

*Tenth Sunday Ordinary Time*  
*June 5, 2005*

INTRODUCTION - Today's first reading might be easier to follow if you consider it is made up of two parts. The first part is a quote from a Jewish worship service in which the people assure themselves of God's love and mercy. The prayer expresses that **God's** love is as reliable as the sun coming up in the morning or the spring rain that brings life to the earth. The second part of the reading begins with the words "What can I do with you, Ephraim?" Ephraim is another name for Israel. In the second part God has a few things to say about **the people's** love. Materially those who were well off were enjoying much prosperity, but their spiritual life was a disaster. God said their love for God and for each other was like a morning cloud or the morning dew that melts away. Because their love was so superficial, their sacrifices of sheep and oxen had no meaning. The psalm response echoes this theme. God does not rebuke them for offering sacrifice, but what he wants is for their sacrifices to be an expression of a genuine love for God and for one another.

HOMILY - One time a reporter asked the notorious bank robber, Willie Sutton, why he kept robbing banks. He answered, "Because that's where the money is." Why did Jesus hang out with sinners and eat with them? That's where the people were who needed to be saved and forgiven. It's not as if the self-righteous people like the Pharisees didn't need to be saved. It's just that they thought they were already perfect and didn't need to hear Jesus' message of forgiveness. The people of Hosea's time (750 BC) had their prayer right when they said "As certain as the dawn is his coming..." God's love is as sure as the sun coming up in the morning (even more sure than that, because there's always the possibility the sun might not rise, but God cannot stop loving or he would stop being God, for that is the definition of God: "God is love.") And God's love is revealed most clearly in Jesus who reached out to anyone who would be receptive to his love and mercy.

St. Matthew was one of those people who was receptive. He was a tax collector at a tollbooth along one of the ancient trade routes. Roads were few and far between in those days. They were not smooth roads like we're used to because they were made of cobblestones, but they were better than nothing and those who used them had to pay something. Each little district had its own tollbooth and there was someone there to determine what the toll would be and to collect it. That's what Matthew was doing. Tax collecting was a way to get really rich, because the tax collector always took a portion of the tax for himself, and no one was there to make sure he didn't take too much. That's **one** of the reasons tax collectors were

so much despised. But Jesus saw something in Matthew that he liked and he invited him to join him. St. Matthew was too humble to tell us, but we learn from St. Luke that Matthew left **everything** to follow our Lord (even more so than the other apostles). There would have been any number of people ready to snatch up a good job like Matthew had, so when he left the tollbooth, his job was gone. The other apostles could have always gone back to fishing, but Matthew had no job to return to. That didn't seem to bother Matthew. As a matter of fact, he threw a big party at his house to celebrate Christ having chosen him.

On a personal note, when I first felt the Lord was calling me, I was much less enthusiastic than Matthew. Instead of wanting to throw a party, I felt like: "I don't want to do this." The hardest part of course was to have to give up having a family of my own. God kept after me though. I'm glad now to be a priest. It gets very stressful sometimes (like life does for everyone), but it's wonderfully rewarding and I'm grateful for God's call.

Going back to Matthew's party, Matthew's friends were probably people like himself, tax collectors, ordinary people, and maybe a few not very good people. The religious leaders had no love for those kind of people and they didn't think God could love them either. But God can't stop loving any of us without being God. On the other hand God doesn't love some of the things people do. And that's the other side of the message for today.

At the time of Hosea the people of Israel took God's love for granted and kept on sinning. We heard God say in the first reading: "What can I do with you?" "What can I do with you?" He told them their piety was like a morning cloud or dew on the grass. It evaporated pretty quickly. The people were breaking all the commandments and still thought they were pretty good because they went to the Temple or their sanctuary to offer their sacrifices. You've all heard the poem: "Mr. Business went to church, he never missed a Sunday. Mr. Business went to hell for what he did on Monday." That pretty much described the people of Israel at the time of Hosea. And in spite of God's love and his warnings through the prophets, they continued to ignore God's laws. In a short time their kingdoms were destroyed by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Just a few survived because they were taken as captives and slaves to Babylon for 50 years.

