

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

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Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Thursday

Matthew 18:21-19:1

"Forgive from the heart."

Whenever we forgive another from the heart,
we put a plank in the bridge
across which we ourselves must travel
on our way from earth to heaven.

For each of us is a sinner.
And the only way
we can pass from earth to heaven
is across the bridge of God's forgiveness.

"Forgive others," Jesus said,
"and God will forgive you."

The safest and surest insurance policy
against the loss of heaven
is the policy of forgiving others from the heart.

"Happy are those who are merciful to others,"
said Jesus; "God will be merciful to them!"
Matthew 5:7

How do we work through an emotional block
that makes it hard for us to forgive someone?

"Forgive one another, as God has forgiven you
through Christ."
Ephesians 4:32

Jesus talks about divorce

Friday

Matthew 19:3-12

"The two shall become one."

A young mother of several small children
wrote to Ann Landers.
Her husband had done something stupid,
and she had separated from him.
Ann wrote back, "Don't be stubborn and proud.
Take him back. I promise you won't regret it."

Years later
another woman wrote to Ann Landers.
She had just buried her husband.
Eight years earlier she was separated from him,
but she went back to him
because of Ann's letter to the young mother.

She thanked Ann for her advice,
saying their last eight years together
were the happiest of their married life.

Jesus put the highest priority on
preserving the bond between husband and wife.
Jesus' priority must also be ours.

What kind of sacrifice are we willing to make
to preserve a marriage bond?

"Our love should not be just words and talk;
it must be true love, which shows itself
in action."
1 John 3:18

Jesus talks about children

Saturday

Matthew 19:13-15

"Let the children come to me."

Children, more than anyone else,
need constant reassurance that they are loved.
They need to feel
the touch of an adult hand,
the warmth of an adult cheek,
the embrace of adult arms.

"Love locked in our hearts doesn't reach them;
it is like a letter written and not sent. . . .
[Children] must hear: I love you.
I am proud of you. I am glad you're here.
A soft voice, friendly eyes and gentle words
will convey this message to a baby."
Jane Lindstrom, *These Times* (October 1976)

Jesus knew the importance of all this.
That's why he said,
"Let the children come to me."

How warm and reassuring are we
in our dealings with people,
especially young people?

"The scars left from the child's defeat
in the fight against irrational authority
are at the bottom of every neurosis."
Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*

Parable of the Rich Young Man

Monday

Matthew 19:16-22

He went away sad.

Someone composed a modern version of the Parable of the Rich Young Man. It went something like this:

“A high school athlete asked Jesus, ‘What must I do to be your follower?’ Jesus said, ‘Respect your teammates, obey your coach, practice hard, play fair.’ ‘I do all of this,’ said the young athlete. ‘What more should I do?’

“‘If you want to be perfect,’ said Jesus, ‘forget about making the team, forget about applause and yearbook pictures. Use your athletic talent to help youngsters who get into trouble because there’s no one to teach them how to play properly.’

“When the youth heard this, he went away sad.”

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: How generous are we with our talents?

Today’s reading invites us to recall that it’s not always holding on to things that makes us strong; sometimes it’s letting go.

Jesus talks about wealth

Tuesday

Matthew 19:23-30

“Wealth brings problems.”

George Burns starred in a film called *Oh, God!* He played the part of God and wore thick glasses and a funny little hat. John Denver played a supermarket employee. One day God appeared to the employee with a message for the people of the world.

Getting people to take the message seriously turned out to be difficult. Soon the supermarket employee found himself on the verge of losing his job.

He turned to God and said, “Preaching your word is costing me my job!” God replied, “That’s not a bad trade, is it? Lose your job and save the world.”

It’s so easy to get involved in the good life and blind ourselves to the basic needs of thousands, even millions. It’s so easy to do incredibly selfish things.

Recall a time when we sacrificed something to help another.

Lord, help us realize that the only things we really keep are those we give away.

Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Wednesday

Matthew 20:1-16

“Are you jealous?”

The idle workers in this parable aren’t loafers. They’re laborers who need a job. The fact that they’re still waiting at 5 P.M. shows how badly they need work.

In Jesus’ time, if a man didn’t find work today, his family often didn’t eat tomorrow. A man who found work early in the morning rejoiced all day, and so did his family.

Had the early workers not learned the employer paid the latecomers a full wage, they would have gone home joyful. As it was, they went home angry.

The latecomers stand for repentant sinners. The early workers stand for those Pharisees who resented sinners entering the kingdom late and getting the same reward they did.

Do we ever find ourselves resenting the good fortune of others?

Lord, help us rejoice when our brothers or sisters are blessed. We are all the Father’s children.

Parable of the Wedding Feast

Thursday

Matthew 22:1-14

“Why aren’t you dressed properly?”

Ancient kings
sent out general banquet invitations first.
Later they sent out specific invitations,
giving the exact day and hour.
To say yes to a general invitation
and no to a specific one was an insult.
It was like agreeing
to meet someone for lunch next week
but saying no to them when they call back
to arrange the exact time and place.

The original guests in the parable are the Jews.
The latter guests are the Gentiles.
The Gentiles’ belated invitation, however,
doesn’t exempt them from basic etiquette.
To accept an invitation also means
to agree to come properly dressed.

We have accepted the King’s invitation
and must come to his feast
dressed in garments of love and gratitude.

How loving and grateful are we?

“O Thou who has given us so much,
mercifully grant us one thing more—
a grateful heart.” George Herbert

Jesus talks about the commandments

Friday

Matthew 22:34-40

“Which is the greatest commandment?”

Quest for Fire is an unusual movie.
Its French producer, Jean-Jacques Arnaud,
said its production fulfilled a life-long dream.
He had always wanted to celebrate, in film,
the discovery of fire.
For it was this discovery 80,000 years ago
that saved the planet Earth from extinction.

Today,
concerned people think the planet Earth

is at the crossroads of survival again.
Our need today is not fire, but love.

Will someone 80,000 years from now
celebrate, in film, the discovery of love,
which saved the human race from extinction
in the 20th century?

Recall a time
when someone showed special love toward us.

“Someday, after mastering the winds,
the waves, the tides, and gravity,
we shall harness for God the energies of love,
and then, for the second time
in the history of the world,
man will discover fire.” Teilhard de Chardin

Jesus talks about legalism

Saturday

Matthew 23:1-12

“Do what they say, not what they do.”

The Pharisees were the successors of Moses.
Moses passed his authority to Joshua.
Joshua’s authority was passed to the elders.
The elders passed it to the prophets.
And the prophets passed it to the Pharisees.

Even though
some Pharisees abused their religious authority,
Jesus told his followers to obey them.

Modern religious leaders
may also abuse their authority.
But we should never use this as an excuse
to reject the church or the teaching of Jesus.

No one rejects a musical instrument or a song
just because someone plays or sings it badly.

To what extent
do we let the personalities of church persons
interfere with our own fidelity to Jesus?

Lord, help us
take to heart these words of Augustine:
“We cannot have God for our Father
if we don’t have the church
for our Mother.”

Jesus condemns legalism

Monday

Matthew 23:13-22

“You slam the door in people’s faces.”

Every once in a while the gospels show us the “stormy north side” of Jesus. It is a side we tend to forget about, but it is a side we must take seriously. What brought out Jesus’ “stormy north side”?

It was people like certain Pharisees, who turned religion into a game of rules. Worse yet, they forced their game on others.

Religion is not a game of rules; it is a loving response to a loving God. “Love God and do what you will,” said Augustine. By this he meant that if we love God, everything will fall into place. If we don’t love God, a million rules won’t help.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: Do we focus on rules and forget their spirit?

Today’s reading invites us to recall that when we die, God isn’t going to measure our heads to see how clever we were. He is going to measure our hearts to see how loving we were.

Jesus condemns formalism

Tuesday

Matthew 23:23-26

“You strain out flies and swallow camels.”

We continue our look at the “stormy north side” of Jesus. The phrase “woe to you” rolls from Jesus’ lips like thunder during a storm. But even in the midst of the thunder, a spark of humor softens the sternness of Jesus.

Picture a meticulous man eating food. He pours his wine through a piece of cloth to strain out insects.

Now picture the same meticulous man cheerfully swallowing a huge, dirty camel.

This is the image Jesus uses to try to get certain scribes and Pharisees to see how foolishly they practice religion. Jesus says to them, “You focus on mint but ignore mercy. You focus on herbs and seed but ignore faith and justice.”

Do we ever strain out flies and swallow camels in our worship and service of God?

Lord, help us realize that a test of worship is how sensitive it makes us to the hungry and the homeless in our midst.

Jesus condemns hypocrisy

Wednesday

Matthew 23:27-32

“Outside you’re lovely; inside you’re ugly.”

