

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
March 3, 2019 – Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 6:39-45

Recently I was having a routine medical exam that involved an analysis of my blood. Before sharing the results of the test with me, my physician asked me if I wanted to really know the results. I was a bit taken back by her inquiry, so I asked her why she asked me. She smiled and said that some patients seem to prefer good news to truthful news. Especially when it involved themselves and their health.

Her insight into human nature came to my mind in reading today's gospel. Jesus is teaching his followers (us) about honest communication. Full communication, he noted, includes being honest with oneself. He uses that great image of the log and the splinter. We tend to clearly see the tiny splinter in our neighbor's eye but fail to see the giant log (or beam) in our own. Honesty with oneself can be challenging. Especially if we have something we would rather hide.

I have been a teacher for most of my professional life. Early on, I read books that described successful teaching methods. I wanted to learn if there were any tricks to the trade. I learned that there were. The most important truth was this: Love your students and always be honest with them. They will more likely remember you than what you taught.

These can be hard lessons to accept. It's all too easy to deny personal responsibility for our actions. We too easily blame others and the "other" can be as silly as the weather, what we ate, our less-than-perfect ancestors or "the breaks of the game." We often find it difficult to admit to our personal shortcomings. Or to blame ourselves.

Jesus is concerned with our being honest with ourselves because he wants us all to be good communicators of his message. We deliver his message through our words and actions. All of them. Especially his message of kindness, forgiveness and love to all those we meet each day, even to strangers. Our example as caring parents, neighbors and co-workers says so much more about God and us than do our words.

When Pope Saint Paul VI wrote about communicating the gospel message to others in his teaching about evangelization (something we are all supposed to do), he said that the primary way the gospel is communicated is through witnessing. That happens through how we live, more than in what we say. He also noted that evangelization happens in the family where parents evangelize their children, but also, children evangelize their parents.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
March 10, 2019 – First Sunday of Lent
Luke 4:1-13

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and its powerful ritual of receiving ashes on our foreheads. While not an official Holy Day, it is one of the most-attended Catholic masses of the year. I even know non-Catholics who attend Catholic Mass that day to receive ashes. And what's the message of Ash Wednesday? We are made from dust, and in a sense, we will return to dust. Of course, the focus is on the bodily aspect of our existence. In spirit we are created by God to live forever. Still, Ash Wednesday is a good reminder that we are not the source of our lives. God is.

Most of us are "seasonally aware" of Lent more than any other season of the Church's year. For some this awareness began when we were children and were directed to "give up" one thing or another during Lent. For me, this meant no candy. I had a very sweet tooth.

As the weeks passed, I accumulated candy (I don't recall how) and stored it in a container on a kitchen shelf. When Lent ended, I quickly collected my stash and consumed it all at once, which resulted in my developing my biggest sugar-high of the year. What this all had to do with being a good person or a devoted Catholic is not easily shown. All that I recall is that I was conscious through Lent of how many more days I had to wait until ...

Still, the idea of "giving up" something is a good one and is rooted in what is described in today's gospel concerning Jesus going into the desert for forty days. He fasted during that time, perhaps so that he could develop the strength to resist various temptations which would be at odds with his mission as God's presence among us.

The temptations might be summarized as the temptation to bodily pleasure (turn stones to bread), to power over others (you can rule everyone) or even to control God (jump off the top of the temple and God will save you.).

In contrast, Jesus came to direct us to feed the hungry, to serve the needs of others, and to trust in God's assistance no matter what. In a word, Jesus came not to be served but to serve others. We are encouraged to "give up" whatever it is that limits our loving relationship with God and with each other. We apply this message to those we encounter every day, family and others. And to do this more effectively, we might fast from what we don't need, pray more to develop greater sensitivity to others and to trust more in God's help. We do this especially during Lent, but let's not forget to do this the rest of the year.

David M Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
March 17, 2019 – Second Sunday of Lent
Luke 9:28-36

I live in the shadow of two mountain ranges. So, when the gospel describes an event happening on a mountain top, I can easily picture it in my mind. I also recall earlier biblical mountain-top moments, like when Moses was given the Ten Commandment. You can expect something special to happen when on a mountain-top. Perhaps it's closer to heaven.

We have heard about the Transfiguration of Jesus many times. It is described to us at least once a year during the Mass readings and it is a common event that has been captured by Christian artists over the centuries. It's a rather remarkable event, unlike any other in the life of Jesus. Some scholars suggest that it happened in the presence of the closest of the disciples of Jesus because they would be tested later during his passion and death. We might recall that Peter himself, who witnessed the transfiguration, still failed Jesus in those last days.

One feature of the story that I think important is the desire on the part of the disciples who were there to "freeze-frame" the event. It was so wonderful that they wanted it to continue. They desired to create a lasting memorial of the event, like a church or a shrine or some kind of permanent expression of what they experienced.