By the time of Jesus, many of the Jews had learned their lesson and were very strict about keeping all God's laws, all but the most important one, the law of love. They turned their religion into a thing of pride, looking down their nose at other people whom they judged to be not as good as they were. This appears to be

especially true of the Jewish leaders. Jesus was busy calling people back to God and back to following God's ways, while the religious leaders considered people other than themselves as hopelessly lost. No one is hopelessly lost unless they choose to be. If they want God's mercy all they need to do is turn back to him.

Love is the main message today. God loves us always, but we don't always love him as we should. We're here today to listen and learn how we can do it better and to give him our love in the most perfect prayer there is, the Eucharist.

### *Eleventh Ordinary – A Cycle*

**June 12, 2005**

INTRODUCTION: At the time of our first reading, Moses had just helped God's people escape their slavery in Egypt. They were traveling through the Sinai desert when they arrived at Mt. Sinai, in the middle of the peninsula. God was at that moment preparing them for the covenant he intended to make with them. He began by reminding them of what he had done for them and the special relationship they would have with him if they would keep his covenant.

Our psalm refrain reminds us we are his people today and we belong to him through a covenant that promises us God's kindness and faithfulness forever.

The second reading is one of my favorites. It tells us that God loved us while we were still sinners, before we were reborn in his grace. Now that we share his life, how much more can we be sure of his love!

HOMILY: There was a little girl on her way to Sunday school, dressed in her Sunday best clothes. She was running to get there because she was late. As she ran she prayed: "Dear Lord, don't let me be late!" In her haste she tripped on a curb and fell, getting dirty and banged up. She got up, brushed herself off and started running again. And she continued praying: "Dear Lord, don't let me be late, but please don't shove me either!"

I don't think God shoves us when we're doing our best but I believe sometimes God does shove us when we need to get moving, or at least

need to get moving in the right direction. In today's first reading we had an image of God that is very popular today. God said to his people "I bore you up on eagles' wings." We love that song by Michael Joncas which he wrote for a couple of his friends for their wedding! The image gives us a feeling of protection and security, but there are other aspects of the image of eagles' wings I think we should consider. When the baby eagles are old enough to fly, the adult eagle will nudge the little ones out of the nest in order to get them in the air so they can start to fly. If they start falling and look as if they are going to crash that's when the adult eagle's wings come to the rescue. The adult bird will soar down and under their falling fledging and support them and lift them up so they can try again. God wants to keep us from crashing, but God is not in the business of providing free airplane rides so we can get through life without much work or effort. God is in the business of getting us to mature, to grow up, to use the gifts and talents and energy he has given us. We've all had times when we feel as if God has dumped us and we have to make it on our own. The truth is he's watching out for us, but he's not going to do our job for us. We're not getting to the Promised Land without effort on our part. And part of that effort is to hearken to his voice and keep his covenant as he told his people in the first reading. Doing that is not always easy.

If eagles' wings symbolizes God's watchful care, God's watchful care is also expressed by another image in today's gospel - that of a shepherd. St. Matthew tells us how Jesus' heart went out to the people of his day who were like sheep without a shepherd, lost and abandoned. Jesus wants to reach out and help all of them but he knows he can't so he chooses people to help him. They receive the name "apostles" which means those who are sent out.

Today he still sends people out. Some of them have the same role the apostles had, to be spiritual leaders of the community, like the pope and the bishops. But he sends out others, priests, deacons, religious, teachers, CAIN and St. Vincent de Paul helpers and supporters, parish nurses and many liturgical ministers to serve the community. So many

people need to know the Lord, to feel his healing, life- giving touch. And even if a person is not involved in any specific ministry, we are all sent out to bring others to Christ through the sacrament of confirmation. Just think, if everyone here brought one more person next week to Mass, how wonderful that would be.

Jesus said to pray that the master of the harvest send out laborers for his harvest. God wants to share his love with all people, but someone needs to let people know that. That someone is not just me, but you too. We could certainly be blessed with more priests. That's something we need to pray about. The day will come when many priests will have two or three parishes. I feel this temporary assignment to St. Joseph's Church is turning into something permanent for me. Because there are fewer and fewer priests, that is all the more reason why lay people have to live up to their calling to be the light of the world. We share with our friends a good story or a good movie or a good restaurant. Why can't we share our faith and tell people how much of a support it has been for us.

God's love flows from every reading today. Can we absorb that love and bring it to someone else?

