

MAA Oblate Study Days 2022

Gospel of Luke: Theology for Life Today

July 5-8 (Tuesday thru Friday), 9 conferences

Tuesday

10:45 Illustrious Theophilus.

2:30 Luke 23:35-43, the beginning of the gospel. Luke 23:35-43[47].

Two thieves crucified with their King. "Today" (vv. 34, 43). Prayer (v. 46)

Wednesday

9:15 Parables. Luke 8:4-8, The Sower, the Seed, the Soils, and Harvest

10:45 Healings. Christ the Healer (Icon). Luke 13:10-17, Hunchback.

2:30 Luke 4:21-30. Prelude: Native ≠ Eternal Interests

Thursday

9:15 Luke 7:36-50. Simon the Pharisee ≠ The Woman at Jesus' Feet

10:45 Luke 10:38-42. Mary ≠ Martha; Luke 16:1-13. "Children of This World" ≠ "Children of the Light" (the Shrewd Administrator)

2:30 Luke 15:11-32. Family Challenge: Strayed Son Returned ≠ Elder Brother

Friday

9:15 Luke 19:1-10. Zacchaeus, Before ≠ After

“Most Excellent Theophilus”

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, ³ I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received. (NAB)

For whom did Luke write the Gospel and Acts? The intended reader: κράτιστε Θεόφιλε [**most excellent Theophilus**]. The evangelist is concerned for the reader’s well-being, and that of the community, perhaps in the metropolis, Antioch in Syria.

- **a reader, a benefactor; [etymology:] “lover of God” and/or “beloved by God”**
- **an educated community, with a certain level of culture**

Luke may be considered the Emily Post (“Miss Manners”) of the evangelists; e.g., Luke **14:7-14**, with practical advice about the etiquette of dinner-parties -- advice that serves as an analogy for humane, gospel relations in community.

- **a zealous disciple of Jesus, member of a community or church in the face of of fatigue.**
- **an audience who is uncomfortable with certain changes, and particularly in the questionable integration of certain sectors in the community, the conservative Jewish element, attached to tradition, and the newcomers, officials in society and benefactors of the urban church.**

- **5:29-32, mixed table companions at Levi’s house**

- **8:22-25, community in a boat during a storm**

- **9:10-17, feeding of the 5000**

- **22;39-60, breakup of the community**

- **24,36-49, restoration**

- **9:23:** “If anyone wishes to come after me, s/he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” [duplicate the exodus from slavery/Egypt: follow Jesus to the city of the promised freedom]

- **9:57-62**: follow Jesus without holding back, no strings attached. The examples emphasize the radical nature of the commitment.

- **9:57-62, three prospective followers,**

- “I will follow you wherever you go”; Jesus replies. “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.” (vv. 57-58)

- To another he said, “Follow me.” But he replied, “[Lord,] let me go first and bury my father.” But he answered him, “Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (vv. 59-60)

- Another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home.” [To him] Jesus said, “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” (vv. 61-62 NAB)

Theophilus finds him or herself in the parable of the soils, the little caravan/community of 12 and some prominent women, who make up the small community around Jesus (8:1-3.4-8).

- **8:15**: the good earth that receives the seed is identified with “those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience”

- **8:19, 21**: “My mother and my brothers and sisters are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

- **11:27-28**: [In response to the woman from crowd, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you!”] Jesus replied, “Rather, blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and observe it!”

- **6:46-49**: Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them. That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built. But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed.”

- **1:38**: [Mary] “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

- **1:42**: “Blest are you among women and blest is the fruit of your womb.”

- **1:45**: “Blest is she who trusted that the Lord’s words to her would be fulfilled.”

Theophilus aspires to follow Jesus and desires to keep above the minimum standards of the gospel observance and thus ensure the rewards.

- 3:10-14, three interviews with JBap, represent 3 classes of prospective disciples: general population, public officials, the military and police force.

- And the *crowds* asked him, “What then should we do?” He said to them in reply, “Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.” (vv. 10-11)

- Even *tax collectors* came to be baptized and they said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He answered them, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.” (vv. 12-13)

- *Soldiers* also asked him, “And what should we do?” He told them, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.” (v. 14)

In each case the command doesn’t seem so radical; do your chores, give away what is leftover, don’t use your uniform or position to defraud or coerce others.

- **10:25-28**: After an inquiry as to the greatest command –Love of God and love of neighbor– the inquirer wants to know: . . . who is my neighbor? Jesus turns the question around: To whom am I obliged to be neighbor?

- **18:18-23**: Keep the commandments -- to inherit eternal life . . . to be perfect.

20,1,20,27 (three interviews in the temple): chief priests and scribes, spies, and Saducees

Theophilus, the typical member of an urban community.

- cities, towns (**πόλις**): Lk 19 xs; Mt 12 xs; Mk 4 xs; Jn 8 xs.

- **10:10-12**

- **10:13-16**: Chorazin; Bethsaida, Capernaum

- **11:29-32**: Jonah/Nineveh

- **19:41-44**: Jerusalem

- **Acts 11:19-26**, the church of Antioch, where the disciples were first called “Christians” (v. 26); v. 29, the generosity of Antioch community; **Acts 13:1; 14:26**: mission starts, ends at Antioch

- **Acts 28**: Rome

Theophilus, possibly a Jewish Christian, who clashed with non observant Jews or gentile converts; more probably, a gentile Christian who was intolerant of “lapsed Catholics”:

- **7:36-50**, Simon and sinner woman

- **15:11-32**: Lost (Prodigal) Son and the resentment of the observant, faithful elder son

- **18,9-17**: parable of the Pharisee’s and the tax collector’s prayers; “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them”

- **19:1-10**: Zacchaeus, a maverick in the eyes of Jesus’ critics, in whose company Jesus was at home

Was Theophilus a person like Marth who received Jesus in her home, the writer’s patroness or sponsor?

-Finally, who is Theophilus? Benefactor, a person of some means, encouraged to live the gospel and to generous giving.

- **8:1-3**: the disciples, women benefactresses of Jesus and disciples

- **9:23-25**: “Then he said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?”

- **20:20-26**: give to Caesar, give to God; image and likeness

- **21:1-4**: generosity, like the poor widow, the likes of Jesus, who “offered of her poverty all her livelihood” (αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ὑστερήματος αὐτῆς πάντα τὸν βίον ὃν εἶχεν ἔβαλεν, v. 21)

- **Acts 11:29**: collection for the broader Church

- **Acts 13**: missionary base from Antioch

Luke 23:33-43[47]. Crucified with Christ the King

³³ When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified Him and the criminals there, one on the right and the other on the left. ³⁴ But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. ³⁵ The people stood by and watched; the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God.” ³⁶ Even the soldiers jeered at him. As they approached to offer him wine ³⁷ they called out, “If you are King of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸ Above him there was an inscription that read, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.” ⁴⁰ The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, “Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? ⁴¹ And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ He replied to him, “Amen, I say to you, today [*sêmeron*] you will be with me in Paradise.”

⁴⁴ It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon ⁴⁵ because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. ⁴⁶ Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”; and when he had said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, “This man was innocent beyond doubt.” (NAB)

Observations

- **Vv. 33[.43].46**, the first and last words that Jesus addresses to the Father: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”; [“I assure you: today you will be with me in paradise”]; “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”. Jesus requests forgiveness for those who crucify him and places his own life, burdened with all our sins, in the hands of his Father.
- **Vv. 33.39-43**, the two criminals crucified with Jesus, “one on the right and one on the left”. Luke contrasts two responses to the salvation that Jesus offers; the evangelist is a friend of contrasts:
 - the beatitudes and curses;
 - Simon the Pharisee and the sinner at the feet of Jesus;
 - Mary, at the feet –the posture of the student, an apprentice– and Martha, occupied in *diakonía*;
 - the rich man at table and poor Lazarus at the door;
 - the Pharisee and the publican in the temple; the two criminals crucified with Jesus.

A hermeneutical key for the Gospel of Luke is the complex human being, suspended between two poles.

- V. 34, “Father, forgive them” (Acts 7:60), recalls the fourth request of the Our Father (cf. Lk 11:4), as well as the death of the first martyr
- V. 34, “They divided their clothes, casting lots” (Ps 22:19). Adam, after sin, fleeing from the presence of God, lost his glory; he discovered that he was naked and exposed. Adam and Eve now may win the clothing, the identity, of our Lord. Jesus, Lord, naked like sinful humanity (cf. Gen 3), clothed sinners with the garments of his son. (This connects with the return of the prodigal son, cf. 15:22, the best tunic for the son, returned home). The Gerasene demoniac naked (8,27) among tombs, now clothed and sitting at Jesus’ feet (8,25).
- Vv. 35-39, Jesus crucified, mocked by the authorities, by the soldiers and by a co-crucified; the taunts –“If you are the Messiah of God..., *save yourself*” (vv. 35. 37. 39)– echo the temptations of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, “If you are the Son of God” (cf. 4:3.9). The temptation to save oneself represents the supreme aspiration of a person who, moved by the fear of death, tries to save himself at all costs.
- V. 41, Jesus’ defense lawyer is a criminal
- **V. 42**, “Remember me...” recalls the prisoner’s address to Joseph (Gen 40:13-14), an invocation heard in the psalms and other biblical texts. The individual fears being forgotten. In reality, God doesn’t abandon us, we abandon God. “Does a woman forget her child at her breast, without pitying the son of her womb? Well, even if they forget, I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15).
- **V. 43**, “*Today [σήμερον] you will be with me in paradise*”; the word σήμερον and its cognate ἡμέρα, is a typical word in Luke to indicate the daily life, the “ordinariness” of salvation; see 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32.33; 19:5.9; 22:34.61; 23:43. He recalls the condition of discipleship (9:23), “Whoever wants to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross every day [καθ’ ἡμέραν] and follow me”; Luke is the gospel for the everyday Christian.
- **V. 43**, “you will be with me”. In Ps 23:4 the psalmist trusts: “Although I walk in the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, because you are with me”. Jesus, the good shepherd, guides his sheep along the paths of life.
- **V. 44**, the darkness at noon is the figure the prophets used to announce God’s judgment (Joel 2:10; 4:15; Amos 8:9).
- **V. 45**, “the veil of the temple was torn”, after 3 hours of darkness. Here we hear the testimony that, in the dark night, a new light comes to us,

free access to God. All humanity has access to the Father (Heb 10:19-22), indicated by the fact that the Temple curtain is torn in half, a curtain that separated the place of God's presence (Lev 16:2)

- **V. 46**, Jesus prays the psalm (31:6) of trust in God, who welcomes us with love; this recalls the prayer in Gethsemane, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup of bitterness away from me; but not my will, but yours be done” (Lk 22:42); Lucas records that an angel attended him and comforted him.
- **V. 47**, the verdict of innocence was announced by a gentile executioner

Today [σήμερον], a particular interest in the gospel and in the community to with it is addressed.

- 23:43, Jesus addresses the repentant thief: “σήμερον you will be with me in paradise”
- 2:11, to the shepherds, at night: “Today, in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord has been born to you”
- [in some mss. at the baptism of Jesus, a voice from heaven:] 3:22, “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased”, it reads, citing Ps 2:7, “You are my Son, I love you, I have begotten you today”
- 4:21, Jesus addresses his fellow citizens in the synagogue of Nazareth: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”; with this announcement, Jesus begins the jubilee year (of salvation): the visit Isaiah promised: the Good News to the poor, freedom to prisoners, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.
- 5:26 (after the spiritual/moral and physical healing of the paralytic, the audience acclaims:) “Today we have seen wonderful things”
- 9:23 (condition of discipleship): “Whoever wants to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross every day [καθ’ ἡμέραν] and follow me”
- 11:3 (Our Father:) “Give us each day [ἐπιούσιος] our daily bread [καθ’ ἡμέραν]”
- 12:27-28, Jesus speaks of the trust in to divine Providence: “Look at the lilies, how they neither spin nor weave. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory dressed like one of them. Well, if the grass that is in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, God dresses it in this way, how much more to you, men of little faith!
- 13:32-33,

- 19:5, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, because it I must stay at your house today”
- and then, 19:9 [to Zacchaeus], “Today salvation has come to this house.”
- 22:34.61, at the last supper, anticipating the desertion of his disciples: “I tell you: Peter, before the rooster crows today you will have denied three times that you know me”
- 23:43 (Jesus to the criminal:) “Today you will be with me in paradise”

Key moments in Jesus’ ministry are scheduled with this σήμερον, “today”. In Psalm 95:7 we hear: “Today if you listen to his voice, do not harden your heart as in Meribah”. God, who spoke to the Israelites in the past, addresses us “today” in the liturgy, and warns us against hardening our hearts, and invites us to listen and be transformed by the Word of God. We participate in the saving and liberating works of Jesus, who addresses us today, touches our blind eyes and afflicted bodies. With the theology of “today”, Luke bridges the events of Jesus’ ministry to our lives.

