. Why? Are these tasks too menial? Are they not demanding enough? Or are those who fail to respond too self-centered, or do they feel such work is beneath them? Are they committed to Christ and the ups and downs of our lives together? Or do they hold back... refusing to serve Christ by serving those around them?

So... my impression is that the men of this congregation don’t score very well on the things they probably do best... Martha projects... Brother Lawrence activities. Why? Is it a lack of commitment? If so, that would be serious. And what about what Jesus called “the good portion?”... a concern for the spiritual life? How do we... men and boys, women and girls... measure up on devotion to Christ? On love of God and neighbor? On listening? On waiting?

Those of you who are familiar with the Brotherhood of St. Andrew...a men’s organization committed to spreading the kingdom of God...know its members are committed to Christ...they are dedicated to praying daily for the spread of Christ’s Kingdom. They are committed to studying the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the church regularly. And they are to make continuous efforts, week by week, to bring others nearer to Christ. Sounds as if these men have their work cut out for them. These precepts are not foreign to our Daughters of the King chapter here. But it seems that the Daughters are far more likely to tackle projects that need to be done than the men of Trinity Church.
Now...in case you were wondering...as Christians we don’t have to decide whose approach to serving Christ... Martha’s or Mary’s... is correct... is right... or is best. It’s not a matter of either/or. Our Lord Jesus Christ needs all of us. He needs our skills, gifts, and talents. Marthas and Marys complement each other. We need to give and receive. We need to go and do. We also need to sit and listen. Martha was great at going and doing. Mary excelled at sitting and listening.

We must realize that regardless of how many deeds we do for God and His church... our souls hunger and thirst for divine intimacy. And we’re not always willing to be a part of this essential dimension.

In addition to “doing things” for God... His Church... His people... and others... we need to spend time with Him. We need a holy place. We need to study His Holy Word. Just as surely as we eat, drink, sleep, or breathe... we need to be communicating with God... praying... meditating... listening.

As previously discussed, Brother Lawrence was a strong proponent of achieving Christian perfection in the faithful performance of the ordinary duties of everyday life. But he was also a well-read theologian. And he believed that Christian perfection could also be found in divine contemplation.

We shouldn’t follow the example of Martha. We shouldn’t follow the example of Mary. We should follow the examples both of them opened up to us. Amen.

*Editor’s Note: this poem has also been attributed to a 19 year old girl in domestic service in England in 1928*
He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."
In his first parable in this morning’s gospel lesson... Jesus seems to be throwing us a curve. Texans aren’t the only people who think big... expect to see big things. The rest of us Americans are built that way, too. We are only impressed by big things: Big cars, big houses, big cities, big farms, big stores, big planes, big ships, big government. If big is good, it seems that bigger is better... in our view. No wonder that an automobile manufacturer once said: “If we build compact cars, we’re going to build the biggest and best compacts on the road.” We’ve had bigness thrown at us... bigger and better... so often that we’ve come to expect to seek things through enlarged eyes. So much for bigness.

Jesus calls our attention to a mustard seed. It’s difficult to envision anything smaller than a mustard seed unless we’re speaking of organisms we can’t see without using a microscope. So let’s try to think small for a while. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like... a grain of mustard seed. Small beginnings... but it has had a mighty growth. Not orderly or predictable. Sometimes unexpectedly... and often when common ordinary people put their faith into action. A babe in a manger. A carpenter. A traveling rabbi. A condemned man nailed to a cross. An empty grave. Eleven men believing in Him.

Our own faith... and that of others... had modest beginnings. Would a mustard seed be a good symbol of our faith? What kind of soil did it find in us? Has the seed germinated? And has the plant been nurtured? Has it made significant growth? Or is it still waiting for inspiration? Is it still depending on some action on our part?

There have been some wonderful and inspiring examples of the growth of Christianity in the lives of individuals... and in various peoples. The reference to the grain of mustard seed is a parable of hope. And hope was a constant need of Jesus’ disciples. They were so few... the obstacles they faced so numerous... and the known world... though small in comparison to the world we’re familiar with... must have been overwhelming to them.

How could they possibly win it? How could they change it?

Jesus was telling His disciples then... and He’s telling us today... that we must not be discouraged. We must serve and witness where we are. For most of us that is in and around Morgantown, West Virginia. And we, individually and collectively, must be a small beginning from which the kingdom grows until the kingdoms of the earth become the Kingdom of God.
Elizabeth Ann Seton had an idea. She developed it... she got approval from people who counted. And then it was put into operation. What was her idea? Parochial schools throughout the Roman Catholic Church... world-wide. We can't imagine how much good these schools did for educating millions of people in academic subjects and in Christian living. One small idea... a mustard seed, if you will... that germinated... and grew into a world-wide mission for good. The kingdom of heaven had made a quantum leap.

If we turn back the calendar a dozen years or so... there was no place in downtown Morgantown where a hungry man, woman, or child with little or no money could get something to eat. That's not the case today. Why? Because a few concerned Christians at Trinity Church... some of whom are still with us... saw a need. That was good. But... far better... they did something about it. Others from various churches saw what was going on and volunteered to pitch in. So now... a community meal is served at Trinity Church at lunch time six days a week. A regular cadre of workers serves the meal Monday through Friday of each week. Then... on Saturdays... service club members, professional men and women, and a host of others... do their bit to help feed the hungry of the area. What they're doing... what you're doing... may not seem like much. But it's a significant accomplishment. The little mustard seed is growing. And... did you realize this? ... the kingdom is expanding. As a congregation... as a community... we're doing something for the needy... to help the kingdom of heaven grow.

My family and I came to Trinity Church almost 32 years ago. Has it really been that long? All of you look so young. Two of the major challenges Trinity Church was facing 32 years ago were:

1—A large parish debt
2—Help for its Church School program

Churches usually resolve their financial problems in one of two ways. Members of the congregation find a way to retire the debt...or the church closes its doors. Fortunately for Trinity...for you and for me...the debt was paid off several years ago. It may not seem so to you, but to me, it was miraculous. I'm sure some of you out there feel the same way. The debt was overwhelming. But this burden...this millstone...has been lifted from the shoulders of Trinity's parishioners. And, I'm certain, the people of Trinity have been able to expand the kingdom of heaven because of that. Some of the money that was being spent to retire the debt is now going to
feed the hungry. The same is true of energy expended. It’s much more fruitful. But that’s not the end of this story. There are still opportunities to serve God in this ministry. Volunteers are always put to work…and they’re always appreciated. Some get more out of it than they put into it.

Another major problem in 1961 involved the Church School program. That’s not unique. I’ve been in six other Episcopal congregations…and all their Church School programs had needs. In the small churches…it seems that if you had children, you didn’t have teachers. Or if you had teachers, you didn’t have children. It looks as if there was a conspiracy.

I see some very good things going on in the Church School program at Trinity. I see a large number of children who attend…and participate regularly…and learn. I see a small group of dedicated…overworked…teachers doing some excellent work. And they have a great rapport with the children. On the other hand, I still see several needs. The Church School facilities certainly aren’t ideal. Most will agree that they are not adequate. I know it’s partly because of the way Gothic churches are built. But if our children…young people…are as important as we say they are…we should take a long hard look at our facilities.

I’ve found that…over the years…congregations keep telling us how important children are to the church…and they try to aid in their spiritual growth and development. But…let’s face the fact that children are helpless…dependent on us adults for everything. They can’t tell us their needs. We sometimes feel we know what they are…but when they come up against other needs in the church…the children don’t fare well. For instance…how much is our expenditure per child in the Church School? And how many adults are committed to helping in their spiritual growth and development?

Our Church School program needs broader participation. How many men are involved in it? How many fathers? How many grandmothers? How many grandfathers? How many single men? Single women? How many athletes—past and present? How many lawyers? How many engineers? How many administrators? How many accountants? How many writers, poets, musicians, actors and actresses? These are some of the people who make up our parish membership. But…unfortunately…hardly any of them are serving as role models for the children of this parish. And they need you…and you…and you. They need your influence. They need your influence in their lives. They need this enrichment.
Children played an important role during the last days of Jesus’ earthly life. He was on His way to the cross... and the disciples were edgy. They wanted to protect Him from outside influence... interference... and interruptions. They didn’t want anyone to bother Him. The people were bringing children to Him, that He might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. “But when Jesus saw it He was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for such is the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.’ And he took them in His arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.”

Perhaps we can learn from this. Speaking of the children, Jesus said: “To such belongs the Kingdom of God.” Why? What’s so special about children?

1—They are filled with humility.
2—They are obedient.
3—They trust others, accept authority, and have confidence in others.

That’s why Jesus says... to such... to them... belongs the kingdom of God. Perhaps we should pay more attention to the children. After all, the kingdom of God is our goal, too. Has the mustard seed that is our spiritual life germinated? Have we had a reformation? What are we doing for the kingdom?
If you were going to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, I seriously doubt that you would use the images, word pictures, that Jesus did. It's not that they aren't pertinent... they are... but that we're not as familiar with them as Jesus and the people who heard them... His parables... were. Let's look at the examples He used to characterize the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. Would you recognize a grain of mustard? Most of us probably wouldn't. Have you ever seen a grain of mustard?... a mustard seed? Most of us probably haven't unless it was embedded in a piece of clear plastic... and labeled as such. And why would it be treated in such a way? Because Jesus made it famous by His use of the seed in this and other parables.

In Palestine, a small mustard seed really did grow into a large plant... one that attained a height of several feet. And birds did perch on it... and some may have built nests in its branches. Not unlike the mustard plant or tree... the Kingdom of Heaven also had a modest beginning. When Jesus and a few disciples started ministering to the needs of those around them... things began to happen. Who would have dreamed that what they stated in Palestine 2,000 years ago would have had such a phenomenal growth? From the dozen close associates and the others that Jesus attracted early in His ministry... Christianity has spread to every part of the world. That in itself is remarkable. And who would have dreamed that Jesus would have more than a billion... that's billion... followers at this moment in history? But that is the case. However, we must not get caught up in numbers. It wouldn't matter how many Christians there are... if they weren't changing the world around them by what they do... how they live. Although we Episcopalians aren't noted for spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ... certain individuals, congregations, and other groups are. When it comes to “planting” churches, the Baptists seem to do quite well. But there are people in Africa who have a unique... and highly effective way... of spreading Christianity. “When we want to take Christianity to one of our villages,” said an African girl, “we don’t send them books. We take a Christian family and send them to live in the village. And they make the village Christian by living there.” Sounds like an excellent idea. Wonder if any of us could accept such a challenge. Lots of people are doing wonderful things in Africa... for Christianity is growing faster there than in most any other part of the world.

Back to the modest beginning of Christianity. Many other great things throughout history have begun small. Who knows when an idea, a deed, or an act of kindness can have a small beginning and then grow to
something far greater? And who can discount the work, the faith, the courage of one inspired person? One of the
greatest stories of the Christian church involves a humble man... a desert hermit named Telemachus... sometimes
called Almachius. Telemachus felt a strong urge, which he felt was the call of God, to go to Rome around the
year 400, Even though Rome was a nominal Christian city by that time in history, it still had gladiators killing
each other. And 80,000 people would be there to cheer the fighters engaged in mortal combat. Aren’t they also
children of God? Was the question on Telemachus’ mind. At one of the fights, he leaped from his seat... into the
arena... and stood between the warriors. He was pushed aside. The crowd was enraged. People began to throw
rocks at Telemachus. Still... he tried to move in between the fighters. Then an official’s voice was heard over
the noise of the crowd. As sword flashed... and suddenly Telemachus was dead. The crowd was hushed. Then
the spectators realized what had happened: a holy man was dead. His body lay there before them... which no one
could deny. Something else happened that day in Rome. The end came to the gladiator fights. Never again. One
person had ended what some thought could never be done. He made a difference. And Rome was cleansed. No
longer was it afflicted by that terrible blight. Let us pay tribute to Telemachus. Even though it cost his life... he
did a great and noble thing. And the entire world is a better place because of what he did. He did much to
advance the Kingdom of Heaven.

So did William Wilberforce (1759-1833). Are you familiar with his name and what he did? A widely
known and greatly respected English political leader... Wilberforce was converted to an evangelical Christian life
in 1784, when he was 25 years old. His friends induced him not to abandon political activities after this inward
change in his personal life. However, he refused to accept high office or a royal title. But he did give unselfishly
of his time, talent, and money to promote overseas missions, popular education, and the reformation of public
manners and morals. We could use many people like Wilberforce in the U.S. today; couldn’t we? Wilberforce
also supported Parliamentary reform and Roman Catholic emancipation. The latter was difficult sledding because
evangelicals... as well as the Anglicans... didn’t have much interest in or concern for Roman Catholics in those
days. But Wilberforce’s chief claim to fame lies in his persistent, uncompromising, and single-minded crusade
for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire. He died one month before Parliament put an
end to slavery and slave traffic. He is credited with freeing the slaves throughout the British Empire. The idea
was sown in the mind of one man... and it changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people... made their lives better... gave them rights... gave them a dignity they had never known. He took an idea and became possessed by it. Then an unstoppable tide began to flow. Wilberforce struck a great blow against injustice. He also did much to advance the Kingdom of Heaven. My... how that mustard seed of an idea planted in his mind grew! It had great impact on hundreds of thousands of lives!

How is the Kingdom of Heaven like leaven? Both have great power... transforming power... changing power. Leaven changes the entire character of bread. Without leaven, bread is dry, hard, and unappetizing. But bread baked with leaven is very tasty. Such bread is also soft and spongy. When leaven is added to the dough... it brings on a radical change. In a similar way, the coming of the Kingdom causes a transformation in lives. The influence and power of Jesus Christ can... and does... make bad people good. They have a cumulative effect... but such changes begin with the individual. Then their influence is felt on a broader scale.

Christianity has had tremendous influence over many aspects of life... and for large segments of people. It has developed and strengthened family life. It has done much to transform life... for the better... for women, for the ill, for the aged, for children, for the handicapped... to mention a few examples. Hospitals and health care owe much to Christians and Christian concepts. So does education. Hundreds of millions of people throughout the world are far better off because of the love and concern of Christian people who have put their faith into action. Countless people have been the recipients of the transforming power of Christianity and of Christ on individual life of society. The Kingdom... the power of Christ... the Spirit of God keeps on rolling. Who will ever know the extent of their influence for good?
Our gospel lesson this morning opens with Jesus’ twin parables of small beginnings...and they are excellent examples. What are they examples of? The spread of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The small seed of the mustard plant doesn’t mean much to most of us. But it had great meaning to the people whom Jesus shared this parable. In fact, in the East a mustard seed was proverbial for smallness. What a great term to illustrate the spread of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The flowering wild mustard plants we see on the WVU farm land along the Mileground in the spring are not the same as those found in the Middle East, but they are similar enough to share relevance. Both have small seeds. And small certainly would be an apt term to describe the beginnings of the Kingdom of Heaven. But who knows where it will end?

The second parable involves leaven. Not much baking seems to be taking place in the home anymore...so leaven is not talked about as much as it used to be. In Jesus’ time, and before, leaven was spoken of but in negative or evil terms. Why would this be? The Jews connected fermentation with putrefaction or rotting... so it was looked upon as evil. Leaven, a little piece of dough kept over from a previous baking, ferments. And a small amount of leaven transforms the character of an entire baking. Unleavened bread is essentially flour and water... hard, dry, and unappetizing. But bread baked with leaven is tasty, good to eat, spongy and porous.

The point Jesus is making is that leaven has a transforming power. And over the ages, Christianity has demonstrated that it has transforming power. Christianity had greatly changed for the better... life for children, for women, for the weak, for the ill, for the elderly, and for countless other groups of people. It was a Christian monk, Thalasius, who founded the first asylum for the blind. Apollonius, a Christian merchant, was responsible for the first free dispensary. Fabiola, a Christian lady, founded the first hospital of which there is any record. In short, it can be said that Christianity was the first faith to be interested in the broken things of life.

Like leaven, Christianity has worked silently... referring to the work of the Holy Spirit... to transform a multitude of lives. But it is equally true that there is something dynamic about the working of the Kingdom of Heaven. The proof is all around us, and no area of the earth is left untouched by the redemptive quality of its coming. Or, as it has been aptly said, the spirit of Christ is yeast in our world.
The parable of the pearl of great price apparently would have had more meaning for the rich. It was the rich who collected pearls because of their monetary value and as an object of beauty. The rich would travel great distances to acquire a beautiful and valuable pearl. It has been suggested that to find the Kingdom of Heaven is to find and possess a great pearl... the greatest thing in the world. If you’re in the Kingdom of Heaven it means that you accept and do the will of God. It brings peace to the heart, joy to the mind, and beauty to life.

What about the man who found a treasure which lay hidden? It was not uncommon in the Middle East to bury money. This man was not looking for treasure but stumbled onto it. Could we say he might find the Kingdom of Heaven during his daily life?

I call your attention also to the parable in which Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net thrown into the sea... gathering fish of every kind. The meaning of this parable... if you’ll pardon the pun... is not difficult to fathom. Nor was it meant to be. Just as the net gathers fish of every kind... the Kingdom of Heaven, through its earthly instrument, the Christian church, must be a mixture of all kinds of people. Some are good. Some are bad. Some are useful. Some are useless. Which ones are which? It’s not up to us to decide. That’s God’s role. He will make that determination at the appropriate time... on the day of judgment.
Proper 12, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT:  2 Samuel 11: 1 - 15

PSALM:  14

NEW TESTAMENT:  Ephesians 3: 14 - 21

GOSPEL:  John 6: 1 - 21

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.
Before we begin talking about today's gospel lesson from Mark... the feeding of the 5,000... we ought to take a look at the events that preceded it. It was our gospel lesson last Sunday... but some of you may not have been here. Mark tells us that Jesus had called to Him the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff, no bread, no bag, and no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics.

And further, He said to them, where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them. So... then Mark tells us... they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.

Later, Mark relates the story of the death of John the Baptist... how King Herod had him beheaded and his head presented to Herodias' daughter on a platter. When John's disciples hear about the death of their leader, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Now... this is where Mark introduces the story of the feeding of the 5,000. Need I remind you that the disciples were tired... that they had been preaching and teaching and healing. And so many demands were being made on their time that they no longer had any privacy.

They were having a critique of their missionary visits... telling Jesus what they had been doing...what they had been teaching... what they had seen and heard. After Jesus had invited the disciples to retire to a lonely place to rest... a large crowd spotted them... recognized them... and interrupted their time together.

We can only speculate on what the disciples' attitude was toward this intrusion... but it was probably like ours would have been. We would have resented it. The crowd spoiled the day for Jesus and his closest associates as far as they were concerned. But Jesus was not irritated. He had compassion on them. This would not be a typical response for most people... but crowds brought out the best in Jesus. He was unflappable. He refused to be critical of them. He looked upon them as sheep without a shepherd. It was for them that He came to seek and to save.
I suppose it was predictable how the disciples would react to the problem of food for the crowd. They had an easy answer: Get rid of them. Send them away. Pass the buck to someone else. At least we will be free of this hungry horde… and the disciples’ life together would be normal again.

But no. Jesus told them to give the people something to eat. They were thinking about buying some bread but they didn’t have much money. Jesus then asked them how many loaves they had. Go and see.

He took a practical approach. What are your resources? That is a matter they had ignored. We often make the same mistake; don’t we? We don’t take stock of our resources. We wait for others to act while we go our merry way. We often look for a solution from without… when it might well be within us. We frequently become part of the problem… rather than the solution.

This is not a radical concept. Even today, many community leaders… when they encounter a problem… turn their thoughts toward Washington… as if our Federal Government has the solution to all our difficulties. They soon learn that this isn’t always true… and if they don’t solve their own problems themselves they may never be resolved. In a similar way… some of our congregations hold out their collective hands and try to get the Diocese to take over their problems.

And do you realize that the disciples never thought about calling on the power of God to minister to this multitude of hungry people? Fortunately, Jesus did. Did you ever wonder how this story might have turned out if the disciples had admitted to Jesus and to God the Father that the hunger of this huge crowd was too great for them and called on God for help? We don’t know… but it may have ended the same way. At Jesus’ insistence, they did offer their own resources… five loaves and two fishes. Not much, but a start. Then God took their resources… insignificant as they were… and added His power to their contributions… freely offered... and a great miracle occurred.

How many of you are aware of miraculous happenings in your life… or in the life of someone you know? Have you ever been inspired… or seen someone who was? What do we mean when we say So and So was inspired? We mean this: He has done something he is not capable of doing on his own. He has accomplished this through the power of God. Or, stated another way, God has accomplished this in him.
But first, he needs to offer the very best of himself. That gives God a place to start. He adds His power... His strength... to the resources (and weaknesses) of the one He is helping... and then amazing... miraculous... thing do happen.

After the five loaves and two fishes had been used, a vastly larger quantity of food became available before the multitude had been fed. The 12 baskets of fragments seem to symbolize the 12 tribes of Israel, or possibly the 12 disciples. As with Jesus’ turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, superabundance is characteristic of the divine bounty. Lots of food for everyone... and enough left over to feed countless others.

Let’s return to Jesus’ first miracle... or first sign... turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. It was dramatic. It was exciting. It grew a great deal of attention. Of course, many of the miracles God performs are not dramatic... they are not widely known or publicized.

For example... I recall the story of a housewife who told a friend, “I saw God turn beer into groceries.” God turning beer into groceries! Amazing. Miraculous.

For 30 years the husband had spent his earnings on beer while his wife and family suffered. Other members of the family had to skimp and save and beg and borrow and sometimes go without food. This happened to them week after week, month after month, year after year.

Then one day, the husband and father... we could call him the prodigal husband or the prodigal father... came to his senses. He became a Christian. He accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord of his life... and began living up to his family responsibilities. He started buying groceries instead of beer.

Amazing! Yes. Miraculous! Yes. The wife and mother was right. Quietly and without fanfare, God had performed another miracle: He turned beer into groceries. Not as dramatic as feeding 5,000 hungry people in an isolated place, but just as miraculous.

In case you ever wondered... God still performs miracles. If we stay attuned to Him, we can see... and hear... and experience them.
He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"
“Lord, teach us to pray.” These words, found early in today’s gospel lesson from Luke, seem to represent a break-through. The disciples had often seen Jesus in prayer. They knew that prayer was a very important part of his well-disciplined life. They also knew that Jesus never made any important decisions before He prayed.

Jesus was getting through to His disciples. One of them asked Him to teach them to pray. What the unnamed disciple was probably looking for was a simple prayer that member of the group could pray together when Jesus was teaching or training them. John the Baptist had taught his disciples such a prayer. So had numerous rabbis over the years. However, learning a prayer indicates a certain discipline toward prayer… and knowing a prayer can provide a focus toward a conversation with God.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He didn’t spell out all the details. What He did was to give them the formula. When they prayed… or when we pray… we are to use this form… expand it… and call to God’s attention those matters that are on our hearts and minds. This is the prayer that Jesus gave to them:

“For, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.”

Brief and to the point. Older and much shorter than the familiar version of the Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew (6:9-13). Matthew’s version is said to be liturgically more appropriate and effective. But Luke’s version has much to commend itself. For instance, it begins with Father… not our Father who art in heaven. It’s conversational in tone. That’s how Jesus addressed God. What could be more direct than “Father?” That makes this approach to God more personal. What Jesus is doing here is inviting His disciples to share in His own prayer life. He is leading His disciples to approach God the same way He does. Jesus thinks of His disciples as saying Father as He does rather than approaching God in a more formal way. Jesus’ religious life was a human religious life. It’s not surprising that the Epistle to the Hebrews makes use of the ideas that Jesus shared not only our flesh but also our approach to God.

Paul tells us in Romans (8:15) and Galatians (4:6) that it was the spontaneous cry of Father in the heart of the believer that bore witness to the Spirit of Christ. So it was that Jesus in the days of His flesh taught His disciples to say Father; now in the Spirit He prompts that cry in their hearts and in the hearts of countless people who never heard His voice.
Hallowed be Thy name. It’s our intention that the name of God… and the values for which it stands… should be revered by the entire creation for which God continually cares. Thy kingdom come. God’s rule is for the good of all. However, we must never forget that many people defy God. They don’t share His approach. They’re concerned with their own interests… not what is best for everyone.

Hallowed be thy name and thy Kingdom come are almost the same. Both have a connection with “the last days,” but both seem to be related to the immediate needs of the believing community or the community of faith to which Jesus and His disciples belonged.

Thy will be done… on earth as in heaven. We don’t need to be reminded that God’s will is not always done on earth. Let us pray and work harder to help bring this about.

Give us each day our daily bread. Please note that Jesus says to pray for present need…food for the day. This means we are not to worry about what may happen to us in our unknown or uncertain future. One day at a time. Day by day give us what we need to eat. Help us to trust God to provide for us… what we need at the time… not to store up food or other material things for the future. Does this petition remind us of the days when the Israelites were wandering in the desert? God looked out for them and their various needs. Remember that the food which He provided for them, manna, only lasted one day before it spoiled. Except at the end of the week. Then the children of God could gather enough to tide them over the weekend.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer speaks of debts rather than sins. These two words… and the word trespasses… certainly aren’t incompatible. And when it comes to forgiving others… many Gospel texts tell us that forgiving others is a step we must take… before God will forgive us.

What’s this all about? God forgives us…contingent on our forgiveness of others. You heard it right: God forgives us as we forgive others. And repentance is a necessary ingredient of this equation. Or as it has been said, “Repentance and forgiveness are the two sides of a single shield. If forgiveness depends upon repentance, it is true that repentance depends on forgiveness.”

Many of the recorded teachings of Jesus describe God’s forgiveness of us as being dependent upon our forgiveness of others. So we must always remember: To forgive and to be forgiven cannot be separated.
The final words of the Lord’s prayer as found in Luke are: And lead us not into temptation. I’m sure we don’t expect God to lead us into temptation. But we certainly can be exposed to sin…so asking God not to allow us to fall into temptation would be more appropriate. If we are tempted, we cannot blame God. But it is appropriate that we ask Him not to allow us to fall into temptation. Perhaps it would be better if we prayed that God would save us from the time of trial…or suffering…or persecution.

The prayer Jesus gave His disciples… and us… covers future trials and testing. On our own… we can’t withstand such challenges. But rather than give in to them, we can… with God’s help… meet them. When God helps us resolve a problem or difficulty, we are strengthened and encouraged. We grow in our faith… and grow closer to God, who made this possible.

The Lord’s Prayer—whether we use the version in Luke or the longer form in Matthew—gives us a good start on our daily devotions. It gets us started in a good frame of mind and leads us in the right direction. If we use it at the end of our private devotions, the Lord’s Prayer sums up what we ought to bring before God at any particular time.

Perhaps we should consider some other aspects of prayer. For example, when should we pray? Some might say anytime… and they would be right. Our prayers might be vocal… or silent. And silent prayer is appropriate anywhere and anytime. Some feel we should pray all the time. That is… prayer, one form or another, should be as natural as breathing… or even a part of breathing. It can be… whether vocal or silent. Musically inclined people might prefer to sing prayers… rather than say them. Still others may want to play them on the piano, flute, organ, trumpet, guitar, recorder, violin, or other instrument.

Where should we pray? Where we are. Publicly… in church, as today… and in other situations and places. At home. You may want to establish a holy place in the house, dormitory, or apartment. At a favorite desk or table… or seated in a chair that’s not too inductive to sleep. It doesn’t really matter where your holy place is. It’s good to have one. Should we use Bibles, Prayer Books, Hymnals, or note-taking materials when praying? It’s up to us. What seems “right” for you? What’s most important about prayer? Praying.
Proper 13, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 32: 22 - 31

PSALM: 17

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 9: 1 - 5
I am speaking the truth in Christ--I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit--I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

GOSPEL: Matthew 14: 13 - 21
Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.
Just before today’s gospel lesson begins... Jesus has heard some very distressing news. John the Baptist is dead. King Herod had him beheaded, and John has been buried by his disciples who came and told Jesus. Understandably... this is one of the times that Jesus felt a need to be alone. But that was difficult to do in Galilee... which was only 25 miles wide and 50 miles long and was thickly populated. According to the historian Josephus... Galilee had 204 villages, each with a population of at least 15,000. That’s more than 300,000 people for that small area. No wonder the crowds soon found Jesus.

When people invade our privacy, we’re often offended... even angry. We may send them away... insist that we be left alone. But that was not the case with Jesus. He didn’t seem the least bit offended by the crowds that followed Him. What was His reaction to the five thousand in today’s passage from Matthew? Matthew tells us He had compassion on them. Saying we have compassion on someone or a group of people probably means we feel sorry about their situation... or perhaps we sympathize with them. Certainly Jesus sympathized with them... but sympathy is not enough to heal disease or rescue lost sheep. When the word “compassion” is used in describing action Jesus has taken, it means far more than having sympathy. In that sense, Jesus alone has true compassion. He healed their bodies, and He healed their souls. He made them well. He made them whole. They were cured... completely.

Now that Jesus has healed the sick who came to Him... is there anything else that needs to be done? Yes. There is a large crowd of people out there... and they haven’t had anything to eat for a long time. The disciples come to Jesus, telling Him: “This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Imagine their surprise when Jesus told them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” The disciples said: “But we only have 5 loaves and two fish.” Jesus said: “Bring them to me.” And then things began to happen.

We should be impressed with Jesus’ response. When His disciples called His attention to the hungry multitude of people... He didn’t flinch; did He? He didn’t flee. He didn’t dismiss the crowd, as some of His disciples wanted Him to do. They would have had the multitude go into the villages and buy food for them. Do you think the disciples were true optimists? Or did they want to get rid of the crowd? Where would all these people have bought food? Where would the villagers have obtained the food to sell? Their supply would have
been limited. And where would this huge crowd of people... most of whom were poor... have found the money with which to buy food?

How do you think the disciples felt when Jesus told them that the people “...need not go away. You give them something to eat.”? When Jesus uttered these words, the disciples realized immediately that He was not going to abandon these tired, hungry people. Beyond that... should the disciples... or should we... expect something special? Why do I ask that? Because we all know that Jesus was a man of compassion (9:36). When He saw the crowds, Matthew tells us, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

That’s how Jesus acted earlier when He came in contact with people whose problems were very real... and sometimes overwhelming. Typically... that’s how He reacted. He didn’t back off then... nor did He back off in today’s gospel reading. Certainly, these people took up His time. The things He did for them were physically exhausting... and emotionally draining if you took them seriously. And Jesus took them seriously. Did He feel that these people were taking advantage of Him? No. Did He think they were wasting His time? No. Did He think they were important? Yes. Did He think He was doing something worthwhile for them? Yes.

There’s something here that we should remember... and take to heart. We’re not better than those who come to us for help. And also... we should share ourselves... our time... with those who come to us for help. Our schedules aren’t sacred. Nor are they cast in stone. Those who come to us are not “disadvantaged people.” They’re not unfortunates. Or clients. Or cases. They’re our brothers and our sisters. And that’s how we should view them. In our relationships with them, we should remember the Golden Rule... to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We should treat them as Jesus would... remembering that He was compassionate toward everyone... that He respected everyone... that He not only respected their dignity... but He also ministered to their needs. He never told them He was too busy to help them. He never passed the buck to someone else. He never ran out of time... or patience... with them. Jesus is the true shepherd of the human flock. He lays down His life for the sheep. He triumphs over time and death. He shields the flock with His strength and wise leadership. And He provides them with food... physical and spiritual.

It looked as if Jesus and His disciples were in over their heads. What they were confronted with was a situation far beyond the realm of human power. The disciples were willing to admit defeat. How could they feed
such a large group? But they hadn’t counted on that extra-special helping hand of Jesus. They took the little food that they had and gave it to Jesus. He accepted their little... and added His abundance... and the people were fed. They were fed well. Matthew tells us they were satisfied. In fact, they took up 12 baskets full of the broken pieces left over.

Don’t ask me to tell you exactly what happened in Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand. Don’t ask for a complete explanation. I can’t help you. But I can tell you... with confidence... that these people were hungry and... miraculously... Jesus fed them. He didn’t view them as a nuisance... or a pain in the neck... or as a bunch of irresponsible riff-raff. He saw them as people in need of something to eat. And He fed them... all five thousand of them.

Did you notice that Jesus didn’t immediately give the people what they needed? First... He accepted the five loaves and two fish that his disciples had in their possession. That wasn’t much to offer... but they gave that little they had. That was a start... barely. We don’t have much to offer, either, when we come to Jesus for help. But when we offer what we have... even if it’s minimal... and Jesus adds His input... His presence... His abundance... His very self... some remarkable things happen.

Have you noticed? ...the human portion... though insignificant in amount... is essential. By itself, it’s a sign of our human helplessness. Five loaves and two fish? What are they among so many? “Bring them here to me,” said Jesus. We will never be able to tap into the physical or the spiritual bounties... unless we offer what we have to Christ. The bread that He used when He began to feed the multitude did not come out of nowhere. It wasn’t much... but it was made by human hands. The five loaves and two fish may have seemed useless... and yet Jesus started with them... and they were miraculously multiplied many times. When we offer what we have... Jesus can add to it... and suddenly everything adds up to far more than we can imagine. Even when we bring our failures, our weaknesses, our misgivings,... Jesus can make something good out of them.

Do you see the connection between the feeding of the five thousand and the Eucharistic meal in which we participate? The bread and the wine are the means of Christ’s presence. And they are multiplied in love... human and divine. That the bread and wine consecrated in the Service of Holy Eucharist become the Body and Blood of Christ is implied by Scripture... and was taught by the church fathers. We Anglicans believe that the living
Christ is personally present, and that we receive Him when we receive the consecrated bread and wine. How does this happen? We don’t know. It’s a holy mystery.

The five thousand came to Jesus... and He fed them. He came to them in the breaking of the bread. After His resurrection, Jesus came to His disciples in the breaking of the bread. And... now... He comes to us in the breaking of the bread... in the Eucharist. During the Eucharist... very appropriately... some celebrants look heavenward in prayer at the consecration of the bread (and the wine)... which then is followed by the blessing... and later the breaking... of the bread. The distribution of the bread to the faithful... might also remind us of the feeding of the five thousand, in which the disciples also participated.

At our service of Holy Eucharist, the celebrant holds the bread or lays a hand upon it and says, “On the night He was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when He had given thanks to you, He broke it, and gave it to His disciples, and said, “Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.”

Matthew tells us at the feeding of the Five Thousand that Jesus: “ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and two fish He looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.” Jesus is saying... and witnessing to the fact... that all gifts are from God. He took the food and said a prayer of praise and thanksgiving, as at the Last Supper. He tells us... He shows us... that it is God’s gifts that he brings to mankind... to us.

The disciples... like the deacons in the early Christian Eucharist... then gave the bread to the crowds and collected the broken pieces afterwards. Isn’t it amazing what Christ can do with so little... whether it’s feeding a multitude with five loaves and two fish... or accepting our small... insignificant... offerings... and transforming them into far more than we could ever hope for. It’s reassuring to know that if we’re faithful... and offer what we have... that God will provide the increase. That’s the way He is. That’s His nature. Let us pray.

Most loving God, we thank you that in the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament You refresh and strengthen us with the Body and Blood of Your dear Son Our Savior Jesus Christ. We pray that in eating the Bread of heaven, the Bread of life, we shall never hunger again...and that in drinking the cup of pardon, healing, gladness, and strength, we shall not thirst again. For the beauty of this worship, for the presence of Christ, for the memorial of His Passion, for communion with Your saints, for this heavenly food, for Christ in us the hope of glory, we praise and bless Your Holy Name. Amen.
We have heard again the story of Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000... in today’s gospel reading from Matthew. How many times have you heard this story? Twenty? Fifty? More than fifty? I wouldn’t doubt you if your answer is any of those. And what new information...or what new insight...could I bring to you today that would have an impact on you? Is it likely to be life-changing? I doubt that it would be. So what we might have here is another sermon on a familiar topic with a great deal of information with which you are already familiar. So... you might see this as a good time to put your receiving or listening apparatus on hold... or perhaps go a step further and take a nap.

I’ve anticipated these possibilities and have decided I’m not going to talk about Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000. I’m going to take a look at Paul’s Letter to the Romans... and more specifically Chapter Eight, Verses 35 through 39... the epistle for today. I have a feeling you’re not as familiar with today’s epistle as you are with our gospel lesson... so perhaps we should have a little background information. What’s this letter all about? I’m glad you wondered about that because Paul’s letter to the Romans has some unique qualities. When theologians began looking into its origin and its authorship most everyone agreed that it was written by Paul. This despite the fact that it is different from any of his other letters. And he was writing to a church which he had not founded. In fact, Paul had never before had any personal contact with the congregation in Rome. And further, Romans contains very few details of practical problems with which Paul’s other letters were filled. Romans, at least on the surface, seems impersonal... and not a response to a current situation or problem. In fact, it’s close to being a theological treatise. Paul, in his other letters, is usually dealing with an immediate problem, or error, or some danger that was threatening the church to which he was writing. But not so with Romans. In it Paul states his own theological position, regardless of any immediate situation.

So what is the occasion for Paul to write to the Christians in Rome? It had long been his dream to preach there. Besides, it was on the way to Spain... and Rome had done much to open up Spain. Some of the great Roman roads and buildings are still standing.

There was another connection between Rome and Spain. Several of the men who were making a name for themselves in Roman history and literature were Spaniards. Paul’s strategy was to do this: Visit the
Christians in Rome, even though he had never had any contact with them... and then use Rome as a base for his new campaign in Spain.

That’s the way it was when he sat down in Corinth to write his letter to the Church at Rome... just before setting out with the gift for the Jerusalem church that the congregations under his leadership had raised.

Paul knew that he had enemies in Jerusalem, where he was going first, and he would probably attract others wherever he went. And, of course, sea voyages were always potentially dangerous. Not surprisingly, he was quick to ask for prayers to God on his behalf. What might be surprising is what he asked prayers for: That he might be delivered from the unbelievers. He seemed more concerned about these enemies than shipwreck or the dangers of sea travel.

Paul was not embroiled in any controversy when he wrote his Letter to the Romans. And he was not in prison. He was a free man. So he had some leisure... some quiet time... for reflection. And he took advantage of this opportunity.

In the first eight chapters of Romans... Paul deals with the problem of righteousness. And, he tells us, righteousness is obtained by having a right relationship with God. That should be of great interest to all of us... because that is what I dare say all of us desire: A right relationship with God.

Paul opens the eighth chapter of Romans by telling us that God has done something through Jesus Christ that the Law cannot do. That through Jesus Christ our status has changed... for the better. While we were yet sinners we were put into a right relationship with God. And as saved sinners we cannot go on sinning. Christ’s death changed our status... and His risen state changed our state. He is not dead, but alive... and He is always with us to help and guide us, to fill us with the strength to overcome temptation. Paul puts great emphasis on this thought: Jesus puts us into a right relationship with Him... while we are still sinners.

The change in our status is justification ... where the entire saving process begins. The change of our state is sanctification... and it goes on, never ending until we see Jesus face to face and are like Him.

Paul is quite clear in telling us that the entire saving process—the coming of Christ and the death of Christ—is the proof of God’s love. God has done through the gift of His Son Jesus what we could never do for
ourselves. God has also done what the Law cannot do. Weakened by the flesh, the Law could identify the moral situation... but was powerless to change it.