*Twelfth Ordinary – A Cycle*

*June 19, 2005*

#### INTRODUCTION

There was a prophet, Jeremiah, who lived in Israel about 600 years before Christ. At that time God's people were on the verge of being destroyed by the Babylonians. Babylon, their capital city, was on the Euphrates Rives less than 100 miles south of modern day Baghdad. Jeremiah had the very unpopular job of warning God's people they had to keep their part of the covenant with God if they wanted God to protect them from the Babylonians. Keeping the covenant meant to keep God's commandments and they were breaking practically all of them. People often do not like to be told they're behaving badly so they looked for every possible opportunity to kill Jeremiah. His words in today's first reading reflect the pain and misery he experienced for being faithful to the mission of speaking God's word. We should not be shocked when we hear him pray that God take vengeance on his persecutors. We can't expect even holy prophets like Jeremiah to be as

perfect as Jesus who, 600 years later, was able to ask God to forgive even those who crucified him.

Our first reading leads into the gospel. Jesus had just chosen his twelve apostles as we heard last Sunday and now in today's gospel he prepares to send them out as missionaries. He is warning them their message will not always be popular, they may even suffer and die for it, but they must preach with courage and not be afraid of what might happen to them if they meet rejection.

## HOMILY

After the wife took her overworked husband to the doctor and the doctor examined him, the doctor took the wife aside and whispered: "I don't like the way your husband looks." She answered: "I'll agree he's pretty homely, but he's always been a good father to the children." Happy Fathers' Day to all of our fathers, none of whom are homely! You're all handsome! Thank you for the dedication and example and love you constantly give to your children. You're in our prayers especially today.

Our recently deceased Holy Father, John Paul II had as his motto: "Be not afraid." Of course, he was quoting our Lord whom we just heard give the same mandate to his apostles in today's gospel, "Do not be afraid." If God knows how many hairs are on our head or is aware when even a little sparrow dies, then we can trust he's watching over each one of us. There's no guarantee that bad things might not happen to us, they even happened to God's holy prophets and to Jesus himself. But somehow we have to trust God is in control and will make everything turn out right for those who are faithful to him.

"Be not afraid." Sometimes that's easier said than done. Anxiety and fear take many forms, some of which are quite serious and debilitating. Even if we do not suffer from some of the more severe types of anxiety, we all worry at times and are afraid. Fear is built into us and we feel it when we're threatened in one way or another. If it weren't built into our systems, none of us would be here today. If our ancestors didn't have fear programmed into their system, they wouldn't have been motivated to get out of the way of charging bulls, saber tooth tigers or poisonous snakes. Nor would we be moved to get out of the way of cars and trucks coming at us 50 miles an hour. Fear helps us survive in life. But sometimes it gets out of control or it takes over our life even when the object of our fear is more imagined than real.

Jesus tells us what we should fear most of all. He said, "do not be afraid of those

who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” In Old Testament times Gehenna was a place of human sacrifice to pagan idols. At the time of Jesus it was a garbage dump which was constantly burning. Thus Gehenna became the symbol of evil and hell. Is Jesus telling us here to be afraid of God? Aren’t we supposed to love God? Doesn’t St. John tell us “perfect love casts out fear?” All of that is true. But sometimes our love is not quite perfect and a little fear of what might happen to us if we do wrong can be very helpful in keeping us on the right track. That kind of fear is healthy. Fear can also prompt us to pray and that’s not all bad either.

Several years ago a young lady came to me and was very afraid of drug dealers. She had recently talked a friend out of using drugs and she was afraid the dealers would do her some harm to get even. She was afraid even to go outside. I don’t know how she got up enough nerve to come and see me, but she did. I started talking with her about fear and suggested we might look in the Bible to see what Jesus said about fear. So I just opened up the gospels, not knowing where I might be opening it, but I was sure I would find something about fear because Jesus spoke about it often. I just happened to open to the passage we just heard in today’s gospel where Jesus said, “do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” She started thinking about what Jesus said, and before long she realized she needed to make her peace with God. I helped her through that in the sacrament of reconciliation and once she was reconciled with God, her other fears seemed to melt away. The peace she felt with being right with God gave her new strength and courage. I’ve seen this happen with others too.

As I said earlier some of our fears are realistic. It would have been stupid of that girl to go thumbing her nose at the dealers. Many of our fears, though, are not realistic. I think if we are at peace with God and know the Lord is with us, there will be fewer things in life to upset us or frighten us. Amen.

