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Jesus begins his ministry

Monday

Mark 1:14-20

"The right time has come."

On July 20, 1969, astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped from the lunar module, *Eagle*. Just before his foot touched the moon, he said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Few people remember the exact words Armstrong used to inaugurate the new age that started at that moment, but they do remember the spirit behind them.

The same is true of the first words Jesus used to inaugurate the new age that began when he started to preach in Galilee. Mark records the first words of Jesus this way:

"The right time has come,
and the Kingdom of God is near!
Turn away from your sins
and believe the Good News!" Mark 1:15

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What keeps us from turning away from sin?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
Lord, help us face the sun
and let the darkness of sin fall behind us.

Jesus expels an evil spirit

Tuesday

Mark 1:21-28

"Be quiet!"

A mob of London protesters grew restless. The tension mounted by the minute. It was like watching a balloon expanding beyond its capacity to stretch. The police stood by, waiting for the explosion.

But then an elderly chief of police arrived. He walked slowly toward the seething mob. When he reached the first row of protesters, they fell silent and stepped aside politely.

He walked right through the crowd unharmed. The chief's action was like letting the air out of an overstretched balloon.

Later a man asked him, "Weren't you afraid?" "No!" replied the chief. "I represented the king, and they knew it."

Jesus had a similar impact on evil spirits. He represented his heavenly Father, and every evil spirit knew it.

Have we ever felt the powerful presence of Jesus in our midst?

Lord, let the impact of your presence touch us and silence our sinful tendencies.

Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law

Wednesday

Mark 1:29-39

She got up and served them.

A car driven by a University of Cincinnati student was struck by a speeding freight train. Miraculously, the student was uninjured.

The narrow escape had a profound effect on the student's attitude toward life. He no longer felt his life was his own to do with as he pleased. He had been saved from certain death by no merit or skill of his own. He believed he had been "saved to serve."

Peter's mother-in-law responded similarly. When she was cured by Jesus, the Gospel says, "The fever left her and she began to wait on them."

When was the last time we experienced God's saving or healing power in our own lives?

Lord, "save me,
for I am your servant and I trust in you. . . .
Teach me . . . what you want me to do,
and I will obey you faithfully;
teach me to serve you with complete devotion."

Psalms 86:2, 11

Jesus heals a leper

Thursday

Mark 1:40-45

“Be clean!”

A leper was an outcast in ancient society. The Book of Leviticus says he had to dress in “torn clothes, leave his hair uncombed, cover the lower part of his face, and . . . live outside the camp, away from others.”

Leviticus 13:45-46

The Book of Leviticus also says that if a leper experienced a remarkable cure, “he shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall . . . examine him. If the disease is healed, the priest . . . shall pronounce him clean.”

Leviticus 14:2-4, 7

Some spiritual writers see a similarity between leprosy and sin. Sin also alienates us from God’s community. Only when we are pronounced “clean” can we rejoin the community in good faith.

How does sin, even private or personal sin, affect the community of the church?

“Remove my sin, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”

Psalms 51:7

Jesus heals a paralytic

Friday

Mark 2:1-12

“Stand up!”

A famous singer once said that he owed his singing career to his wife. She had faith in his singing ability at a time when he had lost faith in himself and was ready to quit.

Many of us are saved by other people’s faith in us—not our own. A teacher has faith in a student when the student has lost faith in himself and wants to quit.

A parent has faith in a daughter when the daughter has lost faith in herself and no longer cares.

The paralytic is another example of such faith. He is saved by the faith of four friends. It is their faith that attracts Jesus’ attention.

Recall a time when another person’s faith played a big role in our life.

Jesus said, “If you have faith as big as a mustard seed, you can say to this hill, ‘Go from here to there!’ and it will go.”

Matthew 17:20

Jesus calls Levi

Saturday

Mark 2:13-17

“Follow me!”

The doormen of certain luxury hotels pay for the right to be the hotel’s doorman. Doormen can make a small fortune in tips, if they serve patrons attentively.

Ancient tax collectors, also, paid for the right to collect taxes. Efficient tax collectors could get back the price they paid for their job and a sizable profit. Unfortunately, some collectors used extortion and other unsavory practices to collect taxes from citizens.

This explains why tax collectors, as a group, were despised.

Levi belonged to such a group, and no doubt he was indiscriminately despised by people.

Do we tend to discriminate against individuals just because they belong to a group we dislike?

“The LORD said . . . ‘I do not judge as man judges. Man looks at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart.’”

1 Samuel 16:7

Jesus talks about fasting

Monday

Mark 2:18-22

"You don't fast when it's time to feast."

No one keeps an arm in a cast after it's healed.
No one keeps holding an umbrella
after the rain stops.
No one keeps wearing an overcoat and gloves
after summer comes.

Devout Jews in Jesus' time
fasted as a sign of hungering for the Messiah
and as a way to try to hasten his coming.
Once the Messiah came, therefore,
their reason for fasting would lose its meaning.

This is Mark's point in today's reading.

Mark presents Jesus as the promised one.
The Messiah has come; the kingdom is at hand.
The time for fasting is over;
the time for feasting has come.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
Do we perform certain religious practices
routinely without reflecting on their meaning?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
Lord, keep us
from worshipping you mechanically and by rote.

Jesus talks about the Sabbath

Tuesday

Mark 2:23-28

"I am Lord of the Sabbath."

The fiery preacher Billy Sunday once quipped,
"Going to church doesn't make you a Christian
any more than going to a garage
makes you an automobile."

Like the prophets of old,
Jesus found it necessary to warn people
that there was far more to religion
than attending the Temple,
performing certain practices,
and obeying certain laws.

Jesus' main point in this reading, however,
goes far beyond this teaching.
Jesus tells the Pharisees
that his Father has given him "all authority
in heaven and on earth." Matthew 28:18
He is Lord of the Sabbath.

To what extent do we tend to confine religion
to attending church and obeying laws?

Lord, help us realize
that the heart of religion is love and service:
loving and serving you above all things
and loving and serving our brothers and sisters
as ourselves.

Jesus heals on the Sabbath

Wednesday

Mark 3:1-6

The man's hand grew well again.

This miracle climaxes
a series of five straight confrontations
between Jesus and the religious authorities.

First, the authorities challenged Jesus
for claiming to forgive the paralytic's sins. (2:7)
Second, they challenged Jesus
for eating with tax collectors. (2:16)
Third, they challenged Jesus
for not having his disciples fast. (2:18)
Fourth, they challenged him for permitting
his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. (2:24)
Finally, they challenged him
for healing a man on the Sabbath. (3:2)

The last sentence of today's reading
previews what is in store for Jesus.
Mark says: "And they made plans to kill Jesus."

How do we respond to people who challenge us
for following the dictates of our conscience?

Jesus said,
"If the world hates you,
just remember that it has hated me first. . . .
If they persecuted me,
they will persecute you too." John 15:18-20

Jesus silences the evil spirits

Thursday

Mark 3:7-12

"You are God's Son!"

Angels are called "sons of God." (Job 1:6)
Israel is called the "son of God." (Exodus 4:22)
The king is called "God's son." (2 Samuel 7:14)
The just are called "God's sons." (Sirach 4:10)
The Bible uses the title "son of God"
to refer to anyone close to God.

Why, then, did Jesus silence the evil spirits
for calling him the "Son of God"?

The answer is unavoidable.
Mark interprets their use of the title
to mean something much more
than what it usually means in Scripture.
It means what Mark intends it to mean
in the opening sentence of his Gospel.
Jesus is the "Son of God" in the literal sense.

But Jesus knows the people aren't yet ready
for this earth-shaking revelation.
They must be educated to it gradually.

What's there about Jesus that speaks to us
most eloquently of his divine sonship?

"This man was really the Son of God!" Mark 15:39

Jesus chooses the Twelve

Friday

Mark 3:13-19

"I call you and will send you."

Every personal relationship with Jesus
follows a similar pattern.
We may sum it up in two words: *come* and *go*.

Today's reading puts it this way:
Jesus says to those whom he called to himself,
"I have chosen you to be with me."
Then he adds,
"I will also send you out to preach."

In other words,
first Jesus makes the Twelve his *disciples*,
a word that comes from the Latin word
discipulus, meaning "learner."

Then Jesus makes them his *apostles*,
a word that comes from the Greek word
apostulus, meaning "to go forth."

What is true of the Twelve
is true, in varying degrees, of all Christians.
We are "called" to be "sent."

Do we "go forth," realizing we preach
a sermon to all we meet by our actions?

Lord, speak to me; then speak through me.

Jesus' family worries about him

Saturday

Mark 3:20-21

"He's gone mad!"

J. D. Salinger wrote a story called "Teddy."
In the story,
young Teddy talks about how hard it is
to try to live a spiritual life in today's world.
He says:

"I mean it's very hard to meditate
and live a spiritual life in America.
People think you're a freak if you try to.
My father thinks I'm a freak, in a way.
And my mother—well
she doesn't think it's good for me
to think about God all the time.
She thinks it's bad for my health."

Jesus had the same problem
with his relatives and close friends.
His lack of food and proper rest alarmed them.
"Let's take charge of him," they said in effect,
"before he is permanently damaged."

How do we view deeply committed Christians?

"The disciples were begging Jesus [to eat]. . . .
But he answered, 'I have food to eat
that you know nothing about.'" John 4:31-32

Jesus warns of the unforgivable sin

Monday

Mark 3:22-30

“Reject the Spirit; reject forgiveness.”

An African boy and three Western men survived a plane crash in the jungle. The boy said he knew the way to safety. But the men refused to believe him, thinking he was too young to know. Eventually the men went their own way and perished.

This story may provide an insight into the unforgivable sin against the Spirit.

People who rejected Jesus' offer of help doomed themselves, just as the Western men doomed themselves by rejecting the African boy's offer of help.

Not even Jesus can help us if we deny he has the power to do so, or reject his offer to do so.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: Are we cutting ourselves off from the forgiveness of Jesus in any way?

Today's reading also invites us to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. (Ephesians 4:32)

Jesus talks about his family

Tuesday

Mark 3:31-35

“Whoever does God's will is family to me.”

H. G. Wells writes in *The Outline of History*: “The doctrine of the kingdom of Heaven . . . is certainly one of the most revolutionary doctrines that ever stirred and changed human thought.”

Wells goes on to say that since God is the Father of all, he can't show favor to a few any more than the sun can shine on a few.

