

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle July 3, 2016

INTRODUCTION: *Isaiah 66,10-14; Gal. 6,14-18; Lk. 10,1-12.17-20)*

Our first reading deals with a time in Jewish history right after the Babylonian exile. After the Jews had been slaves and exiles for 50 years in Babylon, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return home. Little by little they returned, but what they found when they did return was discouraging and depressing. Their cities, lands and homes were in ruins. They thought they could never build up their country again. God encouraged them, however, with messages of comfort and hope through the prophet Isaiah. Through Isaiah, God insists that they rejoice. He assured them he did not bring them home from exile to abandon them. Jerusalem would be like a mother once again, nurturing them and caring for them. Our first reading tells them they will enjoy prosperity once more. The psalm refrain echoes this call to rejoice.

HOMILY: Today's Gospel is an unusual passage. We don't know anything about this group of disciples except what Luke tells us. Some commentators claim Luke made up this story. I think there is more to it than just a made up story. Remember, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. People did have to travel in groups in those days for companionship and for safety. I think Jesus and the twelve would have been a large enough group to discourage highway robbers from attacking them. My theory is that Jesus sending out the 72 disciples was an event that took place after the resurrection. It had special significance for the missionary activity of the early church when Jesus sent his apostles and disciples to the ends of the earth. Perhaps Luke found it convenient to place this passage here because Jesus had just given his 12 apostles the same directives that he gave the 72: to recognize the urgency of their mission and to travel lightly.

I think they probably were not sent far away or for very long, considering they were so restricted in what they could bring with them. They would have to learn to make some accommodations as time went on. Traveling to the northern parts of Europe in the winter with no sandals, no money, no sack where they could carry food or extra clothes would cause most of his missionaries to end up with pneumonia. Then Jesus would have even fewer missionaries to spread his message.

I think the main message in today's reading is that the missionaries returned full of joy - a theme of our first reading and psalm refrain today. They obviously had a productive venture. Doing the work of the Lord may be difficult and even fatal (like lambs in the midst of wolves as Jesus calls it) but it can also be joyful and very rewarding. On this occasion the disciples experienced the good side of it, but we know that a lot of people were put to death from the earliest days of the Church until the present time for responding to God's call to serve him. The story is meant to encourage us to pray for people to help spread the gospel (which we do in the prayer for vocations). Even if a person doesn't do this as a special calling, there are always opportunities to share our faith with others.

One of the things where I want you to focus your attention is the disciples were told to heal the sick. Jesus even gave us a special sacrament called the sacrament of the sick. Every once in a while I make this sacrament available after Mass, which I shall do today. Most of us older people called it Extreme Unction (meaning the last anointing), and it served the purpose of preparing a person to meet their God. But the sacrament was also meant as a prayer for healing. I have great faith in this prayer and sacrament. If anyone wishes to be anointed, just

stay after Mass for a few minutes and move to the front of the Church. I will move around and anoint anyone who wishes to be anointed.

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle **July 10, 2016**

INTRODUCTION – *Deut 30, 10-14; Colossians 1, 15-20; Luke 10, 25-37*

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. 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 implies that God would bless them greatly "if only they would heed the voice of the Lord..." The passage goes on to stress that people do not have to guess what God wants of them. It's no hidden mystery. This concept connects with today's gospel - the story of the good Samaritan. The story is depicted in our stained glass window by the door on the Blessed Virgin side. When a scholar of the law asked Jesus what God wants of us, Jesus' reply to the man shows that the man already knew the answer to his question. Almost instinctively, we all know what God wants of us. Knowing is not the problem; living it is.

HOMILY – I want to start by calling attention to the harmony and balance Luke puts into today's gospel. It begins with a scholar of the law (we'll call him a lawyer for short) asking a question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Then Jesus asks a question: "what is written in the law? How do you read it?" The lawyer gives an answer: "you shall love the Lord, your God, etc." Then Jesus gives an answer: "you have answered correctly, do this and you will live." Again the lawyer asks a question: "who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells a parable, which we all know, then he asks a question: "which of the three was neighbor to the robbers victim?" The lawyer answers: "the one who treated him with mercy." Then Jesus answers: "go and do likewise."

We've all heard this gospel explained many times. It is a story that clearly conveys its message without any further explanation. And yet, when we hear it in conjunction with the next passage in Luke, we discover there is a deeper meaning to the story of the Good Samaritan. By contrasting the next story, we see a perfect balance between today's gospel and next Sunday's. Next Sunday we hear about two of Jesus' friends, two women named Martha and Mary. It's important to see how Luke connects these two gospels for the lesson Jesus will teach us next balances out the lesson the Good Samaritan teaches us today. Today we are told at the end of the story: "go and do likewise." Next week we will be instructed not to do anything, but to sit, listen and learn.

