

## Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 1, 2007

**INTRODUCTION** - Today's gospel reading brings us to a critical point in St. Luke's gospel. St. Luke tells us at this point in his gospel that Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. From this point on in Luke, everything that Jesus said or did took place while he was on his way to Jerusalem. This part of Luke's gospel is referred to as the "Journey narrative." When Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem, he knew what was ahead for him, nonetheless, he started his journey with courage and determination. He warns those who would follow him that following him would require sacrifice, and there wasn't time for second thoughts or to be indecisive. Our first reading may seem to be a strange one, but it was chosen to correspond with the idea of total commitment to one's call. It tells about two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is getting old and his life is coming to an end. At God's command he chooses Elisha to replace him. Placing his mantle on Elisha's shoulders symbolized this call. Having 12 yoke of oxen to plow with would indicate that Elisha must have been a prosperous farmer. His sacrificing the animals and burning his equipment indicates a total commitment to his vocation. He broke completely with his former way of life and did not look back.

**HOMILY** - The gospels have one objective, to lead us to Christ. Christ has one objective, to lead us to God. And God has one objective, to bring us to eternal happiness. Today's gospel, in its desire to lead us to Christ does not picture Christ as "an easy going, do whatever you want, you're all going to get to heaven anyway" kind of person. Jesus is the most loving person who ever lived, and at the same time, when it comes to eternal life, he is a non wishy-washy, ambivalent person. With regard to salvation he is no nonsense. Some people might even consider his words hard.

Let us consider some of these hard sayings. We hear first of all about an encounter with the Samaritans. Most of us probably think of the Samaritans as nice people, because of the parable of the good Samaritan. But there was considerable animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. A Jew could risk his life traveling through Samaria and as we see in today's gospel, Jesus is prudently sending messengers ahead of him to see if a particular town would receive him. They wouldn't. James and John were all for calling down destruction upon that town. Not only did they want bad to happen to those people, they wanted to be involved. They asked Jesus, "Do you want us to call down fire from heaven upon them?" Jesus just rebuked them and moved on. Jesus did not come to condemn but to save. He was a man of peace. You are possibly thinking, how is what Jesus said here a hard saying? Well, consider who are the Samaritans in your life, the people you would like to get rid of if you could? Can you have the same attitude as Jesus, willing to avoid vengeance, willing to forgive, looking for ways to find peace? It's not always easy.

The other two or three sayings are hard ones too. There is someone in the gospel who comes up to Jesus and wants to follow him. Jesus describes the sacrifices that might be involved, especially the sacrifice of not even having a place to call home. Those who lived in the early Church had many sacrifices to make to stay faithful to our Lord, even to the extent of maybe having to sacrifice their lives. People still do in other places of the world today. But in our

country so many people find it hard to sacrifice an hour for Sunday Mass or time to pray during the week, not to mention the sacrifice involved in keeping the commandments. Being a Christian is not just a matter of saying we are. It is living the way Christ wants us to.

“Let the dead bury their dead” is one of the hardest to understand. I have always understood this as the situation of the young man who wouldn’t be ready to follow Jesus until his father died which may have been years away. Jesus was saying there wouldn’t be time. How many times do we say when I get this done or that done, then I’ll begin going to Church more or spend more time praying? We’re all busy today. Where we choose to spend our time tells us what’s important to us. The devil’s biggest temptation for many of us is to tell us “you have lots of time. You can pray later. You can do that good deed later. Just relax for a little while. You owe it to yourself.” (Of course we need to relax at times, but we also need to make time for the Lord.) The last statement is very similar. “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” Our following Christ has to be serious. We can’t be indecisive and uncommitted. We can’t let feelings alone guide us, deciding to pray when we feel like it and putting our faith aside when we don’t feel like it. Our faith is too important for that. I remember all the new faces I saw in church after 9/11. I’m glad people came but for many the enthusiasm didn’t last. God deserves better than a passing thought or a spurt of piety when we happen to feel like it.

Hard sayings! They sure are. Are they meant to accuse us or put us down or depress us? No. Our Lord’s words to us come from his love and his objective is to lead us to holiness and eternal happiness.

## 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 8, 2007

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading describes a time in Jewish history right after the Babylonian exile. The Jews had been returning home to Israel after they had been slaves and exiles for 50 years. Their cities, lands and homes were in ruins. Consequently, they were discouraged and depressed. God encouraged them with messages of comfort and hope through the prophet Isaiah. He did not bring them home from exile to abandon them. Jerusalem will be like a mother once again, nurturing them and caring for them. They must rejoice. They will enjoy prosperity once again. The psalm refrain echoes this call to rejoice.