Jesus shows his “stormy north side” again when he utters his last of seven warnings to some scribes and Pharisees. It is the most devastating indictment of all. Jesus charges them with hypocrisy. The dictionary defines *hypocrisy* as “pretending to be something we are not.”

Ancients often buried their dead above ground in stone tombs.

These burial chambers were whitewashed to make them look nice.

Jesus told the offending scribes and Pharisees:

“You are like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside.”

Do we ever pretend to be what we are not?

Lord, help us realize that when we try to make an impression on someone, that’s exactly the impression we make on them. Worse yet, we dishonor you.

Jesus talks of the final hour

Thursday

Matthew 24:42-51

"He'll come when you least expect him."

There were three student devils in hell.
They were about to accompany their teacher
to earth for some on-the-job experience.
Their teacher asked them what techniques
they planned to use to get people to sin.

The first little devil said,
"I think I'll use the classical approach.
I'll tell people, 'There's no God,
so sin up a storm and enjoy life.'"

The second little devil said,
"I think I'll use a more subtle approach.
I'll tell people, 'There's no hell,
so sin up a storm and enjoy life.'"

The third little devil said,
"I think I'll use a less intellectual approach.
I'll tell people, 'There's no hurry,
so sin up a storm and enjoy life.'"

What things are we putting off in our life?

Lord, give us the wisdom
to know what to do,
the skill to know how to do it,
and the virtue to do it.

Parable of the Bridesmaids

Friday

Matthew 25:1-13

"Don't be caught napping."

A wedding was a major community event
in the time of Jesus.
The celebration lasted for days.

A highpoint was the arrival of the groom
at the house of the bride.
There he was greeted with great joy
and ceremony by a group of bridesmaids.

Ancient literature says that sometimes
grooms delayed their arrival.

Some even waited until the middle of the night.
Their prankish purpose
was to catch the lovely bridesmaids unawares.

Jesus used this image to teach the people
about his coming at the end of time.
It will catch many people unawares.
As a result they will not be prepared
to enter the eternal banquet feast with Jesus.

If Jesus' second coming were to take place
an hour from now, how prepared would we be?

Lord, help us realize
that when we waste our time,
we also waste ourselves.

Parable of the Servants

Saturday

Matthew 25:14-30

"I buried what you gave me."

A little girl
came home from a house down the street.
Her kindergarten classmate had died suddenly.
"Why did you go over there?" asked her father.

"I wanted to console her mother,"
said the little girl.

"What on earth could you do to console her?"
asked her father.

"Nothing much," said the little girl,
"so I just sat in her lap and cried with her."

It is probably not an accident
that Jesus has the servant with the least money
bury it and do nothing with it.

Do we excuse ourselves from doing anything
to help the poor, the suffering, or the elderly
because we think
we have nothing much to give them?

Lord, help us realize
that if we can't do great things,
we can at least do little things in a great way.

Jesus is rejected at Nazareth

Monday

Luke 4:16-30

The people expelled Jesus.

Imagine driving along smoothly when, bam, you hit a giant pothole. The jolt rearranges all your bones. That's what today's reading does, also. Why do the people react so violently to Jesus?

First, Jesus takes upon himself a prophet's role by saying that he is fulfilling the scriptures. And no prophet is accepted in his hometown. Second, Jesus challenges his Jewish listeners by praising two Gentiles, a widow and a leper. That's like nominating a Democrat at a Republican convention.

The people's reaction to Jesus brings the starry-eyed Christian down to earth with a thud. It previews the rejection that Jesus will meet in many other places in the days ahead.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How open are we to all of Jesus' teachings?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us accept your word, no matter how much it challenges us and jars us out of our complacency.

Jesus expels an evil spirit

Tuesday

Luke 4:31-37

They were amazed at the way he taught.

Several years ago a TV program dealt with the making of the Superman movies. One member of the film crew was outraged by how much money Marlon Brando got for a brief appearance in the movie. But his outrage turned to praise when he saw, firsthand, Brando's amazing power to move an audience.

Jesus possesses amazing power too. We see it blaze forth in today's reading.

First, Jesus teaches in such a way as to hold the people completely spellbound.

Second, Jesus' authority tames the evil spirit. He commands, "Be quiet and come out of the man!" And the evil spirit obeys.

Do we present our evil tendencies to Jesus to be silenced—especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Lord, let your powerful presence touch us deeply and heal whatever keeps us from serving you more faithfully.

Jesus heals many people

Wednesday

Luke 4:38-44

He laid hands on them.

In his book *Power to Heal* Francis MacNutt describes a remarkable nurse. She begins each day by asking Jesus to bless her hands and use them to heal her patients. She then goes about her work in a loving way.

MacNutt also describes a New York University study of nurses who lay hands on patients, lovingly, with the intention of healing them. The results are astounding. The patients recover more rapidly. It seems, says MacNutt, that loving, caring people communicate, through their hands, a loving, life-giving power to sick bodies.

Jesus often laid hands on people to heal them.

Do we ever begin our day by asking Jesus to use us to help people that day?

Lord, teach us what a great power you gave us in the power of a loving touch. Help us use it to help people, especially the elderly, the sick, and the lonely.

Jesus calls four fishermen

Thursday

Luke 5:1-11

"I will let down the net."

A sign on the shore of the Sea of Galilee quotes Peter's words in today's reading: "Master, at your word, I will let down the net." The sign goes on to say:

"The words and deeds of Jesus are not actions of the distant past. Jesus is still looking for men and women who are prepared to take risks at his word, because they trust him utterly."

Peter's words of trust, and the catch of fish that followed, weren't recorded merely to inspire us.

They were also recorded to invite us to imitate Peter.

Is there some risk that Jesus may be inviting us to take for him in our own time?

"It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing because you can do only a little. Do what you can." Sydney Smith

Jesus talks about fasting

Friday

Luke 5:33-39

"Don't pour new wine into old wineskins."

Jews fasted for all kinds of reasons. Fasting was a sign of mourning for the dead, a sign of repentance for sin, a way of preparing for the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom.

We can't be certain why John's disciples fasted, but it was probably to prepare for the coming of the Messiah and God's kingdom. After all, John said, "Something big is about to happen."

This would explain Jesus' response. In effect Jesus is saying, "Something big and important has happened. The Messiah has come; the kingdom is at hand. The reason for fasting is ended." To keep fasting now would be like continuing to bandage an arm after it is healed. It would be like continuing to hold an umbrella after the rain has stopped.

Do we perform certain religious practices routinely without reflecting on them?

Lord, keep us from letting our religious worship become mechanical or wooden.

Jesus talks about the Sabbath

Saturday

Luke 6:1-5

"The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

"When you walk along a path in someone else's grainfield, you may eat all the grain you can pull off with your hands, but you must not cut any grain with a sickle." Deuteronomy 23:25

It was accepted practice to do what the disciples were doing. Some Pharisees objected to their doing it on the Sabbath. They interpreted the action as reaping, a violation of the Sabbath. (Exodus 34:21)

Jesus makes two observations. First, he cites the example of David to show that certain basic needs, like hunger, take precedence over certain laws. Second, he cites his authority over the Sabbath: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

What is our own attitude toward the Lord's Day and its observance?

Lord, give us the same kind of respectful and balanced attitude that you had toward the law and its observance.

Jesus heals a man's hand

Monday

Luke 6:6-11

Would he heal on the Sabbath?

An old monk prayed all his life for a vision.
One day it happened.
Just as it did, however, the bell rang,
signaling that it was time to feed the poor
who gathered daily at the monastery gate.
It was the old monk's turn to share with them
whatever food was on hand for the day.

The monk was torn between his heavenly vision
and his earthly occupation.
Then he sighed, turned his back on the vision,
and went outside to feed the poor.

When he returned, the vision was still there.
As he bowed in thanksgiving the vision said,
"Had you not gone to feed the poor,
I would not have stayed."

Today's reading makes a similar point.
When worship conflicts with helping the needy,
God wants us to help the needy.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
What are we doing to help the needy?

Today's reading invites us to remember:
Where the needy are, Jesus is.

Jesus chooses twelve apostles

Tuesday

Luke 6:12-19

Jesus spent the night in prayer.

Before the Battle of Gettysburg,
President Lincoln knelt down and prayed.
Later he confided to General Sickles:

"Never before
had I prayed with so much earnestness.
I wish I could repeat my prayer.
I felt I must put all my trust in Almighty God.
I prayed that he would not let the nation perish.

I felt that my prayer was answered.
I had no misgiving about the result."

Jesus, too, turned to his Father in prayer
at critical moments in his life.
One of those moments came before he chose
the men who would work closely with him
to establish God's kingdom on earth.