Next week we will hear about Jesus visiting Martha and Mary. They were the sisters of Jesus' friend Lazarus whom Jesus would, at some time in the future, raise from the dead. When Jesus showed up at their house, Martha began working herself into a frenzy trying to get some food on the table, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet and just listened to him. When Martha complained that Mary wasn't doing anything to help her, Jesus defended Mary against her sister. I hope you can see the full-blown contrast between Mary who simply sat and listened to Jesus while her sister was going crazy trying to fix dinner and the Good Samaritan in today's gospel who put himself out taking care of an injured man, delayed his own journey, risked his own safety and spent two days' wages with a promise of more if needed. See how the two stories are linked together by contrasting with one another and each highlights the lesson that is contained in the other.

So where does that leave each of us? If we were to ask Jesus which example, the Samaritan or Mary, we should follow in a specific instance, his answer would probably be “yes!” Unless it’s immediately obvious what is the right thing to do, knowing whether in a certain situation we should “go and do” something, or we should listen and reflect is a matter about which we need to call on our friend, the Holy Spirit. Amen.

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle **July 17, 2016**

INTRODUCTION: (*Genesis 18, 1-10; Colossians 1, 24-28; Luke 10, 38-42*) God is always with us, but we are not always attentive to his presence. And yet, I suspect that 90 % of us here can tell about those surprising times when we have actually experienced his presence in real and awesome ways.

Our first reading is about Abraham who welcomes three strangers. At first Abraham didn’t realize that it was God whom he was entertaining. Even though Abraham was now 100 years old and Sarah was 90, God had come to announce to Abraham and his wife that they would soon have a son. In our gospel we hear about Jesus visiting his friends Martha and Mary. It is unlikely that either sister could have known that they were in the presence of the Son of God. As I reflect on today’s gospel, it appears that Mary was much more perceptive than her older sister Martha and thus Mary sensed that focusing her full attention on Jesus was more important than anything else in the whole world.

HOMILY: I want to start with what I think is an interesting little piece about today’s gospel. St. Luke and St. John mention Martha and Mary in their gospels. John also mentions their brother Lazarus and he tells us they lived in Bethany two miles from Jerusalem. I imagine Jesus connected with them when he visited Jerusalem during Passover time. During big feasts, all inns and hotels were taken so if a person wanted a place to stay, they had to befriend someone who lived in Jerusalem or in the neighboring villages. You may have noticed that Luke did not mention where they lived and where this event took place. That’s because Luke wanted to put the story about Martha and Mary close to the story about the Good Samaritan as an illustration that sometimes we have to go out of our way to help people and sometimes we need to sit quietly at our Lord’s feet and listen and learn. You see, Luke had just told us Jesus was beginning his journey to Jerusalem. If Luke told us Jesus was now in Bethany, he would be saying that no longer had Jesus started his journey than he arrived. Luke has a lot he wants to tell us about what Jesus said and did on his journey before the arrival at Jerusalem.

In that culture and at that time, Mary overstepped her bounds by sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening to him. Rabbis did not allow women to be disciples. However, we see earlier in the gospel that Jesus had no problem with women being numbered among the disciples. (*Lk. 8, 1-3*) Martha had seniority over Mary because Martha was older. She is the one who invited Jesus. In visiting with Jesus and sitting at his feet rather than serving the food, Mary was acting as if she were the head of the household. It was left to Martha to serve in a lesser role of being the servant. To add to Martha’s displeasure, Jesus did not support her when she asked him to chase Mary into the kitchen to help prepare a meal. Everyone knows it’s important to eat, and it’s something all of us like to do as well. But there’s something even more important than that; we need to listen and learn from Jesus for this is what will lead to eternal life. (God tells us in Deuteronomy: “Not by bread alone does man live.”).

As it turned out, Mary sensed that listening to Jesus was more important than anything else she could have been doing and Jesus agreed with her. Jesus told Martha she was “anxious and

worried about many things.” I think that’s a phrase that describes most of us in our world today: “anxious and worried about many things.” Mary stayed focused on Jesus. As we come to Mass today, we all are trying to stay focused on Jesus. Wouldn’t it be great if we could stay focused like Mary? Well I can tell you, we can. But it takes practice.

One spiritual writer in India, Anthony de Mello, S.J., compared the human mind like a tree full of monkeys, jumping all over from one branch to another. When we want to focus on something, how often do the thoughts come and go so quickly that we think of 15 totally different things within the same minute. One significant area of psychology that has developed in the past several years is mindfulness. It is the ability to keep our focus on one thing without distraction and it’s what Mary had as she focused on Jesus.