Some indications of “today” are related to the sacraments: 1) Today we are born again; 2) today we are anointed by the Holy Spirit; 3) today our sins are forgiven; 4) today our illnesses are cured; 5) today Jesus joins us in a meal; 6) today we will join him in paradise.

Reflection

We contemplate the enthronement of Christ the King. Sprouting from the horizon between earth and sky, three wooden posts against a sky-blue field. Nailed to the post in the center, a naked figure. A criminal at his side is his last defender, ready now to accompany his Lord into his kingdom. This servant radiates hope, while he requests: “Lord, remember me when you arrive in your kingdom,” and hope is rewarded: “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

The portrait is splendid: King and servant, the two in dialogue, breathing their last. Both have received the death penalty, but one, the King, is innocent while the subject receives a reprieve by defending his Lord. Jesus, the innocent lamb sacrificed for our sin, pays the release of the criminal. Christ Crucified grants the reprieve to those condemned to die receive pardon and are freed. The

dialogue recalls old Simeon's canticle: "At last, O Lord, according to your promise, you can release your servant for final peace" (Lk 2:29).

Nothing is said of the other crucified criminal, the one who mocks Jesus: "If you are the Messiah, save yourself and us", the one who does not hear the reprieve: "Today you will be with me in paradise", who finds no meaning or transcendent value in his suffering.

I ask myself, what is the value, the supernatural value of my suffering? Where is it going? What is its value? Do I treasure it like a private devotion, or does it have liturgical value?

Now, we move on to the present life: many crosses. The panorama is no less spectacular. Our King, the Lamb of God, the scapegoat, burdened with our guilt, looks like us... the only difference is, he is innocent. Now we identify with the one who became one with us. We behold our King, enthroned on the cross; let us approach him to achieve value and meaning in our own lives.

Name, describe the suffering you carry at this stage of your life – physical, emotional, spiritual, social. Reflect on the question, what is the transcendental value of this suffering? Where do you find a theological value in suffering?

There is no one present who does not carry the cross, no matter what it is made of or how much it weighs: distance, rejection or clashes with a loved one, vocation crisis, illness or physical pain, anxiety, care and concern for a family member, anxiety and fears that crucify the spirit day after day. In this scene Christ, our King, fully enters our life, he does not despise the cross; on the contrary, with it he opens the door to death and resurrection.

Friends of the gospel, our crosses are planted together with the cross of Christ, on the left or on the right. Some on the left side tempt and ridicule Jesus to come down, or they forget Jesus, so preoccupied are they by their own concerns. The one on the left is the voice of the society we live in, a generation with little patience for discomfort, inconvenience, for humility and suffering.

From the cross on the right side we hear: "Remember me, Lord, when you come into your Kingdom." It is the wisdom of God that Saint Benedict teaches

when he encourages us to persevere in our commitments until death, to share “in the sufferings of Christ with patience, so that we may deserve to share in his kingdom” (RB prol.50). At the end of the Holy Rule, Saint Benedict gives an ecclesial value to all the areas of our life” (RB 72).

First, Saint Benedict recommends fraternal charity: “Let them anticipate honoring one another.” With these words he underlines a basic value in community life and in all forms of friendship and love: respect for one another. This attitude must be practiced: we become imitators of Christ, who came first to love us. Like Christ who first loved us and sacrificed himself for us, may we be first to love and respect our sister and brother.

The second advice complements the first and emphasizes the human misery that we all share: “Tolerate with the utmost patience the physical and moral weaknesses of the brothers” (RB 72.5). Patience, which has a lot to do with shared suffering, is a form of fidelity in love; in a real way we share the suffering of those around us. It is an approach not grounded on feelings; it is a choice nourished by faith and grace.

In the portrait of Christ the King enthroned, we are in his presence. The thorns on his head radiate like rays of light, crowning him King, but unique king. A dying criminal addresses him: “Lord, when you come to your Kingdom, remember me.” The criminal declares Jesus innocent: “This man has done no wrong”; he recognizes his true King and Lord: “When you arrive in your Kingdom, remember me.” Jesus takes the load of his baggage and welcomes him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Christ the King cancels our guilt and saves us.

Meditation

- *Contemplate the crucifixion of Christ the King. X-ray the attitudes that your conscience harbors towards the magnitude and mystery of Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of the world*
- *Identify the attitudes of the co-crucified with Jesus. Find in yourself the traits of the co-crucified, “one on the right and one on the left”.*
- *Identify the hope and the prayer of one of the two.*
- *Identify the cynicism, ridicule, and disbelief of the other.*

Jesus *orante*, model of prayer

Luke describes Jesus as the model of prayer, the *orante*. At important moments Jesus prays, he retires in solitude to commune with his Father. When he describes Jesus praying, Luke has his community in mind. For Luke, prayer is the dotted line that traces our walk through life. Through the same door of prayer through which Jesus enters his passion and death to the resurrection, the believer enters the resurrection. Prayer identifies us with Jesus, and opens us to life in his Holy Spirit.

What happens at prayer? At baptism, Jesus prays, and the sky opens (3:21) – a sublime picture of the effect of prayer, that opens the skylight to heaven, and the Holy Spirit descends. In prayer we realize that we are loved by God, we recognize our true and lasting identity.

When Jesus cured the lepers and the people gathered around him, he retired to a solitary place to pray (5:16). Prayer is a refuge where we are free from the noise and from passing illusions. Before Jesus selected the twelve apostles, he spent the night in prayer (6:12). Prayer enables us to make decisions. Before asking his disciples about what the people thought about him, before Peter's confession, Jesus prayed (9:18). In prayer he prepares to introduce his disciples to the mystery of his suffering and his path to the cross and resurrection.

Only Luke reports that Jesus prayed during the transfiguration: “While he prayed, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (9:29). With prayer we get in touch with who we are and who we are meant to be. The superfluous is removed. The illusions and idolatries that motivate us fall away, and in the transfiguration the truth of our beauty shines forth. Our face radiates the splendor of God who dwells in us; we recognize that we are a reflection of God.

Moses and Elijah accompanied transfigured Jesus in prayer. Moses is the middleman who delivered the law. When we pray, our life is put in order, we experience freedom in God and the impression that people have of us no longer matters. Elijah is the prophet. In prayer the prophetic quality of our life

dawns on us. In prayer –the transfiguration of Jesus teaches– we come into contact with our true selves and the glory of God shines through us. What happens in prayer can't be turned on and off like a faucet. A cloud envelopes us and darkens our gaze, but that experience of light accompanies us as we return alone to the valley of darkness, the shadowlands of daily life.

The high point of Jesus' prayer is the Passion. On the Mount of Olives, he is confronted with the will of God. An angel – only in Luke's account – visits Jesus, sweating blood, and strengthens him. Praying is just peaceful, since even in prayer the *orante* wrestles with the will of God. But an angel visits and revives our strength, in the face of anxiety and fear. Jesus sweats blood before his passion, and he prays with greater insistence (22:44).

Luke narrates the scene on the Mount of Olives against the background of darkness. We are not strangers to the darkness and God's silence. We sometimes think that our prayer is empty, that it is not profitable, that nothing happens, there's nobody on the other side, or God, silent, has cancelled us in his FACE. "The system is down". What happened to the disciples happens to us: we fall asleep in prayer. And then the wake-up call: "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray so you can face the test" (22:46). We experience the same trials Jesus did: loneliness, anxiety, abandonment, need, and suffering. Prayer overcomes temptations and keeps God present in the extreme difficulties. Jesus counselled the sleeping disciples, "Pray that you may not be put to the test" (22:40).

The prayer in Gethsemane gave Jesus the strength to endure the Passion. Through prayer he receives the knowledge and the confidence that, even in death, God would not abandon him.

Jesus reaches the peak of his prayer on the cross, where he prays not just for himself, but for his murderers: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they do" (23:34); he dies praying as a pious Jew, reciting the vespers psalm with his last breath: "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). But he adds to his words an intimate note of confidence, *Abba*. From the cross Jesus affectionately addresses his Father into whose loving hands he confides his life. Prayer infuses meaning in this Passover. Amid all cruelty,

Jesus prays and offers himself into God's hands. His relationship with God frees him from the power of human adversaries. His own assassins do not triumph over him. Prayer allows him to ascend to another level where the catcalls of his executioners have no effect. The prayer that Jesus exercises from the beginning of his ministry to his death on the cross, is where he finds his support. He persevered in his life's mission thanks to the strength of prayer; prayer kept the window to heaven open and kept in union with his Father.

Add in:

Lucas 09,18-24'22

Del evangelio: Acompañado de sus discípul@s, Jesús busca un lugar aparte para orar. En esta ocasión, pregunta a sus discípulos, “¿Qué dice la gente de mí? ¿Quién dicen que soy yo?” A base del ejemplo de Jesús, maestro de la oración, nos pregunta: ¿Qué es la oración? ¿Para qué sirve? O bien más al grano, ¿Cómo orar?, y ¿qué se hace en la oración? El mismo evangelio nos instruye:

- **Jesús descendió en el Jordán, subió de las aguas, y se puso a orar, y se le abrió un boquete en el cielo; se escuchó una voz: “Tu eres mi Hijo Amado”, y el Espíritu se aleteó sobre Jesús, como el Espíritu de Dios sobre la creación.**
 - **En la oración, se amplía el horizonte, se abre una ventana hacia el cielo.**
- **Jesús subió la montaña para orar, y cuando bajó, de entre los muchos discípulos, nombró a Doce para acompañarlo más de cerca.**
 - **En la oración, se discierne, se recibe fuerzas para hacer decisiones adecuadas en la vida.**
- **De nuevo Jesús subió el monte con tres discípulos y, mientras oraba, conversaba con Moisés y Elías, sobre la “liberación” que le esperaba en Jerusalén.**
 - **En la oración, nos ponemos en contacto con nuestro pasado, y preparamos para enfrentar el futuro.**
- **Hoy en el evangelio, Jesús se encuentra en un lugar aparte con sus discípulos; les pregunta: “¿Qué dice la gente de mí? ¿Quién dicen**

Uds. que soy yo?”. Se despeja las confusiones acerca de Jesús: no es Juan Bautista o un profeta. Es el Mesías. Encuentra su identidad como persona, y qué implica esta identidad.

- **¿Para qué sirve la oración? La persona encuentra su identidad, y hacia dónde se dirige. Jesús, el Mesías, se dirige hacia la resurrección, por un camino que incluye el sufrimiento, rechazo y la muerte. En un segundo momento, como resultado de su oración, Jesús revela a los discípulos y a nosotros acerca de quiénes somos quienes pretendemos seguir a Jesús hacia la resurrección y la vida plena.**
- **Justo antes de la pasión, Jesús se pone a orar a su Padre, y le dice, “Padre, aparta de mí este cáliz, pero... no se haga mi propia voluntad sino la tuya”.**
 - **¿Para qué sirve la oración? Para ponernos en sintonía con la voluntad mayor, la voluntad de nuestro amable Dios.**
- **Por último, Jesús ora durante su sacrificio en la cruz: “Padre, en tus manos entrego mi espíritu, todo lo que soy”.**
 - **¿Para qué sirve la oración? Para entregarnos al amor eterno de Dios, en la confianza de la Resurrección y la vida eterna con Amable Dios.**

Luke 8:4-8. The Sower, the Seed, the Soils, and the Harvest

Where is Jesus in the year 30, his ministry? Where is Luke and his audience in the second generation of Christianity? Where are we?

⁴ When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to him, he spoke in a parable. ⁵ “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. ⁶ Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. ⁷ Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. ⁸ And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.” (NAB)

Ecclesial reflection

A parable of sowing seed inspires hope in our beginnings. The sower cannot know the results of his efforts. Will the setbacks be offset by a happy ending? Living the gospel is like planting/sowing seed; it is a beginning, without much knowledge about what comes later, the growth, the weather conditions, crop failure, or harvest. In this parable Jesus focuses on the planting, that amounts to tossing seed haphazardly on the ground. Nothing more. In this parable what strikes the hearer is the carelessness of tossing the seed. Jesus concentrates on the sowing, not the harvest: “The sower went out to sow the seed.”

While tossing the grain, the farmer doesn't discriminate between the different conditions of the topsoil. He doesn't avoid the rocky ground with its thin layer of dirt; he doesn't avoid that patch where he knows the seedlings usually get entangled among thorns that would tear or prick his skin –the telltale scratches and wounds of a person who works the land, the decorations for a sower!

