
LENT

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Jesus talks about fasting

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

“Conceal your fasting.”

Our big danger today is not that we will fast and make a show of it. Our big danger is that we will not fast at all.

We think fasting is harmful. In his book *Fasting: The Ultimate Diet*, Dr. Allan Cott takes issue with this notion. He insists fasting does not harm adult health. On the contrary, it often benefits our health.

Dr. Cott cites the example of Japanese soldiers found hiding in the jungles of Guam and the Philippines, 30 years after World War II had ended. They were in better health, physically, than were their countrymen in Japan.

Dr. Cott also notes that British citizens enjoyed better health during the period of food rationing in World War II than during the period when food was plentiful.

What role ought fasting to play in our own life?

Lord, help us use your gift of food wisely and as a way to serve you more effectively.

Jesus talks about the cross

Thursday after
Ash Wednesday

Luke 9:22-25

“Whoever loses his life for me saves it.”

A Yugoslavian political prisoner has written a book called *Underground Notes*. He cites case after case of prisoners who, like himself, suffered greatly in confinement. These prisoners all testified that when it came to choosing whether to save their body or to save their soul, those who chose to save their soul experienced a remarkable infusion of strength. They experienced new powers to go on living, even in the most adverse circumstances.

On the other hand, those who chose to save their body ended up losing both their body and their soul.

Jesus points out that this is true not only of prisoners but of all of us. When we compromise our spiritual integrity, rather than endure some physical hardship, we end up losing everything.

How willingly do we submit to physical hardship for the sake of spiritual benefit?

Lord, help us always to choose the hard right over the easy left.

Jesus answers a question

Friday after
Ash Wednesday

Matthew 9:14-15

“My disciples will fast when I depart.”

The week following a Jewish wedding was a time of great joy for the bride and groom. No matter how poor they were, they were treated like a king and queen by friends and relatives. To fast during this period would be unthinkable. It would be totally out of the question.

Jesus compares the coming of God's kingdom, which he announces, to a Jewish wedding feast. He is the groom; his disciples are his friends.

Now is the time for rejoicing. When he is taken away from them will be the time for fasting.

Lent is a time when we mourn, in a special way, the absence of Jesus.

It is a time when we recall, in a special way, that we must prepare for Jesus' final coming at the end of time.

Then we will rejoice with an unending joy. Now we must fast and make ready.

What is the best way we could make ready during this Lent for Jesus' final coming?

“Come, Lord Jesus!” Revelation 22:20

Jesus explains why he came

Saturday after
Ash Wednesday

Luke 5:27-32

"I came to call sinners."

Anthony Mastroeni
has made this rather chilling observation:

"No one steals anymore,
they simply lift something. . . .
No one lies anymore,
they simply misrepresent the facts. . . .
No one commits adultery . . .
they simply play or fool around. . . .
No one kills an unborn child,
they simply terminate a pregnancy. . . .
All this represents a clever way of . . .
candy-coating the reality of sin."

If we close our eyes to sin in our lives,
we don't see ourselves as sinners.
And if we don't see ourselves as sinners,
we don't feel a personal need for Jesus.
For he came not for the self-righteous,
but for sinners.

How difficult is it for us
to be honest about our own sinfulness?

"If we say that we have not sinned,
we make a liar out of God,
and his word is not in us." 1 John 1:10

Jesus talks of the Last Judgment

Monday

Matthew 25:31-46

"I was a stranger . . . I was sick."

Two boys were canoeing in the Canadian wilds. They had been roughing it for a week and were tired and in need of rest. Suddenly they spotted a trapper's cabin. The boys beached their canoe and headed up the river bank toward the cabin. It was open, clean, and vacant. On a table was an open Bible. Lying across the pages was a note saying:

"Your cabin saved my life. I had taken seriously ill and needed shelter. Your cabin provided it. I can't give you money, only God's blessing. Read Matthew 25:31-46 below:"

"Come and possess the kingdom. . . . I was a stranger and you received me . . . I was sick and you took care of me."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: When was the last time we helped a stranger or a sick person?

Today's reading invites us to recall "there's more pleasure in loving than in being loved." Thomas Fuller

Jesus teaches about prayer

Tuesday

Matthew 6:7-15

"Pray like this: 'Our Father . . .'"

A Norwegian anthropologist, Thor Heyerdahl, won world recognition by floating a small raft, the *Kon-Tiki*, across 4,300 miles of ocean.

Earlier, as a young man, he nearly drowned when a canoe capsized near a waterfall. As the raging river pulled him down relentlessly toward the falls, the words of the Lord's Prayer unexpectedly flashed into his mind. With them came a burst of energy

and the feeling of a presence greater than himself. Thor battled the river with new strength.

Eventually, totally exhausted, he made it to safety.

That experience was a turning point in Thor Heyerdahl's life.

How meaningful is the Lord's Prayer to us? What was our closest brush with death?

"The Lord's Prayer may be committed to memory quickly, but it is slowly learned by heart." F. D. Maurice

Jesus talks about signs

Wednesday

Luke 11:29-32

"You will be given only Jonah's sign."

A man named Theudas appeared in Israel in A.D. 45.

He claimed to be the Messiah. (Acts 5:36) As proof of his claim, he promised about 400 of his followers that he would divide the waters of the Jordan, as Moses had divided the waters of the Red Sea. Of course, he failed.

Some people were asking for a sign like this from Jesus, to show God's approval of him.

Jesus offered only his preaching as a sign, as Jonah had done to the Ninevites. Jonah offered no signs to confirm what he said. When Jonah preached, people with open hearts heard God's voice in him and repented. So it must be with Israel. People who can't hear God's voice in Jesus won't see God's hand in signs, either.

How open is our heart to God's voice speaking to us through other people?

Lord, help us realize you are more eager to communicate with us than we are to listen to you.

Jesus talks about asking for help

Thursday

Matthew 7:7-12

“Knock and it will be opened.”

Maury Wills won't forget his first day in a big-league tryout camp. At the end of the day the coach told him, "Go back home! Forget about big-league baseball. You're too small."

Maury didn't go home, and he didn't forget about baseball. For eight years he worked long and hard in the minor leagues. "I was close to quitting a hundred times," he said, "but I always stuck it out."

To make a long story short, the Dodgers eventually gave Maury a chance. Four years after they did, Maury was voted the Most Valuable Player in the National League.

Maury Wills is a model of the perseverance we should have in our prayer.

How persevering are we in our prayer?

Lord, help us realize the only way to fail in anything is to quit.

Jesus teaches about worship

Friday

Matthew 5:20-26

“Make peace; then offer your gift.”

A prayer called Litany for Holy Communion is credited to the United Presbyterian Church. It goes something like this:

“Lord, forgive us for turning our churches into private clubs.

“Forgive us for loving familiar hymns and religious feelings more than we love you.

“Forgive us for pasting stained glass on our eyes and on our hearts to shut out the cry of the hungry and the hurt in the world.”

This litany reminds us of the consistency that must exist between worship and life. It's the same kind of consistency that Jesus talks about in today's reading.

Practically, how do we respond to the cry of the world's hungry and hurt?

“The worse sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them.” G. B. Shaw

Jesus talks about enemies

Saturday

Matthew 5:43-48

“Love your enemies.”

One day President Abraham Lincoln was speaking kindly to a Confederate soldier. A woman was shocked at this and said, “Mr. President, it seems to me that we would do well to concentrate our energies on destroying our enemy, not befriending him.”

President Lincoln replied, “Madam, the best way to destroy our enemy is to befriend him.”

This same spirit of wisdom and compassion permeates Jesus' remarks in today's reading.

