

SEPTEMBER 2/3, 2017

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. In today's second reading, St. Paul exhorts the Romans to *total* stewardship. Brothers and sisters, he urges. "... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God."
2. What does it mean to offer ourselves as a "living sacrifice?" Or to "deny" ourselves for the sake of the Gospel? The word "sacrifice" is not a comfortable word in today's society. It conjures up images of suffering, loss, pain, denial. We live in a culture that does not want to be denied or to suffer or to experience loss. But Christian stewardship is countercultural. Christian stewardship is living the Gospel by dying to ourselves everyday so that we can more effectively reveal the redemptive, forgiving, generous and healing power of the Lord and challenge all that is selfish, destructive, and wasteful in our world.

OR In today's Gospel reading, Jesus brings up the topic of the cross to his followers. They would not realize the cross was part of God's plan and was to be their legacy until after the Resurrection. Today's followers of Christ recognize they are stewards of his entire legacy, including his cross; that through their mutual sacrifices God's glory is revealed. They don't live their life in Christ only when it is convenient for them. They make a decision to take up their cross and carry it no matter what the cost. What crosses do we bear in order to reveal God's glory?

3. ***"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."*** It is unlikely that Jesus could get elected to public office in the United States, or anywhere else. Denying ourselves, being concerned about the needs of others to the point of some inconvenience or risk, is an attitude and experience uncommon in our western culture of instant gratification and self fulfillment. Peter, out of sincere concern for Jesus, tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem to fulfill his mission. Jesus calls him "Satan" and says he is thinking like men, not God. Jesus responds to Peter, not in anger, but in disappointment. Despite all Jesus had taught them, all they had seen, his disciples, including the "Rock," did not understand that loving our neighbor as ourselves requires that we discern God's will for us, whatever the inconvenience or risk, and use God's great gift to us of free will to choose to do God's will. Peter eventually discerns God's will for him and does it. So must we.

OR ***"Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me."*** That is not something we want to hear Jesus say to us. It was probably upsetting for Peter to hear Jesus say those words to him. We can detect the disappointment and frustration of Jesus with the man he had just made the "rock upon which I will build my church" and to whom he had handed the "keys to the kingdom of heaven." Yet despite his harsh words, Jesus does not lose faith in Peter because Peter had not lost faith in Jesus. Peter just had not fully grasped the magnitude of the message and mission of Jesus. So Jesus turns the occasion into a teaching moment. He instructs Peter and the others that they must learn to think "as God does." They must think of others ahead of themselves. They must not be so attached to this life and to all the stuff in this life that our culture makes so alluring and appealing. In a world in which people die for the right to property, and "meism" is pandemic, it is difficult to comprehend and live true detachment that allows us to "think as God does" not as "human beings." But we must try.

1. Am I my brother's keeper? All three readings today suggest that for the Christian steward the answer is "YES!"
2. Being good stewards of God's gifts of family, friends, and neighbor and community requires being prophetic, which at times involves admonishing others for wrongdoing. It is the Lord's way of urging us toward unity and right relationship. Jesus said to first admonish alone and with discretion, then involve others as necessary. To love in this manner can be quite difficult, but imperative. What do we do when we know of someone's inappropriate behavior? When do we intervene when another makes a potentially harmful decision? Do we have the courage to speak out when our community or society acts in an unjust manner?

OR In Saint Paul's letter to the Romans he suggests that God lavishes His love upon us through Jesus Christ, who calls us to the kind of loving relationship, if we so choose it, that demands accountability. It is like, in Saint Paul's vocabulary, a kind of "debt" that we can never "pay-in-full." But we begin to repay by following the direction of one of the most familiar statements in the Bible: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Good stewards realize that God does not call them just to love those who are easy to love, but to love the unloved and the hard-to-love people in this world as well. This week, remind yourself: "I am put here as an ambassador of God's love."

3. ***"If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector."*** Jesus called the people of his day to be aware of the harm they had done to their relationship with God by the harm they do to others by act or omission. Jesus taught us that forgiveness requires an admission of the sin we have committed, a sincere sorrow for that sin, a desire to be forgiven and a determination to sin no more. Jesus also taught us that when someone sins we should help them see their sin. If that fails, have others join us in helping the sinner. Then bring it to the church. If all that fails, they should be made aware that they have separated themselves from the People of God and our Triune God.