Moving into today's epistle, Paul says that sin cannot condemn us... since we are justified. Also that Christ's holiness will not condemn us because it expresses itself in love. And isn't it wonderful that Jesus, who might be our judge is in reality our advocate? It is He who pleads our case.

Then Paul goes into his famous passage that tells us: If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus—who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us, who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, says Paul, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Then come the words which express Paul's great faith, which, I trust, we can at some point in our Christian journey also claim: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How much does God love us? He loves us so much that He gave His only Son for our redemption. Abraham was so loyal to God that he offered... was willing to sacrifice... his dearest possession, his only son, Isaac. But God interceded and Abraham didn't need to follow through. However, God did allow His only Son, Jesus the Christ, to be sacrificed for us. And in so doing He demonstrated that there are no limits to His love for us. Isn't it wonderful what God has done for us!

Jesus died. He rose again. He is at the right hand of God. And He makes intercession for us. Isn't it amazing that Jesus... who could be judging us... is really interceding for us. And nothing can separate us from the love of God in our Risen Lord. No hardship...no affliction...no danger...no peril...can separate us from our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, they only bring us closer to Him.

In our life we live with Christ. In death we die with Him. And because we die with Him, we also rise with Him. In death, we won't be separated from Jesus Christ...we will be ushered into His nearer presence.
Proper 13, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 2 Samuel 11:26 - 12: 13a

PSALM: 51

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 4:1 - 16

GOSPEL: John 6:24 - 35

So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."
“I am the bread of life.” So said Jesus in the gospel reading from John, which we have just heard. And further: “He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”

How is Jesus the bread of life? Just as surely as bread and water are necessary to sustain physical life, He is necessary to sustain the spiritual life of the believer. But the figure of speech that Jesus uses goes beyond that. Those who eat of His bread and drink of the water from His fountain shall never hunger nor thirst again. He satisfies their heart’s needs... fully... and forever. That’s a major reason why we come together as a community of faith for worship—which indicates preaching, teaching, prayer, praise, fellowship, and Eucharist. The Eucharist is sometimes referred to as the breaking of the bread. In fact, worship services—with or without the Eucharist—are commonly and appropriately called the breaking of the bread. This dates back to the early church. The Book of Acts tells us that the earliest Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

Why is bread so important? Because it’s so necessary to life. Because it’s so common, it also lends itself to higher symbolic meaning that is easily and readily understood. In the wealthy households, slaves prepared the bread. But the prophet Samuel warns that the king demanded by the Israelites “will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. Later, the making of bread became an occupation (2 Sam. 8:13). When he was in prison, the prophet Ezekiel was given a loaf of bread each day “from the bakers street.” However, in the average family, the bread was prepared in the home with the wife or daughter doing the chores. In biblical times, bread was usually made from wheat flour for the better off economically or barley meal for the poor. Unleavened bread was the order of the day until after the settlement of Canaan. Principal methods of baking bread were: on a heated stone, on a griddle or in a pan, and—the most common way—in an oven. Most bread was in the form of flat disks about 18 inches in diameter, many of which had holes punched in them before or after baking. Not all bread was flat. The arrangement of the Bread of the Presence in the Temple in Jerusalem suggests that loaves were used.

Because bread was one of the most important items in the diet, it was also used in cultic offerings, as well as at ordinary meals. Bread is frequently translated as food in both the Old and New Testaments. Bread is also mentioned as a gift to strangers. Melchizedek brings bread and wine to Abram. And the Wandering Levite offers
bread to his host’s servants. Bread was the common food of soldiers in the field and of harvesters. It was appropriate that Jesse send Saul a gift of bread and wine and a kid and that Abraham provide Hagar with bread and water when he sent her away. What were the “good things of Egypt” that Joseph presented to his father Jacob and his brothers when they are about to return to Canaan? Grain and bread.

When Jesus said, “I am the door” and “I am the true vine,” He was speaking metaphorically, but not when He said, “I am the Living Bread.” The institution of the Eucharist and the practice of the Church show that when He spoke of the Living Bread He was referring to the sacrament which He was going to institute.

Paul writes in First Corinthians (11:23-24) “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” Our reading from John tells us that the Jews murmured at Jesus because He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” Some of them knew Joseph and Mary, so they challenged His statement that He had come down from heaven.” Jesus frowns on such a literal interpretation and moves onto another point: It is the leading of the Father that draws people to Jesus. And further: Eternal life belongs only to those who have moved from dependence on the physical sense into the experience of spiritual perception: Faith.

Spiritual life is fed by spiritual food, which is unlike the manna. The manna [which the Israelites ate in the wilderness] lasted only one day, and it was food only for physical bodies. The living bread is the very life of Jesus. It was given up in order that life may be given to the world. The Jews had another question: How can this man (Jesus) give us his flesh to eat? Jesus’ answer would be repulsive to them: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Blood meant life to the Jews and they wouldn’t eat meat unless it was free of blood. The figure of speech (metaphor) that Jesus used refers to living in constant union with Christ. It is symbolized in our service of Holy Eucharist by eating the bread and drinking the wine. The believer in Christ abides in Him, and Christ abides in the believer. This mystical union is not subject to the temporal changes and the changes of our mortality. Jesus again emphasizes the contrast between the physical and the spiritual in these words: For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Our Catechism (p. 859) tells us that the outward and visible sign in the Holy Eucharist is bread and wine, given and received according to Christ’s
command. The Catechism also tells us that the inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ given to His people and received by faith. What benefits do we receive from the Holy Eucharist? Forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life. As Jesus said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Unless we eat of the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood we have no life in us. Those who eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood have eternal life.

We Americans are at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding passages in Scriptures that are based on animal sacrifice... such as today’s gospel reading from John. The writers and original readers of the New Testament were all familiar with this subject. Animals were sacrificed every day among Jews and Gentiles and Jesus’ day. Jesus knew this and the people he was addressing knew this. And they all understood it.

Sacrifice, or offering to God, is important to all religious systems except for Mohammad, who rejected it. It meant offering. He offered his life to his country. He may not have been called on to lose it. But even so it has been offered just as surely as if he had lost it. So sacrifice doesn’t mean loss. It doesn’t mean killing. It may mean gain or a more abundant life. The essential idea of sacrifice is offering, usually to God.

The sacrificial system of Israel is background for all that is written about sacrifice in the New Testament. It had a long and complex history, which we don’t have time to outline now. However, the last stage, which was reached under the influence of the prophets, is pertinent to our discussion. The sacrifices of the Day of Atonement are especially important. At that time, sacrifice was not a bribe to God to make Him give help, nor was it aimed at punishment. What was needed to reconcile sinful man with a righteous God was not a change in God... but a change in man. God is always the same. He cannot be bribed. It is man who needs to be changed. Sinful man suffers from guilt and a myriad of faults. The Hebrews didn’t claim that their sacrifices removed the power of sin...only that they covered sins of ignorance and weakness...but not sins deliberately committed. The sinner had to overcome the power of sin by his own strength, and it was believed that he could. The apostle Paul rejected Judaism for this reason (Romans 7:23). Why? Because he learned first-hand, from experience, that he could not overcome the power of sin by his own strength.
The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement were national sacrifices for the national sins of Israel: The High Priest, representing the whole people, took the place of the man who made the sacrifice. The atonement—reconciliation—was made for the priests first, then for the people. The complete sacrifice had six stages:

1—The drawing near of the sacrifice with the victim.
2—The laying of the sacrificer’s hand on the victim’s head, by which he identified with the victim.
3—Slaying of the victim by the sacrifice
4—Entry of the priest, carrying the blood, into the sanctuary.
5—Burning of the flesh of the victim, which was thereby transformed and carried into the Divine life.
6—The feast of the offerers on part of the flesh…but not on the Day of Atonement, because these offerings were too holy to be eaten.

The two chief ideas behind these ceremonies were the removal of sin and reconciliation with God. But the animal sacrifices were only a prophecy of what was to be done by Jesus Christ. He did what they could not do; He is at the same time Sacrificer (John 10:17); Victim (I Cor. 5:7), (Hebrews 9:12); and Priest (Heb. 5:10, 6:20, and 7:26). His sacrifice in different stages corresponds to the Hebrew sacrifices that foreshadowed it. The presentation took place when He was crucified; the slaying, at His death; the entry into the sanctuary with His blood, at His Ascension; the cleansing with the blood, at our baptism; and the feast on the flesh, at the Holy Eucharist.

What took place once for all was the death on the cross. There is no more slaying; what was done on Calvary was done once for all. It was not the offering…but the slaying.

What Christ offers is His living body and blood. He is not dead…but risen. His death on the cross was voluntary. He gave Himself for us and it affected for us what the involuntary death and bulls and goats could not bring about. He did not suffer punishment. The purpose of punishment is reformation, and Jesus did not need this. The priest in the Hebrew system was a sinner, and he was liable to death. But our priest, Jesus Christ, is not a sinner and He is not liable to death.

Remember what Jesus said: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood we have no life in us. Those who eat the flesh of Jesus and drink His blood have eternal life.
The crowds that had taken part in Christ’s miraculous feeding of the 5,000 were only temporarily satisfied. They wanted more... especially more food. But that’s not what Jesus had in mind. They received more of Jesus. “You seek me only for the chance of loaves and fishes,” He tells them sadly.

It was obvious to Jesus that these people were only interested in the easing of material difficulties... perhaps in obtaining more comforts. Jesus was disappointed in the people’s reactions. So what’s new? He would be disappointed in people today. There’s a great interest in some of the by-products of Christianity, much more than in Christianity itself. People are still interested in the loaves and fishes—better wages and salaries, bigger houses, more conveniences, more leisure time. There does seem to be a willingness, often reluctant to follow Jesus at a safe distance... if He would offer such things. Some would look to Him to provide them. They would also be inclined toward another leader who identifies with the things they want... if he or she promises to make their dreams come true. But Jesus is more concerned with the lives that we lead than with the things that we possess... with how we treat our families, friends and neighbors... not how much money we make or what exotic places we visit on vacation, or how much our retirement income will be. And what about Jesus Christ? What think we of Him?

How often do we limit our response to Him? How often do we take the easy way... the path of least resistance... paying lip service to Him... doing only the minimal? Some do as little as they can get by with at school and at work, too. That’s why so many people are under-employed.

Unemployment is a serious matter. Our hearts go out to the unemployed, many of whose dreams have been shattered. Prolonged unemployment may leave psychological scars on its victims. Having their confidence shaken is also a serious setback.

Under-employment is something else. It involves setting low goals or no goals. It stems from a willingness to get by... by whatever means. For some it’s an unfortunate temporary situation. But for others it’s the logical result of a life of just trying to do the lease work possible... trying to get the greatest rewards for doing the minimum. That’s also the way they were in school, too. It doesn’t seem to bother some that they are not using their God-given abilities. That they’re never willing to accept a challenge, that they’re operating well below their abilities. No wonder some of them find life uninteresting... even boring. No wonder they go from job to
job... no wonder they have no pride of workmanship... no sense of accomplishment. We need to widen our
tent... expand our horizons. We must dream dreams... and when we get in over our heads we can call on God to
help us make them come true. So if we’re never challenged... we’ll never know what we can do. If we’re never
challenged, we won’t feel a need to call on God to come to our aid. And it’s a pity. Why should we be willing to
sell ourselves short? But selling God short is even more unfortunate. It keeps us from experiences His power.
And there’s no limit to His power. It’s most evident after we’ve done all that we can do... after we’ve offered our
best efforts... and then call on God. He will widen our tent... of understanding... of knowledge... of action... or
whatever else we need.

Men and women of faith... of vision... of action have made a tremendous impact on the world around
them. They have done great things for the betterment of mankind... many through institutions that still exist.

Two good examples—and there are numerous others—would be in education and health care. Who
started our first schools? Christians. Whom should we thank for higher education? The church and its leaders.
Who founded the first hospitals? The church. Who looked out for the poor and other needy people? The early
church. The early Christians did this long before public welfare as we know it began. But the church and its
members have always been known for looking out for the needs and the best interests of those around them. This
also includes social issues like child labor and slavery.

Let’s take a look at the issue of slavery. We know that it had its beginnings in pre-history. The Bible
makes numerous references to slavery. In England during the late 1700s and early 1800s there was an unlikely
advocate for the abolition of the slave trade. He was a wealthy, well-educated nobleman noted for his generosity
to the poor. His name: William Wilberforce (1754-1833). During a trip to continental Europe he came under the
influence of his New Testament reading and was converted to Evangelicalism. He decided to lead a strict
Christian life. He wanted to take Holy Orders but John Newton opposed this and persuaded him to serve the
cause of Christianity in Parliament. He was especially qualified for such a vocation because of his oratorical
gifts. Wilberforce took his Christian duties seriously, especially those of repentance and hatred of sin. He
enjoyed great popularity and established himself as the acknowledged leader of the Evangelical Party. He
contributed generously to various charities and helped found the Church Missionary Society (1798) and the Bible
Society (1803).
Wilberforce became a Member of Parliament in the House of Lords for Hull and later for Yorkshire. Throughout his life after his conversion, the absolution of the slave trade continued to be his chief concern. For many years the House of Lords refused to pass the bill he championed but finally did so in 1807. Later he supported the movement for the complete abolition of slavery which took effect with passage of the Emancipation Act of 1833, shortly before his death.

John Newton, mentioned earlier (1725-1807), was also a widely known evangelical... one of the few, according to one historian, who could preach about sin from close personal experience. He was the son of a shipmaster and went to sea at the age of 11. As he grew up he got into bad company and lived a rollicking life at sea and on shore. Among other things, he was actively involved in the slave trade. After his conversion in 1748, he was prominent in the Evangelical Revival along with George Whitefield, the Wesleys, William Wilberforce, William Cowper, and others. Several of them wrote hymns that are still sung today. Cowper wrote “O for a Closer Walk with God” and “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” Newton, who later became an Anglican priest, is best known for writing “Amazing Grace,” “Glorious Thing of Thee are Spoken,” and “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds.”

As previously noted, Wilberforce saw the slave trade as evil and spent much of his life... and his money... fighting against it. Some of the time he was serving in the House of Lords, where many of his peers were engaged in questionable business dealings. And one of Wilberforce’s strongest backers was Newton, a reformed slave trader.

Only God could pick such unlikely candidates to put an end to the slave trade in the British Isles. There were plenty of challenges to Wilberforce, Newton, and the others who fought against trading in slavery.

The Church honors William Wilberforce on July 30. So last Wednesday those who attended the mid-week Eucharist at St. Mary’s Chapel remembered him. We could use more people like William Wilberforce in Parliament, the Congress of the United States, or the West Virginia Legislature. He put his Christianity on the line in the world around him. The Evangelical Christians in the British Isles and other like-minded people did a great thing in outlawing the slave trade in 1807. It took much longer in the United States to accomplish this. Of course, slavery didn’t end, but it did take a big hit.
Now let’s take a closer look at our gospel lesson. I am the bread of life, says Jesus. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. In Christ there is that which feeds, that which restores spent energy, that which sustains. In Christ there is also strength that we can appropriate and make our own. But we can never harness that strength... call it ours... until we are challenged.

Carl Jung says it’s well known that Freudian psychoanalysis is limited to making conscious the shadow-side and the evil within us. It simply brings into action the civil war that was latent, and lets it go at that, according to Jung. The patient must deal with it as best he can. Freud has unfortunately overlooked the fact that man has never yet been able single-handedly to hold his own against the powers of darkness. Man has always stood in need of that which each individual’s own faith held out to him, Jung says. Man is never helped in his suffering by what he thinks for himself, but only by revelations of a wisdom greater than his own. It is this, says Jung, which lifts him out of his distress. He’s so right. We cannot rescue ourselves. We cannot overcome the evil within us. We cannot solve the problems that overwhelm us. We need a Savior...and we find in Jesus Christ the power to get us through life’s darkest moments... because He is there with us, giving us the fullness of life. Of course, we have to want what He has to offer. And we must accept it.

We must stay plugged into Him... because if we lose touch with Him we deny ourselves the necessary food. Without the living bread we perish. But He offers fullness of life. For, as He says, he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth in me shall never thirst. Jesus also identifies with the bread from heaven and the bread of God in our gospel lesson.

Jesus reminds His listeners that it wasn’t Moses who gave their fathers manna to eat in the wilderness. It was God who gave it to them... through Moses. And now God is giving the true bread which comes down from heaven. Jesus is divinely tied up in the message... but He is also the messenger. He brings life and sustains life in such abundance that the believer has no unsatisfied desires. As the words in Hymn No. 335 tell us:

I am the bread of life
They who come to me will not hunger
they who believe in me shall not thirst
no one can come to me unless the Father draws them.

The Bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world,
and they who eat of this bread, they shall live forever.
They shall live forever.
Proper 13, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT:  Hosea 11:1 - 11

PSALM:  107

NEW TESTAMENT:  Colossians 3:1 - 11


Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.' And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be'" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."
“I am the bread of life.” So said Jesus in the gospel reading from John, which we have just heard. And further: “He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”

How is Jesus the bread of life? Just as surely as bread and water are necessary to sustain physical life, He is necessary to sustain the spiritual life of the believer. But the figure of speech that Jesus uses goes beyond that. Those who eat of His bread and drink of the water from His fountain shall never hunger nor thirst again. He satisfies their heart’s needs... fully... and forever. That’s a major reason why we come together as a community of faith for worship—which indicates preaching, teaching, prayer, praise, fellowship, and Eucharist. The Eucharist is sometimes referred to as the breaking of the bread. In fact, worship services— with or without the Eucharist—are commonly and appropriately called the breaking of the bread. This dates back to the early church. The Book of Acts tells us that the earliest Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

Why is bread so important? Because it’s so necessary to life. Because it’s so common, it also lends itself to higher symbolic meaning that is easily and readily understood. In the wealthy households, slaves prepared the bread. But the prophet Samuel warns that the king demanded by the Israelites “will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. Later, the making of bread became an occupation (2 Sam. 8:13). When he was in prison, the prophet Ezekiel was given a loaf of bread each day “from the bakers street.” However, in the average family, the bread was prepared in the home with the wife or daughter doing the chores. In biblical times, bread was usually made from wheat flour for the better off economically or barley meal for the poor. Unleavened bread was the order of the day until after the settlement of Canaan. Principal methods of baking bread were: on a heated stone, on a griddle or in a pan, and—the most common way—in an oven. Most bread was in the form of flat disks about 18 inches in diameter, many of which had holes punched in them before or after baking. Not all bread was flat. The arrangement of the Bread of the Presence in the Temple in Jerusalem suggests that loaves were used.

Because bread was one of the most important items in the diet, it was also used in cultic offerings, as well as at ordinary meals. Bread is frequently translated as food in both the Old and New Testaments. Bread is also mentioned as a gift to strangers. Melchizedek brings bread and wine to Abram. And the Wandering Levite offers
bread to his host's servants. Bread was the common food of soldiers in the field and of harvesters. It was appropriate that Jesse send Saul a gift of bread and wine and a kid and that Abraham provide Hagar with bread and water when he sent her away. What were the "good things of Egypt" that Joseph presented to his father Jacob and his brothers when they are about to return to Canaan? Grain and bread.

When Jesus said, "I am the door" and "I am the true vine," He was speaking metaphorically, but not when He said, "I am the Living Bread." The institution of the Eucharist and the practice of the Church show that when He spoke of the Living Bread He was referring to the sacrament which He was going to institute.

Paul writes in First Corinthians (11:23-24) "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" Our reading from John tells us that the Jews murmured at Jesus because He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." Some of them knew Joseph and Mary, so they challenged His statement that He had come down from heaven." Jesus frowns on such a literal interpretation and moves onto another point: It is the leading of the Father that draws people to Jesus. And further: Eternal life belongs only to those who have moved from dependence on the physical sense into the experience of spiritual perception: Faith.

Spiritual life is fed by spiritual food, which is unlike the manna. The manna [which the Israelites ate in the wilderness] lasted only one day, and it was food only for physical bodies. The living bread is the very life of Jesus. It was given up in order that life may be given to the world. The Jews had another question: How can this man (Jesus) give us his flesh to eat? Jesus’ answer would be repulsive to them: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Blood meant life to the Jews and they wouldn’t eat meat unless it was free of blood. The figure of speech (metaphor) that Jesus used refers to living in constant union with Christ. It is symbolized in our service of Holy Eucharist by eating the bread and drinking the wine. The believer in Christ abides in Him, and Christ abides in the believer. This mystical union is not subject to the temporal changes and the changes of our mortality. Jesus again emphasizes the contrast between the physical and the spiritual in these words: For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Our Catechism (p. 859) tells us that the outward and visible sign in the Holy Eucharist is bread and wine, given and received according to Christ’s
command. The Catechism also tells us that the inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ given to His people and received by faith. What benefits do we receive from the Holy Eucharist? Forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life. As Jesus said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Unless we eat of the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood we have no life in us. Those who eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood have eternal life.

We Americans are at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding passages in Scriptures that are based on animal sacrifice… such as today’s gospel reading from John. The writers and original readers of the New Testament were all familiar with this subject. Animals were sacrificed every day among Jews and Gentiles and Jesus’ day. Jesus knew this and the people he was addressing knew this. And they all understood it.

Sacrifice, or offering to God, is important to all religious systems except for Mohammad, who rejected it. It meant offering. He offered his life to his country. He may not have been called on to lose it. But even so it has been offered just as surely as if he had lost it. So sacrifice doesn’t mean loss. It doesn’t mean killing. It may mean gain or a more abundant life. The essential idea of sacrifice is offering, usually to God.

The sacrificial system of Israel is background for all that is written about sacrifice in the New Testament. It had a long and complex history, which we don’t have time to outline now. However, the last stage, which was reached under the influence of the prophets, is pertinent to our discussion. The sacrifices of the Day of Atonement are especially important. At that time, sacrifice was not a bribe to God to make Him give help, nor was it aimed at punishment. What was needed to reconcile sinful man with a righteous God was not a change in God… but a change in man. God is always the same. He cannot be bribed. It is man who needs to be changed. Sinful man suffers from guilt and a myriad of faults. The Hebrews didn’t claim that their sacrifices removed the power of sin…only that they covered sins of ignorance and weakness…but not sins deliberately committed. The sinner had to overcome the power of sin by his own strength, and it was believed that he could. The apostle Paul rejected Judaism for this reason (Romans 7:23). Why? Because he learned first-hand, from experience, that he could not overcome the power of sin by his own strength.
The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement were national sacrifices for the national sins of Israel: The High Priest, representing the whole people, took the place of the man who made the sacrifice. The atonement—reconciliation—was made for the priests first, then for the people. The complete sacrifice had six stages:

1. The drawing near of the sacrifice with the victim.
2. The laying of the sacrificer’s hand on the victim’s head, by which he identified with the victim.
3. Slaying of the victim by the sacrifice.
4. Entry of the priest, carrying the blood, into the sanctuary.
5. Burning of the flesh of the victim, which was thereby transformed and carried into the Divine life.
6. The feast of the offerers on part of the flesh... but not on the Day of Atonement, because these offerings were too holy to be eaten.

The two chief ideas behind these ceremonies were the removal of sin and reconciliation with God. But the animal sacrifices were only a prophecy of what was to be done by Jesus Christ. He did what they could not do; He is at the same time Sacrificer (John 10:17); Victim (I Cor. 5:7), (Hebrews 9:12); and Priest (Heb. 5:10, 6:20, and 7:26). His sacrifice in different stages corresponds to the Hebrew sacrifices that foreshadowed it. The presentation took place when He was crucified; the slaying, at His death; the entry into the sanctuary with His blood, at His Ascension; the cleansing with the blood, at our baptism; and the feast on the flesh, at the Holy Eucharist.

What took place once for all was the death on the cross. There is no more slaying; what was done on Calvary was done once for all. It was not the offering... but the slaying.

What Christ offers is His living body and blood. He is not dead... but risen. His death on the cross was voluntary. He gave Himself for us and it affected for us what the involuntary death and bulls and goats could not bring about. He did not suffer punishment. The purpose of punishment is reformation, and Jesus did not need this. The priest in the Hebrew system was a sinner, and he was liable to death. But our priest, Jesus Christ, is not a sinner and He is not liable to death.

Remember what Jesus said: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” Unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood we have no life in us. Those who eat the flesh of Jesus and drink His blood have eternal life.
Jesus didn’t take the bait, did He? He refused to referee a situation in which a man wanted a share of his brother’s inheritance. Why did the man from the multitude want part of his brother’s inheritance? Did he covet what his brother received or would receive? Yes. Or at least that’s the implication Jesus gave. The eldest son usually inherited all of a family’s estate. And the man who approached Jesus wanted part of what his brother received or would receive. He seemed to envy his brother and covet his inheritance. Envy and covet are considered synonyms of each other... and applied to one who feels discomfort about the good fortune of others. Envy implies resentment, jealousy, or even hatred directed toward others. Covet implies a craving for the good fortune that is rightfully another’s.

So... not unexpectedly... covetousness is a serious sin... serious enough to be dealt with specifically in the Ten Commandments. The Tenth Commandment as found in Exodus (20:1-17) says “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

And the same commandment as found in Deuteronomy (5:6-21) says “Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” The main difference is that coveting your neighbor’s house is listed first in Exodus and coveting your neighbor’s wife is mentioned first in Deuteronomy.

Now let’s take a look at the Parable of the Rich Fool which Jesus told the man who wanted part of his brother’s inheritance. The rich farmer... or the rich fool... seemed to have a limited vocabulary. It was filled with four words... four personal pronouns: I, me, my, and mine. Do they tell you something? Yes. He never saw beyond himself. He was completely self-centered.

He had no interest in giving away any of his possessions. On the contrary, he seemed intent on obtaining more. He didn’t deny himself anything. In fact, he always affirmed himself. Would giving make the rich farmer happy? Not on your life. He was not a giver; he was a keeper. Perhaps even a taker.

How does his thinking square with Christian thinking? It doesn’t. In fact, his outlook is the opposite of Christian thinking. The rich farmer had some other flaws in his character. He never saw beyond this world. All his decisions were made with the world... this world... in mind. He never gave any thought to the next one.
The rich farmer made a major false assumption when he decided to tear down his barns and build larger ones in which to store his grain. He didn’t realize it at the time, but he would not be needing them because he would soon be dead.

The Letter of James addresses a similar point (4:13-15) to those who make future plans and ignore the fact that they have no control over their mortality. "Come now, you who say, ‘today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get grain’ whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.’ As it is you boast in your own arrogance.”

So the business people who ignore their mortality, the rich farmer, and those of any era who seek security in this world and expect to live forever have much in common. To say that they all are likely to experience disappointment is an understatement.

Jesus’ parable of the rich farmer reminds me somewhat of a situation at an Episcopal church which will remain anonymous. The congregation had an excellent physical plant, a beautiful chancel, stained glass windows, and a more than adequate nave. Church school facilities were good.

But there were some inadequacies and inefficiencies about the facilities. Because the seating capacity was limited, it was necessary to hold at least three and sometimes four worship services each Sunday. That put a heavy burden on the clergy who were conducting the services. And on the vestrymen and women and individual members of the congregation who had some responsibilities concerning the worship site. And the parking was inadequate.

Most everyone agreed that something needed to be done. Meetings were held and members of various church organizations and individuals made their suggestions. One would think that the leadership and members of the congregation would decide to purchase ground within a reasonable distance, construct a larger church building or buildings, and put in larger parking facilities. Then the church property could be sold, preferably to another church congregation or organization. Right? No. Wrong.

This is actually what happened: The church building was torn down. And a new structure, slightly larger and more aesthetically pleasing to some of the parishioners was built on the same site. This isn’t an exact
figure—only an approximation—but in place of the $1 million worship site the congregation moved into a $2.5 million building. And what about parking? The facilities were essentially the same... which means they still had insufficient parking.

Now you see why there seems to be a similarity between Jesus’ parable of the rich fool and the tearing down of one worship site and building a slightly larger but far more costly structure on the same plot of ground.

Jesus quickly identified the rich farmer’s self-centered and greedy attitude in wanting to tear down his barns and build larger ones in which to store the grain.

What about the church leaders who tore down a $1 million place of worship and replaced it with a $2.5 million facility? They personally would not make any money. But they were able to wield the power that some in this world demand. Their motives were different from the rich farmer’s... but far from unselfish.

Jesus tells His little flock, a reference to the Church, to “sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Seek ye first the kingdom of God, says Jesus. Spend your time—and your efforts—in discerning and doing God’s will... and be content. Work for the things that last forever... so you can take them with you when you leave this world.

This reminds me of a Spanish proverb: There are no pockets in a shroud. There are no pockets in a shroud.
First Reading: Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm: 99

Epistle: 2 Peter 1:13-21


Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.
August 6, 1995

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Trinity, Morgantown

Luke tells us that the Transfiguration of Jesus occurred after He took with Him Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while He was praying, the appearance of Jesus' countenance was altered, and His raiment became dazzling white. But before this great event took place, the three disciples went to sleep... took a nap. They later awoke to become what Peter called “eyewitnesses of his majesty.” But at the time the three apostles had no concept of how significant this miraculous event was. They realized... after the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus had occurred and after Pentecost had opened their eyes... that they had had a fleeting glimpse of Jesus’ divine nature. On reflection, they understood something of its significance... confirmed audibly to them by the voice of God.

This great transformation changed the body of Jesus... in character and appearance... in front of their very eyes. His divine nature suddenly burst the bonds... the limitations... of His human form and irradiated His body with a force which could only have come from the Creator God. Later... this same force propelled Him irresistibly through the grave and into His resurrected form. The Transfiguration of Jesus was, in fact, a preview... a portent of the Resurrection. But at the time the apostles witnessed it, it was a mystery. For the most part... it’s still a mystery to us. Yes, we can understand the Transfiguration in a limited way... through this confirmation in Jesus’ lifetime on earth that He is very God of very God... and it gives us a hint of the creedal description of Him as “Light of Light.” This day is for Christians—especially Anglicans, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians—a day of reassurance that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord, that He is God’s very Son “being of one substance with the Father.” It is one of the most important days... and one of the major miracles of Jesus’ life and ministry. It ranks alongside such major miracles as Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead... feeding of the five thousand... and turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Only the Resurrection of Jesus is of greater significance than these events.

When I think of the Transfiguration... I am reminded of Peterkin... the Peterkin Conference Center. How many of you have ever been to Peterkin? How many have attended a summer camp there? Over the years... there have been many transfigurations at Peterkin. Many lives have been changed for the better... and the changes are visible. These young people may have been more inquisitive about God than their teachers and
leaders realized. Does it occur to you... did it occur to their counselors and leaders... that they were searching for God... that they were seeking meaning to life... that they were trying to find some definitive answers?

They wanted to see Jesus in their peers... in their counselors... and in themselves. But I’m afraid most of them were disappointed... and largely for one reason: They were not taken seriously. After all, it could be said... and probably was true... that they were only children... and they were not especially devout. They were not particularly knowledgeable. They were not usually that interested in spiritual matters.

That’s the way children were looked upon at Peterkin or in church in those days. And that is also the way they are looked upon now. Never mind that they are stretching... that they are struggling... that they are growing. Unfortunately many of them are not growing spiritually because we don’t provide them with what they need. They may not be asking the right questions of us. Or we may be giving them the wrong answers. Or they may be asking the questions that are on their hearts and minds of others... of non-Christians... of non-believers.

How are they going to encounter the living Christ? In the church? Are we creating the proper environment? Are we providing the setting... the atmosphere? Are we making the contact? Are our children... the children of this congregation... making the connection?

Are our youth perceiving Jesus Christ in the Church? Is the Christ of the centuries experienced as one walking alongside each child... each person... as a friend? Are we assuring the children... are we convincing them... that Jesus Christ is the only friend they can ever have who will not disappoint them? The only friend on whom they can count? The only friend for whom they will never... ever... have to apologize?

While speaking of young people... I’m reminded that we adults may not realize how much influence others have on our youth...or how important their peers seem to be to them. The world in which we live makes a big point of seeking role models—especially for our young people. Rock musicians...TV personalities... stars of country, gospel, and popular music... stage and screen actors and actresses... an occasional political figure... hockey stars... professional baseball, football, basketball, and soccer players, and a host of others are called on to be role models. And quite often the person picked for this role doesn’t want it... didn’t ask for it... but can’t get rid of it. That is... he or she can’t cease to be the role model... until messing up. We... as a society... put them on a pedestal. But we’re not happy about them until they fall... until we realize they have feet of clay.
When the athlete or the TV personality gets caught in a drug raid or is arrested for drunk driving or selling LSD... then our society quite often reacts by denouncing So and So for lack of character. What a jerk he turned out to be! I should have known that he would do something like this. I'll never trust him again.

Another reaction might be to quickly latch onto another hero... tout his or her good points and accomplishments and then continue the cycle of building up... and tearing down... building up the image of someone to such a level that no one could measure up... and then dropping him when he proves to be what we should expect him to be... human.

Are adult Christians able to avoid such pitfalls? I wish it were otherwise... but the sad fact is they're not. We are also guilty of misplaced trust, of putting too much confidence in human beings. In his first Letter to the Corinthians (I Cor. 1:10-17) Paul lamented the fact that the eyes of the congregation were not always fixed where they should be. There was dissention and some were claiming to belong to Paul... some to Apollos... and some to Peter... or some to Jesus. Paul’s response: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? Paul appealed to the congregation at Corinth that in the name of Christ that they agree, and that there be no dissension among them, that they be united in the same mind and the same judgment. Paul makes his point: The eyes of the church should not be focused on human leaders... but as Christians we should always look to Jesus Christ.

On this great feast day... let us remember that as all eyes were on Jesus as His transfiguration... all eyes should be on him today... and every day. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith and with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit... He is the object of our worship.

I have indicated how our society has built up... and torn down... role models. We have given them far more acclaim... and attention... importance... than they deserve. More importance than they could possibly earn... or would acknowledge.

So... as Christians we shouldn’t be focusing on such role models as those I’ve mentioned. Nor should we be focusing on any other human beings... but on Jesus Christ.
A pastor friend of mine, Ed Barnard, points out that many Christians today have a tendency to focus their thoughts on their pastors rather than on our Lord. He spells out these thoughts on the subject in a newspaper column which I will read.

"Years ago I accepted a call to pastor a small church. The pastor of two churches within the same denomination urged me not to accept the call. But I was young and had great enthusiasm, which unfortunately was not matched by my intelligence. The first Sunday morning while sitting in the chair by the pulpit I did a quick preacher’s count of the number of adults present. I opened my remarks by saying, ‘There are 48 adults present this morning. If we all work together as brothers and sisters, one year from [today] we can see our adult group doubled.’ We went to work with all members working together as their talents suited them and on the first anniversary of my ministry to that congregation we had by actual count 97 adults present. Praise the Lord. The church had four elders and unfortunately they were divided with two elders being on one side and the other two in opposition. One family from which two of these elders came had dominated church policy and action for a long period of time. One thing that pleased them was to have the pastor and his family joining them for dinner on the Lord’s Day as well as every time anyone in that large family had a birthday. In bringing new people into the church, we received a number who were new Christians in the 20 to 40 age bracket. It was my thinking then as it is now that those new Christians needed a shepherd, so I appointed myself. As I became more involved with the new Christians, I became less involved with the dominant family. One evening I went to the church before prayer meeting to discover the two elders from the dominant family putting my books in boxes. When I entered the study I was informed by one of them that I had been fired and they wanted all my belongings out of the church that same evening. I knew the by-laws of the church so I informed them I could not be fired without a majority vote of the congregation and a period of time must pass before such a meeting could be called. I walked out of the study to attend prayer meeting, unaware that the actions of these two elders had become public knowledge so when prayer meeting began, we had the largest attendance that church had ever known at its midweek service. Before I could speak this particular elder arose and announced that the ‘preacher had been fired.’ But his discourse was interrupted before he could finish by one of the newer members who informed him that he was aware of the church by-laws and demanded the policy be followed. That elder and his large family, with some of his acquaintances, walked out of the church and never returned in spite of my efforts to effect reconciliation. The point: These two elders did not have their eyes on the Lord and thank him for a wonderful increase in membership. Their eyes were on the pastor and their feelings were hurt because he was spending his time with new Christians rather than around their dinner table. What happened to the other two elders, you ask? Well, they went to work and before another year passed we had replaced the number who walked away and even more. If a church should want to maintain unity and be honored in the community, it should keep its eyes on Jesus and Him only. At least that’s my humble opinion. What’s yours?”

I say Amen to Ed Barnard’s comments. And on this day… the day that we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ… I call on Christians here and elsewhere: Keep your eyes focused on Jesus Christ. If you’re looking for a role model… look to Him. He will never let you down. You will never have to apologize for Him. Not only will He be there to greet us at the end of our spiritual journey… He will also be with us every step of the way. Amen.
This is a great day for this congregation. First, it’s a Sunday, the first day of the week… one of the 51 little Easters we celebrate each year. What else makes this day so special at the Church of the Transfiguration, in Buckhannon, West Virginia? The fact that we’re celebrating the Feast of the Transfiguration, for which this congregation is named. August 6 is the actual feast day, but small congregations can’t always have the celebration then… so we’re celebrating this feast today rather than yesterday.

Church of the Transfiguration, Buckhannon, is now in its 107th year, for which we rejoice. It’s not as old as some of its neighbors, but older than three of the churches in the North Central Cluster. Perhaps some of you can fill us in on the history and oral tradition of this congregation.

Of course, the Feast of the Transfiguration is hundreds of years older than any of the churches in the New World. It originated in the Eastern church as a local and unofficial feast, but by the Eighth Century it was widely celebrated and equaled any holy day in importance with the exception of Easter. The Feast of the Transfiguration was not introduced into the Western world until 1457. So it had a great deal of history and tradition built up before this particular congregation was organized in 1887.

What is the Transfiguration? What is the event all about? Where did it happen? What is its significance? Three wonders occurred at the Transfiguration of Jesus:

1—He was transfigured in form or appearance. His face was altered and His clothing became dazzling white.

2—Elijah and Moses, long dead, appeared.

3—A divine voice spoke from a cloud.

The Transfiguration came a few days after Peter’s famous declaration that Jesus was the Christ. Soon afterward, Jesus first forecast His sufferings, death, and resurrection; the necessity of a cross; and the coming of the kingdom. This is the decisive time for Jesus during a trip immediately before His final journey to Jerusalem.

Where the Transfiguration occurred is not known, but the events that preceded it took place near Caesarea Philippi. Tradition locates the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor, but many scholars prefer Mount Hermon. Still others have suggested the Mount of Olives.
The vision of our Lord, with Moses and Elijah, was witnessed by Peter, James, and John. It is described by the evangelists as an historic event. They are in full agreement on the main outline, but, not unexpectedly, there are differences in the details they record.

Jesus' true nature, symbolized by the light, and His future glorious state after His death were revealed only to Peter, James, and John. The appearance of Moses and Elijah, the most notable figures in law and prophecy in Israel, testify that law and prophecy support Jesus and His mission.

After the cloud comes and overshadows them... a voice comes out of the cloud, saying "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to Him!" Doesn't this remind you of Jesus' baptism... immediately before He began His public ministry? At that time a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

After this experience, the three disciples kept silence. Only after the death and resurrection of Jesus could they understand what their vision meant.