What is our own attitude toward prayer,
especially at critical moments in our lives?

Lord, help us take to heart these words:
"The man who has lost contact with God
lives on the same dead-end street
as the man who denies him." Milton Marcy

Jesus teaches his disciples

Wednesday

Luke 6:20-26

"Your reward will be great!"

A South Korean poet named Kim Chi Ha
was sentenced to life imprisonment.
His crime?
In several of his poems he had protested
his government's treatment of the poor.

In the midst of his ordeal,
Kim Chi Ha maintained a sense of humor.
When an angry judge added seven more years
to his life sentence, he joked to his mother,
"I must stay in prison
seven more years after I die."

Kim's mother supported her son totally.
"Jesus was always for the poor," she said.
"We, too, if we are to be his followers,
must be for the poor and oppressed."

How seriously do we make our own
Jesus' concern for the poor and the oppressed?

Lord, help us keep in mind these words:
"All that is needed
for evil to prosper in our world
is for good people like ourselves
to remain silent." Edmund Burke

Jesus talks about loving enemies

Thursday

Luke 6:27-38

"Do good to those who hate you."

A trapped rattlesnake can become so angry that it will bite itself.

That's a good image of what happens when we let anger and resentment control us. We end up biting ourselves, not our enemy. We think we are getting even with our enemy. The truth is we are harming ourselves more than we are harming our enemy.

Doctors tell us that many of their patients are victims of their own anger and resentment. They are sick because they are consumed by anger and hatred. The best medicine they could take would be to follow the teaching of Jesus: "Do good to those who hate you . . . and pray for those who mistreat you."

How do we handle anger and resentment when it begins to control and to consume us?

Lord, help us learn from the enemies of the psalmist. Concerning their fate, the psalmist says: "My enemies . . . dug a pit in my path, but fell into it themselves." Psalm 57:6

Jesus talks about guidance

Friday

Luke 6:39-42

"The blind can't lead the blind."

Before the era of radio and television, a telephone operator used to get a daily call requesting the exact time. She was always able to give it authoritatively. This was because she checked her watch daily when the town's factory sounded its whistle at the end of each work day.

One day, however, her watch stopped and she told her mystery caller that she was waiting for the factory whistle.

She explained that she used it each day to check or set her watch.

There was a silence. Then the caller said, "This is the factory. We always use your time to decide when to sound our whistle each day."

When it comes to right and wrong, do we follow the information of others who may be as blind as we are? Or do we follow Jesus, the light of the world?

Lord, help us follow you. You alone know the correct way. You alone can guide us along the path of truth.

Parable of the House Builders

Saturday

Luke 6:43-49

"Hear God's word and live it."

Dr. Smiley Blanton tells the story of a patient who saw a Bible on his desk.

"Do you—a psychiatrist—read the Bible?" the patient asked. "I not only read it," I told him, "I study it. It's the greatest textbook on human behavior ever put together. If people would just absorb its message, a lot of us psychiatrists could close our offices and go fishing."

Reader's Digest, August 1966

To illustrate his point, Dr. Blanton says that if patients paralyzed by guilt feelings took to heart the Parable of the Prodigal Son, they could be healed overnight. God's loving forgiveness is infinitely greater than any mistake we can make.

What gospel teaching do we find hardest to take to heart?

Lord, "your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path." Psalm 119:105

Jesus heals an officer's son

Monday

Luke 7:1-10

"I haven't found such faith in Israel."

Faith is a gift from God.
The gift of faith might be compared
to someone's gift of seed to a farmer.
The farmer can bring only one sack to be filled,
or he can bring 100 sacks.
God proportions his gifts to our openness
to receive them.

Furthermore,
when the farmer takes the seed home,
he can plant it and cultivate it.
Or he can plant it and ignore it.
Or he can store it and let it rot.

God's gift of faith to us is like that.
We can cultivate it, ignore it, or let it decay.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves:
How open are our hearts to God's gift of faith
or to his willingness to increase our faith?
What do we do with God's gift of faith?

Today's reading invites us to pray:
Lord, help us realize
that our faith is God's gift to us.
What we do with that faith
is our gift to God.

Jesus raises a widow's son

Tuesday

Luke 7:11-17

Jesus said to her, "Do not cry."

Mark calls Jesus the "son of Mary." (Mark 6:3)
This is an unusual statement.
Usually, Jews identified a son by his father.
One explanation for the unusual identification
is that Joseph was already dead
when Jesus began his preaching ministry.

Mary was a widow,
just as was the woman in today's gospel.
Mary, too, had only one son.
This explains why, on the cross, Jesus arranged
for his mother to live with John. (John 19:27)

Jesus' heart was moved
with special pity for the widow.
He knew the sorrow his own death
would cause his mother.
He had undoubtedly thought about it often.
Raising the widow's son
was an act of tender pity on Jesus' part.

How compassionate are we
toward those who suffer misfortune?
How do we translate compassion into action?

Lord, help us see people through your eyes
and love them with your heart.

Some reject Jesus and John

Wednesday

Luke 7:31-35

"They are like ill-humored children."

In Jesus' day, children played games
like "funeral" and "wedding."
For example, one child played the dead person,
other children sang a sad song,
and still others cried and wailed in sorrow.
Or two children played the newlyweds,
other children played the dance band,
and still others played the dancing guests.

Sometimes the children didn't get their way
and they became ill-humored.
For example, if they couldn't be the dancers,
they refused to play.
They just sat on the pavement and pouted.

This is the image Jesus used
to describe certain people in his day.
Because they didn't get "their way,"
they became like petulant children.

How do we react when things don't go our way?
Do we become ill-humored?

Lord, help us remain open to everyone.
Keep us from closing our minds
just because things turn out to be different
from what we expected them to be.

Jesus visits a Pharisee's home

Thursday

Luke 7:36-50

A sinful woman anointed Jesus' feet.

A member of Alcoholics Anonymous said:

"Sometimes I wish everyone became an alcoholic for a short time. We'd have a different world. When you hit rock bottom and bounce back, it changes you like you wouldn't believe.

"Before you may have been proud. Now you're humble, because you know how vulnerable you are. Before you may have been self-serving. Now you're loving, because you know what life without love is like. Before you may have been judgmental. Now you're more forgiving, because you know from bitter experience how easy it is to fail."

Simon and the woman illustrate this point.

Are we like Simon, or like the woman?

Lord, help us be less judgmental and more forgiving, less self-serving and more loving, less proud and more humble in spirit, like Jesus.

Some women travel with Jesus

Friday

Luke 8:1-3

They helped with their resources.

Some think the least-watched moment during a TV program is when the commercial runs.

But there's another moment that receives far less attention than this one.

It's when the credits run after a program. Yet if it weren't for the people whose names roll across the screen at that moment, we wouldn't have any TV programs at all.

Today's reading is like the "credit" moment on television. We are introduced to some of the people who worked behind the scenes to help fund Jesus' preaching journeys: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and "many other women."

Are we content to play a behind-the-scenes role in church programs? Do we help fund the church's mission work?

Lord, help us realize that not everyone can work center stage and in the spotlight.

Parable of the Sower

Saturday

Luke 8:4-15

"Some seeds fell in good soil."

The finger of God scratched the soil and planted a seed, and Francis of Assisi took off his silk clothes and put on beggar's rags to preach to the poor.

The finger of God scratched the soil and planted a seed, and Albert Schweitzer left his concert piano in Europe to become a missionary doctor in Africa.

The finger of God scratched the soil and planted a seed, and Mother Teresa left a convent in Albania to minister to outcasts in India.

God is still planting seeds today. Whether the seed bears fruit or not depends on the heart into which it falls.

How open are our hearts to God's word?

Lord, help us receive your word with the simplicity of a Francis of Assisi, the generosity of an Albert Schweitzer, and the love of a Mother Teresa.

Jesus talks about our actions

Monday

Luke 8:16-18

“Everything will be revealed.”

Writing in *The Upper Room*, Laren Spears describes an interesting dialogue between a small boy and his mother. It goes something like this.

“Can God see me in my room?” asks the boy.
 “Yes!” replies the mother.
 “Can God see me in my closet?” asks the boy.
 “Yes!” replies the mother.
 “Can God see me in the middle of the night?”
 “Yes!” replies the mother.
 “I don’t much like that!” says the boy.

Today’s reading reminds us in yet another way that we are accountable to God for everything we do— even the secret things that evade human notice.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: How open are we in our dealings in life?

Today’s reading invites us to remember that “the measure of a man’s real character is what he will do if he knows he will never be found out.”

Thomas Macauley

Jesus talks about his family

Tuesday

Luke 8:19-21

“Whoever obeys God’s word is my family.”