How do we try to live out Jesus' teaching to “love our enemies”?

Lord, help us make our own these words of the poet:
“He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.”

Edwin Markham

Jesus talks about judging others

Monday

Luke 6:36-38

"Do not judge others."

Winston Churchill was such a bad student that his father feared he would never be able to support himself as an adult.

Thomas Edison was so slow in school that his father was convinced he was a dunce.

Charles Darwin did so badly in his studies that his father once told him, "You will be a disgrace to yourself and to all your family."

Judging others prematurely is a terrible fault. It can be destructive to the one being judged. Churchill, Edison, and Darwin were strong enough to survive bad judgments. How many thousands of other young people are not strong enough?

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How negative are we in our judgment of others, especially young people?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us realize that it is better to reach out a helping hand than to point a critical finger.

Jesus talks about service

Tuesday

Matthew 23:1-12

"They make loads heavy."

Photographer Patt Blue was in a hospital on an extended assignment for *Life* magazine.

At the hospital she made the acquaintance of Carrie, a victim of multiple sclerosis. Patt kept a diary during her assignment. Her entry for September 17, 1979, reads:

"The nurses aides or whatever they are seem to hate their jobs—

they sit and watch TV. . . .

When Carrie is put in a wheelchair, no one talks to her like a human being. She falls over—
no attempt is made to straighten her out."

Are we like the people Jesus speaks of in today's reading?
Do we make people's loads heavy by treating them without compassion?

Lord,
make us sensitive to the burdens others carry,
and help us
reach out to them with a loving heart.

Jesus corrects the disciples

Wednesday

Matthew 20:17-28

They became angry.

The 17th-century British general and statesman Oliver Cromwell was sitting for a full-length portrait painting of himself.

When the painting was finally finished, Cromwell saw that the artist had omitted some warts from his face. Cromwell told the artist to correct the well-intentioned omission, saying, "Paint me, warts and all."

Today's reading is a good example of how the gospel writers painted the disciples of Jesus, "warts and all." Some other examples of this are Peter's denial and Judas's betrayal of Jesus.

In spite of all their faults
God used the apostles to achieve great things.

How readily do we admit our "warts"?
How convinced are we that God can use us, "warts and all," to achieve things for him?

Lord, help us realize
that you can transform our liabilities
into spectacular capabilities.

Parable of Lazarus

Thursday

Luke 16:19-31

"There was a poor man named Lazarus."

In 1950 Albert Schweitzer was named the "man of the century."
In 1952 he won the coveted Nobel Peace Prize.

At the age of 30, Schweitzer gave up his career as a concert pianist in Europe to become a doctor.

Eventually, he built and staffed a hospital in the jungles of Africa.

Schweitzer said the parable of Lazarus and the rich man influenced his decision to become a missionary doctor. He reasoned that his African brother was Lazarus and he was the rich man: "How could I enjoy applause while Lazarus endured pain."

How sensitive are we to the pain that many people are suffering in the world? What are we doing about it?

"Share your food with the hungry. . . . Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear." Isaiah 58:7

Parable of the Tenants

Friday

Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

"Surely they will respect my son."

This carefully constructed parable fits the facts of biblical history. In Jesus' time absentee landlords were common. They rented their land to tenants who repaid them in crops rather than cash.

When harvesttime came, the landlord sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his share of the crops. Hostility between tenants and landlords frequently ran high.

The vineyard in the parable stands for the people of Israel. The vineyard owner stands for God.

The tenants are the leaders of Israel. The slaves are the prophets. The owner's son is Jesus. The new tenants are the apostles of Jesus.

Who are the successors to the apostles today? Do we accept them and follow them as such?

Lord, help us keep our hearts open to your messengers and your representatives.

Parable of the Prodigal Son

Saturday

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

"His father hugged and kissed him."

One of the strangest plays in Rose Bowl history occurred on New Year's Day 1929. Roy Riegels of the University of California picked up a Georgia Tech fumble and ran it 65 yards in the wrong direction. His own players eventually tackled him. When California attempted to punt, Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety, which was Tech's ultimate margin of victory.

At halftime Riegels expected the worst from Coach Price. But Price didn't mention the wrong-way run. When halftime was over, the California coach put his hand on Roy's shoulder and said, "The game's only half over. Give it your all!" Riegels did.

This story illustrates a point in today's reading. God doesn't give us just one chance. He gives us a second chance.

How well do we use the second chance that God gives us?

Lord, help us show others the same forgiveness you have shown us.

Jesus is rejected in Nazareth

Monday

Luke 4:24-30

They dragged Jesus out of town.

Our popular image of Jesus is that of a person surrounded by loving crowds. But many times Jesus was surrounded by violent crowds. Today's reading is an example.

Violent crowds also surrounded Jesus' followers. The apostles were flogged. (Acts 5:40) Stephen was stoned. (Acts 7:58) Paul was stoned once and beaten eight times. (2 Corinthians 11:24-25) This reminds us of Jesus' words in John 15:20: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."

The gospel reminds us that we may have to suffer for our faith as Jesus did. But it also reminds us not to fear. "Be brave!" says Jesus. "I have defeated the world!" John 16:33

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How do we respond when our faith is cast in a bad light by the media or in conversation?

Today's reading reminds us not to give up, but to get up.

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Tuesday

Matthew 18:21-35

"Forgive seventy times seven times."

The 1984 American League Playoffs were between Detroit and Kansas City. During the third game in Detroit, someone in the field seats near home plate kept holding up a sign reading "Isaiah 55:7." Every time a certain camera angle came up, there was that sign, "Isaiah 55:7."

A few days later the sign came up in conversation.

Someone got a Bible and checked the reading. It said:

"Let the wicked leave their way of life and change their way of thinking. Let them turn to the LORD, our God; he is merciful and quick to forgive."

Today's reading reminds us that just as God is quick to forgive us, so we ought to be quick to forgive others.

Is there anyone we have not fully forgiven?

Lord, help us remember to practice this African proverb: "The one who forgives ends the quarrel."

Jesus teaches about the Law

Wednesday

Matthew 5:17-19

"I came to fulfill the law."

Ancient synagogue services began by taking the Scrolls of the Law from the ark and marching them around the congregation. This is one indication of the reverence that Jews had for the Law of Moses. Yet Jesus says he came to modify that Law.

The New Testament, Greek word *exousia*, which we translate "authority," is defined as "the power to add or subtract from something." It is this kind of authority over the Law that Jesus claims and exhibits in the passages that follow today's reading.

Clearly, Jesus had to be either a madman or the Son of God.

No ordinary person would dare to modify the Law of Moses.

Small wonder Jesus ran into serious trouble with the religious leaders.

It took great courage for Jesus to carry out his Father's mission.

How courageously do we live out our Christian commitment?

"Do not be afraid—I am with you!" Isaiah 43:5

Jesus refutes false charges

Thursday

Luke 11:14-23

"Beelzebul helps him."

The Broadway musical *1776* dealt with the historic days during which our forefathers debated the Declaration of Independence. At one point the debate was like a pole standing in wet sand. It could fall either way: back into the past and continued domination by England, or forward into the future and freedom.

One night John Adams, who led the fight for independence, was terribly worried about the outcome. Standing alone in the darkened hall, he sang: "Is anyone there? Does anyone care? Does anyone see what I see?" Adams's song was an expression of frustration.

Jesus, too, knew moments of frustration. Today's reading recalls one of them. Unable to deny the miracles Jesus was working, his opposition began to slander his person, saying he worked them with Satan's power.

How do we handle frustrations?

Lord, give us the grace to stand with courage, no matter how frustrating things get.