What would you do if a spacecraft landed in your back yard... and some little people would try to talk with you before the craft took off? Would you call the police? Would you call your closest television station? Would you go into hiding? Or would you keep quiet? I have a feeling that you would keep quiet. There's always the hope that later developments will give you some insight into what happened. That's apparently the way that Peter, James, and John reacted. The Transfiguration of Jesus... His glorification... didn't make sense to them until after His Resurrection. Before that, they were hazy on what they had seen.

It has been said of various saints that they were transfigured at their martyrdom. The case of Bishop Polycarp is a notable example. Polycarp seems to have been glorified and transfigured as few others have. The following was taken from an account of Polycarp's death, written by members of his church at Smyrna in Asia Minor in a letter to the church of Philomelium in Pisidia. It's so dramatic and factual that it needs no elaboration:

"Polycarp was betrayed by a servant and arrested one evening at a farm outside Smyrna. He was taken into the city and led before the proconsul in the stadium, where a crowd was assembled for the games. The proconsul urged him to forswear his religion: 'Take an oath by the emperor's guardian spirit; curse Christ.' 'I have served him eighty-six years and he has done me no wrong,' answered Polycarp; 'How can I blaspheme my king and savior?' The proconsul's cajoleries and threats had no effect, and the people yelled for the blood of the
man 'who destroys our gods.' So, as he had already foretold, Polycarp was ordered to be burnt alive. He uttered a prayer of praise and glory to God, and when he had offered up himself and said Amen the fire was kindled: and the flames made a sort of arch, like a ship’s sail filled with the wind, and they were like a wall round the martyr’s body; and he looked, not like burning flesh, but like bread in the oven or gold and silver being refined in a furnace. Then the executioner was ordered to stab Polycarp to hasten his end."

A postscript to the death of St. Polycarp, martyr:

The annual festival of St. Polycarp, still observed, is the first regular commemoration of a martyr of which there is record.

Does Jesus’ transfiguration mean anything special to us? It is my hope and my prayer that all of us have been changed for the better because of our association with Christ. Do those around us see Christ in us? Do we see Christ in others? If not, there’s something missing in our lives. And we’re missing something. Amen.
Proper 14, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 37: 1 - 4, 12 - 28

PSALM: 105

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 10: 5 - 15

GOSPEL: Matthew 14: 22 - 33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."
In today’s gospel lesson... Matthew follows up Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand... with the occasion when He walks on the water to come to His disciples during a storm. Both John and Mark connect today’s drama with the miraculous feeding... and they do it in such a way as to suggest that one who can multiply the loaves is not subject to the usual conditions of earthly existence. Some commentators view today’s incident as a Resurrection appearance of Jesus to Peter. This story would have given great encouragement to the Christians in Rome in the 60s and 70s, after the martyrdom of Peter. The Christians in Rome were isolated... but regardless of how difficult the times were, their Savior... their Master... would certainly come to their aid. They were confident of that.

Our lesson today tells us that the storm came after Jesus had the disciples get into the boat and head for the other side of the lake. He waited until the fourth watch—between 3 and 6 a.m.—to rejoin them. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were terrified... and they cried out in fear.

But when they realized it was Jesus, they calmed down. Matthew tells us that Peter said, “Lord, if it you, bid me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him, saying to him, “O, man of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Him, saying, truly you are the Son of God.”

Peter seemed quite confident—didn’t he—when he asked Jesus to have him come to Him on the water? That certainly was a courageous act on his part. And he was doing very well. Here was Peter walking on the water... as his beloved Master had done. At first, he had his eyes partly on Jesus and partly on himself. Then he began to focus on the storm, rather than Christ. His faith was strong as long as his eyes were focused on Jesus... and he had a pure motive.

Fortunately for Peter... Jesus was there to pick him up when he failed... when he stumbled... when his faith wavered. How many times have we fallen... and been rescued by Jesus? How often have we taken our eyes off Jesus... our attention from Him... with disastrous results?
I think most of us can relate to Peter... and the difficulties he experienced. Let’s look at the story of his Christian journey. John’s gospel tells us that Peter was introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that Andrew brought his brother Peter to Christ. And Jesus gave him the name Cephas, the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek “Peter” or rock. Peter was present at the miracle at Cana when Jesus turned the water into wine. On another occasion, Matthew and Luke tell us, that at our Lord’s command, Peter brings in a large catch of fish. Jesus then cures Peter’s mother-in-law. Sometime later he is formally called to be an apostle. Now let’s get into the matter of how Peter fits into the picture... how important he is to the ministry of Jesus. Did you realize that in all the lists of the 12, Peter is named first? He is present on the several occasions when only a small “inner group” is involved: At the raising of Jairus’ daughter, at the Transfiguration, and at the Agony in the Garden. In fact, Peter usually takes the lead and is the spokesman for the disciples. As we know from today’s lesson, Peter walked on water—if only briefly—and he speaks for the others when they declare their readiness to continue following Christ.

After his confession of faith—at Caesarea Philippi—when he professes his belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Lord tells Peter that this truth has not been revealed to him by flesh and blood, but by the Father in heaven. The Apostle then receives the promise: “Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Peter’s confession of faith is soon followed by a sharp rebuke by Jesus. Because of his natural love for his Master, Peter objects to His prediction of the Passion. Peter and John are in charge of making preparations for the Last Supper, during which time our Lord affirms his pre-eminence. Peter’s impulsive love leads him to protest when Jesus washes the feet of His disciples... and, on his way to the Mount of Olives, to his boast that he will never leave the Lord. Then Jesus predicts Peter’s triple denial.

At the arrest of Jesus, Peter cuts off the right ear of the high priest, but like the other disciples, deserts his beloved Master. He follows from afar to the court of the high priest, where he is accused of being one of our Lord’s followers, but denies three times that he knows Him. Then... remembering Jesus’ prediction... Peter bitterly repents. After His Resurrection, Jesus makes a special appearance to Peter. According to John’s account, He appears to him and several other disciples at the Sea of Tiberius, where Peter makes reparation for his triple
denial. He does this by his triple affirmation of love and receives the charge from Jesus to feed His sheep...and the prediction of martyrdom.

Had you realized how deeply involved Peter was in the ministry of Jesus? If you didn’t, you’re not alone. It seems that he grows on us... and that we don’t realize how much a part of Jesus’ ministry he is until we look at the entire picture. He had his ups and his downs. Don’t we all? But Peter always seems to bounce back.

After the Ascension of Jesus, Peter immediately takes the lead in designating the successor of Judas Iscariot... and throughout the first half of Acts he appears as their head. When the Holy Spirit fell on the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost... Peter preached a powerful sermon and those who received his word were baptized, and about three thousand people were added to their numbers that day.

The Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... had made a powerful preacher out of this simple fisherman who had no special qualifications except what he had gained and learned while he was with Jesus. Peter was a “new” person... a “different” person... after the Resurrection of Jesus. Peter was the first of the Apostles to perform a miracle in the name of Jesus. Acts tells us that Peter and John were going up to the temple to pray... when a man who had been lame from birth was being carried to the gate of the temple to ask visitors for alms. He asked Peter and John for alms. Peter told him: “I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them... walking and leaping and praising God.

Of course, these aren’t all the things that Peter did... but rather they are a summary of his life and works up to the later years of his apostolate, of which little is known. However, we do know he was energetic and enthusiastic about his work. He was not one to sit around. And... after hearing his life capsulized... I hope we will realize how much he meant to Jesus as a fellow laborer... and, after the Resurrection and Ascension, how much his great faith and his strong leadership did to spread the gospel and advance the kingdom of God. He was, indeed, a giant among the early Christians... and his faith was strong... like a rock. We can learn much from him. O that some of his enthusiasm for following Christ would rub off on us! O that we were so strongly anchored in our Christian faith!
There's a great deal of significance to the opening lines of today's gospel lesson. Matthew tells us that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him, while He dismissed the crowds. Then He went into the hills by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone.

The Revised Standard Version says that Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. The King James translation says Jesus constrained His disciples to get into a ship. So it sounds as if there was a reluctance on the part of the disciples to board the boat. And, further, that Jesus realized that they must go. Why? What is this all about? This passage from Matthew doesn't offer any special insight into this situation. But a quotation from a related passage from John's gospel does. (6:14). This came after John's report on the feeding of the five thousand: "When the people saw the sign which He had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'" (6:15). "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew into the mountain by Himself."

Is it any wonder that this mob of people had taken a strong liking to Jesus? After all, He had certainly done a miraculous thing in the feeding of the five thousand. To say that this sign attracted attention would be an understatement of the first order. To many it was a sign that a prophet was in their midst. And they were eager to enlist Him in their cause. They wanted Him to be their king... they wanted Him to lead them back to their glory days. Never mind what Jesus saw as His mission... they weren't interested in fitting into His plans. They wanted Him to fit into theirs.

This was a mob speaking. And mobs aren't made up of rational people. They want what they want... and they want it now. And high on their list of wants would be freedom from their Roman oppressors. Jesus seemed to them to be just the person... a miracle worker who would lead the people to accomplish their aims.

But Jesus was too wise to fall for their foolishness. He realized that if He could be coerced into doing what they wanted... He would never be able to do what His Father had sent Him into the world to do.

What if... Jesus had seriously listened to the crowds? He would have been seen as the charismatic leader for whom they had long awaited... the man who would lead the revolt against the long-despised Roman government.
What if... Jesus had yielded to these pressures? He realized He would have moved His mission toward
man... and away from God. Had he done that... His mission would obviously been doomed to failure. There
could possibly have been some outward change... but hearts would not have been changed. The people wanted
someone to deal with the Roman oppressor... not someone to lead them into the paths of righteousness. They
were concerned with a better political system for themselves... not with a more abundant life for all people... not
with living in harmony with those around them and following the commandments of God. So... Jesus was
unwilling to get caught up in a situation when eyes were turned toward man... and away from God. He knew He
had to make a move... and do it now. Many scholars believe that the action He took in today’s gospel lesson was
to draw a line across His ministry. From this time forward He would devote Himself to His disciples. And...
further... He would break with the Jewish law. This is quite noticeable in the 15th Chapter of Matthew. One of
the key aspects of the law which Jesus rejected dealt with ritual purity. Remember when the scribes and Pharisees
asked Jesus why He and His disciples transgressed the tradition of the elders by not washing tier hands when they
ate? His answer: Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God
commanded, Honor your father and your mother and He who speaks evil of a father or mother, let him surely die.
They deviated from that precept, Jesus said. They were teaching that they need not honor their father. So, said
Jesus, for the sake you’re your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah
prophesy of you when he said: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do
dey worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men.” Then Jesus made His famous comment that it isn’t
what goes into a person’s mouth that defiles him... but rather it’s what come out of the mouth. This saying of
Jesus cancels all food laws of the Old Testament. What matters is not the state of a person’s ritual observance but
rather the state of his heart.

So... Jesus needs to get away from the crowds... to spend time with His Father. He then proceeds to
withdraw from the crowds... and His disciples. He needs to have an intimate one-on-one meeting with His
Father. He needs to spend time alone with God... for direction and guidance for the days ahead. He needs
confirmation that this is time for His break with the Jewish law.
Even so... when the crisis came... the storm... when the disciples needed Jesus... He was there. They had already reached the limits of their human resources... when He appeared. He rescued them from the storm. He also rescue us from the storms of our lives. He bids us to take heart... to have no fear. And His presence in our lives quite frankly can give us the confidence that we need... that we often lack.

Did you notice that Peter held true to form? He was impetuous... impulsive. He was not one inclined to look before he leaped or acted. No... he acted first. How about us? How often have we failed because we let our emotions rule our decision-making? Frequently we don’t want to take the time to count the cost. When Peter got in trouble with the sea... and the wind... He called out to Jesus... who again came to his rescue. Peter took his eyes off Jesus... and failed. But Jesus was there to rescue him. Peter failed again... but each time his failure brought him closer to Jesus Christ. And Peter’s failures only made his love for Jesus grow stronger.

How many times have we taken our eyes off Jesus? Unfortunately... we have done this many times... and our lives have suffered. At times, we have plunged into chaos. And we can’t get straightened out again until we realize He is the way, the truth, and the life. And further... that not only will He be there when we reach the end of our journey... but fortunately for us... He is also our companion on the way. And He continually rescues us. We can count on Him.
Because Peter has a major role in today's gospel lesson, perhaps we should pay special attention to him. Who can forget how he let Jesus down in the hours prior to His crucifixion? Or how badly he felt because he had denied Him... not once... not twice... but three times.

Some might say that Peter never looked before he leaped. How many of us have looked... and looked... and looked and then failed to leap? It's not unusual for Christians to spend long hours in study to learn more about the faith or more about the Bible. Or to train for a Christian ministry. All well and good. But there comes a time when we should move on... accept our responsibilities and go to work. How many times have we done all that looking... and refused to leap? Some of us could find inspiration in Peter. There were times when he leaped prematurely. But he leaped. He didn't hold back anything... but acted enthusiastically.

One of the words used to describe Peter... perhaps the most accurate one... is impetuous. He was ruled by his heart. His heart was in the right place. He was not motivated by greed. He did not seek power. He did not compete with Jesus’ other disciples for position. What did motivate Peter? Love.

Let’s not forget that throughout Jesus’ ministry Peter was an outstanding “disciple” or “learner” or “pupil.” At times he was quick, as an individual, to take the initiative. But he was usually found in the role of acting or speaking for the 12. He was comfortable in being the spokesman for the disciples... and he was very good at it. It should come as no surprise to us that he was greatly respected.

Peter is very close to Jesus. Nevertheless Jesus sends Peter and the other disciples away after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. In fact, He insisted that the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side of the lake. Then Jesus went into the hills by Himself to pray. Some scholars think this was the time that Jesus broke with the Jewish law and would devote the rest of His earthly life to His disciples. Thus, withdrawing from them and going into the hills to pray would be expected of Him. He always spent time with His Heavenly Father before embarking on a new venture... or a new phase of His ministry.

As the boat was being tossed about, Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples. When they saw Him they became scared. They thought they were seeing a ghost. But He spoke to them and His words overcame their fear. Peter told Jesus that if it is you, bid me to come to you on the water. “Come,” said Jesus.
So Peter got out of the boat and briefly walked on the water. Things went well until the wind scared him and he began to sink. “Lord, save me,” he cried out. And Jesus reached out His hand and caught him. Perhaps Peter had his focus on Jesus when he began to walk on the water... but on himself when he began to sink. In any event, Jesus came to his rescue... and to the rescue of the other disciples.

Did it occur to you that not only does Peter want to be close to Jesus...but he also wants to do what Jesus does? He did, too. Up to a point. Fortunately Jesus was on hand to rescue him when he failed. We, too, can do many things when we are focused on Jesus. And when we lose our focus and fail, He rescues us, too.

Using today’s Gospel lesson as a backdrop... how many times have we been moving along on our Christian journey... when our faith wavers? What happens then? If we are open to Him... Jesus comes to our aid...as He came to the aid of Peter and the other disciples on the boat. Amen.
Proper 14, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: 2 Samuel 18: 5 - 9, 15, 31 - 33

PSALM: 130

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 4: 25 - 5: 2

GOSPEL: John 6: 35, 41 - 51

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."
At the beginning of our gospel lesson today Jesus makes the first of His “I am” statements: “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” He follows up with two related statements: “I am the living bread” and “I am the bread which came down from heaven.”

Jesus is talking with the remnants of the crowd of 5,000 which he and the 12 had miraculously fed. He tells them it wasn’t Moses who gave the children of Israel the bread from heaven. And further that my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world. It is then that Jesus identifies himself with the bread from heaven... the bread of God.

The Jews had always looked upon the manna they received in the wilderness as the bread of God. The giving of the manna had been seen as the supreme work of Moses, and the Messiah was bound to surpass it. That was the traditional Jewish thinking.

As the first redeemer caused the manna to fall, they expected a repeat by the second redeemer. They didn’t expect the manna to fall in their age but in the age to come. For whom has it been prepared? For the righteous in that age. All believers will be worthy and will eat of it.

The Jews also believed that a pot of manna had been hidden in the ark in the first temple... and further that Jeremiah had hidden it away and would produce it again when the Messiah came. They were expecting Jesus to produce bread from God to back up his claims. Their view was that the bread used to feed the 5,000 was not bread from God. It had begun as earthly loaves and continued as earthly loaves. The manna, they said, was different.

Jesus reminded them that it was not Moses who gave them the manna. It was God. And further... it was not really the bread of God, but only the symbol of the bread of God. The bread of God, Jesus said, was that He who came down from heaven gave more than satisfaction from physical hunger. He gave life. And additionally, Jesus claimed, the only real satisfaction was in Him. So Jesus is the bread of life and the bread of God.

I am the bread of life, says Jesus. He is as necessary to His followers as food. Christ provides us with that which feeds, sustains, and restores. He offers a strength we can appropriate. His strength can become our strength. It enables us to do what we can not do without him.
Unfortunately there are many people today—including some who consider themselves to be Christians—who look upon Jesus as a great teacher and moral leader... but nothing more. They see Christianity as a great moral force which the world needs. But they don’t want to get personally involved in it. To some, it’s all right for women—particularly mothers—and children but not for them. These men are not sophisticated... but view themselves as very masculine and answerable to nobody. No wonder that in a number of cultures—especially southern Europe and Latin America—husbands and fathers stay away from church in droves.

Some who view Jesus only as a great teacher and moral leader also see Christianity as wholesome and acceptable. But to them it’s only another religion. In other words, it’s nothing special. They find no shortcomings in other religions. They don’t discriminate. Isn’t one religion as good as another? Nor do they make it a point to learn what other religions are all about... what they stand for. They don’t want to be challenged. They go along with just about anything to avoid taking a stand. Their attitude seems to be: why bother?

Who is Jesus to us? Perhaps we should review our thinking. He is far greater than a great moral leader and teacher. He is the only Son of God the Father. He came into the world to free us from the power of sin so that, with God’s help, we may live in harmony with Him, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation. Jesus is also the second person of the Holy Trinity, which includes God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

How would we describe our faith in Christ? Are we willing to talk about it? Is it continuing to grow? Is Jesus the central person in our lives? It’s up to us... it’s our decision... to allow Jesus to come into our lives. When we enter into a personal relationship with Him, He truly becomes our Lord, the Lord of our lives. We become dependent on Him. And He leads us into the path of righteousness. We follow Him... yet He is with us every step of the way... as we embark on... and continue... our Christian journey. And when it’s completed, He will be there as our Advocate to greet us.

When Jesus said He is the bread of life, He didn’t mean He is the source of what we need to exist. He provides far more than that. He provides all that we need. Without Him... we exist... but with Him; Him in us and we in Him... we have life. Life eternal. Amen.
Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.
There's something special about the site of today's gospel lesson from Matthew. But before we get into that, let's take a look at what has been going on. Two Sundays ago our gospel lesson reported an incident when Jesus, with the help and cooperation of His disciples, fed five thousand hungry people. After that, Jesus withdrew from the crowds, and from His disciples, to pray and to seek His Father's will for Him in the days ahead.

If you'll recall... many of those who were present at the miraculous feeding of the five thousand realized there was a prophet in their midst... and they wanted to enlist him in their cause. They looked up to Him... saw in Him the ideal person to lead them back to the glory days of Israel. Jesus would have none of this. He was concerned with carrying out the will of His father... not furthering the cause of man and his political hopes and dreams of breaking the bonds of Roman rule over the Hebrew people. Jesus had to get away from these influences that had the potential of tearing Him away from His ministry. At about the same time He had a confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees that was going to lead to His break from the Jewish law. One of the key aspects of the law, to which Jesus objected, dealt with ritual purity. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to know why Jesus and His disciples transgressed the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands when they ate. Jesus then charged them with breaking the commandment of God for the sake of their tradition: For God commanded "Honor your father and your mother and he who speaks evil of a father or a mother, let him surely die." The scribes and the Pharisees deviated from that precept, Jesus said. In effect, they were teaching that they need not honor their father. So, said Jesus, for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men. Then Jesus made His comment that it isn't what goes into a person's mouth that defiles him... but rather what comes out. This saying of Jesus cancels all the food laws of the Old Testament. What matters is not the state of a person's ritual observance but rather the state of his heart.

Now back to our starting point. What's unique about the site of today's gospel lesson? It takes place outside Jewish territory. Jesus is not in the Gentile world. It's a new experience for Him... and it's a foreshadowing of what is to come. Both Matthew and Mark record a series of incidents that speak of Jesus'
ministry among the Gentiles. The confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees may have led to His leaving His homeland for a while. This would make sense. It would permit Him to get away from the scribes and Pharisees... and the others who followed his every move so closely that He couldn’t have any privacy. So... in Tyre and Sidon... He could escape the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees... and the popularity of the masses. It would also give Jesus time to prepare Himself and His disciples for the days ahead... and the cross. In addition, it was an opportunity for contact with the Gentile world... a foretaste of things to come. Barriers are beginning to fall... and it won’t be long until the gospel also leaves Jewish territory and goes to the entire world.

Yes... Jesus was in foreign territory... but there was a woman with an urgent human need. She is not concerned about who she is... or where she is... or who Jesus is. She has an urgent need. Her daughter is seriously ill... and she seeks help for her. And Jesus is her only hope. Jesus may have had an inner struggle: should He limit His ministry to His own people or look beyond nationality and boundaries? His disciples weren’t helpful. They took the traditional view: Perhaps this woman could become a nuisance. But ignoring her... or refusing her heart-rending request... would hardly demonstrate Christian love, concern, and compassion.

Here is a Gentile woman... who had an overwhelming human need. She cried out to Jesus for help. And I doubt that any of us here today expected Him to ignore her or to reject her request. He was moved to have compassion on her... but we must remember she was a Gentile. Not only was the woman a Gentile... but, more specifically, a Canaanite. And the Canaanites and the Jews had a long history of enmity toward each other... even then. For the most part, they ignored each other. But that was hardly possible in this case.

So, you see, this woman had several things going against her. But let’s not underestimate a mother’s love. And her great faith. She would gladly open herself to ridicule. She would put herself at the mercy of Christ... because of her great need. It was so overwhelming that she would persist... regardless of the cost.

What was Jesus’ initial response to the Canaanite woman? At first, He was silent toward her. Does this sound familiar? Jesus was silent before Herod (Luke 23:9). He was silent before Pilate (27:14). He “looked” at the rich young ruler. He “looked” on the crowd when His brothers tried to talk Him out of carrying out His mission. In silence... Jesus had watched people making their gifts to the treasury... including the poor widow.
who gave “two mites” all that she had. Jesus’ silence toward Peter had broken his heart... and brought about his redemption.

When Jesus answered the Canaanite woman... His words were not encouraging to her: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she was not going to give up. She came and knelt before Him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

And He answered: “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” These words would seem to be very harsh... especially when coming from Jesus, who was widely known for His compassion... to a mother who was appealing to Him to heal her daughter. The words of Jesus were the traditional words that Jews would use in addressing or referring to Gentiles. They were often called Gentile dogs or infidel dogs...and later Christians were called Christian dogs.

Some expositors feel Jesus was using the traditional words to the Canaanite woman but in a tone of voice that was tender and kindly. Some think He was smiling during His talk with her. Could it be that He was saying one thing and planning to take an entirely different approach to her problem? How words are said sometimes makes all the difference in the world. Also... Jesus could have been using this verbal exchange with the Canaanite woman to teach His disciples. Could He be indicating to them that traditionally we Jews don’t have any dealings with Gentiles... but watch me... I’m going to heal this woman?

Her answer to Him would show her true character. “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table.” She responds with wit and spirit. She is ready to receive help from Jesus... regardless of His attitude toward her and other foreigners.

Then Jesus answered her, “O, woman, great is your faith! Be it done as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. From what I’ve seen and heard and read and imagined... I have the feeling that Jesus was usually soft-spoken and low-key, whether He was preaching, or teaching, or talking to others. But I feel sure He raised His voice when He told the Canaanite woman: Great is your faith! Her faith was great, too. It was greater than the chosen people had shown. Is this a foreshadowing of what’s to come? Is this verbal exchange leading to something far greater? Is this an opening for the Christian faith to penetrate the Gentile world? Is this an indication that the Gentiles would be receptive?
How would you describe the Canaanite woman? Certainly, she was a loving person. She loved her
daughter so much that she took the child’s problem upon herself...and made it her problem. Rebuffs didn’t
bother her. She knew what was important to her daughter and to her.

She had an abundance of faith. At first, she called Jesus Son of David. That was a political title... which
considered Jesus a wonder worker, but looked on Him in terms of earthly power. But, did you notice? She ended
up calling Jesus Lord. She saw something in Him greater than she could express in earthly power. Whatever it
was, it was awakened in her before Jesus granted her request. A prayer to a great man was turned into a prayer to
the living God. This Canaanite woman began with a request. She ended... on her knees... in prayer.

Did she have persistence! It appears that no one could discourage her. She knew what she wanted...what
she needed... and she wasn’t going to take no for an answer... regardless of the circumstances.

All of us can learn from this Canaanite woman. We may have done so already.
Proper 15, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT:  1 Kings 2: 10 - 12, 3: 3 - 14
PSALM:  111
NEW TESTAMENT:  Ephesians 5: 15 - 20
GOSPEL:  John 6: 51 - 58

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."
Today’s gospel lesson from John is related to last week’s, so we will look backward for a few moments. We’re doing this in order to discuss the remarks of Jesus about food and drink—physical and spiritual. Here’s the situation: Remnants of the multitude that Jesus had miraculously fed arrive at the synagogue in Capernum. Jesus is already there. These people are surprised… and pleased… pleased because they see in Him someone who can also give them food in the future. They are thinking about their stomachs… but Jesus is thinking about their souls. He tells them they should not labor for the food that perishes… but that they should seek the food that counts… the food that nourishes their spiritual lives.

When the matter of the children of Israel eating manna in the wilderness comes up, Jesus tells them it was not Moses who gave them the bread from heaven. And further that His Father gives them the true bread from heaven… for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.

Jesus’ next statement: I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. …this is the will of the Father, that everyone who believes in him should have everlasting life.”

The Jews murmured at Jesus because He said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” Some of them knew Jesus and Mary, so they challenged His statements that He had come down from heaven. Jesus frowns on such literal interpretation and moves to another point: It is the gracious leading of the Father that draws people to Jesus. And further: Eternal life belongs only to those who have moved from dependence on the physical senses into the experience of spiritual perception… faith. Spiritual life is fed on spiritual food, which is unlike the manna. The manna lasted only one day, and it was food only for physical bodies. The living bread is the very life of Jesus. It was given up in order that life may be given in the world.

The Jews had another question: How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Jesus’ answer to them: Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Blood meant life to the Jews and they would not eat meat unless it was free of blood. The figure of speech that Jesus uses (a metaphor) refers to dwelling in constant union with Christ. It is symbolized in our service of Holy Eucharist by the act of eating the bread and drinking the wine. The believer in Christ abides in Him. And Christ abides in the believer. This mystical union is not subject to the temporal changes and the changes of our mortality.
Jesus again emphasizes the contrast between the physical and the spiritual in these words: For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Our Catechism (Page 859) tells us that the outward and visible sign in the Holy Eucharist is bread and wine, given and received according to Christ’s command. The Catechism also tells us that the inward and spiritual grace in the Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ given to His people and received by faith. And what benefits do we receive from the Holy Eucharist?

1—Forgiveness of our sins
2—Strengthening of our union with Christ and one another
3—The foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life

As Jesus said, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. Unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood we have no life in us. Those who eat the flesh of Jesus and drink His blood have eternal life.

Those who didn’t grow up in the Middle East or study its history are at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding passages in Scripture that are based on animal sacrifices... such as today’s gospel reading from John. The writers and original readers of the New Testament were all familiar with this subject. Animals were sacrificed every day among both Jews and Gentiles in Jesus’ day. Jesus knew this and the people He was addressing knew this. And they all understood it.

Sacrifice, or offering to God, is important to all religious systems except for Mohammad, who rejected it. You have heard it said that So and So sacrificed his life for his country... when he died in battle. That is not true. Sacrifice does not mean loss. Sacrifice means offering. He offered his life to his country. He may not have been called on to lose it. But, even so, it has been offered... whether he lost it or not. So sacrifice doesn’t mean loss. It doesn’t mean killing. It may mean gain or a more abundant life. The essential idea of sacrifice is offering... usually to God.

The sacrificial system of Israel is background for all that is written about sacrifice in the New Testament. It had a long and complex history, which we don’t have time to outline now. However, the last stage, which was
reached under the influence of the prophets, is pertinent to our discussion. The sacrifices of the Day of
Atonement are especially important. At that time in history, sacrifice was not a bribe to God to make Him give
help, nor was it aimed at punishment. What was needed to reconcile sinful man with a righteous God was not a
change in God... but a change in man. God is always the same. He cannot be bribed. It is man who has
sinned... and it is man who needs to be changed. Sinful man suffers from guilt and a myriad of faults.

The Hebrews didn’t claim that their sacrifices removed the power of sin... only that they covered sins of
ignorance and weakness. They did not cover sins deliberately committed. The sinner had to overcome the power
of sin by his own strength, and it was believed that he could. The apostle Paul rejected Judaism for this reason
(Romans 7:23). Why? Because he learned first-hand, from experience, that he could not overcome the power of
sin by his own strength... by his own efforts.

The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement were national in scope, and they were for the national sins of
Israel. The High Priest, representing the whole people, took the place of the man who made the sacrifice. The
atonement—reconciliation—was made for the priests first, then for the people. The complete sacrifice had six
stages:

1—The drawing near of the sacrifice with the victim.
2—The laying of the sacrificer’s hand on the victim’s head, by which he identified with the victim.
3—Slaying of the victim by the sacrifice
4—Entry of the priest, carrying the blood, into the sanctuary.
5—Burning of the flesh of the victim, which was thereby transformed and carried into the Divine life.
6—The feast of the offerers on part of the flesh... but not on the Day of Atonement, because these
offerings were too holy to be eaten.

The two chief ideas behind these ceremonies were the removal of sin and reconciliation with God. But
the animal sacrifices were only a prophecy of what was to be done by Jesus Christ. He did what they could not
do. He is at the same time Sacrificer (John 10:17); Victim (I Cor. 5:7), (Hebrews 9:12); and Priest (Heb. 5:10,
6:20, and 7:26). His sacrifice in different stages corresponds to the Hebrew sacrifices that foreshadowed it. The
presentation took place when He was crucified; the slaying, at His death; the entry into the sanctuary with His
blood, at His Ascension; the cleansing with the blood, at our baptism; and the feast on the flesh, at the Holy
Eucharist. What took place once for all was the death on the cross. There is no more slaying; what was done on Calvary was done once for all. It was not the offering, but the slaying.

What Christ offers is His living body and blood. He is not dead... but risen. His death on the cross was voluntary. He gave Himself for us and it affected for us what the involuntary death of bulls and goats could not bring about. He did not suffer punishment. The purpose of punishment is reformation, and Jesus did not need this. The priest in the Hebrew system was a sinner, and he was liable to death. But our priest, Jesus Christ, is not a sinner and He is not liable to death.

Mankind is bound by the chains of his sins and guilty in the sight of God. The guilt and power of sin had to be removed, and mankind could not remove them for himself. Our Lord Jesus Christ removed them... but not in such a way that man has no more to do. Like a prisoner... man cannot break his chains. The prisoner must be changed from within, or he is not really free. God the Son opened up this possibility when He became man.

When we participate in a service of Holy Eucharist... we are doing so in remembrance of Jesus Christ... because He calls on us to do so. But it is not a memorial service because he is not dead... but risen. And He tells us that unless we eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, we have no life in us. And those who eat the flesh of Jesus Christ and drink His blood have eternal life.

How often should we receive the Holy Eucharist? Once a year? Once a quarter? Once a month? We are to do this as often as we do it in remembrance of Jesus Christ. To Episcopalians, this means frequently. To some... frequently is weekly... to others, it’s daily.
"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:
father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"
Fire is a key word in today’s gospel lesson. When you think of fire, what images come to mind? Are they positive or negative? Or a mixed bag? In Scripture… fire is sometimes associated with the Day of Judgment, with the Holy Spirit or with repentance to prepare for the kingdom of God. Earlier in Luke’s gospel (3:16-17) people were questioning John the Baptist… John the Baptist… suggesting that he might be the long-awaited Messiah. He answered this way: I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming. The thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John was a traditionalist. He thought of fire… as that unquenchable fire of the Day of Judgment that would purge the body of God’s people and consume the sinners. John uses this illustration: As a farmer takes a winnowing fork or winnowing hook and separates the wheat from the chaff by throwing trodden grain against the wind… stores the wheat in his granary… and burns the chaff… so will the Messiah separate the evil from the good… and destroy the evil. When John contrasts his baptism with water and the Messiah’s baptism with fire, he refers to the unquenchable fire of the Day of Judgment that would purge the body of God’s people. The association of fire with the Holy Spirit seems to have been a later development. We’re all familiar with the account in Acts (2:1-4) of the Day of Pentecost… when suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind and it filled the house where this band of Christians was meeting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. So the sound like that of a mighty rushing wind revealed the presence of the Holy Spirit… and the tongues of fire proclaimed Christ’s message in the many different languages… a token of the ultimate preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The symbol of the fire itself typified the holy zeal and divinely powered utterance of those who would speak forth the divine message. As mentioned earlier, fire is also looked upon as an agent for preparing the way for the kingdom of God. In our gospel lesson today… Luke views fire as the fire of conflict… which will compel people to line up for or against the Messiah.

When Jesus said He came to cast fire upon the earth… He was speaking of judgment. The Jews believed devoutly that God would judge other nations by one standard… and them by another… that they would be absolved because they were Jews.
Jesus makes it clear that His mission cannot be fulfilled except by His death. Remember when He told James and John, the sons of Zebedee... when they asked to sit one at His right and one at His left (Mark 10:35-40)... you do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? And they said to Him: We are able. And Jesus said to them: The cup that I drink you will drink; but to sit at my right hand or my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

So... Jesus is referring to a baptism of suffering and a baptism of death. He foresees His death... and looks upon it as an event of religious significance. And yes... His apostles could have a similar baptism. They could have a similar death.

Let's look a little deeper into the fire of conflict. Jesus was certainly correct when He said He brought division: Father against son and son against father... mother against daughter and daughter against her mother... mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. How true it has been that Christianity has divided families. In many cases, that's an understatement. It has torn them apart... sometimes in very dramatic fashion.

Then came discrimination against them because of their religion... their Christian beliefs. And let's not forget the various persecutions Christians have had to endure through the centuries. Jewish opponents of the Church of Christ began early. The opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles tell of attempts by the Sanhedrin to prohibit public preaching by the apostles. But the apostles wouldn't keep quiet... despite the floggings.

Christians... men and women... were thrown into prison. Others had to flee for safety. But their flight led to a great expansion of the Christian mission. The Gospel was taken to Samaria, despite the great hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans... also to Antioch and other cities of Syria. And from there the Church was launched on its task of evangelizing the world.

Obviously persecution had a great deal to do with attracting converts. Being persecuted... and killed... attracted many others to the Christian faith. The persecuted were great witnesses. Shortly before his death... Herod Agrippa I, King of Jerusalem, struck savage blows at the leaders of the Church by executing James the son
of Zebedee and perhaps his brother, John... and by putting Peter in prison. We are told that these actions “pleased the Jews,” which indicates that the public generally had become hostile to the Christians.

Later... the Christians were expelled from the synagogues. This was viewed as more serious punishment than the floggings administered to Christians by the rulers of the synagogues. The early church frequently had to contend with popular hostility... but seldom with official police measures. As a rule, the Roman administrators acted to protect the Christians against mob violence. Our only evidence for the period is found in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Pauline letters. Paul tells us that he was beaten by the lictors three times (against five floggings in synagogues: II Cor. 11:24-25). However, only one of these beatings is recorded in Acts... and there it said the magistrates were extremely apologetic the next morning... as soon as they realized Paul was a Roman citizen. Several times officials refused to take action against Paul. One who declined to press charges was the proconsul of Achaia, even though the Jews had complained against him. Some of the Asiarchs were among Paul’s friends at Ephesus, and the town clerk threatened them with sanctions. A detachment of Roman troops saved Paul from a mob in Jerusalem. And Paul was not afraid to appeal to Caesar—even though the Caesar was Nero—from an accusation brought against him by his own people (Acts 25:9-12). Paul assured the Christians of Rome that “rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” (Romans 13:3). Throughout the succeeding centuries there have been countless regional or local persecutions of Christians... as well as general persecutions carried out primarily by the Roman Emperors.

How different Jesus is from the Jewish idea of God’s King! Not only is He not the leader of avenging armies and flying banners... but He came to give His life as a ransom for many. His coming did not bring people together... but rather He divided families. This division was why the Romans hated Christianity. It tore families in two... and over and over people had to decide who was the object of their love... members of their families or Jesus Christ. Loyalty to Christ has to take precedence over our earthly loyalties or we aren’t worthy of the name Christians. We can’t be a Christian and put Christ second or third. He still divides families today. We also have to decide whom we will serve.

Or as Jesus said: Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Have you experienced the fire of conflict lately?
Proper 16, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Exodus 1: 8 - 2: 10
PSALM: 124
NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 12: 1 - 8
GOSPEL: Matthew 16: 13 - 20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.
In today’s gospel lesson... Jesus took His disciples to an isolated location where they could be alone... away from various distractions. He had so much to tell them... and He needed to know how much of His teachings... His mission... they were grasping.

His time on earth was limited... and He needed to know if His disciples recognized Him for who He was. He also needed to gain some insight into the future. Who would carry on His work? If the disciples didn’t really know who He was... or if they had no clue as to what His mission was... there would be no hope for the survival of what we now would call the embryonic Christian faith.

Isn’t it interesting where Jesus took His disciples for their retreat... their seminar... their teaching mission? They went to Caesarea Philippi... about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. It was outside the domain of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. It was in the area ruled by Philip the Tetrarch. It might be a surprise to you... but most of the people there were not Jews. What a wonderful place for Jesus to teach the 12! An area free of distractions.

That part of the Middle East had been a center of the ancient Syrian Baal worship. I fact, there were still numerous temples where this pagan religion... and other pagan religions... had been practiced. There was a large hill near Caesarea Philippi. Under it was a cavernous area said to be the birthplace of the god Pan, the god of nature. A cave contained springs believed to be the source of the River Jordan.

In addition, Caesarea Philippi had a great temple of white marble built to the godhead of Caesar. It had been constructed by Herod the Great. So... wasn’t it amazing that Jesus, a penniless Galilean carpenter, and 12 ordinary followers were in such a location? Here they were... in an area overflowing with reminders of the history of the world’s major religions. Yet it was there in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus’ divinity shone through. And His disciples began to understand who He was and what His mission was.

Jesus did not confront His disciples concerning His identity. He began by asking them who others said He was. That question led Him to ask them what He needed to know: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter had the right answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! (Or Simon son of Jonah). For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Shortly afterward Jesus strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.
Now that the disciples knew Jesus’ true identity... He had to move on. And so did they.

Has it occurred to you that 2,000 years later we need to know who Jesus is? Not in an academic sense. Most people know who He was... or who He is. The key questions are: Who is Jesus to us? Who is Jesus to me? And who is Jesus to you?