Will Rogers, the great American humorist, was part Indian. One day a woman was boasting that her ancestors came over on the *Mayflower*. After she had finished her ego trip, she turned to Rogers and said, “What about your ancestors?” Rogers glanced at the floor, shuffled his feet, and said, “My ancestors met the *Mayflower*.”

It’s good Jesus didn’t marry and raise a family. It saves a lot of people the trouble

of trying to trace their ancestry back to him. The most important relationship to Jesus is not a physical one, but a spiritual one. And the way we enter into this relationship is by hearing God’s word and obeying it.

What keeps us from obeying God’s word?

Lord, help us
 appreciate more fully these words:
 “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

Jesus sends out the Twelve

Wednesday

Luke 9:1-6

“Preach and heal!”

President Woodrow Wilson once said, “No one can love his neighbor on an empty stomach.” His point is an important one: We are made up of body and soul.

To address the soul without addressing the body is to ignore reality. In other words, we can’t talk to people of heavenly things if we don’t talk to them, also, of earthly things. The two go hand in hand for the simple reason that we are body and soul.

This is why Jesus instructed his disciples to “preach and heal.” They must attend to both the spiritual needs and the physical needs of the people.

What are we doing to help not only those who are starving spiritually, but also those who are starving physically?

Lord, help us address the whole person. Help us realize that for every talent that hunger and pain stimulate they snuff out a hundred others.

Herod wonders about Jesus

Thursday

Luke 9:7-9

"Who is this man?"

In his book *Surprised by the Spirit*,
Edward Farrell paints a vivid picture of Jesus.
It goes something like this:

"Who is this man
who walks so winningly along the seashore?
Who is this man
whose face shines like the morning sun?
Who is this man
whose eyes pierce me like a sword and say,
'All of you is what I want.
Nothing less than all of you will do?'"

Herod had every right to ask "Who is this man?"
Jesus dogged Herod's days.
Jesus disturbed his sleep.
Jesus invaded his dreams.
No wonder Herod wanted to "see Jesus."

Do we ever stop long enough
to ponder the Jesus question: Who is this man?

"Music I heard with you
was more than music,
And bread I broke with you
was more than bread."* Conrad Aiken, "Discordance"

Peter professes his faith in Jesus

Friday

Luke 9:18-22

"Tell no one I'm the Messiah."

Many Jews were looking for a political Messiah.
They were dreaming of a leader
who'd make Israel "number one" in the world.
They were praying for a Messiah
who would catapult their nation into a position
of international power and prestige.

Jesus had to correct these wrong notions.

*From *Collected Poems* by Conrad Aiken. Copyright © 1953, 1970
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He had to reeducate the people
to the true nature of the Messiah.
Until he did, he could not reveal himself
as the promised Messiah.

Jesus had come to establish a spiritual kingdom,
not a material one.
He had come to wear a crown of thorns,
not a crown of gold.

Do we tend to remake Jesus
into our own image and likeness?

"There must surely have been something
not only mysterious
but many-sided about Christ
if so many smaller Christs
could have been carved out of him."

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Jesus talks about his death

Saturday

Luke 9:43-45

They didn't know what he meant.

Gardening experts
tell us that certain seeds won't germinate
until they've been frozen.
They also tell us that certain buds must freeze
before they bloom.
For example, Joseph W. K. Sloane says:

"Bring a bare branch of forsythia into the house
in autumn and the buds will never open.
Bring it in in January or February
after the buds have been well frozen
and they'll bloom." Reader's Digest, February 1968

The amateur gardener
finds this kind of talk incredible—
as incredible as the disciples found Jesus' talk
about being "handed over to the power of men."
The mind resists talk about crosses and death.
But without them there can be no resurrection.

Do we truly believe that the crosses of life
and death itself are ultimately life-giving?

"Christ has made the dark door of death
into a shimmering gate of life." Author unknown

Jesus talks about greatness

Monday

Luke 9:46-50

“Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me.”

In his book *If I Were Starting My Family Again*, John Drescher says,
“One thing I would do differently is to be more patient with my children when they interrupt my reading.”

He illustrates his point by telling the story of a small boy who tried repeatedly to get his dad’s attention. The little boy wanted to show his father a scratch on his finger.

Finally his dad put down his paper and said, “Well, what do you expect me to do about it?” The little boy looked at his dad and said, “You could at least say, ‘Oh!’ ”

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: How patient are we with children, especially when they inconvenience us?

Today’s reading invites us to reflect:
“Before I got married I had six theories about bringing up children. Now I have six children and no theories.”
John Wilmot

Jesus is rejected

Tuesday

Luke 9:51-56

Jesus rebuked James and John.

Jesus nicknamed James and John “Boanerges,” which could be translated “hotheads.” (Mark 3:17)

Some think the origin of the name is rooted in today’s reading, where James and John want to “call down fire from heaven” on the inhospitable Samaritans.

Jesus not only calms down the two disciples but also rebukes them. They have not yet mastered his words,

“Learn from me, because I am gentle and humble of spirit.” Matthew 11:29

How do we react when people reject us or treat us shabbily?

“When we hate our enemies, we give them power over us— power over our sleep, power over our peace of mind, power over our blood pressure, power over our health. Our enemies would dance for joy if they knew how our hatred of them was tearing us apart.” Anonymous (paraphrased)

Jesus warns would-be disciples

Wednesday

Luke 9:57-62

“Don’t look back!”

In May 1954, Roger Bannister of England broke the four-minute mile. Shortly afterward, John Landy of Australia broke it too. The stage was set for a dream match between the two runners.

The match took place in Canada. Landy led throughout the race. As the two men headed down the final stretch, Landy took his eyes off the finish line, briefly, to see how close Bannister was.

Bannister, who was only a step off the pace, seized the golden opportunity and shot past Landy to win the race. That brief glance backward cost Landy the victory.

What tempts us to take our eyes off the finish line of the race of life?

Lord, help us live by Paul’s words: “I . . . forget what is behind me and do my best to reach what is ahead.”

Philippians 3:13

Jesus sends out disciples

Thursday

Luke 10:1-12

"The harvest is rich, the workers few."

Shortly after the discovery of America, St. Francis Xavier was born in Spain. He became a fine athlete and went to the University of Paris. There, he felt the call to the priesthood and became a missionary to India. In a letter from India he repeated Jesus' words in today's gospel: "The harvest is rich but the workers are few." (NAB) Francis wrote:

"The native Christians [here] have no priests. There is nobody to say Mass for them; nobody to teach them. . . . Many people are not becoming Christian for one reason only: there is nobody to make them Christians. Again and again, I have thought of going round the universities of Europe and crying out like a madman [for young people to come help me]."

How could we do more to spread the Gospel in our own situation?

Lord, send more workers into the harvest.

Jesus warns unbelieving towns

Friday

Luke 10:13-16

"Who hears you, hears me."

St. Augustine told the Christians of his time: "When the sacred Scriptures are read and explained, it is Christ who speaks to us." The Second Vatican Council repeated his words some 1,500 years later.

Both Augustine and the Second Vatican Council were merely echoing the words of Jesus in today's gospel reading: "He who hears you, hears me." (NAB)

The reading of Scripture may not be polished. The homily may not be inspiring. The homilist may not be a dynamic speaker.

But if we listen with open hearts and minds to God's word and to the homily, God will speak to us through them, in his own way, and in his own time. "Who hears you," Jesus told his disciples, "hears me."

How open are our hearts to God's word?

Lord, give us ears to hear you, eyes to see you, hands to serve you, and a heart to love you.

Jesus welcomes back his disciples

Saturday

Luke 10:17-24

"They obeyed when we spoke your name."

An American tourist was visiting Germany. One day he was walking down a deserted road. He came upon a shepherd grazing his flock in a nearby field.

A dog was diligently keeping the sheep from straying too far from the flock.

"What's the dog's name?" asked the tourist. "I'll spell it for you," said the shepherd. "I don't like to say it out loud unless I have something for him to do."

The shepherd's comment makes us realize how important a name is.

People in biblical times held a person's name in extra-special reverence. So it's no surprise that the name of Jesus, when invoked, had special power over demons.

How reverently, and with what confidence, do we invoke Jesus' name in time of need?

Lord Jesus, your name is "honey to the mouth, music to the ear, and gladness to the heart."

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Parable of the Good Samaritan

Monday

Luke 10:25-37

“Go and do the same.”

Several years ago
the *Chicago Tribune* carried a tragic story.
An eleven-year-old boy and his younger brother
were victims of a hit-and-run driver.
As the two boys lay dying on the highway,
dozens of cars swerved around them,
but no one stopped to help.

