

Cross Boundaries

The first reading from Sirach today says:

“Conduct your affairs with humility.”

That virtue of humility is not exactly touted today as an admirable quality to have.

Often we think of it as being self-effacing.

One who does not want any praise at all; or one who is almost debasing themselves in public.

And that is not quite what humility is about.

The best definition I have heard is put by C.S. Lewis.

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less.”

Put another way, it is not about us.

That sounds like a cliché but it is not.

It is thinking of ourselves after we have thought of somebody else; after we thought of God.

So it is God, others and then ourselves.

It is not that we do not think of ourselves at all but we think of ourselves in relation to others and we look at it insofar as what we God have me do here.

What does this other person need me to do here?

Then what do I need to have happen here for me?

Often what we hear today especially with our political race, we hear so little about humility and so much about self and egos.

It is very hard sometimes to get a conversation about qualities such as humility because it is not held up as a virtue.

The reading from Sirach is trying to teach his students about the value of the virtue of humility before God and we are humble and we realize that everything is a gift from God.

Then in the gospel Jesus sounds like

he is giving us a lesson on the social aspect of humility.

Like if you humble yourself then people are going to think better of you.

It is somehow going to affect your self-esteem more.

But second portion of what Jesus says clarifies what he means:
he says to the person who invited him and advises
who he should invite as guests
—not family or friends but strangers and the needy.
This is sounds jarring to the ear
and we have to be careful not to take this literally now.
He is saying it is not a quid pro quo.
Humility is about recognizing as Christ did
—time and time again
—we are all equal.
Just because somebody is lame or poor or elderly or from a
different nation,
they are all still created by God.
In God's eyes, we are all equal.
That is hard for us to hear.

It is hard to see through God's eyes because we filter things so
carefully.

This is not new for our generation.

We filter by our own bias.

We cannot help ourselves.

If someone tells us something we hear it by our bias
and then repeat it to somebody else by our same bias.

That seems to be the way we are.

There was an article in the paper last week,

speaking about how the internet is accelerating this bias.

For example, if I am on the internet and

I am interested in men's hiking boots.

Those men's hiking boots appear everywhere on my website
through ads

—everywhere I go

—did you ever see that?

They have algorithms that are watching what I look at

and then basically push all that same stuff that I am interested in
onto my website browsing.

It does not make any different which website I go to,

these shoes appear over and over again.

It is fascinating.

The same thing happens when it comes to conversations.

All those algorithms are catching what we are talking about and is pushing the news to us what we want or what we perceive we want.

The more we do it, the more it reinforces what we get filtered.

It sounds extraordinary

but it is only doing what we have been doing for centuries albeit slower.

When we have a conversation whether it be political or religious, who do we have a conversation with?

The people we know and they have generally the same opinions so we have some conversations.

It is wonderful but it reinforces my bias.

The internet is just accelerating it even more, where our filters are getting tighter and tighter and tighter.

So here is what we can do:

We have to find a way to cross borders.

We have to find a way to go to somebody who I know disagrees with me completely.

And listen—hear what they have to say.

I do not argue back but just listen to where they come from.

How their experience has brought them to a completely different conclusion than what I am.

That allows me to hear with a new sense of ears and see with new eyes; a new mind; a new way of looking at things.

Here is how we can mess with the algorithms.

Deliberately cross boundaries online.

Deliberately go and listen to Mozart once and watch Mozart appear up in your browsing.

Deliberately go over to another site

—be smart about it—don't just provoke people into it.

Go to another site and listen to another opinion;

genuinely look and hear another argument.
Let the software work for us!

Listen to the conversation.

Young people in particular.

Don't just like everything that likes you and you like them back.

Go for some dislikes.

Isn't that radical?

Somebody who doesn't like you.

Go listen and follow them.

See what they have to say.

If we do not cross boundaries;

if we do not go to listen then we will continually hear

what we want to hear and never hear what we need to hear.

Christ came and said we are all equal in God's eyes;

all created by God, each individual human different.

He told the story a million different ways.

He took a really provocative way of doing it.

He held up those who were least

—the youngest, women, widows, poor and the crippled who had no value

—and he raised them up.

He says these are the ones we need to take care of.

Those are the ones we need to listen to.

Those are the ones we need to see.

Because in seeing them, we will see Christ.

In seeing them, we will see God's love.

That requires of us to cross boundaries.

That requires of us to listen with respect.

It requires of us to ask and to not judge.

It requires of us to be humble;

that we do not have all the answers and

we have not had all the experiences.

When we do that then we will see the face of Christ

in places we never thought we could.

Jesus is the WAZE!

I don't know when the last time I used a paper map;
almost always I use some form of GPS.

I love Google maps as it is a particularly great map system.
When we think about the map through the GPS is really amazing.
We just put in where we want to go and
it gives us the route and tells us exactly what to do and where to
go.

That is the great thing about Google maps:
it tells us as we are driving
—take a left here
—take a right here and so on.

Google also has the hybrid version
where it gives a satellite image and roads maps.

If I am going somewhere new that I have never been before
then I turn on another feature called “street view”
and it gives a satellite image of the exact street from a street
perspective.

I pull it back about a mile before where I am going to be
so I know exactly what the neighborhood looks like when I get
there.

It is actually amazing technology.

Google bought a company and an app called WAZE;
and it is an amazing piece of software, too,
because it enables the social media sharing within.

This basically means that we all contribute to it
—that when we are driving around
—all our data is feeding into its algorithms.

What is amazing about this particular app is
that it enables you to get there the fastest way
—it will reroute you on the side streets
if it knows that the main roads are slow
because the feedback it is getting from other apps and people.

I used it coming back from Santa Clara not too long ago.