Therefore, doctrine of the kingdom sweeps away all restrictive ideas of family. The Father's love breaks down all barriers. Anyone who is a member of God's kingdom is a member of God's family.

In other words, membership in God's family is determined not by blood, but by faith.

Do we treat all who do God's will as family?

“In Christ there is no East or West,
In him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.” John Oxenham

Parable of the Sower

Wednesday

Mark 4:1-20

“Listen if you have ears!”

Jesus started out by teaching in synagogues. Now he introduces a switch. The sandy seashore becomes his synagogue, and a fishing boat becomes his pulpit.

Jesus started out by teaching with statements. Now he introduces another switch. He uses simple stories from everyday life to teach the people about eternal life.

Why did Jesus switch to stories?

First, stories attracted people's attention, made them think, and were easy to remember. Second, stories tested people's hearts. If their hearts were right, people could sense the truth of Jesus' teaching. The stories of Jesus contained just enough light for a person who wanted to know the truth and just enough shadow for a person who wanted to remain in darkness.

How open are we to all of Jesus' teachings?

Lord, help us open our ears to your voice, our minds to your truth, and our hearts to your love.

Jesus continues his teaching

Thursday

Mark 4:21-25

“The little you have will be taken.”

A monk spent his whole life
sitting in a dark cave, meditating.
His disciples brought him
the few grains of wheat that he ate
and the few drops of water that he drank.

Because the monk never walked
or went outside into the light, he eventually
lost his ability to walk and to see.

This may give us an insight into Jesus’ words
that to those who have, more will be given
and to those who have not,
what little they have will be taken from them.

Spiritual powers are like physical powers.
The more we use them, the stronger they get.
The less we use them, the weaker they get.
If we never use them, they soon lose
the little power they once had.

How do we use spiritual powers, like faith?

“If you had faith as big as a mustard seed,
you could say to this mulberry tree,
‘Pull yourself up by the roots and plant yourself
in the sea!’ and it would obey you.” Luke 17:6

Parable of the Growing Seed

Friday

Mark 4:26-34

“The soil produces of itself.”

If the Roman army would have had airplanes,
Jewish Zealots would have hijacked them.

Zealots were religious and political fanatics.
They believed
the first step in establishing God’s kingdom
was to drive the Romans into the sea.
Jesus may have been thinking about the Zealots
when he told his Parable of the Growing Seed.

The point of the parable
is that God’s kingdom is a gift from God
and under God’s control.
God’s kingdom can’t be set up by force
any more than it can be destroyed by force.

After hearing this parable,
most Zealots would have ridiculed Jesus.
But some did follow him.
One was Simon the Zealot,
who became one of his apostles. (Mark 3:18)

How can we cooperate with God
in spreading his kingdom across the earth?

“Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come.”
Matthew 6:9-10 (KJV)

Jesus stills the storm

Saturday

Mark 4:35-41

They were in great danger.

John Newton was a slave trader in the 1700s.
One night a violent storm
tossed his slave ship about like driftwood.
Newton panicked and cried out to God,
“If you see us safely through this storm,
I will stop this business and become your slave.”

The ship survived and Newton kept his promise.
Later, as a minister of the gospel,
he wrote the words to this popular song
to celebrate his conversion:

“Amazing grace; how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found—
Was blind, but now I see.”

Like the disciples in today’s reading,
Newton learned a great truth during the storm:
Jesus is always ready to help us;
we need only call upon him.

Recall a time
when Jesus helped us in a difficult situation.

Lord of the wind and the waves,
calm our storms when all seems lost.

Jesus exorcises a man

Monday

Mark 5:1-20

"Come out of this man!"

An old saying cautions us
"not to miss the forest for all the trees."
Today's reading is an example of this danger.
We can become so distracted
by the curious details of this unusual story
that we miss its main point.

The main point of the story
is not how the man lived among the tombs,
nor how the herd of pigs leaped into the sea.
It is Jesus' amazing power
in driving out the demons from the man.

It is this amazing power of Jesus
that frightens the townspeople and makes them
ask Jesus to leave their territory.
Jesus does depart, but not before
leaving behind an enthusiastic disciple
in the person of the exorcised man.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
How deep is our faith in Jesus' power
to forgive us and to heal us?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
Jesus, help us open our heart
to your forgiveness and to your healing.

Jesus heals a woman

Tuesday

Mark 5:21-43

She touched his cloak.

Jesus healed many people
by touching the sick portion of their body.
He touched the deaf-mute's tongue. (Mark 7:33)
He touched the blind man's eyes. (Mark 8:25)
He touched the leper's skin. (Mark 1:41)

Likewise,
people sought healing by touching Jesus.
The woman in today's story did it.
People on stretchers did it. (Mark 6:56)
The walking sick did it. (Mark 3:10)

When Jesus touched people
or was touched by them, power went out
from him. (Mark 5:30, Luke 6:19, Luke 8:46)

Today we still feel a strong desire
to touch Jesus or to be touched by him.
One way we can fulfill this desire
is in the sacraments.

Does our faith tell us that we are in touch
with Jesus when we receive the sacraments?

Lord, reach out and touch us.
Let your healing power
flow out from your body into ours.

Jesus is rejected by his own

Wednesday

Mark 6:1-6

"Isn't he Mary's son?"

Young Paride Taban fled to Uganda
when religious persecution hit Sudan, Africa.
The boy entered a seminary
and became a priest.
After his ordination he went back to Sudan
to serve his native countrymen.

His own people looked hard at him and said,
"Do you mean to tell us, Paride,
that you are now a priest?
We find that hard to believe.
You are black like us.
You are a member of the Madi tribe.
How can you be a priest of God,
like the white missionaries?"

Two years later the same people
loved Father Taban with a deep affection.

Jesus experienced the same kind of rejection
before he was accepted by many of his people.

How do we handle rejection by others,
especially by people we thought were friends?

"Do not let evil defeat you;
instead, conquer evil with good." Romans 12:21

Jesus sends out the Twelve

Thursday

Mark 6:7-13

They went out and preached.

A missionary in New Guinea tells this story. An old man, a recent convert to Christianity, used to come daily to the mission hospital to read the Gospel to outpatients.

One day the man experienced trouble reading. The doctor checked the old man's eyes and discovered he was going blind.

Next day the old man didn't show up at the hospital. Someone said he had gone off into the hills alone. Weeks later a boy led the doctor to the man.

The old man explained to the doctor that he was memorizing the gospels while he could still see. "Soon I'll be back at the hospital, Doctor," he said, "and I'll continue my work of teaching the Gospel to the outpatients."

How do we overcome obstacles that keep us from sharing the Gospel?

Jesus said, "There is a large harvest, but few workers to gather it in." Luke 10:2

John is executed

Friday

Mark 6:14-29

"Bring me John's head."

John quickly vanished from the picture after Jesus' baptism.

The immediate cause of his disappearance was his criticism of Herod. (Mark 6:17-18)

Commenting on Herod's attitude toward John, a first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, says:

"Herod feared that John's preaching might spark a revolt among the people. . . .

Moved by this fear, he arrested John and dispatched him in chains to Machaerus. . . . There, John was executed."

Today Machaerus lies in ruins high up on the eastern cliffs of the Dead Sea. The old stone fortress sits on a lonely ridge, surrounded by deep ravines. The rare adventurer who climbs up to the desolate spot can still see the forbidding dungeons that once held unfortunate prisoners like John.

Why do so many good people die tragic deaths?

"Lord, whatsoever this day may bring, Thy name be praised." Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Jesus goes off with the Twelve

Saturday

Mark 6:30-34

"Let's go off by ourselves."

Years ago Dr. W. R. Luxton wrote:

"I cannot overstate the importance of the habit of quiet meditation for health of body, mind, and spirit. Modern man's life is grossly abnormal. . . . We have neither time nor opportunity for quiet. . . . We need to explore our lives . . . as we sit quietly and unhurried in his presence."

Jesus knew the need for quiet meditation. He made it a practice to go off by himself to meditate quietly. (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12)

Jesus also taught his disciples to do the same, as today's reading shows.

Do we try to spend a few minutes each day in quiet meditation?

"One of the greatest necessities in America is to discover creative solitude." Carl Sandburg

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Jesus heals the sick

Monday

Mark 6:53-56

Whoever touched him got well.

Fifty-two Americans were held hostage by Iran for 444 days in 1980-81.

On Christmas day of 1980, three clergymen were permitted to meet with the hostages, hold religious services, and give them messages from home.

One clergyman told hostage Barry Rosen, "I saw your wife, Barbara, and your son, Alexander, in New York. Alexander is a lovely boy; he sends you this." With that he placed a kiss on Barry's cheek. Barry had all he could do to fight back tears.

The power of touch is one of the most powerful forms of communication there is.

Small wonder people sought to touch Jesus. Small wonder many of them were healed when they touched him.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How do we use our own power of touch?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us share with others your gift of touch to us.

Jesus challenges some Pharisees

Tuesday

Mark 7:1-13

"Their hearts are far from me."

William Barclay tells the story of a Jewish rabbi who was in a Roman prison. The rabbi used his small daily ration of water not for drinking, but for the religious ritual of handwashing before eating. Because of his determination to obey the rules of ritual cleanliness, he nearly died of thirst.

This story helps us appreciate the shock the Pharisees had

when they saw Jesus' disciples eating food with hands that hadn't been ritually washed.

The strict observance of the law by Pharisees, however, was a weakness for some of them. Their concern for external regulations sometimes overshadowed their concern for internal attitudes.

Rituals became more important for some than things of the heart, like love and pity.

To what extent do we honor God externally, but keep him at a distance in our hearts?

Lord, let our external acts of worship be a true reflection of our hearts.

Jesus talks about evil

Wednesday

Mark 7:14-23

"Evil begins in the heart."

Antiochus IV was a brutal Syrian king. His armies occupied Israel around 170 B.C. Antiochus was determined to wipe out all Jewish belief. So he launched a terrible religious persecution.

An example of the violence is recorded in the Second Book of Maccabees. There seven brothers are tortured and killed as their widowed mother looks on— all because they refused to eat unclean food.

(2 Maccabees 7)

No wonder the Pharisees reacted so angrily when, with one stroke, Jesus swept aside the dietary laws their ancestors had died for.

The point of Jesus' teaching, however, is this: What makes people unclean is not what goes into the stomach, but what comes out of the heart.

Do we sometimes treat our religious practice as a set of external rules to be kept?

Lord, help us realize that religion is basically a thing of the heart.

Jesus rewards a woman's persistence

Thursday

Mark 7:24-30

The demon left her daughter.