“‘I couldn’t believe it,’ said one of the truckers
who stopped. ‘I’m still shaken by it all.
I can’t believe no one stopped until we did.
And people still kept honking at us
and telling us to push the bodies aside
so they could get by. It was pretty nasty.’”

The Parable of the Good Samaritan
has as much relevance today
as it did in biblical times.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves:
How do we respond
to the needs of others when we’re in a hurry?

Today’s reading invites us to pray:
Lord, help us realize
that brotherhood isn’t a pie-in-the-sky dream.
It’s a necessity if our world is going to survive.

Jesus visits Martha and Mary

Tuesday

Luke 10:38-42

“You’re troubled over many things.”

A father came to a parent-teacher conference.
During a talk with one of his son’s teachers,
the father broke down and cried.
“My son doesn’t live with me anymore,”
he said, “but I care about him dearly.”

The father went on to say
that his wife and four children had left him.
He was a building contractor

who sometimes worked 18 hours a day.
He said:

“I wanted to buy my family those things
I had always dreamed of giving them.
I got so involved working
that I forgot about what they needed most—
a father who was there
when they needed his love and support.”

Are we so busy earning a living—
or doing other things—
that we neglect the family things
that money can’t buy?

Lord, help us strike a working balance
between the things money must buy
and the things money can’t buy.

Jesus teaches about prayer

Wednesday

Luke 11:1-4

“Father!”

Kevin Axe wrote an article entitled
“How Fathers Might Pray the Our Father.”
His insights apply to mothers as well.

Axe says he prefers to pray to God
“father to Father instead of child to Father.”
Why?

Axe puts it this way:
“God the Father has a few billion people
who are forever behaving like children.”
Because of this,
“God can identify with me, and I with him. . . .
We’ve got the same problem.
Right, God?”

How reflectively or thoughtfully
do we say memorized prayers
like the Lord’s Prayer?

Lord, help me keep in mind this warning:
“My words fly up,
my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts
never to heaven go.” William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*

Jesus talks about praying for things

Thursday

Luke 11:5-13

"Ask, and you will receive."

The film *Resurrection* deals with faith healing. One scene calls for a close-up of a fly walking around on a paralytic woman's toe. The wiggling of the woman's toe is the first sign she's being healed.

Ten flies were partially frozen to do the scene. The idea was that the heat of the camera lights would revive the fly, enabling it to walk on the woman's toe and fly away on cue.

The first nine flies failed to revive. They tumbled lifelessly to the floor. Ellen Burstyn, who played the paralyzed woman, thought for a moment. Then, in the spirit of the religious message of the film, she prayed: "God, please help us with this important shot." The tenth fly gave an Oscar-winning performance.

How do we feel about asking God's help?

Lord, help us realize that the only way to understand the power of prayer is to pray.

Jesus talks about evil spirits

Friday

Luke 11:15-26

"The person ends up worse off."

A young woman went on a week-long retreat during which she underwent a major conversion. The last day of the retreat she said to the retreat director:

"What do I do now?
Spiritually I'm not strong enough
to return to my old haunts and friends.
How do I fill the void this will create?"

The woman's reasoning was right. If we remove something from our lives, we must replace it with something else. Otherwise, in a moment of weakness, we could fall back into our old ways. As a result, we could end up worse off than when we started.

How do we keep from falling back into certain sins after having repented them?

"As the Sandwich Islander believes that the strength and valor of the enemy he kills passes into himself, so we gain the strength of the temptation we resist." Ralph Waldo Emerson

Jesus praises faithful hearers

Saturday

Luke 11:27-28

"Happy are those who keep God's word."

A runaway boy found a church door unlocked. He prepared to spend the night there.

A few minutes later the pastor found the boy. He felt sorry for him, but he also felt uneasy about letting him stay in the church overnight.

The pastor made several phone calls to try to find other lodging for the boy. But no charitable dormitory had a vacancy. The disappointed boy thanked the pastor and disappeared into the night.

When the pastor told his wife about the boy, she said, "Why, he could have stayed with us in our spare bedroom." Suddenly the pastor remembered Jesus' words: "I was a stranger, but you did not welcome me into your home."

How deeply has God's word taken root in our own everyday thinking and acting?

"What you bring away from the Bible depends to some extent on what you carry to it." Oliver Wendell Holmes

Jesus talks about signs

Monday

Luke 11:29-32

"As Jonah was a sign, so I am, too."

God sent Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh that he was going to punish them for their sins. The Ninevites heeded Jonah's warning and repented their sins. God forgave them and didn't punish them.

Jesus compares Jonah's preaching to Nineveh to his own preaching to Israel. But the Ninevites were more responsive to Jonah's call to repentance than the people of Israel were to Jesus' call.

This explains why Jesus says, "On the Judgment Day the people of Nineveh will stand up and accuse you."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How responsive are we to Jesus' call to repentance? What steps do we take to keep from falling back into past sins?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us realize that the person "who repents, sin is almost innocent." Seneca

Jesus warns the Pharisees

Tuesday

Luke 11:37-41

Jesus didn't wash.

Washing before eating was not just a matter of cleanliness with Jews. It was a matter of religious ritual as well. These washings followed the same pattern.

Water was poured first over the fingertips and then over the fingers, hands, and wrists.

The ritual ended in reverse fashion, with water being poured over the wrists, the hands, fingers, and fingertips.

Jesus did not object to this washing ritual. What he objected to was the attitude that some Pharisees took toward it. They got so caught up in rituals that sometimes they attached more importance to them than they did to helping the needy.

What kind of balance do we maintain between our worship and our service to others?

Lord, help us realize that a true test of worship is how responsive it makes us to the needy and the poor.

Jesus warns some Pharisees

Wednesday

Luke 11:42-46

"You love the reserved seats."

A man had a strange dream. An angel took him to a Sunday worship service.

The organist played. The keys went up and down, but no music came from the organ.

The choir sang. Their mouths opened and closed, but no song came from them.

The congregation prayed. Their lips moved, but nothing could be heard.

The man turned to the angel and said, "Why don't we hear anything?"

The angel replied, "Because there is nothing to hear. There's lots of activity but no real worship."

How much heart do we put into our worship?

Lord, help us worship you not only with our lips but also with our lives, not only with our heads but also with our hearts.

Jesus gives a further warning

Thursday

Luke 11:47-54

“How terrible for you!”

In his book *The Brothers Karamazov*,
Feodor Dostoevski says,
“Men reject their prophets and slay them,
but they love their martyrs
and honor those whom they have slain.”

Dostoevski’s words
echo the words of Jesus in today’s reading.
Jesus says to some Pharisees,
“How terrible for you!
You make fine tombs for the prophets—
the very prophets your ancestors murdered.”

Ironically, these same Pharisees would one day
be instrumental in having Jesus murdered.
In turn, their sons would one day
build monuments to honor Jesus.

The irony continues to our own day.
For example, Martin Luther King was murdered
by the fathers of sons who honor him today.

Why is it hard for us
to accept prophets while they are alive?

Lord, teach us how to recognize and to accept
the prophets in our midst.

Jesus talks about God’s love

Friday

Luke 12:1-7

“Your hairs have been counted.”

They say the heads of blonds
contain about 150,000 hairs;
brunettes, about 125,000; and redheads, 100,000.

It’s difficult to verify
how accurate this computation is.
But just the thought of it
helps us appreciate better Jesus’ point
in today’s reading.

Jesus assures us
that his Father knows the exact count

of the hairs on our heads.
Jesus’ point is
that we are precious in his Father’s sight.
We have a Father
who values us beyond our wildest imagining.

To what extent
do we see ourselves as valuable?
What gives a person value in God’s sight?

“O LORD, our Lord,
your greatness is seen in all the world! . . .
What is man, that you think of him;
mere man, that you care for him?” Psalm 8:1, 4

Jesus talks about witness

Saturday

Luke 12:8-12

“I will acknowledge you.”

Even without knowing it,
we witness to Jesus in countless ways
in our daily lives.
For example, Abraham Lincoln writes
in his Civil War diary:

“Of all the forms of charity and benevolence
seen in the crowded wards of hospitals,
those of some Catholic Sisters
were the most efficient.
I never knew whence they came
or what was the name of their order.
More lovely
than anything I have ever seen in art . . .
are the pictures
that remain of those modest Sisters,
going on their errands of mercy
among the suffering and the dying.”

What kind of witness to Jesus are we giving
by our actions?

“Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *A Psalm of Life*

Parable of the Rich Fool

Monday

Luke 12:13-21

“Grow rich spiritually.”

Murray Garsson and his brother headed up a \$75 million business during World War II. Ten years later the *Detroit Free Press* carried this brief story about Garsson on page 10.

“Death in poverty today wrote the last chapter of the checkered career of Murray W. Garsson, a mystery man in and out of governments of Republican and Democratic administrations.