I was leaving there at 5:15pm

trying to get back here to Almaden for a 6pm meeting.
I put in my destination and it calculated saying, "42 minutes."
I say okay—that is pretty good—I'm going to make it!
I started driving and I am thinking wow this traffic is really bad.
I know Santa Clara really well so I decided to take off
on one of the side streets which I knew well.
WAZE recalculated and it said, "57 minutes."
I was surprised it says longer—I disagree and no way.
But sure enough I go down the street and I hit a whole streak of
red lights.
Then I get another "great idea."
I think to myself, "I know these streets better than a machine,
I know a better way."
I took another left turn and then right.
WAZE recalculates again saying, "79 minutes."
I decide no more turns and
to make a long story short, it took me 79 minutes!

I did not trust WAZE that trip but now when I drive, I always trust
WAZE.

I just listen to it and it is stress free.
I just listen to what she says and I do it and that is it.
I know she's got more data points than I do
and I will arrive in the fastest possible time.
It makes driving so less stressful.

In the gospel today, we hear about this rich, young man who comes to
the Lord
and asks how he inherits eternal life?
It is a reasonable question.
In fact, many of us might want to ask that question.
He knows where he wants to go.
Jesus tells him—follow the rules.
He quickly responds—yes, I do. I have.
But then Jesus says one thing deeper, he says,
"Go sell what you have and give it to the poor and come follow
me."

He just cannot follow those instructions.
That is just too much and he walks away sad.
As we hear this, there is a part of all of us that is sad.
There is a part of all of us
—that we are not willing
—we are not willing to follow the Lord to quite that extreme.
We too follow the Lord but are we willing to sell everything we have
and to give away anything that possesses us in any way
and to follow the Lord?
There is a part of all of us that is sad
because we too find what Lord asks too much!

But what are we are called to do?

Is it to sell everything?
We are called to completely trust in Jesus;
to let go of what possesses us.
When we do that, it is kind of a stress-free life
because we do not worry about things as the Lord will get us there.
Jesus is the WAZE of life
but we have to let him give directions and pay heed.
Then we can drive stress free through life.

Over these last several weeks, we have been talking about
Investing in Our Faith; Serving Christ Jesus in All We Do.

I have asked for an extraordinary commitment from everyone
of 2.5% of their gross time, talent and treasure.
Some of you have come back to me and said 2.5% of my time?
Four hours a week!
That is just huge Father
—do you know what you are asking?
Yes. I do. And that is just a minimum.
One hour in prayer; 10 minutes a day, 6 days a week
—one hour in worship each week
—one hour in service to those in need and
—one-hour elective, adding one hour to any of those areas.

Some of you have come back and said 2.5% of the gross income
—Fr. Brendan do you understand what you are asking for?

And yes, I do and I know it is huge.
I am not asking you to trust in me.
I am asking you to trust in Jesus, who knows the way.
That is discipleship
—the kind of discipleship that Christ wants us to have
and what Pope Francis calls missionary discipleship.
We are called to serve those on the extremes;
the people who have nobody to take care of them;
broken by life;
broken sometimes by circumstances;
broken by bad choices.
We are called to serve them.

Jesus Christ said he is the way, the truth and the life.

Jesus is the WAZE!

We come to follow Jesus.

In the Book of Wisdom we hear of Solomon's prayer.

He was given an opportunity to ask for anything he wanted from
the Lord.

He asked for only one thing

—he asked for the wisdom of how to serve the Lord and to lead his
people.

The wisdom to know the right choice

and he was granted that and all of the above and more.

Today, Jesus promises us that he will give an abundance
to those of us who follow him a 100 times more in this life and
beyond.

So today, we come to this table to make that commitment one
more time;

to come and to follow Jesus;

to leave everything behind and to trust him completely;

to not be afraid that he does not know the way to eternal life.

He has more data points than we do.

He knows the way;

he is the way and we will follow.

Remember the Duck

There is a story told of a brother and sister, Johnny and Sally,
going to visit their grandmother and grandfather on the family farm.
Johnny was given a new sling shot
and he went out to the woods to practice with the sling shot.
No matter how much he tried, he could not even hit anything;
he would miss trees, everything!
He was very frustrated as he headed back to the farmhouse.
Just then he saw his grandmother's favorite pet duck.
It was just floating at the edge of the water.
He took out his sling shot and surprisingly he hit it and killed it
dead.
He is terrified and panics.
He grabs the duck, hides it underneath a pile of brush
only to look back at his sister, standing outside the house, staring
at him.
She never said a word and went back into the house.

Later that night, after dinner was over Grandmother says to Sally.
"Sally, I want you to help me clean the dishes after dinner."
She smiles and says,
"Oh Granny, I would love to do
but Johnny said he wanted to do it instead of me."
Then she leans over and says to Johnny, "Remember the duck."
Johnny did the dishes.
The next morning they got up and Grandpa says,
"Sally, I would like you to come out fishing with me today."
But Grandmother says, "
Oh no. I need Sally to help bake some pies with me for dinner."
But Sally says, "Oh Granny I would love to but
Johnny said he wants to do the baking and help you."
She leans over and says, "Remember the duck."
Sally went out fishing.

This continues for a couple more days until eventually Johnny could not take anymore and he breaks down in tears and tells the whole truth to his grandmother.

She says, "I know. I saw the whole thing from inside the house." I was just waiting to see how much longer you would hold yourself captive to Sally's demands.

We often hold each other's sins against each other.

We hold onto them, we have a nice name for it.

I'm not ready to forgive.

I haven't got there yet.

It is just too painful to think about.

But ultimately, it is unforgiveness.

Ultimately it is: Remember the duck!

We hold people's sins against them sometimes for a long, long time.

Here is really the strangest thing about all this.

We think if we do not forgive the person who has hurt us, we believe we are putting them in prison.

That somehow this person does not deserve freedom.

Ironically, the only person who gets locked up is me.

Often times, these hurts that people do to us are not obvious.

They themselves do not remember and even if they did I don't know if they care.

But we have held onto this unforgiveness, this pain.

The first reading reminds us, we are not meant to play victim to our own hurts.

We are meant to actually insist on forgiving others. Why?

Not only for their good but for our good.

For our freedom.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans is all about this freedom in God.