The farmer does not choose the fertile ground that would promise an abundant harvest. Rather, sowing seed is all about discovering the possibilities, not about assessing the profits, and guaranteeing results. Planting seed is like tossing tiny nuggets of hope onto the heart.

The psalmist sings about sowing in tears and reaping with joy (Ps 126:5-6): “Those who sow with tears reap amid songs of joy. They go out

weeping, tossing the seed; and they return singing songs, carrying their produce.” It is easy to rejoice with the harvest, and sacks of grain are weighed for market. But Jesus and the evangelist find delight in sowing. If we wait too long, we may not see the harvest. There is consolation in the job well done, and the effort invested. It is the relief born from hope, contemplating the empty sacks and the seeds in the ground. We find comfort in the thought that somebody will reap what we have sown. Our job is to sow for the future.

Somehow there is satisfaction, just knowing we have squandered the seed along the way, on rocky ground, among the roots of weeds. In the end we do not know which is the good earth, given the hazards of climate and growth.

But if the farmer does not go out to plant, nothing results. But planting risks a whole series of hazards and mishaps and then—surprisingly—the harvest.

The sower does not choose the ideal ground to receive the seed. He does not discriminate between the fertile ground and the barren. What ground deserves his efforts? The value of the soil is revealed only after planting. The sower's job does not consist in classifying the different fields. He or she tosses the seed of the gospel recklessly, squandering the seed, performing seemingly useless gestures. Let us not forget that the seed is the Word of God that can transform the soil of the heart, challenge the dirt clods and the stony heart, frustrate the thorns, and soften the beaten path. The sower goes out to sow, not knowing where the weeds will be and where the fertile ground. Thus, we do not save the seed for the supposedly good soil. God's grace does not guarantee fruit for every effort.

Personal reflection

One day the sower leaves his house to sit on the edge of the field to contemplate his sowing. He scans the surface: the footpath, the bare, hard ground where people shortcut across the field; the upper patch where the thin layer of soil on limestone is dotted with rocks; the patch where thistles and weeds always sprout, and the good earth. The sower may choose to keep the grain in storage, considering the risks of tossing it on the ground. The divine sower decides to go out and sow.

As he tosses the seed, some fall on the footpath –bird food before you know it. The sower contemplates those areas of my heart that present a hard surface to the gospel, indifference or habit, prejudice, cynicism, or just plain

disillusionment. This land resists the seed; it stays hard, insensitive to the gospel. (The sower sows, and some grains fall along the way...)

...and others fall among rocks, a region of the heart where the seed sinks its roots but not so deep. Quick to sprout, the enthusiasm of new projects and incipient dreamwork, the seed barely sprouts in hasty conversion, but as soon as it appears, it withers in the daylight. In vain the roots of the gospel find depth in perseverance and constancy. If that patch of land could defend itself, it would tell its own gospel story of a life in the face of opposition, social pressure, discouragement, attractions, and impulses alien to the gospel. This patch of soil manifests itself in fast sprouting and growth, early flowering, and quickly wilting, unable to withstand the midday sun. Secular (and sometimes religious) society, with its short tolerance for the spiritual and the transcendent, its disregard for human values, crushes the rootless plant. Hopes dawn in the fresh, early morning, but the midday heat sears the good will and melts cool fervor. (The sower sows, and some grains fall among the rocks...)

...and others fall among thorns, the ground that appears fertile, but under the surface are the rival roots in the end will suffocate the hope of a harvest. We know that terrain well, pockmarked by our own efforts to pull out the weeds. In the field, as in the soul, contrary nature advances and claims the ground that had been prepared to receive the gospel. Fertility, both in soil and in the soul, hinges on the efforts to remove the harmful and tenacious weeds. Beneath the surface hide the thorny dispositions of the heart, the indulged impulses, the yearning for affection. The cares and pleasures, past passions and sins haunt the soul, and choke the gospel seed. (The sower sows, and a few grains fall among thorns, and when the thorns grow, they suffocate the seedlings.)

When the divine sower goes out to sow, some grains fall on fertile ground, and take root in the soul. Onto this acre the scandal of the cross turns the soil over and covers the seed, the blood of Christ waters the grain. The grace of the sacraments weeds the ground around the stalks, and the grain sprouts and grows, until it produces an amazing harvest. The good earth is the parcel in the heart that receives the grain, and, through patient cultivation, sprouts, grows tall, and flourishes, to produce a hundredfold. (The sower sows, and a few grains fall on good soil.)

Ultimately, the parable is an imprecise analogy. The different soils cannot decide for themselves. The human soul, to an extent, yes. The land is either barren or hard or rocky. The heart opens to divine grace, to the movement of the spirit, to patient and deliberate care and cultivation. An essential difference exists between the field in the parable and the field of the heart.

Again, the sower goes out to sow. And a few grains fall on the footpath—but a path that by God's grace and a person's own efforts softens the surface. Other grains fall among the rocks and stones—but we apply our effort to remove the stones, soften the clods, and fertilize the parched land. Other grains fall among thorns and weeds — take care that the weeds don't choke the harvest! And other grains produce an amazing abundance. May we look forward to the joyous ingathering and may the harvest in holiness exceed our best hopes.

Four hermeneutical keys to the parable

(1) The parable of the sower. The sower can be interpreted as God or Jesus; the seed is the Word of God. From this perspective, the parable focuses on God, an industrial farmer who sows, paying no attention to the different types of soil. God makes the sun rise on the good and the bad and makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust (cf. Mt 5:45). The parable demonstrates God's inclusive, indiscriminate love. God scatters the seed, offering his Word to everybody, regardless of one's potential or promise to accept it. Not everyone will receive the Word or allow it to germinate. Jesus offers the Word to everyone, without discrimination or preferences regarding individuals.

Jesus concludes the parable of the sower with the phrase: “He who has ears, let him hear” (v. 8). This recalls the *Shema*, the prayer (Deut 6:4-5), that observant Jews pray three times a day: “Hear, Israel: The Lord, our God, is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” While this prayer emphasizes Israel's exclusive relationship with God, Jesus' parable extends the Good News to all, regardless of blood, social rank, or political party.

If the disciple identifies with the sower, the challenge is to imitate God in his evangelization, to extend the Word beyond his preferences.

From the narrative perspective of the gospel, the invitation addressed to the crowds Jesus is for them to receive and respond to the Word that he freely preaches to them. If you are a member of God's chosen people, Jesus invites you to broaden your definition of the chosen. A door opens to those outside the ethnic boundaries of Israel and alien to the God of Israel.

In Luke's community, the parable justifies the inclusion of marginal Jews and Gentiles among the faithful. The sower scattered the seed even among those who were considered "rocky ground". For contemporary communities struggling for inclusion, the parable works the same way.

Does the sower in the parable disturb me or cause me to question the apparent waste of the seed? Would I sow in a more efficient, less extravagant? How does the parable of the sower challenge me?

(2) The parable of the seed. Here the key point shifts to the ability of the seed to produce a harvest. At first it seems there will be no harvest, but the happy result confirms the nature of the seed, and how the Word of God fulfills its purpose, even though much of it falls on deaf ears. The parable is an elaboration of Isa 55:10-11:

"As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there, but soak the earth, make it fruitful and make it germinate, so it gives seed to the sower and bread to eat, so will my word be, the one that comes out of my mouth, which will not return to me empty, without having done what pleased me and having fulfilled what I send it to."

The parable encourages the disciples to see that, even without a positive response, spreading the Word in the end achieves its purpose. In Luke's community, the parable ensures that the seed is reliable. Not all the seed germinates, but this is not a deterrent to the sowing nor a defect of the seed. Despite the apparent lack of results, efforts to spread God's word will bear fruit.

The seed neither chooses the hand that tosses it nor the ground that receives it. It could be used as food or be sold for profit. What is your relationship with the seed sown in you? What is your relationship with the seed you sow?

(3) The Parable of the harvest. Each type of soil proffers a different production. The hope of a harvest suddenly vanishes with what is sown on the footpath, because the birds gobble it up in the act of sowing, even before it takes root and sprouts. On rocky ground, hope sprouts, but with short-term first shoots, and they die out. In the field of weeds, hope lingers longer. Seeds sprout and grow together with the rival roots, and in the end the weeds triumph. In the good soil the grain matures, and the harvest is abundant.

The amazing harvest places the receiver before an eschatological scenario. The harvest image often refers to the end time, and it is exaggerated. If a good harvest for a Palestinian farmer produces up to ten times more, a hundred times more is unimaginable. This exaggeration speaks of divine goodness that surpasses all human expectation.

From this perspective the parable leaves the listener in awe of the abundance of God's grace that is manifest in the end time. God's work far surpasses any human capacity. The farmer who has worked tirelessly under adverse conditions hears the good news of God's providence for the needy and the assurance of a great reward in the end time.

How have you been amazed at the harvest of divine grace in your life and in the lives of people around you? Have your hopes been dashed again and again, and then fulfilled beyond your expectations?

(4) The parable of the soils. No other parable in the gospel is explained as an allegory. Jesus left the parables open to challenge to future generations.

The allegory (vv. 11-15) focuses on the four kinds of soil, that is, four different hearers of the word. The obstacles that the seeds encounter in the form of birds, rocky soil, weeds, and the hot sun are the obstacles that one confronts after hearing the word. Little understanding, the work of the evil one, the feeble roots, sadness, persecutions and worldly concerns, the seduction of riches –all this prevents the word of God from taking root and bearing fruit.

Where do I slack off in my efforts to cultivate receptive ground to receive the Word? Am I challenged to clear the field of "rocks", the weeds, the thorns, and all obstacles? The parable warns us of the obstacles to faith.

In the so-called “parable of the sower,” the listener is left free to find the meaning for his or her own life. We are challenged to share God’s Word with the same prodigality and in the same indiscriminate manner with which the sower spreads the seed in us.

Luke 13:10-17. Hunchback Woman. I Love my Self but Hate my Body

Tradition ascribes to Luke the profession of physician, based on the medical terminology, more in evidence in his two volumes than in the other New Testament writings. In no other gospel do we find with such frequency, words for healing, *iaomai* (“heal”) or *therapeuein*. On occasion his diagnosis of an illness is more clinical than that in the synoptic parallels. Jesus is incontestably one who restores people to health and heals our ills.

Luke develops his understanding of illness and health from his understanding of human nature. For the Greeks, the *kalos kai ágathos* (“sound and good person”) constituted the ideal, and health was an expression of the beauty and goodness of the individual. A healthy soul lives in a healthy body (*mens sana in corpore sano*)¹ and enjoys harmony in body and soul, an expression of the moral life; the healthy balance in all aspects of the person is the determining factor for well-being.

The person who exaggerates her efforts regarding health or physical fitness is not necessarily healthy. A person who recurs to cosmetic surgery and adjustments is not necessarily healthy. When a person is sick, something is lacking, her dignity and self-esteem suffers. Healing restores personal dignity and balance in life².

This becomes clear from two healings narrated by Luke: that of the hunchback woman (13:10-17) and that of the man with dropsy (14:1-6). Both healings took place on the Sabbath, the day God rested from labor and pronounced the creation good. For Luke, healing restores integrity as God designed it. Every time Jesus heals someone, he collaborates with the Creator; he reveals to the woman and man, that we were created according to God’s design and handiwork. Luke, a skillful theologian, offers a theological vision of illness and health.

Psychology recognizes the connection between the body and the spirit. Some physical ailments are to a degree psychosomatic or “somatizations” (“soma-symptomatic”) of the spiritual state. Health of body and soul go hand in hand. How many of our back disorders are related to tension and stress—

¹ “A sound mind in a sound body,” or in Latin “*Mens sana in corpore sano*,” a well-known motto, stands for the ideal of versatility. A person is only healthy when he is occupied both intellectually and physically.

² For the Benedictine monastic, healing and health happens when the balance between *ora* and *labora* is maintained, to the degree that the monastic keeps an even keel in relation to the Word of God (*lectio divina*) and human words (the common life).

the difficulty in bearing the cross—? How many of our foot and leg pains relate to stumbling or moving ahead in life, experiencing confusion or insecurity where we find ourselves? Besides real allergies and chronic viral infections, some respiratory problems are related to spiritual and emotional constraints? And digestive complaints—gastritis, constipation, colitis— are sometimes related to our affective or emotional state, telling symptoms that people do not digest life very well or with ease? Hypertension can be a symptom of the apprehension and abuse of power and authority. In a word, illness distorts our personal dignity. Healing restores the individual with her essential beauty and wholeness.