OR ***"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."*** Superman is a fictional character that started as a hero in the comic genre then graduated to the television and then to the movie screen. He has served as an icon for the moral truth that with great power comes great responsibility to choose to use such power for good or evil. Happily, for many generations of Americans, Superman has chosen to use his powers for good. Although we may not be able to fly faster than "a speeding bullet or leap building with a single bound", we all possess the awesome power to forgive sins - the sins of commission and omission that others commit directly or indirectly against us. God has given us the ability to say to others, "I forgive you." Unless we are a priest, we have not been given the power to forgive sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But we are stewards of our own ability to forgive and Jesus assures us that if we turn to our heavenly Father in prayer, He will be with us.

SEPTEMBER 16/17, 2017

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. Stewardship is not optional! “None of us lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master,” says St. Paul. “While we live, we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die, we die as His servants.”
2. Today’s Gospel reading continues Jesus’ instructions on being good stewards of others – the direction that if we love Jesus Christ, we must forgive an individual 77 times. The reading compels us to consider one of the most difficult practices of Christian discipleship. Forgiveness is the way of Jesus, the way of the cross. Vengeance, bitterness, and hatred seem so much easier and certainly more desirable. Forgiveness is a hard road to travel, but it is the only road that leads to life in Christ. This week, consider who you need to forgive.
3. ***“I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?”*** *O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because of your just punishment, but most of all because they offend You my God who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin.* Remember saying that? Remember when? Senior members of the Catholic Church recognize it as the **Act of Contrition** said at the end of our confession we made every week, whether we needed it or not. It has fallen into disuse, but it has the elements essential to the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation - awareness of how we have damaged our relationship with God and others; sincere sorrow for our sin; a firm determination to change. Jesus challenges us to be responsible for the state of our relationship with God and others by treating others as we want God to treat us. If we are not willing to forgive others, should we expect God to forgive us? Is it time for a good Act of Contrition?

OR **“So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”** “I love you.” Are they really the three hardest words to say? That ultimately depends on whether those three words are uttered insincerely for some ulterior motive, or whether they are spoken sincerely in imitation of Jesus. If we truly understand what Jesus intends by those three words, they should not be difficult to say. But there are three other words that are difficult to say, whatever our motivation: “I forgive you.” And the impact of those three words depends on whether the person to whom they are speaking has said or implied three other words: “I am sorry.” We are again confronted with the truth that we are stewards of the ability God has given us to forgive the hurts and injustices others do to us and the reality that being stewards of such forgiveness is not easy. To be good stewards of such forgiveness we must constantly try to discern the mind of God and imitate the way with Jesus: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

1. In today's Gospel, the vineyard owner says, "I am free to do as I please with my money, am I not?" We are likewise free. Is a generous return to the Lord in thanksgiving for His many blessings among the choices we have made?

OR Good stewards follow the advice of St. Paul and conduct themselves – by wise use of their time and talents – in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

2. Many Christians are quite perplexed by Jesus' parable in today's Gospel. It goes against logic that those who stood idly by most of the day would get paid the same as those who labored all day long. It is not fair. Surely they merit more pay! A difficult concept for the steward to understand is the sheer immensity of God's generosity; immense beyond comprehension or human reasoning. Have we considered that those who do not seem as deserving as we think will enjoy the boundless measure of God's compassion? Have we considered how boundless that divine love is for us personally?

OR From an early age, we tend to distort the concept of "fairness": "I am good. I deserve good things. I am not receiving good things. Something must be wrong. Who's going to fix it?" We also know the age-old expression: "Who ever said life was fair?" Jesus knew this expression when he offered his parable in today's Gospel reading. Christian stewards acknowledge, with humility, that they have received good things from the Lord in abundance; even if these gifts are not the ones they think they need when they need them. Consider which servants you identify with most in the Gospel reading, the ones who demand "fairness", or that final servant who, seemingly, deserves the least.