His whole letter reminds us that when we remain in Christ,

we are to remain free and the way to remain free

is to forgive and to forgive every time.

The theme of forgiveness runs through all these readings today, especially in today's gospel.

When Peter, who feels rather accomplished, asks how often must I forgive,

seven times? He proudly asks.

Jesus sort of almost mocks him by saying

not seven times but seventy-seven times.

Seven was considered a whole number.

Seventy-seven would be basically saying every time.

We are called to forgive every, single time.

What does it look like to be people who will forgive always?

Is that what we look like now?

Are we known in our family as a person who always forgives, who always let's go of the hurts?

Or are we the one in the family who everyone knows holds onto grudges? Have we got a reputation to be cantankerous; to be difficult; to be unforgiving?

If so, that is completely counter to what it means to be Christian.

To be Christian, in Christ's words today, is to always forgive.

No matter how much people have hurt us; we must never play victim to the hurts of the past.

And the part that is really important is to realize that we gain or keep the freedom that Christ has given to us when he died upon the cross for our sins.

He forgave us our sins so we remain in that freedom when we forgive.

To the extent that we do not forgive, is the extent that we actually limit our own freedom because we are constantly thinking of the past; of some hurt that has happened in the past.

Forgiving other people is super important

but there are two people we find the hardest to forgive.

Ourselves is number one and God is number two.

We find it hard to forgive ourselves.

We find it hard to set ourselves free from the mistakes

and the errors and the poor judgments that we made;
the things we have said; the things we have done;
the things that we have not done; or not said.
So we are called to forgive ourselves.

Then we are also called to forgive God.

We sometimes hold God accountable for
all the other stuff that goes wrong.

Why things went wrong.

It must be God's fault.

God is ultimately in control so we can always hold it against God.

God has forgiven us and today's first reading asks.

"Ought we not then forgive everyone else,
especially God for the hurts;

for the things that have happened to us that we did not "deserve"?"

Today if you are tempted to hold onto any hurts

whether they are caused by somebody else;

whether they are your own;

or whether it is God,

just remember the duck!

How much more are you going to hold onto it

and be held slave to the unforgiveness?

I encourage you.

I plead with you to leave it at this table today;

to let it go and to promise to continue to work at letting it go

because in the end it is our freedom that we give up.

Remember the duck!

Half Teaspoon At a Time

I recently went home to visit my Mum in Ireland,

she is 89 and her health is failing.

She fell a couple of weeks after Christmas and

fractured her pelvis in multiple places; she has been in the hospital

ever since. When one of her children came into the hospital

bedroom

which she shares with three other people,
she recognized our voices right away
and her eyes brightened up and she perked up right away.
Hospital rooms can be quite chaotic with noise nonstop
but she immediately noticed the voice of one of her children
and she paid attention right away.

My mother has never had a great appetite
but in these last few months she has really lost her appetite all
together.

She finds eating a chore—a burden.

She is super slow and there is no way the hospital staff can feed
her.

So we have taken it upon ourselves as family to go in and feed her.

It takes about one hour to feed her lunch

and about 1 ½ to 2 hours to feed her dinner.

Even then, she is only eating half the dinner.

It is not even a full teaspoon—it is a half of a teaspoon at a time.

Watching her eat so slowly is very hard.

I suspect that she is actually burning more calories eating it
than she is actually getting from it!

One night I was feeding her “beans and bangers” (white beans &
sausage)

and she would only eat one bean at a time!

As I reflected on this I thought one could see this as a burden

but I actually looked at it slightly differently.

I found it a privilege to be able to do that and to be able to feed her.

As I was sitting feeding her in her hospital bed

I wondered how often when I was a baby she fed me,

one spoon at a time—and maybe even one-half of a spoon at a
time!

How the circle of life comes back!

We end up where we started and

people take care of us when we first needed to be taken care of.

While there is a tinge of sadness to it,

there is also a great privilege that we get to play that role

for one who has loved us
—we now get to pass that love back to one who has loved us.
When I was young, my mother cared for me and protected me
along with my all eleven siblings.
Now in her old age, we are caring for her,
feeding her and protecting her.
The circle of life indeed.

In today's gospel, we hear about the good shepherd
and how the good shepherd tends to his flock of sheep;
he cares for them, nurtures them, holds them and carries them if
necessary.
That image is easy enough to follow and is much like
the way my mother cared for us as children.
But Jesus also says "I am the gate."
And that is peculiar. A gate?

Let me explain.

Shepherds in those days would have been nomadic.
They would have wandered from one pasture to the next
and there was all open land.
Each shepherd would have their own sheep
and they would know the sheep by name like we name pets.
They would name their sheep and they would call them all by
name
and the sheep would come and follow;
they would not follow somebody else's voice.
They would only follow the one who they knew.
At night all the shepherds would gather their sheep into a common
fold.
This enclosure would have a low wall
so the sheep could not jump over.
All the different shepherds would have come into the fold
and there would have been a small opening
which the shepherds would all lie down in front of
so that the sheep could not get out.
The sheep did not get in or out.

In the morning, each shepherd would go in and call their sheep and then walk ahead and all the sheep would follow.

The message Christ gives us is that he is the one who lays his life down at the gate, who protects us from thieves and robbers who will try to steal us. He is the one, who will protect us. He is the one who will care for us and nurture us and lead us like a shepherd but also the one who protects us.

Good mothers do that for their children.

Mothers protect us in times of danger or times of fear; at times of being overwhelmed at school or stuff going on in our life.

They lay down their life for us.

They drop everything and they tend to us.

They protect us.

Often times, they protect us even from ourselves.

But they also lead us;

they lead us to better pastures;

to happier days and they guide us.

A good mother will nourish, care for and protect her children.

And as we celebrate Mother's Day here in USA,

motherhood is a wonderful image to use with these two stories of being a shepherd and a gate but also being a mother.

But there is a better connection if I use another scripture passage.

In Luke's gospel Jesus is preaching to a group and somebody breaks in and says,

"Your brothers and your sisters and your mother is outside."