The Hunchback Woman (Lk 13:10-17)

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue.

There before him was a woman who for eighteen years had been *possessed by a spirit that crippled her*; she was doubled over and quite unable to stand erect. Jesus saw her, called her over, “Woman, you are freed from your disability,” and he laid his hands on her. At once she straightened up, and she glorified God (13:11-13).

The woman’s disability was not just physical; it also manifested her psychological or spiritual condition. A spirit belittled the woman, bent her over. Luke describes her: [*she*] *had been possessed by a spirit that crippled her*”. The woman is hunched over, weighed down by life. Symptoms of her depression: shallow breathing, drooping shoulders and curved spine; her complexion has lost its natural glow. The curved spine might indicate repressed feelings, worries, or anxieties carried like heavy baggage. Repressed emotions can cause us to droop and sigh.

What caused her chronic disability? Had her back been broken in an accident or was it malformed from birth? Whatever the cause, she could not stand upright. She moved around with chronic pain³ for the past eighteen years.

Doubled over, she could not “look up” to God.” Had she lost contact with the transcendent dimension in life? Her sight was focused downward or

³ The Greek word *pantelés* (“quite unable to”, “whole”, “absolute”, “completely”) describes her illness as incurable.

sideways. Did she suffer from low self-esteem? Was she pretty in anyone's eyes?

In this hunchback Luke portrays the human being oppressed, fractured, her dignity shattered. Jesus looks and really sees the afflicted person. Sometimes, faced with deforming or inconvenient illness, we look the other way or pretend we don't see. But Jesus looks and "sees"; later he will "raise his eyes" to see Zacchaeus in the tree (19,5), or at a dinner party Jesus directs his gaze at the woman with the broken bottle at his feet and addresses the Pharisee: "Simon, do you see this woman?" (7,44). Jesus is not indifferent to human misery; he singles out and has compassion on the afflicted. Once he perceived her depression, he addresses her, and so frees her from the isolation that has kept her "down under"; for once somebody overlooks her shame. The description in Greek, *prosfonéo*, "calls her over" ("name someone", "call") puts Jesus in relation with the woman.

With the hunchback present, Jesus "laid his hands upon her" and with the words, "Woman, you are freed from your disability", he pronounced healing and liberation. In contact with Jesus, the person recovers her freedom and dignity. Jesus who is raised from the dead, raises the depressed woman and restores her health and dignity. This is expressed by Jesus *laying his hands on her* (cf. 4:40).

In the gospel and in Acts, the laying on of hands is a healing touch, along with the invocation of the Holy Spirit. By the imposition of hands God's Spirit invades the woman. The Holy Spirit heals the woman's weakness and binds the crippling spirit. The disciples also lay hands on the sick (Mk 16:18), and free the afflicted from the power of evil. The gospel urges us to be freed from old patterns of life, released by God's saving power and love, and conceive of ourselves as God has designed from the beginning. Jesus touches the woman, and she straightens up and glorifies God. Contact with God has been restored.

The Greek word translated "straightened up", *anorthóthe*, expresses the restoration of a house or home. Jesus restores and refashions the woman according to her original beauty and integrity; Jesus restores his damaged home, his sanctuary, where God dwells in glory.

After the healing of the hunchback, the synagogue president reacted with anger. On the Sabbath one is prohibited from doing any labor; and the religious experts interpreted the woman's healing as human work, while Jesus

presents healing as God's work. The synagogue president makes the letter of the law more important than the person. Jesus answers by referring to treating animals that need to be led out of the stable to drink: *"Is there one of you who does not untie his ox or his donkey from the manger on the Sabbath and take it out for watering?"* (v. 15). The permission to untie the ox or the burro implies that a person can lose humans from what binds us. God, the liberator of all, freed people from slavery and now restores our dignity and frees us.

The Sabbath reminds us of creation and the exodus from slavery. On the seventh day God rested from creation and contemplated its beauty and integrity (cf. Exod 20:8-11); the Sabbath commemorates Israel's redemption from slavery (cf. Deut 5:12-15). For Jesus, the way to celebrate the Sabbath is to restore human life, to restore human dignity and praise God, the goodness and beauty.

The assembly's reaction is joy "at all the wonders he worked" (Lk 13:17). People are overjoyed for the new-found freedom in Jesus. With the healing of the hunchback, Luke invites his community to straighten up, be freed of the evils that keep God out of our line of vision and our walk in life. Freedom is extended to the audience, so we can rejoice in our dignity and return home healed, healthy, and restored in friendship with God.

Homegame

Jesus did not ask the lady if she wanted to be healed; he initiated the therapy. Analogously in your own life, how does Jesus invite us to be healthy? In what ways have you preferred spiritual, moral, or physical illness to the health that God freely offers?

Violation: the victim

For the thousandth time the woman revisited in her memory that single event in her distant past, which has stigmatized her for life. She was a pretty girl, a fresh flower, light and sweetness, effervescent joy. Affection, given and received, was natural to her among family and friends.

Affliction intruded in her gentle soul and opened a wound that would infect every stage of her life. Call it violation, abuse, rape, seduction —no single word grasps the horror and its consequences. Was it when her young cousin played with her and touched her out of curiosity? Was it a father, a brother, or uncle who grabbed her coarsely? A girl friend who taught her to feel that way? Did someone entice her, force, or grab her, press him or herself against her? Whatever it was, at five or eight or twelve or sixteen years of age, it has marked her life.

Why does she feel dirty, secretive, and unworthy? Does she fear she may have conspired in some unconscious way to excite the evil touch of another person? Does she fear that, innocent as she was and ever shall be in this, she may have in some unwilling way enticed or excited the senses of her predator-victimizer and thus become the accomplice in guilt? Does she feel ashamed because she may have derived some forbidden pleasure in what happened to her?

Now with tears and horror she tells and retells her story and gets no relief. The experience has conditioned her ability to relate to people, and she questions her motives, manages tentatively and inconclusively her emotions. She questions her commitments in life: did she marry young and frantic to try to escape from a cycle of inner pain? Did she isolate herself in shame to hide her past? Did she sublimate the horror and transpose it to piety or spirituality, because the body had been violated and no longer pure? Now an adult, as she faces the mystery of her person and sexuality, does she doubt herself, question her motives, wonder how far the boundaries would extend if given free rein?

As a mature woman, how can she treat the stigma, so it heals and does not keep hurting, paralyzing her relations with others? How can she believe in herself and trust God?

The woman begins to forgive herself. She was not guilty, and it's wrong to suppose that a victim could be culpable, but that fact does not remove the sting of guilt, anger, and confusion. It is like a child who is out playing in her clean dress, and she gets it dirty without wanting it, without knowing it, and when she goes to Mother, she is ashamed and feels, somehow, guilty. She is not. She did not decide to get her dress dirty.

For healing to happen, the woman begins to think of her life as bigger than an action or one thing that was forced on her. What happened to a little boy or a little girl is not the sum total of life? She has grown, she has been

formed, educated, she has made decisions that have molded her present life. A negative experience during youth is one piece in the complex puzzle; it is not the whole picture, but it can be a very big piece. Perhaps what is done in counseling and therapy is to appreciate the whole jigsaw puzzle of life, and try to understand how that lost piece fits in.

With the residue of experiences in our early life, let us be patient and compassionate. If our thoughts or memory invade us, passion or desire obsess or overwhelm us and invite one to alienate him or herself, she may find release from bondage, not in a religious matrix and outward forms, not in the scrupulous, endless washings of the stain, but in God, who delivers us from bondage on the Sabbath, the day that admires the exquisite beauty of creation, when a new horizon opened up and a former way of life was transformed by contact with Jesus.

Bipolar Challenges in the Gospel of Luke

- Lk 10:38-42. Mary ≠ Martha
- Lk 15:11-32. Family Challenge: Strayed Son Returned ≠ Elder Brother
- Lk 16:19-31. Lazarus ≠ Rich Man
- Lk 16:1-13. “Children of This World” ≠ “Children of the Light” (Shrewd Administrator)
- Lk 19:1-10. Zacchaeus, Before ≠ After

Luke 04:[14-]21-30, Prelude: Native ≠ and Eternal Interests

²¹ Jesus said to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They asked, “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” ²³ He said to them, “Surely you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, cure yourself,’ and say, ‘Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.’” ²⁴ He said, “Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his native place. ²⁵ Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine spread over the entire land. ²⁶ It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. ²⁷ Of the many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet, not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with anger. ²⁹ They rose, drove him out of the town, and pressed him to the cliffside on which their town had been built, to throw him down headlong. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went away. (≈ NAB)

Observation

- *Today* [σήμερον]. Cf. exposition in “Christ crucified between two thieves” (*supra*)
 - 2:11, “*Today* [σήμερον] in the town of David a savior has been born to you.”
 - 4:21, “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled even as you listen.”
 - 19:5, “*Today* I must stay at your home...”
 - 19:9, “*Today* salvation has come to this house.”
 - 22:34, 61, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows *today*, you will deny three times that you know me.”
 - 23:43, “*Today* you will be with me in Paradise.”
- “son of Joseph”, 1,27; 2,4.16; 3,23-25

- “Prophet” (in Luke): 7,16.26.39; 9,8.19; 13,33; 24,19 ...
- A widow in Zarephath, in Sidon, the nest of idolatry (where we least expect the miracle of God’s grace. Widow in Luke 2,37; 4,25-26; 7,12; 18,3.5; 20,47; 21,2-3
- the lepers living in the periphery. Leper in Lk 4,27; 7,22; 17,12
- v. 30, “he passed through the midst of them...,” a forecast of the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection

In Benedictine spirituality, two forces vie with one another for precedence and attention, the consciousness of God and eternal value, and the pressing demands and attraction of the secular life, understood as the material, socio-political world we are immersed in, the headline news, fashions, and fads. The Benedictine navigates between two time zones, *kairos* and *kronos*, just as Jesus’ presentation in the synagogue at Nazareth tugged in two directions at once. The people attended the synagogue on the Sabbath for religious motives, but in the presence of Jesus and his incipient celebrity, they were attracted by some immediate advantage that just might fall to them –a miracle or two, some notoriety, a benefaction for the town. Just so, we Benedictines are divided, pulled in two directions at once by sacred and secular interests. “*Through the midst of*” these interests (v. 30), Jesus, and we, negotiate and navigate the tension in our ordinary lives as we approach the Paschal mystery. Saint Benedict counsels us: “Do now what will be of profit for all eternity” (RB prol.44; cf. Mk 8,36).

During a synagogue service, the applause of Jesus’ Nazareth friends tapered off and public opinion veered in the opposite direction. At first, apprised of his rising stardom, the local population gave him a standing ovation. But quickly, when Jesus divulged their secret thoughts, the applause thinned, the offended local population boiled to the point of throwing him over the cliff. What had happened between these polar extremes, admiration of Jesus and the attempt against his life? (This about-face in the crowd’s reaction to Jesus happens time and again in his ministry, and it recurs in our own friendship with Jesus, the dramatic shift from the exultant Palm Sunday “hosanna” to the confused “Crucify him” on Good Friday.) This happens in our spiritual life and search for God, as the monk vacillates between the “*Good Zeal* that separates from evil and leads to God” and the “*Wicked Zeal* of bitterness that separates from God and leads to hell” (RB 72.1).

At first, the Nazareth citizens, proud of their native son, were captivated by his word, when he confirmed that the Isaian prophecy had been fulfilled in

their midst. “*He won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips*” (v. 22). The audience, pickled with pride, recognized him as the son of one of their own, a local craftsman. Is he not one of us, our kin, the son of Joseph, my neighbor? How innocent and effortless the surge of neighborhood pride, one of our boys attains fame! Now he belongs, not just to one family, but to everybody.

One other detail comes into play. The boy Jesus had been reared in their midst; they knew him, formed him, watched him grow, and identified with him. But, what about the young adult Jesus! (The angel Gabriel appeared to his mother, not to the citizens of Nazareth!) Did Jesus still belong to them? And his growing fame and miracles, might his cousins benefit from his peculiar talent? Such is the case of a political figure or rising “star” in the public eye, when the hometown expects to gather some glitter from his fame and new money. Let’s share the spotlight and market the stardom for ourselves. So, Jesus reads our pretensions: “Surely you will quote me this proverb, ‘Physician, cure yourself,’ and say, ‘Do here in your native place the things that we heard you performed in Capernaum.’”