The name *Tyre* means "the rock."
The city of Tyre may have gotten its name from two huge rocks that jut from the sea, just off its coastline.

To the region of this city Jesus now comes.

A Phoenician woman who had heard of Jesus' power over evil spirits asks him to expel a demon from her daughter.

Jesus seems reluctant to do so at first. Perhaps he wishes to test her for some reason. The woman recognizes this and presses Jesus. Deeply moved by her persistence, Jesus says, "Go back home, where you will find that the demon has gone out of your daughter."

The woman returns home and finds her daughter completely well.

How persistent are we in our prayers to Jesus?

"If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake up somebody."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Jesus heals a deaf-mute

Friday

Mark 7:31-37

"Open up!"

Helen Keller was blind, deaf, and dumb. In *The Story of My Life*, she tells how her inability to communicate with people triggered violent fits of temper.

One day a Miss Fuller devised a way to teach Helen to talk. She put Helen's hand to her face to feel the position of her lips and tongue when she spoke a word to Helen.

Helen then tried to duplicate the positions and say the same word.

After long practice, Helen learned to speak. Her joy was unbounded. She wrote later: "I used to repeat ecstatically, 'I am not dumb now.'"

This story gives us some insight into how the deaf and dumb man in today's reading must have felt when Jesus healed him.

How grateful are we for our healthy faculties of speech, hearing, and seeing?

Father, help us use our eyes, ears, and speech for your greater honor and glory.

Jesus feeds four thousand people

Saturday

Mark 8:1-10

Everybody ate and was full.

The big surprise about this story is that Mark tells it at all. Mark is picky when it comes to miracle stories. He avoids repetition. Yet Mark describes a similar story in 6:34-44. Why this story, then?

The main reason is the one Augustine noted 1,500 years ago. The first feeding involved only Jews. This one, judging from where it happened (Mark 7:31), included Gentiles, too.

So the story isn't a repetition. Jesus himself makes this clear. (Mark 8:19-21)
The story anticipates the day when Gentiles and Jews will break bread together. (Acts 10)
The real miracle isn't the feeding. The real miracle is the fellowship of Gentiles and Jews that the feeding foreshadows.

How open are we to all the people who gather to break bread with us each Sunday?

"Christ himself has brought us peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people."

Ephesians 2:14

Jesus talks about signs

Monday

Mark 8:11-13

“Why do they seek a sign?”

Bedouins are desert nomads.
They wander about pitching their tents
wherever nightfall finds them.

Someone once asked a bedouin,
“How do you know there is a God?”
The bedouin replied, “The same way
I know an animal has crossed the desert:
by its footprints in the sand.”
In other words, for the bedouin,
the bright stars in the midnight sky,
the tiny flowers in the desert sand,
and the palm trees of an oasis are signs of God.

The problem some Pharisees had
was not that Jesus hadn’t given them any signs.
It was that they had chosen to blind themselves
to Jesus’ signs.
To show them more signs would be
like showing a blind man more pictures.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves:
How open are we to God’s “footprints” in life?

Today’s reading invites us to pray:
“O LORD, our Lord, your greatness is seen
in all the world!” Psalms 8:1

Jesus talks about trust

Tuesday

Mark 8:14-21

“You still don’t understand?”

A seminarian was sent on a begging pilgrimage.
His teachers wanted him to learn firsthand
what it was like to have to beg for food
and put all his trust in God.

Each night, at sunset,
the seminarian began to feel the panic
at not having a place to stay
or not having a meal to eat before nightfall.
This panic plagued him night after night,

even though previous nights had taught him
that someone always took him in and fed him.

In today’s reading we see the same concern
gnawing at the disciples.

They fret about not having enough to eat,
even though Jesus has fed big crowds
on two different occasions.

“Hasn’t experience taught you anything?”
Jesus seems to say.

“Where is your trust that I care about you
and will take care of you?”

How much trust do we have in Jesus?

Lord, help us realize that Jesus loves us
more than we do ourselves.

Jesus heals a blind man

Wednesday

Mark 8:22-26

Jesus placed his hands on the man again.

People who have to go to a doctor or a dentist
for treatment consider themselves lucky
if they get off with just one appointment.
Usually it takes several appointments
to clear up some physical ailment.

Isn’t it strange, then,
to think that one session of prayer is enough
to clear up some spiritual ailment?

Today’s reading shows
that even Jesus repeated his efforts
to heal a person of blindness.
He laid hands on the man twice
before the man was able to see clearly.

It’s also significant that Jesus prayed
three times in the Garden of Gethsemane.
Each time he repeated the same words.

How persevering are we in our spiritual efforts?

“The joy of reading Virgil comes
after the bore of learning him . . .
the success of marriage comes
after the failure of the honeymoon.”

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Peter professes his faith in Jesus

Thursday

Mark 8:27-33

"Who do you say I am?"

In *The History of Napoleon Bonaparte*,
J. S. C. Abbot quotes Napoleon
as saying to General Bertrand:

"I know men, and I tell you
that Jesus Christ is not a man. . . .
You speak of Caesar, of Alexander . . .
and the enthusiasm they enkindled
in the hearts of their soldiers;
but can you conceive of a dead man
making conquests with an army
faithfully and entirely devoted to his memory?"

Napoleon's point is
that Jesus isn't just *another man*.
Jesus continues to transform minds and hearts.

Who, then, is Jesus?
Peter gives this answer to Jesus
in today's reading: "You are the Messiah."

How has our own understanding of Jesus
grown and developed over the years?

To the lost, Jesus is the way.
To the ignorant, he is the truth.
To the dead, he is the life.

Jesus talks about life

Friday

Mark 8:34-9:1

"What if you gain all but lose your life?"

In 1923 a high-level business meeting was held
in Chicago's old Edgewater Beach Hotel.
Present were nine of the most powerful men
in America.

They included such people as the presidents of
the nation's largest steel company,
the nation's largest gas company,
the nation's largest utility company.

Twenty-five years later,
where were these nine powerful men?

Three had died penniless,
three had committed suicide,
two were in prison, and one had gone insane.

The fates of these men
illustrate Jesus' point in today's reading:
"Does a person gain anything
if he wins the whole world but loses his life?"

To what extent do we place a higher priority
on the things of this world
than we do on the things of the next world?

"O LORD . . . teach us how short our life is,
so that we may become wise." Psalm 90:1, 12

Jesus is transfigured

Saturday

Mark 9:2-13

A change came over Jesus.

Malcolm Muggeridge and a British TV crew
were making a documentary on Mother Teresa.
They wanted to film her and her sisters
at work at the Home for the Dying in Calcutta.
But the cameramen said it would be impossible
to get a picture because the light was too dim.
They decided to try anyway.

To their surprise the footage was spectacular.
It was bathed in a mysterious, warm light.

Muggeridge, who was not Christian at the time,
is "absolutely convinced" the light came from
the loving people in the home. He said,
"This love is luminous,
like the haloes artists have seen
and made visible round the heads of the saints.
I find it not at all surprising that the luminosity
should register on a photographic film."

A similar light must have radiated from Jesus
during his transfiguration.

Have we ever noticed a glow in someone?

Jesus said, "You are like light
for the whole world." Matthew 5:14

Jesus talks about faith

Monday

Mark 9:14-29

"Everything is possible if you believe."

Lew Miller was a war casualty who went from 190 pounds to 90 pounds. But Miller was a man of great faith. He believed Jesus' words in today's reading: "Everything is possible for the person who has faith."

Miller began to pray for healing, meditating on how it might take place.

He says:

"I created strong mental images. . . . I visualized my body coming alive with life-giving spirit. . . . I saw myself walking . . . running."

Lew Miller, *Your Divine Connection*

Slowly, Miller began to regain his health. Doctors were amazed, but Miller regarded his recovery as something a person of faith might reasonably expect.

Today's gospel invites us to ask ourselves: Do we believe faith makes everything possible?

Today's reading invites us to pray:

"I do have faith, but not enough. Help me have more!" Mark 9:24

Jesus talks about leadership

Tuesday

Mark 9:30-37

"If you want to be first, serve others."

Whittaker Chambers is a former Communist. His best-selling book *Witness* tells how he had three heroes in his youth. One was a communist-party leader in Poland named Felix Djerjinsky.

In his youth

Djerjinsky was a political prisoner in Poland. While in prison he insisted on doing the dirtiest jobs, like cleaning the public restrooms and showers.

He believed that a true leader should be willing to do the lowest jobs to set an example for the others to follow.

Djerjinsky's ideas about leadership dovetail with Jesus' words in today's reading:

"Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all."

How willing are we to serve, rather than to be served by others?

"You can't lead anyone any further than you have gone yourself." Gene Mauch

Jesus talks about discipleship

Wednesday

Mark 9:38-40

"Whoever is not against us is for us."

In the time of Jesus many people believed that demons caused certain mental and physical illnesses.

One way to combat these illnesses was to expel the demon causing it. This could be done by invoking the name of a more powerful spirit to expel the demon. A lower power couldn't resist a higher power. The 19th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles describes such an exorcism.

When Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us," he is merely saying that so long as evil is destroyed, it makes no difference who destroys it. The result is the same: good triumphs.

Do we recognize that there are many ways to promote God's kingdom, or do we tend to favor our own way as the best?

"There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served." 1 Corinthians 12:4-5

Jesus talks about sin

Thursday

Mark 9:41-50

"Make any sacrifice to avoid sin."

The Italian schoolgirl Maria Goretti gave up her life rather than be a part of sin. The English statesman Thomas More gave up his life rather than be a part of sin. These two examples illustrate what Jesus is talking about in today's reading.

Jesus uses the most graphic images imaginable to dramatize that we must be willing to root out from our lives whatever threatens our relationship with God. Rooting it out may be painful.

"It might seem like cutting out part of our own body, but if we are to know real *life*, real happiness, real peace, it must go. This may sound bleak and stern, but in reality it is only facing the facts of life." William Barclay

How willingly do we give up whatever threatens our relationship with God?

"In your heart enthrone him:
There let him subdue
All that is not holy,
All that is not true." C. Noel

Jesus talks about marriage

Friday

Mark 10:1-12

"The two become one."

A young man knocked at the door of a house. A voice from within said, "Who is it?" The young man said, "It's me. I've come to ask permission to marry your daughter." The voice from within said, "You're not ready; come back in a year."

A year later the young man returned and knocked again.

The voice from within said, "Who is it?" The young man said, "It's us.