Jesus says in return,

"Anyone who listens to the Word of God is my brother or my sister and mother."

It is easy to understand how we are brother and sister to Christ; if we listen to the Word of God, we are his brother and his sister.

But mother?

Motherhood meant more than the physical part of being a mother.

Think for a moment that a mother carries a child in her womb
and then gives birth to that child;
then nurtures and cares for that child until they become
independent
and go out into the world.

So as disciples, we are called to be bearers of the Word of God.
We are called to carry the Word of God within our own hearts;
come to know it in our own hearts;
to let it grow within our own hearts until it comes to fruition.
Then we are called to bear fruit into the world
and then to nourish and to care for the Word to come alive
allowing it to grow fruit in others.
It is a beautiful image of what we are called to be disciples as
mothers;
to care for others.

When we put all these images together on this Mother's Day
then we are challenged in the most unique way to be disciples like
mothers.

We are called to listen deeply as any good mother does.
This requires of us to spend time and listen to each other
and not just our own immediate family
but we listen with an open heart and come to know the voice often
whether it is hurting or whether it is joyful
—what they say is a joy shared is twice the joy;
and sorrow shared is half the sorrow.

So we are called to know each other's voices
and then we are called to lead others into the Word of God.
We can only do that if we ourselves are rooted in scripture.
We ourselves ought to know the voice of Christ in our hearts
and that we know what the Lord is calling us to do.

We are called to be disciples as in mothers with the Word of God
within our hearts but to bear fruit and to listen to one another;
to tend and to care for one another.

Maybe that is only half a teaspoon at a time
but whatever it is, that is what we are called to do

—to care and to love one another as a mother cares for her children.

Harden Not Your Hearts

Friday of last week, I had the opportunity to attend the inauguration of my friend as President of the University of Portland.

It was two days of festivities and we finished early on Friday night. I was staying at a hotel in downtown Portland and when I arrived back at the hotel I was thirsty after the day activities.

However, I did not want to pay the price of that bottled water at the hotel

—a thimble of water for \$5!

I knew there was a Rite Aid around the corner so I went there.

As I was walking into the Rite Aid a large beautiful dog caught my attention.

She was lying on the ground with all legs in the air being scratched by her owner

who was a homeless man sitting on the ground beside her.

I continued to walk into Rite Aid

and as I was buying my bottle of water

I thought to myself that I should buy another bottle of water and some extra food just in case I decided that on the way out I would talk to this homeless man and his dog.

As I came out I knelt down and petted the dog, which was still with four legs in the air.

It was a gorgeous dog.

So I started to have a conversation:

“What’s your dog’s name?”

He said, “Spooky.”

I said, “Spooky. That is an unusual name for a dog.

Why did you call him Spooky?”

He said, “Because the streets are spooky.”

He was a young man and his name was Michael.

So I asked him how old he was and he told me 25 years old.

He had been on the streets over 6 years.

In the ensuing half hour conversation
as I am sitting beside him petting his dog,
we had a profound conversation
that I think will probably change me for life.

I asked how he ended up this way

—there was no apparent reason

—there was no alcohol on his breath; there was no drug abuse.

There was certainly no apparent mental illness.

I was confused so I said,

“Michael. What’s your story?”

Why are you on the streets at such a young age?”

He said “My mother died when I was young
and my father beat me up so I decided it was safer out of his
house.

So I left.”

I said, “Didn’t you have any relatives or anything?”

He responded, “Yeah. I went to my grandparents
and I lived with them for awhile
until both of them died.

I had no where else to go so I went to the streets.”

That was 6 years ago when I was 18.

Eventually I asked him, “What can I do for you, Michael?

Can I do something for you?”

“Yes. Can you give me a job?”

I replied, “I don’t live here. I live in San Jose.”

He retorted, “Well can you give me a job in San Jose?”

I wasn’t expecting that one!

I said, “If you make your way to San Jose,

I can probably get you a job in San Jose.”

But then I asked him, “What can I do for you tonight?”

And he said,
“Nothing. You have already done it.
You’ve done something that nobody has done for me in months.
You’ve talked to me;
you’ve treated me like a human being.
I haven’t felt this good in months!”

I pressed further, “But is there anything else I can do for you tonight?”

He said, “Could you buy me a warm meal?”

I said, “Sure. Where do you want to go?”

He quickly added, “There is a street merchant up there
he sells stuff and it will cost me about \$5.”

I inquired, “If I give you that money will you really buy a meal.
You won’t use it for drugs or alcohol?”

He smiled and added, “No. I don’t drink or do drugs.”

After giving him money for well more than a few good meals, I
asked

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Can I have your phone number?” he quickly asked.

I offered, “Yeah, I can give you my phone number
but what will that do for you?”

He thought for a moment and then added,

“In a couple of weeks or months when I don’t feel good about
myself

maybe I will call you and talk to you?

And feel good just for a few more moments.

It was sure nice talking to someone!”

When I left him and went back to my hotel with my bottle of water
you can understand that I wasn’t able to sleep so well that night.

As I paced my room to figure out the justice of our world,

I tried to figure out how it happens

that a 26-year-old has become so hopeless

—so desperate that he lives on the streets

begging for attention just to be seen.

The sadness for me was I didn’t actually see him.

I saw his dog and then I saw him.

How pathetic is it that I don't even see the human being first;
I see the dog first and then the human being.
How sad is it that our society has become so hardened
or as scripture says in the responsorial psalm; "our hearts are
hardened."

MY heart has been hardened!

I do not know if Michael's story is true

and I am not sure it matters:

He is homeless and in need and I needed to give him something.

I thought of St. John Christendom who once spoke of
the stories that homeless people spin.

John Christendom says that when a man is on the streets and is
poor

and makes up a yarn for us to believe to illicit money from us;
some money or some form of pity;

the lie is not his responsibility but it is ours.

St. John says it is ours because our hearts are so hardened
that we are not be moved by the mere sight of a human
lying desperate in need of human dignity.