The reaction of the local population grew more tense once it became clear that Jesus would not accede to their pretensions. He quoted another well-known adage, “*No prophet is accepted in his native place*” (v. 24), what amounted to an insult to his people. The growing dissatisfaction anticipates the tone of Jesus’ ministry; from this point on to the crucifixion, his parables and healings gave off the odor first of acceptance and then rejection. Two worlds in tension.

In his response to the dashed dreams of his townspeople, Jesus cited two precedents, where the beneficiaries of the prophet’s attentions were foreigners, regardless of the vast need in the native country. The prophet Elijah responded not to one of the widows of his homeland but to a widow in Sidon, birthplace of the most famous idolatress, adulteress, in world history, Jezebel. The prophet Elisha cured an outsider, a leper who was not one of the many lepers in Israel, but a Syrian. In the same way, Nazareth has no special privilege or claim over Jesus, who forms the new people of God he will form by his Passover—his sacrifice, death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Holy Spirit—in Jerusalem.

The meaning of this incident in the Nazareth synagogue? Jesus left his town to do the work of his Father. His baptism and temptation were his debut,

after which he returned home, not to rest on the laurels of budding success, but to be rejected by his own people; from that point on the ties with his native village are cut and he expands his ministry, a man without a country, to all people. In fact, as his mission and the Father's will becomes clearer, his birthplace becomes a threat. Now Nazareth, and afterwards, Jerusalem, "*did not recognize the time of [her] visitation*" (Lk 19:44), to such a degree – another gospel attests – that Jesus couldn't work any miracle there, on account of their lack of faith (Mk 6:5).

Jesus' rejection in Nazareth is a preamble to his passion and death in Jerusalem, when once again, his native countrymen and foreign representatives applaud him, only later to reject and crucify him, attempt to erase the trace of God from their midst. On that later occasion, just as in Nazareth when Jesus, on the verge of being hurled over the cliff, passes through the walls of death, and rose from the dead, making Nazareth a dramatic anticipation of the resurrection and ascension, when Jesus will go ahead to prepare a place for us, the best benefit that we his people could hope for from our elder brother Jesus.

Gentle Listeners, This gospel has much to do with us. We, too, sense the tension between God's grandiose plan for salvation and the self-centered and merely provincial interests of Nazareth townsfolk, in the human heart a tension exists between the interests of God and the merely secular interests and spectacles. Attractive novelties tarnish the luster of eternity that glows in the human heart. Driven by whim, affections, the distractions of the shopping mall eclipse the light of eternal life, erase the Passover from the roadmap, rob the glory of the resurrection that pertains to everyone without distinction, try to grab the fleeting benefits for oneself, and one's own family of interests. But the resurrection life and the Holy Spirit are not hemmed in by national frontiers; they know of no distinction between foreign and native. God's goodness knows no limits. *This is especially poignant for Luke's multicultural church in Antioch in Syria.*

To be a disciple of Jesus, his kin and contemporary, there's only one valid passport: the faith that Jesus will save us. Every other title, that pretends to annex Jesus to our projects – political party, blood type, reputation for holiness or apostolic zeal and efficiency – every credit card is useless, besides friendship with Jesus and good works that stem from this relationship. Jesus recognizes as his own those of us who, deprived of every other privilege, place ourselves at the mercy of his grace, the measure and font of holiness.

In our reading of the Gospel of Luke, I propose a key for reflecting on our Benedictine lives, "Bipolar Challenges in the Gospel of Luke." What do I mean? Martha and Mary are portrayed, poles apart from one another. Nobody is Martha in her pure, unadulterated state; likewise, nobody is one hundred percent Mary. Each girl represents an orientation in our human and Christian life. The contrast enables us to reflect on our own life. Each person is action and contemplation rolled into one, ora et labora. We have Martha inclinations and Mary tendencies, and at times each of us exhibits a preference for one or the other, but neither exists in her pure state. Another example, the prayer of the Pharisee and the tax collector: they are exaggerations side by side in the same pew, and together they mirror our lives. Your prayer is somewhere between the two extremes. Let's examine ourselves in the mirror of the gospel, appreciate the tensions and attractions in our own heart.

By way of meditation, identify the poles of attraction in your life, the temporary and the eternal, the impulsive and the permanent. Address the attractions and gratifications that each one offers, the. What draws you most strongly? What holds you back from moving in one direction or the other?

Luke 7:36-50. Simon the Pharisee ≠ The Woman at Jesus' Feet

³⁶ A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, so he entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. ³⁷ A sinful woman in the city learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ she placed herself at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he thought to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus said to him in reply, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. ⁴¹ "Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty. ⁴² Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon said in reply, "The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven."

He said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then he turned to the woman but said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸ He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹ The others at table said to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰ But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (≈ NAB)

Observations:

- *reclining* at table to dine
- a woman: Luke is a ladies' man. He begins the gospel with prominent ladies, Elizabeth and Mary; the widow Anna, daughter of Fanuel of the tribe of Asher, in the temple; Herodias, who slept around with the Herod boys; the widow of Nain at her son's funeral (7:11-17); Magdalene, Joanna, Herod's steward Chuza's wife; Susanna, among the benefactresses of the college; Martha and Mary (10:38-42); the hunchback lady, eighteen years bent over (13:10-17); the widow with the two coins who offers the substance of her life, a Christological photo that anticipates Jesus' offering of his life on the cross for us; the ladies at Golgotha; the ladies in the cemetery on the morning of the first day of the New Creation; then, in Acts of the Apostles, the lovely Tabitha-Dorcas, and her clothing and fashion industry, known for her virtue, among others.

- The “alabaster flask, evidently this prominent woman who crashed the Simon’s dinner part was not living on food stamps.
- The feet of Jesus: this lady, the former Gerasene demoniac (8:35); Jairus the synagogue official (8:41); Mary, Martha’s sister (10:39); an ex-Samaritan leper (17:16); proof of the resurrected body of Jesus (24:39-40);
- The woman’s hair (2xs mentioned) adds a sensual tint to the scene: in Rev 9:8 the locusts look like horses, but have women’s hair and lions’ teeth; Peter in his letter warns against fussing too much with the hair (1 Pet 3:3); Paul writes to a society where respectable Christian women should cover their heads, so as not to be confused with the Corinthian sex servers (1 Cor 11:5, 10).
- Jesus looks at the woman at his feet while he addresses Simon by name
- Simon is reluctant to recognize himself in the mirror; he glares at the intrusive, repentant sinner and says categorically: “That’s not who I am.”
- In the parable, both persons owe a debt

Simon, an upright, law-abiding Pharisee, missed no opportunity to defend the law, pay the temple tax, and uphold the Jewish customs. At the end of the day he balanced his accounts and only looked at the column of credits. Cautious about the company he kept, judicious about whom he invited, Simon furnished his public life with polite, like-minded “glitterati”, who hosted him when it was their turn. Even so, the exquisite host, ostensibly concerned for propriety and decorum, questioned his guests’ moral stature –his criticism of Jesus goes right to the heart: “If this man were really a prophet, he would mind what sort of company he kept–, Simon judged his table companions, and excluded certain “unworthies” from social life.

Simon was on familiar terms with Jesus, who responded graciously, relaxed, and accepted the invitation to recline at his table. Did “familiarity breed contempt”? The host, ostensibly cozy with Jesus, held his guest at a distance, and neglected the customary gestures of hospitality. I wonder if Simon expected some of the glitter of his guest to fall on him. Was his social status enhanced by hosting such a prophet? Did he hope for some miracle? A stroll across the swimming pool? Water to wine? Embellish this soirée and receive honorable mention in the Galilean Gazette? Or were Jesus and Simon just casual friends meant to relax in each other’s company?

The only glitch was when *that woman*, a reputable sinner, barged in and burst Simon's bubble. We suspect she was a prostitute, another spoke in the wheel of corruption in Capernaum. In Simon's discriminating eye, she's riffraff, making her living in shabby, sleazy ways. Yet, as Luke reports, this sinner was not the cold, hard-hearted schemer who trampled on God and neighbor to get what she wanted and coddle her way up the ladder. She longed to be free from the constricting web of sin that shamed her.

Simon, reclining, wining, and dining, engaged in lively conversation with his celebrity guest-prophet, sunning himself in the glow of the perfect evening...

...until she showed up. A floozy? I wonder that there was no fuss when she entered the home. Had she visited before in less celebrated, more intimate moments? Perhaps even the mistress of the house and the servants were used to her comings and goings, and it seemed only slightly amiss that she would show up on that evening when Simon was basking in the limelight of his show piece. Why, perhaps that very afternoon Simon had politely excused himself, whispering to her, "Not tonight, Honey. I'm having a quiet evening at home, expecting a few friends over."

But, unfortunately for Simon, this is not the type who conducts her business in private and gets paid to keep her mouth shut. She'd heard of Jesus and wants what only he can offer, so she barges in and, once at Jesus' feet, weeps and wipes up her tears with her hair, then massages the feet with precious perfume. Insulted, the parsimonious host, assesses the prophet's credentials, questions his perspicacity, faults him for failing to read the hearts of such low life, for not being more discriminating in his company. Meanwhile, Jesus, the clairvoyant, takes an electrocardiogram (EKG), of Simon's heart.

So, finally, Simon and the woman meet on official grounds. Jesus gazes at the nameless lady at his feet and addresses his host across the table, "Simon." Note the scene. The two change places; Jesus deftly identifies her with his host, and one might ask, had the Pharisee ever been in her slippers? Had Simon, once flooded with emotion and religious zeal, unabashedly approached God, wept, and emptied the perfume of his heart in a fervent, fresh conversion?

Jesus tells a parable (vv. 41.42): "Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days' wages and the other owed fifty." ⁴² Since

they were unable to pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Which of them will love him more?”⁴

It’s a striking parable, and the details just don’t happen in life and society. In the real world, pawnbrokers and loan sharks are neither heroes nor beloved. There was always something shady about them. And so the parable starts out. But the audience quickly guesses that this is about God—even in the Our Father we pray (in Matthew’s version, 6,12), “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Moreover, in the Our Father and other biblical texts that appeal to God’s mercy nothing is held back: the *whole* debt is forgiven unconditionally. Given the context the story of the sinful woman or, more broadly, the historical context of Jesus’ treatment of sinners—it had to dawn on the hearers: he is talking about God! That had to happen when Jesus added the question: “Which of them will love him more?”

Do any of us really love pawnbrokers, even if they forgive our debts? It is difficult to speak in terms of “love.” We may be surprised, uncertain, confused, shamed, moved, or grateful. But love? No way! The word “love” creates a different set of associations, above all our love for God. After all, Jesus’ audience spoke the “Hear, O Israel” from Deuteronomy 6 every day: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

With the word “love,” this parable is raised to another level. Now it is clear to everybody that the shady moneylender was really God, who—as Jesus’ dealings with sinners demonstrates—forgives all guilt, all debts. Just as the moneylender is suddenly no longer a moneylender, so before God human debts, human sins, are no longer debts, no longer sins, but opportunities for grace. For those who come to Jesus and believe the Gospel, all debt is forgiven.

Now, in Simon’s case, something happened along the way, the vitality of his “Good Zeal that separates from evil and leads to God” had grown stale. The fervent glow of his faith grown cold, his friendship with God had formalized, hardened into routine. Now that Simon had clamored up the rungs of acceptable society, he championed propriety among his peers, who might be quick to discriminate and “cold-shoulder” him if he were to give a fresh

⁴ Cf. Gerhard Lohfink, *The Forty Parables of Jesus* (Liturgical Press Academic, Collegeville, 2021), 73-74.

show of that youthful zeal. Simon measured his friendship with God by the standard of custom and law, which required upholding certain social standards, and sin and sinfulness is swept under the carpet.

As Jesus addresses Simon across the table, he gazes at the sinner at his feet, so filled with her desperate condition, corroded with contradiction, her only recourse was run and hide ... or turn herself in. So, she did. She found Jesus where she would expect to find him: in the homes of “decent” people, the sinners without overt flaws.

Gentle Listeners, Let’s not be too hard on righteous, dependable Simon, a pillar of the community. After all, Jesus, relaxing in his tidy, well-kept home, is his personal acquaintance. But neither was Jesus a stranger to the woman. She’d heard of him; perhaps she had once been close to him. But then she strayed, and because of the business of growing up, a hasty marriage and painful divorce, raising the kids, a demanding job, social pressure, the hypocrisy she perceived in organized religion, and pious people, this woman had distanced herself from “church” for a while.

Gentle Listeners, Consider the bipolar challenge in this gospel. Simon is that brittle part of me that invests in securities and appearances. The person at Jesus’ feet is that fresh, sensitive person in me ready to repent. Assess the two, one bolstered by the observance and propriety; the other, frank with her prayer and friendship with God. Assess these polar regions in the heart. How do you read yourself in this x-ray?