“Garsson, penniless and homeless, died last night in Bellevue Hospital where he was taken after he had been sleeping for three weeks in his physician’s reception room because he had been evicted from a hotel.

“Dr. Emanuel M. Josephson said he let Garsson sleep in his office because he was broke.”

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves: How much time do we spend on things that are here today and gone tomorrow?

Today’s reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us grow rich in your sight.

Jesus talks about preparedness

Tuesday

Luke 12:35-38

“Be ready!”

James Matthew Barrie was an early 20th-century Scottish writer. He enriched the world with several creative plays and novels. Perhaps his best-known play is *Peter Pan*.

I don’t know if Barrie had a list of favorite Scripture passages. But if he did, I wouldn’t be surprised if today’s gospel reading were on it. Barrie once said,

“The most dangerous day in a man’s life is when he discovers the word *tomorrow*.” For on that day he learns procrastination.

Today’s reading talks about being prepared for Jesus’ second coming. In a wider sense, however, it talks about that unknown hour when death will come for each one of us.

How prepared are we for that moment?

Lord, when death comes, may we be able to say what Jesus said shortly before he died: “Father! I have finished the work you gave me to do.” John 17:4

Parable of the Prepared Servant

Wednesday

Luke 12:39-48

“When much is given, much is required.”

Richard Hutton and Frank Kendig have written a book called *Life Spans, or How Long Things Last*. The book is filled with unusual facts.

For example, the shoes of an average major league baseball player last two months. The stick of the average hockey player lasts two games. The boots of a combat soldier last two months.

Life spans of things are fairly predictable. Life spans of individuals are less predictable. Today’s gospel reminds us about how unpredictable life is. It warns us to use our time on earth selflessly and productively. It ends: “Much is required from the person to whom much is given.”

How are we using our talents and time? Are we using them exclusively for ourselves?

“Life consists not in holding good cards but in playing those you do hold well.” Josh Billings

Jesus talks about his mission

Thursday

Luke 12:49-53

"I have come to divide."

One of the characters in *Elmer Gantry*, a novel by Sinclair Lewis, is Frank Shallard, a fundamentalist preacher. As Shallard grows old, he grows cynical. One day he says to a friend, "Just what are the teachings of Christ? Did he come to bring peace or more war? He says both."

Shallard's question is like asking, "Do stairs go up or down? They seem to go both ways."

It's the same way with the teaching of Jesus. It depends on where you want to go. For people searching for truth, Jesus' teaching leads to joy and peace. For people in search of things other than truth, it leads to division.

When our conscience tells us we can no longer travel the same road with friends or family, how do we deal with this situation?

Lord, may your fire bring light where there is darkness and warmth where there is coldness. May it always purify us and never destroy us.

Jesus talks about signs

Friday

Luke 12:54-59

"Settle your accounts now."

Imagine a woman who is home all by herself at night. Suddenly the smoke alarm goes off. To keep the noise from disturbing her sleep, she buries her head under the pillow.

There were people in Jesus' day who reacted the same way to the coming of God's kingdom. Signs of the kingdom were everywhere.

But instead of heeding the signs, they buried their heads under thick pillows.

Today's reading invites us to reflect on our own attitude toward the gospel message.

How well are we heeding Jesus' teaching? Are we living it out in such a way that should death come for us this evening, we would be ready to go? Or are we living in such a way that death would catch us totally unprepared?

Lord, help us try to live each day as though it were our final gift to you for your priceless gift of life to us.

Jesus talks about repentance

Saturday

Luke 13:1-9

"Reform your lives."

Years ago the media ran an unusual story. A thief stole a tape recorder from a Methodist church in Florida.

When he got home, he saw that there was a tape in the machine. Curious to know what was on the tape, he pressed the Play button and listened.

To the thief's surprise, it was a moving sermon by the minister, inviting sinners to change their ways.

The thief was so impressed by the sermon that he returned the recorder to the church and initiated a reform of his own life.

How sincere are we in our own efforts to make desirable changes in our own lives? How do we manifest this sincerity in concrete ways, as the repentant thief did?

Lord, we cannot unring a bell. We cannot stop its sound from journeying out across the sky. But with your grace, we can keep from ringing it again.

Jesus heals a crippled woman

Monday

Luke 13:10-17

Jesus touched her.

In his article "The Loving Message of Touch" Norman Lobsenz cites several studies to show the important role that touch plays in the healthy development of children. Experiment after experiment confirms this.

Children

who enjoy a high degree of physical contact with parents are much healthier than those who are denied such contact. For example, research shows that infants who are touched a lot walk sooner, talk sooner, and have higher IQs.

If ordinary human touch has such power, think of the power that the loving touch of Jesus must have had.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How are we using our gift of loving touch?

Today's reading invites us to reflect on the importance of touch, as emotional support. "I don't think I ever hugged my father. He never told me he loved me. . . . I needed emotional love and support."

Mark Chapman, slayer of John Lennon

Parable of the Mustard Seed

Tuesday

Luke 13:18-21

"The plant becomes a tree."

A father gave his little boy a tiny acorn. "Son," he said, "this tall oak tree we're sitting under was once a tiny acorn like this."

The boy took the tiny acorn into his hand and turned it around and around.

He looked up at the tree.

Then he looked back at his father.

"Daddy," he said, "how can God pack a big tree into a tiny acorn like this?"

Jesus' disciples

also wondered how the kingdom of God could ever grow to include the whole world.

Like the little boy,

they were looking at the problem from a limited viewpoint.

They were forgetting

about God's mysterious wisdom and power.

Do we tend to look at things

from a purely human point of view?

Lord, help us look at acorns and see trees.

Help us look at raindrops and see oceans.

Help us look beyond time and see eternity.

Jesus talks about salvation

Wednesday

Luke 13:22-30

"Enter the narrow door."

A *Peanuts* cartoon shows Charlie Brown standing inside his house staring at the door. He wants to go outside to ski, but he's too bundled up to get through the door. He shouts angrily, "Well, how am I going to get through the door?"

Charlie's dilemma

is the same one many Christians have.

They want to get through the narrow door that leads to eternal life.

But they are too wrapped up in the "things" of this life to get through the door.

Meanwhile, they shout angrily,

"Well, how am I going to get through the door?"

How willing are we to strip away

the "things" of this life

in order to enter the narrow door

of eternal life?

Lord, help us realize

that "half of the confusion in the world

comes from not knowing how little we need."

Admiral Richard Byrd

Jesus loved Jerusalem

Thursday

Luke 13:31-35

"I wanted to embrace you."

A speaker was telling parents to reach out more to their children. He said most parents spend far too little time with their children. "This is inexcusable," he said.

After the speaker finished his lecture, there was a question-and-answer period. One father got up and said to the speaker:

"You've talked a lot about our failure to reach out to our children. I've reached out again and again and again to one of my teenagers, but my best efforts have been resented and rejected. What do I do now?"

Jesus knew the pain the father was feeling. Again and again, he reached out to Jerusalem, but his best efforts were resented and rejected.

How do we respond when our overtures of love are scorned, especially by those we love most?

Lord, help us keep on loving, as Jesus did, even when our love is thrown aside and trampled on.

Jesus heals a sick man

Friday

Luke 14:1-6

"Wouldn't you rescue an ox?"

Luke records four episodes where Jesus heals on the Sabbath. (4:38, 6:6, 13:13, 14:4)

The enemies of Jesus condemned him for this. They reasoned, "To heal is to work, and to work is to violate the Sabbath."

Jesus defends this particular Sabbath healing by observing that his accusers would rescue an animal on the Sabbath. In other words, Jesus says in effect,

"Why is it all right to help an animal, but not all right to help a person?"

Elsewhere Jesus defended his Sabbath activity by declaring that human need took precedence over the Sabbath laws. (Luke 6:3)

His most provocative defense, however, was that he was Lord of the Sabbath. (Luke 6:5) In other words, his Father gave him authority over the Sabbath.

Do we tend to relegate love to seasons, or do we try to help people no matter the time or the place?

"When you walk, let your heart lead the way."
From the song "Alfie"

Jesus talks about humility

Saturday

Luke 14:1, 7-11

"The humble will be made great."

Pope John XXIII was remarkably down to earth and humble. One of his first acts as Pope was to visit Regina Coeli, a large Roman prison. The Pope told the prisoners that as a boy he learned how serious a jail sentence was. He explained that his own cousin served time.

The Vatican newspaper, *L'Observatore Romano*, reported the Pope's visit.

But it said nothing about the Pope's cousin. The paper felt that some of its pious readers would be shocked to learn that a papal relative had once been in jail.