**HOMILY:** Only St. Luke tells us of the 72 disciples Jesus sent out. There was too much to do for the Twelve. Even today, the official leaders of the Church cannot reach all the people who need to hear God’s message of love and peace. For Jesus it was quite a few more helpers he had to recruit. It seems the first thing he said to them was “there aren’t even enough of you.” “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; pray for more workers for the harvest.” The next thing he did was warn them. It would be a dangerous job. They would be like lambs in the midst of wolves. That’s not a very appealing image. Lambs have no defense. Their only defense is their shepherd. Of course, Jesus knew the heavenly Father would watch over them. Jesus sent

them out in pairs. He knows we need each other's support in our journey of faith. Their mission probably didn't take them very far and probably not for a very long time. That's partly why they needed no money or luggage. The other reason they needed to take nothing with them was because they needed to learn to rely on God to provide for them. They had God's peace, which they could share with whoever was open to it. They had power over demons and they had the gift to heal. You would think they would have been received with open arms wherever they went and it seems as if they were. They came back to Jesus full of joy. Their mission was urgent; they weren't to stand around shooting the breeze with people, "greet no one along the way," and their message was simple. They weren't ready to preach or teach like Jesus did. They were only to tell people the kingdom of God was near.

What is the kingdom of God? We pray for it all the time: "Thy kingdom come." Jesus preached about it many times, often in parables. It is something that not all people want to be part of for it will be like a farmer's field where some of the seed is productive while some withers and dies. Or it is like a field where wheat and weeds grow together until harvest when the wheat is kept and the weeds are destroyed. But for those who open their hearts to the kingdom, it will be wonderful. It will be like a great banquet, like the wedding celebration for a prince. It will be eternal, it will be peaceful, it will be a rule of love, it will be joy beyond our ability to imagine. Because it is near, Jesus tells his 72, "rejoice, rejoice that your names are written in heaven." I'm going to tell you a story about what heaven might be like. Old Mr. Murphy loved Ireland. He worked and toiled on its land when he was young. He poured his sweat into its soil. He raised his sons and daughters on its fertile ground. He fought for its freedom. When he could, he traveled its length and breadth. He loved it so much that when it came time to die, he had his sons carry him outside so he could lay next to the ground. He even grabbed a handful of earth to hold onto. And that's the way he died. When he got to heaven's gates God came to meet him. God had the appearance of an old man, like we're used to thinking of God the Father, white hair and beard. God told him he was a good man and welcomed him to heaven. But God said he couldn't bring that dirt into heaven. Murphy couldn't let go of it; he loved Ireland so much. So God left Murphy standing at heaven's gate and went back inside. A few years past and God came out again, this time with the appearance of one of Murphy's drinking buddies. They chatted and told a few jokes, then God invited Murphy to come on in but to let go of the dirt he was holding onto. But Murphy couldn't; he loved Ireland so much. So God sadly left him there at heaven's gates. After more years God appeared again, this time as one of Murphy's granddaughters. She told him how everyone missed him and begged him to come in. By this time Murphy's joints had stiffened and his hands could no longer hold on to the little part of Ireland he was trying to take with him. The soil fell from his hands and God brought Murphy inside. Once inside he couldn't believe it, there before his eyes was his beloved Ireland and much more besides. Sometimes people are so enamored of the little bits and pieces of God's creation that they have a hold on that they can't believe there could be anything better. But if we open ourselves in faith to whatever God asks of us, if we open ourselves in faith to the glory that Christ promised to those who follow him, we will already begin to know God's kingdom. Then we will understand Jesus' parable that the kingdom is like a treasure buried in a field or a pearl of great price. The kingdom is something we cannot see now, but it is near for those who see it in faith. It is joy beyond imagining.

The power and presence of the risen Christ fills us when God's grace is in us, for that is what

grace is: God's life. It is a life that will endure forever in peace and love. This is the good news, the gospel, this was the preaching of Jesus, the proclamation of the 72, "The Kingdom of God is near." Believe it, and in this faith and this hope, rejoice.