But Jesus did not want that to happen because he knew that he came not to wow others with wonders or spectacles, but to bring a down-to-earth message that would influence people in the ordinary settings of their daily lives. He taught that extraordinary meaning was there in the ordinary settings of our lives. The giving of a cup of water to a thirsty child contained divine significance. Recall the final words of Matthew's gospel. Whatever you do to the least, here and now, you do to and for God.

Thus, right after the Transfiguration, Jesus returned to looking exactly like he appeared before this event and directed his disciples to head back down the mountain to the places where they lived day after day. He did not come to show them the wonders of the heavens but rather the miracles that were part of everyday life in earth. And not just in their lives, but in ours, too.

The sacred presence of God is hidden amid all loving human gestures. Our task is to be aware of that presence, to give thanks for the opportunity to show our love for the God who created us and sustains us in ways very much down-to-earth.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
March 24, 2019 – Third Sunday of Lent
Luke 13:1-9

For centuries fig trees were highly valued in the Near East. Their broad branches provided much-needed shade in hot weather and their fruit was highly prized. When ripe, figs had high sugar content, so they offered a rich source of energy for daily life. They could even be baked into bread and preserved for a long time. Wine could also be produced from ripened figs. Everyone in the time of Jesus would pay close attention when he mentioned fig trees. People knew of their importance for survival.

He pointed to the fig tree as an example of something that was intended for the many uses just mentioned. But he added that if a fig tree did not deliver, it was to be cut down. A fruitless fig tree had little value, although some people might have thought that "next year" it would be better. Jesus recommended more decisive action. All of God's creation has a purpose, he taught, and if anything fails its purpose, immediate action had to be taken.

Jesus used the fig tree as an example of us. We were not created by God to just sit around and do nothing. God has expectations for each one of us.

In recent years, the Catholic Church has expanded its understanding of what it means to have a vocation (or calling) from God. A few Catholics are called by God to be a priest or a nun. But that is not the only meaning of receiving a call from God. The Church now sees these special callings as a limited view of "vocation." In contrast, we now believe that every one of us has what might be called an invitation or vocation from God to do something particular to advance God's Kingdom here on earth.

We do well to consider our daily work as part of our vocation. So too are the various roles we perform in our family life. For instance, I try to keep in mind that I have a vocation or a calling to be a teacher and a writer. But I also have a vocation that is directly connected with my being married and being a parent. Right now, I have an added vocation from God to be a grandparent. These activities and roles are not only important to those I serve, but also to God. God has certain expectations of me and of you. In a sense, every aspect of our calling from God is personal and unique. We each have a specific vocation to be an active member of our church, our families and our communities. In that sense, our lives are to "bear fruit." Lent is a good time to be reminded of that.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
March 31, 2019 – Fourth Sunday of Lent
Luke 15:1-3,11-32

Today's gospel is easily recalled because it describes a family scene that many will recognize. Maybe some will connect this story directly to their own lives or with the life of a family that they personally know. All one has to do is mention the first lines of this story: "There was a father who had two sons," and most will know what follows. This remarkable story that Jesus created is known by two titles: "The Prodigal Son" or "The Forgiving Father." Today we will focus on the father and his attitude about his family, especially his sons. Most see the father in the story as being a "stand-in" for God.

As the story goes, his younger son was a bit of a scoundrel. He took his inheritance even before his father died. He overlooked the possibility that his father might need that money for his old age. But the son didn't care. He was quite self-centered. After pocketing his dad's money, he left home and wasted every cent on selfish spending. Not surprisingly, he eventually ran out of money and was in desperate straits. The only option he felt he had was to sneak back home, get a job from his father and work as a hired hand. No one would have blamed the father if he agreed to this new arrangement.

But, as we all know, the father would not take that option. After all, he loved his son (actually both sons) and in seeing his son returning home from a distance, he ran to greet his wayward boy. At that time, listeners to this story would have been doubly shocked by the actions of the father. Fathers didn't run to their sons. Sons were to do the running. Also given his son's history, a father's rejection of his son would bring no surprise. The "bad" son deserved no special treatment from his dad.

Instead the father was compassionate, forgiving and arranged for a party to celebrate the return of his son. We can assume that everyone was surprised at this response, and some, the older son for sure, were even angry with the father. He was violating about a hundred accepted norms for proper parental behavior given the circumstances.

Some might have said that the father was simply "crazy." Of course, they would not have taken into consideration one important detail. The father *loved* his son and that made all the difference. Now, connect this story with your idea of God. Can you imagine God running to you, even after you had made a mess of things? Would God do such a thing? According to the teaching of Jesus, God would! In fact, God does. Time after time. Without any hesitation. A firm belief in God's personal compassionate and forgiving love for all of us is at the center of our Christian faith.

David M. Thomas, PhD