Instead, we have to hear a yarn pulled over our eyes to believe he
is in need. John Christendom says that the sin of his lie is not on
his back but on ours. It is on your back you hardened, heartless
one!

Hard words from one of our Church Fathers.

I do not have the solution for why it happens.

I am not going to judge why Michael is on the streets or how he got
there.

I do know this;

there is not an awful lot of difference between him and me
—whether it be my good fortune and his bad fortune;

my apparent good choices and his apparent bad choices.

He ends up in a place where he needs help.

I am in a place where I can give help.

So I helped him and I still feel helpless!

In today's scripture, Jesus is telling the Pharisees and scribes that these gifts have been given to the people to share. Sometimes our mistake is we think the gifts we have been given are for me; me and my immediate people. Jesus in today's scripture is saying —no—it is given to all and you must produce the fruit. So it is not me who is going to judge you nor you judge me; it is going to be God who judges all of us on how we have shared the gifts that we have —not with just our immediate ones but with all who are in need especially those who are most in need —without judgment and without casting them down.

I am not sure how to solve the problem.

I am probably sure I cannot.

But I know that just like the prophets in the gospel came and let us know about the kingdom of God

I believe every now and then

we get messengers in our own life who help us break open the presence of God.

In this case, it was a homeless man, Michael and his dog, Spooky.

I do not know if we see the messengers that God puts in our life.

Are we willing to hear the messengers that God puts in our lives to wake us up to reality?

I am not sure if it is going to be for you another homeless person.

Do we even see them?

Later that night I went outside again because I could not sleep and as I walked the streets, I was shocked by the number of homeless. Portland is a Mecca for homeless because they have such liberal laws but I was shocked that the average age was somewhere around 25; most of them were young men.

It just seems something is wrong
when they are that desperate to go to the streets.

This week the Lord asks us not to harden our hearts.

He asks us to produce good fruit with what we have been given.

We are asked to listen to the messengers in our life
and to allow our heart to be softened;
to hear the message of God in our life.

Now that may be a homeless man for you;

maybe it might be your spouse;

it might be a child or a parent or a perfect stranger.

Harden not our hearts;

may we open our hearts and hear the call of God.

Lamp Lighter

Before the advent of electric lights in the household

there was either candlelight or kerosene light.

There were very few lights beyond that.

It wasn't until the age of gas where we would come to cities

and one could see the city lit up by what was called a lamplighter.

He would go around and physically light the gas lamps.

Because we have electricity today it is sometimes hard to appreciate
the metaphors we hear in the readings today about being a light in
the world.

There was a great English writer, John Ruskin, in the late 18th
century,

who one night was waiting for a friend to come over.

He was looking out his window from darkness
with a little candle into complete darkness outside.

He could see nothing but the lamps being lit.

He couldn't even see the actual lamplighter

but just the light of the light being lit and the trail of light after him.

His friend never did arrive but as he pondered the lamplighter,

he thought that is what a disciple of Christ ought to be

—to be a lamplighter

—to leave a trail of the light for all to see.ⁱ

It is a beautiful image.

There are really powerful words in the Psalm
as well as the first reading and the gospel reading,
which speaks of being a light in the world.

Christ was calling every one of his disciples to be that light
—to be the light for all to see.

That is our role to be a lamplighter.

The question is what does it mean to be a lamplighter today?

In today's first reading from the Prophet Isaiah,
which echoes the very reading we will hear later on from Matthew
25,

which calls us to reach out to the homeless;

to feed the hungry;

to welcome the stranger and immigrant;

to reach out to those who are broken.

That is the role of discipleship.

And that is what we are called to do.

That is what we are called to do and to be for this world.

It is not only an individual task but it is a communal task as well
when we as a community become a light to others.

In this last week, we came to the end of our homeless shelter
here in our parish and we have passed that light onto St. Martin de
Tours. The group of nine churches have gathered together
to form this network called Village House

to be the shelter for these 15 women

—we are trying to be a light to all the other faith communities.

There are over 300 faith communities just in the County of Santa
Clara.

We are calling a light not to just those 300
but to the entire community beyond.

We are trying to say, by our actions, that it matters.

Yes. I know it is only 15

—it is a tiny percentage of the women and the men
that are on the streets of San Jose.

But what we do is to light a lamp for those 15

and what we have done is left that trail of light for them
so they can believe once again that they are children of God
and that in spite of things that have happened in their life,
they still remain children of God.

That is a powerful light that we have lit in our community.

It cannot just stop there.

It is in everything we say and do that needs to light the way for
others to see.

Now I notice that we do not see the lamplighter.

It is not about us as individuals.

It is not even about us as a community per se
but it is about the light of Christ that we give them.

It is drawing attention to who Christ is in our community.

That is what we draw attention to—not the individual
—or the individuals involved but that the light is lit.

Today more than ever we need to light the lamps of others
so that the world can see.

It is so important for us to stand up for those who have no voice;
to say and to act in ways that people will know
that we are to welcome the stranger;
to welcome the immigrant whether they are Muslim
or whether they are Christian.

We must be willing to say that it is not okay;
we must be willing to welcome in those who are broken;
those who are hurt;
those who need our help.

If not us then who?

If not us then who?

We are called in this life to be a light not just for ourselves

—to not just keep this light to ourselves

but to light the lamp of others;

to help point the way to Christ

and the light in this world that he has called us to be.

Today as we come forward to the table once more
to be fed and to be nourished;

to be that Body of Christ,
we come also to be lamplighters
—to leave a trail of evidence of Christ’s light in a very darkened
world
that needs that light.
You and I are the lamplighters.

Leading the Blind Gently

“I once was blind and now I see.”

Many of you know I have a beautiful dog called Leyla.

I got her 4 years ago and she has been quite a handful.

She was a gorgeous black German Shepherd.

Here is the picture of her back 6 months ago.

But today she is a different dog and here is another picture of her.

She has a rare autoimmune disorder.

