

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
May 3, 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:1-10

We are living at a time of closed gates. Think about the magnificent stadiums and other gathering places where we enjoy exciting sports events and musical concerts. These venues are symbols of our times, often dwarfing other buildings in our cities. That's where our teams play. That's where we find so much excitement and entertainment. And diversion. But today the gates are closed. Which allows us to more fully appreciate this Sunday's gospel about open and closed gates.

Jesus used everyday examples to explain the deep truths he wants us to know. In his time the most common farm animals were sheep. It was usual for small villages to have a few sheepfolds, enclosures where sheep could be kept safe and secure. Every sheepfold had a gate, which allowed the sheep to enter or depart when needed. Never were these gates (or sheep) unattended. Should the gate accidentally open, the sheep could slip out and this could be catastrophic for their owners.

When Jesus was asked about his using the example of gates and enclosures by the local religious leaders (the Pharisees), he told them that he was the gate and he was the good shepherd. Further, a gate for Jesus was made not to keep us out, but to allow us entry into God's kingdom. And that gate was *always* open. And once we entered, we would be given the opportunity to have a more abundant life. No ticket required. People only needed to appear at the gate, and they will be welcomed inside. And all are invited to enter. God's love and generosity to all is being shown in today's wonderful gospel.

Because of the current pandemic, we are more aware of our environments. We live much more these days in a world of limits and restrictions. For very good reason, we can easily feel confined, *gated in* so to speak.

But it's also timely to think about our God, who is always (to use another image for our times) "open for business." While the doors to our churches may be closed, God's door (or gate) is always open to us. God is present wherever we are. Being confined to our homes and neighborhoods should not be taken as being distanced from God. Or from the invitation of Jesus to enter God's presence. Jesus is the open gate, inviting us to be close to God, to feel God's support, especially during these trying times. We are never alone.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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May 10, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 14:1-12

Over the years, many books have been published summarizing "the greatest" of this or that. Like "Greatest short stories" or "Greatest sayings" or "Greatest poems." And now with the sports world mostly shut down, we are offered on TV "Greatest Super Bowls" or "Greatest fights of the century" or "Greatest blunders in baseball." Since we are so limited now, it's good to be able to see the greatest of something.

If we were to list "the Greatest sayings of Jesus," a passage from this Sunday's gospel would likely qualify. It is this: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will also know the Father."

Are there more important words in the New Testament? Of course, there are many gospel passages that are worth our serious consideration. But none are greater than this one. It is definitely worth our effort to think about these words of Jesus. And to assist us in this task, perhaps it might be helpful to restate the first sentence this way: I am the way to the truth of your life.

One of the greatest spiritual books ever written was called *The Imitation of Christ*. And while the saints are given to us as guides for our lives, Jesus is the primary example of a life well-lived, a holy life. Jesus offers us the best example of how to live. Not only by his words, but even more importantly, by his example.

He lived the truth of what it meant to be fully human and fully alive. And to live as God desired us to live our lives. For instance, Jesus accepted others in all their uniqueness, especially those who were dismissed or side-lined by society. He reached out to anyone suffering or in need. There was no limit to his generosity, his willingness to help, his concern for everyone. He once said in the same gospel that the greatest love is when one gives her or his life for another. As did he.

We are now passing through perhaps some of the most challenging times of our lives. Many have given exceptional service to the victims of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many have put their own lives in jeopardy to help others survive. While it is rarely mentioned, I do so here. They are living the truth of the way that Jesus called all of us to do.

David M. Thomas, PhD

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May 17, 2020 – Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 14: 15-21

The air was heavy with fear and distress. Recently Jesus has upset those who used temple worship for their own ends, that of making money for themselves. Jerusalem at the time was filled with pilgrims who had come to celebrate the Passover. The Roman authorities were thus on guard because they were worried about a local political uprising against their occupation. They were especially concerned that a local person might excite the people to rebellion. They had set up on a hill at the edge of Jerusalem a set of crosses that were being used to eradicate anyone they felt was dangerous. Like I said, there was fear in the air on all sides.

It was during this time that Jesus celebrated his Last Supper with his closest disciples. Given the circumstances, he carefully chose his words. In this Sunday's gospel we have a passage from what he said. His followers were worried of losing him. He wanted to assure them that separation would never happen. He would always be with them, but in a new way. The day will come, he said, when he would be with his Father, yet he would also remain with them and they would be with him. These words were said to clarify and describe a new kind of presence of Jesus in their midst. In other words, there would be no final separation. They would all remain together.

Two-thousand years later, these words are addressed to us. In a spiritual, yet very real way, Jesus remains with us and in us. In a sense we cannot see God's presence because God is too close to us. It's like when we place an object right next to our eyes, yet we can't really see it because our eyes will not focus on anything that close.