The next four years the newspaper's editor was kept busy editing out other papal "indiscretions."

Does our family background embarrass us? Do we pretend to be more than we are to impress other people?

Lord, help us realize that when we try to impress other people, that's usually the impression we make.

Jesus talks about motives

Monday

Luke 14:12-14

"Be glad when they cannot repay you."

A businessman made an appointment to see the principal of a Catholic high school.

The businessman told the principal he wanted to express his gratitude to the school for all it had done for his sons.

"I'd like to establish an annual scholarship for some needy student," he said.

The principal was delighted and said, "Would you give us the honor of letting the scholarship bear your name?"

The businessman replied, "Give the scholarship any name you wish, but not mine. I'd like the source of the scholarship to remain anonymous."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: When we give of our time, talent, or money, how interested are we in being given public thanks or recognition?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, protect us against doing the right thing for the wrong motive.

Parable of the Great Feast

Tuesday

Luke 14:15-24

"Please accept my apologies."

A father says, "I want to spend more time with my kids, but I'm too tired when I get home."

A mother says, "I want to read the stories of Jesus to the little ones, but I can't find the time."

A single person says, "I really should get involved in some program to help others, but I can't decide which one."

These three people are like the three people in today's reading.

They have excellent excuses for not doing something they should do. But each knows that if we want to do something badly enough, we usually find a way to do it.

What is something we are putting off that we could do if we really tried?

Lord, help us see our excuses for what they are—nothing but excuses.

Jesus talks about discipleship

Wednesday

Luke 14:25-33

"Take up your cross and follow me."

Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* contains a poem called "The Muckers." Set in the depression years, it describes a crew of workmen digging a ditch for a pipeline. The job is dirty and dangerous. Some workers wallow knee-deep in mud.

Above the ditch stands a group of unemployed men, watching the men below. Half of the watchers say to themselves, "What a tough job to have." The other half say, "I wish I had that job."

Sandburg's point is that it's painful to work, but it's also painful to be without work. Today's gospel makes a similar point about discipleship. It's sometimes painful to be a disciple, but it's also painful not to be one.

How grateful are we for our discipleship? How generously do we live it out?

Lord, help us realize that the cost of being a disciple is big, but the cost of not being one is bigger still.

Parable of the Lost Sheep

Thursday

Luke 15:1-10

"I'm so happy I found my lost sheep."

A teacher instructed her students to rewrite Jesus' Parable of the Lost Sheep, putting it in a modern setting. One student wrote:

"Suppose you have just finished typing a 100-page term paper. You discover one sheet is missing. What would you do?"

"You would forget about the other ninety-nine sheets and go looking for the one lost sheet. When you find it, you are so happy that you take the other ninety-nine sheets, throw them into the air, and say, 'Yippee! I found my lost sheet.' That's how God feels when you come back to church again."

Are we as forgiving toward others as God is toward us?

"Teach me to feel another's woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I show to others
That mercy show to me." Alexander Pope

Parable of the Dishonest Servant

Friday

Luke 16:1-8

"A bad man gives a good example."

A student asked, "Why did Jesus praise a crook for being dishonest?"

A second student replied, "Jesus didn't praise him for being dishonest. He praised him for having foresight. There's a big difference."

The second student is right. The owner in the parable praised the foresight

of the servant. He didn't praise his dishonesty.

That brings us to the point Jesus wishes to teach us. We should exercise the same kind of foresight that the servant did. We should use our time and talent in this life to prepare for the next life.

How much foresight are we demonstrating in preparing for the next life?

Lord, help us live in this world as though it were only a temporary stopover, not a lasting home.

Jesus makes some observations

Saturday

Luke 16:9-15

"What we prize, God counts as nothing."

Jerry Kramer was a pro football star. Toward the end of his career, he wrote a best-seller called *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Diary of Jerry Kramer*. One passage reads:

"I remember reading John O'Hara's *The Last Laugh* about a movie star who had been an SOB all his life and at the end of the book after he had gone completely downhill, he said something like this, 'At least I've been a big-time movie star and nobody can take that away from me.'"

Kramer comments, "Ha, ha. . . . Big deal. Who cares?"

How can we tell what things in this life have eternal value?

"Life is not lost by dying!
Life is lost minute by minute,
day by dragging day,
in all the thousand, small, uncaring ways."

Stephen Vincent Benét

Jesus talks about scandal

Monday

Luke 17:1-6

“Woe to one who leads another astray.”

An old man was dying.
As he lay in bed,
it was clear to a friend sitting nearby
that something was troubling him.

Finally, the old man broke the silence.
“When I was a boy,” he said,
“I used to play in a field
near the intersection of two roads.
At the intersection stood an old signpost.
One day I twisted it so that its arrows
directed travelers down the wrong road.

“As I lie here now, I wonder how many people
I misdirected by that action—
and by other wrong actions in my life.”

Scandal is one way we misdirect people,
especially the very young.

Today’s reading invites us to ask ourselves:
What actions in our lives are, perhaps,
a source of scandal to others?

Today’s reading invites us to pray:
Lord, help us realize the power we have
to direct or to misdirect others in life,
especially the young.

Jesus talks about service

Tuesday

Luke 17:7-10

“We’ve only done our duty.”

Airwolf was a TV series in the early 1980s.
Jan-Michael Vincent, one of the show’s co-stars,
told a *TV Guide* reporter,
“I feel like I’ve given the show
a real shortchange.
I don’t feel I’ve given it 25 percent.”

When asked if this was because
he didn’t like the show or his role in it,

the actor drawled,
“No, I was just lazy.”

We can all relate to Vincent’s comment.
We’ve all shortchanged relationships and jobs.

Someone observed,
“It’s gotten to the point
where we expect a bonus or reward
for fulfilling what we were obligated to do.”

How would we rate our performance
as family members? Workers? Christians?

“Out of our beliefs are born our deeds.
Out of our deeds we form our habits;
out of our habits grow our characters;
and out of our character we build our destiny.”
Henry Hancock

Jesus heals ten lepers

Wednesday

Luke 17:11-19

Only one returned to thank him.

John Hughes has driven a taxi
around the streets of New York for 35 years.
He could fill a book with his stories.

One day he found an emerald ring in his cab.
He racked his brain to try to remember
to which fare it could have belonged.
Suddenly he remembered helping a woman
with a lot of bundles.

He drove back to the spot where she got out.
It took him two days to locate her.
When he did, he returned the ring to her.
She didn’t give him a reward.
She didn’t even thank him for his effort.

John said later, “Still, I felt good
because I had done what was right.”

What is the quality of our own gratitude?

“For the flowers that bloom about our feet;
For the tender grass so fresh and sweet;
For the song of bird and hum of bee;
For all things we hear and see,
Father in heaven, we thank Thee.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Jesus talks about the kingdom

Thursday

Luke 17:20-25

"The kingdom is within you."

A little girl was standing with her grandfather by an old-fashioned open well. They had just lowered a bucket and had drawn some water to drink. "Grandfather," asked the little girl, "where does God live?"

The old man picked up the little girl and held her over the open well. "Look down into the water," he said, "and tell me what you see." "I see myself," said the little girl. "That's where God lives," said the old man. "He lives in you."

The kingdom of God is like that too. It's not "here" or "there," but in your heart. Where there's love, there's God and the kingdom of God.

How does the fact that God and his kingdom are within us affect our attitude toward ourselves and others?

"Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you!" 1 Corinthians 3:16

Jesus talks more about the kingdom

Friday

Luke 17:26-37

"It will happen suddenly."

God's kingdom might be compared to a child. The child is alive and growing, but it hasn't yet reached adulthood.

It's the same way with the kingdom of God. It's in our midst and growing, but it hasn't yet reached maturity.

When will the kingdom reach maturity?
When will Jesus come in final glory to claim the kingdom for his Father?

This will happen suddenly and without warning. It will catch two people working side by side. One will be prepared; the other will not. This much is certain. Once God's kingdom reaches maturity, the judgment of God will take place as swiftly as vultures circle round a dead camel in the desert.

If we knew Jesus' second coming were to take place a year from now, how would this knowledge affect our lives?

"Teach us how short our life is, so that we may become wise." Psalm 90:12

Parable of the Unjust Judge

Saturday

Luke 18:1-8

"She'll wear me out!"

If you watch late movies, you may have caught a rerun of *Funny Face*.

In one of the film's great dance sequences, Fred Astaire knocks a top hat off his head with a cane and catches it on his heel. The trick that looks so easy on the screen took 30 tries before the camera.

When Astaire picked up his hat the 29th time, we can imagine that the film director was ready to scrub the routine. But Astaire wouldn't hear of such a thing. He wasn't made that way.

How persevering are we in our own efforts to live the Christian life?