## 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 15, 2007

**INTRODUCTION:** The Book of Deuteronomy is a series of sermons addressed to the people of Israel by Moses right before they were to enter the Promised Land. Moses had led them from the slavery of Egypt and was with them for many years as they traveled through the Sinai desert. You might remember Moses knew he would die before the people could enter their Promised Land, so he is in a sense giving them some last words of wisdom before he would have to leave them. Today's first reading begins with an incomplete sentence: "If only you would heed the voice of the Lord..." The sentence presupposes a thought such as: "God will bless you, if only you would heed the voice of the Lord..." The passage goes on to stress that what God wants from his people is no hidden mystery. God has been very clear as to how he wants us to live. This concept connects with today's gospel when a scholar of the law asks Jesus to interpret for him what God wants of any of us. Jesus' reply to the man's question shows that he already had the answer he was looking for. Almost instinctively, we all know what God wants of all of us. Knowing it is not the problem, but living it is.

**HOMILY:** I have two confessions to make. The first one is not exactly relevant to today's readings, but I thought you might enjoy it. While I was working on my sermon Friday afternoon, I was reading over old sermons I had preached in past years looking for ideas and I almost put myself to sleep. So if anyone nods off, I won't be offended.

The second confession I have to make is about Jesus' parable. In the early days of my priesthood, I didn't like to have to read this gospel. I thought it always gave priests a bad rap. Priests are supposed to be good, caring, always willing to help others. We all know, unfortunately, they are not always that way. I have to humbly confess there were times when I've been like the priest or Levite in the story. I've turned people down who were looking for help. I've been taken by all kinds of people, even people I've trusted, and I've been taken big time, and I'm not just talking about a few hundred dollars! I have to admit I've grown less trusting as I've gotten older. Love is not just a matter of reaching out to help someone, it's also a matter of how much you are willing to risk being hurt or letting someone use you or take advantage of you. I think this is one of the hard lessons in today's gospel.

You know, the Jewish man who was a victim of robbers could have been dead. If so, it would have disqualified the priest and Levite from participation in Jewish worship for several days, because contact with a dead person made a Jew ritually unclean according to the Law. I remember a few years ago a rabbi doing a funeral service for a friend of mine, and the rabbi stood outside on the porch of the funeral home saying the prayers and giving the sermon. By law he could not even enter the funeral home. If the victim in Jesus' story were dead, the priest and Levite were doing

what the Jewish law required of them if they were going to participate in any religious service. On the other hand, what if he were a decoy. The robbers could have been hiding nearby, waiting for someone to try to help this poor man, then they would have one more person they could pounce on. Being a good Samaritan is risky business, and that's what love is. It is risky business too. Our Lord is telling us in today's gospel love demands we sometimes stick our necks out and take the risk of being hurt or being used or taken advantage of.

When Jesus said the two greatest commandments were about love: love of God and love of neighbor, the Jewish scholar asked Jesus another question: "And who is my neighbor?" You might recall that there was great animosity between Jews and Samaritans, so in introducing a Samaritan into the story, Jesus shows us "neighbor" could be anyone, even someone we despise.

There is another question I wish the Jewish scholar had asked. I wish he had asked Jesus "And what is love." In our modern culture love is such a fuzzy concept and is equated in most people's minds with something that makes me feel good. I think if I pray and I feel good, I am loving God. If I pray and I feel as if I'm not getting anything out of it, I feel like I'm wasting my time. If I do something for someone else and I feel good, I think I've been a loving person. If I do something for someone and they don't say thanks or don't seem to appreciate it or just take me for granted, I don't feel good and decide it wasn't worth it. Modern culture has taught us to measure every loving act by our feelings, our reward, our payback. Sure sometimes we pray and feel good and sometimes we do something for someone and feel good about it. But sometimes we don't. Love is measured by what we give, (to God, worship and praise, to others what good things we do for them); it's not measured by the good we get out of what we do. The Good Samaritan may have felt good doing what he did, or he may have felt burdened by the extra stress and inconvenience this put on him. Jesus doesn't tell us how the Samaritan felt. He tells us of the good thing he did.

While we speak of the Good Samaritan, I might point out our Good Samaritan window. But our best example of love is right here at Mass. Jesus came to us and was willing to give all to save us. We were the person needing to be rescued from ignorance, sin and death and he came along as the Good Samaritan and gave his life for us. We not only have his example of love in this Eucharist, but we are united with him so that we can be empowered to love others in the same way. In our Eucharist (a Greek word which means "thanksgiving") we thank God for all he has done for us in Jesus and we ask his help to become more loving as he has taught us. Amen.