As Christians... we recognize Jesus as divine. We acknowledged that at our baptism. Or if we were baptized as infants... we acknowledged the divinity of Jesus at our Confirmation. In any event, we state our belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit. We also make a series of promises:

To continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers.

To persevere in resisting evil and when we fall into sin to return to the Lord.

To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Now back to the key questions of who Jesus is to us, to me, and to you: How would you as an individual... as a Christian... answer them? Is He the Lord of your life? How do you know that? How do you show that? Knowing Christ... and following Him... is a full-time 24-hour a day commitment. It requires the use of all our skills, gifts, and talents. It also requires us to give, work, and pray for the spread of the kingdom of God. Certainly there are times when we don’t know what we should be doing... but by spending time with Jesus the Christ we slowly learn the direction we should be going... and receive His help in doing what He calls us to do. This is an area of our lives in which we often fall far short. Isn’t it ironic that we work so hard to advance in our place of employment... and do so little for the spread of the kingdom of God? Or to communicate with God... or to worship Him.

Some of the people who are advancing so well in their chosen occupation are standing still... or perhaps even regressing... in their spiritual life. It seems that there are many distractions when it comes to praying... or listening... to God. Our work, our social activities, our families. Not to mention computers... television sets... radios... music... conversation with others... all sorts of noises. Is it surprising that some who have made
solemn promises to love God, to serve Him, and to call upon His name have never advanced beyond “Now I lay me down to sleep” in their prayers?

It’s as if we are ready to put great effort into advancing our careers... or in responding to challenges in the secular world but aren’t willing to give our Christian faith more than minimal attention. It’s as if it’s of little importance to us as far as our everyday life is concerned.

How do our daily lives mesh with the Great Commission? I’m sure you know about the Great Commission. When Jesus gave it to His disciples, it was not meant only for those with Him, but for us in succeeding generations as well. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

Are we putting such emphasis on proclaiming the good news in Christ? If so, how? As individuals? Or as a congregation?

Who is Lord of our lives? Is it Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom we promised to follow and obey? Do we speak with Him regularly? When the sun is shining? When things are going well? Or do we wait until things are going badly and ask Him to rescue us... to pull us through our current difficulty? Do we give thanks for the good things that happen to us? How? Do we wait for the storms of life... and ask God to bail us out? Is Jesus the Lord of our life all the time? Or when we’re in serious trouble? Or to paraphrase a question Jesus asked (in Luke 6:46): Why do you call Him Lord and not do what He tells you to do?

Jesus tells us in Matthew that “not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

I hope that these words will stimulate our thinking... and make us look at the lives we are living. Is Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God to us? Or is He some lesser figure? Who is He to us?
From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."
Our gospel lesson today begins with Jesus' prediction of His suffering and future glory. But He and His disciples are obviously not on the same wave length. Just before our reading begins, Peter, in response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Then follows Jesus’ remark that flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And, further, that you are Peter (Petros in Greek) and on this rock (petra in Greek) I will build my church, and the powers of death or the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. Then Jesus charged His disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.

Before Peter answered the question of Jesus’ identity, the disciples had previously told Him who others said the Son of Man is: “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Matthew tells us that the disciples had learned an important fact: That Jesus was God’s Messiah, His Anointed One. But they still did not know what this meant. To them, Jesus was to be a conquering hero, a warrior king who would kick the Romans out of Palestine and lead Israel back to its days of glory. They envisioned another King David.

Is it any wonder that Jesus wants them to remain silent concerning His identity? Can you imagine what would have happened if His followers, who knew very little about Jesus’ identity… or the role He was to play… had gone out and preached and taught their own ideas… their own thoughts? Such action would almost certainly have led to rebellion… with disastrous results. They would have had no army, and such action would have led to another ill-conceived thrust at imperial Rome, which would have been well-prepared to put down such an insurrection. Roman armies had dealt with other localized uprisings… efficiently… effectively… on numerous other occasions. Roman history has recorded a variety of unsuccessful outbreaks against its power and authority.

So… before the disciples can preach that Jesus is the Messiah, they must first learn what that fact means. That they have a long way to go is demonstrated in today’s Gospel lesson when Jesus rebukes Peter for saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you” after Jesus explains to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.
Peter seems to know that Jesus is the Christ. However, he apparently misunderstands the nature of His approaching sacrifice and was trying to keep Him from fulfilling His divine mission. Jesus’ attitude was this: Anything that would take Him out of the will of His Father would be satanic. That’s why He rebukes Peter at this time… even though He had blessed him earlier. And it’s interesting that the phrase Jesus uses is the same one He uses (4:10) to refute the devil in the wilderness temptation.

Peter is told “You are not on the side of God.” Or “You are not thinking God’s thoughts.” Then Jesus begins the process of teaching His disciples what they will need to know about Him… who He is… and His message to those He hopes to attract.

As soon as Jesus had told the disciples that He must suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes… the religious leaders of the country… Peter reacted with thoughts attuned to violence. The Messiah that Peter was expecting was associated with glory, power, and conquest. To him, the image of a suffering Messiah and any similarity between a cross, a symbol of shame, and the work of a Messiah was an impossibility. This can not happen!

Then come Jesus’ strong words: “Get behind me, Satan!” Origen suggested that Jesus was saying to Peter: “Peter, your place is behind me, not in front of me. It is your place to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way you would like me to go.”

So… Jesus would seem to be putting Peter in his place… his proper place. Become my follower again seems to be Jesus’ attitude toward Peter. Peter might sin… might fall… but the opportunity is open for him to become a follower again. We should take solace in this fact. Aren’t we always falling… sinning? And aren’t we always given a chance to return to Jesus? Time after time after time.

In the final verses of today’s gospel lesson… immediately after His rebuke of Peter… Jesus tells us what discipleship is all about. If we are to be His followers, we are to deny ourselves and take up His cross and follow Him. Brief and to the point. Simply said… but difficult to carry out.

First, we are to deny ourselves. This means far more than occasionally rejecting a pleasure… or vice… and patting ourselves on the back for such self-denial. It means taking ourself out of the equation
entirely... to shed our selfish behavior and become self-less. Or saying yes to God and no to myself... to make God the center of my universe... my thoughts... my life.

For us... taking up one's cross is not likely to be doing something that would cause our death... although it could. It's more likely to be giving up our personal ambition in order to serve a higher calling... to serve Jesus Christ. And the reward quite likely will be small in terms which the world recognizes.

But, don't forget... there's a sacrificial element to serving Christ. If we do what He wants us to do... in serving the needs of those around us... our own needs sometimes need to disintegrate and at other times to take on a lower priority.

In the final verses of today's Gospel lesson Jesus tells us that whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for His sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?

Have you ever met believers who were bold and innovative, resourceful, and willing to take chances in their private or vocational life... but who seem to protect or hoard the spiritual aspect of their life? It's as though they are trying to hide something that cannot be hidden and which certainly needs no protection.

Isn't it ironic that there are Christian men and women who get up early, work hard, put in long hours in the office, the hospital, the classroom or the mine or factory... but offer little energy, or time, or money, to God? What's wrong with a Christian whose loyalty to God is limited to what he or she says... and doesn't include what he or she does? ... who gives the best he or she has to work... to career... or family... but who has little time for God... and who give God and occasional tip... not a tithe or even a contribution worthy of mention?

Not unlike the disciples in today's gospel lesson... such lukewarm Christians seem to know... intellectually... who Jesus Christ is. They may even know what that should mean to them. But they aren't ready to make a commitment to Him. They want all the benefits of Christian life... but are unwilling to follow in the footsteps of our risen Lord. They refuse to deny themselves. They have their priorities mixed up.

They're not denying themselves. They're denying Jesus.
Proper 17, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT:   Song of Solomon 2: 8 - 13
PSALM 45
NEW TESTAMENT:   James 1: 17 - 27
GOSPEL:       Mark 7: 1 - 8, 14 - 15, 21 - 23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles. So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."
What has your reaction been to the ministry of Jesus and His disciples? Have the love of God and love of neighbor that they demonstrated in their lives shone through the Scriptures? Have you been inspired by their teachings? Have their lives and teachings changed you for the better? Have you been impressed by the miracles that Jesus performed? Have you held Jesus in awe because of the large number of people He healed? Have you felt that the kingdom of heaven has come near?

Of course, because you were not an eyewitness to these events involving Jesus and His disciples... your information is based on what others said and wrote about them... and what you have experienced through the presence of Jesus in your life. However, you have read accounts of Jesus’ ministry... you have heard countless sermons and teachings about what He said and did. All in all, it would probably be true that you have seen the “big” picture. Certainly you are aware of the many life-changing experiences for which Jesus and His disciples were responsible.

You know, of course, that Jesus and His disciples didn’t wash their hands before they ate. Does it matter to you? If so, how much? What they had failed to do was not a violation of cleanliness but of Jewish ceremonial practice. But to the scribes and the Pharisees this was of tremendous importance. As previously noted, they didn’t seem to see the big things that Jesus and His disciples did. But the little things attracted their attention in a hurry.

The scribes from Jerusalem apparently were the ones who caused the trouble... because they were more strict and more orthodox than the local Pharisees. However, the local Pharisees were involved in this confrontation with Jesus. In fact, they may have instigated it.

You may have wondered what ceremonial hand-washing has to do with loving God and keeping the Commandments. You are not alone. So did Jesus... and He was quick to challenge the scribes and the Pharisees. This lesson gets at the heart of the matter... what religion is or should be. It shows a wide gulf between Jesus and the orthodox Jews of His time. Why did Jesus and His disciples not observe the tradition of the elders, which in this case means the ancient Jewish leaders like Hillel and Shammi? What was the tradition? And what made it so important?
The Law for the Jew originally meant two things: First, the Ten Commandments. Then came the five books of the Old Testament... Genesis... Exodus... Leviticus... Numbers... and Deuteronomy... the Pentateuch. As you know, the Pentateuch contains numerous detailed rules, regulations, and instructions. But when it came to moral questions, the law laid down a series of moral principles... and each person was to interpret and apply it to his own situation. That’s the way things were until the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ. At that time a class of legal experts, called the scribes, became prominent in Jewish life and culture. They weren’t content with great moral principles. They expanded them, they broke them down, and they compiled thousands of rules and regulations aimed at governing every possible situation and action of life. These rules and regulations were not yet written down at the time of Jesus. They make up what is called the Oral Law... which is also referred to as the tradition of the elders... or the ancients. The great legal experts of the old days... like Hillel and Shammai. Later... in the Third Century A.D., a summary of these rules and regulations was made and written down. It is now known as the Mishnah.

In today’s gospel lesson from Mark... the Jews claimed that Jesus and His disciples were eating with unclean hands... ceremonially unclean and unfit for the service and worship of God. There were definite and rigid rules for the washing of hands. These rules had nothing to do with hygienic purity... but rather applied to ceremonial cleanness. Failure to follow these complex rules would make you unclean... not from a health standpoint... but in the eyes of God. And this was a serious matter. The Jewish leaders said this could make the offenders subject to attacks of a demon. Some actually suffered persecution, excommunication, and starvation for such violations.

How did Jesus respond to these complaints of the Scribes and Pharisees? First, He called them hypocrites. Then He quoted a Prophecy of Isaiah: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.” And further: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition.”

It’s easy for us to see, isn’t it, that those whom Jesus was criticizing were not loving God with all their hearts and with all their minds? And they were not loving their neighbors as themselves. The great faith that had
evolved over the centuries was degenerating. It was becoming mere motions... it was losing its religious and ethical significance. The cleanings and the scourings had become a substitute for faith in God. A poet once said the Pharisees had become so busy with scrubbing “useless pots the whole day long” that they had completely “lost the dance and song.” Another writer said that the Pharisees’ tradition had moved religion from the sanctuary into the kitchen. So it’s not difficult for us to see that Isaiah’s words could be applied to them... that they had gotten so wrapped up in their traditions, their rules and regulations, that they were only giving lip service to God.

It’s easy to criticize. But what about us? Do we seek first the kingdom of God? Or do we seek first our own kingdom? Sometimes we also need to be reminded that God’s commandments are far more important than... and that they take priority over... church ritual. That they take precedence over the day-to-day decisions of our lives. If we ignore this spiritual truth, we do so at our own peril. We also ignore at our own peril another statement that Jesus made in today’s Gospel lesson: There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things that come out of a man are what defile him.

A biblical commentator, in writing on these verses, refers to the sins that Jesus lists here as an appalling list of poisons. They begin with evil thoughts, the root of them all, and end with foolishness. He further notes that slander, pride, and foolishness rank right up there with theft, murder, and adultery as sins that defile. We have a tendency to downgrade slander, pride, and foolishness. But Jesus has them on His list of major sins.

Slander has been defined as a form of murder... or the assassination of character. Certainly it’s more than a socially undesirable characteristic, or a character flaw. We’ve long been aware of the fact that pride is one of the seven deadly sins. Some think it is the deadliest of all... mainly because it blocks all spiritual growth.

Foolishness is not to be taken lightly. Jesus didn’t take it lightly. Some biblical scholars translate foolishness as folly (Goodspeed) and recklessness (Moffatt). After considering today’s Gospel lesson we should not be overly concerned about how others might get bogged down in a myriad of distractions from the life we are called on to live. Certainly others have their share. But we should be concerned about our own situations. Are we honoring God with our lips... or with our hearts? Our Lives? Are we living a life worthy of our calling? Are we seeking the kingdom of God... or our own kingdom? These are questions that we must deal with.
Jesus’ argument with the Scribes and Pharisees in today’s gospel lesson from Mark indicates how far apart they were in their thinking. First, they asked Jesus why He and His disciples didn’t observe the tradition of the elders. What was this tradition? William Barclay, noted Biblical translator and theologian, has located the exact scribal rules and regulations that apply to the passage in today’s Gospel lesson from Mark.

In order to be ceremonially clean and fit for the service and worship of God, one had to do the following: Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed in a certain way. To begin with, the hands had to be free of any coating of sand, or mortar, or gravel, or any such substance. The water for washing had to be kept in special large stone jars, so that it itself was clean in the ceremonial sense and so it might be certain that it had been used for no other purpose and that nothing had fallen into it or been mixed with it.

First, the hands were held with tips pointing upwards; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist. The minimum amount of water was one log, which is equal to one and a half eggshells full of water. While the hands were still wet each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other. That is what the phrase about using the fist means. The fist of one hand was rubbed into the palm and against the surface of the other. This meant that at this stage the hands were wet with water. But that water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So… next the hands had to be held with fingertips pointing upwards and water had to be poured over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the finger tips. After all that had been done the hands were clean. You could not worship God until you had done exactly what Mr. Barclay has spelled out.

Doing these things was, to the Scribes and Pharisees, at the heart of their religion. They considered ritual, ceremony, and regulations like these to be the essence of service to God. Ethical religion was buried under a mass of taboos and rules. In addition, certain animals were unclean. A leper was unclean. Anyone who touched the body of a dead person was unclean. And anyone who had become unclean made everything he touched unclean. And anyone so touched would make unclean anything he touched. A Gentile was unclean. Food touched by a Gentile was unclean. And any vessel touched by a Gentile was unclean. No wonder that when a strict Jew returned from the market place that he immersed his entire body in clean water to take away any taint he might have acquired.
The legalistic Jew of Jesus’ time believed he was on the right track if he carried out the correct acts and practices regardless of what his thought and heart were like. They were identifying religion with outward observance. This was a mistake… and Jesus called it to their attention. We can be guilty of the same type of mistake… of identifying goodness with certain so-called religious acts. Church-going, Bible-reading, and financial giving to the church don’t necessarily make us good persons. Do we do any of these things for ulterior motives? What is our attitude? What is our feeling toward God and our fellow-men? If our hearts are filled with bitterness, grudges, pride, and enmity… all the religious observances in the world can’t make us good Christians. Such thoughts, actions, and attitudes make us hypocrites.

Jesus charged the Scribes and the Pharisees with substituting the efforts of human ingenuity for the laws of God. Their lives weren’t dependent on listening to God and doing what was right. They depended on listening to the clever arguments and debates of the religious experts. True religion can’t be a product of a person’s mind. It must come from listening to and accepting the voice of God.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus also tells us that the only defilement of any importance—that is, spiritual and moral—is evidenced by what comes out of us, not what goes into us. In other words… it is an evil heart that ruins life. It produces a vast variety of poisons, which Jesus names. And did you notice that Jesus doesn’t consider some of them big and others menial? No. They are all important. Jesus also tells us that things aren’t clean or unclean in the religious sense. Only persons can be defiled. How does that come about? By our own actions. They are the products of our own hearts. It is then that Jesus lists the numerous things that come from our hearts and make us unclean. “All these things come from within,” He says, “and they defile us.” As previously noted… He doesn’t say some are major and some minor. He seems to give them equal value… which means foolishness ranks right up there with pride, envy, and deceit.

Jesus has given us a list of poisons to avoid. Obviously we can’t overcome them on our own strength. We need God’s help… all the time. Let us pray for Him to strengthen us… to encourage us… and to rid our hearts of these poisons. In the words of the Prayer for Purity in the Prayer Book (Page 355) let us ask God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love Him, and worthily magnify His Holy Name.
Proper 17, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 2: 4 - 13
PSALM: 81
NEW TESTAMENT: Hebrews 13: 1 - 8, 15 - 16
GOSPEL: Luke 14: 1, 7 - 14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."
The words of Jesus in today’s gospel lesson could raise some interesting situations if we would follow through.

How many of you have invited a friend to church at St. Barnabas? Did he or she attend? If they were church people, did he or she invite you to a worship service? Did you go?

Habit or custom or the rules of hospitality often get in the way when we try to include others in our lives.

How many of you belong to a country club? A fraternity? A sorority? Or another social club? Assuming an acceptance of your hospitality, when you invite guests, where do they sit? Do you offer instructions or suggestions? Or do you leave that up to them? Or does someone in the club figure out the seating arrangement?

How are you repaid for your hospitality? Don’t your guests usually invite you to a similar social event at their club? This sounds as if things haven’t changed from the time Jesus was walking the earth. Wouldn’t He be an interesting dinner guest? He might shake up everyone… including His host… but who could predict what His topic of conversation would be?

Did any of you ever invite a group of your friends to your house for coffee and conversation? Did it occur to you to invite our cluster missioner to meet your friends… and vice versa? It could turn out to be more than a social event. It could lead to talk about God… about religion… about Christianity… about our spiritual journey… about evangelism… about world missions. Who knows where such conversations might lead? Of course… one of us… actually one of you… would have to take the first step.

Did you ever invite someone who couldn’t repay your hospitality to your house? Yes, that could include a poor relative… and a variety of others. Perhaps it would be difficult for one family to invite all the needy to a social gathering at their house. But it would not be impossible for this congregation… St. Barnabas Episcopal Church… to invite all the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind of the surrounding area to a big party on the church grounds and in the church building.
I think it would be wonderful if you, the members of St. Barnabas, would schedule a party... here or elsewhere... for the maimed, the poor, the lame, and the blind. How in the world would you come up with a seating arrangement? I certainly wouldn’t be willing to even try.

Who would be likely to claim the right to a certain seat? Who would demand special privileges? Who would expect to be treated better than anyone else? Knowing something about human nature by virtue of living on Planet Earth for more than three score and ten years, I would expect several individuals to fill these voids. In fact, I would be surprised if they didn’t.

On the other hand, if you gave a party for the poor... and the handicapped... and those you might have met at a soup kitchen... you wouldn’t have to worry about their paying you back for what you would probably think of as a good thing. They won’t pay you back. They can’t. But your efforts would attract God’s attention. They would be pleasing in His sight. That’s what really counts.

If you entertain your friends and others whom you would like to impress, your motives are immediately suspect. You would probably enjoy what you were doing, and it might even be of some social benefit to you.

But if you feed... or clothe... or entertain... a group of needy people... you should realize that God’s love runs most quickly to the neediest of His people. He looks at hearts and attitudes. It’s far better in God’s eyes to have compassion on the needy than to try to impress some of your friends who will later try to impress you with their food, drink, or clever conversation.

So why try to impress them? It’s pleasing to God to look out for the poor... the handicapped... the blind... the maimed... those otherwise needy... or others who are socially unacceptable. Remember... God readily accepts all of them. So... the question remains: Should we try to impress our friends and neighbors... or to please God? In case you are wondering, I say we should please God.
Proper 18, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Exodus 12: 1 - 14

PSALM: 149

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 13: 8 - 14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18: 15 - 20

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."
Both our gospel lesson and our epistle today deal with personal relationships... getting along with others. These are matters that none of us can ignore because they affect us in our private lives, our public lives, and in our church lives. And when we speak of our church lives, I mean at the congregational level. Our relationships with others... particularly other Christians... are almost as important as our relationship with God.

So... we’re concerned not with the broad spectrum of society when we say getting along with others... but rather being specific: Getting along with each other... each other... with you and me... and with you and you. That means we should be seeing a name and a face and a personality in each of us gathered here today... as well as those who for whatever reason are missing from our weekly call to public worship.

Before looking more closely at what Matthew is telling us today... let’s go back to the beginning of the chapter from which it is taken. At the opening of Chapter 18, the disciples ask Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?” He tells them that unless you turn and become like children—one of whom He had stand in the middle of them—you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Then Jesus tells them that whoever receives one such child in His name receives Him... and warns against causing a little one to sin. Says Jesus: “It would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Later comes the parable of the lost sheep... telling about the man who had 100 sheep, one of which had gone astray. “Does he not,” asked Jesus, “go in search of the one that went astray?” Then, in the same context, a brother who has gone astray is identified in the opening words of today’s gospel lesson: “If your brother sins against you... go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.”

There’s wisdom in following such a procedure. However, these are not the exact words of Jesus but they most certainly go back to something He said. More precisely, they are a reflection of the thought and practice of the early Church.
In His earthly life... and in His teachings... Jesus never put down Gentiles or tax collectors. Nor did He treat them in any way but with respect. Some of those He healed were Gentiles. He went to visit Zacchaeus, a tax collector, in his home. And Matthew, one of the 12 and writer of the gospel bearing his name, was also a tax collector. So rather than condemn Gentiles and tax collectors, Jesus tried to make them His friends and followers. He sought to appeal to them in ways that would touch their hearts. As far as He was concerned, they were not hopeless.

Let’s not forget Jesus’ words to the chief priests and the elders: “Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it you did not afterward repent and believe him.”

The apostle Paul had already excommunicated members of congregations in his charged based on the testimony of two or three. This policy had apparently been used regularly by a number of Christian churches. The word “church” used here refers to the local congregation. Treatment of an expelled member as a tax collector or Gentile obviously originated in the later Church because Jesus Himself never treated anyone that way. To Him, no one was without hope.

The following are some of the points Paul made in today’s epistle from Romans:

1—Love should be genuine, he says. Sincere. Don’t expect more than we give. Don’t put conditions on what we offer. If we give it any thought at all, we’ll realize that God has done a great deal for us and we should respond to Him in gratitude. We love because God first loved us. Or, as Paul tells us in Galatians, “The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20). Paul regarded love as the quality which more than any other should mark a community of Christians. Who could disagree with him? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be known by our expression of love? Love of God... love for one another.

2—Hate what is evil and hold on to what is good, Paul tells us, regardless of the circumstances. Are we able to grieve with those who are grieving? That’s when they really need a friend. And when a friend or
acquaintance has received some good news... can we rejoice with him or her? Or are we envious? The success of a friend can become a really test of character... our character, as well as his.

3—We are called on to love each other with brotherly affection, Paul reminds us. We are all part of one family. In fact, we are all brothers and sisters. We have the same father, God.

4—Hold fast to what is good. Search out good qualities of our fellow Christians and honor them in this way. Being humble ourselves would be helpful.

5—Be zealous about things that are worthwhile. We should devote our energy to them.

6—If we are aglow with the Spirit of God, we should show it. Certainly we should not be lukewarm Christians. That’s probably the worst kind... perhaps even worse than cold Christians.

7—Serve the Lord. How? To the best of our abilities. It’s all right to find new ways to do this. Let’s be imaginative. Don’t seek limitations.

8—Rejoice in hope. We have the blessed hope of life eternal. Let’s act like it. Let’s look forward and upward... not down and backward.

9—Be patient when we suffer reversals or disappointment. Better days are ahead.

10—Be constant in prayer. Remember the Canaanite woman whose daughter was ill. She was persistent. The story had a happy ending when Jesus healed the daughter, whom she dearly loved.

11—Contribute to the needs of the saints. Share what we have with others. Christians are givers... not takers.

12—Practice hospitality. Christians are noted for open doors and open hearts. What about us? When Paul calls on Christians to bless those who persecute, I hope he was referring to non-Christians. Even so, this is a major challenge. Bless and do not curse them. Praying for them is a big step... both for us and for them. And, once begun, it can lead to a variety of experiences. Can we live in harmony with those who persecute and otherwise mistreat us? Another statement by Paul also makes us stop and think: Never avenge yourself, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” We can’t be sure that vengeance will take place... but only God can exercise it. This power is His alone.
I stand by my earlier observation that today’s gospel lesson and the epistle, Paul’s letter to the Romans, deal with personal relationships. But because the passage in Matthew involves an erring brother and a congregation it can also be looked upon as a matter of church discipline. The law of witnesses referred to in today’s example of an errant brother is found in the Book of Deuteronomy (19:15). It tells us that a single witness shall not prevail against a man for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed; only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained.

Now... more on personal relationships. We could illustrate the most intimate forms of personal relationships this way: First and foremost, it would be appropriate to look upon our personal relationship with God as being vertical. It’s a relationship of the highest order. And it draws our attention... our thoughts and perhaps our eyes... heaven-ward. We could show the nature of such relationships this way. <Raise hand and eyes toward Heaven.> Not only is our attention directed up... to God... but we await His response and possible action... from on high. The more vertical activity we have the better. We can’t have too much. God is far more willing to hear our prayers than we are to pray. We shouldn’t limit the amount of time we spend with God... nor should we talk all the time. We should also listen.

Our personal relationships with God’s people... family, friends, acquaintances, fellow church members, fellow employees, strangers, those whom we might meet, et cetera... are important... but on a different level than our relationship with God. We can look upon them as being horizontal. Like this. <Make bottom of cross.> Put the vertical part of our personal relationships (with God) and those with God’s people...and what do we have? A cross. Perhaps it will remind us... if we should ever need to be reminded... of the importance of our personal relationship... with God and with them whom we encounter in our every-day lives.

We need an abundance of patience to get along with others. Let’s remember that when our patience is tried. Are we willing to try? Or is our patience in short supply? Are we, like Jesus, unwilling to treat anyone as hopeless? Do we need to work on our relationships... with God and with others?
Proper 18, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT: Proverbs 22: 1 - 2, 8 - 9, 22 - 23

PSALM 125

NEW TESTAMENT: James 2: 1 - 10 (11 - 13) 14 - 17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

GOSPEL: Mark 7: 24 - 37
The first part of the Letter of James, from which today’s epistle lesson is taken, deals with true religion. And that’s a matter about which all of us—in fact, all Christians—should be concerned. First, in the words of James, true religion is evidenced by patience in temptation. The second section of the Letter of James, with which we will be wrestling today, tells us that true religion is evidenced by our conduct. This should be no surprise to us... but from time to time we need to be reminded.

However, before we get involved in that, let’s take a look at some of the thoughts of James that precede it. First, let’s introduce the situation. We’re not sure who James is—or rather, which James this is—because there are several possibilities. Nor are we certain of his audience. James identifies himself as the slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ and addresses this letter to the 12 tribes in the Dispersion. Other than Jude, James is the only New Testament writer to call himself a slave (or prisoner) of God without any other qualification.

It has been said that being a slave of God implies at least 4 things:

1—Absolute obedience. A slave has no rights of his own. He is bound to obey his master, never questioning his own social status. He is owned outright by his master, and the only law he knows is his master’s word.

2—Being a slave implies absolute humility. He is concerned only with obligations and duties. He has no rights or privileges.

3—Being a slave implies absolute loyalty. A slave has no interest of his own. What he does, if he is a slave of God, he does for God. And he is loyal to God only.

4—Even so, being a slave of God implies a certain pride. Very few persons can claim such an honor... and they are among the greatest of God’s heroes. Old Testament slaves of God include Moses (1 Kings 8:53; Daniel 9:11; Malachi 4:4); Joshua and Caleb (Joshua 24:29; Numbers 14:24); and the great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut. 9:27). Job (1:8) was also a slave of God. So were the prophets Isaiah (20:3); Amos (3:7); and Jeremiah (7:25). So James is in excellent company as a slave of God.

Now back to the matter of James’ identity. Which James is he? We have several possibilities. There is James the father of Judas, not Judas Iscariot but another of the Twelve. There is James the son of Alphaeus. Another James is called James the younger. Then there is James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee and also
a member of the Twelve. Then there is James, who is called a brother of Jesus and who is believed to be the leader of the church in Jerusalem after the crucifixion of Jesus. However, this James was not a follower of Jesus before the crucifixion. Nevertheless, noted biblical translator and commentator William Barclay is of the opinion that this is the James to whom the letter is attributed. He says it's possible that "...this letter is in substance, a sermon preached by James, taken down by someone else, translated into Greek, added to and decorated a little and then issued to the Church-at-Large so that all should benefit from it. That explains its form and how it came to be attached to James. It even explains the scarcity of references to Jesus, to the Resurrection, and the Messiahship of Jesus; for in one single sermon James could not go through the whole gamut of orthodoxy and is, in fact, pressing moral duty on man and not talking about theology. It seems to us that this is the one theory which explains the facts."

Barclay writes further: "We may approach this little letter feeling it is one of the lesser books of the New Testament; but if we study it faithfully, we will lay it down thanking God that it was preserved for our edification and inspiration."

We said earlier that the Letter of James addresses the subject of true religion. First, says James, it is evidenced by patience in temptation. "Let no man say when he is tempted, that he is tempted by God." James tells us. And further: "God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death."

To tempt means to test, with a view to revealing the quality of a person's character. James tells us that God never takes the initiative in tempting someone to sin...that this impulse comes from personal weakness in the face of pressure, or stress, or incitement.

Of course, God does permit Christians to undergo testings and trials for the purpose of purifying our hearts and perfecting our faith. Need I remind you that we Christians could not grow spiritually if we were never tested? However, when we fall into temptation, it's often our own fault. It may be because we're ill-prepared, or careless, or weak.
In today’s lesson James reminds us that true religion is evidenced by our conduct. He calls on us to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. And further... we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only... “for if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer,” James tells us, “he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.” But if we are to be blessed, James says, we should not be a hearer who forgets... but a doer... someone who acts... lives out his faith. We’re to do certain things: Bridle our tongues, to visit widows and orphans in their affliction, and to keep ourselves unstained from the world.

Teachers, preachers, and parents are three large groups whose members could benefit greatly by being slow to anger. And I’m sure all of us have been tested... not only over the years, but also in the recent past. Being slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to listen is good for all of us. We may not always like such a policy... but day in and day out it will serve us well.


Ritual and liturgy are not substitutes for sacrifice and service. If we must neglect one part of our religion, we would be well-advised to neglect the part inside the church buildings. What we do outside these buildings is far more important: How we treat others... how we look out for their needs.

How we live out our religion in the market place should be the most important part of our lives. It’s not that we shouldn’t attend church and participate in worship... but what is heard in church (the holy place) must be lived out in the market place (the world around us)... or there is no point in hearing at all. Hearing only, hearing if it does not translate into action, is a waste of time. Jesus tells us, “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.” (John 15:7-8). So... we are called on to bear much fruit... to glorify God and to prove to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We are known by the fruit we bear... by the works... deeds... that we do.
Proper 18, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 18: 1 - 11
PSALM: 139
NEW TESTAMENT: Philemon 1 - 21

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."
Today's gospel lesson from Luke is concerned mainly with discipleship and its cost. In His days on earth, there were numerous people who came to see Jesus... to hear Him... to ask Him questions... to seek favors or some special consideration. Others were just curious about Him. They didn’t want to get too close. And, of course, there were those who sought to entrap Him by asking trick questions or questions for which there may not have been a plausible answer. Such people often tried to embarrass Jesus or to put Him in an unfavorable light.

Regardless of their motives... and, of course, they were mixed... Jesus attracted good-sized crowds. Today’s gospel passage says that great multitudes accompanied Him. The term “multitudes” is also used in other gospel passages. Jesus knew, as we should, that everyone who was in attendance was not necessarily a friend. In fact, quite the opposite was sometimes true. Some were followers of Jesus... some were not. What is required to be a follower? Not very much. Throughout history... and probably during pre-history... there were people who followed after leaders or their armies. They weren’t soldiers... but they had their reasons for staying close to the troops. Some were trying to sell food or clothing or other supplies to the soldiers... others were friends or relatives... some had a spirit of adventure... or wanted to see the world... or had nothing better to do. So they followed along after the troops... hence the term camp followers.

In a similar way... people followed along after Jesus. If things suited them... they stayed around. If not, they would leave. After hearing Jesus’ words about the requirements of discipleship... we would say that a high percentage of those who heard Him were not disciples. Far more were followers. What’s the difference?

A younger man was happy to say that he had been a student of a great teacher. When the teacher heard this he said: “He may have attended my lectures, but he was not a student of mine.” In a similar way... Jesus has far more followers than disciples today. It’s easy to be a follower. No demands are put on you. You don’t have to pull your weight. You don’t have a rigorous schedule or course of action. In fact, you don’t have to do much of anything. And that’s the problem. The church has too many followers... always has. And it doesn’t have enough disciples of Jesus Christ.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus lays down the conditions for discipleship. Luke tells us that Jesus said “If any one comes after me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”
Matthew tones down these words. In his account Jesus says he who loves father and mother more than me cannot be my disciples. Luke's words are not to be taken literally... but they are not to be taken lightly. According to the Abington Bible Commentary the word "hate" goes back to an Aramaic word meaning to love less. In other words, a Christian is not to "hate" members of his family in order to be a disciple of Jesus... but rather he is to love members of his family less when the claims of home come into conflict with the claims of Jesus. So... in being a disciple of Jesus, we are called on to love Him more and to love members of our family less.

Jesus Himself had to face the choice between family and God. "Who is my mother, or my brethren?... Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother." This response is found in Mark (3:33-35). We also have to make a choice between Jesus and family.

What are other conditions of discipleship that Jesus requires? Whoever does not bear his or her cross and come after Him cannot be a disciple of Jesus. These are Jesus' own words in today's gospel lesson. A man carrying a cross for his own crucifixion was a common sight in the days of Jesus. So the people who heard these words didn't need any explanation or elaboration. They knew all too well what it meant to carry a cross. However, this was before the crucifixion of Jesus, so the association of the cross with Him had not been made.

Being crucified was a terrible way to die. It also carried with it the element of shame and dishonor. However, after Jesus was crucified for the ransom of many, the cross could be seen in a different light. His crucifixion glorifies the cross... gave it respectability... nobility. This is something that the preachers in the early church were quick to embrace and talk about.

If we would be Jesus' disciples, we need to take up our own cross. And when we do that we must crucify the old life that we have lived... and we must live a life that would be worthy of Jesus. In the end... there is a joyful experience in carrying the cross. It leads to eternal life... life everlasting... life with God and those who love Him. We are to share with Christ the abundant life that His crucifixion has opened up to us. His Resurrection has been a tremendous triumph which all Christians share. And... in coming after Jesus... we also share in His friendship... His love... His compassion.
We must be clear that Jesus does not try to sweet talk us into anything… nor does He force us to follow Him… to take up our cross. No… He tells us up front to stop and count the cost of following Him. It’s characteristic of great leaders to let those who would serve under them to know what to expect. What did Garibaldi offer his men? In his own words, he offered them hunger and death. Of course, there was the hope of freedom for Italy. But there was no guarantee. What did Winston Churchill promise the British people? Blood, sweat and tears. So… what Garibaldi and Churchill offered was in keeping with what Jesus had told those who would follow Him to do: Stop and count the cost. We need to know what we are getting into… whether we’re constructing a building or fighting a war… or getting married… or becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

You or I aren’t in a position to wage war… or make peace. But we can relate to the possibilities of constructing a building… or getting married… or becoming a Christian. And we should count the cost.

The Prayer Book service reminds us that “marriage is not to be entered into lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.” In other words, both the bride and the groom are to make certain commitments… to each other and to God. When we make a commitment to Jesus Christ… when we commit our lives to Him… we become His disciples. We should not do this unadvisedly or lightly. We should count the cost. But when we make this commitment… we are full-fledged disciples. And our lives will never be the same.

But there’s more. We’re not to be content with being disciples of Jesus… even though this is a big undertaking and will require the best of our time and energy and gifts, skills, and talents. Something further is expected. Remember the Great Commission in the last chapter of Matthew? (28:16-20). That’s when Jesus told the 11 apostles to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So… being a follower of Jesus Christ takes little effort and is of little value.

However, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is important… and requires commitment to Him.

Even so, we’re not to rest on our laurels. We’re to go and make disciples of others.

Amen.
Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."
The rabbis taught us that a man must forgive his brother three times. This teaching came from passages in the Book of the Prophet Amos. In the opening chapters of Amos, there is a series of condemnations on various nations for three transgressions and for four. (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). From this it was deduced that God's forgiveness extends to three offenses. Then what happens? Then, the rationale was, God visits the sinner with punishment at the fourth offense. If God forgave only three times... man couldn't be more generous than God. So... the rabbis felt that forgiveness was limited to three times.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother who had sinned against him, he thought he was being extremely liberal by suggesting seven times. Seven would be twice as many times as required, plus one additional time. This would seem to indicate that Peter's liberality in forgiving someone who had sinned against him would be worthy of praise. What was Jesus' response? "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

Of course, we aren't able to take this figure literally. What Jesus is saying is that there is no limit when it comes to forgiveness. Then Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving slave or the unforgiving servant. The debtor is one to whom temptation comes... and he is not able to resist. He is forgiven what amounts to a huge debt, though he only asked for time in which to pay. What did the forgiven man do? He immediately went to a fellow servant, who owed him a very small sum, and demanded he pay what he owed immediately. He couldn't... so the creditor had him jailed. The man who had been forgiven so much showed the one who owed him a very small debt no mercy. Someone once figured that the debt the fellow servant owed was only one six-hundred-thousandth part of what the king had forgiven the man who had appealed to him.

This parable reminds us that God's forgiveness and man's forgiveness are linked. We talk a great deal about divine mercy... but we may overlook the human condition. God is always ready to forgive... but even God can't enter a heart that's unwilling to forgive.

So... this is a lesson that runs throughout the New Testament: We must forgive in order to be forgiven. If we don't forgive others, we cannot hope for God to forgive us. "Blessed are the merciful, said Jesus, "for they shall obtain mercy." This is at the heart of Jesus' teachings.
So is this one: (Matt. 6:12-15): "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

This is, of course, part of the Lord's Prayer, as found in the Sixth Chapter of Matthew. Jesus has just taught His disciples His own prayer. Then He immediately expands and explains one of the petitions, the one concerning forgiveness: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you." Then comes the admonition: "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

You may have noticed that debts and trespasses are both used in this passage. Commentators generally agree that the Greek word used in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is perhaps best translated as "debts." The word translated as "trespasses" in both the King James and Revised Standard carries the idea of "missing the mark." And the word in Luke's Version of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:4) can best be translated into our word "sins."