"Happy is the person who remains faithful under trials, because when he succeeds in passing such a test, he will receive as his reward the life which God has promised to those who love him." James 1:12

Jesus heals a blind beggar

Monday

Luke 18:35-43

"What do you want?"

A high school teacher read today's gospel passage to some students. Then the teacher said:

"Imagine you are alone in your room. Suddenly Jesus appears and asks, 'What do you want me to do for you?' What would you say to Jesus?"

Here are some answers the students gave:

"Give me confidence in myself."
 "Give me courage to stop smoking."
 "Give me back my childhood faith."
 "Take away my depression."
 "Forgive my sins."
 "Restore happiness to my uncle."

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: What would we ask for if Jesus said to us, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Today's reading invites us to pray:
 Lord Jesus,
 you are strength when we are weak.
 You are light when we are in darkness.
 You are the way when we are lost.

Jesus meets Zacchaeus

Tuesday

Luke 19:1-10

He climbed a tree.

The opening game of the 1984 National League baseball playoffs between Chicago and San Diego was held in Wrigley Field, Chicago. Tickets were sold out weeks in advance. On the day of the game, TV cameramen were busy zooming in on fans on rooftops and light poles all around Wrigley Field.

One humorous shot showed a young man watching the game from high up in a tree just over the left-field wall.

The fan in the tree recalled another man who climbed another tree centuries before to see Jesus. Both tree climbers make an important point: Where there's a will, there's a way.

How badly do we want to see Jesus? What special effort are we willing to make to see him?

Lord, give us the spirit of Zacchaeus. Give us the courage to climb trees and to go out on limbs to see you better.

Parable of the Gold Coins

Wednesday

Luke 19:11-28

"I hid your gift."

In 1947 a teenage Arab shepherd boy found the first Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave. These leather scrolls were 2,000 years old. From the point of view of time, Jesus could have read from them.

The boy sold the priceless scrolls, cheaply, to a leatherworker in Bethlehem. The buyer said that he fully intended to use the leather to repair shoes. Later he decided the scrolls were too valuable for that and turned them over to scholars.

This story dramatizes the point Jesus makes in today's reading. We can use God's gifts, like our talents, in a variety of ways—some worthwhile, others wantonly wasteful.

What are some of the talents God gave us?

Lord, help us use our talents even though they are not the best. Summer mornings would be a lot less cheerful if the only birds that announced their arrival were those that sang best.

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem

Thursday

Luke 19:41-44

"You didn't recognize the time."

In his play *Julius Caesar*
William Shakespeare talks about the tragedy
of missed opportunities.
Act 4 of the play has Caesar say:

"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."

This was the fate of the citizens of Jerusalem.
They had opportunity after opportunity
for achieving salvation, peace, and greatness,
but they let them slip through their fingers
like grains of sand.

How are we using the countless opportunities
for salvation, peace, and greatness
that God gives us?
What form do these opportunities usually take?

"We live in deeds, not years;
in thoughts, not breaths;
in feelings, not figures on the dial." Gamaliel Bailey

Jesus goes to the Temple

Friday

Luke 19:45-48

He drove out the merchants.

The incredible courage of Jesus
leaps from the pages of today's reading.
It explodes brilliantly
like a burst of fireworks against a night sky.

When Jesus walked into the Temple that day,
he knew there was a price on his head.
If there was ever a day
he should have played it cool, this was it.

But Jesus picked this day to accuse
certain religious leaders of Israel

of gross neglect.

They had allowed the house of God
to become a house of thieves.

The courage of Jesus
is not just something for us to admire.
It's something for us to imitate.

What is one of the most courageous things
we've done for our faith?

"Some men die by shrapnel
And some go down in flames.
But most men perish inch by inch
Playing at little games." Anonymous

Jesus talks about afterlife

Saturday

Luke 20:27-40

"The dead will rise."

A soldier told author Louis de Wohl
that it wasn't until one summer afternoon
that he believed in the existence of the soul.
"Since that afternoon," he said,
"I not only believe the soul exists, I know it."

The soldier was on a battlefield with a friend.
Suddenly a shell exploded a few yards away.
Miraculously he escaped unharmed,
but his friend was killed.

The corpse lying on the ground at his feet,
however, was not his friend.
It was only an empty shell, a pitiful thing,
close to nothing at all.
His friend's intellect, his knowledge,
his spirit, and his charm had departed.
It was then that he knew
his friend had merely separated from his shell.

What is our "proof" of life after death?

"I know not where His islands lift
Their froned palms in the air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care." John Greenleaf Whittier

Jesus praises a widow's gift

Monday

Luke 21:1-4

"She gave all she had."

The parents of a small boy asked him to give blood for his critically ill brother. When the boy cried, his parents assured him that giving blood was quite painless. But the boy continued to cry. The parents were surprised because, normally, the boy was brave about such things. Finally the boy got himself together, managed a smile, and agreed.

After the transfusion the boy was quiet. His mother hugged him and said, "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" The boy shook his head and said to his mother, "How soon will I die?" Only then did the mother realize that the boy thought that giving his blood meant that he'd die in place of his brother.

Today's reading invites us to ask ourselves: How generous are we in the giving of our resources, as the widow gave, and in the giving of ourselves, as the boy gave?

Today's reading invites us to pray: Lord, help us give and not count the cost.

Jesus talks about false prophets

Tuesday

Luke 21:5-11

"Don't be fooled."

The movie *Firstborn* is about a wife and her two young sons, who have been abandoned by her husband. After two years she is terribly lonely. She meets a man who moves in with her. The boys feel an immediate distrust of the man. They try to warn their mother, but she is too involved to be objective. Finally the boys' fears materialize, and they and their mother barely escape with their lives.

It is so easy for us to misread people and situations. This is Jesus' point in today's reading:

"Watch out; don't be fooled. Many men, claiming to speak for me, will come and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time has come!' But don't follow them."

How objective are we about situations that involve us personally?

A famous recipe for rabbit stew begins, "Catch rabbit." Sometimes we overlook the obvious.

Jesus warns about difficult times

Wednesday

Luke 21:12-19

"Don't worry; I'll be with you."

In 1939 Hitler's armies were goose-stepping across Europe. England's future began to look dark. On Christmas day King George VI addressed his people and counseled them to trust in God. He ended by quoting the poem "God Knows," by Minnie Louise Haskins:

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown!' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'"

Jesus also counseled his followers to trust during times of trial and tribulation.

What is our level of trust in God and neighbor?

Lord, help us make the advice of the psalmist our own motto in difficult times: "Trust in the LORD. Have faith, do not despair. Trust in the LORD." Psalm 27:14

Jesus talks about Jerusalem

Thursday

Luke 21:20-28

"It will soon be destroyed."

Over 100 million viewers saw the 1983 TV movie *The Day After*. It was filmed in Lawrence, Kansas, and dealt with what that city of 47,000 people would be like the day after a nuclear attack.

"From the boardrooms of Manhattan to the schoolrooms of San Francisco," wrote *Newsweek* magazine, "it was one of the most talked about programs in history."

Today's reading sounds like an excerpt from the script of *The Day After*. Jesus warns his disciples that a greater disaster is going to strike Jerusalem. Jesus also tells them not to be afraid.

What is the greatest danger that our modern world faces?

"If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord."
Romans 8:31, 39

Jesus talks about the kingdom

Friday

Luke 21:29-33

"You will know when it is near."

Ancient Greek philosophers believed that history followed a cyclic pattern. In other words, they believed that history repeated itself. Every 3,000 years or so some great disaster wiped out the world. After the disaster, human history began all over again, repeating itself.

Christians believe just the opposite. They believe history follows a linear pattern.

In other words, history moves in a straight line. It has a definite direction, a definite goal.

History's goal is the final coming of God's kingdom, which Jesus set in motion but left to us to complete.

What are we, personally, doing to bring God's kingdom to completion?

"Civilizations decline, not necessarily through some colossal criminality, but from multitudinous cases of petty betrayal and individual neglect."

Thomas Carlyle

Jesus talks about survival

Saturday

Luke 21:34-36

"Watch and pray."

On April 15, 1912, the *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank, taking 1,500 lives.

"Some time ago a magazine asked a shocking question: If you had been there when the *Titanic* was sinking, would you have spent time rearranging the deck chairs?"
Violet Munro. *The Upper Room*

Can you imagine yourself ignoring the cries of people and not helping with the lifeboats at a time like this?

This is Jesus' point in today's reading. He says of the coming of the Son of Man: "Be careful not to let yourselves become occupied with too much feasting. . . . Be on watch and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all those things."

How watchful and prayerful are we?

"It is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded ridge . . . and another to tread the road that leads to it."

St. Augustine. *Confessions*