We've come to ask your permission to marry." The voice from within said, "You're now ready. Please come in."

Marriage is thinking and acting as one, not as individuals.

How much do we think of ourselves first and others second?

"Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction." Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Jesus blesses the children

Saturday

Mark 10:13-16

Jesus placed his hands on them.

A mother used to say "God bless you" each time her three-year-old sneezed. One night she tucked the little girl in bed, kissed her, and said, "God bless you." The little girl said, "But I didn't sneeze."

The little girl's remark illustrates a sad point. Parents no longer bless their children, as they once did. Parents should revive this ancient practice.

All they need do is place both hands on the child's head, as Jesus did in the reading, and say whatever words seem appropriate, like "May God bless you and keep you always."

Would we feel at ease blessing our children? What keeps us from blessing them?

"May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you.
May he look upon you with kindness
and always give you his peace."

Aaron's blessing, adapted from Numbers 6:24-26

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Aaron's blessing, adapted from Numbers 6:24-26

Jesus talks about wealth

Monday

Mark 10:17-27

He went away sad.

One day an Indian boy found a priceless pearl.
He knew his worries were over.
He would never have to work again in his life.

But when the boy tried to sell the pearl,
the buyers put him off.
In the days ahead
the boy was attacked several times.
Now he knew the pearl buyers
were out to rob him and possibly kill him.
He had to choose
between the pearl and his life.
With the pearl buyers looking on,
the boy went down to the beach, took his pearl,
and threw it into the sea as far as he could.

The boy's decision stands in contrast to that
of the rich young man's in today's reading.

The two stories invite us to ask ourselves:
What hold do material possessions have on us?

The stories invite us to reflect:
"When wealth is lost, nothing is lost;
when health is lost, something is lost;
when character is lost, everything is lost."
Anonymous

Jesus talks about the next life

Tuesday

Mark 10:28-31

"Many who are last now will be first then."

The Scottish novelist James Matthew Barrie
has written a play that centers around
the servant of a wealthy family.
The poor man is ordered about cruelly
from morning to night.
His status is the lowest imaginable.

One day the family goes on an ocean voyage.
A shipwreck ensues, and the family and servant
are washed ashore on a deserted island.

The family is totally helpless in the situation.
The servant alone knows what to do.

In the days ahead
the servant emerges as the leader of the group.
Suddenly he is seen for what he is
and is elevated to the highest status.

The story recalls Jesus' words that many
who are last in this life will be first in the next.

Do we tend to judge people
by the world's standards rather than by God's?

"There's an eternity behind
and an eternity before
and this little speck in the center." John Brown

Jesus talks about discipleship

Wednesday

Mark 10:32-45

"Serve as I have served."

The Italian sculptor Donatello
was a contemporary of Michaelangelo.
They say Donatello once refused a block
of marble from the quarries of Florence
because it was "too flawed."
It was then delivered to Michaelangelo
who carved from it his masterpiece, "David."

Today's reading shows us how "flawed"
some of Jesus' disciples were.
James and John are portrayed as jockeying
for a place of honor in God's kingdom.
A lesser leader
would have rejected ambitious men like this.
Jesus carved from them the foundation
upon which he eventually built his church.

Do we accept people and situations
for what they are,
and then try to make the best of them?

"A blind man's world
is bounded by the limits of his touch;
an ignorant man's world
by the limits of his knowledge;
a great man's world by the limits of his vision."
E. Paul Harvey

Jesus heals a blind man

Thursday

Mark 10:46-52

"Your faith has healed you."

A *Peanuts* cartoon shows Charlie Brown standing alone. Peppermint Patty passes by and, as she does, Charlie calls out to her, "Believe in me!" But she keeps right on going.

Next, Snoopy passes by and Charlie calls out, "Believe in me!"

But Snoopy just keeps right on going.

Lucy then walks by and the same thing happens.

The last picture shows Charlie sitting all alone. His head is in his hands and he is saying, "I just can't get people to believe in me."

Jesus ran into the same problem in his day. Those who did believe in him, however, were rewarded in a remarkable way.

A case in point is Bartimaeus in today's reading.

How deep is our faith that Jesus can heal us of whatever defects we have?

"Faith is like love; it cannot be forced."

Arthur Schopenhauer

Jesus talks about faith

Friday

Mark 11:11-26

"Have faith!"

Elton Trueblood makes a disturbing observation in his book *The Predicament of Modern Man*.

He says that leaders of our society are trying to get people to live by an ethic that grew out of a religious tradition that many people no longer accept or follow. For example, how can you expect people to obey the ethic of the Ten Commandments if they don't believe that these commandments came from God?

"In a word," says Trueblood, "ours is a cut-flower civilization. Beautiful as cut flowers may be, they will eventually die because they are severed from their sustaining roots."

The cut flower, of course, is the ethic; and the sustaining roots are the faith that produced the ethic.

What can we do, personally, to respond to the crisis in religious faith in modern life?

"What a man believes may be ascertained, not from his creed, but from the assumption on which he habitually acts." G. B. Shaw

Jesus' authority is challenged

Saturday

Mark 11:27-33

"We do not know."

Tareyton cigarettes ran an extensive advertising campaign years ago. It simply showed a person with a black eye smoking a Tareyton.

Sometimes the person was a young man; sometimes it was a young woman; sometimes it was a middle-aged person. But regardless of who it was, the punch line was always the same: "I'd rather fight than switch."

There were a lot of people in the time of Jesus who were like that.

They had their minds all made up about what the Messiah would be like. And they would rather "fight than switch."

Are we open to different points of view, or do we tend to be inordinately close-minded about certain things? What things?

Lord, "you called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness."

St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Parable of the Vineyard Tenants

Monday

Mark 12:1-12

“Finally, the owner sent his son.”

Few parables dramatize the patience of God so dramatically as this one.

Three times the owner dispatches servants to obtain his share of the harvest.

And three times the vineyard tenants mistreat the servants.

Finally, the owner sends his “own dear son.” When this great overture of patience fails, the owner has no other alternative but to take action against the vineyard tenants.

God (the vineyard owner), who was so patient with the leaders of Israel (tenants), is patient with us, also.

But as with the leaders of Israel, so with us, the day will come

when God will hold us accountable for any failure on our part to respond to his generous patience.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: In what area of our life is God being especially patient with us?

Today’s reading invites us to pray: Lord, don’t let your patience be lost on us. Help us be as patient with others as you are with us.

Leaders try to trip up Jesus

Tuesday

Mark 12:13-17

“Bring me a coin!”

Jews detested having to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. They especially detested having to pay them with a Roman coin bearing the emperor’s image.

The question put to Jesus was designed to get him into deep trouble, no matter how he answered.

If Jesus said it was lawful to pay taxes, he would incur the anger of the people. If he said it was unlawful, he risked being reported to the Romans and being arrested as a revolutionary.

Jesus exposes the insincerity of his questioners by asking them for a Roman coin. To possess it was to admit a Roman obligation. The crowd would have been impressed that Jesus did not carry a Roman coin.

How sincere are we in our dealings with other people?

“Whoever is dishonest in small matters will be dishonest in large ones.” Luke 16:10

The Sadducees question Jesus

Wednesday

Mark 12:18-27

Jesus said, “He is the God of the living.”

In the film *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, there’s a beautiful sequence in which a deaf man, named Mr. Singer, asks a teenage girl what music sounds like.

The smiling teenager stands in front of him so that he can read her lips. She also gestures with her hands and her body. But nothing works. Finally, she and Mr. Singer laugh and give up.

Jesus ran into a similar problem when he tried to teach people about heaven. It was something many could not comprehend. For example, in today’s reading, the Sadducees imagine heaven to be a kind of “glorified” version of earth.

But heaven is not a “glorified” version of earth. It is an infinitely different kind of reality.

How do we view heaven?

“What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God has prepared for those who love him.” 1 Corinthians 2:9

A scribe questions Jesus

Thursday

Mark 12:28-34

Jesus said, "Love God and neighbor."

There were two tendencies among the teachers of the law in Israel.

One was to expand the law into hundreds, even thousands, of little laws.

The other was to contract the law into as few sentences as possible. For example, a disciple once asked a rabbi if he could sum up the entire law while standing on one foot.

Jesus is asked a similar question by a scribe in today's gospel.

Jesus sums up the entire law in terms of love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . [and] love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Concretely, how do we express our love for God and for our neighbor in everyday life?

"We take almost more care to conceal our love than our hate." Ludwig Borne

Jesus asks a question

Friday

Mark 12:35-37

"Why does David call the Messiah 'Lord'?"

Jesus' question boils down to this:

"If the Messiah is David's son, why does David call him "my Lord"?"

Is Jesus implying that the Messiah isn't really David's son?

Not at all!

The point Jesus is making is this: The Messiah is not *just* David's son. The Messiah is also the Lord.

Even David himself must bow down to him. For the word David uses to refer to the Messiah is *Lord* (*kurios* in Greek), the word reserved for Yahweh.

In other words, while humanly descended from David, the Messiah transcends human descent. He is not only the son of David but also the Son of God, the Lord.

What is there about Jesus that convinces us that he is the Lord?

Thomas looked at Jesus and exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" John 20:28

Jesus praises a widow

Saturday

Mark 12:38-44

"She gave all she had."

In his book *How to Be a Winning Loser* Jim Macholtz has a modern version of today's reading. It goes something like this:

A coach and his assistants were timing various members of the track team doing the 200-yard dash. Several runners posted superb times. Then came a runner with a very slow time. But the coach said to his assistants:

"This young athlete has given more than any of the others; for those others who ran had more than enough endurance, but he, with less than enough, gave all he possibly could."

How generous are we in giving our all in whatever we do?

"The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The Beatitudes

Monday

Matthew 5:1-12

“Happy are those who mourn.”

Dr. Tom Dooley excited the imagination of the world in the 1950s. He was a young doctor who went to Asia to work among the dirt poor. One day Tom revealed to someone that he had always loved the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. He said:

“‘Blessed are they that mourn . . .’ means something special to me. . . . *Mourn*, as it is used in the Bible, doesn’t mean ‘to be unhappy.’ It simply means . . . to be more aware of sorrow in the world than of pleasure. . . . If you’re extrasensitive to sorrow and do something . . . to make it lighter—you can’t help but be happy.”

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: How sensitive are we to sorrow and pain in the world around us? In our own families? What are we doing about it?

Today’s reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us do more than admire the Sermon on the Mount; help us live it.

Jesus teaches about witness

Tuesday

Matthew 5:13-16

“You are like light.”