This is the rationale for using three different words for a similar situation: First, life is an obligation to be met. It seems difficult... so we rebel against its impossible demands. To break the obligation is to be in debt, and we can't pay it. Only God can cancel our moral debt.

Second... life is aiming at a mark... as we are on our way toward heaven. To choose a lower mark, or to miss the mark, is failure. G.F. Watts had as his motto: "The Utmost for the Highest." Are our goals that high? We frequently miss the mark; don't we?

Third: Life is devotion to goodness. Our goodness... our purity...is often stained. Only God can give cleansing. We need a daily cancelling of debts, a clarifying of aim and re-dedication to it; and a thorough cleansing of the whole purpose and practice of our life.

And what if we refuse to forgive others? In that case, we turn our back on the possibility of God's pardon. But if we are ready to forgive, we open the door to God's mercy... because He always waits... ready to pardon. God's forgiveness of us is dependent on our forgiveness of others.
Any way we look at it, forgiveness isn’t easy. When we forgive someone, we leave ourselves vulnerable. If we forgive someone, we have to forget about revenge. We have to be willing to give all and bear all… in order that the wrongdoer may be won back to life. Only God can do this for us. The Incarnation has made it possible to see the work of pardon. Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the whole world… and He forgave those who nailed Him to the cross. Only the love of God brings forth forgiveness. We can’t purchase forgiveness with our works… however good or however numerous.

What of the phrase... “And forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors? Or forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us? Or forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us?

One who is unwilling to forgive... is not penitent... and refuses to face up to how own sins. He is only aware of the sins of another... and he is not thinking about God. He is focusing on himself and his own pride. How often that word... that force... comes between us and others... and, consequently, between us and God. General Oglethorpe once said to John Wesley: “I never forgive.” To which Wesley replied: “Then I hope, sir, you never sin.”

Paul called on the Ephesians to be loving and considerate of each other (4:31-32): Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Please note that forgiving each other is an important part of their life together. It should be with us, too. This is how we should treat each other.

The Book of Acts (7:59-60) tells us: ... “And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit. And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” But the ultimate in God’s forgiveness comes from Jesus’ words from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34). Amen.
Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.
Three of the topics which the Letter of James addresses are true religion, true faith, and true wisdom. Last week’s lesson dealt with true religion... as evidenced by our patience in temptation and by our conduct... the lives we live. Today’s lesson talks about true faith as evidenced by impartiality and by works.

James tells us something that we already know... but sometimes need to be reminded of: There is no room in the Christian fellowship for snobbery, contempt, and discrimination. These, he tells us, are all examples of worldliness. The faith of our Lord Jesus Christ is not compatible with such behavior.

If we discriminate between churchgoers because of their social position or their financial status, we become judges—judges with evil thoughts. That’s not the way we should react. The faith that begins in Jesus Christ doesn’t make distinctions that are based on birth, race, property, or sex. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ. (Gal. 3:28).

James reminds us that if we show any partiality we commit a sin. He makes the point that God has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom of which he has promised to those who love Him. You have probably known people who were poor in worldly possessions... and rich in faith. I certainly have. They aren’t concerned with the luxuries of this world. They’re more interested in spiritual matters... and they don’t get caught up in the things of this world.

We also need to realize that if we show no partiality we are not to discriminate against the rich because they are rich. They have their problems, too. Like the rich young ruler who encounters Jesus... it’s easy for their possessions to come between them and God. This is true... although most of us do not have any first-hand knowledge of it. In the early church, many congregations met at the homes of the rich. This was before congregations had their own buildings... so the well-to-do who became followers of Jesus were doing fellow worshipers a much-needed service. And certainly many of their other gifts were put to good use.

At times, slaves moved into church leadership roles. This could bring on added tensions. But wouldn’t a slave who was a Christian be a better slave because of his Christian faith? And wouldn’t a slave’s owner be a more fair and understanding master because of his Christian beliefs? I’m not advocating slavery... only trying to show that it’s possible to find Christians, Christian beliefs, Christian love, and Christian fellowship in a variety of
ethnic, cultural, and social situations. And, James reminds us, if we show partiality we sin. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves.

James also brings up the matter of faith and works. Some would lead us to believe that Paul and James are at odds on this matter. Paul tells us that no one can ever earn the forgiveness of God... that the first step must come from the grace of God. And further, that we can only accept the forgiveness that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

James is writing to people who are already practicing Christians. They claim to be new persons in Jesus Christ. They have already been forgiven and are in a new relationship with God. They have already been justified. They must now demonstrate that they have been sanctified.

So... we can not be saved by works... regardless of how good they are. On the other hand, if we are living a Christian life... if our faith is genuine, what we do and what we say will produce results. What will be the result of our faith? What will it produce? We might answer deeds or works. Either is correct. Fruits would also be correct.

Can one person have faith and another works? No. It’s not a matter of faith or works. It’s a matter of faith and works. Both—and: Thoughts and action. Prayer and effort.

It’s only by doing that we can express our faith. Our faith moves us to action. But first we must have faith in a worthwhile cause or principle that God has called to our attention. Amen.
Proper 19, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 4: 11 - 12, 22 - 28
PSALM 14
NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Timothy 1: 12 - 17
GOSPEL: Luke 15: 1 - 10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."
The image of a shepherd carrying on his shoulder a lamb for which he had searched many weary hours is one that seems to symbolize the role of Jesus and His earthly ministry. It is also a scene that has captured the imagination of artists, poets, composers, writers, and other. It is a picture for which no caption is necessary. There's something about this image that seems to make it universally understood. Christians seem to recognize Jesus and His role of the good shepherd...even though many of them know little about sheep or shepherds.

There's a great deal of irony concerning this great parable taken from the gospel according to Luke. Let's look at the situation. Tax collectors and sinners were flocking to Jesus. They were attracted to Him because He was willing to meet them where they were and on their level. This didn't sit well with the scribes and the Pharisees. They were incensed that Jesus welcomed sinners... and even ate with them. Why were they so upset? Jesus' approach was unorthodox... to say the least. It was radical. The Pharisees looked upon all people who didn't keep the Law as sinners. They called them the “People of the Land”... and there was a huge barrier between the Pharisees and the People of the Land... whom they looked upon as non-persons. The Pharisees' regulations called on other Pharisees to entrust no money to these people, to take no testimony from them, to trust them with no secrets, not appoint them as guardians of charitable funds, and not go with them on a journey. Pharisees were forbidden to be the guest of any of the people of the land... or to have them as their guests. In fact, if possible, they were expected to avoid any contact at all with such people.

In view of the great emphasis Jesus put on finding the lost sheep... looking out for the interest of the poor and the needy... you'd think that such an attitude would have a very high priority with Christians today... individually and collectively. Like the shepherd who left the 99 sheep who were safely in the fold and pulled out all the stops to find the missing lamb... Jesus took extreme measures to find the lost... and to care for them. He found ways to include everyone. He wasn't set in His ways. He wasn't biased against anyone... group or individual.

Have the Christians... the congregations... with whom you've been associated had a similar approach? Have they put their sights on going from door to door or farm to farm to find the sick, the hungry, the neglected, the battered, those discriminated against because of their race or color or sex or youth or age? Have they sought out other lost souls?
And if they see people with such needs, what do they do about them? Do they take them to a physician’s office or clinic or hospital? Do they go into the court system seeking justice for those who have been discriminated against? Do they go to the school authorities to make certain that disadvantaged children obtain the books and instruction that they need? Do these disciples of Jesus Christ collect the food and clothing that these children and their families need to keep body and soul together? Do they see to it that those whose mental health problems cut them off from the community are given the support and professional help they need?

Have any of you... or your Christian friends... taken some of our unemployed people to a restaurant for a meal? Or to a prospective employer to inquire about a job? Have you... or they... talked to any of these modern “people of the land” about the kingdom of God? Or have we assured these oft-neglected people that God love them? Have we demonstrated our concern for the welfare of these needy people?

Or have we done some rationalization? ... feeling that the various governmental or community officials or agencies are the ones to be concerned about those who for various reasons can’t take care of themselves? I’m afraid that such an attitude is more and more becoming the norm... and not all congregations... and certainly not all individual Christians... feel responsibility for the misfortunes of others. In many situations there’s an obvious lack of compassion. We must remember... and we sometimes need to be reminded... that when a sheep is lost... a shepherd can’t forget about the lost one and rejoice that he has 99 left. That is not a satisfactory percentage for sheep. And it’s even less satisfactory for people... for human beings. The individual is important. Each one of us is unique. We are all created in the image of God. And this is a matter that should be of extreme importance to all of us Christians.

In our defense, we do turn out in great numbers to seek a lost child. And we and others go out of our way to try to find a missing hunter. But do we show a similar interest in other lost people... in others who are in great need? I’m speaking of those who are misguided, or who are for whatever reason heading in the wrong direction. Do we take an interest in them? Or do we rationalize our inaction or lack of interest? Perhaps they are fool-hardy or show little interest in resolving their own problems. But we must also realize that quite often they don’t have such capability. How can their situations be turned around... unless you or I ... or someone... get personally involved?
Did it occur to you how differently Jesus as the good shepherd and the Pharisees, who included most of the good people of the community, reacted to the so-called "people of the land"... the sinners?

Jesus was constantly in contact with them... showing compassion for them... ministering to their needs whether they were overwhelming or trivial... teaching them... meeting them on their own level... and, yes, even eating with them... in contrast with the scribes and Pharisees who would have no dealings with them because they didn’t keep the Law.

Doesn’t it sometimes seem that we Christians are reacting to the needs of those around us more like the scribes and Pharisees did rather than the way Jesus did? Have things become so institutionalized and compartmentalized that we Christians don’t have to be concerned with the needs of the needy? How often do we try to justify our inaction or lack of interest by calling attention to the public institutions or agencies or officials and their responsibilities? Are these appropriate and legitimate Christian responses? Or are we falling back on the same sort of excuses that the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day boldly defended?
The opening words of our gospel lesson today point to a situation that occurs throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They indicate that Jesus had great rapport with the tax collectors and sinners... and that the scribes and Pharisees had no time for them. What a contrast in the attitude of Jesus... who always gave time and consideration to this socially unacceptable... and the scribes and Pharisees, who wanted nothing to do with them.

In a book on Jesus and faith, John Dominic Crossan (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1994) tells how various people reacted to Jesus. In the first chapter, these are the responses that Crossan found that people made to Jesus: “He’s dumb, let’s ignore him. He’s lost, let’s leave him. He’s dangerous, let’s fight him. He’s criminal, let’s execute him. He’s divine, let’s worship him.” It was the last category of people, of course, who later formed the Christian Community of faith.

It has been suggested that an addition should be made to Crossan’ list: “Jesus offers unqualified acceptance, let’s listen to him.” The gospels are full of incidents that follow this theme. People who wouldn’t even consider making contact with other religious leaders were attracted to Jesus... and were ready and willing to listen to him.

Why? What was the attraction? Why did people like to meet Jesus, to spend time in His presence? Was it because He accepted them... regardless of virtue, or merit, or deservedness? Or because His attitude toward them was non-judgmental? In any event... the so-called “wicked,” those who did not keep the law and those who had no social status whatsoever, responded to Jesus with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, the “righteous,”... those who kept the law, stayed away from him.

Our parables today... the lost sheep and the lost coin... are on the theme of God’s love for the sinner. The parable of the lost son or the lost sons, or the prodigal son, is the third in the series... but it isn’t part of our gospel reading today. It is the entire gospel reading for another day. Today’s parables focus on lost things... the lost sheep and the lost coin.

When a ship is lost... it’s a disaster for the vessel itself, for its cargo, and for any human beings or animals who might be on board. What is the outcome of a situation when a soul is lost? Such lost-ness is not comparable to a ship going to the bottom of the sea. No. Souls are lost as sheep are lost... as a wanderer losing
his way. As a man is lost in a hurricane or a snowstorm. A person, in such a situation often flounders for a period of time. Like a sheep... he has lost his way... and may be in great danger. Even though he has lost his way... he has not lost hope.

He calls for help... and keeps moving. He doesn’t give up. Later he sees a light. Anxious relatives... concerned neighbors and friends hear his call. He is rescued. He is safe.

So souls are lost as sheep are lost. And always the shepherd is looking for the sheep that is lost. And what a joyful occasion when a shepherd finds a lost sheep! His joy is magnified many times when a lost sheep is found. A shepherd finds no comfort in the fact that five or ten or fifty or ninety-nine of the sheep are safe if one is missing... or lost.

What a joyful occasion it is when the lost if found... or in the case of the so-called prodigal son... when he comes to his senses. Don’t forget that the loving father gave a warm welcome to the prodigal son when he came into sight... not when he arrived at the house. But... unlike the good shepherd... the loving father did not go out and search for him... as the good shepherd did in today’s gospel lesson.

We often wander from God. All we, like sheep, have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way. We have forsaken the green pastures and the still waters the Lord provides. We have strayed from the Good Shepherd into rough and dangerous waters and terrain.

But Christ comes to our aid. He rescues us. He gets us back on track. He seeks... and finds... the lost. That means us... when we have strayed. He gave His life for the lost. He still gives His life for His sheep. He accepts us—even if He has to first find us. He gives us hope when no one else does. Amen.
"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."
Today’s gospel lesson tells us something we may not like to hear... and it does so without regard to our age, sex, race, or ethnic background. Nor does it protect us if we are rich or poor or if we fit somewhere in between in the local, state, national, or international economic scale.

If I remember correctly, the tortoise actually won its race against the hare... not because it ran faster but because the hare was so much swifter than the tortoise it didn’t treat it as a worthy rival. In other words, it really wasn’t a competitive race... but because of its plodding... its persistence... the tortoise crossed the finish line ahead of the hare. Why do I mention this race? Because Jesus is telling us that those who are first in time... have the best clocking... may be last when the race is run. Those who seem to have won the race can lose it.

Judas Iscariot, who walked day by day with our Lord Jesus Christ, was headed heavenward. But a false turn... a momentary yielding to temptation... changed everything for him. He did an about-face. His soul was lost. But the life of the penitent thief on the cross, crucified with Jesus, was turned around... for the better. Because he was penitent... and appealed to Jesus for mercy... he was instantly welcomed into paradise.

Remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus? (Matt. 19:16). He was attractive in person and upright in life. He had much to offer. But he turned Jesus down. His great possessions got in the way. On the other hand, the apostle Andrew was a modest man who didn’t have much to offer... but he followed Jesus... willingly and enthusiastically. In the end... he was held in great honor.

Earlier in Matthew (7:22) Jesus speaks of those who claimed to have done many wonderful works and He reminds us that those who had “success” in Christian work... by man’s standards... aren’t really going to make it... by the standards of God. He denies knowing those who did not do the will of His Father in heaven... regardless of their claims and their great acts judged, by man’s standards. So there will be radical differences in what seems to be the case... and what really is... when it comes to doing what is pleasing to God. Or, as Jesus tells us at the end of our lesson today... the last will be first... and the first last. He must really consider this important. These are the same words found at the end of the previous chapter of Matthew. Matthew considers them important too. So should we.

What are some of the other points that today’s gospel makes? What are the advantages of being a Christian for a long time? Say you’ve been a Christian for 20 years... and you’ve worshiped here at <insert
church name here> most of that time. Shouldn’t your seniority count with God? Shouldn’t it mean something special to Him? It’s all well and good that you’ve done what you’ve done... for a number of years. But the man, woman, or child who became a Christian last week is equally important to God. Seniority doesn’t count with God. Nor does He penalize those who come to Him late... at the eleventh hour... even on their death bed. God’s ways are not man’s ways. What means a great deal to some employers and employees doesn’t mean anything to God.

Doesn’t it seem unfair that God honors a late-comer as much as a long-time Christian? Yes. But we must remember that the rewards of God are not according to what we human beings think is their merit. In the Parable of the loving Father... the prodigal was welcomed home... with feasting and fanfare... even though he had been living a life of sin and dissipation. That parable tells us much about God... because, after all, the father in the parable is our Heavenly Father. And He rejoices each time one of His children turns to Him... regardless of how bad he or she is... or how long he or she has strayed from Him. This is not to say that we have to have been the worst of sinners before turning to God in order to gain greater acceptance.

Human beings are always getting two five-letter words confused. The words are: M-E-R-I-T and G-R-A-C-E. Our standards and God’s standards are vastly different. His are far higher than ours. We push merit... but how much merit can we claim? Because all of us have sinned you’d think we would appreciate the rewards of God... His grace. But no, we’re too self-centered. We don’t rejoice at the good fortune of others... we murmur because we haven’t attained our own selfish desires.

Were the earlier workers in today’s parable pleased that those hired later were able to work and earn money to feed their families? No. They felt those late-comers got something they didn’t earn... didn’t deserve. If these day laborers hadn’t gotten a break that day, they and their families would probably have gone to be hungry. Didn’t the early-comers thank God for their own daily bread? No... they were jealous of the late-comers... and critical of the householder, in this case, God.

Let’s understand this parable. It’s a matter of grace. Merit has nothing to do with it.

God will be God. And He will shower His grace on whom He wishes... when He wishes... where He wishes... and in whatever way He wishes. When will we learn this?
Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."
Has it ever occurred to you to give the parable in today’s gospel lesson a different name? It’s sometimes called the Parable of the Dishonest Steward, which is certainly a fitting title. The Parable of the Four Scoundrels would also be appropriate. And we can name them by title. The steward was a scoundrel. The men to whom his master owed debts of oil and wheat were scoundrels. So was the master himself.

Whatever we call today’s parable… it deals with matters of importance to Christians… past and present and future. All of us should be concerned about stewardship… stewardship of our time, talent, and gifts. And the money and property with which we are entrusted. Please note that I didn’t mention ownership of property. We may have a deed or a certificate that states we are the owner of such and such real estate or share of stock or bonds or X number of dollars in a bank, or titles to automobiles, boats, trucks, and trailers… but we don’t really own any of them. Not one of them is permanently ours.

As Jesus says in today’s gospel lesson: “He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.” This is very true. And further… an employer is not going to put an inexperienced person in charge of a big account. First, the employee must prove that he or she is honest and efficient in a smaller assignment. That’s the way the system works. And it makes sense. But Jesus takes matters a step further. He extends the system from earth to eternity. On earth we are in charge of things that aren’t really ours. And when we die… obviously we can’t take them with us. Or, in the words of an ancient proverb, there are no pockets in a shroud. Let me repeat: All such resources… assets… over which we have control during our lifetime aren’t ours. They are only lent to us. We are stewards over them. They can’t ever be ours permanently. Makes you wonder why we are such an acquisitive society.

In heaven, things are different. There… each of us will get what is rightfully and eternally ours. Of course, what we get in heaven depends on how we used or abused what was entrusted to us on earth. What we receive as our very own will depend on our use of the things over which we had been steward.

If we as Christians are as eager and as ingenious in trying to attain goodness as the dishonest steward was in trying to attain money and comfort, we would all be much better people. We would put things in a better perspective. We wouldn’t spend five or ten or twenty times as much on sports… or houses… or boats… or entertainment… or horses… or dogs… than we give to the Church. Our Christianity is hardly real or effective
until we spend as much time... and effort... and money on it as we don on our worldly activities. Sometimes we need to be reminded of our responsibilities as stewards... which I am trying to do. The Rabbis had a saying, “The rich help the poor in this world, but the poor help the rich in the world to come.” In this way... a person’s true wealth would not consist of what he kept, but in what he gave away. One of the Church Fathers, St. Ambrose, in a comment on the rich fool who built bigger barns to store grain, wrote this: “The bosoms of the poor, the houses of widows, the mouths of children are the barns which last forever.”

In our workplace we are called on from time to time to make status reports. How is the project going? What about the orders? Are we able to keep up with them? And what about collections? Are they adequate to keep us in business? In the various levels of government... there has to be accountability... or a testing of stewardship. For the most part it seems that the people in charge... and their employees... do as they should... that they are responsible people and they take their duties seriously. However, we do read or hear from time to time of a public official or employee embezzling large sums of money... or money in a public trust fund is depleted because someone has made unwise decisions. Like the steward in today’s parable, they soon lose their jobs. Some are imprisoned... and lose much more... the respect and confidence of those with whom and for whom they worked.

In a similar way... the various levels of the Church must demonstrate responsibility and accountability. I’m sure that at one time or another most of you have been involved in this. But the major emphasis in responsibility and accountability for Christians is... and should be... on an individual basis. Our personal stewardship is critical to our spiritual well-being and to our spiritual growth.

Paul tells us in his first Letter to the Corinthians (4:1-2) that this is how Christians are to be regarded: As servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, he says, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

As previously mentioned... the Christian concept of stewardship before God involves time, talents, possessions, and self. Elsewhere in Luke (12:42-44), Jesus asks, “Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that
servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. I tell you, he will set him over all his possessions.”

And Jesus tells us further in Luke (12:48b): “every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required.”

Isn’t it ironic that many Christians want very much to succeed... to acquire... and work hard to do so... in their secular occupations but have only modest aspirations when it comes to their church-related situations. They want to travel on the fast track at work but are happy to be “one of the boys” or “one of the girls” when it comes to their church responsibilities. Isn’t this akin to under-reporting of income? It certainly would be under-reporting of skills, gifts, and talents. We should be making good use of them at church as well as in our occupations. Anything less would be misleading, and unfair to ourselves and to God. Such a course of action would also be dishonest; wouldn’t it? We wouldn’t be doing any better in our role of steward as that scoundrel in today’s parable... and we’d be a lot less forthright. By that scoundrel I mean the one who deceived his master. (Of course the others were scoundrels, too.) This dishonest steward readily admitted his deception... after word of his unscrupulous actions reached his master.

Have we been more faithful to God... and those around us... in the matter of how we use our time? Or in how we spend it? There’s a popular misconception: That certain people, certain groups of people, have more time than others. I’m here to tell you that simply is not true. Of course, it is true that some people spend their time more efficiently... more generously... more willingly... more joyfully... than others. But it is not true that single people... non-professional people... or retirees, for example, have more time than anyone else. We all have the same amount of time. It adds up to 168 hours a week... for each of us.

Isn’t it wonderful that in recent years the Episcopal Church has re-discovered the tithe? And reminded us that we are to give 10 per cent of our time, talent, and treasure... to God... for the spread of His kingdom? Following these precepts is becoming a good steward. More and more we talk about our responsibilities... our assets... even money. It may even surprise us that we do this. But it shouldn’t. Jesus spent a great deal of time doing just that. And He is our model for things temporal as well as spiritual. He teaches us that they can’t be separated. They go together. And, if they don’t, something is wrong.
When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."
If we were called on to give today's parable in Matthew a title, what would you call it? How about: "The Parable of the Better of Two Bad Sons? Before we proceed, let's be up front with the explanation so there will be no doubt about whom Jesus is speaking.

The second son represents the people who said they would obey God... but they did not. They are the Jewish Leaders... the chief elders and priests. The first son refers to the tax collectors and harlots. They intended to go their own way. That's how they started out... but later they decided to take God's way. In the parable they prove to be the better son.

If we were looking for the ideal son... both of those in today's parable would fall far short. Do you agree? How would the ideal son respond to his father's command? Wouldn't he say, "Yes, I'll go into the vineyard today and work"... and then proceed to do what he had promised. That's what I would expect the ideal son to say and to do; wouldn't you?

So both sons in today's parable are far from being ideal. But those whom Jesus questioned... Jewish church leaders in Jerusalem... agreed that the first one who said he wouldn't obey but later changed his mind and did was the better of the two. Not that he had much to commend him. Neither of these sons would bring great joy to their father... our Heavenly Father... would they? Neither was good... or even satisfactory. But the first one, who finally obeyed, was at least better than the other. He was bad... but even so, he was better that the other. Our parable seems to be telling us that the father didn't have much with which to work. Is that so unusual? Can we sometimes find similar situations in our daily lives? Those with whom we deal... whether they're prospective employees, paid employees or volunteers... don't always bring the greatest of abilities, attitudes. or work habits to the job. Sometimes we might feel that we're trying to accomplish something and to get along with people who have virtually no assets to offer... but we must choose someone.

I'm sure that when Jesus got the attention of the chief elders and the priests that they resented what He said about the "people of the land"... those who did not observe the law and didn't pretend to. Jesus told them that these outcasts were going into the kingdom of God before they were... and they were the leaders of the religious establishment. They were the Who's Who of the Jewish religion... and they were in Jerusalem... on their home turf. And they kept telling everyone who would listen that they were God's chosen people.
What Jesus was doing was challenging the Pharisees in their formalism and the Sadducees in their pretended devotion to the Temple.

There are truths in this formula that go beyond the point Jesus was making. William Barclay, the noted translator and biblical commentator, reminds us that there are two very common classes of people in this world today. He calls them the people whose profession is much better than their practice... and those whose practice is far better than their profession.

Those in the first category are very good at making promises. In fact, they will promise just about anything. They will also tell us how devout they are and exaggerate what they are doing in the community. They are also full of enthusiasm when they talk about what they are doing for the spread of God's kingdom. But that's about as far as they get. They talk of a life of devotion to God and service to His people. But when it comes to doing what they claim... or what they promise... they usually come up far short of expectations. How many people like this do you know?... people who continually build themselves up... and then let everybody down... especially God.

Then, according to Mr. Barclay, there's the type of person whose practice or performance far exceeds his profession. They would tell you... and seem to be serious about it... that they aren't interested in God... or the church... or in religion. And they go out of their way to appear cold and cruel... even when doing good deeds. They seem to do good things from time to time but don't seem to have their heart in it. Nor do they enjoy doing good deeds.

But I digress. Let's get back to our parable. The householder... God... was dealing with two sons... two types of people, neither of whom seemed to have much to offer. We learn that promises can never take the place of performance in the Christian life. We've probably seen that demonstrated many times. On the other hand, it's certainly not difficult to spoil a good thing by the way we do it. So... the Christian way is in performance... not promise... and the mark of a Christian is obedience, done graciously and courteously.

If Jesus had offered the ideal son in the parable... the one whose performance matches his promise and who does the job well and with a positive and cooperative attitude and with consideration for others... He
wouldn't have needed to look beyond Himself. He fulfills the high expectations of His Father... and He always does so... day in and day out.

Jesus does all these things so well... and in such a wonderful way... that we usually fall far short. So often people want to dwell on these negative aspects... to call attention to our failures... not our successes. Obviously we're going to have our share of failures. But rather than highlight them, why don't we call attention to our successes? I'd like to call your attention to such a success story this morning. It's one of the few positive articles I read in the newspaper on Friday morning. Written by Leonard Pitts Jr. of the Miami Herald, it's about Chris Carrier of Coral Gables Florida. He was abducted in 1974 when he was 10. His captor burned him with cigarettes, punctured his skin with an ice pick, and shot him in the head and left him to die in the Everglades. Chris survived, although he lost sight in one eye. No one was ever arrested.

Then, recently, a man confessed to the crime and Carrier went to see him. He found David McAllister, a 77-year-old ex-convict, frail, blind, and living in a North Miami Beach nursing home. Carrier befriended him and began dropping in every day to visit, read to him from the Bible, and to pray with him.

There will be no arrest in this case. The statute of limitations is long past. Carrier told Pitts that's fine with him. “When I look at him,” he told a reporter, “I don’t stare at my abductor and potential murderer. I stare at a man, very old, very alone and scared.”

Chris Carrier is a good example of an obedient son. What he has done is certainly worthy of mention. Sometimes there's such a contrast between Jesus and us. Jesus always was the obedient son... doing what was right for the right reasons. We usually fall short... for which we are constantly reminded. Isn't it wonderful that Chris Carrier did a good thing with pure intentions?

Talking about him is also good for building up the Body of Christ. We should track down more good deeds by other Christians and tell the world about them. Too many people spend too much time criticizing Christians... who aren't nearly as bad as they would have us believe.
Proper 21, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT:  Esther 7: 1 - 6, 9 -10, 9: 20 - 22
PSALM:  124
NEW TESTAMENT:  James 5: 13 – 20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

GOSPEL:  Mark 9: 38 - 50
Let's take a look at today's reading from the Letter of James. Earlier... the author identifies himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Servant of God was a common title in the Old Testament. It could be applied to any Jew dedicated to God's service. Or, more particularly, the term was used for one consecrated to such service. In this context we would perhaps think of Moses, or one of the patriarchs, or one of the prophets. This title is seldom found in the New Testament. The more usual title for a Christian leader is "servant of Jesus Christ." And this combination of "servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ" is unique in the New Testament. However, servant of God and servant of the Lord Jesus Christ are in Christian thought the same in every respect. This concept has continued to develop over the centuries.

James was a brother of Jesus but he was not a follower until after the Resurrection. He was widely known as the leader, or bishop, of the early Church in Jerusalem. The Letter of James, written to the 12 tribes in the Dispersion, covers a variety of topics. Our lesson for today fits into the same pattern. It follows immediately after a section on worldly friendship, in which James reminds us that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

At the beginning of today’s epistle, James calls on us to submit ourselves to God. Resist the devil, he says, and he will flee from you. And further... draw near to God and He will draw near to you. James is telling us that no matter how rebellious we may be or may have been... if we submit ourselves to God, we will be welcomed. In fact, we will be uplifted. After all, God is always open to a change of heart. When we get off the track, God prefers that we turn from our wickedness... and live... rather than to continue as we had been going... and die spiritually.

James goes on to tell us that God’s help is immediately available to us if we draw near to Him by repentance—if we reject the false pleasures and desires in which we have indulged ourselves. Cleansing our hands, originally a washing for ceremonial purity, is used figuratively here for practicing proper outward behavior. And purifying our hearts refers to having a proper inward attitude.

If we are going to be restored, we must be penitent. Penitent... yes... but not remorseful... according to a well-known Christian writer. He says that remorse is the scrutiny of one’s errors without hope. And that repentance is the scrutiny of those same mistakes with hope. He adds that “the genius of Christianity lies in the
fact that it demonstrates renewal. We have the capacity of being restored, renewed. There is no other teaching in the world which is so full of the concept of renewal.”

James later calls on those to whom he addresses in his letter not to speak evil against one another. If you speak evil against the law or against a brother, James tells us, you are no longer a doer of the law… but a judge. And that puts us in a very unenviable position. Why? Because there is only one lawgiver and judge… God Himself… and He is able to save and destroy. Who are we to judge our neighbor? That’s God’s role.

Paul is concerned with the same problem in Romans (14). He speaks of a strong man in the faith who believes he can eat anything. On the other end of the spectrum is a weak man who eats only vegetables. To which Paul says let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him.

Then Paul speaks of the person who esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Let everyone be convinced in his own mind, says Paul. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Paul then reminds us against passing judgment on others… because each of us must give an account of ourself to God. Jesus also speaks on this topic in Matthew (5:22 and 7:1-5). “You have heard it said to the men of old, you shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.”

Also in Matthew… Jesus says, “judge not that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you will get.”

Later in today’s epistle, James points out that we do not know what tomorrow will bring. “What is your life?” he asks. Answering his own question, he says you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead of announcing a series of man-made plans, he tells us, we should say, if the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin. So… what James is telling us is that God should be a
part of our planning... of anything we hope to do. And, even so, He still has veto power. God is our Creator... and in thanksgiving for all He has done for us... has given us... we should be wise stewards of our time, our possessions, our gifts, and our talents. We are expected to use them to benefit others and to fulfill God’s mission. In fact, we are called on to pray, work, and give for the spread of God’s kingdom.

There’s far more to being a good steward than making a financial pledge to the church that doesn’t cost us very much and showing up at services when it’s convenient or we feel like it. A good steward recognizes that all that he has belongs to God... and he only manages these skills, gifts, possessions, and talents. He gets to use the much larger portion and returns the smaller part to God for the spread of His Kingdom. Traditionally this portion has been a tithe... 10 percent of what we have. Most people who tithe have begun by giving a smaller amount and then working up to 10 percent. When we become conscientious about our giving... we find ways to increase the portion we return to God. We begin to see that the more we give to God the more He blesses our lives. And the more we share with others the more we receive. We don’t have to stop at 10 percent.

In Old Testament times, tithing was the law. The first tenth of the yield of the lands and the herds was given to the Lord. In other words, God received His portion before the people got theirs. They didn’t give after they got theirs or if they had enough left over. No. God came first. His portion came off the top.

Jesus doesn’t impose a tithe... but He asks for a total giving of our lives. He calls on us to give and to share our love for Him and His people. One of the best ways to show that we love Jesus is to tithe.

I leave you with a thought from a prominent Christian Layman: “Stewardship is not leaving a tip on God’s tablecloth; it is the confession of an unpayable debt at God’s Calvary.”
"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his
gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the
rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the
angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he
looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me,
and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But
Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like
manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great
chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross
from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house--for I have five brothers--that he
may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and
the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead,
they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced
even if someone rises from the dead.'"
Did you ever know anyone named Dives? It's not a common name. In fact, it may not be a name at all. But it is a word. Dives, in Latin, means rich. And it seems to describe and fit the personality of the first man mentioned in today's gospel lesson in Luke. The various biblical translations don't give the name “Dives” to this rich man, but tradition does. In any event, we know something about him... what he was like... and what his attitudes were.

Luke tells us that this rich man wore purple and fine linen. The robes of the high priests were purple and they were made of fine linen. When Jesus told this story, he may have had them in mind. This fine apparel cost a huge amount of money in the days when a working man earned only a pittance... a few cents a day.

What else did Jesus say about Dives? He says he feasted sumptuously every day. Such words indicate that Dives ate only the most exotic and costly of food. In other words, he didn't enjoy gourmet foods occasionally. He ate them every day. Most people seldom had an opportunity to eat meat... once a week if they were fortunate. But not Dives... he had meat... the best available... every day. He feasted every day... definitely a violation of the Fourth Commandment which forbids work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11)... and further it says six days you shall labor. No doubt about it, the common people worked the six days before the Sabbath. But not Dives. He didn't keep the Sabbath... and he didn't work during the prior six days.

What descriptive words would you use to identify Dives? How about these? Selfish, arrogant, self-indulgent, uncaring, self-centered, gluttonous, pride-filled. They all seem to fit. Can you think of others? Back in those days, people didn't eat with knives, forks, or spoons. And they didn't use napkins. Everybody ate with his or her hands. In the homes of the wealthy, it was common to wipe the hands with chunks of bread. Then the bread was tossed out. That's where Lazarus comes in. He was waiting for these morsels of bread that were being thrown away as garbage.

Lazarus is the only person in any of the parables in the Scriptures who has a name. Lazarus is the Greek form of Eleazor and means “one whom God has helped.” There's symbolism in both the characters in this parable because Dives means rich. Lazarus is as low as you can get in the social structure. He was a beggar. So he wouldn't make a very presentable appearance. In addition... he was covered with sores. And he couldn't keep the dogs of the street from licking the sores on his body. A very unsanitary situation. That's the way things were
for those two opposites in this world... the rich Dives and the beggar Lazarus. Lazarus was dependent on Dives for food... otherwise he might have starved. But we can’t give Dives any credit. In fact, it’s easy to condemn Dives for a variety of sins. Judgmental people would have a field day with him. Granted... we cannot relate to him in matters associated with his great wealth because we can’t afford to wear the best and most expensive clothing. And we can’t afford to eat gourmet food every day. We may not eat it at all. And, if we do, I have a feeling that it would be seldom.

While we’re condemning Dives... let’s consider his situation. Did he force Lazarus away from the area where he picked up a few scraps of food? No. Did he beat him for showing up at inopportune times? No. Did he kick Lazarus off his property? No. Did he prevent Lazarus from entering his property? No. Well, then, what crime or what sin did Dives commit against Lazarus? After considering this matter for some time, I can’t point to any. I don’t think he committed any. Do you? If so, what sin or what crime did he commit?

Dives’ sin was one of omission... because he never even noticed Lazarus. He was in his presence... walked past him often... almost every day. But he never saw Lazarus... never saw Lazarus. He accepted him as part of the scenery. To him it was natural and inevitable that he would dine sumptuously... wallowing in luxury... while Lazarus would be lying in pain and hunger. What Dives did didn’t get him ostracized by the community, nor did it cause him to be put in jail. What he didn’t do got him into hell.

Later in our story... the roles of Dives and Lazarus are reversed. After their deaths, the rich man, Dives, is in Hades, in torment... and the poor Lazarus who had virtually nothing to speak of on earth was enjoying all the benefits of heaven. What a change for both of them!

First off, Dives calls out for help. He seeks mercy... and then suddenly he remembers Lazarus’ name... or perhaps it is revealed to him. In any event... he feels that Lazarus can help him. Father Abraham rebuffs him, telling him that there’s no movement from heaven to hell or vice versa. Then... finally... he thinks of others... his five brothers... their spiritual welfare... but father Abraham again rebuffs him. They have Moses and the prophets, he tells Dives. “Let them hear them.” And he said, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Then father Abraham said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”
What does the story of Dives and Lazarus mean to people today? Doesn’t it speak clearly of heaven? If we enjoy a cheap heaven now... on earth... it’s possible... even quite likely... that we would lose a taste and an aptitude for a real heaven in the future. If we live life without compassion, we dig a chasm between ourselves and our fellow human beings... and we separate ourselves from God. After all, and above all, He is the God of love.

When Dives listened to greedy people and continued to live that way, he was building hell. And every time Lazarus refused to be embittered by the bitter pill of poverty and neglect that he was being served, he was building a home in heaven.

Is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ of no avail? To those who believe... and are ready to follow... the Resurrection of Jesus is life itself. But we must be persuaded that we want to take the Christ-like road. The Letter of James tells us that “the devils also believe, and tremble.” (James 2:19). They believe... but in the end they remain devils. They have free will... and they are not persuaded to change. So they choose darkness over light. Like Dives... who never saw Lazarus... their eyesight is bad. So is their perception of what matters in this life.
Did the parable that Jesus told in today’s gospel lesson ever make you stop and think? Or do you feel that because you are neither rich nor poor that it doesn’t apply to you? Think again. Perhaps you should give its some more attention. Especially when you realize that it had great impact on Albert Schweitzer. At one time this parable probably had no significance to him. But, oh, how that changed. It provided the spark that led to dramatic changes in the life of Albert Schweitzer. It turned his life upside down.

Schweitzer was a German theologian and musician. He had been content to concentrate on being a pastor, a theologian, and an organist. But he couldn’t. This parable of the rich man and Lazarus so upset and overwhelmed Schweitzer that he founded a hospital in deepest Africa and devoted much of his long and productive life as a physician there... ministering to the poor natives who had been denied medical attention because of who they were and where they lived. Of course, he also ministered to their souls as well as their bodies.

Before embarking on this mission of mercy... Schweitzer had come to the conclusion that Africa was a beggar lying at Europe’s doorstep. A beggar lying at Europe’s doorstep. Can you picture that? The parable that Jesus told in today’s gospel lesson from Luke took on new meaning to Schweitzer. It was not just about a rich man named Dives and a beggar named Lazarus.

Did I tell you that when Schweitzer was called to build a hospital in Africa, he was not a physician? After realizing how serious Schweitzer was about ministering to the natives in Africa, we shouldn’t be surprised that he switched his interests from theology and music to medicine... and that he went on to graduate from medical school and become a physician. And although he had little money of his own, Schweitzer was able to raise enough to establish the hospital and put it into operation. Others also came to the aid of the project. Building and operating the hospital required a tremendous amount of energy and drive on the part of Schweitzer, who also continued his theological writings. What he did was wonderful... but not unique. Let us remember that God has inspired countless projects of this or similar nature... some smaller, some larger.