Jesus talks about love

Friday

Mark 12:28-34

"Love God with all your strength."

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychologist. The Nazis imprisoned him during World War II. The first thing they did was to take his clothes and give him the rags of a dead prisoner. In the pocket of the dead prisoner's coat Frankl found a page from a Hebrew prayerbook. On it was printed the Shema Israel, which Jesus quotes in today's reading:

"Hear, O Israel!
The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!

Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (NAB)

That prayer was a great inspiration to Frankl during the years of imprisonment that followed.

How strong is our own love for God?

Love gives; that is creation.
Love suffers for others; that is redemption.
Love longs for unity; that is eucharist.
Love is forever; that is heaven. adapted from Fulton Sheen

Parable of Two Prayers

Saturday

Luke 18:9-14

"I'm glad I'm not like the others."

William Barclay was on a train. He looked out the window at a white cottage. It looked lovely against the green hillside.

Ten months later he was on the same train. A layer of new snow covered the ground. Barclay remembered the lovely white cottage and watched for it again. This time, however, he was shocked. Against the new snow it looked drab, soiled, and downright dirty.

When we compare ourselves to others, we might appear pretty good. But if we could see ourselves alongside the person God made us to be, we might be shocked. We might respond as the tax collector did: "God have pity on me, a sinner!"

How much do we compare ourselves to others?

Lord, help us take to heart Paul's words: "Each one should judge his own conduct. If it is good, then he can be proud . . . without having to compare it with what someone else has done." Galatians 6:4

Jesus heals an official's son

Monday

John 4:43-54

"Come, before my child dies."

Parry O'Brien was an Olympic shot-put star. One night when he was still in high school, his father was awakened at 3:00 A.M. by a series of strange thuds outside.

He went to the window to see what was wrong. There, under the streetlight, was his son heaving the shot. "What on earth are you doing?" he shouted. Parry replied, "I got an idea about how to throw the shot better, and I couldn't wait until morning to try it out."

Parry and the official in today's reading had something in common. Both were determined people. For example, the official traveled 20 miles to ask a lowly carpenter for help. When Jesus tested the official's determination, the man didn't get discouraged.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How easily do we become discouraged?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord Jesus, give us the kind of determination that you respected and rewarded in the official.

Jesus heals a sick man

Tuesday

John 5:1-3, 5-16

He had been sick for thirty-eight years.

The "ovenbird" is common to Argentina. It gets its unusual name from the fact that it builds its nest in an ovenlike shape.

Several years ago a pair of these birds built their mud-and-straw nest on top of one of the monuments that adorn a main plaza in Buenos Aires.

A crew of workmen removed the nest. The next year

the birds returned and rebuilt the nest. Again workmen removed the nest. Once again the birds returned and rebuilt the nest. This time citizens insisted the workmen let the nest stay.

Today's sick man was like those birds. He kept returning to the pool to be cured. Eventually his perseverance paid off, too.

How persevering are we in our efforts?

Lord, help us realize that "there's no force so mighty in the world as perseverance."

Helen Keller

Jesus talks about his Father

Wednesday

John 5:17-30

"The Father loves the Son."

One hot afternoon Dorothy Dawes was standing by the Sea of Galilee. She was watching swarms of Israeli children splashing in the water.

Suddenly one of the children shouted, "Abba!" This word caught her by surprise and moved her deeply. It was the same ancient word that Jesus used to address his Father.

Occasionally the Old Testament prophets referred to God as "Father."

But they never used the word *Abba*. *Abba* was an affectionate title, like *Daddy*. Yet this is the word Jesus used to address his Father. It is also the word he taught us to use when we address the Father in prayer.

What is the level of our own affection toward God when we address him as "Father"?

Lord, help us call out to you with the same level of loving trust that a small child has when it calls out to its father or mother.

Jesus talks about his works

Thursday

John 5:31-47

"My works witness to me."

A teenager asked the pastor of a church if he might join the church.

"Why do you want to join *this* church?" asked the pastor.
"Well," said the boy, "my friends at school belong to a lot of different churches, but those who belong to this church stand out. They're the ones I respect the most. I've been looking for a church to join. When I saw how the kids from this church acted, I decided I wanted to join it."

Jesus often talked of the power of good example. In today's reading he says,
"The deeds my Father gave me to do . . . speak on my behalf."
Elsewhere he says
that if you don't believe because of what I say,
"believe because of the things I do." John 14:11

What kind of example are we giving by our actions, especially to young people?

"Be careful how you live;
you may be the only Bible someone ever reads."
W.J. Toms

Jesus is the center of a storm

Friday

John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

They tried to seize Jesus.

The novelist Joseph Conrad loved the sea. One day, in his youth, he was learning how to steer a ship. Suddenly a storm blew up out of nowhere.

Instead of taking over the wheel, the old sea captain had Conrad keep steering. All the while the old man kept bellowing out instructions to the youth:

"Laddie, keep her pointed into the wind!
Laddie, keep her pointed into the wind!"

In today's reading we find Jesus following those same instructions. A storm rages about him, and the winds of controversy grow violent. But Jesus doesn't alter his course. He keeps pointing into the wind. He refuses to compromise truth.

How do we respond when we meet opposition to what we think is right?

Lord of the sea and waves,
help us keep pointed into the wind
when the storms of opposition arise.

Jesus creates controversy

Saturday

John 7:40-53

"Nobody ever spoke as this man does."

Syndicated columnist Sydney Harris wrote:
"My friends are sometimes shocked when I read a few pages of a new book, and then lay it down with the supreme conviction that it is not worth reading."

Harris explains that if an unskilled person began to operate on someone, a surgeon would know instantly that the person knew nothing about surgery. The same is true, he says, of writing.

The same is true, also, of speaking. People who heard Jesus speak knew at once that there was something special about him. This is why the Temple guards said of Jesus, "Nobody has ever talked the way this man does!"

What about Jesus attracts us most?

"The Greek and Roman orators spoke to their listeners of life as it seemed to the mind. The Nazarene spoke of a longing that lodged in the heart." Kahlil Gibran

Jesus forgives an adulteress

Monday

John 8:1-11

Jesus wrote on the ground.

For centuries people have wondered what Jesus wrote in the dust with his finger. It's contrary to the norms of good literature "to arouse the reader's expectation without easing his curiosity. Had Tolstoy invented this touch, Christ would have written something very telling in the dust, something very telling indeed, but nothing half so telling as the silence of John."

Arnold Lunn, *Now I See*

The wordless gesture of Jesus in today's reading is sometimes called an "action" parable. That is, Jesus makes an important point more by what he does than by what he says.

Other action parables include the times Jesus ate with sinners and washed his disciples' feet. (Luke 5:29, John 13:5)

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What are we saying to others by our actions?

Today's reading invites us to remember that people would much rather "see a sermon than hear one." Edgar A. Guest

Jesus talks about his Father

Tuesday

John 8:21-30

"I do what pleases him."

In his book *A Taste of New Wine* Keith Miller says that one day he got so depressed that he got into his car and drove off into the Texas countryside. Coming to a secluded spot, he stopped his car and started to cry. A few minutes later he looked up at the sky and shouted to God, "If there's anything you want from me, take it!"

As he sat there Keith suddenly realized what it is that God wants from a person: "God wants your *will*; and if you give him your will, he'll begin to show you life as you've never seen it before. It is like being born again."

That moment was a turning point in Keith's life.

How do we determine what God's will is for us?

"With God, go over the sea—without him, don't even go over the threshold."

Russian proverb

Jesus talks about freedom

Wednesday

John 8:31-42

"You are slaves."