One day a missionary began his class on Jesus by saying to some children:

“Today I want to tell you about someone whom you all must meet. He’s a person who loves you and cares for you even more than your own family and friends. He’s a person who’s kinder than the kindest person you know. He’s a person who forgives you no matter how often you do wrong.”

The missionary noticed a little boy getting more and more excited as he talked. Suddenly the little fellow couldn’t contain himself any longer. He blurted out, “I know the man you’re talking about. He lives on our street.”

How closely does our life resemble Jesus’ life? What is our most Jesus-like virtue?

“Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my spirit.”

John Henry Newman

Jesus teaches about law

Wednesday

Matthew 5:17-19

“They will be great.”

A high school boy tells this story on himself. One morning his father was leaving for work. He was about a half-hour early, as usual.

The boy said, “Dad, why don’t you relax at home for an extra half-hour, rather than go to work so early?” The boy’s father said, “I don’t go to work immediately; I usually catch the eight o’clock Mass at Holy Trinity.”

The boy said he gulped twice. This was the first time his father ever mentioned going to daily Mass. “I was really impressed,” the boy said. “It gave me a new attitude toward Mass. It also gave me a new insight into my dad.”

How convinced are we that we teach others, especially the young, more by example than by word? What does our example say about our faith?

Lord, help us realize that we may be the only book on the faith some people will ever read.

Jesus talks about anger

Thursday

Matthew 5:20-26

"Make peace with your brother."

During the hectic early days of the Civil Rights Movement, there was a lengthy bus boycott by blacks in Montgomery, Alabama. Whites retaliated by firebombing the homes of black people and threatening their lives.

In this irrational atmosphere of hate, Martin Luther King stood up in his Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Looking out across the sea of faces, he told his congregation that peace and forgiveness lay in their hands.

King went on to explain to them that the act of forgiving "must always be initiated by the person who has been wronged."

Do we forgive those who hurt us, or do we nurse resentment toward them?

"Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start." Martin Luther King

Jesus teaches about adultery

Friday

Matthew 5:27-32

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off."

There's a delightful scene in *Peter Pan*. The kids are jumping up and down. Peter has just flown through the air. The kids try to fly, too, but can't. They ask Peter, "How do you do it?" Peter says, "Think lovely thoughts. They'll lift you up into the air."

Peter Pan's advice applies to today's reading. Jesus warns us that we can sin with our minds as well as with our bodies: "Anyone who looks

at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty . . . in his heart."

What defense is there against such thoughts? One defense is Peter Pan's advice: "Think lovely thoughts. They'll lift you up into the air." In other words, keep the mind filled with more wholesome thoughts.

How careful are we with our mental activity?

Lord, help us realize that the best way to keep weeds out of the garden of the mind is to plant it so full of flowers that weeds have no place to grow.

Jesus teaches about oaths

Saturday

Matthew 5:33-37

"Say 'Yes' or 'No.'"

A high school teacher asked her students to do a "pencil" meditation on some teaching of Jesus. One student wrote:

"Every day I hitchhike home from school. Every day I meet the same kind of person. He's the one who motions he's going to turn so he won't have to pick you up. Then as you watch him, he keeps right on going in the same direction.

"Lord, why aren't people more straightforward? Why don't they tell the truth, rather than mask their actions with excuses? Why don't they say 'No' when they mean 'No'?"

How straightforward are we with other people?

Lord, give us courage to be forthright in our dealings with others. Keep up from masking our actions. Help us live as Jesus taught. Help us say "Yes" when we mean "Yes" and "No" when we mean "No."

Jesus teaches about giving

Monday

Matthew 5:38-42

"Give to those who ask."

Almsgiving

was a respected virtue in ancient Israel.
The Jewish Talmud says,
"He who gives alms is greater than Moses."

But money was not the only kind of alms
people gave to the needy.
The Talmud says, "Whoever gives a small coin
to a poor person will receive six blessings,
but whoever gives a kind word to a poor person
will receive eleven blessings."

Maybe we can't always give money away,
but we can give something much more.
We can give forgiveness to our enemies,
kindness to the elderly, example to the young,
and love to all.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
How generous are we in our giving?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
Lord, help us imitate you in our own giving.
We ask you for a grain of sand;
you give us a beach.
We ask you for a drop of water;
you give us an ocean.

Jesus teaches about enemies

Tuesday

Matthew 5:43-48

"Love your enemies."

Years ago scientists held a seminar.
It dealt with describing new experiments
for unlocking nature's potential.
For example, one experiment involved
transmitting 200 TV programs simultaneously
on a cable the size of a human hair.

A person attending the fair
noticed that no experiment
dealt with unlocking human potentials.
Every experiment dealt with "things."

Later the person asked four successful people
what they would recommend to help people
unlock some of their human potentials.
One response was unexpected:

"Love your enemies.
Do this and you will discover within yourself
a potential for loving and forgiving
that you never dreamed you had."

Are there any special people we should forgive?

Lord,
teach us how to forgive offense
and to hug the offender.

Jesus teaches about charity

Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

"Don't show off your religion."

Dag Hammarskjold was Secretary-General
of the UN from 1953 until 1961.
He was killed in a plane crash on his way
to the Congo to try to negotiate a cease-fire.

When they cleaned out his apartment,
they found a personal journal with a note
saying it could be published—in case of death.
The journal, called *Markings*,
became an overnight best-seller in book stores.
One reason for its popularity
was that it was so personal and so honest.
For example, one entry read:

"Uneasy, uneasy, uneasy—why? . . .
Because anxious for the good opinion
of others . . . you have lowered yourself
to wondering what will happen in the end
to what you have done."
Then he added, "Bless your uneasiness
as a sign that there is still life in you."

How much are we controlled or influenced
by the opinions of other people?

Lord, give us the courage
not to do the right things for the wrong reasons.

Jesus teaches about prayer

Thursday

Matthew 6:7-15

"Pray like this."

Dag Hammarskjold's journal, *Markings*, reveals him to be a prayerful person. Although he had no declared religion, he was attracted to Christianity. He had a profound admiration for Jesus.

Hammarskjold was responsible for building the Meditation Room at the UN. One of the prayers he undoubtedly meditated on in this room was the Lord's Prayer. His journal contains several references to it. One of the most moving reads:

"Hallowed be Thy name, *not mine*,
Thy kingdom come, *not mine*,
Thy will be done, *not mine*."

What role does prayer have in our daily life?
Do we have a set place and time for prayer?

Lord,
help us keep in mind St. Augustine's advice:
"What we ought to pray for
is in the Lord's Prayer;
what is not in it,
we ought not pray for."

Jesus teaches about wealth

Friday

Matthew 6:19-23

"Your heart is where your riches are."

Years ago
the wire services carried an unusual news story.
A 90-year-old widow was found
in a rundown apartment in New York City.
She was near death from starvation.
She had lived on hot dogs
and had skimped on heating bills
by scrounging the neighborhood
for boxes to burn in an old iron stove.

Three weeks later
the woman died in a New York hospital.
When they cleaned out her apartment,
they found \$275,000 in paper money
stashed away in cardboard boxes.

Where is our treasure and what is it?

Lord, teach us the wisdom
of these words:
"It's good to have money
and things that money can buy,
but it's good, too,
to check up once in a while
to make sure you haven't lost the things
that money can't buy." George Horace Lorimer

Jesus talks about worry

Saturday

Matthew 6:24-34

"Don't worry."

A man was watching a clockmaker
hook up a pendulum to a grandfather's clock.
He thought to himself,
"That pendulum will have to tick for decades."
Then he began to do some quick calculations:
60 ticks a minute, 3,600 ticks an hour,
86,400 ticks a day, 604,800 ticks a week,
31,449,600 ticks a year.

The man imagined the pendulum saying,
"Oh, I'll never be able to make it!"
Then he thought, "Of course it will make it.
It has to make only one tick at a time."

Like Jesus' disciples, we worry about things.
What if a family member takes seriously ill?
What if our family income is suddenly stopped?
What if war comes?

Do we trust in God as much as we should?

Lord, help us imitate the pendulum.
Help us tick off one day at a time
and trust in you,
who love us more than we love ourselves.

Jesus talks about judging others

Monday

Matthew 7:1-5

"Don't judge."

A teacher gave her students this assignment:
"Tonight I want you to go home
and compliment your mother for something."

The next day
the students reported on the assignment.
One boy said, "It was a total disaster!"
He explained:

"After supper I told my mother,
'Gee, Mom, that was a great meal.'
She looked at me kind of funny and said,
'What are you setting me up for?'
'Nothing,' I said. 'It was really good!'
She said, 'Well, if it was so good,
show your appreciation by doing the dishes.'"

The boy meant the compliment,
but his mother jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
How prone are we to make rash judgments?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
Lord, help us realize that it is better
to be "set up" by someone occasionally
than to misjudge one innocent person.

Jesus teaches about discipleship

Tuesday

Matthew 7:6, 12-14

"The gate is narrow, the way is hard."

Sports Illustrated carried a story
about a Florida tennis academy for teenagers.
The school is run like a marine boot camp.
Lights out at ten. No TV on weekdays.
Absolute discipline on the tennis court.
Yet, committed teenagers flock to the school.

"The only reason I come here,"
said one 14-year-old, "is to play tennis.
I don't care about anything else.
I have my radio and my racket. That's enough."

Only the most committed young person
will enter the school's narrow gate
and travel its rough road.

But those who do
will find at the end of their journey
a joy the uncommitted can't even imagine.

How deep is our own personal commitment
to God's kingdom?

"Every athlete in training
submits to strict discipline,
in order to be crowned with a wreath
that will not last; but we do it for one
that will last forever." 1 Corinthians 9:25

Jesus talks about false prophets

Wednesday

Matthew 7:15-20

"Beware of false prophets."

Two Cleveland teenagers
got an idea for a comic strip character.
They tried to sell their idea
to a number of comic strip editors.
All the editors rejected it for the same reason:
The character was too foolish.

The teenagers
finally gave up on their character
and sold the permanent rights to him for \$130.

That character was Superman.

The editors turned out to be false prophets.
Because the teenagers believed them,
they sold a treasure for \$130.

Today there are a lot of people
who say it is foolish to love your enemies.
They say it is foolish
to put your faith in a book
that was written 2,000 years ago.

How influenced are we by false prophets?
How do we determine who is a false prophet?

Lord, give us the wisdom to recognize
false prophets and the courage to refute them.

Parable of the House Builders

Thursday

Matthew 7:21-29

“Do the word.”