Being neither rich nor poor, can you relate to today’s parable? Do you know any rich men... or women? How do they live? Or... because you might not know... how do others say they live? Do they eat well? Do they
have several houses? Several cars? Or many cars or boats or planes? Do they share their good fortune? Do they give to the less fortunate? Do they support the United Way? Do they give to the church? Do they send money or food or clothing to the community collection center? Do they support the crisis center? And what about medical care or legal help for the indigent? Do they look out for the needs of children?

It would be difficult to compare Dive’s situation with that of a rich man in the U.S. today. In Dive’s day, there were no social services departments... or no emergency assistance programs, no health departments, no Medicare, no housing projects for the people with such needs, no food stamps, no counseling centers or counselors, no workmen’s compensation, no vocational rehabilitation or training, no health rights organizations. None of these agencies existed. In Lazarus’ day, if you were poor... or ill... there was only one thing you could do. Beg. Beg.

In our day... and in the area in which we live... a large segment of the population is said to be middle class. We’re neither rich nor poor. Our federal, state and local governments provide a variety of services to those who need them. In addition, local churches, clubs, lodges, and other organizations and individuals voluntarily supply services to the needy. Yet some still fall through the cracks. And more and more of the voluntary help is going to be needed in the future.

In Lazarus’ day, most people were poor. And if you weren’t poor, you were probably rich because there was not a middle class at that time. Another point needs to be made here. Most rich people seemed oblivious of the needs of the poor... as is demonstrated in the parable.

Now I want to lay something on you. Compared to the people living in the so-called third world, all of us are rich. How does that make us feel? We have far greater material wealth than people in the third world—more food, more clothing, better housing, technological conveniences, and better transportation... to name a few advantages we have. We have more of these material possessions and advantages than third world people could ever dream of... much less possess. I realize that it would be difficult to share our largesse with those in the third world... but we have opportunities to do that—even if in a limited way.
We can search out and participate in programs to help a few of them. We can give money from time to time that would at least help a few people in the third world. And, of course, we can pray for them. I listed prayer third rather than first so we wouldn’t skip over the matter of sharing our wealth and possessions.

Certainly... we should not take the attitude that Dives did toward Lazarus. Dives wasn’t a particularly bad person. Because he was rich doesn’t mean he should have apologized for the high station in life that he enjoyed. But he should have at least acknowledged that Lazarus existed... and he should have helped him and others in a similar situation. He didn’t even notice Lazarus. He ignored him... and his great need.

I trust that we are more observant... and that we share what we have with the needy family down the street... or across town. They do exist. They are out there. Just because we don’t see them very often doesn’t mean we’re off the hook. Just because they live a few blocks away doesn’t excuse us... doesn’t cancel out our responsibilities. They may be beggars lying at our doorstep. I mean at times literally... not as a figure of speech.

The more we think about this parable the more easily we should see... and understand... why it had such tremendous impact on Albert Schweitzer. God helped countless poor African natives through Dr. Schweitzer. Have we ever seen any poor people on our doorstep? Or elsewhere? How many of them has God helped through us? It has been said countless times that the poor will be with us always. They certainly won’t go away. In fact, they may be at our doorstep this very minute. How are we going to help them?
OLD TESTAMENT:  Jeremiah 17: 5 - 10

Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse- who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

PSALM: 95

1 O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
3 For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
4 In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.
5 The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

6 O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
9 when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
10 For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.”
11 Therefore in my anger I swore, “They shall not enter my rest.”
NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 6:3 – 4, 8 – 11

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

GOSPEL: Mark 10:35 – 45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”
This is the day that the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Today's lessons were chosen because they speak to the topic of living responsible Christian lives. The prophet Jeremiah (17:7-8) tells us that “Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of doubt it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

If we're committed to Christ, we're always bearing fruit... we're always doing what responsible Christians do. What, pray tell, do committed Christians do? In brief... they work, they pray, and they give toward the spread of the Kingdom of God. They love God and their neighbor... and their lives reflect this love.

We should not be anxious... because our trust is in God... and He will lead us through any troubled waters we encounter. He doesn't protect us from trying times. Not at all. He guides us through difficult situations, and we are strengthened for the days ahead... because our help is from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

God is the Creator... and we are the stewards of what He has entrusted to us. We are not the owners of the land on which we live. We do not have title to the air that we breathe. It's really God’s... but He lets us use it. The same applies to the other “things” that we have access to.

In our second reading today... Paul concludes the passage from this Letter to the Romans (6:8-11) with these words: “...if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Being alive to God in Jesus Christ means that the Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... is at work in our lives. What we do as Christians should be a reflection of the life that Jesus lived on earth. Of course, we won't be living a perfect life, but one patterned after the sinless life that Jesus lived. In brief, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. And further... we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.
So... our lives are to be filled with acts that reflect our love of God and neighbor. And it is the Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... that directs us... that leads us... and teaches us... always. Remembering that we are to be imitators of Christ. Or, as William Newton Clarke said, “Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see.”

In today’s gospel lesson from Mark (10:35-45)... Jesus tells us that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” That should be our attitude, too. We show our love of God by serving his people. Jesus set the standard. In Luke’s gospel (22:27), he asks, “Who is the greater, one who sits at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

So... if Jesus’ life was filled with service to others... we’re on solid ground when we go and do likewise. And that’s exactly what He is calling on us to do. We must stay attuned to the needs of those around us.

Now I am going to bring to your attention a matter that was discussed in last Sunday’s epistle. In his letter to the 12 tribes in the dispersion, James called on them not to make firm plans for the future. James, brother of Jesus who did not become a follower until after the Resurrection, was leader, bishop, of the church in Jerusalem when he wrote the letter.

“Come now,” he wrote, “you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life?” Answering his own question, he says you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead of announcing a series of man-made plans, he tells us, we should say if the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that. “As it is,” he wrote, “you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.”

So... what James is telling us is that God should be a part of our planning... of anything we hope to do. And, even then, He still has veto power. God is our Creator... and in thanksgiving for all He has done for us... all He has given us... we should be wise stewards of our time, our possessions, our gifts, and our talents. We are expected to use them to benefit others and to fulfill God’s mission. In fact, we are called on to pray, work, and give for the spread of God’s Kingdom and the welfare of His people.
There's far more to being a good steward than making a financial pledge to the church that costs us little. And showing up at services when it's convenient or when we feel like it is hardly a commitment. A good steward recognizes that all that he has belongs to God... and he only manages these skills, gifts, possessions, and talents. He gets to use the much large portion and returns the smaller part to God for the spread of His Kingdom.

Traditionally this portion has been a tithe... 10 per cent of what we have. Many people who tithe began by giving a smaller amount and then working up to 10 per cent. When we become conscientious about our giving... we find ways to increase the portion we return to God. We begin to see that the more we give to God the more He blesses our lives. An the more we share with others the more we receive. We don't have to stop at 10 per cent.

Jesus doesn't impose a tithe... but He asks for a total giving of our lives. He calls on us to give and to share our love for Him and His people. One of the best ways to show that we love Jesus is to tithe. Did you ever see the bumper sticker that reads: "Honk if you love Jesus?" There's another one that's more in tune with what God calls us to do. It says, "If you Love Jesus, Tithe. Anyone Can Honk."

I leave you with this thought from a prominent Christian layman, Paul S. Rees: "Stewardship is not leaving a tip on God's tablecloth; It is the confession of an unpayable debt at God's Calvary."
Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.'

Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."
Today’s gospel lesson begins with the familiar parable about a marriage feast. First, let’s take a look at what it says... and to whom it is addressed. The parable speaks of a great feast... a wedding feast. When the invitations were sent out, nothing was said about when it would be. It seems to be understood that when everything was prepared for the wedding feast, which the king had arranged for his son, that the servants would again go to the guests with a final summons from the king. In this case, the king had sent out the invitations quite some time ago. But the final notice hadn’t come because everything wasn’t ready for the party. Then... when it came, the guests insulted the king. They refused his invitation to the wedding feast. And that was a real no-no.

This parable has a local meaning, which is related to the previous parable of the wicked husbandman. And again it is an accusation of the Jews. Those invited to the feast, who refuse the king’s invitation, stand for the Jews. Many generations ago God had invited them to be His chosen people. When God sent His Son into the world... they were invited to follow Him... but they refused. As a result, God’s invitation went directly to the highways and byways. The people of the highways and byways, who never expected to receive an invitation into the kingdom, refer to the sinners... those who couldn’t or wouldn’t keep the Law... sometimes called the people of the land... and the Gentiles.

However, this parable has something to say on a broader scale than its local application. God invites the Christian to a feast... or a life... as joyous as a wedding feast. In fact, He invites us to a life of joy... a joyous life. And we miss all the benefits of a joyous life... if we refuse God’s invitation.

Another point that the first parable makes is that those who turned a deaf ear to the invitation of Christ were not bad people. We’re not dealing with an immoral people. They didn’t lead licentious lives. No... they went about the matter of running their farms, their businesses. This they did at the expense of their spiritual lives, which were crowded out. They didn’t have time for... or interest in... the spiritual. It’s so easy to get wrapped up in the things of our daily life here and now that we give no attention to things eternal. We don’t always act as if we’re a citizen of heaven who is just passing through life on earth. Frequently we spend far too much time... and effort... on and with the things of this world... and not enough time considering the things of the next world.
Quite frequently the second bests... the third bests... which aren't necessarily bad... shut out the best things in our lives. It's possible to be so concerned with making a living that we fail to make a life. We have our priorities mixed up... and we may not realize this until... or unless... we face a spiritual crisis and take a good, hard look at ourselves.

If we make a mess of our lives, aren't we likely to worry about the punishment that will be meted out? That's probably the case. But let's look at this another way. If we don't take the way of Christ... if we don't live a life worthy of Him... just think of the joy we will miss. Those who refused the invitation to the wedding feast were punished. But the real tragedy is that they missed the joy of attending the wedding feast. In a similar way, if we don't accept Christ's invitation... or if we don't enter fully into fellowship with Him and our Christian brothers and sisters... how will we feel? Won't we experience great agony... and pain... when we realize how many precious things we have missed?

A final point that our first parable makes is in the nature of God's invitation. It's strictly a matter of grace. Those who were gathered in from the highways and byways had no claim on the king. They never expected an invitation to the wedding feast... because they didn't keep the Law or they were Gentiles. And they certainly didn't deserve such an invitation. Neither do we. Why, then, have we received such an invitation? Because there's a wideness in God's mercy. Because He is a kind-hearted and generous king who offers us His hospitality. Why does He do this? The invitation was extended because of the grace of God... and only because of the grace of God.

Do we need a further connection between joy and the Christian life? The life we are living? If so, we don't have to look beyond this morning's epistle. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul calls their attention to two great qualities of the Christian. The first of these is... joy. Paul says: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." If we have problems with rejoicing, let's take a look at Paul's situation. A mental picture of what was to come flashed through his mind. Don't overlook the circumstances: Paul was in prison, facing almost certain death. The Philippians were setting out on their Christian journey together... and dark days, danger, and persecutions undoubtedly lay ahead. Paul thought out everything that could possibly happen. And then he spoke:
“Again I will say, Rejoice.” Christian joy is unique. Its source is in the continual presence of Christ. Christians should never lose their joy. After all, we can never lose Christ.

There was another quality... besides joy... that Paul associated with the Christian life. It’s a Greek word that is difficult to translate, but it comes out as gracious goodness, moderation, patience, gentleness, forbearance, magnanimity. The Greeks themselves explained this word (epieikei) as “justice and something better than justice.” It’s a word that should indicate to Christians that rules and regulations and laws are not the last word. This should tell us that there are times when we should not apply the letter of the law.

It has been said that the early Christians probably won favor by their spirit of praise. That the forced gaiety of the ancient world hid a bitter sorrow... but the self-denial of the Christians was the sign and means of joy. Why shouldn’t we be joyful? We have the blessed hope of eternal life with God... and also His companionship while on our pilgrimage. So let’s be joyful... for Christ’s sake... for the sake of other Christians... and for the sake of those whom we might attract to the Christian way of life. May God give us the strength, the power, the courage, to face the days ahead with the inspiring and encouraging words of Paul: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Amen.
As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."
I don’t know what today’s gospel lesson from Mark is saying to you, but to me it speaks to a strong interest in respectability. And respectability seems to be important in modern society. I really don’t sense that there’s a strong desire to succeed in one’s lifetime occupation… but everyone apparently wants to be looked upon as respectable.

I’m not sure why this is true. Perhaps it requires less effort on our part. Or respectability is looked upon with favor by our peers. We must admit that their attitudes and opinions are important to us… sometimes far too important.

Is respectability a quality of life that we hope to earn? Or is seeming to be respectable adequate? Can respectability be attained in one generation? Or does it require a longer time frame? Is it something we can inherit from our parents and/or grandparents or others? Or do we ourselves have to earn or attain respectability by our own efforts?

As mentioned earlier, many people aren’t motivated to succeed in life. Should it not follow that a similar number of church members do not have a strong desire to become devout Christians? “I don’t want to be known as a holy Joe,” is the way some people express this attitude. Others volunteer that “Yes, I’ve been baptized.” But they add they’re not active in any church congregation. Or they say “I believe in God.” But they make little effort to express that belief… or to put it into action. This is where the word “respectable” would seem to rear its ugly head. It’s not a term that seems to mean a great deal… and yet a large number of people consider it important to their lives.

Getting back to our gospel lesson… did it occur to you that the rich young man has all the qualifications to make him respectable? He is from a prominent family. He claims to know all the commandments and to have observed them from his youth. He does not kill. He does not commit adultery. He does not steal. He does not bear false witness. He does not defraud others. And he honors his father and his mother. Jesus commends the rich young man for observing the commandments. Then He gives him the bad news: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”
These words, Mark tells us, really attracted the young man’s attention. In fact, his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful. Why? Because he had great possessions. Further… these possessions came between him and ministering to the needs of others. He was fully equipped to be of help to others… but he was not willing to do so. His great possessions became a stumbling block. He was respectable… and he wanted to remain at that level. He was not motivated to do greater things… or to help others… or to attain goodness.

When Jesus called on this rich young man to go, sell what he had and give to the poor… He wasn’t demanding that of everyone who showed an interest in following Him. He was specifically requiring that of this young man for a very good reason. His great possessions were coming between him and a life that would be meaningful… one that would also require some special effort on his part.

Please note that Jesus wasn’t impressed by this young man’s possessions. He saw that his wealth was posing a problem to becoming a follower… and He told him up front. He leveled with him. Jesus never asks anyone to follow Him blindly. He tells us what is required. And we decide for ourselves if we’re willing to pay the price. How much do we want to become “real” Christians?

It’s not unusual for the Church to react to a wealthy person in a far different way than Jesus did. Often… too often… church leaders look upon a wealthy person as a potential chairman of the finance committee… or a vestry person… or a church warden.

Because he is a central figure in this drama, we should take a hard look at the rich young man who said he had observed all the commandments from his youth. Jesus viewed him as a practitioner of moral respectability… one who looked upon goodness as not doing. And, said Jesus, that’s not enough. What had the man who said he had kept all the commandments actually done? Not much.

All the commandments the young man who said he had kept… except for one… were negative in nature. He had not killed anyone. He had not committed adultery. He had not stolen. He had not borne false witness. He had not defrauded anyone. In other words, he had not done harm to anyone. But what good had he done? He was… here comes that word again… respectable. He had not done bad things… but he had not done good things. He had not used any of his considerable possessions to help anyone. He had not reached out to anyone who needed a helping hand. He had not done anything to strengthen another person.
Jesus, in pointing the way to the Kingdom of God, indicates that it goes far beyond what the Law had required. Observing the Law is something that would have made one an upright, decent citizen of Israel. But those who want to be Jesus' disciples must do more than that. After all, Christians are doers. Christianity consists of doing things. We cannot be respectable by not doing things.

In case you're wondering what commandment the rich young man observed that was positive: He honored his father and his mother. That's laudable but no great accomplishment. It's certainly not unique... but at the time it would have been considered respectable.
Proper 23, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4 - 7
PSALM 66
NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Timothy 2: 8 - 15
GOSPEL: Luke 17: 11 - 19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."
After hearing today's gospel lesson from Luke, what words come to mind? Would they be gratitude and ingratitude? Were you surprised that of the ten lepers healed of their loathsome disease that only one returned to give thanks to God? Or would you say that would be about average?

Let's get more personal about gratitude... about giving thanks. How long has it been since we gave thanks to our parents for bringing us into this world, for feeding, clothing, and loving us? Have we thanked them lately for providing the minute-by-minute nurture that permitted us to grow from a helpless infant to a real person... an individual created in the image of God? Or, if our parents are dead, how long has it been since we thanked God for them... or their countless acts of love?

Each of us owes a great deal to others. How many of us accept this fact? How many of us have said thanks to the teacher or counselor who helped us find the way from nothingness or oblivion to a path of usefulness... one with purpose? How many of us have tried to repay a friend who helped us through what to us seemed like an impossible situation? Of course, it's true that we may be unable to repay them... and, even if we could, they may be unwilling to accept any payment. But that doesn't relieve us of our responsibility. There are countless things we can do in gratitude for what they have done for us.

How often are we ungrateful to God? Do we thank Him for the food He provides us each day? And our clothing and shelter? Are we grateful to Him? Do we show it? Do we tell Him? How many times has God rescued us... or come to our defense... and we've forgotten all about it? In fact, we may have forgotten about it by the time He answered our hurried and frantic prayer. Just because God is dependable doesn't mean we should take advantage of Him and His grace. We can at least try to deserve what He has given us. We can't repay Him... but we can show our gratitude. How? Let us count the ways. Following are some of the responses biblical figures have made to God for His countless gifts of love and grace.

The Second Book of Samuel (Chapter 22) tells us that David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.
He said (Verses 2 through 7):

> The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer,  
> my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,  
> my shield and the horn of my salvation,  
> my stronghold and my refuge,  
> my savior; thou savest me from violence.  
> I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.  
> For the waves of death encompassed me,  
> the torrents of perdition assailed me;  
> the cords of Sheol entangled me,  
> the snares of death confronted me.  
> In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
> to my God I called.  
> From his temple he heard my voice,  
> and my cry came to his ears.  

(Also verses 32, 47, and 50)

> For who is God but the Lord?  
> And who is a rock, except our God?  
> The Lord lives; and blessed be my rock,  
> and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation.  
> For this I will extol thee, O Lord, among the nations,  
> and sing praises to thy name.

David said a great deal more... several more verses, in fact. He was so thankful... and put such expression into this psalm of praise that it could easily be transformed into a dramatic production of some length. And much could also be said about the depth of David’s thanksgiving. He was thankful all over—heart, mind, body, and soul. And when David was thankful... words of praise flowed forth throughout his very being.

Let’s look for a moment at a critical time in the life of the prophet Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar had captured Judah and taken large numbers of its people to Babylon. Daniel was one of them. After the king had had a dream and none of his wise men could interpret it, he ordered that all of them be destroyed. Daniel asked Nebuchadnezzar for an appointment so that he might show the king the interpretation. He and his friends then prayed that they would be saved from the king’s wrath. Then during the night the mystery of the dream was revealed to Daniel in a vision.
These are the words Daniel used to bless the God of heaven and to give thanks to Him for His grace and loving kindness: (Daniel 2:20-23):

Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes time and season; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and mysterious things; and he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To thee, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for thou hast given me wisdom and strength, and has now made known to me what we asked of thee, for thou hast made known to us the king’s matter.

Canticle 16 in our Prayer Book, a variation of which we have just sung (Canticle 16, page 92) contains the Song of Zechariah. Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, is thanking God for a great number of things: First, the gift of his son, John... John the Baptizer. But he is also thankful for a great deal more. He sees the gift of his son in a larger and greater context... what God has given him will be the channel of God’s mercy for all the people of Israel... because John will be the one who paves the way for the long-awaited Messiah. Zechariah also looks back and he thanks God for visiting and redeeming His people. In his perception, God has already done this... because He has given the people of Israel a spiritual quality and a spiritual commission that no one can destroy. <Read from Luke 1:68-79>.

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."
Is there any doubt in your mind that Zechariah is thankful? His thankfulness is simple... yet profound. He expresses it now but it is linked to the distant past and to the future. He is about to witness a great event in the coming of the Messiah.

Thankfulness to God is a trait for which the apostle Paul is widely known... especially for God’s grace to him and for the congregations he visited and to which he wrote his famous letters. The congregation at Thessalonika was one of his favorites. He gave these words of encouragement to the Thessalonians when addressing them during a very difficult time in their lives together (2 Thess. 1:3-4): We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, as is fitting, because your faith is growing abundantly, and for the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring.

The point Jesus made in our gospel lesson today is well-taken. People in His days on earth were quick to receive and slow to give thanks. Has human nature changed? No. Has our Christian faith enabled us to rise above this show of ingratitude in which ten received a blessing but only one gave thanks? Are we thankful for God's grace to us? Are we thankful for the many acts of love and kindness that others have shown to us? Of course, verbal answers don't mean much. The key question is: Are our lives patterned after the response of the leprous Samaritan who returned to give thanks to God... or to the nine lepers who saw no need to?
Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.
It may seem strange to us, but in today’s gospel lesson, Jesus is discussing, of all things, taxes. I have a feeling that most of us would probably rather talk about something more interesting and less emotional… the weather perhaps. Taxes, taxation, and tax collectors are often subject to jokes.

Mark Twain once asked: “What is the difference between a taxidermist and a tax collector?” The answer: A taxidermist takes only your skin. Speaking of taxes, Twain said: “We’ve got so much taxation. I don’t know of a single foreign product that enters this country untaxed except the answer to prayer.”

Taxation is not a subject that’s popular with many people… unless you’re the recipient of a tax or you somehow benefit from it. But taxation is a fact of life… and this was also the case in Jesus’ day. It took money to support the Roman Empire… and the usual way for a government to raise money has long been taxation.

During Jesus’ days on earth the Roman government collected three regular taxes. First, there was a ground tax. The government’s share was one-tenth of the grain and one fifth of the oil and wine that a family produced. Some of it was collected in kind, some in its monetary equivalent.

The second tax was collected on a man’s income. It’s interesting that it amounted to one per cent of what he earned. That’s the same percentage that used to be paid by an employer in the U.S. so an employee could receive Social Security payments at the end of his work career. So you see an income tax is hardly a new concept… but it is still with us.

The third tax that the Roman government collected was a poll tax. It was paid by every male person from the age of 14 to 65 and every female person from the age of 12 to 65. It amounted to one denarius, slightly more than a day’s pay for a working man. Jesus called the denarius the tribute coin.

The tax that figures in today’s gospel lesson is the poll tax. The poll tax used to be popular with politicians in the Southern U.S. Some states found ways to keep blacks from voting by abusing the collection or non-collection of the tax. It was sometimes as much a weapon against voting as it was a tax. And it didn’t raise very much money.

Why was Jesus talking about taxes? The Pharisees and Herodians, who seldom agreed on any issue, were on the same side in this case. When they asked Him if it were lawful to pay taxes to Caesar they put Him in a dilemma. Or so they thought. Their thinking went this way: If He said it was unlawful to pay the tax, they would
report Him to the Roman government, claiming He was making seditious statements. And His arrest would follow. If He said yes, He would be discredited in the eyes of many of the people with whom He was popular. The Pharisees, who were extremely orthodox, resented the payment of the poll tax to a foreign king as an infringement of the divine right of God.

The Herodians belonged to the party of Herod, King of Galilee, who owed his power to the Romans and, of course, worked closely with them. The Pharisees and Herodians forgot their differences temporarily because of their common desire to get rid of Jesus.

Jesus had to ask for a coin to make his point. Like some of our presidents—and others—He doesn’t seem to be one who carried money. The head of the Emperor... Caesar... was stamped on the coin. No surprise. Rulers traditionally struck their own coins. This was a sign of their kingship... or their emperor’s office. And the coinage was officially recognized as belonging to the person whose image it bore. Even pretenders could get into the act and make their own money.

Jesus then asked, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” End of conversation. Matthew says, “When they heard it, they marveled; and they left Him and went away.”

Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees and Herodians was brief, simple, and to the point. He stated a principle. He didn’t weigh it down with a lot of rules and regulations. That’s why his teachings are relative today. They’re timeless. They never go out of date.

We can draw some conclusions from Jesus’ statement. Christians aren’t exempt from paying taxes. No, we’re like everyone else. We’re obligated to pay our taxes. It’s our civic duty. We’re rendering to Caesar... or the state... or the government... the things that are Caesar’s... the government’s.

What about the other side of the coin... so to speak? What does Jesus mean when He says, “Render to God the things that are God’s?”

Several things come to mind. First, we are to worship God regularly in His Church. We are also to work, give, and pray for the spread of His Kingdom. Most discussions on giving center on the question of how much.
The biblical standard was and continues to be the tithe. The Episcopal Church calls on its members to tithe. How much is a tithe? Ten per cent of our resources. And then there's also the matter of how we use our time.

It has been said that each individual’s life is like a coin. Each one is separately minted in God's creation. We are made in the image of God. God's inscription is on us. We are His. He has made a great impact on us... on our lives.

Genesis tells us that God said (1:26-27, 5:1-3, 9:1-7), “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

Genesis also tells us that when God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. The Old Testament never suggests that the image of God was lost by the fall. However, in the New Testament, the image of God is something which—except for two instances—does not belong to man. It is identified with Christ, and image now being the perfect reflection of the prototype. Through his relationship to Christ the believer is transformed into the same image. This is partly our blessed hope in the world to come and to some extent a present reality.

So... if we're created in God's image... and we're probably all convinced that we are... we belong to God. And if we belong to God, we must give to God what is due Him. And what is that? Our total selves.

Everything in the teachings of Jesus hinges on the seeking of the kingdom of heaven. According to Jesus, nothing can come before seeking the kingdom. Not cleaning up the environment, not getting people to church, not tithing, not choosing a career. Why can't these matters come ahead of the kingdom of God? A good question and a simple answer: because if we don't seek the kingdom of God and righteousness first, we won't seek them at all. Wisdom tells us that. And so does human nature.

Caesar's power... or the State's power... is more obvious than God's. But God's power is eternal. We may be forced at times to yield to the power of Caesar... the power of the State. But we owe our ultimate allegiance to God.

So... render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Amen.
James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."
Let’s assume for a moment that you are home, relaxing from the cares of the world around you. You’ve had a busy day. For some of you, it was a frustrating time... whether in the office, the factory, the classroom, the hospital, the laboratory, the clinic, the courtroom... or as a volunteer for a cause or agency... or at home, doing some of the things that needed to be done there. While we’re making assumptions... let’s carry the situation another step or two. The dishes are washed and dried... and put away. So are the children.

This doesn’t seem to be the time to tackle any major project. You have some free time... but it’s limited. It’s too early in the week to look over the Scripture lessons for next Sunday, besides you don’t feel up to concentrating. Nor is this a good time to spend with God. You’re too exhausted. But it’s not bedtime yet. Why not turn on the television set? You do... and the first thing you hear... and see... is “Be the best you can be.” Never mind that it’s a commercial for the Army... it gets your attention. Of course, it’s really saying much more than that... though much of what comes through is implied.

How do you get along in the Army? Make that how do you get ahead in the Army? ... Or, for that matter, the Navy... the Marines... the Air Force... the Coast Guard. In the commercial, the Army is calling on you to be all you can be. Not only are you to do your best... but you’re also called on to out-shoot your fellow soldiers... to outrun them... to run over them... to outmaneuver them... to beat them in whatever you undertake. Be very competitive! Grab any advantage you can. Seek special privileges whenever and wherever possible. Ask special favors of the corporal, the sergeant, the lieutenant, the captain... even the major or the colonel or the general, if you have an opportunity. Get ahead! Do whatever it takes. Remember the commercial: Be all you can be. And, in the secular world, that includes doing everything in your power to gain an advantage over all others. That’s the way the game is played. Everything is fair in such a situation. Do your best... regardless of whom you hurt. Win at all cost. Be ambitious. Have gall.

Do you see any connection between the situation I’ve just described and the incident involving James and John in today’s gospel lesson from Mark? I do.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, made two unusual requests of Jesus:

First—they wanted Him to do for them whatever they asked of Him.
And Second—they wanted the honor, the power, of sitting... one at His right and one at His left, in His glory... or when He came into His glory. They had ambition. They had gall. They wanted to be somebody. They wanted to be all they could be... and they would be quite willing to call the shots... to carry the ball. They would be happy for Jesus to submit to them and their blind ambition.

You may remember this incident in Matthew’s gospel. In his version, it was Salome, the mother of James and John, who made a request for special consideration for her sons James and John. It has been suggested that Matthew felt such a request was unworthy of an apostle. And further, to save the reputation of James and John, he attributed it to the natural ambition of their mother.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” What does this request sound like? Sounds like a prayer; doesn’t it? And the wrong kind of prayer at that. James and John... and perhaps their mother too... were asking Jesus to accommodate them... to fit Himself into their plans. They weren’t willing to meld their plans into His. In fact, just before they made their selfish and inappropriate request to Jesus, He had told them what was going to happen to Him... that they were going up to Jerusalem; that the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles. And further: they will mock him, and spit on him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.

Were the disciples listening?

This was the third time that Jesus had made his passion announcement... and then what happens? Obviously the disciples fail to understand its significance. This is especially true of James and John... for it is at this time that they make their naïve, ill-timed request for a special position in the kingdom of God... or Christ’s glory. A very juvenile reaction. Here is Jesus telling about the tragedy that is going to befall Him... lead to His death... and what are James and John concerned about? Their own social position. They think they would like to be given a higher spot in the pecking order... and they have the audacity to ask Jesus to bring it about. Or, as the secular world might tell us, they want to be all they can be. Can you imagine?

I indicated earlier that this was the third time that Jesus made the announcement of His passion, which was to happen soon. The first came in the eighth chapter of Mark... soon after Peter’s confession that “You are the Christ.” Peter obviously didn’t understand Jesus’ announcement because he rebuked Him... and was himself
rebuked by Jesus. That was when they were on their way to Caesarea Philippi and He asked His disciples who men said He was... and He also asked them... but who do you say that I am?... and Peter said, “You are the Christ.”... and He charged them to tell no one about Him.

As they were going through Galilee (ninth chapter of Mark), Jesus made the second announcement of his upcoming passion. Mark says they did not understand the saying and they were afraid to ask Him. They had made no discernible progress since the first announcement at the time of Peter’s confession.

We might be inclined to conclude that the disciples were not very bright or that their hearing was bad or that they didn’t want to hear what Jesus was saying... that they closed their minds to such a possibility. But it was difficult... if not impossible... for them to be open to such a concept of messiahship. They knew... or thought they knew... what the Messiah should be like... how He would appear...how He would come in kingly power and be a charismatic leader who would rule over them. Later disciples have had difficulty in accepting the crucified Lord. Even today, the modern world has difficulty in accepting the cross of Jesus as the supreme revelation of God... and all this after His passion. No wonder the disciples had such problems.

In today’s gospel lesson... before making His third passion announcement... Mark tells us that Jesus was walking ahead of them when He told the twelve for the third time... what was going to happen to Him. After the first Passion announcement, the other two members of the “inner circle,” James and John, are refused their request. They cannot claim any special seats in Jesus’ inner circle. It’s not a favor He can grant them. He also tells them such is not the route to greatness. They are not to exercise authority over others. Unlike how it is in the secular world... they are to be all they can be... not by ruling over others, lording it over them... but by being their servant... serving others. And the greatest among you, Jesus says, is the one who would be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Yes, Jesus came to serve... not to rule. He calls on us to go and do likewise... not to be all we can be by following the dictates of the secular world... but to serve all we can serve... by following Jesus and by doing what He calls on us to do.

If service to others is important to us, we should be concerned with earning a living... not amassing a fortune or trying to acquire all the physical comforts and other luxuries we can. If we say yes to Christ, we must
say no to self-seeking and self-will. Unlike James and John, we should not seek special status or position or try to bend God’s will to ours.

If we use our time, our gifts, skills, and talents for the benefit of others... they will grow into something greater. Or, as Jesus says, they will bear much fruit. And further... by giving up ourselves we will gain eternal life. Remember what Jesus said of Himself, “Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. That’s what He did and that’s what we’re called on to do: to give up our lives... not on a cross, as He did... but for the service of others.

If we live life as a service to others... we make good use of our gifts, skills, talents, time and money. We expend them... and the result is something greater. But those who refuse to use your skills, gifts, and talents will, in the end, lose them.

God gave us life to live... not life to save... live to keep. So if it is to have meaning, we are to burn it out... wear it out... but not let it rust out.

Be all we can be. How? By serving all we can serve... to the best of our ability. Amen.
This is the day that the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Today’s lessons were chosen because they speak to the topic of living responsible Christian lives. The prophet Jeremiah (17:7-8) tells us that “Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of doubt it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

If we’re committed to Christ, we’re always bearing fruit… we’re always doing what responsible Christians do. What, pray tell, do committed Christians do? In brief… they work, they pray, and they give toward the spread of the Kingdom of God. They love God and their neighbor… and their lives reflect this love.

We should not be anxious… because our trust is in God… and He will lead us through any troubled waters we encounter. He doesn’t protect us from trying times. Not at all. He guides us through difficult situations, and we are strengthened for the days ahead… because our help is from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

God is the Creator… and we are the stewards of what He has entrusted to us. We are not the owners of the land on which we live. We do not have title to the air that we breathe. It’s really God’s… but he lets us use it. The same applies to the other “things” that we have access to.

In our second reading today… Paul concludes the passage from this Letter to the Romans (6:3-11) with these words: “…if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Being alive to God in Jesus Christ means that the Spirit of God… the Holy Spirit… is at work in our lives. What we do as Christians should be a reflection of the life that Jesus lived on earth. Of course, we won’t be living a perfect live, but one patterned after the sinless life that Jesus lived. In brief, we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. And further… we are to love our neighbor as ourself.
So... our lives are to be filled with acts that reflect our love of God and neighbor. And it is the Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... that directs us... that leads us... and teaches us... always. Remembering that we are to be imitators of Christ. Or, as William Newton Clarke said, “Faith is the daring of the soul to go gather than it can see.”

In today’s gospel lesson from Mark (10:35-45)... Jesus tells us that “the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” That should be our attitude, too. We show our love of God by serving his people. Jesus set the standard. In Luke’s gospel (22:27), he asks, “Who is the greater, one who sits at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

So... if Jesus’ life was filled with service to others... we’re on solid ground when we go and do likewise. And that’s exactly what He is calling on us to do. We must stay attuned to the needs of those around us.

Now I am going to bring to your attention a matter that was discussed in last Sunday’s epistle. In his letter to the 12 tribes in the Dispersion, James called on them not to make firm plans for the future. James, brother of Jesus who did not become a follower until after the Resurrection, was leader, bishop, of the church in Jerusalem when he wrote the letter.

“Come now,” he wrote, “you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.’ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life?” Answering his own question, he says you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead of announcing a series of man-made plans, he tells us we should say if the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that. “As it is,” he wrote, “you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.”

So... what James is telling us is that God should be a part of our planning... of anything we hope to do. And, even then, He still has veto power. God is our Creator... and in thanksgiving for all He has done for us... all He has given us... we should be wise stewards of our time, our possessions, our gifts, and our talents. We are expected to use them to benefit others and to fulfill God’s mission. In fact, we are called on to pray, work, and give for the spread of God’s Kingdom and the welfare of His people.
There's far more to being a good steward than making a financial pledge to the church that costs us little. And showing up at services when it's convenient or when we feel like it is hardly a commitment. A good steward recognizes that all that he has belongs to God... and he only manages these skills, gifts, possessions, and talents. He gets to use the much larger portion and returns the smaller part to God for the spread of His Kingdom. Traditionally this portion has been a tithe... 10 per cent of what we have. Many people who tithe began by giving a smaller amount and then working up to 10 per cent. When we become conscientious about our giving... we find ways to increase the portion we return to God. We begin to see that the more we give to God the more He blesses our lives. An the more we share with others the more we receive. We don't have to stop at 10 per cent.

Jesus doesn't impose a tithe... but He asks for a total giving of our lives. He calls on us to give and to share our love for Him and His people. One of the best ways to show that we love Jesus is to tithe. Did you ever see the bumper sticker that reads: "Honk if you love Jesus?" There's another one that's more in tune with what God calls us to do. It says, "If you Love Jesus, Tithe. Anyone Can Honk."

I leave you with this thought from a prominent Christian layman, Paul S. Rees: "Stewardship is not leaving a tip on God's tablecloth; It is the confession of an unpayable debt at God's Calvary."
Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"
The parable in today's gospel lesson, if it were on a court docket, might be termed the widow versus the unrighteous judge. But before we get emotionally involved in it, we should have a look at the importunate friend in the 11th chapter of Luke. The parables are twins... and the moral in them is the same: Persistence in prayer brings results. Since persistence is not a quality most of us possess, or seek, perhaps I should say that again: Persistence in prayer brings results. In order to bring the parables together, I'll read the one from Luke. <Read Luke 11, verses 5 through 8.>

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs

What we have here is an un-neighborly neighbor. He’s certainly no Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan would get up immediately and give the late... and unexpected... caller what he asks for. He would also give him everything else he could possibly use... and then promise him additional assistance in the future.

But that’s not the way the un-neighborly neighbor reacts. In his defense, he does yield to pressure... which pays off for the midnight visitor. What would your answer be if someone came to your house for a loaf of bread... or a pizza... or a quart of milk... or a cup of sugar? Would you get up, put a smile on your face and give him or her what was asked for? I doubt if you would. Wouldn’t you be more likely to get up reluctantly... grumbling and frowning all the time? But, like the others, you would probably yield to pressure and give that inconsiderate person whatever you could spare. And you would probably grumble or frown or pout a great deal during the next 24 hours.

How would you react if you were the widow who came to a judge to seek what you were entitled to? In the biblical context... a widow represented those who need to be defended against exploitation. Children are also looked upon this way. Has anything changed? Not really. Children, who are helpless, and widows still face difficulties in the courts. The unrighteous judge in today’s parable caved in to pressure because the widow was persistent... not because she was on solid legal ground or because the judge wanted to help her.
We hear these stories... and we marvel at how true to life they are. But, more often than not, we fail to see their significance in our own lives. So we either miss the points they make or we don’t plug in to the wisdom they offer.

What do we look for in our prayers? Don’t we, more often than not, seek cheap, quick, and easy answers? Aren’t we looking for—and expecting—an instant answer to our prayers? We don’t seem to realize that God’s gifts are more precious when we have to wait for them. But we want everything fast... quick... now. Fast food seems to suit us just right. It might contain too much fat... too much sodium... too much cholesterol... too much sugar. But it’s fast... even instant sometimes. Wouldn’t we be better served if we devoted more time and effort to food preparation and our eating patterns? And also to our prayers... whatever form they take?

Why should a widow have to plead and wait? If a heartless judge will grant her request... won’t God also hear her? Yes. But He may not answer in the way she expects. The same is true of our prayers. Sometimes God has different things in mind for us... things that we might not even dream of. He may delay in order that our motives be purified. Have we ever wondered about the worthiness of a prayer? Is that what I really need? Is it something I want... but don’t need? Persistence in prayer might also help us shift our focus toward a more pure motive... and away from continually asking for something we consider most important to us.