## **16th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**July 22, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION:** One of the themes of today's readings is hospitality. Jesus, and most likely his disciples, share the hospitality of Martha and Mary, his friends in Bethany. Our first reading is about Abraham who welcomes three strangers with a lavish banquet. The Bible said he was 100 years old, but he was still pretty energetic as we hear. He doesn't realize it at the time that it

is God whom he is entertaining. God must have enjoyed the feast, for God tells him that his lifelong desire that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son would finally be fulfilled.

**HOMILY:** There was a man who went to see his doctor and he had a carrot sticking out of one ear and a piece of celery sticking out of the other, with a couple of grapes stuck up his nose. He complained to the doctor he was not feeling well. The doctor said "It's obvious, that you're not eating properly!" I hope you will pardon me for emphasizing the obvious, but everybody enjoys eating. Most of us sit down to eat several times a day and probably snack occasionally in-between. Jesus was away from his home territory of Galilee and was near Jerusalem when he visited Martha and Mary in Bethany. He and most likely his disciples probably hadn't had a good meal for a while and Martha was ready to put out a really fine feast for them all. But Jesus knew that in addition to feeding our bodies, there are other needs that we human beings have. After all, he is the one who responded to the temptations of the devil in the desert, after forty days of fasting, that we do not live by bread alone! Our hearts need to be fed with love and our spirits need to be fed with wisdom and truth. And Martha's sister, Mary, was needing to be fed with the wisdom and truth and love that Jesus spoke. When Jesus said "Mary has chosen the better part," was he saying that sitting and praying or reading the Bible is more important than having a good meal? I don't think so. We need both. It wouldn't be a bad idea though if sometimes we ate a little less and prayed a little more. We seldom get so busy that we forget to eat in the course of a day. How often do we forget to spend a little while with God during the course of a day or even during the course of a week. When Jesus said "Mary has chosen the better part," was he saying taking time to pray is better than feeding a hungry person? I don't think Jesus is saying that either. We need to do both. I think that's why St. Luke put this story right after the parable of the Good Samaritan. St. Luke is telling us we need balance. We need to do good things for others, but we need to take time just to sit at our Lord's feet and communicate with him. I'm sure most of us remember the passage from the Book of Qoheleth: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; etc." Perhaps what Jesus was saying to Martha when he said "Mary has chosen the better part," he was saying this is a golden opportunity; here is the Son of God coming to visit and you're worried about chopping up the parsley; or perhaps he was saying "you're trying to put out an eight course meal, Martha, and we would be happy with just a sandwich," or perhaps he was saying "maybe we ought to think about feeding the spirit before feeding our faces;" or perhaps he was saying "maybe we need to spend a little time enjoying each other's company before we get all uptight about dinner." I remember some years ago when I would visit home, I just wanted to spend a little time sitting and talking and my mother was always trying to serve something to eat, even if I had just had supper. Frustrating! Now she is in a nursing home and when I visit, she's not trying to feed me. We both just enjoy the visit. On the other hand, I have heard from so many wives how their husbands never have time to sit down and talk. They're always busy doing something or else they're half asleep in front of the TV. They complain "I feel like I'm all alone." In too many families today, the family members are too busy to listen to one another, to talk to one another, to feed one another emotionally. We do not live by bread alone. Jesus came to Martha and Mary's house and was given hospitality. Jesus did not belittle what Martha was doing. She was trying to see that Jesus and his apostles were fed. I'm sure he

appreciated it. But he wanted to feed them too, with a food that would not just satisfy them for a few hours but for eternity. Didn't he tell us in another place: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you?" (Jn. 6,27) As we come here today we are giving God our worship, our time, our love, our thanks, our prayer and our praise. Our being here is a gift to our God who created us and to our Savior who died for us. But we're not just giving. We sit at his feet, listening to his word, being fed with his wisdom and truth. We receive him in Communion, we open our hearts to his love and presence. We pause for moments of silence so he can speak to us. Prayer is not just doing all the talking. It is also listening. Everything has its appointed time. Now, on this Lord's day, is the appointed time to be like Mary in today's gospel and communicate with our Lord.

### **17th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**July 29, 2007**

**INTRODUCTION:** Last Sunday's first reading told us about a visit Abraham had from three strangers. It turns out one of the three visitors was God himself. God was on his way to two cities near the Dead Sea, Sodom and Gomorrah, and he invited Abraham to go with him. On the way God took Abraham into his confidence and told him the cities were about to be destroyed because of their depravity and immorality. Notice the comfortable yet respectful familiarity that existed between God and Abraham.