At first the vets did not know what it was

but she lost all her pigmentation and it went white or pink
and then her hair started to fall out or went white.

Until this week, we were sort of managing with different
medications.

This week, she went totally blind as part of her condition.

What was really hard was watching her navigating the house,
she walks into walls and any object.

She used to be able to go with me everywhere,

hop out of the car, go hiking with me, and so now she hits
everything.

Everything has changed in a matter of days.

More than likely it is irreversible

and we are trying to medicate her hoping that we can reverse it
temporarily.

What is interesting is when we have someone who is blind,
we have to change things.

We change very quickly.

We have to slow down.

In this case, I have to literally walk her around the house and tell her where everything is.

She follows my every word now.

It is amazing to see her adapting so fast; faster than me!

But she follows my scent or my voice.

At the end of the day, she has no problem following me because obviously the scent has gotten stronger.

Just after I shower, she finds it really hard because like where is the scent gone?

I have to tell her where to go and she follows every command.

She has learned really well just in 3 days how to navigate the house.

Now she is only hitting a couple of walls

but you cannot move seats because she will walk straight into it.

What is interesting is when a dog is blind,

I change how I handle the dog.

I find a way to lead them because they need to be led.

It is funny this happened this week

as I am preparing for the scripture reading

about the man born blind.

The Lord has wicked sense of humor!

In the gospel today, there is oral fight about the man born blind how he is healed and then given sight back.

What is interesting of course is there is a physical level

but the gospel is written at the second level.

It is at this level that we are blind;

not with our sight but with our heart.

We are blind.

I thought to myself,

“What are we called to do for those who are blind spiritually?”

We have to do exactly what I have to do with my dog Leyla.

We have to help them walk in the midst of their darkness,

hoping that they will see eventually.

Like my dog, if I am in a hurry and I shout at her,

she gets more frightened and she cowers down to the ground.

She becomes more frightened because she cannot see anything.
There are a lot of people in our lives who are blind spiritually
and I think they do not necessarily intend to be blind.

They are blind and they need our help.

They need us to show them the way ever so gently and kindly.

Not grab them and pull them,
but gently hold them and lead them.

Sometimes, I know that many of you who are parents struggle
with your children not going to Church;
grandparents even find that your children and grandchildren
do not go to Church and it is heartbreaking.

If we try to yank them or pull them,
they become maybe not frightened
but they become maybe angry and push and resist all the more.

What we need to do is to find a way to gently lead them back to
Church,

to gently lead them by kindness and gentleness.

A gentle hand will lead them in the midst of their darkness.

I hope the medications will work for my Lela

to return her sight but in the end,

I know that I will continue to care for her no matter what.

For those who are in darkness, spiritually,
we hope that the Lord will give them the sight
but we cannot give them their sight back.

That is not for us to do.

That is only the work of the Spirit.

Only the work of the Lord will bring them to full faith.

What we can do is lead them with a gentle hand.

What we can do is lead them in the way of the Christ that we know.

And that requires of us to always be vigilant

and to slow down in our life and

to realize that they are broken sometimes;

they are wounded;

and they are distant from the Church and the Lord.

Often we do not know what caused their blindness
but we can care for them in their blindness.

We do want to continue to guide them.

In the midst of blindness whatever the cause of it is,
we remain faithful to what we can see,
which is the Lord is with us
and that we guide with an ever so gentle hand
those who are spiritually blind back to the Lord
and may the Lord heal their darkness.

Care Not Cure

Henri Nouwen once said there is a difference between care and cure.

There is only one letter difference but there is a great difference.

He said that “cure” is what social workers do.

It is what people—like lawyers—do, like the man in today’s gospel
does.

They are called to bring about a change;
a cure connotes change.

In that change, they are measured by results.

The social worker has a certain number of people they have to
work with

and they are measured on how well they advance them through
the system.

Lawyers are measured on how well they do;
on how many times they win.

It is not unlike the corporate world.

We are measured on what we bring about
—how much change we can get accomplished.

In the context of social work,

cure is what, often times, doctors, nurses and social workers
are paid to bring about.

Henri Nouwen makes a distinction in that type of work and that of
care.

“Care” is what one does from the outset.

It is an attitude.

It is something that one does and
it is not concerned about the necessary change
—it is not directed towards change.

Its end is in itself—to care for someone.

Cure can bring about some wonderful change

but it has the potential for harm

because cure can be done at an accelerated pace;

it can be done in such a way that it can cause pain.

It can be done in such a way that it can bring about violence

because it necessitates an agenda of speed.

Care on the other hand has no agenda.

There is no direct output although it too brings about change

but it is gentle change

—a change that comes about because one recognizes that one is
loved.

When one is loved, that changes everything!

In today's gospel, we hear about the Levite and the priest,

who because they were not allowed to touch a person who was
bloody

(that made them unclean), they were not allowed to bring about
cure.

They were strictly not allowed.

So they did what the law said, which is walk on the other side.

The Good Samaritan, as we have come to know him,

did not look at the law but looked with compassion at the man's
wounds

and cared. He loved. He offered compassion.

In that care, he brought about a cure.

What we do here in Nicaragua this week is not about

bringing a cure to people in Nicaragua.

That is not our agenda.

Our agenda is simply one thing

—and that is to love; to care; to treat every single person

whether it is a fellow missionary or whether it is one of the staff

here,
short-termers or long-termers or whether it is a Nicaraguan as an
equal.

We come to love them where they are,
not to bring about a change on our time frame.

We must understand that it would be somewhat absurd to think
that we could bring about change in one week.

If there is going to be any change,
it is going to be because we love them,
because we care for them,
because we allow the Spirit of Christ into our hearts
and to work through us.

Who is our neighbor?

Our neighbor according to Jesus is no longer just those of your
race

—the Jews or the Levites
—it is now anyone in need.

We come down from the United States
to care and to love our neighbors in Nicaragua.

They are no different from us.

You will find that out very quickly
when we start to work alongside them.