We can be slaves in two ways. First, we can be slaves of another person. Black people suffered this kind of indignity prior to the Civil War.

Second, we can be slaves to ourselves. This is a more subtle kind of slavery. It takes many different forms. For example, we can let a bad habit enslave us. We can let prejudice enslave us. We can let impatience enslave us. We can let ignorance enslave us.

It is this kind of slavery that Jesus talks about in today's reading. And it is from this kind of slavery that Jesus wishes to free us, if we will only let him.

What are some of the ways we are currently enslaving ourselves?

"Jesus said . . . 'If you obey my teaching . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" John 8:31-32

Jesus talks about afterlife

Thursday

John 8:51-59

“Obey my words and live forever.”

Thomas DeWitt Talmage was the pastor of a small congregation. He had a strong faith in the promise Jesus makes to his disciples in today’s reading: “Whoever obeys my teaching will never die.”

In keeping with his faith in this promise, Talmage never removed the names of deceased persons from the parish registry. He simply listed them as having “changed residence.”

Toward the end of his ministry, Talmage listed 500 members living in his parish and 2,500 others who had “changed residence.”

How deep is our own faith in Jesus’ promise that whoever obeys his teaching will never die?

“On this side of the grave we are exiles, on that side, citizens; on this side, orphans; on that side, children . . . on this side, disguised, unknown; on that side, disclosed, and proclaimed as sons of God.” Henry Ward Beecher

Jesus is rejected

Friday

John 10:31-42

“You make yourself to be God.”

The British historian H. G. Wells said Jesus was the world’s greatest teacher. But Wells didn’t believe Jesus was God’s Son.

The British theologian C. S. Lewis thinks Wells’s position is inconsistent. Lewis says we’d never call a *human being* who claimed equality with God a great teacher. We might call him a fool, a madman, or the devil; but we’d never call him a great teacher.

When it comes to Jesus, Lewis says, we can’t have our cake and eat it too. Only one of four choices is open to us.

Jesus was either a fool who should be pitied, a madman who should be shunned, the devil who should be stoned, or the Lord who should be adored.

What convinces us that Jesus is the Lord—and not a fool, a madman, or the devil?

To see Jesus is to see God;
to listen to Jesus is to listen to God;
to love Jesus is to love God.

Jesus is marked for death

Saturday

John 11:45-57

“Better one dies than all.”

“What fools you are!” said the High Priest. “Don’t you realize that it is better for you to have one man die for all people, instead of having the whole nation destroyed?”

Some have called this remark the most ironic statement in all Scripture. What Caiaphas said was true, but in a far different way than he intended. He meant to say that it was better to have Jesus die than to have the Romans destroy Israel.

But Caiaphas’s statement was true in an even more remarkable sense. It was true in the sense that had Jesus not died, the entire human race would have perished because of sin.

Have we ever knelt down and thanked Jesus personally for having saved us?

“All my theology is reduced to this narrow compass, ‘Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.’” Archibald Alexander

Jesus is anointed in Bethany

Monday

John 12:1-11

"I won't always be with you."

Thomas Carlyle was a 19th-century writer. He was a grumpy person who took his wife, Jane, for granted. Rarely did he show her any affection.

One day Jane died suddenly and unexpectedly. Carlyle was plunged into a pit of depression. He suddenly realized how inconsiderately he'd treated this wonderful woman all her life.

Carlyle was unable to sleep at nights. He'd lie awake in the darkness and cry out, "Oh, if I could see her once more . . . to let her know that I always loved her."

Jesus reminds those who criticized Mary for affectionately anointing his feet that the day was coming when he, too, would depart from their midst.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What signs of affection do we show loved ones?

Today's reading invites us to recall these words: "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: 'It might have been!'"
John Greenleaf Whittier

Jesus foretells his betrayal

Tuesday

John 13:21-33, 36-38

Judas took the bread and left.

There's an old letter from George Washington to his wife, Martha. Dated March 4, 1797, it was written just hours after John Adams was sworn in to succeed Washington as President of the United States.

Washington had been sorting through his papers, deciding which to keep and which to throw out. He writes:

"You can imagine my feelings as I reread Thomas Paine's last letter to me. He and I were once friends. . . . And yet, because I didn't think him qualified to become postmaster general, he charged me with being 'treacherous.'"

Jesus also knew the pain and sorrow of having a close friend turn against him.

How do we cope with crushing disappointments, like having a close friend turn against us?

"The one I trusted most, the one who shared my food, has turned against me." Psalm 41:9

Jesus foretells his betrayal

Wednesday

Matthew 26:14-25

Judas said, "You don't mean me?"

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Some think Judas never intended Jesus' death. He really believed Jesus was the Messiah. He believed that part of Jesus' mission was to rally the people behind him and drive the Romans out of Palestine.

But when it came to this part of the mission, Jesus seemed to be dragging his feet. Judas intended his action of betrayal to be a trigger to get Jesus moving.

This theory would explain why Judas took his life when things backfired. If this theory is correct, Judas's sin was that of trying to play God. He had his own ideas of what God wanted done and how Jesus should do it.

Do we tend to play God in people's lives?

"'My thoughts,' says the LORD, 'are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.'" Isaiah 55:8-9

Jesus washes his disciples' feet

Thursday

John 13:1-15

He poured water into a basin.

Donald Hankey's *The Beloved Captain* tells how the captain cared for his men's feet.

After long marches he went into the barracks to inspect the feet of his soldiers.

He'd get down on his hands and knees to take a good look at the worst cases.

If a blister needed lancing, he'd frequently lance it himself.

"There was no affectation about this," says Donald Hankey.

"It seemed to have a touch of Christ about it, and we loved and honored him the more" for it.

Is there a "touch of Christ" about our concern for our brothers and sisters?

"Jesus, my feet are dirty. . . .

Pour water into your basin and come and wash my feet.

I know that I am overbold in asking this, but I dread your warning, when you said,

'If I do not wash your feet, you can have no companionship with me.'

Wash my feet, then, because I do want your companionship."

Origen (third century)

when he spotted the cross on the horizon and was guided to safety by it.

Some think it was this story, or one like it, that inspired Sir John Bowering's famous hymn "In the Cross of Christ I Glory."

"In the cross of Christ I glory
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gather round its head sublime."

What does the cross of Christ mean to us?

"All I want is to know Christ . . . and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life." Philippians 3:10-11

Jesus dies

Friday

John 18:1-19:42

"It is finished!"

The ruins of an old cathedral stand on a high bluff overlooking the harbor of Macao, China. Towering over the wreckage is a bronze cross. It can be seen for miles at sea.

One of the stories connected with the cross concerns the survivor of a shipwreck. He was clinging to a piece of wreckage

Guards give false testimony

Monday

Matthew 28:8-15

"Say the body was stolen."

Tomb robbing was not unusual in ancient times. Striking evidence of this is a Roman decree found in Palestine.

Issued by the emperor, it dates from about the time of Jesus and makes tomb robbing a capital crime.

Some think the emperor issued the statement in response to the report of the Roman guards that Jesus' body was stolen.

Whatever the case, this much is certain. The stone plaque is historical evidence that tomb robbing was a fact of ancient life. It reveals that the soldiers' report about Jesus' body was a credible explanation for what happened on Easter Sunday morning.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What convinces us most that Jesus is risen?

Today's reading invites us to recall:
 "You can put truth in a grave,
 but it won't stay there.
 You can nail it to a cross . . .
 and shut it up in a tomb, but it will rise."

Clarence W. Hall

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene

Tuesday

John 20:11-18

She thought he was the gardener.