**HOMILY:** A young minister was asked to say prayers at a burial. He was told it was a homeless person and they were being laid to rest in a little country cemetery in which no one else had yet been buried. He got lost on the way there. By the time he arrived, he saw the backhoe, there were three or four workers eating lunch and the hole was half filled, but there was no funeral director in sight. He knew he was really late and he was totally embarrassed. He apologized profusely to the workers, stepped up to the graveside and started to pray. The workers joined in with Alleluia's and Amen's and Praise the Lord. The young minister preached enthusiastically for quite a while from several scripture passages. He closed his prayer book and went back to his car. As he neared his car he heard one of the workers say: "I ain't never seen anything like that before and I've been putting in septic tanks for 20 years."

We can pray anytime, you know. I'll bet that septic tank worked perfectly for 200 years! I will say later, no prayer is ever wasted, but sometimes prayer is more fitting than at other times. It is a curious request the apostles brought to Jesus, asking him how to pray. These were not guys who suddenly got religion. Some of them may have been, but some of them had previously been disciples of John the Baptist. Surely John taught them how to pray. Being Jews, they would have gone to synagogue every Sabbath for that was a must for all Jews. There they would have heard two readings from the "Old Testament," and they would have heard two sermons, one for each of the readings. They would have prayed and sung psalms too. Jews prayed the psalms as part of their daily prayers as well. Yet they ask our Lord, "teach us to pray." It could be that the apostles observed Jesus at prayer and they knew there must be something more. Jesus' response gave them some insight into his own personal communication with the Father. St. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is a little shorter than the version we find

in St. Matthew but essentially the same. St. Matthew's is the one we are familiar with. Mostly whenever we think of prayer we think of asking for things. When we are in need of God's help, it is appropriate to ask for it. Yet there is a more important reason to pray than simply to tell God we need something. The more important reason is to build a relationship with God. Relationships cannot exist without communication. We could safely say the quality of our relationship with someone depends on the quality of our communication with them. Because the ability to communicate is something we have to learn, hundreds of books are written to help us improve our skill in that area. We need to learn how to communicate with God, just as we need to learn how to communicate with one another. Because God is infinitely greater than we are, communication with God is more difficult. If prayer came so easily, our church would be filled every week! Even with the Third Commandment that tells us we have an obligation to worship God, people find the slightest reason to avoid putting time aside for God.

Jesus knows prayer has its difficulties. That's why he tells us not to give up. There are lots of people who get religious only when they want something. When they pray and don't get what they ask for, they are further convinced that prayer doesn't work. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us it does. The problem is we get too impatient and we want things right away. Too often when we pray we forget our prayers are addressed to "our Father." As we know, sometimes fathers say "no" or "not yet" or "I don't think that would be a good idea." Notice also Jesus tells us before we start asking for things we first say "thy will be done."

Prayer is an expression of our faith. That's partly why prayer is not easy, because faith is not easy. When we enter into prayer, we are entering into a dialogue as Abraham did. We tell God what we would like, yet at the same time we recognize God is the one who has the last word, not us. What is that last word? It is our eternal happiness. That will be the kingdom he wants us to be part of and he will not give us anything that may get in the way of our being part of his kingdom. He even tells us to pray for it. "Thy kingdom come."

Jesus said, "Ask and you will receive." He doesn't say, "you might receive or maybe you'll receive, but you will receive." What he is saying is that no prayer is wasted. Prayer cannot fail to bring some blessing – even if it's not the thing we think we need most. If we truly believe God is all wise and all loving, then we have to conclude that if we do not receive what we've asked for, God has something better in mind. This is partly why people give up on prayer, they do not have this faith in God's wisdom and love. Prayer works, even when we do not see immediate results. I think it is important to say a word about distractions. So many people get discouraged when they pray. I've quoted Thomas Merton before. He said, if you don't get distracted during prayer, you're brain dead. It's good to remember that distractions are normal. I believe whenever we even try to pray, God is pleased that we are reaching out to him. One of the easiest ways the devil has to lead us away from God is to discourage us or to convince us not to pray. He tells us "it doesn't work," "you're wasting your time," "it's boring," "you have too many other things to do," "you're too tired now," etc, etc. Don't ever quit praying, no matter what. It will always bring you great blessings and most important, it will bring you to a deeper relationship with God. Now we pray the greatest prayer there is, the prayer Jesus gave us at the Last Supper, the Eucharist.