Psychology and medicine have discovered the value of mindfulness and the many benefits it brings. For example: “one study recently presented to the American Heart Association showed that patients who practiced mindfulness regularly reduced by half their risk of heart attacks, strokes, and death from all causes.” (*The Great Courses: Practicing Mindfulness by Mark W. Muesse, PhD*) Mindfulness helps us work with difficult emotional states and with situations in life over which we have no control. The benefits of mindfulness are many and have been proven, but it takes ongoing practice. People often get frustrated by not being able to keep their mind on their prayers. Keeping our thoughts on God as we pray is one form of mindfulness. Thomas Merton said: “if you don’t get distracted while you pray, you are brain dead.” We all get distracted, but by not giving up, we will find ourselves becoming more and more focused on God and on his love for us. Amen.

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle **July 24, 2016**

INTRODUCTION We heard last Sunday about Abraham having a surprise visit from three strangers. Hospitality was a very important virtue in those days. And so Abraham provided an elaborate feast for them. I am often asked whether the three represented the Trinity. No. One of the three visitors was God himself; whereas, the other two are identified as angels in the story. The doctrine of the Trinity did not become clear until after Jesus had ascended to the Father, nineteen centuries after the time of Abraham. In today’s gospel, God reveals to Abraham that he is greatly displeased with two cities near the Dead Sea, Sodom and Gomorrah, and he invited Abraham to go with him as he went to visit them. Abraham realized God was about to severely punish those cities for their depravity and immorality, and he is greatly concerned because his nephew, Lot, lived in Sodom. The passage is primarily a lesson in persistence in prayer. Although persistent, I would like you to notice the comfortable, yet respectful, familiarity that Abraham had with God.

HOMILY: The mention of Sodom and Gomorrah reminded me of a story. God was in heaven hearing all kinds of terrible things about what was happening on this earth. So he sent St. Michael the Archangel to earth to see what was going on and then report back. When Michael returned he told God, “Things are far worse than what you heard. There’s violence and war all the time, stealing, orgies, drunkenness, no respect for the 10 Commandments or authority. God said are there any good people left. Michael said “a few.” God said he would send famine and plague all over the earth, but we must warn the good people to advise them how to prepare. God dictated a letter to the good people, and do you know what it said? If you answered “no,” then I guess you didn’t get a letter, did you?

The disciples approach Jesus and ask him to teach them how to pray. Certainly we would expect the disciples knew how to pray. They had the Book of Psalms (150 of them). They would have gone to synagogue every week on the Sabbath, and there they would sing some of the psalms and hear passages from their Bible (the part of the Bible we call the Old Testament). Two passages were always read, and each one was followed by a homily specific to the reading.

Presuming that the disciples were faithful to their religious obligations, and that they prayed regularly, I would be curious to know why the disciples would ask Jesus to teach them something more about prayer. Maybe their prayer was not spiritually satisfying. Maybe they thought there were some magic words they should use to get God's attention or to get God to give them what they wanted and to answer their prayer more quickly. Perhaps they wondered whether, when God didn't answer, it was a sign God didn't want to be bothered with it. That's the way my father was, if I came to him for a second time to ask for something, he would say: "I told you, "no." Why are you asking me again?" Perhaps they figured God has lots of people asking for things all the time and he can't keep up with the demand, so maybe they thought Jesus could teach them how to get to the top of God's "to do" list. Or maybe they thought God forgot them? Perhaps they thought they were not worth God's time or love. Aware of their sinfulness, why would God listen to them. I've heard every possible reason why a person might be dissatisfied with prayer and they want to pray better or they just give up. But Jesus insists, we are important to God, God loves us, we are his children, so we should approach him with our needs. We should not give up Jesus tells us.

Let me make a theological distinction here: many of us were taught there are four types of prayer. The four types can be remembered by linking them up to the four letters of the alphabet that make up the word "acts." a = adoration; c = contrition; t = thanksgiving; s = supplication; i.e., asking God for a favor. Notice the Our Father does not seem to express any theme of thanksgiving. Maybe Jesus just took it for granted that a person would just naturally say "thanks" whenever they feel that God has blessed them. Or maybe Jesus didn't mention thanksgiving because he expected to talk about it some other time. By the way, the greatest prayer Jesus gave us is not the Our Father; it is the Mass, otherwise known as the Eucharist – a Greek word which means "let us give thanks." So if we go to Mass every week, we're always giving thanks.