Galileo once visited the tomb of St. Anthony... to spend time in prayer to God at the grave site and to ask some help from the saint. Not unexpectedly, he was going to pray for three things for himself and his family:

1—Money for himself
2—Health for his children
3—Old age for his mother.

But first Galileo meditated on the life of St. Anthony... and his prayer that followed was surprising... even to him. It was devoid of any selfishness whatsoever. He prayed for an illumination of his mind that he might find some new knowledge for the benefit of mankind. This was a totally unselfish request... far different than asking for money for himself, health for his children, and old age for his mother. It was also quite different from the prayers we often make.
We seem to be stuck on petitionary prayer. Of course, we have needs... and it’s quite natural and normal and acceptable to petition God in order that we obtain what we seek. But we have to realize that not all our prayer requests are worthy. What we request of God may be harmful to us. It may not be something we need at that particular time. It may not be something we really need... but rather a selfish want or wish. I have a feeling that most of us spend too much time and effort on making petitions to God... as well as regularly asking for things that God in His wisdom doesn’t consider appropriate for us. Even so, He hears our prayers... and He answers them... but the answer he gives may not be yes or no but something entirely different. He knows more about us than we do... and He knows what we need far better than we do.

We’re also surprised in the world around us... in the technological world... from time to time. If we tap in to all the computerized data we can find on a subject and then seek an answer to a question, we may be shocked when we see it on the screen. This, I’ve been told, has been termed an unanticipated response. This is something God has been doing forever. We shouldn’t be surprised at receiving an unanticipated response from Him. We know He has been providing such answers and further, we know that He is wise and trustworthy. Can we trust Him? I hope so. God has demonstrated time and time again that He is trustworthy... worthy of our trust.

And yes, we should be persistent in prayer. St. Paul tells us that we should pray without ceasing. But we should be selective in the petitions we make to God. And if we aren’t convinced that God wants us to do a certain thing or to move in a certain direction, we should pray that He will reveal His will to us... help us to discern what His will is for us.

I also call your attention to another form of prayer... one that is often neglected. It’s always appropriate. I’m speaking of thanksgiving. And I suggest that each of us give thanks to God more often. How in the world can we thank Him too much if we really appreciate all that He has done for us?
When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" '?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.
“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

This statement, from today’s gospel lesson from Matthew, really gets to the heart of the matter of how you and I should be living... what we should be doing. In Matthew’s gospel the statement is attributed to Jesus in response to the question by a lawyer, or Scribe, as to which is the great commandment in the law. In Luke, it was the Scribe who offered the statement, taken from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18) ... which Jesus endorsed whole-heartedly.

The question of which commandments were the most important was a good one. The people must have been overwhelmed by the number of commandments in the law. Getting them prioritized could only be helpful. In Jesus’ day, it was said that there were 613 commandments, of which 365 were negative and 248 positive. Imagine trying to obey them all... and not knowing which were the most important.

The first and great commandment calls on us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. This is not a matter of fleshly or physical love. It is a higher form of love than affection for family or friends. Perhaps reverent devotion would explain the love we are to have for God.

God is our creator... our source of being. And only in Him can we learn the purpose of life. Only in Him can we find the inspiration, the power, to do what He wants us to do... what His will is for us. How do we do this? By seeking His fellowship... His company. By worshiping Him... by calling on Him... by praying to Him and by listening for His responses to us. By serving Him faithfully... daily. By sharing our innermost thoughts and feelings with God.

The second part of the Great Commandment is to love our neighbor as we love ourself. Our love of God must bear fruit. It must result in love for others. But love of God must come first. It’s only after we love God that man becomes lovable. Man is made in the image of God... and for that reason man is lovable. We can’t make any distinction... when it comes to loving our neighbor. As Jesus teaches us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan... everyone is our neighbor. We can’t exclude anyone. In fact, we should be finding ways of including everyone. A neighbor is anyone to whom we can be a neighbor. Everyone is worthy of being our
neighbor. We can't rule out anyone because of race, ethnicity, or national origin. We can't demand that neighbors be male or female. We can't bar someone for being, or not being, a member of any class, or social or cultural background.

Later in today’s gospel lesson, when Jesus asked the Pharisees, "What do you think of the Christ?" ... translated as the Messiah in some versions.... “Whose son is he?” their answer was predictable: “The son of David.” Please note that He did not ask them what they thought of Jesus, Himself, but rather what was their conception of the Messiah... the office and the person of the Messiah. As we know... many of the Pharisees... and members of other sects... had long waited for a Messiah to overcome the Romans who had been controlling their lives for generations. So, not unexpectedly, they had pinned their hope on a swash-buckling military leader who would throw off the Roman yoke that had oppressed them. They had great expectations. And to them... the Messiah for whom they waited would bring back the glory days of King David. Never mind that the good old days under David were not such great years. They were filled with violence, family feuding, and intrigue. But to the Pharisees, the Messiah was to be a man of action... a military leader to whom they all could relate. David had done much to impress them and, over the centuries, his failures and weaknesses seemed to have disappeared. They had these romantic expectations... and, right or wrong, David was their model. When they viewed someone as son of David... no one could rank higher in their heart and minds.

To the Pharisees... son of David was the highest honor that could be imagined. The Jewish hope believed that the Messiah would be the son of David. Then Jesus deflated them by reminding them that in the Scriptures... Psalm 110... David calls the Messiah Lord. If David calls the Messiah Lord, how can He be David’s son?

The early church... and succeeding generations... have found Jesus to be far more than the Jewish hope. He has been found to be... He is... the son of David... and the Son of God! Passages in First Corinthians (15:25), Ephesians (11:20, 21), and Hebrews (1:13; 10:13) bear out this contention. And Psalm 110, which has been viewed as both Davidic and Messianic, identifies the Messiah as the son of David... and also being at the right hand of God, which would indicate His being the son of God.

While Psalm 110 says that the Messiah shall be the son of David... it also claims that He must have more than human lineage. A further point: Jesus constantly rebuked the conceptions current at the time of His life on
earth for their emphasis on the humanness, the nationalism, and the materialism in the identification of the Messiah.

So... to us... the Messiah is to be the son of David... and much more! Son of David is inadequate. He must also be the Son of God.

Messiahship is not to be thought of in terms of a Davidic conqueror who would repeat David’s military triumphs... but the Son of God, who would demonstrate the love of God upon His cross.

How can the Messiah save us unless He knows our need... first-hand? And... in addition... He must be clothed in light and power from above. He must come from God. He must be God.

We need a deliverer... someone whose purity can cleanse us of our sins. We need someone to give us the power to rise above our dead selves... someone who is willing to taste death... and yet who conquers death... to give us the assurance of eternity.

The Resurrection of Jesus was not simply when He Himself was “crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:9) and “passed through the heavens” (Heb. 4:14), but was also the moment when He “opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers” and “inaugurated the ‘new and living way’ (Heb. 10:20) between man and God.”

And on these developments... we pin our hope.
Proper 25, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Joel 2: 23 - 32
PSALM 65
NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Timothy 4: 6 - 8, 16 - 18
GOSPEL: Luke 18: 9 - 14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."
The Pharisee in today’s gospel lesson didn’t need a press agent to state his case... so perhaps it’s just as well that press agentry didn’t come into being until fairly recently. Obviously he had an exalted opinion of himself, of his life, and of his righteousness. Or should we refer to his self-righteousness? In any event, his attitude was one of extreme arrogance. Luke says Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others. There were other Pharisees who had similar opinions of themselves and did not hesitate to say so. Of course, not all Pharisees were like this.

While Hebrew literature can provide many examples of great humility, the prayer of a rabbi of about 70 A.D. is quite similar to the Pharisee’s prayer in the parable Jesus gives us today. The rabbi was also exposed to the danger of spiritual pride. This is his prayer: I thank thee, O Lord, my God, that thou hast given me a place among those who sit in the house of study, and not among those who sit at the street corners; for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early to study the words of the Law, and they rise early to engage in vain things; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward, and they labor and receive no reward, I live and they live, but I live for the life of the future world, and they live for the pit of destruction.”

Now let’s take a closer look at the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke. First, he described himself. By all the common tests, he was righteous. He gave a tenth of his income to charity and to religion. Please note that I said he gave a tenth of his income, not a tenth of his possessions. In some cases... there’s quite a difference in the two. He also imposed disciplines on himself greater than the Law demanded. Private fasts were not required by the law but many devout Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. You may be interested to know that by the Second Century many pious Christians also fasted two days a week—on Wednesdays and Fridays. The Pharisee was a patriot and an upright man who apparently gave to the Temple and to the community charities. What about his prayer? It really wasn’t a prayer at all; was it? He didn’t pray to God... or as on commentator wrote, he prayed with himself. Or you might also say he gave himself a testimonial before God. And what he had to say was apparently typical of the worst of Phariseeism.

At least three things inhibited the Pharisee’s prayer:

No.1—A person who is proud cannot pray. Is there any doubt in your mind that he was proud?
No. 2—If we despise our fellow man, we cannot pray. And this Pharisee was proud to say he was not like other men... extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. All of us are part of a great collection of sinners and all of us are in need of God's mercy... but the Pharisee was unable or unwilling to realize this.

No.3—True prayer comes after we set our lives beside the life of God. Compared to other men, women, and children, we might fare rather well... but we dare not try to equate our lives to the life of Jesus or to the holiness of God.

Now... let's return to the parable. We seem to have lost somebody. What happened to the tax collector? Obviously some tax collectors of that day were repentant and some were not. This one was. In fact, he was so repentant that he wouldn't even look up heavenward. Here was a crook and cheat who kept calling on God to cleanse his soul. He was beating on his chest... pleading for mercy. Unlike the proud Pharisee, the tax collector stood apart of others because he didn't feel worthy of their fellowship.

The big difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector was in their attitudes. The Pharisee was self-righteous, pompous, and arrogant. The tax collector was humble and penitent. "I tell you," said Jesus, "this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Do you remember last Sunday's gospel lesson? It was also about prayer. In it... Jesus tells us we ought always to pray and not to lose heart. Then He tells the parable of the judge who neither feared God nor regarded man. A certain widow came to him demanding that she receive justice. He kept putting her off, but her persistence finally forced him into a decision. It was favorable to her because he was tired of the continual demands she made on him. Jesus was saying if an unjust judge can be wearied into giving a widow justice, how much more will God—a loving Gather—give His children what they need? Of course, we don't always get what we pray for... sometimes the answer is no. At other times we receive more than we ever dreamed about.

Only God knows what is good for us in the long run. That's why we must not be discouraged in prayer. Be persistent, says Jesus. In today's lesson, the tax collector found the way to break through to God. He was repentant... and he sought mercy. And, as Jesus tells us, his prayer was heard. Not only was it heard... but it was
answered… favorably. His request met the criteria. It was in conformity with God’s will. He didn’t demand justice… he asked for mercy. Just think about this: If he had sought justice… and received what he deserved… he probably would have ended up in terrible shape. In response to Jesus’ words about persistence in prayer… I am reminded of the passage in First Thessalonians (5:17-18) when Paul tells the Thessalonians to rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Pray constantly… or pray without ceasing… these are the words that inspired the pilgrim in that Russian spiritual classic on prayer, sometimes called “The Way of a Pilgrim.” Written anonymously, the title of this work might be translated as “Candid Narratives of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father.” It all began when the pilgrim went to church and during the Liturgy hear these words from First Thessalonians: Pray without ceasing. They soon became so imprinted on his heart that he began to wonder how it was possible to pray without ceasing, particularly since people need to concern themselves with other things in order to make a living. So this is how the pilgrim’s spiritual journey began. He wandered from place to place in Russia and Siberia in the middle of the Nineteenth Century. The book tells of the devoutness and the humility with which the pilgrim approached his spiritual journey. It also gives several sketches of the people he meets and the trials he encounters. The pilgrim soon becomes convinced that the words of the Jesus prayer were vital to his effort to pray without ceasing. Does everyone know what the Jesus prayer is? How many don’t? This is the Jesus prayer: Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. It is a prayer that has been on the lips of countless devout Christians over the centuries. Sometimes it’s said in a longer version: Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. One of the pilgrim’s spiritual teachers started him on his way when he told him:

“Many people reason quite the wrong way round about prayer, thinking that good actions and all sorts of preliminary measures render us capable of prayer. But quite the reverse is the case, it is prayer which bears fruit in good works and all the virtues. Those who reason so, take, incorrectly, the fruits and the results of prayer for the means of attaining it, and this is to depreciate the power of prayer.”

“And it is quite contrary to Holy Scripture, for the Apostle Paul says, ‘I exhort therefore that first of all supplications be made.’ (I Tim. 2:1) The first thing laid down in the Apostle’s words about prayer is that the work
of prayer comes before everything else: ‘I exhort there that first of all…’ Christians are bound to perform many good words, but before all else what they ought to do is to pray, for without prayer no other good work whatsoever can be accomplished. Without prayer they cannot find the way to the Lord, they cannot understand the truth, they cannot crucify the flesh with its passions and lusts, their heart cannot be enlightened with the light of Christ, they cannot be savingly united to God.”

“None of these things can be effected unless they are preceded by constant prayer. I say ‘constant,’ for the perfection of prayer does not lie within our power; as the Apostle Paul says, ‘For we know not what we should pray for as we ought (Romans 8:26). Consequently it is just to pray often, to pray always, which falls within our power as the means of attaining purity of prayer, which is the mother of all spiritual blessings.”

Later… a monk suggested that the pilgrim start quietly saying the Jesus Prayer exactly 3,000 times a day—whether he was sitting, walking, or lying down. It was difficult for him at first… but later it came so natural that when he stopped he felt a need to continue. He went back to his mentor after a few days and he told him to say the prayer 6,000 times a day. Within a week he realized that all he wanted was to be alone and to say his prayer. When he went back to his spiritual advisor, he was told to preserve the habit and strengthen it. “Waste no time, therefore, but make up your mind by God’s help to say the Prayer of Jesus 12,000 times a day. Remain in your solitude, get up early, go to bed late, and come and ask advice of me every fortnight,” were the words he was given.

By now he is well prepared for his journey… and many more adventures are in store for him. But he has learned what for his is important about prayer.

So… the pilgrim attains persistence in prayer… as Jesus had called on those around Him to do… and as Paul calls on the Thessalonians to do. All well and good. What should our attitude of prayer… or for prayer… be? Today’s parable concerning the Pharisee and the tax collector should give us some insight. The tax collector was repentant for his sins and he sought God’s mercy. We do well when we go and do likewise. And persistence in prayer… perhaps we can attain it during our spiritual journey. It’s something to be desired.
All Saints' Day

OLD TESTAMENT: Daniel 7: 1 - 3, 15 - 18

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.

As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the attendants to ask him the truth concerning all this. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter: "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever--forever and ever."

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 44: 1 - 10, 13 - 14

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning. There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles; those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore; they were wise in their words of instruction; those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes—all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times. Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;

Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation.
PSALM 149

1 Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
3 Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.
4 For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory.
5 Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches.
6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands,
7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples,
8 to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron,
9 to execute on them the judgment decreed. This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the LORD!

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 1: 11 - 23

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.
Revelation 7: 2 - 4, 9 - 17

I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, saying, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads."

And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."
Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.
Today we are celebrating the Feast of All Saints... one of the high festival days of the Church year. In addition to remembering those who have died and are part of the “church triumphant,” we will also remember our own call to be saints of God in the “church militant here on earth.”

Who are these saints whom we are honoring? Generally speaking, they are those who have inherited the covenant privileges as the holy people of a holy God. (I Peter 1:15-16). Christians are “saints” by virtue of being “in Christ Jesus, according to Saint Paul. So... when we speak of the saints we should include ourselves because use of the word saints as equivalent to “Christians” is frequently found in the New Testament.

Why are we here today? And what are we to be doing? There’s a key phrase in the Apostles’ Creed: I believe in the communion of saints. Communion is a sharing of love and prayer. We’re doing that. The communion of saints is also a result of the spiritual unity of the Church.

Our spiritual, or Church family, of which our Lord Jesus Christ is the Head, is made up of all baptized Christians, both living and dead, And we meet at the altar, where we join with “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven” in the worship of God. It is Jesus who binds together the living and the dead.

The Collect of the Day for All Saints’ Day is this: “Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ the Lord: Give us the grace to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, on God, in glory everlasting.”

It has always been the practice of the Church to pray for the dead, as it was for the Jews in our Lord’s time. If the dead are conscious... as seems to be implied by Matthew 22:32, we must believe that they pray for us. In that reference in Matthew, Jesus reminds the Sadducees that God the Father said, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. (See also Rev. 6:9-11.) Our fellowship is based on mutual love and prayer. The Letter to the Hebrews (12:1) tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, who form with us “the assembly of the first-born” (Heb. 12:23).
Even the Puritan Richard Baxter wrote of a belief in the communion of saints in these words:

“In the communion of saints
In wisdom, safety, and delight,
And when my heart declines and faints,
It’s raised by their heat and light.
Still we are centered all in Thee,
In the same family we be,
By the same faith and spirit led.
Before Thy throne we daily meet
As joint-petitioners to Thee;
In spirit we each other greet,
And shall again each other see.”

English Hymnal 401

When we pay tribute to all the saints, which we are doing here today, we may need to be reminded that they have a variety of sizes, shapes, and personalities. Some are famous and talented. Others are poor and uneducated... and seem to have little to offer. Some have paid a heavy price for being Christians, while others have seldom had their faith put on the line. Some have loudly proclaimed their love of God or faith in Him... while others are so self-effacing that they are reluctant to be identified as anything more than unworthy followers of Jesus Christ. They would be embarrassed to be called saints. But all are important to God.

Leo Tolstoy reminds us of how much the Christian ideal has changed. “It’s no longer the greatness of Pharaoh or of a Roman emperor, nor the wealth of Phoenicia, but humility, purity compassion, love.” He noted further that “the hero is no longer Dives, but Lazarus the beggar, not Mary Magdalen in the day of her beauty, but of her repentance; not those who acquire wealth, but those who have abandoned it; not those who dwell in palaces, but those who dwell in huts; not those who rule others, but those who acknowledge no authority but God’s”

I mentioned earlier that the saints of God on earth and those in heaven are part of a mystical union. The Spirit of God... the Holy Spirit... has joined His saints in heaven and on earth. This fellowship of love and prayer supports us throughout our earthly pilgrimage... and we are surrounded by those who have gone on before us. They are witnesses to God’s power and mercy.
There's a classic poem in English literature which speaks eloquently of this mystical union of the saints on earth and in heaven. The poem, We Are Seven, was written by William Wordsworth. He asks a little girl how many children are there in her family. She said seven and went on to identify them, including two who had died. When he challenged her figures, she insisted... for good reason... that we are seven. <Read Poem>

And they are seven. Five saints on earth... and two in heaven. There's no doubt in the mind of this eight-year-old girl that she and her four earthly siblings are eternally joined together... linked in some mysterious way...to her sister and her brother in heaven. They are in communion with each other. O that we could share such insight... such love... such faith.

We Are Seven
By William Wordsworth

——A simple Child,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:
She was eight years old, she said;
Her hair was thick with many a curl
That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,
And she was wildly clad:
Her eyes were fair, and very fair;
——Her beauty made me glad.

"Sisters and brothers, little Maid,
How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.

"And where are they? I pray you tell."
She answered, "Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

"Two of us in the church-yard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And, in the church-yard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother."

"You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be.”

Then did the little Maid reply,
“Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the church-yard lie,
Beneath the church-yard tree.”

“You run about, my little Maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid,
Then ye are only five.”

“Their graves are green, they may be seen,”
The little Maid replied,
“Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,
And they are side by side.

“My stockings there I often knit,
My kerchief there I hem;
And there upon the ground I sit,
And sing a song to them.

“And often after sun-set, Sir,
When it is light and fair,
I take my little porringer,
And eat my supper there.

“The first that died was sister Jane;
In bed she moaning lay,
Till God released her of her pain;
And then she went away.

“So in the church-yard she was laid;
And, when the grass was dry,
Together round her grave we played,
My brother John and I.

“And when the ground was white with snow,
And I could run and slide,
My brother John was forced to go,
And he lies by her side.”

“How many are you, then,” said I,
“If they two are in heaven?”
Quick was the little Maid’s reply,
“O Master! we are seven.”

“But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!”
’Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, “Nay, we are seven!”
Today we honor all the saints... the famous and the unsung... the rich and the poor... people of varied backgrounds and disposition. As our lesson from Ecclesiasticus reminds us... some of the saints received great honor and glory, but there are countless others who left no records. We don't even know their names. It's as though they never existed. But they are important, too... especially to God. Even so, our gospel lesson doesn't look back. It looks forward to Christ's promises of coming blessings... the beatitudes. They describe the qualities of Christian perfection and have analogies in the Old Testament and elsewhere in the New Testament.

This is how Matthew introduces the topic of the Beatitudes: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak and taught them."

First, let's remember that Jesus also went up the mountain when He was transfigured and when He gave us the Great Commission of "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law. The mountain setting gives us a hint of a lofty teaching. If Jesus went up on the mountain, what He was doing and what He was saying must be important.

It was not unusual for a Jewish rabbi to speak informally while he was standing or moving about. But when Jesus sat down He was doing his official teaching. Another indication that what He was saying was significant. Of course, the Sermon on the Mount, or the Beatitudes, sometimes called "the Blessed," is not one single sermon preached on one occasion. In reality it is a brief resume of all the sermons and teachings of Jesus. We could call it a summary of the faith. One famous scholar called the Sermon on the Mount "The Ordination Address to the Twelve." Others have referred to it as "The Compendium of Christ's Doctrine," "The Magna Charta of the Kingdom," and "The Manifesto of the King." Now let's take a look at what Jesus is saying.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Or in translating the idiom from the Aramaic we could say, "O the blessedness of the poor in spirit." This is not a condition Christian must wait for in the future world. It is something into which we have already entered. It will reach its fullness... its consummation... in the presence of God. Even so... it is a present reality. O the joy of being a Christian! O the joy of following Christ! O the happiness of knowing Him as Master, Savior, and Lord!
Who are the poor in spirit? God has a great love for the poor... and especially for those who have a poverty of spirit. A person realizes he or she has no resources to survive, to meet the challenges of life... and turns to God for His help and strength. That's the person who is blessed. What happens? He or she is detached from things... and attached to God. When we realize our utter helplessness and put our trust in God... that's when we can give God the perfect obedience that makes us a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. When are those who mourn blessed? When they accept their own sorrow and work to learn from it. It begins with facing sorrow rather than running from it. It also includes a voluntary sharing of our neighbor's pain and suffering. Luke's version says: Blessed are ye that weep now, for you shall laugh.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Who are the meek? Aristotle viewed the meek as the happy medium between too much and too little anger. This would suggest that such a person would always be angry at the right time... and never angry at the wrong time. Another possible translation would be blessed is the person who has every instinct, impulse, and passion under control. But is having self-control going far enough? It's a start, but only by recognizing our own weaknesses and our need for God will we attain humility. And aren't we blessed when we humble ourselves enough to recognize our ignorance, our weaknesses, and our needs?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Who among us will claim righteousness? Not many. But there often is a small voice that seems to be telling us we should be doing this or that. Or that something in our life or in the world around us isn't right. We may not be able to straighten out things... but we need to try... and something needs to be said about our intentions. Many hungers and thirsts are selfish... or of passing pleasure. But those who hunger and thirst after Christ find fulfillment... and joy for evermore.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Being merciful is not feeling sorry for someone. It has been defined as the ability to get inside another's skin until we can see things with his eyes, think with his mind, and feel things with his feelings. It is not an emotional wave of pity. It is a deliberate act of the mind and the will. In order to be truly helpful to someone in need we must experience things together with that person. We must go through what he or she is going through.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. What is purity of heart? In the Bible heart is usually a reference to the entire personality. It involves mind, will, and the emotions. Rightness of mind and singleness of motive are two meanings of purity of heart. Other definitions are "those who are right with God" and those who with singleness of mind try to do God's will. Not only do the pure in heart see God in the world around them and in the lives of His people... but they will see Him face to face in the age to come. What a great day that will be!

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Peace and peacemaking are very important concepts in the life and teachings of Jesus. Angels who proclaimed His birth sang of "peace on earth." "Love your enemies," said Jesus... "Do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you." (v.44). Jesus was surrounded by less than peaceful situations. Jews had contempt for the Samaritans, and the Samaritans didn't care for them. Alienation and separation from God were commonplace situations. In Hebrew... peace (Shalom) means much more than the absence of trouble. It means everything that makes for mankind’s highest good. In the Bible, peace means enjoyment of all good as well as freedom from all trouble.

At first, most Christian scholars took the beatitude about peacemakers in a purely spiritual sense. They would have said, "Blessed is the person who makes peace in his own heart and in his own soul." Inner peace is good... but Jesus emphasized right relationships between man and man. Those who work for peace often are looked upon as cowardly... but anyone who tries to heal differences is doing something worthwhile. It is a Godly work... and more is needed. When we try to bring about peace... God acknowledges us as His children. There’s plenty of opportunity to practice peacemaking in our everyday lives. And God will bless our efforts.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Have you been persecuted this week? Have you been persecuted for righteousness’ sake? Have you been persecuted because you stood up for someone who was being mistreated? Have you been ostracized for doing an honest day’s work? It’s not likely that we will be called on to die for Christ... but that’s certainly a possibility some Christians face elsewhere in the world. And, over the centuries, thousands have died for Him. But all of us... every Christian here and anywhere else on earth... are called on to live for Him. And we don't have to go to a foreign land to do that. We can do that right here... or at home... or at work... or at play. If we’re dealing with others at work or at play... we might need some peacekeepers.
As you probably know, Emmanuel Church did not have an All Saints’ Day celebration last Monday. We are having it today. The All Saints’ Day feast, which is observed throughout the Western world, celebrates all the Christian saints… known and unknown. References to such a feast go back to the 300’s. Then it was observed on a definite day… the first Sunday after Pentecost. That’s still the date the Orthodox churches celebrate All Saints’ Day. This feast was firmly established in the West on May 13 in 609 or 610. There’s some confusion about the year. But that was the day the Pantheon in Rome was consecrated to Christian usage. The observance of All Saints’ Day on Nov. 1 dates to the time of Pope Gregory III in the 700’s. He dedicated a chapel in the Basilica of St. Peter on a Nov. 1st to “All the Saints.” Pope Gregory IV ordered its universal observance on Nov. 1. So… members of the church in the West have celebrated All Saints’ Day on Nov. 1 for more than 500 years.

Who are the saints whom we honor? Saints is a word used to describe God’s people in the Old Testament as well as the New. It is found in many passages of Scripture. “Holy ones” and “saints” seem to be used interchangeably.

As a covenant people, Israel in the Old Testament is said to be a holy nation, being consecrated as the peculiar possession of God, who is uniquely holy and the source of holiness. The word “saints” was translated as holy or set apart for God’s use. A key reference in this relationship to God is summed up in the “Code of Holiness”: “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2).

Saints or holy ones are referred to in several of the psalms as well as in Zechariah, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah. In Daniel the faithful or the faithful ones to whom the kingdom will be given could be identified as the saints or holy ones. The faithful of pre-Christian times are called saints in Matthew (27:52). Saints generally describes the Christian community as those who have inherited the covenant privileges as the holy people of a holy God (I Peter 1:15-16; 2:9). Paul uses the term saints in many of his letters. Christians are said to be saints by virtue of being in Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:1), with Christ Himself pre-eminently the “Holy One of God.” Paul also writes of those “called to be saints,” and they include Gentiles. So saints becomes a common term for members of the Church, and Paul’s letters are addressed to the various local communities of faith under this title. (Romans 1:7; I Cor. 1:2; II Cor. 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; and Colossians 1:2).
I am pleased to greet you, the saints of Emmanuel Church, Keyser, in the name of our risen Lord Jesus Christ. May all of us enjoy the peace of God, which passes human understanding. It has long been the practice in the Christian Church to honor… to venerate… the saints… invoking the names of many of them. All well and good. But there have been some problems. Devotion to the saints spread rapidly from the Fourth Century. Some later theologians claimed it bordered on idolatry and detracted from the worship of God.

What is the communion of the saints? Our Prayer Book teaches us that it is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise. Why do we pray for the dead? Because we still hold them in our love and because we still trust that in God’s presence those who have chosen to serve Him will grow in His love, until they see Him as He is.

Today’s lesson from Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach, pays tribute to a large number of Israel’s heroes. The writer notes that their bodies are buried in peace, but their names will live forever. Further, he says, nations will recount their wisdom, and God’s people… we could call them the saints… will sing their praises.

And our lesson from the Revelation of John speaks of a vast throng, which no one could count, from every nation, of all tribes, peoples and languages, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb… the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ Himself. They were robed in white… they pass through the great ordeal. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Yes… they are saints… a very special kind of saint. They have died for their faith. They are martyrs.

And, John tells us, they will never again feel hunger or thirst. That the sun shall not beat on them, nor any scorching heat. Why? Because the Lamb will be their shepherd and will guide them to the springs of the water of life. And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes.

John’s reference is not likely to be applicable to us. But let us hope and pray that we are among those who are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses as envisioned by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. And let us look to Jesus the Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, as the model of our life on our earthly pilgrimage… that He may encourage us here and now and greet us when we arrive at our heavenly destination. Amen.
Proper 26, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Joshua 3: 7 - 17

PSALM 107

NEW TESTAMENT: 1 Thessalonians 2: 9 - 13

GOSPEL: Matthew 23: 1 - 12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."
This is a confusing time of the year—from a variety of standpoints. In the first place, it’s sometimes difficult to tell what season we’re in. It may seem to be summer... or fall... or Indian summer... or winter... depending on what kind of weather we’re having. Then comes the matter of what the calendar says. Today is Sunday, October 31. Our church calendar tells us it is the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost. It also says today is the Eve of All Saints. If that is true—and it is—tomorrow (Monday) is All Saints’ Day. And the next day—Tuesday—is All Souls’ Day. What about Halloween? Let’s forget it. It has nothing to do with the Church. Besides, it’s already past. And things are already confusing enough.

Now let’s turn our attention to today’s gospel lesson from Matthew. Jesus tells us that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. The acts that Jesus was denouncing earlier cannot be limited to the scribes and Pharisees. And, of course, all of these church leaders weren’t egotistical and self-centered. We see similar ostentation among those around us today. We see Christians who are extremely busy appearing to be pious... or others being seen in a favorable light or at the “right” place so as to call attention to themselves. Such actions certainly don’t advance the bond of brotherhood that Jesus was espousing... or the spirit of servanthood that He himself lived to the fullest and called on others to emulate.

A high-ranking man from India was once discussing brotherhood with an English doctor in Liverpool. Said he: “You say that you are all one in Christ, all brethren, and equal in Him... go to the Cathedral at Calcutta; there you will see a grand chair of crimson velvet and gold—that is for the Governor-General... Then there are other chairs of crimson and gold—they are for the members of Council; and then there are seats lined with crimson—they are for the merchants.... Then there are bare benches for the common people and the poor.... If the poor man goes and sits in the chair of the Governor-General, they will break his head! Yet you are all one in Christ.”

Not much evidence of brotherhood in this situation; is there? Or servanthood, either.

Turning to Jesus’ comments on servanthood, we need to realize that He took this role seriously... as a way of life, not just as a figure of speech. Luke tells us, in a related passage (22:24-27), that a dispute arose among Jesus’ disciples as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.
And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves."

To me, this passage from Luke is one that should help us to get things in the proper perspective. Mankind has long been interested in grand titles for people who rank high in the pecking order—man's pecking order, not God's: His Majesty or Her Majesty, Your Grace, Doctor, Reverend, Professor, etc. Are people on whom these titles are conferred the greatest? Not really. They put their shoes on one at a time, just like you and I do. But it's true that people in certain situations, people of privilege, do receive special consideration. In fact, they are sometimes held in awe by other human beings.

But, Jesus reminds us, preferment in God's order comes on other terms. The greatest, says Jesus, is the person who willingly takes on the most menial of tasks. Jesus Himself came among us as one who serves. So the key word of all true greatness is devotion... not privilege. This point of view was offensive to the Jews. This is not the type of Messiah they had been waiting for through the centuries.

Human judgments are not easily reversed. But Jesus' attitude has had a profound influence on religious, political, and military leaders during the last 20 centuries. We're more critical of... and make greater demands on... our leaders these days. Not in every case, of course, but few will now blindly follow someone who won't make sacrifices. No longer are those being led willing to carry the entire burden. The leader has to assume some of it, too, just like Jesus said: "Let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves."

Napoleon Bonaparte is reported to have made a statement that bore out Jesus' words: "Alexander and I both founded our empires on force. Jesus alone founded His on love. And to this day, countless thousands would die for him." Since then, numbers have increased, not decreased. Time has added to them... not diminished them.

Jesus asks, "Who is the greater, one who sits at the table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at the table?" "But I am among you," He says, "as one who serves."

He also calls on us to go and do likewise. Amen.
One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'--this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.
In our Rite I Service of Holy Eucharist... which we don’t follow very often at St. Paul’s Church, the celebrant says the following, found on Page 324:

Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith: Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. This is sometimes called the Summary of the Law. Does it sound familiar? I certainly hope so. Not only is it a very important part of the Rite I service of Holy Eucharist... but it’s also a paraphrase of Jesus’ conclusions in this morning’s gospel lesson from Mark (12:28-34).

In today’s lesson, one of the scribes came to Jesus with a question that was often discussed by the rabbis and their students: Which commandment is the first of all or the greatest of all? At times the law was expanded into countless rules and regulations. In other instances, the challenge was to reduce the law to the fewest words possible... one sentence, one statement that would reflect its entire message.

The famous rabbi Hillel was once asked to instruct a proselyte in the whole law while standing on one leg. His answer: “What thou hatest for thyself, do not do to thy neighbor. This is the whole law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn.” Previously Akiba had said: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself—this is the greatest general principle in the law.” And another great teacher, Simon the Righteous, said: “On three things stand the world—on the law, on the worship, and on the works of love.”

So you can see that reducing the law to a few words is no simple matter. It’s even more difficult when you realize that another great teacher, Sammlai, had taught that Moses received 613 precepts on Mount Sinai, 365 according to the days of the sun year, and 248 according to the generations of men. So... the 10 commandments have greater ramifications than we might have realized.

King David is credited with reducing the 613 precepts to 11, in Psalm 15 (in its entirety). Isaiah reduced the 11 to 6 ... (Isaiah 33:15). Then Micah reduced the 6 to 3 (6-8). Another effort by Isaiah lowered the 3 down to 2 (56:1). His 2 precepts were:

1—Keep justice.
2—Do righteousness.
Then Habakkuk (Habakkuk 2:4) refined them even further in this one-sentence gem: The righteous shall live by faith.

Today’s lesson from Mark tells us that one of the scribes commended Jesus for His answer to the question: which commandment is the first of all? Jesus’ answer: The first is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

The first commandment, as quoted by Jesus, is the creed of Judaism. The sentence with which the services of the synagogue always began and still does. It is called the Shema... and the full Shema is found both in Deuteronomy (6:4-9, 11:13-21) and in Numbers (15:37-41). It declares that God is the only God. As has been said, when Jesus quoted this sentence, every devout Jew would agree with Him.

Jesus’ statement, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, was taken from the Book of Leviticus (19:18). In its original context, it has to do with a person’s fellow Jew. It would not include Gentiles... because they wouldn’t count as anything. It was quite all right to hate Gentiles. But Jesus took out the qualifying words. He didn’t discriminate against the Gentiles. He took an old law and gave it new meaning... He broadened its application. He tells us that we are to love our neighbor... whoever he or she is... as ourself. This is quite different than those like us as ourselves; isn’t it?

So Jesus had done what no rabbi had ever done before. He put the first two commandments together and made them one. He summarized the Law. He told us in this lesson from Mark, and showed throughout His life, what religion was to Him... and what it should be to us:

Loving God... and loving men.

Loving God... and loving others.

Loving God... and loving mankind.

How do we show... how do we prove... that we love God? By demonstrating that we love men... by loving mankind... by loving others.
The love that God desires is a love of action... or could it be called love in action? We are to love with all of our being or personality... all our moral nature... all our emotions... all our intellect... all our energy. That’s what God calls on us to give or do. When we give a fraction... we become a fraction of what He might be to us. And then... we are to love our neighbor... others... as ourselves. We are not to love others with a mushy or sentimental affection... but rather we are to look out for their interests... their needs... and provide others with the services they require.

The perfect example for loving our neighbor as ourselves is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This tells us quickly that there should be no limits to our love of others. Not only are we to supply the help a neighbor needs... but we should also anticipate his or her future needs. Such a love knows no bounds... has no barriers... and it’s costly. When we’ve learned this... and practiced it... we’re not far from the kingdom of God.

As Jesus said: Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all they heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.
Proper 27, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Haggai 1: 15b - 2:9

PSALM 17

1Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

2From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

3If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.

4As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent.

5My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

6I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words.

7Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

8Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,

9from the wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me.

10They close their hearts to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly.

11They track me down; now they surround me; they set their eyes to cast me to the ground.

12They are like a lion eager to tear, like a young lion lurking in ambush.

13Rise up, O Lord, confront them, overthrow them! By your sword deliver my life from the wicked,

14from mortals—by your hand, O Lord—from mortals whose portion in life is in this world. May their bellies be filled with what you have stored up for them; may their children have more than enough; may they leave something over to their little ones.

15As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.
As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?

But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."
The epistle appointed for today is taken from the Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. How would such a passage from this letter be important to us? How would you identify the city of Thessalonica? What sort of people would we have found there? Perhaps some background information would be in order. When Paul and his companions, Timothy and Silvanus (Silas) went to Thessalonica, it was one of the most important cities of the eastern Mediterranean area. The city was built on a hill overlooking both a gulf and a fertile plain. The city we’re talking about had the best harbor in Macedonia. It was there that the Romans established a major naval station and built docks. Also... their overland military highway went from Rome to Thessalonica and thence to the countries at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. So Thessalonica (now known as the city of Salonika in Greece) was quite important as a port, as a naval base, and as a vital link in the Roman highway transportation system. Thessalonica was also the home of two of the recognized mystery religions found in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. I refer to the religion of Dionysus, the dying and rising god, and of Orpheus. Orpheus was the hero of a related and somewhat reformed cult that had its origin in Dionysus. Both of these groups were fertility cults... and their members expressed themselves in sexual indulgences, wild orgies, and extravagant ecstasies. Now add to this the fact that emperor worship was actively practiced throughout Macedonia. Beroia was the center of emperor worship and the home of such worship in the province.