Once a person comes to know the self, he’s less likely to judge, more likely to tolerate the infirmities of body and behavior (RB 72.5) of the neighbor. He’s likely to treat others with the same patient tolerance and compassion that he received from God.

Luke has in mind his own community that undoubtedly included “Pharisees,” Christians, who looked askance at the new converts of a dubious past. The gospel also targets our community of the Pharisees as well as persons of a questionable past.

It often happens that persons who have gotten out of “dead-end streets” in life are apt to show greater compassion to their fellows. Their kindness is a grateful expression of the mercy they received. Whoever experiences forgiveness as freedom from the past is often capable of tolerating the sinful

neighbor. He doesn't distance himself from sinners because he's conscious of the unmerited pardon received. But it's not always so. Sometimes the mixture of conversion and forgetfulness breed a new form of Pharisaism.

Gentle Listener, conversion is a salient theme in Luke, from the Magnificat, the preaching of the Baptist, and throughout the gospel. Basically, conversion, *meta-noia*, has two faces. The radical conversion, like that of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, when one's thinking and attitude are fundamentally altered. One converts to a radical change in understanding life, that has its effects in day to day living. This sometimes happens at the beginning of our spiritual journey in life.

The other face of conversion is the Benedictine vow of lifelong process of *conversatio morum*, conversion woven into the warp and woof of the first, attending to the details, attitudinal and behavioral fine tuning, putting our lives in harmony with Christ and the symphony of the Paschal mystery.

What place does conversion have for me now in my life? In what ways am I called to conversion, a change of attitude, that is reflected in a change of behavior?

Let us prefer nothing to the Love of Christ. May God bring us all together to everlasting life.

Luke 10:38-42. Mary and Martha

³⁸ As they continued their journey, he entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister, Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to him. ⁴⁰ Martha, burdened with much servicing, approached him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me alone to serve? Tell her to help me." ⁴¹ The Lord replied to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. ⁴² There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

Observations:

- Martha welcomes Jesus; she is a "relative" of the benefactresses of Jesus and his disciples (8:1-3)
- Two sisters, Martha and Mary, live under the same roof
- Mary "at the feet" of Jesus: the repentant sinner (7:38); the former Gerasene demoniac (8:35); Jairus, the synagogue official (8:41); Mary, Martha's sister (10:39); an ex-Samaritan leper (17:16); proof of the resurrected body of Jesus (24:39-40); Saul-Paul describes his seminary formation in Jerusalem "sitting at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3).
- **διακονέω**, domestic and administrative activity (v. 40); also, **διακονία** of the word (Acts 6:4)
- Martha confidently and gently chides her guest
- Jesus says, "Martha, Martha", reminiscent of the repeated name in a person's address: "Abraham, Abraham" (Gen 22:1); "Moses, Moses" (Exod 3:4); "Samuel, Samuel" (1 Sam 3:4); "Daniel, Daniel" (en Theodocion, Dn 14,37); "Martha, Martha" (Lk 10:39); "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat" (Lc 22:31); "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4)—all critical interventions in the lives of the person addressed.

Along *the way*, after pronouncing the parable of the good Samaritan, attentive to the victim of an assault. *Jesus entered a village where Martha, attentive, like the Samaritan in the parable, or like the innkeeper, welcomed him into her house. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet and listened to him.*

One girl complains about her sister. Jesus might have answered, addressing each one, and us.

Martha, Martha, what is it about your sister that you don't get? You, your *diakonía* incarnate the gospel in the world. You build monasteries,

schools, hospitals, clinics; you offer catechesis, education, and raising the consciousness in favor of human rights and social justice. You manage health care centers, visit prisons, manage hospice and home health care. You write letters to major religious superiors and government officials. Martha, Martha, you advocate for human rights, recycling, and clean air and water. But you're not alone. Where do your resources come from? Where do you refuel the spent energy? Your dedication and service is exhausting, and you risk ending up cynical, sad, harsh, skeptical, and empty. Martha, Martha, once the house has been built and you receive Jesus as guest, do you sit and listen to him?"

Jesus turns to her sister: "Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow? You don't live alone. Your sister built and maintains the house, receives the guests and furnishes your life of prayer, reading, and study."

"You two complement each other, Martha's business and your study and listening. But for the believer in a noisy, often violent world, listening is the oasis where the weary soul is refreshed. Without listening and dialogue with Jesus, the foundation crumbles. Mary, you and your sister live together; you need her as much as she depends on you. Human development, civic projects, even charity organizations are not enough to infuse life with meaning and joy. A person also needs silence and friendship with Jesus, the way, the truth and the life."

Gentle Listeners, Luke is forming a Christian community. When we first meet these two gospel girls at home, the gap between them widens, but Martha needs Mary like a tree grows from the root to nourish and sustain it. Without the root, all Martha's activity and occupation is reduced to pure political, social, or domestic interest, devoid of kindness, without the color and taste of faith in God. How many persons do we know, lay or religious, dedicated to the needs and urgencies of the world around, who neglect the friendship with God and are bereft of self-awareness? Have they neglected their center, their deepest self? Do they know who they are, where they come from and where they're going? We forget that our sister Mary conspires with God to infuse meaning in our service. Without Mary, the believer risks reducing himself to a functionary, a monastic community risks becoming a more or less efficient social, political, or educational institution ... without Mary.

Gentle Listener, deep down, don't we sympathize with Martha? She offered her home to Jesus and was stranded with the details of *diakonía*, the

housekeeping and hospitality. Besides, we hear the poignant words, “Martha, Martha, many things perturb you, but really only one thing is necessary.” Poor Martha, slighted, her clear skies became overcast after the Lord’s little reprimand. After all, Miss Martha offered her best intentions, until her attentive love received the sting of her guest’s remark. Did he really mean that also she should sit at his feet and listen, so everybody would go hungry, and the home would become a disaster? ¿Do we idealize Mary too much?

Jesus also invites Martha and all those who suffer the demands of *diakonía* to contemplate the Word incarnate that lodges in her heart. Jesus could have said: “Martha, thank you for your warm hospitality, the delicious food and peaceful rest. But, Miss Martha, can we spend some time together, speaking and listening? You’re my best co-worker, Martha, but now, take a little rest, savor some *kairos* and be my friend; listen, while I renew your heart and remind you how much I love you. Then, go and serve.”

The Benedictine motto articulates this. It’s not simply “*ora*” nor only “*labora*.” Neither is it “*labora et ora*”; the motto puts *ora* in the anchor position. But the balance between prayer and service is a challenge for everybody. In the monastery, the first service every day is not to report for the daily assignments, but the liturgy: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” Rather than working morning till night, as if the world depended on us, we reserve spaces to enjoy the divine friendship, to thank God, to adore him and listen to his voice. The challenge is to find our niche as contemplatives in a revolving world, create space and a time (*kairos*) for God, listen to his voice, in order to infuse eternal value and love into so many activities that tug at our consciousness, impose on our agenda, sap our energy and distract our attention from the transcendent and eternal.

From a meditation on Jesus’ visit to Martha’s home, chart the assets and deficits of your prayer and service. Are you satisfied with your life choices? What can you change to live a better balance?

Let us prefer nothing to the Love of Christ // May God bring us all together to everlasting life.

Lk 15:11-3. Family Challenge: Strayed Son Returned ≠ His Elder Brother

Luke is forming a heterogeneous community of believers. The scribes and Pharisees complained about Jesus rubbing elbows with prostitutes and tax collectors, so he told them this parable.

A famine broke out in the country, and the strayed son got a job tending pigs; he got so hungry he wanted to eat the silage. For the Jew, taking care of pigs was rock bottom; the youth remembered the well-fed laborers in his father's house. Unhappily divorced from his family, he decided to return and prepared his speech. "Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I don't deserve to be called your son anymore. Take me back as a hired hand."

The sequel is the elder son in the field, that bears the memory of where Cain killed his younger brother, Abel; the field recalls Jacob his brother Esau who threatened to kill his crafty twin who had stolen his inheritance. The field is where Joseph's older brothers sold him to slave traders who in turn sold him in Egypt.

The elder son, coming in from the field, hears the music and dancing and, from one of the servants, learns of the welcome home in honor of his lost and found brother. His simmering resentment keeps him from attending. Refusing to listen to his old man, he explodes: "What's the use? That good-for-nothing son of yours wasted his inheritance that cost you so much work. I slaved for you all my life and you never even gave me a barbecue with my friends!"

His father replies: "Son, everything I have is yours. Your dead brother came back to life." The story ends with the elder son emotionally paralyzed by a grudge.

At the end of the day, the inheritance is not earned; it's an offer waiting for us to respond. The younger son accepted the invitation. By his refusal his elder brother divorced himself from the family. He didn't understand that the inheritance consists in the Father's love, free of charge. After the disaster of his personal projects to achieve happiness, one son returned home and received the father's love, any debt cancelled. The egocentric projects of his elder brother prevented him from happiness, and, thus, he wasted his inheritance in a more dreadful way than his younger brother ever did. Is this parable an example of the rift between Simon the Pharisee and the repentant

sinner at Jesus' feet? Does it resonate with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus at his door?

This parable baffles the prevailing scale of values. The law-abiding Pharisees were convinced they were God's favorites. The parable lays the cards of our feelings and attitudes on the table. Our birthright is the infinite goodness of a loving Father who loves both sons, each one having abused the inheritance in his own way. The father waits for each son to take his part in the family. As long as somebody remains outside, the family is incomplete.

Luke 15:25-32

¹¹ Jesus said, "A man had two sons, ¹² and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. ¹³ After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. ¹⁴ When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. ¹⁵ So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. ¹⁶ And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. ¹⁷ Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. ¹⁸ I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.'" ²⁰ So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' ²² But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

²⁵ Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. ²⁷ The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ He became angry, and when he refused ²⁸ to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ He replied to his father, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. ³⁰ But when that son of yours returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' ³¹ He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. ³² But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'" (≈NAB)

Observations

- v. 11, a single father, with 2 children; absent mother
- v. 12, the younger addresses the father, “Father”; requested a pre-death distribution of the inheritance
- v. 13, he left for a faraway country, and his life went from bad to worse
- v. 14, extreme famine; in the Joseph story (Genesis) famine motivated the reunion of the family in Egypt
- v. 15, he worked on a pig farm (pigs, repeated), which illustrates how far removed he was from the family
- v. 16, starving, he craved pig fodder; nobody gave him anything: he had achieved an independent but empty life
- v. 17, “he came into himself” (lit., “coming to himself”) ... “my father”
- v. 18, “I will rise” (again, v. 20): “my father...”, “Father”
- v. 19, I don’t deserve to be called your son
- v. 20, “he rose” (cf. v. 18)
- v. 21, “Father... I do not deserve to be called your son”
- v. 22, change of dress = change of dignity; the ring and sandals, restored to full membership in the family
- v. 23, fatted calf (vv. 23.27.30); earlier he wanted to eat the pig silage; the contrast with the elder son’s compliant about never receiving even a goat to celebrate with
- v. 24, the father says, “my son”, once dead, now resurrected (v. 32)
- v. 25, his eldest son... in the field (like Cain or Esau, or the Joseph’s older brothers)
- v. 26, the elder son identifies more with the servants
- v. 27, a servant sows discontent in his report, “your brother... your father”
- v. 28, the father came out, and his elder son refused to enter
- v. 29, he replied to his father, “I slaved for you” and complains about the barbecue he never got with his friends
- v. 30, “that son of yours” devoured your goods with prostitutes. Until now nothing had been reported about how he squandered his inheritance; his retort is a projection of his frustrated passions (cf. v. 13)
- v. 31, father addresses his resentful son: “Son, you are always with me”
- v. 32, Your brother ... dead and resurrected ... lost and found (cf. v. 24)

Reflection

The parables are designed to catch the listener’s attention and invite us to reflect. Each parable moves its listeners in different ways. Here, both the older son and his brother ask the reader: “Who am I? Do I identify more with the older son or with the younger? Or maybe both? Where does the eldest and the youngest son find a place in my life? The evangelist is intent on forming a community of believers.

The theme of the family of two sons places in relief the polarity in the heart, just as Martha and Mary complement each other in life, or the pious Pharisee and publican contrast two attitudes in prayer. In our heart dwells the younger son, who would like to roam free from law and responsibility; there, also, dwells the elder son, who is enslaved by a rigid sense of duty. The evangelist reflects how both inclinations inhabit our interior. In what way do I divorce myself from home and family? By wandering free in faraway places, or by being such a stickler to duty that love has grown cold? The parable invites us to return to the Father and be welcomed home.