The disciples asked Jesus, "teach us to pray." Jesus gives them a prayer that "reveals what the ideal attitude of the Christian disciple toward God should be." (*The Anchor Bible, Luke, Joseph Fitzmyer, pg 896*) Jesus adds some further thoughts about not giving up on prayer. He tells us there is no excuse for us to give up on God or to give up on prayer. God is our father whose love is infinite, and in his love he is always ready to help us. Where we usually stumble and fall when it comes to prayer is when we feel God is not answering our prayers. We think of prayer as a way to change God, and when we haven't been able to do that, we stop trying. So one way to look at prayer is as a dialogue. To pray is to let another whom we trust come into our lives. It is to rely on someone greater than ourselves, to be reminded again that we are a son or daughter. God knows what we need before we ask him. If we persevere in prayer, we may discover that while we were busy trying to get him to do something for us, he was busy working in us the entire time. Jesus teaches us, in the Our Father, that we must first pray "thy will be done" before we get busy telling him what we want him to do for us. He wants us to trust that he will always respond to us, even if he chooses not to give us what we want. He gives us something better because his will is always ordered toward our greater good. Amen. (*cf. Evelyn, Louis; We Dare to Say Our Father, pg 34 – 43*)

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time– C Cycle July 31, 2016

INTRODUCTION: (*Ecclesiastes 1,2; 2,21-23; Colossians 3,1-5,9-11; Luke 12,13-21*) One of the most well-known passages in the bible begins with the line: “For everything there is a season...a time for every matter under heaven.” That passage is from a book in the Old Testament that in Hebrew is named Qoheleth; in Greek it is called Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth is often translated as “the Preacher.” All we know about the author is that he was a teacher or preacher and he lived about 200 years before Christ. Qoheleth is a short book of only 12 chapters in length. We only hear from Qoheleth once in our three-year cycle of readings and today’s short passage (not the famous passage I quoted earlier) reminds us of the passing nature of all things.

HOMILY: Once there was a cartoon in the paper of an elderly man on his deathbed. The man was extremely wealthy and was surrounded by servants, family members, lawyers, a priest, and a few other associates. It was obvious why most of the people had gathered there. Rather than looking as if he was soon to meet his maker, the old gentleman was sitting up with his arms folded and a very determined look on his face. One bystander was saying to another, “Someone just told him he couldn’t take it with him, and so he says he’s not going.” (*Dynamic Preaching, July – Sept. 2016, pg 30*)

As Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, many people crowded around him to hear his teaching. A voice came from out of the crowd asking Jesus to make a judgment in the case of two brothers fighting over an inheritance. The question had nothing to do with what Jesus had been teaching, so the brother who felt as if he was being cheated must not have been listening to anything that Jesus was teaching. However, the interruption gave Jesus an opportunity to speak on another topic: greed.

Greed is an excessive desire for wealth and/or possessions. We need things, of course. We need clothes to wear, food to eat, a roof over our heads, etc., but our things can easily become a major preoccupation. It’s not just the wealthy who can let greed and envy take control of their lives. It can be a personality trait in anyone, whether they are poor, middle class or quite wealthy, and when it does, then our possessions will end up owning us. One great harm greed does is it leads us to neglect other important facets of our lives; such as, spending time with our family and our God. I’ve even seen people lose all they had through gambling because they wanted to win the BIG prize. Psychologically the greedy person measures their own self-worth by what they have (or do not have). The more possessions they have, and the more wealth that is theirs (or is not theirs), the more important or unimportant they think of themselves to be; i.e., the more superior (or inferior) they consider themselves in comparison with others.

God gave us a brain, he gives us talents, he gives us strength and energy and he expects us to use the gifts he’s given us to provide for ourselves and our loved ones. To have to work and to be able to enjoy the fruits of our labor is not a punishment for sin. God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Paradise and commanded them to cultivate it and care for it before they disobeyed God. When they were told there was one thing they were not allowed to have, they decided they had to have that too.

Jesus gives us an illustration in this parable. The rich farmer wasn’t portrayed as a sinful person; he didn’t steal, or cheat his laborers. It was a good growing season that made him rich. Most probably he was honest, hard-working and smart – but not smart enough to fully grasp

reality. He had set himself up for many years of leisure and prosperity, but in one day, someone else would end up enjoying it all because Jesus said “this night the man’s soul would be required of him.” The man was rich in material things, but poor in the most important thing of all: his relationship with God.

I know I’m preaching to the choir; I’m preaching to people whom I suspect have discovered, as I have, that the more I help others with what I’ve been given, the more it seems to come back to me. I’m preaching to people who believe that our relationship with God is the most important thing in our lives, or you wouldn’t be here. I thank you for coming today and every week as you do. You’ve heard this story before, but it’s worth repeating and will make a good conclusion to my homily. An American tourist, traveling in Europe, visited a wise and famous rabbi who lived there. The American was surprised when he saw how simply the rabbi lived – in a single room with a table and chair and a number of books. “Rabbi! Where is all your furniture?” asked the tourist. “Well, where is all yours?” the rabbi asked. The American tourist answered, “My furniture? I’m just passing through here.” The wise rabbi responded: “That’s also true for me. Although I’ve lived here my entire life, I’m aware that I’m simply passing through here too!”