A young husband had grown accustomed to his wife staying in bed while he got up alone, ate alone, and left for work alone.

One morning he awoke to find his wife up and cooking breakfast. He wondered, “Why the sudden change?” After breakfast he found the answer.

On his wife’s night table was the *Reader’s Digest*, open to the article that she had been reading the night before. It was entitled “Do European Women Make Better Wives?” Apparently the article had given his wife a fresh insight into sharing and serving. His wife was simply putting into practice what she had read.

Which of Jesus’ teachings do we find hardest to reduce to practice? Why?

Lord, help us realize that it’s not enough to read the Gospel, study it, or discuss it. We must put it into practice.

Jesus heals a leper

Friday

Matthew 8:1-4

He reached out and touched him.

Bill Russell, the famous basketball star, was giving a talk one night. After it was over, a woman came up and asked him to say a few special words to some boys she had brought from a nearby correctional facility.

Bill was familiar with boys like this. He grew up with them. So he told the boys to forget the past,

look to the future, and give it their best shot. Then he shook hands with each one.

Bill said later, “I wanted those kids to know that I cared about them enough to touch them.”

Touching people was also one of the ways Jesus showed people that he really cared about them.

How do we show people we care about them?

Lord, help us realize that one embrace or one warm touch of the hand can release more healing power than a bucketful of pills and medicine.

Jesus heals an officer’s servant

Saturday

Matthew 8:5-17

“Just give the order.”

“In a Roman legion there were 6,000 men; the legion was divided into 60 centuries, each century containing 100 men, and in command of each century there was a centurion.” William Barclay

Centurions are mentioned surprisingly often in the New Testament, each time with respect.

For example, it was a centurion who stood beneath the cross and said of Jesus, “This man was really the Son of God.”

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that today’s reading portrays the centurion as an honorable person.

In a world where slaves were treated as tools, the centurion treats his slave as a son. In a world where Romans lord it over Jews, the centurion treats Jesus with honor. But the centurion’s crowning virtue is his faith.

Why isn’t our own faith stronger than it is?

Lord, help us realize that we become what we believe.

Jesus talks about discipleship

Monday

Matthew 8:18-22

"Let the dead bury their dead."

At first,
these words of Jesus sound cold and cruel.
But given the Eastern context, they are not.

The story is told of a young Arab
who refused a college scholarship, saying,
"I will take it only after I bury my father."

The father was healthy and still under fifty.
The boy wanted to put off leaving home
until his father's death.
Perhaps his father might need him in old age.

Jesus' point is that not even the noblest reason
qualifies for an excuse to delay response
to Jesus' invitation to come into the kingdom.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
Are we putting off a decision, perhaps,
to follow Jesus more closely?

Today's reading invites us to reflect:
"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries."

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, IV, 3

Jesus stills the storm

Tuesday

Matthew 8:23-27

"What kind of man is this?"

Helen Keller was blind, deaf, and dumb.
One day, as a child, she climbed a tree
and waited in its branches while her teacher
went to the house to get a picnic lunch.
Suddenly the wind began to blow fiercely.
The tree began to bend and sway violently.
Helen wrote in her autobiography:

"I crouched down in the fork of the tree.
The branches lashed about me. . . .

Just as I was thinking
that the tree and I should fall together
my teacher seized my hand
and helped me down.
I clung to her, trembling with joy."

This story illustrates the kind of fear
that gripped the apostles during the storm.
It also helps us appreciate their peace and joy
when Jesus stilled the storm.

How do we handle
emotional and spiritual storms in our life?

Lord, when the wind grows violent
and when the waves threaten to engulf us,
stand up in our boat and say, "Be still!"

Jesus exorcises two men

Wednesday

Matthew 8:28-34

They begged Jesus to leave.

A critic got a last-minute concert assignment.
It annoyed him because he had to postpone
a dinner date with some friends.

An hour later the son of the featured soloist
of the concert died suddenly.
The critic phoned his friends:
"Good news! The soloist's son died.
They've canceled the concert."
Suddenly the critic realized what he had said.
The death of the soloist's son
was not "good" news; it was "tragic" news.

In today's reading two men are healed
at the expense of some pigs.
But instead of rejoicing,
the people are angry at the loss of their pigs.

To what extent do we let personal pleasures
blind us to the more basic needs of others?

"Christ is like a single body. . . .
If one part of the body suffers,
all the other parts suffer with it;
if one part is praised,
all the other parts share its happiness."

1 Corinthians 12:12, 26

Jesus heals a paralytic

Thursday

Matthew 9:1-8

"Your sins are forgiven."

A doctor sent a very sick woman to a specialist. When the specialist checked the woman, he found her condition greatly improved.

The woman's doctor was stunned. He asked her, "Did anything unusual happen since I last saw you?"

"Yes," said the patient, "I made up with a childhood friend with whom I had been feuding for years."

Modern medicine is beginning to confirm what ancient peoples suspected: there's often a link between sin and sickness.

This could explain why Jesus forgave the paralyzed man first. Perhaps Jesus sensed that in this man's case spiritual healing must precede physical healing.

What spiritual healing do we feel a need for?

"The man who pursues revenge should dig two graves— one for his enemy and one for himself."

Chinese proverb

Jesus talks about sinners

Friday

Matthew 9:9-13

"I came to call sinners."

A man was visiting the Holy Land. One night he found himself all alone in the garden of Gethsemane. The stars were out and the night was lovely. Moved to tears, he knelt and prayed out loud: "Lord, don't let me ever sin against you." Then he knelt there in complete silence. Suddenly, a voice from out of the dark said:

"My son, you ask me never to let you sin against me.

If I granted that request to all my children, how could I ever show them my mercy?"

That story reminds us that we are all sinners. There comes a time when every one of us, no matter how good we are, sins against God. When this happens, we shouldn't become discouraged, as Judas did. We should ask for forgiveness, as Peter did.

Are we more prone to excuse ourselves than to accuse ourselves?

Lord, let us not forget that there's a wideness in your mercy like the wideness of the sea.

Jesus talks about fasting

Saturday

Matthew 9:14-17

"Why don't your disciples fast?"

A young wife was preparing to bake a ham. As her husband watched, she took a knife and cut off a piece of meat from both ends. "Why did you do that?" he asked. "I really don't know," she said, "but my mother always did it."

A week later the young man was visiting his wife's family. He asked his wife's mother why she did this. She smiled and said, "Because the hams sold at our store were too big to fit my pan."

Jesus' coming began a new era in Israel. The promised Messiah arrived. The need for fasting, a sign of hungering and preparing for his coming, was over. Now was the time for rejoicing. Continuing to fast was as meaningless as was cutting off the ends of a ham when a larger pan was available.

Do we hold on to things uncritically?

Lord, help us recognize valid change and accept it gracefully.

Jesus heals two women

Monday

Matthew 9:18-26

"If only I touch his cloak."

Someone compared the cloak of Jesus to the sacraments of the church. The person explained the comparison this way:

"Just as the woman in the Gospel reached out in faith and touched Jesus through his cloak, so we can reach out in faith and touch Jesus through the sacraments. If we do, Jesus' healing power will flow into us, just as it flowed into the woman."

The comparison may not be perfect. But if it helps us appreciate what a precious gift the sacraments are, it has served a valuable purpose. This much is certain: Jesus wants to heal us as much as he wanted to heal the woman.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What area of our life needs healing most?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us realize we can make contact with your healing power in the sacraments.

Jesus pities the people

Tuesday

Matthew 9:32-38

"The harvest is great, the workers few."

A photo in a Sunday newspaper showed a field of strawberries rotting. The caption read:

"The harvest is great but the workers are few. Nearly a ton of strawberries will be lost in Mercer County because of a labor shortage."

The scene was sad, but there's a sadder one. It's the scene of millions of people

dying *spiritually* because there is no one to share the good news of Jesus with them. If Jesus were to write the caption for this scene, he might say:

"I have no feet but your feet to take me into your world. I have no hands but your hands to reach out to the needy. I have no tongue but your tongue to tell people why I suffered and died for them."

How do we let Jesus use our body for his work?

Lord, our hands and feet are soiled by sin, but wash them and use them for your work.

Jesus chooses twelve apostles

Wednesday

Matthew 10:1-7

These are the names of the Twelve.

The English humorist G. K. Chesterton paid tribute to England's 12-person jury system with a tongue-in-cheek remark. It went something like this:

"For easy jobs, like exploring outer space, we choose extraordinary scientists. But for difficult jobs, like deciding if someone is guilty or innocent, we choose ordinary citizens."

That's what Jesus did, too. Jesus chose twelve ordinary citizens to carry out the toughest mission in history. One was Matthew, a tax collector. Another was Simon, a troublemaker. And the other ten were smelly fishermen.

Do we believe that Jesus still works through ordinary people like us?

"Lord, I'm only a spark, make me a fire. . . . I'm only a drop, make me a fountain. I'm only a feather, make me a wing." Amado Nervo

Jesus teaches his apostles

Thursday

Matthew 10:7-15

"Give without being paid."

A wealthy person became sad
when he pondered Jesus' teaching on giving.
He prayed to be able to accept the teaching.
But the more he prayed, the sadder he got.

When the man was near despair,
an angel came to comfort him.
"Why are you so sad, my son?" asked the angel.

The man replied,
"Because of my Master's teaching on giving.
Does it mean
that I have to give again and again and again—
without stopping?"

"Oh heavens no!" said the angel.
"You have to give
only as long as the Master gives to you."

How do we show gratitude for God's gifts?

Lord,
we asked you for a star
and you gave us the Milky Way.
We asked you for a ray of light
and you gave us the sun.

Jesus talks about persecution

Friday

Matthew 10:16-23

"Be like sheep among wolves."

Ancient Jews divided history into two ages:
the age they lived in, an evil time,
and an age to come, a good time.
They spoke of the age to come
as the "Day of the Lord,"
a day when good would defeat evil—forever.
Between the two ages
Jews saw a kind of "no man's land,"
a time of great religious upheaval.

In today's reading, Jesus tells his followers
that the "no man's land" is about to begin.
From the hindsight of history,
we see that it was the interval between
the Old Testament and the New Testament.

You and I live in the New Testament era,
the age in which good will defeat evil.
But the victory won't come automatically.
We must make it happen.
Furthermore, we must be on guard
lest we become casualties in the struggle.

What are we doing to bring about the kingdom?

Lord, be with us in our struggle
to make something beautiful here on earth.