In fact, chances are they will care as much for us than we will for
them.

If there is going to be a cure,
it will probably be the cure of our hearts;
the cure from selfishness;
the cure from complacency;
the cure from taking things for granted;
the cure from being so self-centered in our own lives.

This week what we come to do is to be neighbors.

We come not to cure; we come to care.

We come to love our brothers and sisters as Christ has loved us.

In doing so, we share in the Body of Christ
and that is what we do when we come to the altar today.

We share and recognize and gain strength from this altar
and from receiving the Body and Blood of Christ as a reminder
that we are all one.

One human race no matter what creed;
no matter what race;
no matter what ethnicity.

We come as one.

One people.

One faith in Christ.

Our neighbor is that one.

Unequal Parts

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

As you know, I just got back last week from Ireland
having presided at my own Mother’s funeral.

It was a wonderful occasion for us
to celebrate the long, happy life of our Mother.

All twelve of the children were able to come back and be there.

We gathered, all 12 of us, for the first time in 12 years
—how typically Irish to only gather for a funeral!

It was a great celebration of her life and of our love and respect for
her.

There were a couple of special moments
but one moment in particular was during the funeral service itself.

At the beginning and the end of the funeral,

the priest is the first to walk into church
leading the casket either into church or out of the church.

So I had arranged it that as I would leave the church,

I was the first one, the youngest,

and that my brother, the eldest, and my two sisters
would be at the back of the casket;

then my eight other brothers four on either side

would carry Mom on their shoulders and that is how we left the
church.

It was a very powerful moment as all 12 children surrounded their Mother and walked her out of the church bound together in love. It was a very powerful moment as people watched us march down holding our Mother together. A beautiful moment of unity of love and of respect for my Mother for the many years of having given her life to us in service. That night, we celebrated and it was a great day.

In contrast to that, the next day, the Will was read! Shall we say the harmony and unity quickly disappeared. What happened was my Mum decided to divide the estate in unequal parts. It was not divided equally between the twelve of us. When one divides an estate by 12, nobody is getting much anyway! There was great discussion and really some soul searching as to why —why would she do this? Why would she divide it in unequal parts? Why not just divide it equally?

Of course, the question that eventually came up was: Who did she love the most? And I'm going, "Well—I'm the youngest —and I'm a priest! C'mon! Isn't it obvious!" Unfortunately, the percentages didn't reflect that reality! We were trying to understand what she was thinking and we had lots more conversation; we poked fun at each other a little bit. In the end, the conversation came to a grinding halt when one of my elder brothers remembered what our parents had responded to many years earlier when they were asked, "Which of your children do you love the most?" And he recalled, and I remember it myself as well, —they said, "Whichever one needs it."

That summed up my Mum's, and indeed both my parents' lives
—they loved whoever needed it the most.
So the estate was divided according to my Mum's perception
of who needed it the most at the time she wrote the Will.
And—she didn't love anyone less
—she loved everyone equally
but loved a little bit more to those who needed it more.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us love one another—as I have loved
you.

I believe God does the same thing!

God loves us all equally.

He doesn't love anyone less. Right?

But he does love those who are hurting;

those who have pain and have struggled

and maybe even have had a loss themselves in their life.

He loves those a little bit more because they need it a little bit
more.

That is the way it happens time and time again.

God surrounds us with his love at those times when we most need
it.

Sometimes, we who need it the most do not even feel it
but God is loving us all the more in those weaker, more painful
moments.

Sister Pat McCormack, who gave a wonderful retreat here
has this wonderful phrase she quoted:

“There is nothing I can do

that can make God love me anymore than he already does and
there is nothing I can do

to make God love me any less than he already does.”

God loves us all because he created us.

Without condition, he loves us completely.

If there is going to be a little extra dose of love,

God gives it to those who are on the periphery, as our Pope
Francis says.

Those ones who are hurting;

those who are disenfranchised;
the poor; the homeless; the weak; the broken; the sick.
Yes these God loves just a little bit more because they need it.

So we are called to mirror that in our own lives.

We are called to love like that.

Like my Mum and Dad said to love everyone
but to love those who needed it the most a little bit more.

That is the challenge for us and it is really hard to do.

It sounds so straightforward;

yes it is simple but it is not easy.

Because often times those people in our lives who are hurting
push us away and they do not allow us to love them;
that is what hurts all the more.

So we have to continue to love them even at a distance.

And communicate as best we can

that we continue to love them and nothing has changed.

We have to ask ourselves this:

Who is in our lives today who needs just that extra bit of love
because they are hurting;

because they have a wound of some sort

or because something has happened to them?

Also if we are one of those in that position of hurt,

can we allow those around us to love us

even though we are feeling maybe a little bit unlovable?

Can we allow them the privilege to love us just a little bit
more especially in this weak time;

especially in this moment when we are most vulnerable?

That is where the grace of God comes in.

So today as we celebrate Mother's Day

and the great love that Mothers have

—sometimes unequal because one person needs it more than
others.

God too loves us all.

And if there is an unequal portion,

it is saved for those who are most in need

—who today in our life needs the love the most?
And can we love them as Jesus commanded:
“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Love Beyond Measure

These last few months have been a difficult few months
as I have spoken of many times.

I am very grateful for you, the community
who have been very supportive of me over this time;
and especially my family and my friends.

Another who has been very supportive to me at a very personal
level

has been my faithful companion and dog, Leyla.

She has been there every time I would come home.

Every time that I felt like I needed to cry,

she never questioned why I needed to,

she would just roll up beside me

and she would lay on me knowing that I was hurting.

It was particularly difficult this last Sunday

when Leyla died in my arms at just 4 ½ years old.

Many of you know, Leyla had a tough life.

She was a beautiful dog when I first got her (see the photo below).

Leyla had a rough life with serious health issues.

In the first six months she developed epilepsy.

After a year of trying different cocktails of medications
we eventually got her seizures under control.

Then blissfully, we had no seizures for two years.