Jesus narrates the parable of the “prodigal family” in the presence of scribes and Pharisees, scandalized because he ate with sinners (15,2). Jesus tells us not only about who God is or how a person can be brought to conversion and salvation, but how he himself acts. He dines with sinners and makes the Father’s mercy patent here and now. Jesus descended from heaven to unveil the face of the Father who has compassion on people who have lost their way, lost their very selves, who are interiorly dead and have become strangers to themselves. By eating and drinking with outsiders, Jesus presents a lively drama of the merciful God.

What Jesus does by eating with sinners occurs in the Eucharist. In this celebration God offers a banquet, and we, who had been dead and have returned to life, who had been lost and found, rejoice in our holy communion with Christ. He calls the dead to a new life, taps the life that flows in the interior of the person. Jesus seeks out lost and missing persons. With his parables, Jesus kindles the hope of people who have reached the end of their rope, those labeled as beyond recovery. For such people, too, conversion is possible. There’s no reason to despair. Even when we go on a fling, abandon ourselves to craziness, and end up eating pig food, the possibility remains of a return to the Father’s home, where we will be in communion with God as his children.

The second half of the parable turns to tragedy. The elder son is resentful and doesn’t join the party.

Each of the actors is characterized by his feeling and passion. The younger son wakes up, smells the bacon, and recovers his lost “self”; the father overflows with compassion; the elder son stays angry. Like the Pharisees, he has made every effort to fulfill God’s law and comply with his obligation, but he finds no joy in his dutiful life. We might identify with the elder son. We, too, can live to fulfill our commitments and obligations, do God’s will, but joyless, bothered by other people who don’t behave right. Such an attitude shows that our motivation is not pure, we derive little joy in what we do or who we are.

The unconscious motives that kept the elder son home made him resentful to the point of anger; his response to his father is poignant. “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any of your orders, yet you never even offered me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. But, for that son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your

property –he and his loose women– you kill the fatted calf” (15:29-30). True, the dutiful son had fulfilled the father’s will, but out of ulterior motives. He wanted recognition, some reward. He secretly hoped the father would distinguish him for staying home like a “good boy.”

Beneath the façade of the elder brother’s decency, one senses repressed sexual fantasies. In the chronicle of the younger son’s wasteful life, it was never reported that he squandered his money on prostitutes. This idea was spawned in his stay-at-home brother’s projection. In the elder brother, Luke describes our shadow side that tries to hide under a pious façade.

The father tenderly addresses the elder son, “*My son*, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because *your brother* here was dead and has come to life, he was lost and is found” (15:31-32). Dad tries to convince his son that the one he refers to as “that son of yours” is also “your brother.” That the strayed sheep has been found, that the dead has been raised to life, is reason enough to celebrate.

Elder Son

For a time, one son is driven by his impulses, leaves his father’s house, but then returns. The stay-at-home son distances himself on principle and in the end is outside the family circle, pondering the barbecue with his friends that never happened. He clings to his complaint. In the end, the one who never left home finds himself outside the family circle. If there is tenderness, and generosity in the home, it does not convince the son who withdraws into his repressed, resentful self, because in that house, according to the reports of a servant, he will find not only a prodigal brother whom he can’t tolerate but, above all, a father prodigal in his mercy. The elder son who complains, “That son of yours who devoured your goods with a scandalous life,” won’t tolerate a father who pardons the reprobate and welcomes him home. How to live in a house where the heart rules more than order and discipline, where mercy surpasses a person’s sense of justice? How to tolerate a family circle where the sinner receives forgiveness without reproach?

The elder son doesn't realize that, in a sense, he too must return, change his attitude, yes, and be forgiven his unfailing observance, the petty moralism, the pretense of the exemplary son. In a sense, this parable illustrates the breakdown of human logic, and moves us to "theo-logic": the refusal to accept my brother is equivalent to rejecting "Our" Father.

It's striking that the "prodigal son" calls him "father" repeatedly and with feeling and devotion, while the elder son neither pronounces "father" nor "my brother". He divorces the family, he stays outside in the field, like Cain in Genesis, who killed his brother.

The elder son misses something essential. What's the use of obedience without joy? (To calculate how far he strayed, listen to the complaint of the heir to his father's estate: he gripes about a miserable kid goat.) How to forgive the joy over his brother's return, how to forgive his father's forgiveness? That son who refused to enter the home that received his brother was proud of not getting lost, not "going away" like his prodigal brother, but the irony is that he became a slave of his sense of justice. I wonder if his brother was referring to him when he mused, "How many of my father's workers have more than enough to eat, while here I am starving!"

The father pleads with his righteous son: "Son, you are always with me; Everything that is mine is yours". Is this what scares him, making his father's heart his own, his love beyond his sense of justice? If it were a matter of measuring justice, the elder son is an expert. But here it's not a question of judging, but rather of being "prodigal", of opening and emptying, that is, of loving without limits. So, one son, who despises his birthright to such a father, remains outside the family circle.

Gentle Listeners, we learn something from the tragedy of the elder son: a refusal to recognize the brother is a rejection of the Our Father, and that simple refusal dismantles the family home. The eldest son did not forgive the father prodigal for his love and tolerance; and without his forgiveness, the family remains incomplete, without remedy. What does Saint Benedict teach us? "Let them tolerate with the utmost patience one another's infirmities, whether of body or character" (RB 72).

What does Jesus teach us who pretend to live in community and form a Church? One lesson reveals the true face of God, disfigured by the weight of the law and the rigor of human judgment. What is God like? How do we, created in his image and likeness, present ourselves before him? God is not a despot who limits human freedom and denies well-being. And if the son leaves the family home, he need not hesitate to return; he will always be received with the gracious Father's open arms. Do we forgiven sinners expect less? To what extent do we consent to inherit our gracious Father's merciful heart?

In the parable, a son, far from home, got hungry, and longed to eat the pig food. When he returns, they kill the fat calf and celebrate a Eucharistic feast. The one starving, returned, and was restored. The irony is that the other son wanted his brother dead, or at least punished, and he preferred to fast –he had never even asked for a barbecue with his friends– and he chooses, for a time, to remain outside the family circle.

Read this parable and reflect how it might express your own choices in life, your demands, and sentiments. Each son reveals what might be hidden in the soul, and each sheds light on the merciful Father. We can identify with the father, the elder son or the younger, the careless or the correct son, the stray or the conformist. Each son in his own way was dead and lost: one to his impulsive illusions, the other to a correct life truncated by fear and judgments. The merciful father invites us to a eucharistic feast. Jesus invites us to find joy in a community of brothers, all sons of a Father, prodigal in mercy and love.

From a look in the mirror, we ask ourselves, who am I? In what ways do I identify more with the elder son? With the younger? Where does the elder son find a home in my heart? And the younger? What steps can I take toward reconciliation?

Luke 16:19-31, Lazarus ≠ Rich Man

¹⁹ There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. ²⁰ And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs used to come and lick his sores. ²² When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ He cried out, “Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.” ²⁵ Abraham replied, “My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. ²⁶ Between us and you a great chasm prevents anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.” ²⁷ He said, “Then I beg you, Father, send him to my father's house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers, so he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.” ²⁹ But Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.” ³⁰ He said, “Oh no, Father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” ³¹ Abraham replied, “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.” (≈ NAB)

Observations

- anonymous wealthy person ≠ poor Lazarus, “whom God helps”
- dressed in purple garments and fine linen ≠ covered with sores
- table ≠ door
- dined sumptuously each day ≠ would gladly have eaten scraps
- “Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue” ≠ Dogs used to come and lick his sores
- The rich man died and was buried ≠ the poor man died, was carried away by angels to Abraham's bosom
- Abraham afar off; the netherworld, in torment (vv. 23 y 25) ≠ the bosom of Abraham (consoled) (vv. 22 y 25)
- he raised his eyes and saw Lazarus at Abraham's side (v. 23) ≠ “lying at his door” (v. 20)
- “you received good during your lifetime” ≠ Lazarus received bad
- Conversation between Father Abraham and his “child” ≠ Lazarus silent
- a great chasm prevents anyone from crossing ... from side to the other

Luke aims to form a community and he urges his audience to form a community consciousness. The parable presents opposite poles, the anonymous magnate and poor Lazarus: an opulent, gluttonous life in contrast to Lazarus' hungry and vulnerable life. They lived side by side – “lying at his door”; after death, irreparably separated; the enormous chasm mirrors the vast separation of neighbors during their earthly sojourn. The parable projects the solace of the suffering compared to the tragedy of those possessed by their wealth, disparity accentuated by the eternal grief of a magnate who had gorged himself at his table and the comfort of Lazarus at his door who suffered privation. Abraham's response to the wealthy man doesn't express a judgment; it simply points out an inversion of roles: “My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented” (v. 25). Three times the wealthy damned addresses “Father Abraham.”

Jesus illustrates how people relate to each other in the present life and how our temporal relations are the measure of our eternal friendship with God. It's not poor Lazarus “at the door” who was divorced from humanity and from God; it's the person wrapped up in his/her comfort zone that results in a separation that can't be bridged. The walls and gates of hell are not the obstacle; rather, it's the gulf we allow to grow and separate us from our neighbor in the present. The person who inadvertently chooses such a separation digs a deep, wide moat that insulates him forever.

Why did such a person let this happen? The wealthy man hadn't stolen, killed, cheated, committed adultery, or gotten involved in organized crime or politics. His sin was of omission: the blindness that resulted in his divorce from his neighbor. By his oversight or disinterest, it never even dawned on him that he had a poor neighbor at the door. He isolated himself from the human reality around him.

Jesus describes a person who has more than enough resources and, for that reason, neither needs, depends on, nor preoccupies himself with other people. He simply doesn't *see* anyone else in the photo; he only recognized his neighbor when it was too late. Finally, in his isolation, the self-centered

person longed for a trifle of attention, just to lick the moist finger of Lazarus whose sores previously had been licked by dogs, but the distance between the two was unbridgeable. During their lifetime they lived side by side and the gap could have been spanned, but the wealthy man bottled in himself made the distance insurmountable. His habit of ignorance and blindness made the chasm unbridgeable.

We live in an age that fosters fractured relationships. The ease of cybernetics, for all its commodity, can cheapen intimacy and friendship. Now with the trend for families smaller in number, with people coming to our seminaries, communities, and institutions who are an only child or one of a few, we face the challenge to educate ourselves to the presence of a neighbor and to wake up to the privilege and responsibility of being neighborly. Even with regard for our elders, the trend is to warehouse them in residences, or occupy them on Caribbean cruises, where they are isolated from family, from their grandchildren and the common life. Our care centers may be “state of the art” facilities, but they threaten to isolate our infirmed and elder family members.

How many persons entrap themselves in self-isolation! People can organize gatherings and banquets and die from loneliness. People may accustom themselves to the power and prestige that accompanies their talents and have no awareness of their neighbor who, in biblical anthropology, is their other side, their other half. In a poignant description of the creation of the human person, the Genesis theologian describes the human as essentially alone, surrounded by the animal world, mascots, none of whom is like unto himself; finally, God induced in man a deep sleep, a kind of mystical slumber, during which the divine physician removed the “side” the “coast” (translated in English “rib”), and formed a complement to the one who had undergone the surgery. In the beginning we are presented as essentially side by side; something happens when we sin and find ourselves no longer side by side but face to face, yet patently distant from each another. In sin we lose our awareness of our other side. In the Benedictine life, we are constantly challenged to recognize our other side; every single confrere is in some way a “side” of me; sometimes so malformed I prefer not to see and recognize it.

Benedictine life, which in essence is “cenobitic,” –the etymology of the composite term is “common” and “life”, speaks for itself. Does that suggest that the “original sin” of the Benedictine is the denial or unconsciousness of his life in community, the failure to recognize the needy person at our door?

What does Jesus’ teaching have to do with us? We’ve been endowed with gifts and blessings. To what purpose? To whose advantage? Our sharing, our liturgy, our co-operation of “co-laboration” –working together–, our good humor and compassion testify to a faith that, yes, we live in community with a neighbor who awaits our recognition now, before it’s too late.

The parable shows how we tend to make distinctions among ourselves, or we close our eyes to our human reality at our side. Jesus doesn’t exclude anyone from an eternal friendship. Rather, it’s the self-sufficient or self-centered person who excludes him or herself, excommunicates herself. His projects, occupations, diversions, and preferences are so appealing that he doesn’t even open his eyes to the person at his side. And the resulting exclusion or ignorance is not based on economic disparity between the two. Any one of us can end up happily aware or sadly unconscious of the persons around us and their needs.