Jesus talks about fear

Saturday

Matthew 10:24-33

"Don't let evil intimidate you."

A famous pastor got up to preach.
The king, who was an evil man,
was in the congregation.
Suddenly the pastor realized how close to home
some of his remarks would strike the king.
So before he started to preach,
he paused and spoke out loud to himself:

"Oh, pastor, be careful what you say.
The king of England is here today."
Then pausing again, he said,
"Oh, pastor, be careful what you *don't* say.
The King of Kings is also here today."

Jesus spoke out fearlessly against evil.
Nothing intimidated him.
Even his enemies admired his courage.

What keeps us
from speaking out more aggressively
against evil?

Lord, teach us the meaning of these words:
"Fear knocked at the door.
Faith opened the door. No one was there."

Jesus talks about his mission

Monday

Matthew 10:34-11:1

"There's no room for compromise."

One of the great friendships in the Bible was between David and Jonathan. The friendship was even more remarkable because King Saul, Jonathan's father, hated David.

Once Saul ordered Jonathan to betray David. Jonathan refused.

When it comes to doing what is right or wrong, neither a parent nor our closest friend can force us to violate our conscience. This is Jesus' point in today's reading. Because of his claim to be the Son of God, Jesus divided people, even father from son and mother from daughter.

The decision to follow Jesus touches the deepest part of our being. No one may interfere with it, not even father, or mother, or closest friend.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What keeps us from following Jesus better?

Today's reading invites us to pray to Jesus: "Please take us with you. Let us skip the road with you." *Godspell*

Jesus warns unbelieving towns

Tuesday

Matthew 11:20-24

"Woe to you, Chorazin."

There's a biblical site in the Holy Land that few tourists visit. It is not because it lies off the beaten track. On the contrary, it's just a few miles from the Sea of Galilee. The site was once a thriving town where Jesus preached and worked miracles. Today, however, it is an ugly, deserted place, littered with rubble.

The site is Chorazin.

In spite of Jesus' preaching and miracles, the citizens of Chorazin refused to reform their lives.

"It will go ill with you, Chorazin," Jesus said.

It has.

What needs reforming most in our own lives?

Lord, help us take to heart these words:

"A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean question: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill?" *John Steinbeck, East of Eden*

Jesus prays

Wednesday

Matthew 11:25-27

"You've hidden it from the learned."

A test given to astronaut candidates requires them to give 20 answers to the question, Who are you? John Glenn says the first few answers are easy: "I am a man. I am a flier. I am an American." But as you continue, it gets harder and harder to say who you are."

John Glenn's observation illustrates an important point: we can know a lot *about* ourselves, but not really know ourselves. Or, to put it in terms of today's reading, we can know a lot of facts *about* the Father, but not really know him.

We can be too clever; we can know too much. We can miss the forest for the trees.

The only way to get to know a person is to approach the person as a child does: with total trust and openness.

How well do we really know the Father?

Lord, help us realize that knowing our heavenly Father is not a question of opening a book and reading. It is a question of opening our heart and loving.

Jesus offers rest to the weary

Thursday

Matthew 11:28-30

"My yoke is easy."

A yoke is a wooden harness
by which the necks of two oxen are joined
so they can pull a load together.
Carpenters tailor the yoke to fit each animal
to avoid painful rubbing or bumping.

An ancient story says that Jesus made yokes
in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth.
And he made them fit the animals
better than any other carpenter in Galilee.
Because Jesus was a carpenter,
he knew firsthand what he was talking about
when he used the metaphor "my yoke is easy."

The word that Jesus used for "easy"
can be translated "well fitting."
So we could translate Jesus' words as meaning,
"My yoke is well fitting."
In other words, Jesus is saying,
"Trust me, and yoke yourself to me.
Together we can pull any load."

Do we really believe
that with Jesus all things are possible?

"When I am afraid, O LORD Almighty,
I put my trust in you." Psalms 56:3

Jesus talks about the Sabbath

Friday

Matthew 12:1-8

"I want kindness."

Imagine
you gave a birthday party for your little girl.
Imagine that as she unwrapped each gift,
she kept the wrapper
and threw the gift into the trash compactor.

This absurd example gives us an insight into
what some Pharisees were doing to religion.
They were turning religion into an activity
of keeping laws.

Keeping laws was becoming more important
than showing love and mercy.

The offending Pharisees were turning religion
from something beautiful into something ugly.
They were turning religion
into something God never intended it to be.
They were throwing away God's gift
and keeping the paper it was wrapped in.

What did God intend religion to be?

Lord, help us realize
that religion is not a list of things to do,
but a person to be followed.
It's not a puzzle to be solved,
but a life to be lived.

Jesus is God's chosen servant

Saturday

Matthew 12:14-21

"He won't break a bent reed."

A high school teacher told Ernest Hemingway,
"Forget about writing. You're not that good."
A college debate coach told Fulton Sheen,
"You're the worst speaker I ever heard."
A music teacher told Enrico Caruso,
"Your voice sounds like wind in shutters."

Hemingway, Sheen, and Caruso
were tough-minded young people.
They overcame the negativism of teachers.
But how many youngsters are that tough?
How many young people have their dreams
dashed to pieces
by negative teachers or parents?

How different Jesus was.
He never broke the bent reed.
He never blew out the flickering candle.

How encouraging and supportive are we,
especially in our dealings with young people?

Lord, help us pass on to others the good news
that no dream is impossible;
no foe is unbeatable.
"Everything is possible for the person
who has faith." Mark 9:23

Jesus challenges the Pharisees

Monday

Matthew 12:38-42

"Your only sign will be that of Jonah."

Gideon was a complete nobody when God chose him to lead Israel. (Judges 6:15)
To make sure God has really chosen him, Gideon asks for a sign.
He puts some wool outside and says to God, "Cover it with dew by morning, but keep the ground around it bone dry."

Next morning the wool is wet and the ground is bone dry. But Gideon is still skeptical; he asks for another sign.

There's a time when we need signs. But there's also a time when we need trust. For example, all parents know that a time comes when they must "let go" of a child's hand and let it walk on its own. If they don't, it may never walk. The same is true of our trust in God. There comes a time when we must simply trust.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: Why do we find it hard to trust God at times?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, bless us with a loving, trusting heart.

Jesus defines his family

Tuesday

Matthew 12:46-50

"Those who do my will are my family."

Imagine that you had a brother or sister who was a celebrity. You'd never tire of thanking God for that brother or sister. You'd never tire of having people ask you about your loved one. You'd have privileged access to your loved one at every moment of the day.

In today's reading, Jesus tells those who do his Father's will,

"You enjoy a closer relationship to me than to your own flesh-and-blood family."

Jesus, our brother, is a great person not only by worldly standards but also by heavenly standards. He is not only the greatest person who lived but also the very Son of God.

In Jesus, our wildest dream becomes incredible reality.

How can we learn our Father's will for us?

Father, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Parable of the Sower

Wednesday

Matthew 13:1-9

Jesus used parables to teach them.

The farmer in the parable is Jesus. The seed is God's word. The path, rock, thorns, and good soil are the hearts of those who hear God's word.

The point of the parable is this: As the seed's fruitfulness depends upon the seedbed into which it falls, so the fruitfulness of God's word depends on the heart into which it falls.

If God's word is not bearing fruit in our life, it's not because God's word is defective. It's because there is something wrong with our heart.

Have we ever asked Jesus to enter our heart and to heal whatever needs healing there? What seems to need healing the most in our heart?

Lord, you are medicine when we are sick. You are light when we cannot see. You are food when we are hungry. You are strength when we are weak. You are the way when we are lost.

Jesus explains why he uses parables

Thursday

Matthew 13:10-17

"They will lose the little they have."

At first Jesus' words sound unfair.
But Jesus is simply applying a "law of life"
to religion: Nothing stands still!
Life moves either forward or backward.

For example, a girl who knows a bit of French
decides to drop her language study.

Result?

She eventually loses the little French she knew.

Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom
forced people to make decisions—
to accept or to reject what he taught them.

Those who rejected it cut themselves off
from learning more about the kingdom.
They lost what little opportunity they had.
If a woman puts her hands over her eyes,
you can't show her any more pictures.
If a man puts his hands over his ears,
you can't sing him any more songs.

How do we respond to God's gifts to us?

Lord, "what we are is your gift to us.
What we become is our gift back to you."

Author unknown

Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower

Friday

Matthew 13:18-23

"Learn what the parable means."

Only in the first case was the word rejected.
In the other cases,
it was received joyfully.

The big problem in *hearing* God's word
is usually not in receiving it,
but in retaining it and making it bear fruit.
Hearing God's word involves three stages.

The first is the "mind" stage.
It involves listening to God's word
and understanding what the word means.

The second is the "heart" stage.
It involves "taking to heart" God's word
and allowing it to touch us.

The third is the "soul" stage.
It involves embracing God's word
and putting it into practice.

Hearing God's word involves listening to it
with our mind, our heart, and our soul.

Which stage is the most difficult for us?

"Speak, LORD, your servant is listening."

1 Samuel 3:9

Parable of the Weeds

Saturday

Matthew 13:24-30

"Let them grow until harvest."

An atheist, Pat, was walking down the street
with his Christian friend, Mike.

Suddenly
they came upon a belligerent street gang.
Pat pointed to the young toughs and said:

"Look, Mike, it's been 2,000 years
since Jesus came into the world
and it's still filled with sinners."

Five minutes later, Pat and Mike
came upon a group of dirty-faced children.
Now it was Mike's turn.

He pointed to the kids and said to Pat:

"Look, Pat, it's been 2,000 years
since soap was discovered
and the world's still filled with dirty faces."

Why hasn't God's kingdom
made a deeper impact on human life thus far?

Lord, may your kingdom come,
and may we do our part to facilitate
its coming.

Parable of the Yeast

Monday

Matthew 13:31-35

"The dough rises."

Some young Christians were attending an international summer camp. One project the camp leaders gave the young people was to explore ideas for spreading the gospel in the world.

The young people talked about television and radio programs, newspaper columns, Bible camps, and so forth. Finally, when they ran out of ideas, an African girl volunteered this information:

"When Christians in my country think a pagan village is ready for Christianity, they don't send them books and missionaries. They send them a good Christian family. The family's example converts the village."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What example are we giving to people, especially to young people?

Today's reading invites us to keep in mind that "an ounce of practice is worth a pound of preaching." John Ray

Jesus explains the Weed Parable

Tuesday

Matthew 13:35-43

"Listen, if you have ears!"