A common thread that weaves through the Easter stories is the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus. It happens to Mary Magdalene. It happens to others. (Luke 24:16, 37; John 21:4)

This inability to recognize the risen Jesus speaks of the nature of the resurrected body. Resurrection is not a restoration to life, such as happened to Lazarus. (John 11:44) It's a quantum leap forward into a new life.

The body of Jesus that rose on Easter was radically different from the one Jesus possessed during his lifetime. Paul compares the body before resurrection to a seed, (1 Corinthians 15:37) and the body after resurrection to a plant.

What assures us most that we will someday be raised from the dead, as Jesus was?

"If seeds in the black earth can turn into such beautiful roses, what might the heart of man become in its long journey to the stars?" Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Jesus appears to two disciples

Wednesday

Luke 24:13-35

They came to Emmaus.

"Jesus acted as if he were going farther." William Barclay refers to this gesture of Jesus as the "courtesy of Jesus." Jesus doesn't force himself on people. He waits for an invitation.

Our invitation to Jesus is often indirect. We don't recognize, at first, that it is Jesus. Mary Magdalene thought Jesus was a gardener. The Emmaus disciples thought he was a lonely traveler. The disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee thought he was a beachcomber. (John 21:4) The disciples in the upper room thought he was a ghost. (Luke 24:37)

How difficult is it for us to recognize the risen Jesus in people around us?

"When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you . . . ? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you?"

Jesus replied, "I tell 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 appears to more disciples

Thursday

Luke 24:35-48

They were terrified.

In his book *But That I Can Believe*, John A. T. Robinson describes how the disciples must have felt on Good Friday night:

“Jesus was someone they had known and loved and lost. . . . It was all over. . . .

“And then it happened. . . . He came to them. The life they had known and shared was not buried with him, but alive in them. Jesus was not a dead memory, but a living presence.”

Today’s reading carries with it a tremendous truth about life. What seems to be a tragic end is often a glorious beginning. What seems to be an unbearable cross is often an incomparable blessing.

Recall a time when a cross in our own life turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

“Death and Sorrow, earth’s dark story, To the former days belong.” William J. Irons

Jesus appears on the seashore

Friday

John 21:1-14

The disciples caught 153 fish.

The catch of exactly 153 fish has always caught the eye of Bible readers. There’s wide agreement that the unusual figure is symbolic, but less agreement about its exact meaning. The simplest explanation is one St. Jerome gave 15 centuries ago.

Ancient zoologists listed the kinds of fish in the world at precisely 153.

The number 153, therefore, might symbolize all the nations of the world. Jesus’ Parable of the Net would support this.

(Matthew 13:47-50)

John’s comment that the net didn’t tear might also be interpreted to support it: There’s room in the kingdom for everyone. The kingdom was made to hold all peoples.

How do we help to work for the spread of God’s kingdom to all nations?

“Our business is not to do something *for* the church, but to do something *with* it.” Joseph F. Newton

Jesus instructs his followers

Saturday

Mark 16:9-15

“Preach the gospel to all mankind.”

In his book *God’s Smuggler*, Brother Andrew, a Dutch missionary, tells how he used to smuggle Bibles into communist countries.

Brother Andrew says that smuggling Bibles is more difficult than running gold or diamonds. The reason is simple: Bibles are bigger. Volkswagens and Fiats are popular smuggling vehicles. Pocket-sized Bibles are hidden in the panels.

“You’d be amazed how many you can get in a VW Beetle,” says Brother Andrew. “My personal record is about 800.”

Every time Brother Andrew crossed over into a communist country with a load of Bibles, he risked up to three and a half years if he got caught.

How do we carry out Jesus’ command to “preach the gospel to all mankind”?

“Christianity is a battle, not a dream.”

Wendell Phillips

Jesus talks about rebirth

Monday

John 3:1-8

"Be reborn of water and the Spirit."

What does it mean
to be reborn of water and the Spirit?

Water is a symbol of purification.
Water washes things, makes them new.
Being reborn of water means
receiving a new past.
It means having our sins washed away.

Spirit is a symbol of transformation.
Spirit transforms things, re-creates them.
Being reborn of the Spirit means
receiving a new future.
It means being transformed into God's children.

Being reborn of water and the Spirit means
being purified and transformed.
It means getting rid of an old life of sin
and receiving a new life in Christ in its place.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
In what sense is baptism an unending process?

Today's reading invites us to recall
that whoever "isn't busy being born
is busy dying." Bob Dylan

Jesus talks about his mission

Tuesday

John 3:7-15

"I come from heaven."

When Neil Armstrong walked on the moon
July 20, 1969, some people believed
the whole affair was being staged on a back
lot in Warner Brothers' Studio in Hollywood.

NASA officials
say they routinely receive letters from groups
and individuals all over the world
claiming the space exploration phenomena
is a "big hoax"
being perpetrated on a gullible public.

Jesus encountered similar disbelief
among the people of his own time.

"You do not believe me
when I tell you about the things of this world,"
says Jesus to Nicodemus,
"how will you ever believe me, then,
when I tell you about the things of heaven?"

How do we handle doubts and questions
about our faith when they arise in our lives?

"If you wish to be convinced of eternal truths,
do not augment your arguments,
but weed out your passions." Blaise Pascal

Jesus talks about life

Wednesday

John 3:16-21

Everyone who believes will live.

Today's reading contains the famous verse
that some call "the Bible within the Bible":

"For God loved the world so much
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not die but have eternal life." John 3:16

This verse sums up the entire biblical message.
It also affirms the two major biblical truths.

First, God took the initiative to save us.
Sometimes preachers give the impression
that God is more interested in condemning
than in saving.
Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Second, the verse affirms
that God's initiative was motivated by love.
God could not bear seeing his children
wander farther and farther from home.

Are we totally convinced of God's fatherly love
for us?

"God loves each one of us
as if there was just one of us to love." Augustine

Jesus talks about choice

Thursday

John 3:31-36

Whoever obeys will live.

“Whoever believes in the Son
has eternal life;
whoever disobeys the Son
will not have life.” John 3:36

This sentence
echoes the words of Moses to the Israelites
in Deuteronomy 30:15-18:

“Today I am giving you a choice . . .
between life and death.
If you obey the commands of the LORD . . .
the LORD your God will bless you. . . .
But if you disobey . . . you will be destroyed.”

Eventually,
every one of us comes to this crossroad in life.
A signpost clearly marks the two routes,
but we can take only one of them.

Which teaching of Jesus do we find hardest
to obey?

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”*
Robert Frost, from “The Road Not Taken”

Jesus feeds five thousand

Friday

John 6:1-15

They had all they wanted.

The television media
gave unusual coverage to John Paul II’s meeting
with Scottish youth in 1982.

One of the passages of Scripture
that the Holy Father talked about
with the young people was today’s reading.
He pointed out how Andrew, Scotland’s patron,
was conscious of the inadequate amount of food
for feeding the crowd.

*Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

But he put what he had in the hands of Jesus.
Jesus blessed it and fed the 5,000 with it.
Then the Holy Father said to the young people:

“It is exactly the same with your lives. . . .
You feel conscious of your inadequacy. . . .
But what I say to you is this:
Place your lives in the hands of Jesus.
He will accept you and bless you . . .
beyond your greatest expectations.”

How trustingly do we place our lives
in the hands of Jesus?

Blessed are they
who place themselves in the hands of God.
God will place himself in their hands.

Jesus walks on water

Saturday

John 6:16-21

“Don’t be afraid.”

In one of his letters, St. Francis de Sales
describes a custom of farm people in his region.
When they carry water in a bucket,
they float a piece of wood on the water
to keep it from splashing about
and spilling over the sides.