When I first heard about God's constant presence as a youngster in Catholic school, I was afraid because the nun said that this was because God wanted to see every bad thing I did. God even knew about any bad thoughts I had. I did not take this information in as good news.

But later - in times of fear and loneliness - this promise of Jesus to remain with us and in us gave me consolation and hope. Right now, in the midst of social distancing, it's a good time to recall this because Jesus, in God's Spirit, is always close by, or as Jesus said: "You are in me and I am in you." We are never alone. But like so many deep aspects of our lives, we sometimes forget. We forget that Jesus *promised* that his love for us would never end. He wants to be our companion wherever we are. The big question is: Do we want his companionship?

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
May 24, 2020 – Seventh Sunday of Easter
John 17:1-11

Our awareness of life and death has increased dramatically over the last few weeks. Thousands and thousands have tragically died during the coronavirus pandemic. So, it is almost impossible not to think of those who have died and to think about our own life in terms of our own eventual death.

From this Sunday's gospel we recall that Jesus himself carried similar thoughts, especially as he neared the end of his own life. He thanked God for his life, a reminder that besides being divine himself, he was also human. Yet he fully believed that the end of his earthly life was not the end of him. He spoke of returning to the Father. He mentioned in his prayer toward the end that he had completed what he was sent to do, which was to offer to us an incredible gift from God. Eternal life!

We live in a very secular culture. In such a milieu, some see death as a final ending. We die and that's it. Nothing more. But that's not the gospel message for us today. In the midst of widespread tragic death there remains our belief that there is more to come. Much more. We will experience life with God and with each other that will not cease. No one who is still alive here has seen any details of this future life. No one has heard or smelled or tasted or felt what "eternal life" will be like. We are assured, however, that it will lack one aspect of our current life, and that is its duration. It will be eternal. It will not end.

We don't know if there will be clocks or calendars, days and nights, seasons and change. Some have suggested that it will simply be one everlasting ecstatic moment of happiness and joy. Perhaps. It's anyone's guess. I like to imagine that it will be an unending continuation of the best moments of my earthly life. That would be great.

I do know that we all seem to share a hunger for some form of eternal life. St. Augustine, a brilliant Fifth Century theologian of the church, wrote that our hearts yearn for God and will not rest until they rest fully in God. In other words, we desire more. And we can believe that God placed that desire in us.

We might want to talk among each other about this. We are all getting closer to our deaths each passing day. We should not feel that we are being selfish, or illusionary if we try to imagine what's after our death. Such thinking can also help us to appreciate more each breath of life here. In a sense, it's all part of God's gift of life to each of us.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
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May 31, 2020 – Pentecost Sunday
John 20:19-23

Many of us have recently learned a bit about the importance of our respiratory activity. That's because our system of breathing is the primary target of the coronavirus. Most who die from the virus lose the capacity to breath. And what's more central and essential to human life than breathing?

In the original language of Bible, the word for *breath* is the same word that is used for *spirit*. So, when today's gospel states that the Risen Christ breathed on his disciples and then said, "Receive the Holy Spirit," we can think about this moment as they were being filled with the breath of God, or put simply, divine life. Of course, this was not an act that ended with this Pentecostal moment. It continues in the life of the church. In Baptism, for instance, this same Spirit is "poured" into those who become part of God's family.

We see in this gospel a connecting of some key points of our Christian faith. There is, first of all, God's Spirit (who is God) sent into us. While it may sound like a stretch, we can think of this as like being attached to a divine respirator. God's breath flows into us, giving us a share of God's life. That's what the church means when it uses the word, *grace* - which is the gift of making us daughters and sons of God. This is not a metaphor, not poetry, not an exaggeration. We are *divinized* by God's Spirit entering us. We are transformed.

And as long as we remain attached to that divine source of life, we remain directly connected with God, the source of our life.

Some have said that over the ages the Church has mostly forgotten about the Holy Spirit. We pray to the Father. We connect with Jesus, the Son. But we pay minimal attention to God's Spirit, who in a way is the most important and active person of the Trinity in our lives. The Holy Spirit not only breathes divine life into us, but is immediately present in us, to inspire (!) us, every moment of our lives.

When I was involved in Catholic higher education, we began each academic year with the Mass of the Holy Spirit. That was it. Once out the door of the campus church, no further mention was made of God's Spirit on our campus, at least publicly. Much the same might be said in other church settings. Once the feast of Pentecost ends, the appreciation for the gift of God's Spirit is often set aside. Maybe with each breath we take, we might think about that breath as being not just a natural act, but also a gift from God's Spirit.

David M. Thomas, PhD