3. ***"Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go."*** Many in our culture struggle with the parable of the landowner who pays the same amount to workers who toil for more hours than others. The term "equal pay for equal work" is the mantra for those who want to have wealth like those considered rich and others who attack those who have acquired wealth through honest effort and enterprise. But Jesus was not trying to teach a lesson about inequitable distribution of wealth. He wanted his disciples, and us, to understand that God has given each of us a unique set of talents, abilities and gifts that he expects us to identify, accept, develop and use to the best of our ability for our own benefit and others. No two of us are alike. The criteria for success in the eyes of God is not financial or material wealth. It is how well we have become all that God created us to be. The hallmark of most saints is not how much money or things they acquired, but the many people they inspired to get to know and imitate Jesus. Many of those saints gave up great wealth to become a model of Jesus for others.

OR ***"So when they first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage."*** A TV commercial depicts a mom who makes a peanut butter sandwich for two little boys with the last two pieces of bread. She tells one boy that he can cut the sandwich in half and he gets excited. After he cuts the sandwich she says that the other boy will get to choose which half he wants. Our attitude about what is just is often influenced by the impact such justice will have on us. It is probably natural to side with the workers who started first and complained that the workers who started last received the same wages. But justice is not about how much we have in comparison to others, but about what we do with what we have regardless of what others do or fail to do with what they have. God made us stewards and caretakers of all that we are, all that we have and all that we ever will be. He also made us stewards of justice of things over which we have control. Happily, we are not responsible for what God has given to others, except to give them a good example of how to act justly by imitating Jesus.

SEPT 30/OCT 1, 2017

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. The first son in today's Gospel said he would do his father's bidding, but did not. The second balked at first, but then repented and did as he was asked. What service is God calling me to do? What son am I more like?
2. Jesus said to the religious leaders in his audience that even sinners would get to the kingdom of heaven before they would. How can this be possible? It is perhaps that Jesus saw through them and their duplicitous ways? God is never fooled by our outward behavior, our willingness to be agreeable when we have no intention of going along. Are there times when we pay "lip service" to the Gospel but have no intention of opening our hearts to it? When we know we should take seriously the teachings of the Church but refuse because our minds are already made up?

OR Saint Augustine, a doctor of the Church, once wrote that the first, second, and third most important attitude in Christianity is humility. In today's second reading, Saint Paul is concerned with how we conduct ourselves in our community of faith. He urges us to let our conduct be worthy of the Gospel we say that we believe; and that it all begins with humility. He asks us to consider others better than ourselves, and to serve them by looking out for their best interest, not ours. Consider how Saint Paul's appeal to imitating Christ's humility can enhance your relationships.

3. ***"When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did."*** A preacher gave his congregation a simple rule to live a good and happy life. He said, "Turn right and go straight." Implicit in that simple truth is the need for each person to make a free will decision to choose to do right rather than wrong, to do good rather than evil. Jesus tells a parable that calls us to discern God's will and make a free will decision to choose to do God's will even if it is inconvenient, unpleasant or risky. The father told one son to go to work in the vineyard, and he said "No!" but had a change of heart and went. The second son said "Yes sir!" but did not go. Jesus teaches us that our first response to God's will for us may be "No!", but our final response to God must be "Yes." Doing God's will may not be easy; it can be challenging. For many Catholics and Christians around the world today, it involves losing all worldly possessions and is a matter of life and death. But to be true disciples of Jesus we have no choice but to "Turn right and go straight." and say "Yes!" to God.

OR ***"Which of the two did his father's will?"*** This is a parable that every parent should be able to cite and recite at a moment's notice -frequently. It captures the true meaning of the difference between honesty and dishonesty, good and evil, right and wrong. There are a few of us who have agreed or promised to do something and then failed to do so. Sometimes we forget. Sometimes we get overwhelmed by other events or emergencies and cannot make the time to do what we promised. But sometimes we commit to do something and have no intention to fulfill that commitment. And then there are the occasions when we refuse to do something, then reconsider and do what we have been asked. Jesus knew that when we truly open ourselves to God in prayer we may hear Him ask us to do something we are not willing to do. But when we are being good stewards of our prayer and continue to be open to God's will for us, we will do God's will regardless of the challenge or consequences. It is then that we are honest, good and righteous.