Then she developed an autoimmune disorder
called “uveodermatological syndrome”

|that caused all her fur to fall out and skin pigmentation to change.

She lost her fur but the meds helped it returned but white.

Then she went blind, completely blind in one eye
and half blind in the other eye.

We tried to balance the medications

between the autoimmune suppressors and the epilepsy

and it just never, never got right.

She continued to have these awful seizures until last weekend.

On Sunday I came in from a long day and we do our little routine.

She jumped up on me and gave me my welcome kiss

and then ran outside to do her business, came back in,

and I gave her a treat and she just collapsed in my arms.

She had a heart attack and died right there.

It is hard to understand why certain things happen.

The Lord gave her to me and I loved her so much.

She was definitely a heartache

because I don't know how many times

I had to bring her down to the hospital

and every time I went to bring her down I couldn't put her to sleep.

I just couldn't because she was so important to me.

Ironically, she decides for herself by having a heart attack.

The amount of love that I gave to her because she was in need

she gave back ten-fold in return because I was in need.

I do not know why or how it works that way

but that is the way it is and certainly so for animals.

That is the way it is meant to be with life too.

I do believe that the Lord gives us his love

and if we can accept that love and return it back to him,

he gives it ten-fold back in return.

That is what the message is in today's readings.

When we are generous with our love,

then the Lord magnifies that and returns it ten hundred fold.

The widow in the first reading has her last amount of oil and flour.

And the Lord asks her to give it to Elijah.

Elijah says give it to me and I will give you much more.

And she does. So what happens in return?

The jar of flour does not go empty for over a year;

the jug of oil does not go empty for over a year.

They eat and are filled.

In today's gospel, the widow gives two coins worth just a few cents.
Because of that generosity the Lord rewards her again.
Jesus holds her up, not the ones who give large sums
but the one who gives from her heart;
the one who gives from what she has out of her substance.

It is my firm belief that is the same case with us.

If we can find a way to accept God's love into our heart
and then to love in return;
to love others generously,
not stingily,
not holding back,
not measured in some cautious way
but abundantly love others in return.
And maybe even pets...

The Lord returns that back then to us ten fold, a hundred fold.

I know many of you have experienced the same thing
not only in your own lives with pets
but in your own lives with your family; with your friends.
I know some of you have to deal with
some extraordinarily difficult situations.
In that loving of your children;
or maybe it is your grandchildren;
or maybe it is your parents who are ill,
in that pouring out of yourself
the bounty will come back. Maybe not right away
but the bounty of return comes back ten-hundred fold.

Who are we called to love abundantly, generously, beyond measure?

Whoever that is
that is our work in discipleship;
that is how the Lord will reward us
because it will come back to us in return.

Coincidence or Providence

A little over a year ago, last September,
I was in Portland and I met a young man
who was on the streets with his dog;
you might remember the homily
that was about a man named Michael and his dog Spooky.
Meeting him that day has changed my life forever.

A chance meeting? Coincidence? Providence?
As people of faith and certainly I, as a person of faith,
believe that was not coincidence.
It was Providence.
It was God breaking into my life and inviting me
—inviting me to a deeper conversion in my own life.

Since then, we, as a parish, have taken a huge step forward this last
weekend
and announced we will open our house,
literally this house, to the homeless.
The trajectory is directly connected; one leading to the other.
There were many in this parish,
who were ready and willing to do the work of such a project
but needed somebody to say yes to that project.
They needed me to say yes to this project
and the Lord took care of that part.
Coincidence? Providence?

We see, as people of faith, that is Providence at work in our lives.

Think for a moment about how you met your spouse or best friend
and do you wonder if that was a coincidence or Providence?
The number of things that could have happened did not happen
and then you ended up meeting this person
—and some 25 years later, here you are.

In today's gospel, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth
and on the first sound of her voice it says
“the infant in the womb leapt for joy.”
People who do not have faith would say,

“Ah, it was a kick in the womb; that is what babies do—they kick.”
One could say it was just coincidence.
As people of faith, we do not see that as coincidence,
we see that as Providence;
that the child in the womb, John the Baptist, even before he was
born,
was able to recognize and know the voice of the Mother of the
Lord,
so he leapt in the womb.
The phrase “leapt” would be probably better translated “danced”
so he danced in the womb.

That is what faith does;
faith allows us to see—to see with different eyes;
to hear with different ears.
Sometimes we get carried away, even we, people of faith,
do not see what we are called to see;
do not hear what we are called to hear.
It is not because it is not happening;
it is because of something inside of us
—we are just too busy;
too distracted;
too consumed with so much of our own lives.

Since I met Michael and Spooky,
I have often wondered how many other Michaels I passed by;
I wonder how many other Spookys have I seen on the streets
but never, ever noticed?
It haunts me somewhat because it has meant
that I have not seen Providence in my life.
I have not accepted the invitation from God for deeper conversion.

Advent, especially the last week of Advent,
is one of a great challenge for us
because we get so busy with Christmas preparation
with the parties, the gifts, the cards and you know the way it goes.
My fear is that we lose all opportunity
to see Providence in our life and things go right by us.

It somewhat haunts me if I will miss opportunities again
so I try to be more present than I have ever been before
and I suspect I still miss lots of opportunities
where God's invitation is put out to me.
Sometimes, it is the meeting of a new person;
sometimes it is the meeting of a person we have known for a long
time,
who we are invited to ask certain questions;
sometimes it is a joy that has happened to us
—something new; something wonderful;
sometimes it is something painful;
sometimes something awful has happened to us
and we have to dig deep to find God's Providence in the midst of
the pain.

That is what we are called to in this last and final week of Advent
—to dig deep into our own hearts and
to not miss the invitation that God is giving us
to see Providence at hand all around us in the midst of suffering
and pain;
the hands and the community that gather around us in the midst of
joy,
the moment of gratitude in the midst of so many opportunities,
God is constantly inviting us to recognize his presence among us.

Today, may we not put things down to coincidence.
May we recognize the moment of Providence;
God is breaking through.