That piece of wood is a lot like Jesus.
And the splashing water is a lot like life.

Whenever the waters of life splash about
too much—whenever they get too stormy—
we need only introduce Jesus into the situation.
He will calm the stormy waves
and restore serenity to our lives,
as he did for the disciples in today’s reading.

When was the last time a spiritual or emotional
“storm” threatened our own peace of soul?

“Where’d you get the idea
you could make it yourself?
Doesn’t it get a little lonely sometimes,
Out on a limb . . . without Him . . . ?
Why try and go it alone?
The blessing you lose may be your own.”

Stan Freberg

Jesus talks about food

Monday

John 6:22-29

“Work for food that lasts for eternal life.”

Some people on a weight-reducing program were discussing reasons why they overeat. One person said,
“I overeat whenever I get bored or depressed. I don’t know why I head for the refrigerator at those times, but that’s when I do it.”

Another person said,
“I think it’s because you’re hungry then, but it’s a spiritual hunger.
Your mistake is trying to satisfy a spiritual hunger with physical food.”

In today’s reading, Jesus alludes to the fact that we have two lives to nourish: our physical life and our spiritual life. One requires physical food; the other requires spiritual food.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: Have we ever caught ourselves trying to fill a spiritual emptiness with material things?

Today’s reading invites us to reflect:
“Why spend money on what does not satisfy? Why spend your wages and still be hungry? Listen to me and do what I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all.” Isaiah 55:2

Jesus is the bread of life

Tuesday

John 6:30-35

“I give life to the world.”

The lunar module *Eagle*, carrying astronauts Aldrin and Armstrong, landed on the moon on Sunday, July 20, 1969. While Armstrong prepared for his moon walk, Aldrin unpacked bread and wine and put them on the abort-guidance-system computer. He describes what he did next:

“I poured the wine into the chalice. . . . In the one-sixth gravity of the moon

the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup.

It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon and the very first food eaten there were communion elements. . . .

I sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and the Church everywhere.” Guidepost Treasury of Hope

What value do we place on Communion?

“Because there is the one loaf of bread, all of us, though many, are one body, for we all share the same loaf.” 1 Corinthians 10:17

Jesus talks about his Father

Wednesday

John 6:35-40

“He wants all believers to live forever.”

William Barclay tells the story of an old African chief of the Ngoni tribe. One Sunday morning he sat at the Eucharist watching Ngoni, Senga, and Tumbuka tribesmen worshiping side by side.

Suddenly his mind flashed back to his boyhood. He remembered sitting on a riverbank watching Ngoni warriors, after a day’s fighting, washing Senga and Tumbuka blood from their spears and bodies.

That morning at the Eucharist, the old chief understood as never before what Christianity was all about. It was God, calling all people, through Christ, to put away hostility and live as one family.

How do we live out the bond of unity that the Eucharist symbolizes and strengthens?

“So if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift . . . make peace . . . and then come back and offer your gift to God.” Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus promises his flesh to eat

Thursday

John 6:44-51

"I am the living bread from heaven."

A church door in Cologne, Germany, contains four decorated panels.

The first panel shows six stone jars to recall Jesus' changing of water into wine. The second shows five loaves and two fish to recall Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 and the promise he makes in today's reading. The third shows the Last Supper, when Jesus fulfilled his promise. The fourth shows the Emmaus event, when the two disciples encountered Jesus in the "breaking of the bread."

Few works of art give a better summary of the Eucharist, recalling how it was prefigured at Cana, promised at Capernaum, instituted at Jerusalem, and celebrated at Emmaus.

What motivates us to eat the Lord's Supper?

"Jesus of Nazareth requests your presence at a meal to be given in his honor."

Jesus' flesh is real food

Friday

John 6:52-59

"Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

A man was asked why he believed in miracles. He replied, "Because I see them every day in the lives of people who have been changed by the power of the risen Jesus."

This person's observation explains why Christians gather on the Lord's Day at the Lord's table for the Lord's Supper. It is to send a message to the world that faith is alive, love has conquered, and hope is possible.

It is to witness to the fact that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

This is the most important proclamation of the Christian community. It cannot be spoken by one individual; it must be shouted by the total community.

Do we proclaim the Christian message not just in worship, but also in life?

"Every time you eat this bread and drink from this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

1 Corinthians 11:26

Jesus is rejected by some

Saturday

John 6:60-69

"This teaching is hard."

Many of us have shared in the Eucharist since childhood. But, if we are honest, we must admit that this sharing has not brought us as close to each other and to Jesus as we should be. Why is this?

Perhaps it's because we sometimes tend to view the Eucharist only as a time for receiving—a meal.

We tend to forget that it is also a sacrifice—a time for giving and for forgiving.

The Eucharist is not only the bread of life; it is also the bread of death.

We will walk with Jesus in the sunlight of Easter morning only if we first accompany him through the shadows of Good Friday afternoon.

How giving and forgiving are we in our lives?

"You do not go to the Eucharist to serve God; you go to learn how God breaks bread, so that you can go and do it the same way, because God is known in the breaking of bread."

Louis Evely

Jesus is the Good Shepherd

Monday

John 10:11-18

"I am willing to die for my sheep."

W. M. Thomson tells this story in his book *The Land and the Book*.

One day a shepherd was grazing his sheep near Mt. Tabor. Suddenly three bedouin rustlers appeared. The shepherd knew what he was up against, but he didn't flee. He stood his ground and fought to keep his flock from falling into the hands of the outlaws.

The episode ended with the shepherd being knifed to death defending his sheep.

Jesus had this kind of image in mind when he said,
"I am the good shepherd,
who is willing to die for the sheep."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
If Jesus was willing to die for us,
what are we willing to do for him?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
"The LORD is my shepherd. . . .
Even if I go through the deepest darkness,
I will not be afraid." Psalm 23:1, 4

Jesus talks about discipleship

Tuesday

John 10:22-30

"They follow me."

In England, modern shepherds do not lead their flocks; they drive them. It is just the opposite in modern Israel. There shepherds still lead their flocks, just as they did in the time of Jesus.

A traveler to Palestine tells how he once saw a shepherd leading his flock. Suddenly they came to a shallow stream. The flock hesitated.

The shepherd bent down, picked up a lamb, and carried it across. The mother saw her lamb on the other side and waded through the water to join it. Immediately the others followed.

How willingly and closely do we follow Jesus, especially when the going gets tough?

"The LORD is my shepherd;
I have everything I need.
He lets me rest in fields of green grass
and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water.
He gives me new strength.
He guides me in the right paths,
as he has promised." Psalm 23:1-3

Jesus talks about judgment

Wednesday

John 12:44-50

"My words will be his judge."

W. C. Fields made an impression on the American film world as few Hollywood stars have ever done. Comedians still impersonate him, and television commercials occasionally present a W. C. Fields mimic to plug their products.

There's a story—probably apocryphal—that toward the end of his life, Fields spent a lot of time reading the Bible. Someone asked him about this. Fields replied,
"I'm looking for any loopholes I can find."

The implication is that Fields knew he had lived a life that wasn't in full accord with the Gospel. Now he was looking for a way to excuse himself when he appeared before the judgment seat of God.

In what sense will we judge ourselves, rather than have God pass judgment on us?

"I shall tell you a secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment; it takes place every day." Albert Camus

Jesus talks about service

Thursday

John 13:16-20

“No slave is greater than his master.”

In ancient times,
washing another’s feet was a humiliating task.
No free citizen could be forced to do it;
it was a slave’s job.

This is why Jesus’ action
made such a dramatic impact upon his disciples.
You could hear a pin drop
as Jesus explained the reason for his action.