The Book of Acts tells us that both Thessalonica and Beroia had Jewish synagogues and that associated with these houses of worship was a large number of “devout” Greeks. So it’s remarkable... amazing... miraculous... that Paul and his associates were able to establish a missionary foothold in such an important city as Thessalonica and other key sites so quickly. We’re not talking about isolated Podunks... These places were on the fast track. Christianity was moving into the leading cities only a generation after its birth... and it was having a great impact on these bastions of pagan worship. Talk about challenges! Two different fertility cults, those who worshiped the Roman emperors... plus the Jewish congregations at Thessalonica and Beroia, the latter of which wasn’t far away. All were vying for the hearts and the souls of those who turned their attention to religion. Adding to the tensions of the situation... many of the members of the Jewish communities were openly hostile to Paul and his associates. So... you see... conflict was inevitable. And, of course, the story doesn’t end here. Really it’s at this time that it begins to heat up.
The apostle Paul was ideally equipped to deal with the fertility cult pagans, those who worshiped the emperor, the practitioners of Judaism, and those pushing various Greek philosophies. In fact, it would be difficult to find someone so well-versed in the Christian faith… as well as the various other competing religions… at a time when Christianity was just starting to spread from its modest beginnings… and when it has do much opposition from a myriad of sources.

Unfortunately Paul wasn’t at Thessalonica to guide this fledgling flock… and it was having problems from forces within, as without. It isn’t that Paul couldn’t help them. His influences was great… and, as you know, he could… and did… write letters. Although the Thessalonians to whom he wrote had only recently become Christians, Paul and his associates had taught them well… either by word of mouth or by letter.

Earlier Paul had to deal with the Thessalonians on the matter of the Second Coming of Jesus. Many of them had come to believe that because the return of Jesus was imminent… that they should quit work and sit around and wait for that great day. Paul straightened them out on that matter. They got the word loud and clear: Those who don’t work don’t eat. He also reminded them that they were people of the day… not people of darkness… and that they should stay awake and be sober. “Since we belong to the day,” he wrote, “let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” This is good advice in any situation… and especially when thing aren’t going well.

In another instance, Paul lauded the Thessalonian Christians for the love and concern which they has shown for each other. He told them that they were known throughout Macedonia for the way they treated each other… that they were a shining example of the love of God and their fellow Christians. Wouldn’t it be great if the love and concern which the Christians of <insert church name here> show for each other would be the talk of the diocese! Or even beyond the diocese!

But we need to face the fact that all wasn’t well with the Christian community in Thessalonica. On their missionary journey, Paul and his associates had suffered persecution and had also been treated shamefully, and wrongly accused by members of the congregation of speaking out of a background of error and uncleanness. Not
unexpectedly they felt a need to repudiate these charges as a possible motive among the Thessalonians. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he and his associates had toiled with their own hands... not because they didn’t have the right to expect support in their work of proclaiming the gospel... but because they would give an example of what was the right way of life for others. In other words, Paul presents his life to be an example of Christian conduct. And that is the standard to which he would call others. Christian morality set high standards to follow. Thus a Christian was easily identified... and singled out... because of moral demands were made on the pagans. Nor should we be surprised that some who had only recently become Christians were tempted to return to their old evil ways.

Another trouble area involving the Thessalonian Christians is the presence of busybodies, which, all of us know, can wreak havoc in any congregation where they are found. So... Thessalonica certainly doesn’t have exactly the same problems that we might find in Bridgeport or Buckhannon, or Grafton, or Elkins, but we might find some of the same ones. And, I trust, we would find some of the same good things happening in all of these congregations.

So... moving into today’s epistle... Paul is telling the Thessalonians: Lift up your hearts. They had been living in difficult circumstances and were still suffering from the wounds of their persecutors. The busybodies and loafers had done a job on them... but they are never to forget two things they have going for them: The greatness of God and the love of God. The greatness of God and the love of God. Nor should we forget them either; the greatness of God and the love of God.

If God is magnificent... and He is... He is to be reverenced and He is to be worshiped. Or, as the psalmist tells us, “O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” (Ps. 95:6-7).

Paul goes even further: The glory of our Lord Jesus Christ is God’s objective for us. Had you ever reflected on this? The glory of our Lord Jesus Christ is God’s objective for us. You’ve known people who were Christ-like. Has anyone said of you: He is like Christ? Or I see Christ in her? And Christ is the light of the world.
When Jesus says He is the light of the world, He is not being boastful. No. He is speaking the truth. Two thousand years have come and gone... and His claim has not been rejected. He has not erred... He has not failed. He was... and still is... the Savior of mankind, the declarer of a kingdom, the seer of the centuries, the guide of the human soul, the final hope of a sinful world. And a great deal more.

His glory has been shown in the flesh, supported and reinforced by the spirit, seen of the angels, preached among the various nations, believed in throughout the world, and received up into glory. And, the apostle Paul assures us, Christ’s glory is to be ours! To this He called you through our gospel, Paul tells the Thessalonians, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Stand firm,” says Paul, “and hold to the traditions which we taught you.”

Lift up your hearts! God has chosen us!
Today’s scriptural readings offer us a number of lessons of life. First, let us look at suffering.

Throughout the ages, there has been suffering in the world. If it appears to be deserved… coming about through wrong actions or bad choices… it doesn’t bother us. We seem to understand. But what about the sufferings of the innocent? We can’t explain them by logic. And the fact that they occur causes us to question… even doubt… the justice of God.

Our psalm today… No. 17… speaks of the anxiety that suffering can cause. The psalmist calls on God, whom he trusts, to vindicate him… to deliver him from his enemies who are wicked and lacking in pity. In stating his case… and asserting his innocence… the psalmist says, “If you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.” (Vs. 3).

While the psalmist is caught up in this unfortunate situation, what is going on in the lives of the wicked? They’re enjoying worldly prosperity. They have acquired wealth… boasting numerous possessions that they have obtained by their greedy acts and by oppressing others. They also have been blessed by many children. It isn’t fair; is it?

The psalmist asks God to listen to his appeal… and to protect those who have held fast to the Law. And we shouldn’t be surprised that he asks God to strike down the wicked and reward those who serve the God of Israel.

Now let’s look at Job’s situation. Things that happened to him didn’t follow the belief found in much of the Hebrew Bible that we get what we deserve. Job challenges this belief. Here was a just man… and a man of strong faith. He prospered and, so it appears, he was rewarded for his righteousness. Then disaster strikes. Job loses first his possessions… then his family… and, finally, his health. He’s in a deplorable situation. He seems to have lost everything… even his God. What is there to live for? The end… mercifully… seems near. His friends urge Job to confess… to admit to God that he has sinned. But no, he won’t do that. Why? Because he has not sinned. He knows he is innocent. Later, Job’s friends call on him to curse God in order that his unbearable life can end. But he won’t do that. He still trusts God as his ultimate Vindicator… the Hebrew word for Redeemer.

So Job affirms his own justice with a wish that words of appeal may be inscribed for all time in a book. On that with an iron pen and lead they were graven into the rock forever. Or as we might say that they would be
cast in stone. Unlike most people... who would have caved in... given up the cause... Job holds fast to his conviction that his Redeemer lives and will ultimately pronounce him right... save him.

Who can forget these words that we older people who have been around more than a few years have heard at numerous funerals? This is Job speaking... and how like him these words: “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last He will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me.”

So... even as his friends have been unable to convince Job of his guilt, he was unable to convince them of his innocence. But even in the agony of the hour, Job gave expression to the great assurance that God was his Redeemer... and would, indeed, hear his petition... and grant it. God does appear and declare that Job is the Lord’s righteous servant. And Job repents that he had question Divine Justice.

Our gospel lesson today... from Luke 20... reflects a conflict regarding future life... life after death. Experience has led most of the Jewish people to abandon the belief that in this life we get what we deserve. Much of this experience they gained through the Apocrypha’s record of the Maccabees. God’s justice required that life’s unfairness should be corrected. But the conservative Sadducees held on to the older idea. They liked what they had... and it was considerable because most of the wealthy Jews were Sadducees. They continued to believe that they deserved their good fortune.

Jesus agreed with the view of the Pharisees. The Sadducees’ example of a Mosaic law concerning marriages of a widow to a series of brothers to keep family units from disappearing was absurd. Before she could have been married to all these men she would have been too old to bear children.

However, Jesus made some important points concerning the Resurrection. First, that those worthy to obtain resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. They cannot die anymore because they are children of God and children of the resurrection. Another point Jesus made is that Moses showed that the dead are raised. He calls attention to the passage about the burning bush... in which he (Moses) calls the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now, said Jesus, “He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living... for all live to Him.” Jesus is affirming that these famous patriarchs... and, of course,
other people of faith... are alive. And in the life to come, there will be a recognizable relationship between who we are now and who we shall be.

Jesus accepted... and taught... that the bodily resurrection is an indisputable fact (Matt. 22:29-32; Luke 14:14; John 5:28-29). His apostles taught it constantly (Acts 4:2; 17:18 and 24:15).

Believers should embrace the truth of a resurrection with hope and look forward to it with anticipation. (Dan. 12:13; Phil. 3:11; 2 Cor. 5:1). As disciples we are assured of Divine resources and Divine support.

Therefore, we are to wait patiently for Christ’s Second Advent... the blessed hope of which St. Paul speaks. Meanwhile, let us reflect God’s love to those around us. Amen.
For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."
Originally... in this parable all the attention was focused on the Scribes and the Pharisees. The useless man buried his talent in the ground so that he might give it back to his master exactly as it was. And that was the condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees. They wanted to keep the Law exactly as it was... or in their own words... they wanted to “build a fence around the Law.” They wanted the clock to stand still. No change. No development. To them anything new was terrible.

They were like the man with one talent in the parable... wanting to keep the Law exactly as it was. And that is the reason Jesus criticized them. Among other things, Jesus tells us in this parable that adventure is necessary in religion... that God has no interest in a closed mind.

Luke’s version of this parable... found in chapter 19... is somewhat different. In Luke, the nobleman gave ten of his servants one pound each rather than the various number of talents which Matthew writes about. And in Luke, those who added to the money they were given... because of their faithfulness in very little... were given authority over much... one over ten cities and one over five. But one kept his pound laid away in a napkin... and he was condemned. The nobleman said: Take the pound from him and give it to him how has the ten pounds.” So the stories are somewhat different... but make a similar point. And the results are the same.

Now let’s look deeper into this matter of talents. Perhaps we should refer to them as capabilities. Certainly we all have something worthwhile to offer our employers... our communities. We also have skills, gives and talents... there’s that word again... to offer to God in our congregations and in other ways.

We often hear that people have received talents of singing or playing musical instruments, or business know-how, or leadership, or writing, or acting. Would it surprise you that such a use of the word came from this parable? Originally talent was a measure of weight... then it became a fixed amount of silver or gold. Now we look upon a talent as a capability or a special ability. Some have greater capability than others... but all of us have at least one skill, or gift, or talent or special ability. However, it’s not the talents or capabilities that we have that matter to God. No! His concern is what we do with them... how we use what we have.

God doesn’t demand that someone of limited ability do great things. But He does expect that you and I... and all others... use whatever abilities we have to the fullest. In other words... everyone, whether he or she has
one or many talents, should work hard... make a good effort... to put to good use whatever gifts, skills, talents, or
capabilities that each one possesses.

The Avis Company, which is known for being No. 2 in the car rental business, prides itself on trying harder. All Christians should make a similar effort. All of us will be judged on what we do with the capabilities we have.

It’s refreshing to know that sometimes people of limited ability achieve great success. They become over-achievers. How does this happen? I’m convinced that when they do their very best... and then call on God for help... that He hears them. And further... that He adds His help... provides whatever else is needed... to achieve their goal. So what is happening here? Is someone working at his highest level and reaching his potential? Or do we have divine intervention? Don’t you agree that we might well have some of both? Is luck involved? Probably not. I’m reminded of the man who was asked about his success in life. His answer, “the harder I work the luckier I get.”

Is there any doubt in your mind that God can provide what is needed in order that His will for you will be accomplished?

What about the multi-talented men or women? Our parable tells us that God has great plans for them. He wants them to take on greater responsibilities. But, first of all, He wants them to be faithful in a little... then move on to greater things. Or, as the parable tells us, “you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much.” But nothing good is going to happen to that person who fails to use what little talent he or she has. Like a limb that isn’t used, it becomes limp... useless. It’s of no benefit to its owner... or anyone else.

There seems to be a prevailing attitude these days to do what our secular job calls on us to do... perhaps with a bit of complaining and grumbling... but at least to do it. Some will even surpass what is considered necessary... and will be rewarded accordingly. But this same person seems to develop an entirely different attitude with respect to his or her congregational responsibilities. The multi-talented person suddenly becomes the one-talent person. Instead of doing what he or she is called on to do... sometimes requiring extra effort, or stretching, or growing, or innovation... this person seems to be willing to do only the very minimum. Fairly regular attendance at worship services and something for the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and perhaps an
occasional gift to help the needy. But the person who stops there is missing out on a great deal. He is she is not living up to his responsibilities... and further, such people are letting their congregation down... and they’re letting you... individual members of this congregation ...down. Over the years you’ve had people willing to serve as wardens, treasurer, and members of the vestry and altar guild. But now there are additional needs...greater opportunities...to serve God and this congregation...and the North Central Cluster.

I call on each of you to take a good hard look at yourself...and what you are doing to the spread of the kingdom of God. Are you being challenged? Is what you are doing for this congregation taxing your strength, courage, and ability? What are you doing to help the North Central Cluster? Are you doing as much as you are capable of doing? Are you doing as little as possible? Or do you fit somewhere in between? In case you need to be stretching... growing... accepting greater responsibilities... here are some opportunities, available now or in the future:

Cluster Council member  
Cluster Council officer  
Convention delegate  
Deputy to the national convention of the Episcopal Church  
Deanery president  
Canon 9 priest

Am I serious? I have never been more serious in my life. You may be too laid back to realize this, but there are people in this congregation capable of doing all these jobs... and others too. I call on all of you... each of you... to find out what your skills, gifts, and talents are. And then I challenge you to offer them to God. He wants you to develop them... and to use them to His glory.

Today’s parable tells us that there is a need for faithful service... the proper and continuous use of our skills, gifts, and talents... for the benefit of God and His people all the days of our lives. And the more we do to use our assets... the more other opportunities will become available to be of greater service... to be more fruitful. And the better use we make of our time... our talents... our resources... our abilities... the more we have to commend ourselves to God. After all... He is the one who judges us. And aren’t we seeking His “well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."
OLD TESTAMENT  Daniel 12: 1 - 3

"At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

PSALM (or CANTICLE in this case)  1 Samuel 2: 1 - 10

NEW TESTAMENT  Hebrews 10: 11 - 14 (15 - 18) 19 - 25

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since then has been waiting until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." He also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."
Today's epistle lesson, which is taken from Hebrews, starts off with a strong statement: It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. These words should get our attention this morning.

Are we in agreement? What can we hide from the living God? Nothing. All hidden things are brought to light. God sees through us much more quickly than we would like to admit. And even some who aren't reconciled to Him... who don't trust Him as we do... might, when in a pinch or under pressure, call on Him... thereby recognizing His power and His importance. This shouldn't be surprising to us. To whom could they turn? Sounds as if He might be their only hope. We already realize that He is our only hope. And under similar conditions, He is the only one to whom we can appeal. In Him is all our hope.

That's the good news for us. In God is our hope. But did you notice that our epistle lesson today also looks upon God as our dread? Although we can't minimize the various kind and gracious promises of God as revealed in Scripture... He could also loo on the horizon as someone to fear...one from whom we might wish to flee.

The passage in today's epistle lesson is directed against the sin of apostasy. Scripture is meant to draw people to God in confidence... not to repel them in dread. And this passage must be read in the context of God's grace.

Under Mosaic Law, the apostate died without mercy at human hands. However, it would be difficult to see how any sinner died eternally without the compassion and mercy of the one who said: "As I love," saith the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." That's a quotation from Ezekiel (33:11).

As Christians... we pin our hopes on Jesus because of His sacrificial death and Resurrection. To us, it's a wonderful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. As previously noted... we don't want to turn to anyone else. Under the Law of Moses, and apostate... someone who renounced his faith... died without mercy and upon the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more punishment would someone deserve if he or she spurned the Son of God? The covenant of Christ is far better than the ceremonial Law of Moses. The higher the privilege the more severe the penalty. That's the way it is in Scripture. That's the way it is in life.
What constitutes apostasy? Earlier the writer of Hebrews gives three qualifications:

1—Spurning the Son of God.
2—Profaning the blood of the covenant by which He was sanctified.
3—Outraging the Spirit of grace.

The word “spurned” translated means literally “to trample underfoot” and more generally “to treat with rudeness and insult.” The word profaned means to “consider common.” Evil must find a way to disparage Jesus Christ, reduce Him, get Him out of the way. If we have received full knowledge of the truth, there’s only one way to escape that truth: By belittling the Savior.

The writer of Hebrews follows a warning against those who fall into apostasy by offering encouragement and assurance based on the readers’ past history. The Christian views himself as a sinner deeply in need of grace... and he sees his fellow Christians in a new light because he knows what the grace of God can do. Or, as the prophet Isaiah prophesied: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.” (Isaiah 9:2).

The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us Christians that we face two alternatives: Destruction or keeping our souls. Or we could say losing life or finding it (Mark 8:35). A passage immediately following the words of today’s epistle lesson spurs us on with a note of confidence: “Assurance that those to whom the author writes join him in holding onto their faith and keeping their souls.”

The point is that the righteous one should live by faith. To which we could add... that he who persists to the end shall be saved. If we persist to the end... if we keep our faith... we will receive what is promised. And, our author tells us, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. It is the blessed hope of all faithful Christians. To which we might add: “It’s a wonderful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” But if we fall back...if we don’t persist to the end...it’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And so we have a great need of endurance in order that we may do the will of God and receive what is promised. He is the only one to whom we can appeal. Would we want things to be otherwise?
Our lesson today from Mark has an apocalyptic spin on it. And the Book of Daniel, from which our Old Testament lesson is taken, is one of the most important sources of apocalyptic writing. The other is the Revelation to John. So perhaps we should take a look at what apocalyptic thinking and writing are all about.

Apocalyptic religious thought apparently originated in Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion. It was taken over by Judaism during the exiles and in later years. Then it moved into Christian thought and practice. It is firmly rooted in Christianity even today.

Apocalyptic thought is centered in the belief in two opposite powers—God and Satan (or his equivalent)—and two distinct ages. One is the present evil age under Satan, who oppresses the righteous but whose power God will soon act to overthrow. The other age is a future, perfect, and eternal age under God’s own rule, when the righteous will be blessed forever.

Literary works embodying these beliefs are called Apocalypses. As previously mentioned, the best known are the Book of Daniel and the Revelation to John... but parts of several other books in the Bible are also apocalyptical. Included are sections of the Books of Joel, Amos, Zechariah, and Isaiah.

First, let’s take a look at the Book of Daniel. It is generally believed to have been written as a response to the efforts of Syrian Emperor Antiochus IV to destroy the Jewish religion in the late Second Century B.C. Antiochus has a statue of the pagan god Zeus set up in the Temple in Jerusalem, which defiles the Temple for the worship of Yahweh.

The Jews were badly disorganized at that time. Some were willing to go along with the new culture that was forced upon them. Those who objected to what had happened seemed to be powerless to resist. So Daniel looked for divine power to right this great wrong to the Jewish people and their religion.

Daniel couldn’t directly write against Antiochus. That would probably have led to mass killings. What he did was relate his tremendous imagery to the oppression of Nebuchadnezzar and his immediate successors. Anything later than the first return from the exile had to be represented as prophetic vision. The final deliverance was to be secured by the archangel Michael and the heavenly armies. In today’s lesson, Michael takes his place beside God’s people in a time of trouble and brings about the rescue of all who are inscribed on God’s list of the righteous. The martyrs of this persecution will be raised from death. In fact, everybody will be raised, some to an
eternal life of glory and some to everlasting shame. By this time the concepts of heaven and earth had been established firmly among most Jews. The Book of Daniel closes with a warning to keep the secret, and a vision of angelic beings who proclaims when deliverance is to begin.

There was apocalyptical expectation in Jesus' teachings... and today’s lesson from Mark is an example. However, we don’t really know how much Jesus emphasized apocalyptic thinking in His teachings. Mark and the other evangelists combined a number of these sayings that may have been made at various times. They may have given more emphasis to them than Jesus did.

All of today’s lessons involve the Apocalypse or apocalyptic writing, and most of us are not very familiar with these topics. The 13th chapter of Mark, from which today’s gospel lesson is taken, has been called “the Little Apocalypse.” It begins with the prophecies of Jesus that foretell the doom of the Temple, built by Herod the Great and one of the wonders of the world. Not only is the Temple to be destroyed but also the entire city of Jerusalem.

Then Jesus tells of a series of false Messiahs... wars and rumors of war, earthquakes, and famine. But these will only be the beginning of the sufferings, Jesus says.

Then come the words of Jesus to His disciples to “take heed to yourselves for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors for my sake to bear testimony before them.” And further, “And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious of what you are to say; but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

Don’t miss out on the good news: He who endures to the end will be saved. He who endures to the end will be saved. It’s much better to endure than only to survive. Survival as a human being is a matter of existence. Such a person keeps on breathing, eating, and sleeping... but not much else. But if we survive, we can hold on, hold out. We can persist. And, if so, we have kept the faith!
Jesus then speaks of the abomination of desolation or the desolating sacrilege... that drives God from the Temple. This is a reference to a statue or a person who came to be known in early Christian thought as “Antichrist” or “Man of Sin,” the opponent of God in the struggle with God for control of the universe.

But take heed, says Jesus. He assures His disciples and, through them the Church, that wonderful things are going to happen. This is the blessed hope of all faithful believers. Jesus has foreseen it... and He will guide His followers through the struggle. And the struggle has already begun by the time the Scriptures were coming into being.

The Messianic hope of the early church is apparent... a hope that is expressed in vivid imagery. The exalted Jesus is to return to glory. It’s an event no one can miss or escape... but no one except God the Father knows when this great day will be.

Until then we are to watch and wait... with great expectations. Jesus’ vision is not received strictly as a warning. If heeded, it’s a gift, too. The gift: A new world... which will arrive with great fanfare. It will be a difficult time... but for believers it will be a period of birth and delivery. Until then we must be alert: Watch... and wait. Watch and wait.

And he who endures to the end will be saved.
Proper 28, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Malachi 4: 1 - 2a

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

PSALM: Isaiah 12: 1 - 6
NEW TESTAMENT: 2 Thessalonians 3: 6 - 13

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven."

"But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."
November 15, 1998 Proper 28 Bridgeport and Grafton

This is the Lord’s Day... the first day of the week... and here we are in the Lord’s house... worshiping Him... as we should be. Today’s lessons make use of the same words but in a different context. They speak of the Day of the Lord... the Day of the Lord, rather than the Lord’s Day.

First, let’s take a look at the life and times of the prophet Malachi. Bad things were happening... or perhaps I should say bad things were continuing to happen. This was a period of apostasy. Many of Judah’s rulers had stayed from God. And countless good people who were part of the same community suffered innocently as a result. Only a minority of the people had tried to keep God’s commandments. And by now they were discouraged. Why serve God? they wondered. What good has it done us to obey the Torah? The wicked, they noted, prospered. But God’s servants did not. In fact the wicked were able to make deals with their conquerors... and not only did they survive but they were richly rewarded.

Malachi’s word from the Lord spoke to their situation, bringing them a message of hope. It assured them that the Lord was preparing for a day of redemption. God had not forgotten the people who revered His name. For them... a day of victory and healing was coming. "For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like the calves from the stall.” (4:2).

God was preparing the nation of Judah for that great future day by sending one who could be recognized as God’s prophet, a renewed Elijah. (You’ll recall that Elijah had no tomb but rather had been carried into heaven by a whirlwind. It was believed that God could send him back to earth again.)

So Malachi promised that a renewed Elijah would be sent to prepare for the fearful Day of the Lord. He would do this by reconciling divided families—parents with children and children with parents. The Lord would be doing this so the entire nation wouldn’t be deserving of destruction.

Elijah is looked upon as the forerunner, heralding the coming of the Day of the Lord. This prophecy of the coming of Elijah envisions two fulfilments, one at the First Advent of Christ, and the other at the Day of the Lord. Christ identified John the Baptist’s coming as a preliminary fulfilment of this prophecy. (Matt. 11:14; Luke 1:17, 9:8, 19; John 1:21). The final fulfilment seems to be portrayed in Revelation. Today’s gospel lesson from Luke presents a Day of the Lord much more drastic in judgment than that of Malachi.
Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple quickly got the people's attention. Begun some forty years earlier, it was still not completed. But it was an architectural gem that showed off tremendous wealth and a variety of building materials. Herod used 10,000 unskilled laborers and 1,000 priest-masons who worked on the sacred part of the building. The Temple contained huge blocks of green and white marble 17 ½ feet long, 7 ½ feet high, and 9 feet wide. The eastern front and part of the side walls were covered with gold plate, flashing in the sun. The rest of the building was gleaming white, and one seeing it from a distance might think it was a mountain of snow. Inside were great rich ornaments and statues and other art objects. And, of course there were the sacred vessels seen only by the high priest on special occasions.

It seems that everyone in Jerusalem had some commercial connection with the Temple, with high priests, priests, and Levites and their aides numbering more than 20,000.

Hordes of pilgrims created a huge tourist industry that offered lodging and food to visitors. There were also currency changers, or Temple bankers, who made their living there. And almost everybody, rich and poor alike, deposited money in the treasury.

No wonder that to most people the Temple complex was a symbol of permanence for the nation. Forty years after Jesus predicted its destruction, in 70 A.D., the Roman armies destroyed it. The disciples were persecuted and only John escaped a martyr's death. No one knows how many wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilences, and other disasters the world has had since then. But the end is not yet.

We need to believe in the Second Coming of Jesus... and we need to live in expectation. The disciples lived daily in the hope of Jesus' return... but did not live to see it. But they followed Him... through trying days of persecution and martyrdom. They set a great example for us. Are we likely to witness the Second Coming of Jesus? Only God the Father knows.

Remember when the Jews asked Jesus what signs He had to show for cleansing the Temple? His answer: "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." This, of course, was a reference to His Resurrection... and later His ministry, which must replace the Temple. Jesus also warned that the destruction of the Temple, which came forty years later, would initiate an act of Divine judgment. The judgment would be seen in the social upheavals of war and famine and in countless natural disasters. Those who claimed the name of Jesus were to
face universal hatred and betrayal, even by their own families. But the Lord Himself promised to guide His followers in the type of witness they were to bear. And His protection would keep them free from harm. Jesus speaks also of what may be viewed as our blessed hope. “By your endurance,” said Jesus, “you will gain your souls.”

Throughout the centuries, people have sensed that the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming of Jesus, or the Parousia—the three terms are used interchangeably—was imminent. This must be the end. This is it. But they have all been wrong. Over and over throughout His ministry Jesus made the point: “You cannot know the hour... you must always be on the watch... do not be caught unprepared when the Master returns.”

So... let us continue to watch... and wait. It will also help us if we can develop some patience. For many of us, being patient is not being our self. But patience could be a reliable asset as we prepare ourselves... and then watch... and wait.
Proper 29, Christ the King, Year A

OLD TESTAMENT: Ezekiel 34: 11 - 16, 20 - 24

PSALM 100

NEW TESTAMENT: Ephesians 1: 15 - 23

GOSPEL: Matthew 25: 31 - 46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."
Jesus' teaching in today's gospel lesson from Matthew is an eloquent expression of the ethical spirit of
the Old Testament. Jesus and the finest Jewish teachers were in full agreement. It has been said that this parable
expressed the heart of religion as they understood it. Times have not changed. What it says to Christians today
should also be at the heart of our religion.

Today's parable doesn't speak of any great or courageous acts that we must do. It doesn't tell us when,
where, how often, or how long we are to worship God. It doesn't tell us exactly what we are to believe. It
doesn't tell us what to read or to study. It doesn't tell us what theologies, what precepts we should understand and
practice. It doesn't tell us how we are to approach God... how to seek His will for us or how to ask His help in
times of trouble. But it does make a strong statement that we should take seriously: Jesus Himself identifies
whole-heartedly with those who often are ignored... and those who at best get scant attention. In other words...
we should be looking out for the needs... the best interests... of "the least of these."

This is Christ the King Sunday, and today's reading from Matthew looks for the Son of Man to separate
the righteous from the wicked. This is the third straight Sunday whose theme could be to keep watch... or, more
specifically, to be awake to opportunity.

Fitting into the theme of "being open to opportunity"... today's gospel lesson offers us the opportunity to
love "the least of these in our midst." That's one of the ways Jesus calls us to put our faith into action. The
theologian Reinhold Neibuhr said that when we love "the least"—when we feed the hungry, when we give the
thirsty something to drink, when we welcome the stranger, when we clothe the naked, when we care for the sick,
and when we visit the prisoner—we do so because every self... every person... is an incarnation of Abba-God...
or God the Father. Every person is a member of Abba's family, which means that every person is precious. And
Jesus identifies with each one of them.

So, Neibuhr says, we are summoned to love Abba in others. Freely. Unconditionally. As Jesus loves us.
He says we are not to do this in order to be considered a "good Christian" or a "good citizen." Isn't it ironic that
often when we become more "respectable" we become less spontaneous in our giving... and probably less
generous. We are not called on to love because "the least of these" deserve it, or appreciate it, or are changed in
character because of it. We are to love because the nature of Abba is being formed in us through the Spirit to express the life of Christ in our lives. Otherwise we remain “skin deep” Christians.

Today’s parable is not telling us that we ought to try and outdo everybody else in being a do-gooder. It isn’t telling us that we should be spending all our waking hours in ministering to “the least of these.” We’re still expected to attend worship services regularly. We’re still called on to work for a living and to pray and to give for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when I say give, I mean of our time, our talent, and our money. When we get emotionally involved in leading an exemplary Christian life we’re not likely to forget these “lesser people.” We’ll find time for them, we’ll be willing to share ourselves with them. We’ll be willing to do acts of kindness for them. However, in order to put our faith in action… we should know where the homeless shelters are. Who knows when somebody there may need us? Are we open to such an opportunity? Where are the food pantries in our community? Do we know where they are and who runs them? How many of us have ever helped to gather or distribute food to the needy? Have we volunteered our services? Have we ever helped to collect or distribute clothes? Have we ever visited someone in the county jail? Or the regional jail? Do you realize that the inmates may not enjoy being there any more than you do? Perhaps you are more comfortable visiting someone in the hospital or nursing home than in jail. Are you open to such opportunities?

Remember… any help we give to anyone who is hungry, in need of clothing, ill, or in jail, is giving it to Jesus… or doing it for Him. And when we withhold help from one of these “lesser” people, we withhold it from Jesus Himself… because He identifies completely with them.

Francis of Assisi was born Francesco Barardone, a nobleman, but he was far from happy. His life had no purpose. One day while riding on horseback he met a leper… a man who was miserable… repulsive… who bore the scars and the shame of the loathsome disease that he had. Impulsively… Francis dismounted and flung his arms around the wretched leper. And while in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier… and a Christian. He entered a city on a cold winter day. A beggar stopped him… asking for alms. Martin had no money. But he noticed that the beggar was blue and shivering with cold. Martin took off his tattered soldier’s coat… cut it in two… giving half to the beggar. That night Martin had a dream. He saw heavenly places… filled with angels… and Jesus was in the midst of them…
wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak. One of the angels asked Him: “Master, why are you wearing that old tattered cloak? Who gave it to you?” Jesus’ answer: “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

During her lifetime Mother Teresa has probably helped as many people as anyone in history. She has also learned a great deal about human nature. She knows that some of those she helped resented rather than appreciated the kindness she did for them. But did that stop her? No. (Mother Teresa, a Simple Path.) This is her response to her ministry:

People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

LOVE THEM ANYWAY.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

DO GOOD ANYWAY.

If you are successful you will win false friends and true enemies.

SUCCEED ANYWAY.

The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.

DO GOOD ANYWAY.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.

BUILD ANYWAY.

People really need help but attack you if you help them.

HELP PEOPLE ANYWAY.

Give the world the best you have and you’ll get kicked in the teeth.

GIVE THE WORLD THE BEST YOU HAVE ANYWAY.
Proper 29, Christ the King, Year B

OLD TESTAMENT:   Daniel 7: 9 - 10, 13 - 14

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

PSALM: 93

NEW TESTAMENT:   Revelation 1: 4b - 8

GOSPEL:   John 18: 33 - 37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."
This is one of the times when words seem inadequate to express our thoughts, hopes, dreams, and admiration for the personage whom we worship, love, honor, and obey. As mere human beings we realize that His glory and His greatness defy description and definition. It is Jesus the Christ whose life, death, and resurrection bring us together in His name.

Because of Him, all Sundays are special. But today is extra special. Why? It is the feast day of Christ the King! In celebrating this great day, let us turn to some of the superlatives for enlightenment, realizing that even they fall short. Let's list some of the word, phrases and titles used to identify, describe or otherwise call attention to Jesus the Christ whom we revere as a person above all others: King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Redeemer, Lily of the Valley, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Messiah, Jesus, Sun of Righteousness, Everlasting Father, Son of David, Emmanuel, Advocate, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Son of Man, Horn of Salvation, Bread of Life, Light of the World, the Door, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the True Vine, Alpha and Omega, Living Word of God, Lamb of God, Christ, Savior, Our Passover, Rock, the Last Adam, the Chief Corner Stone, the Head of the Church, Image of the Invisible God, First-Born of Every Creature, the Pioneer of our Faith, the Great High Priest.

But I digress. Inasmuch as this is Christ the King Sunday... celebrated throughout the world... let us concentrate on the Kingship of Jesus, the first of the many titles I mentioned earlier. When we proclaim that Jesus the Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords we’re saying we know His power in our lives and we know He will win the victory. He doesn’t need to be anointed or crowned king. He already is King.

Our Old Testament lesson from Daniel describes the vision of God the Father—referred to as the Ancient of Days—who is sitting on His throne as the beast is destroyed and his followers dispersed. Daniel tells us that the one like a man is presented to the Ancient of Days. He says further that “to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” (7:14).

The Church views this reading as a proclamation of the created order in the kingship of Christ. To those who know Him, His triumph has already occurred. It is a future event for those who have not yet accepted His authority. In the end, Jesus will be revealed as Lord of all, king of all creation.
In the Old Testament times, it was commonplace to refer to God as “King.” The Psalter does this many times. In fact, today’s psalm (93) tells us that “The Lord is king; he has put on splendid apparel and girded himself with strength.” Psalm 10 tells us: “The Lord is king forever and ever.” (10:17).

“Lift up your heads, O gates; lift them high, O everlasting doors; and the king of glory shall come in. Who is he, this king of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory.” (Psalm 24:9-10).

“The Lord sits enthroned above the flood, the Lord sits enthroned as king forever more. The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.” (Psalm 29:10-11).

“For the Lord Most High is to be feared; he is the great king over all the earth.” (Psalm 47:2).

“...God is my king from ancient times, victorious in the midst of the earth.” (Psalm 74:11).

The Gospel writers are quick to pick up the kingly imagery and apply it to Jesus. When the Magi arrive in Judea, they ask an important question: Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? (Matthew 2:2).

Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel informs Mary, "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” (1:32).

The royal imagery for Jesus is also present when He rides the donkey into Jerusalem to the cries of “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Luke 19:38). And Matthew tells us (27:29) that Roman soldiers kneel before Jesus in mock homage saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” (27:29).

Now let us turn our thoughts in a different direction. Our King of Kings is not an earthly monarch.

His crown is thorns.
His throne the cross,
His kingdom the hearts
Of all people.

So... Christ’s kingdom is not a secular entity. As He told Pilate, His kingdom is not of this world. His power is implanted into the intellect and hearts of mankind.

How are we responding to the love of Christ?

Do we live as if we have been freed of our sins by His blood?

Are we willing, as Jesus the King of Kings was, to open up our lives to the needs of others?
Christ the King; Proper 29, Year C

OLD TESTAMENT: Jeremiah 23: 1 - 6
NEW TESTAMENT: Colossians 1: 11 - 20

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."
If thoughts of the seemingly countless Sundays after Pentecost tend to tire you... relief is in sight. Last Sunday was the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost... and also the last Sunday of the season featuring green as the liturgical color. Today is the Last Sunday After Pentecost. It's a transitional day... a day when white is the liturgical color. But what does this mean? Among other things... it means that a new liturgical season is approaching... and it will arrive next Sunday. The color for the upcoming season is purple because it has penitential aspect. Yes, Advent is almost here. It will soon be time to start preparing ourselves... our hearts and our souls and our minds... for the coming of Jesus. But our preparation doesn’t begin until next Sunday. Today we turn our attention to the Feast of Christ the King. We celebrate the all-embracing authority of Christ which shall lead mankind to seek the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ.

We have a choice of gospel readings for today... but I chose to use both of them. You have just heard the one... from Luke 23. Now I’m going to read the other from Luke 19. <Read passage.> It tells of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem; Chapter 23 tells of the Crucifixion of Jesus. These lessons would hardly seem to be calling attention to a king. Yes, Jesus does ride into Jerusalem... and from all appearances it is triumphal. Luke tells us that the people threw their garments on the colt, the foal of an ass, on which Jesus was riding. Luke omits Mark’s comment that some “spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields.” And Mark’s “Hosannah in the highest!” is replaced by “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!” This last shout sounds a great deal like the words of the heavenly host at the birth of Jesus.

What’s a king doing... riding on the foal of an ass? In Palestine, the ass was not the lowly beast it is in our country. It was a noble beast... and kings rode on them, when they came in peace. In war, they rode on horses... as conquering military heroes. So... Jesus rode an ass, meaning He came in peace. Christ the King entered Jerusalem as a king of love and peace. And while His entry into that great city seemed to be triumphal... we must remember that He was on His way to the cross. His ride was dramatic... and it fulfilled the Messianic prediction of Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy king cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass.”
So these two gospel passages for celebrating the Feast of Christ the King don't seem to fill the bill. First, Jesus is not the conquering military hero type the Jews had been expecting for centuries. He comes in peace. And second, His words in the other passage don't come from a king sitting on a throne... but rather from a man nailed to a cross. These are the differences in what was expected and what was received.... mankind’s hopes and dreams and God’s fulfillment. God in His wisdom sent us a spiritual king... not a conquering hero. He sent us the king of love and the king of peace. But few recognized Him.

Is there any doubt in your mind that Jesus established His identity as the Messiah, God’s anointed King, when he rode into Jerusalem? It took great courage to do what He did... especially when there was a price on His head. Perhaps He could have sneaked into the city and avoided the spotlight. But He didn’t. He did the opposite... focusing all possible attention on Himself as He took over the center of the stage. Every eye was on Him... as He fulfilled the role He was playing... the king of love and peace... a spiritual king... not another in a long line of conquering military heroes. He confronted them with the power of love... not the power of hate. He came to free them... not to enslave them.

There are more than 50 titles for Jesus in the Old and New Testaments. We shouldn’t get hung up on them... but we certainly can learn from them. We can learn more about Jesus the Christ... Christ the King... by studying Scripture or books about Him. And we can get to know Him better... more intimately... by prayer and meditation. A few years ago, Henry Gariepy wrote a book called Portraits of Christ. It’s a series of devotional studies on the Names of Jesus. He leads the reader into a deeper understanding of the unfathomable dimensions of Christ’s person and work. Each of the names by which Jesus has been called shows a different facet of His life, His ministry, and His relevance to our contemporary needs. This book has 52 chapters... one a week for an entire year. Of course, it only scratches the surface. There’s more on all sides to give us a better insight into the mysteries of God... as we seek the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ... as we worship the King of love and peace.