One day the Greek philosopher Diogenes walked down the street, carrying a lighted lantern. Someone asked him, "What are you doing?" Diogenes answered, "I'm looking for an honest person."

Sometimes we may feel the way Diogenes did.

We see so much corruption in the world that we wonder how many honest people are left.

Jesus warned that this would be the case. He foretold in today's reading that the wheat field of God's kingdom would be filled with weeds.

What can we do about the weeds growing in the wheat field of God's kingdom?

Lord, help us apply to our lives the words of Paul: "Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good." Romans 12:21

The Treasure and the Pearl

Wednesday

Matthew 13:44-46

"He sold all to buy the pearl."

Someone asked Paderewski, the great pianist, "Why do you continue to practice every day?"

Paderewski answered, "If I skip practice one day, I notice it. If I skip two days, my colleagues notice it. If I skip three days, everybody notices it."

Today's reading makes the same point about following Jesus. We have found the great pearl, who is Jesus. Following him demands total, daily effort.

If we hold back one day, we notice it. If we hold back two days, friends notice it. If we hold back three days, all notice it.

Where do we tend to hold back in our following of Jesus?

"I . . . forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead. So I run straight toward the goal." Philippians 3:13

Parable of the Net

Thursday

Matthew 13:47-53

“The net caught all kinds of fish.”

Dragnets are pulled between two boats.
They measure about 100 feet long
and about 10 feet deep.

As the dragnet moves through the water,
it forms a kind of curved wall
that catches everything in its path.
The nature of the dragnet is such
that it can't discriminate.

The church is like a dragnet.
It can't discriminate either.
Its doors are open to everyone in its path:
good people and bad people,
selfless people and selfish people,
thoughtful people and thoughtless people.

When we find all sorts of people
in the church, we shouldn't be disturbed.
Jesus said it would be this way.

How scandalized are we by church members
who seem to live one life in church
and another life outside of church?

Lord, help us
stop finding fault and start finding solutions.

Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

Friday

Matthew 13:54-58

“Isn't he the carpenter's son?”

If someone asked us
who preached at the service we attended,
we'd give the pastor's name.
But we'd be only half right.
The right answer is, “The pastor and us.”

Why is this so?

People tend to listen
with different degrees of openness.
This is especially true of churchgoers.

We listen to the homilist
with varying degrees of openness.

Openness to the homilist
is as important as the homily itself.
If we are closed, even partially, to the homilist,
as were the people in today's gospel reading,
we will hear the homily one way.
If we are totally open to the homilist,
we will hear the homily in another way.

Recall a homily that moved us deeply.

Lord, help us realize
that the real power behind a homilist's words
is the Holy Spirit.

John is beheaded

Saturday

Matthew 14:1-12

“Bring me John's head.”

Today's reading sounds incredible.
But then we think of another incredible event
in 1984 in San Ysidro, California.
A 41-year-old father drove to a restaurant,
went inside, and gunned down 40 people.
We also think of the senseless slaughter
of infants by Herod's father.
Finally, we think of the most insane act of all,
the crucifixion of Jesus.

When faced with these events,
we try to make sense of them, but can't.

The best we can do
is recall that it was because of such insanity
that Jesus entered our world.
He began the battle against evil;
but he has left to us, his church,
the task of bringing it
to a successful conclusion.

How involved are we
in the work of Jesus' church?

Lord, could W. E. Orchard be right
when he says,
“It may take a crucified church
to bring a crucified Christ to the world”?

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Jesus feeds a crowd

Monday

Matthew 14:13-21

They ate and had enough.

The 1984 Christmas issue of *Newsweek* ran this advertisement asking people to help Ethiopian famine victims:

“Right now giant cargo planes are delivering enough food to feed tens of thousands of hungry people a day. . . . Here’s how you can help! Your gift of \$15 is all it takes to feed a hungry child for a month! . . . Please give whatever you can—now!”

The brutal fact is that six million people were starving in 1984 in Ethiopia alone. Unable to do anything for themselves, they could only pray that some “modern Jesus” would reach out to them.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: What keeps us from helping such people?

Today’s reading invites us to recall these words of Jesus: “‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you? . . . ‘Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me!’” Matthew 25:37-40

Jesus walks on water

Tuesday

Matthew 14:22-36

Peter started to sink.

In the early days of sailing, a boy was on his first training voyage.

One day he was assigned to climb the mast. Halfway up, he made the mistake of looking down. He became dizzy and was in grave danger of falling.

An old sailor called out to him, “Look up at the sky, boy! Look at the sky!”

The boy followed the instructions and resumed his climb safely.

Peter made the same mistake the boy did. He took his eyes off his goal. He looked down into the wind-whipped sea and began to sink.

When things get stormy in life, do we fix our eyes on the storm, or on Jesus?

Lord, completing the work of your church, our Father’s kingdom on earth, is a lot like walking on water in a storm. The only way we can do it is to keep our eyes fixed on you.

Jesus praises a woman’s faith

Wednesday

Matthew 15:21-28

“Your faith is great.”

A six-year-old went to a friend’s house to eat. When everyone was seated, she bowed her head and waited for someone to say grace. When no one did, she said sheepishly, “You’re like my dog; you just start in.”

Jews felt that way about Gentiles. They were “spiritual” dogs. They were grossly insensitive to God. The word that Jesus used here for “dog” refers to a pet dog, not a street dog. Jesus used the word in an affectionate way, much as we affectionately use the word *rascal*: “You little rascal, you!”

The woman’s response seems to indicate this. In effect, she says (with a smile?), “Couldn’t you slip a little food to me, just as little boys slip food to their pet dog when their parents aren’t looking?”

How strong is our faith in Jesus? How might we strengthen it?

“Have faith. . . . Trust in the LORD.” Psalms 28:14

Peter professes his faith in Jesus

Thursday

Matthew 16:13-23

“No man revealed this to you.”

An African missionary
was translating John’s Gospel into Songhai.
When the missionary couldn’t find a word
to translate “to believe,”
he asked a native African how to translate it.

The native thought momentarily and said,
“I think ‘to believe’ should be translated
‘to hear with the heart.’”

We could hardly improve upon that translation.
God doesn’t speak to us with a physical voice.
He speaks to us with a spiritual voice.
He speaks to us
not with physical words that the ear can hear
but with spiritual words
that only a loving heart can hear.

This is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter:
“No mere man has revealed this to you,
but my heavenly Father.” (NAB)

What do we mean
when we say we must listen with the heart?

Lord, help us realize that your word
can be heard only by loving hearts.

Jesus talks about discipleship

Friday

Matthew 16:24-28

“Follow me!”

A poem compares our relationship to Christ
to two people on a tandem bicycle.
It goes something like this:

“At first, I sat in the front; Christ, the rear.
I couldn’t see him, but I knew he was there.
I could feel his help when the road got steep.

“Then, one day, Christ changed seats with me.
Suddenly everything went topsy-turvy.
When I was in control,

the ride was predictable—even boring.
But when Christ took over, it got wild!
I could hardly hold on.

“This is madness!” I cried out.
But Christ just smiled—and said, ‘Pedal!’

“And so I learned to shut up and pedal—
and trust my bike companion.
Oh, there are still times when I get scared.
But Christ just smiles, touches my hand—
and says, ‘Pedal.’”

What keeps us from following Jesus better?

Lord, give us courage to keep pedaling,
even when the road turns into a nightmare.

Jesus exorcises a boy

Saturday

Matthew 17:14-20

“With a little faith, all is possible.”

One day a lion caught a mouse.
As the lion prepared to swallow its tiny victim,
the mouse cried out, “Spare me, great beast!
Someday I may be able to repay you.”

Well, the lion roared with laughter at this.
But he was so amused at the idea
that a tiny mouse could help him
that he freed the little animal.

Sometime later, hunters captured the lion.
They tied him to a tree and went to get a cage.
While they were gone, the mouse happened by.
Seeing the lion’s predicament,
he gnawed the ropes and set the lion free.

That day the lion learned an important lesson.
It’s the same one Jesus taught his disciples
in today’s reading: Bigness isn’t everything.
Jesus said,
“If you have faith as big as a mustard seed,
nothing would be impossible to you.”

How big is our own faith?

We may not be able to do big things,
but we can do little things in a big way.

Jesus talks about the Temple tax

Monday

Matthew 17:22-27

"Should we pay the Temple tax?"

Roman citizens didn't pay Roman taxes. Only citizens of nations subject to Rome had to pay Roman taxes. So, too, members of a king's family didn't have to pay taxes levied by the king. These facts help clarify today's reading.

Jewish converts to Christianity still met and prayed in the Temple. But they wondered about their obligation to pay the Temple tax. Matthew answers by noting that Jesus paid the Temple tax in his lifetime, even though he was God's son and was exempt, so to speak. They should pay it, too, lest they cause scandal.

Matthew's point is a good one. Our criteria for doing something should not be whether we have an obligation or not. It should be, What does love seem to ask of us in this particular situation?

Do we ever ask, "How far can we go before we sin?" rather than "How much more can we do because we love?"

Lord, teach us to love, as you have loved us.

Jesus talks about discipleship

Tuesday

Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

"You must become like children."

The American writer Archibald MacLeish wrote a Broadway play called *J. B.* *J. B.* takes the biblical story of Job and gives it a modern-day setting. One line from the play dovetails beautifully with what Jesus says in today's gospel:

"Children know the grace of God better than most of us. They see the world

the way the morning brings it back to them, new and born and fresh and wonderful."

This lovely line fits in with Jesus' words: "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven."

An occupational hazard of growing older is taking each new day for granted.

Do we begin each day with prayer?
Do we end it with prayer?

Lord, help us appreciate that each new day is a gift from you. Help us realize that how we use each day is our gift to you.

Jesus talks about being with us

Wednesday

Matthew 18:15-20

"I am with you."

The phone rang in a Washington, D.C., church. The voice on the other end said, "Do you expect the President to be at services on Sunday?"

The pastor replied, "I'm not sure what the President's plans are, but I do know Jesus intends to be here."

An occupational hazard of church-going Christians is to tend to forget that each time we gather in the name of Jesus, Jesus gathers with us. He gathers with us just as certainly and personally as he gathered with his disciples in his lifetime.

This is the great mystery that takes place each time we gather in the Lord's name at the Lord's table to hear the Lord's word and eat the Lord's Supper.

Have we ever experienced Jesus' presence while at prayer with others?

Jesus said to his disciples, "I will be with you always." Matthew 28:20