“I, your Lord and Teacher,
have just washed your feet.
You, then, should wash one another’s feet.
I have set an example for you,
so that you will do just what I have done
for you.” John 13:14-15

How can we “wash the feet” of our brothers
and sisters, in imitation of Jesus?

“I shall pass through this life but once.
Any good, therefore,
that I can do, or any kindness I can show
to any fellow creature, let me do it now.
Let me not defer or neglect it,
for I shall not pass this way again.”
Attributed to Stephen Grellet

Jesus is the way to the Father

Friday

John 14:1-6

“I go to prepare a place for you.”

John Peterson wrote a hymn
called “Over Sunset Mountains.” It reads:
“Over the sunset mountains,
Heaven awaits for me;
Over the sunset mountains,
Jesus my Savior I’ll see.”

When a critic saw the lyrics, he told Peterson
to delete the name of Jesus
and expand on the idea of heaven.

Of course, Peterson refused.
You can’t expand on the idea of heaven
if you delete the name of Jesus.
Paul explains why in Philippians 2:9-10:

“God . . . gave him the name
that is greater than any other name.
And so, in honor of the name of Jesus
all beings in heaven, on earth, and
in the world below will fall on their knees.”

How do we picture heaven?

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

Jesus talks about his Father

Saturday

John 14:7-14

“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

One day Moses said to God, “Please,
let me see the dazzling light of your presence.”
God replied,
“I will not let you see my face,
because no one can see me and stay alive.”
Exodus 33:18, 20

We must keep these words of God in mind
if we are to appreciate
Jesus’ earthshaking words to Philip:
“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

It’s impossible to imagine
how incredible Jesus’ words must have sounded
to Jewish ears.
“It may well be to the ancient world
this was the most staggering thing
Jesus ever said.” William Barclay

Yet Jesus spoke these words to Philip
without any qualification.

What characteristic of God
do we find most appealing in Jesus?

In the lowly carpenter of Nazareth,
we see the lofty architect of the universe.

Jesus talks about love

Monday

John 14:21-26

"Whoever loves me obeys my teaching."

St. Augustine introduces one of the finest passages he ever wrote with this question: "What does love look like?"

Augustine doesn't answer the question with metaphors that compare love to the eyes of a child, to a breeze on a hot day, or to daisies dancing in the sunlight.

He simply says:

"Love has hands to help others.
It has feet to hasten to the poor and needy.
It has eyes to see misery and want.
It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of others.
That's what love looks like."

Jesus speaks of love in the same practical way in today's reading:

"Whoever loves me will obey my teaching."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How practical is our love of God and neighbor?

Today's reading invites us to remember that "the worth of a kind deed lies in the love that inspired it." Talmud

Jesus gives us his peace

Tuesday

John 14:27-31

"Peace is what I leave you."

Albert Schweitzer gave up a successful musical career in Europe to become a missionary doctor in Africa.

One day someone asked him what starting point he used to introduce Jesus and the message of Christianity to primitive African tribesmen. Schweitzer replied:

"When I speak of the difference between the restless and the peaceful heart, the wildest of my savages knows what is meant. And when I portray Jesus as He who brings peace with God to the hearts of men, they comprehend Him."

Schweitzer's answer dovetails beautifully with what Jesus says in today's reading: "It is my own peace that I give you."

How would we introduce a searching friend to Jesus?

Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." John 20:21

Jesus is the real vine

Wednesday

John 15:1-8

"Remain united to me."

A Hasidic parable concerns a hungry boy traveling with his father through a thick forest. Suddenly the boy spots a patch of ripe berries and begins picking them and eating them.

When the hour grows dangerously late, the boy can't bring himself to leave the patch. What could the father do? He loved the boy in spite of his boyish behavior.

The father said, "I will start out; you may stay a few minutes longer. But to make sure we don't get separated, keep calling, 'Father! Father!' I will answer you. But as soon as my voice begins to fade, come running."

Hasidic masters used this parable to teach the need to keep united to God in prayer.

What kind of prayer bond do we have with our Father? Jesus? The Holy Spirit?

"The chief exercise of prayer is to speak to God and to hear God speak in the bottom of your heart." Francis de Sales

Jesus talks about love

Thursday

John 15:9-11

"I told you this that your joy may be full."

A *Peanuts* cartoon

shows Charlie Brown warning Snoopy not to go near Lucy's house.

"She's having a 'Crab-In' today," says Charlie.

Instead of heeding Charlie's warning, Snoopy goes straight to Lucy's house and knocks at the door.

When the unhappy Lucy appears,

Snoopy gives her a great big kiss.

Then he trots off, saying to himself,

"That's how you break up a 'Crab-In.'"

Jesus makes the same point in today's reading. The surest way to put joy into someone's life is to put love into it.

How willing are we to go out of our way to try to put love into someone's life?

Nobody needs love more than someone who doesn't seem to deserve it. If we wait for people to become lovable before we love them, we will wait forever. It's precisely in being loved that they become lovable. Louis Evely (paraphrased)

Jesus talks more about love

Friday

John 15:12-17

"The greatest love is to die for a friend."

A prisoner slipped away from a labor detail in Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp in southern Poland.

In retaliation, the Nazis picked ten prisoners, at random, to be killed.

One of the prisoners was the father of a family.

As the guards marched the victims off to execute them, a Polish priest named Maximillian Kolbe

stepped from the ranks and volunteered to take the man's place.

The Nazi officer in charge was stunned, but he recovered his composure and said, "Accepted."

With that the priest marched off to his death.

What is the greatest sacrifice we ever made for someone we never even knew?

"At the hour of death when we come face to face with God, we are going to be judged on love, not on how much we have done, but on how much love we put in the doing."

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Jesus talks about the world

Saturday

John 15:18-21

"The world hates you."

John uses the term *world* in today's reading not in a cosmological sense.

That is, it does not mean the dwelling place of people.

Rather, John uses it in the theological sense, as a "human society organizing itself without God." William Barclay

It is this world that hated and persecuted Jesus.

It is this world that will hate and persecute Jesus' followers.

It is this world that Jesus has defeated. (John 16:33)

It is this world that Jesus' followers will also defeat by their faith. (1 John 5:4)

It is this world that John identifies in some way with Satan himself. (John 17:15)

How courageously do we stand up against the world?

"Will a person gain anything if he wins the whole world but is himself lost or defeated?" Luke 9:25

Jesus talks about witness

Monday

John 15:26-16:4

"You must speak about me."

A CCD teacher brought a large poster to class. It was covered with a newspaper. After class she had each of her 15 students take a scissors and cut a piece off the poster. Then she said, "Take your piece home, but don't peek at it. Bring it back to the next class."

Next class, the students came with their pieces. Excitedly they fit them together to see what the mystery poster looked like. Then they discovered something terrible. The poster had two ugly holes in it. Two students had forgotten their pieces. The teacher said:

"Jesus told us to be his witnesses. When one of us fails to do this, Jesus' witness in our world loses some of its beauty, just as this poster has because two parts are missing."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: Are we witnessing to Jesus in our world?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us witness and not be a "missing piece."

Jesus talks about the Spirit

Tuesday

John 16:5-11

"The Spirit will prove people wrong."

There's a moving scene in Acts. It's Pentecost Sunday and the Holy Spirit has just descended upon the apostles. An excited crowd comes running, attracted by a sound of "a strong wind blowing." Peter goes outside and explains to the crowd what has happened. He says to them:

"This Jesus, whom you crucified, is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah!"

"When the people heard this, they were deeply troubled and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'What shall we do, brothers?'" Acts 2:36-37

Peter instructs them about what to do, and 3,000 people are baptized before nightfall.