***Thirteenth Ordinary – A Cycle***

***June 26, 2005***

**INTRODUCTION** In our gospel today Jesus tells us we must die to ourselves: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Today’s second reading from Paul tells us that through baptism we have died with Christ and rose with him to share in his divine life. Paul was making reference to the normal way baptism was administered in his day. A person was dunked in the water, symbolizing death and burial and then brought out of the water,

symbolizing a resurrection. A person does not have to be baptized by immersion to experience the spiritual effects of the sacrament, namely dying to selfishness and sin and beginning a new life in Christ.

There is a second theme in today's readings: that of kindness to God's holy ones. Jesus is about to send his apostles out as missionaries and he promises them anyone who does a simple act of kindness for them will not lose their reward. In those days there were not hotels and motels. Travelers had to depend on the kindness of others when they traveled. The prophet Elisha in our first reading lived about 800 years before Christ. He often traveled to Mt. Carmel to pray and on his journey to Mt. Carmel he regularly stopped to stay at the home of a couple who lived in a town nearby. The story emphasizes the importance to being receptive to those sent to us by God, whether they be prophets or apostles. The story also shows that if one is kind to one sent by God, God will not let us outdo him in generosity.

**HOMILY** We heard Jesus tell us not to let anything or anyone (even those who are closest to us, even our own lives) be more important than he is. He does not make this request for his own glorification. He isn't looking for worldly glory. His life was a life of poverty and simplicity. Besides he has all the glory he needs. He is, after all, Son of God. You can't get any higher than that. He asks us to give him central place in our hearts and in our lives for our own sake and for our own happiness. We'll never really be satisfied in life until we possess and are fully possessed by the life that Christ came to bring us. As St. Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for thyself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

There are two themes that flow from this basic truth. I think the first message is that the gospel is not always a "feel good" message. Some people only want to hear peace, love and joy when they come to Church. They want a Church that always makes them "feel good." Peace, love and joy are wonderful and Jesus' promises of lasting happiness fill us with hope, and all preachers love to preach about these things, but sometimes, like today, the gospel message is not easy to hear. Being willing to give up everything for Christ, even our own lives (and many people did), is a hard message. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran minister who spent the last two years of his life in prison for resisting Hitler, wrote a lot about "cheap grace," grace that

didn't cost us much. Cheap grace means hoping to gain eternal happiness while asking ourselves, "What is the least I can get by with." One of Bonhoeffer's most memorable lines is "When Christ calls a person, he bids him come and die." Following Christ can cost us dearly. If we're afraid of that, if we're always looking for a Church that doesn't really challenge us, then we are not wanting to hear Christ.

The second theme of today's gospel is kindness, especially to those who bring this message of life through death to us. That includes our hierarchy, the priests and religious, but it includes parents and grandparents, neighbors and friends, teachers and spouses and all who have taught us about Christ and who have been models of faith for us. Most of us didn't get our faith out of a textbook. We got it by God's inspiration and by seeing how others lived it. I did come to know some wonderful priests when I was growing up, but most seemed to me to be stuffy and distant. My faith came primarily from my parents and those who taught me in school. And it still is enriched by people I have known and do know now at St. Boniface. When you are here faithfully every week and you pray and sing from your hearts, my spirits are lifted in prayer. So this act of kindness to God's messengers that Jesus promises to reward applies to anyone. A young girl told the story about needing to have her teeth repaired when she was in college. Being a struggling college student, she could hardly afford to have one tooth filled, but the pain was so bad she had to see a dentist. When she went, he wanted to fix all her teeth and she said I can't afford it and started to leave. He understood and said "well, when you finish college you'll get a job and make some money and you can pay me then." He did the job, on credit, and it made a wonderful difference in the way she felt. She was able to pay him off after graduation. She called him a "woodwork angel." She described "woodwork angels" as strangers who come out of nowhere, out of the woodwork, when a person needs help. They may help out with money, skills, protection from danger or from making a big mistake, they may offer us hospitality as the woman did for the prophet Elisha or they may simply offer us a cup of cold water. We all need them. We all need to be one to others. Herman Melville said, "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow human beings." And Elbert Hubbard said, "People are rich only as they give. He who gives great service gets great returns." Jesus said, "whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these

little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple – amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward.”