What made these people see their error?

In the words of Jesus in today's gospel, the Holy Spirit "proved" them "wrong." They acknowledged their error and repented.

How readily do we admit our errors?

"Without the Holy Spirit, God is distant."

Cardinal Suenens

Jesus talks more about the Spirit

Wednesday

John 16:12-15

"The Spirit will lead you to all truth."

Kathryn Koob was one of 52 Americans held hostage for 444 days by Iran in 1980-81. She remembers how angry mobs used to shout outside the embassy, almost around the clock.

One night she dozed off momentarily. Then she was awakened by what seemed to be movement on her bed. She says: "I turned quickly, expecting to see one of my guards. But no one was there. . . . I was reminded of the Holy Spirit."

After that, the Spirit became close to her.

She says: "He was teaching me love. He was teaching me to accept. He was teaching me to be open to new ideas and new understanding."

In short, Kathryn discovered what Jesus promises us in today's gospel: "The Spirit . . . will lead you into all the truth."

Have we ever experienced the Spirit's help?

"O Holy Spirit, Paraclete, perfect in us the work begun by Jesus." Pope John XXIII

Jesus talks about the future

Thursday

John 16:16-20

"Your sadness will turn to gladness."

A 13-year-old girl had just died of leukemia. While going through her belongings, her parents found a poem she had written several months previously. A portion of it reads like a commentary on Jesus' promise in today's reading:

"O God, I'm Free!
Valleys are green,
and the sun shines
Through the storm and tempest.
Your hand came through.
I grasped it.
O God, you brought me life.
You came through the dark,
A faint spark; but it lit my soul.
My fire is burning, Lord.
No one can put it out.
My God, I am Free!" Mission magazine

Do we really believe God's promise to turn our sadness into gladness?

"O Lord,
may the end of my life be the best of it.
May my closing acts be my best acts." Prayer of a Khurdish mystic

Jesus talks more about the future

Friday

John 16:20-23

"Your hearts will be filled with gladness."

An old wise man in ancient China had one son and one horse. One day the horse escaped from its corral and fled into the forest. "Bad luck," said the neighbors. "How can you be so sure?" said the old man. Next day the horse returned to the corral, leading back ten wild horses with him. "Good luck," said the neighbors. "How can you be so sure?" said the old man.

Next day the old man's son was thrown and broke a leg while trying to tame one of the wild horses. "Bad luck," said the neighbors. "How can you be so sure?" said the old man.

Next day an enemy invaded the village and carried off all able-bodied young men. The old man's injured son was left behind.

Was there ever a time in our lives when a tragedy turned into a blessing?

"Whoever falls from God's right hand is caught up in his left." Edwin Markham

Jesus talks about his Father

Saturday

John 16:23-28

"Ask in my name."

The hospital chaplain headed for Room 164. The nurse told him a patient was there from his part of the country. When he got to Room 164, however, the expected patient was not there.

The chaplain apologized to the occupant, saying he probably got his numbers mixed up. But just as he was turning to go, the patient asked him to stay.

The chaplain sat down and the patient said: "It's no mistake, your being here; I've been praying for the courage to talk to a priest. I couldn't bring myself to do it. And now you wander in here by mistake. It was no mistake." Roland Stair

How deep is our faith in prayer?

"When we pray, we link ourselves with the inexhaustible motive power that spins the universe. We ask that a part of this power be apportioned to our needs."

Alexis Carrel, "Prayer as Power"

Jesus speaks out plainly

Monday

John 16:29-33

"Be brave!"

On the wall of a dentist's office hangs a scroll with the title "I Can Take It Club." Underneath the title are hundreds of signed names. They are names of children who have pledged to face the horrors of the dentist's drill with courage.

The dentist says it's absolutely incredible how signing that pledge changes children from crybabies to "little soldiers."

The spirit behind the list of names is much the same spirit that prompted Jesus to say to his followers, in today's reading, "The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world!"

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How courageous are we in living our faith, especially when moments of trial come?

Today's reading invites us to remember: "By the yard, life is hard. By the inch, life's a cinch." Author unknown

Jesus prays

Tuesday

John 17:1-11

"I have finished my work."

Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* deals with a religious persecution in Mexico. One character in the novel is an old priest. The tension of constantly being hunted takes its toll on him. He becomes an alcoholic and fails to serve his people properly.

Eventually he's captured and sentenced to die. On the morning of his execution the old priest wakes up filled with remorse:

"Tears poured down his face; he was not . . . afraid of damnation. . . . He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed." In his own mind, at least, he was a failure.

How different from Jesus, who was able to pray to his Father at the end of his life, "I have finished the work you gave me to do."

How faithfully are we carrying out the job Jesus gave us to do?

"Life must be dedicated to a destiny to have a meaning." José Ortega y Gasset

Jesus prays

Wednesday

John 17:11-19

"Holy Father!"

The great Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat bore a mark on his forehead from touching it to the ground so often in prayer. Like so many religious people, Sadat's body played a role in his prayer.

Jesus' body also played a role in his prayer. For example, John tells us that Jesus prayed the prayer in today's reading with eyes lifted to heaven. (John 17:1) Likewise, Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven when he cured the deaf-mute. (Mark 7:34)

Jesus also knelt during prayer. (Luke 22:41) And at one point in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed faced downward. (Matthew 26:39)

What role does our body play in our own prayer? What posture do we find most helpful in prayer? Do we experiment with our body in prayer?

"I kneel when I pray, not only to show reverence to God, but also to *become* more reverent before him."

Author unknown

Jesus concludes his prayer

Thursday

John 17:20-26

"I pray that they may be one in us."

Alfred Lord Tennyson has a passage on prayer in his *Idylls of the King*:

"More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of."

Tennyson continues, saying:
"Wherefore let thy voice" rise to God
day and night "like a fountain."
Tennyson concludes
by saying that if we neglect to pray,
we're no better off than animals
who can't pray.

Jesus constantly urges us to utilize
one of the greatest powers God gave us:
the power to address him in prayer.

How faithfully do we address God in prayer?

"Boys, if you ever pray, pray for me now. . . .
When they told me yesterday
what had happened,
I felt like the moon and the stars
and the planets had fallen on me."

Harry Truman to newsmen,
after his first day as president

Jesus commissions Peter

Friday

John 21:15-19

"Take care of my sheep."

Few dialogues in the gospels
match this one for sheer depth of feeling.
And few dialogues in the gospels
match it for sheer depth of meaning.

Three times Jesus asks Peter
the same question: "Do you love me?"
Three times Peter responds to Jesus
with the same answer:
"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

And three times Jesus commissions Peter,
"Take care of my sheep."

Peter's threefold affirmation of love
erases his threefold denial of Jesus.
And Jesus' threefold commission of Peter
makes him the chief shepherd of his church.

How do we respond
to the modern shepherds of Jesus' church?

"The Christian church is a society of sinners.
It is the only society in the world
in which membership
is based upon a single qualification,
that the candidate be unworthy of membership."

Charles Clayton Morrison

John concludes his Gospel

Saturday

John 21:20-25

The world couldn't hold the books.

An anonymous poet wrote:

"Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the heavens of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretch'd from sky to sky."

This same sense of mystery
pervades John's final assessment of Jesus.
It's a beautiful way to end the Gospel
because it returns us to the realm of mystery,
the realm to which Jesus ultimately belongs.

To what extent do we have an appreciation
of the mysteries of God and Jesus?

"God is inexpressible.
It is easier for us to say what he is not
than what he is. . . .
Nothing is comparable to him. . . .
If you could conceive him,
you would conceive something other than God."

Augustine