The parable of the wealthy, nameless magnate and poor Lazarus at his door underlines the enormous ditch that opens between the self-centered person and the poor who lived “at the door” and “longed for scraps.” As time goes on, this ditch becomes an immense chasm that no one can cross. When the wealthy man finally woke up, it was too late. His choices had been made; his cards had all been played. His neighbor could have been his salvation, had he paid attention to him before.

This is the only parable where the star actor has a proper name, which makes me wonder about the intention: “lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores.” The magnate is anonymous; the homeless person has a name. It’s curious that Jesus didn’t pronounce the famous name that ran from mouth to mouth, and instead endowed the invisible vagrant with a name and a person, and communion in the bosom of Father Abraham. What does the name “Lazarus” mean, but “God helps”? Is this to

say that God takes the side of the marginal and ignored, becomes their protector and advocate? In the end, according to the parable, the privilege and disadvantage of the two actors is reversed. In society, the well-off is “Mr. Somebody,” who fashions himself as a person apart, for whom the “nobodies” have no value and mean nothing; he doesn’t even see them at his door. Might this condition end in incurable blindness?

The tragedy is that the wealthy, dressed in fine linen and dining sumptuously daily, only awoke when it is too late. When he finally becomes aware that he needs Lazarus and pleads with his Father Abraham, he no longer has an option. By isolating himself, cataracts grew over his eyeballs, that impeded him from acknowledging others, asking for help, and sharing himself and his talents. Once again, Luke is interested in forming a sense of community among the diverse elements of his church.

You are Lazarus; how have you been hurt and ignored, isolated, and kept at a distance? How do you respond to the people in your neighborhood? What have you learned from your experience?

You are the wealthy subject. Who at your door would you rather not see and accept as agent for your eternal benefit? To what person at your door do you choose not to see?

Luke 16:1-13. “Children of This World” ≠ “Children of the Light” (the Forgiving Administrator)

¹ Then he also said to his disciples, “A rich man had a manager who was reported to him for squandering his property. ² He summoned him and said, ‘What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your administration because you can no longer be my manager.’ ³ The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now that my employer is removing me from my position as manager? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from office, they may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ He called in his employer’s debtors one by one. To the first he said, ‘How much do you owe my employer?’ ⁶ He replied, ‘One hundred measures of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.’ ⁷ To another he said, ‘And you, how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘One hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.’

⁸ The employer commended that dishonest manager for acting prudently⁵. “For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

⁹ I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰ The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. ¹¹ If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? ¹² If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours?

¹³ No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (≈ NAB)

Observations

- v. 1, the identity of the wealthy man. For Luke, the wealthy are those who accumulate fortune and material goods only for themselves, with no concern for others; their sole interest is the present life (cf. 12,13-21)
- v. 1, squandering property is the sequence of the prodigal son (chapter 15)
- v. 5, the forgiveness of debts, one by one
- v. 8, Who are the “children of this world” and who are the “children of the light”?
- v. 8, In what does the “prudence” (Greek **φρόνιμος**), consist, but astuteness in an awkward situation? Jesus does not condone dishonesty
- v. 8, the disciples of Jesus should be cunning in ensuring the true, lasting wealth

⁵ The manager is commended for his cleverness or adroitness (Greek **φρόνιμος**) in an awkward situation.

- v. 9, What is the “dishonest wealth” that the owner refers to?
- v. 10, Contrast of opposites: dishonest in small and great wealth ≠ trustworthy in small and great matters
- v. 11, not trustworthy with honest wealth > not entrusted with true wealth
- v. 12, not trustworthy with somebody else’s goods results in the lack of personal goods
- v. 13, one servant, two masters –hate and love– God and money
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The parable of the shrewd manager is designed to confuse and wake up the listener. A business manager cheats his company, embezzles huge sums of money, gets caught in the audit and, just before he is fired from his white-collar job, he reissues the invoices of the debtors and expects their favor now that he is unemployed. Has he assumed their debts, cancelled his own commission or, by his finagling, defrauded the company? Who would hire such a rogue, knowing he is guilty of fraud? Jesus presents the scoundrel as doubly crafty and to our surprise his employer applauds the “prudence” in his double-dealing (v. 8: “the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light”). With this parable, Jesus challenges our supposed comfort zone and piety. The cleverness of criminal behavior in the present, passing world puts the relaxed interest in matters of eternal life to shame.

Jesus poses this parable as an example of how shrewdly we need to plot in matters related to the Reign of God. He counsels us to be swindlers for God’s Reign, to embezzle and fudge and use other people’s debts to our own advantage. He urges us who manage property that doesn’t belong to us to be astute, to marshal our “prudence” to gain eternal life; thus employs the images of lying, stealth, embezzlement, and bribery, behavior that his audience would have been familiar with.

Jesus’ last comment is totally unexpected: “The employer congratulated that dishonest steward for acting prudently” (v. 8). The scoundrel did everything possible to ensure his future, and this surprise ending invites our reflection. And he declares with flourish: “The children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (v. 8).

A lesson? Jesus presents the clever, dishonest manager as the model of a strategist (cf. v. 8). He connived to profit from and make the best of every situation. He abused the employer's confidence and his office to embezzle and steal. Once he was laid off, he worked the system to land on his feet. While he was still a manager, lowering the commission would have compromised his gains in the business deals. Just as he is being laid off the rascal takes advantage of his office one last time to gain "friends" and profit from his loss. From this scandalous example, Jesus teaches about underhanded dealings with regard to eternal life; he urges us to ply all our effort and "prudence" to get what we most want. Isn't that what the woman at Jesus' feet did? Didn't the thief on the cross do the same?

Why are people who are ensconced in secular society more capable in their dealings than persons who hold citizenship in the reign of God? Experts in the business world know how to profit from every angle. They visualize the gains to their investments. So why are we, "children of the light," less capable in our business dealings? Is it because the gains are long-term, and for the time being we defer our investments and relax our efforts? But how much time do we have? St. Benedict urges us, just as the evangelist is urging his community, "Hurry to do now what will be to your profit for all eternity" (RB prol.44).

To what riches does Jesus refer to when he says, "Make friends ... with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings"? (v. 9). He isn't interested in money or material things. How many listeners of the good news don't have the slush fund to guarantee their own future? Jesus refers to what is of eternal value –health, faith, hope, charity, strength of character, intelligence, and the most precious item in our safe deposit box, at times difficult to access, pardon. All these are riches or, better said, goods that we can dispose of and invest to our own advantage and advancement in God's Reign.

It's possible to ingratiate ourselves to Christ by our kindness, generosity, the gifts of our time, compassion, and patience. But if we don't forgive, how will we approach our Father's Reign, where the inventory is

counted in terms of generosity, pardon, and mercy. And it's a sad fact that a person who refuses to forgive, will only with difficulty tolerate God's forgiveness.

How often in business dealings with others do we demand that someone pay and pay until the last drop of shame has been paid from a slight, an offense, an insult, an infidelity, or an indiscretion! We stick to the principle that he must pay up to the last penny! And even when we manage to forgive him, we don't forget the offense, and that means, ultimately, that we haven't pardoned sincerely, and somebody will have to go on paying.

This payback system doesn't happen just with persons who trespass against us. What about forgiving yourself? Surely, you've done something you're ashamed of. So, what! Welcome to the human race! Why beat yourself up over it? Like a perverted, vicious little god, you make yourself pay and pay, and you won't forgive and let go. God does. How much of our mental, emotional, and physical illness is tangled up with not forgiving and not relinquishing our shame and pain?

One thing is to forgive. Another is to want to forgive. But what about when we neither forgive nor want to? That's when we pray fervently to the Father of forgiveness to give us the desire to want to forgive... enemies, friends, family, parents, confreres, our Church, our very selves.

Gentle Listeners, Jesus said, "The *children of this world* are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the *children of the light*" (v. 8). This is preceded by the ending of the parable, "The master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently" (v. 8). In saying this, does Jesus condone double-dealing, fraud, and swindling of those who manage money and make a profit with impunity? No. Jesus counsels that it's to our best advantage to manage our debts prudently, forgive our debtors, as the heavenly Father has forgiven us.

St. Benedict (RB 4,. -26) reminds us in the chapter on the instruments of good works, "The Love of Christ must come before all else. You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow

greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love.” All the tools in the workshop are to be used to advance in the Reign of God; we employ the tools so we might find friends, advocates, and support after our dismissal from the present life.

When we hear this parable, we observe that dreadful manager cheats his employer. All the actors in the parable, except the employer, are in debt. Some owe huge debts of wheat and oil, so the manager uses his position to ease people’s debts. The question that comes to mind is, how can we live with our debt? Can we learn from it, take advantage of it, or does it strangle you? Left to our own resources, we can’t free ourselves completely from our debt. One alternative is, punish and push ourselves to do something beyond our capabilities, as the manager proposed in his monologue: “What shall I do now that my master is terminating my employment? I’m not strong enough to dig and I’m too ashamed to beg” (v. 3). Both alternatives are a dead-end street.

The manager devises a third alternative. Rather than slaving to pay off the debt, rather than demeaning myself to the point of begging, he forges relations with fellow debtors. He does the unexpected: forgives the debtors of the company, in the hopes of being received in their lives and homes. He invests from his liability. The moral is evident: we should not separate ourselves from others; rather, forgive the debts we owe one another and receive each other in our homes, for we are all in debt to the same master.

The reversal of roles in the parable catches our attention: an administrator, moving enormous sums of money and taking decisions that affect lives, becomes “poor”, gives up his commission and his profit by pardoning the debtors. Acting thus, he gets a new source of income. True wealth is not what a person accumulates or hoards for oneself; it consists in what we give away. The moral of the parable: dispense mercy freely, pardon the offenses of others and be received into the eternal house.

Jesus counsels us to profit from our debt with God. He shows how we can live together with the inevitable debt, without losing our dignity. The key is pardon and mercy. Every day we pray: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who

trespass against us.” We’re hypocrites if we don’t forgive – or at least have the intention and make the effort – to forgive each other.

In the end, who are we, but managers of the goods of our divine patron? All we have comes from God, belongs to God, and has been loaned to us for temporal administration. What goods has God commended to us? St. Benedict prescribes that the abbot and superiors must give an account of their service (RB⁶). Including our families, our confreres, our community are loaned to us for our administration. There is no man or woman who has not cheated someone at least once in life, who isn’t in need of forgiveness. So, let us offer each other the forgiveness we expect for ourselves, so God may receive us in his house and in our eternal home.

Parable

There once was a business person, wealthy beyond belief. He kept his treasure in a warehouse –gold coins, crystal goblets, strings of pearls, diamonds and emeralds, and iron chests filled with rich linens and silver plates, precious art objects, and rare books. He had to absent himself for a time, so he gave one key to his trusted administrator with instructions to use what was in the storehouse just for emergencies. The duplicate key he kept in his own pocket.

So what happened was emergency after emergency. Almost every day in the owner’s absence, the administrator would open the storehouse and take what was needed—a pearl for the hungry, a gold coin to the family whose crops had failed. One after another, need after need. The administrator gave and gave and kept giving. Finally, one day a woman approached him for money to buy medicine for her sick baby. He inserted the key into the lock, entered the warehouse, only to find it empty. Concerned that the lady would go away with nothing, he shut

⁶ “Whatever the number of brothers he has in his care, let him realize that on judgment day he will surely have to submit a reckoning to the Lord for all their souls – and indeed for his own as well” (RB 2,38; cf. 2,7-8; 64,7 – an echo of the present passage).

and locked the door and offered her the key. She took it gratefully and changed it for medicine and food. Thus, the administrator awaited the owner's return.

Several days later he did return and, on the way to the warehouse the administrator tried to explain. There was this difficulty... and that emergency... The owner fit his key into the lock, opened the door, and found the storehouse brimming with treasure. The administrator could hardly contain his amazement. "The 'key' is," the owner said, "give it all away."

That's essentially what Jesus did. He emptied himself of all this divine wealth, gave everything away, so we might have life in abundance. Jesus knows the relative value of things. On one occasion he estimated that two apparently insignificant coins of a poor widow were worth more than all the publicized donations of wealthy donors (Lk 21:1-4). With sadness he saw that the attachments in the present life impeded a wealthy official to follow him freely (Lk 18:18-23). At the end of his life, Jesus was sold for a price (Lk 22:5), a victim of a disciple's greed, a measly thirty silver pieces!

Once upon a time a monk had more wealth than you can imagine –health, faith, hope, patience, charity, intelligence, and mercy –all kept under lock and key in the warehouse of his heart. With emergency after emergency, every day the monk took from his treasury to respond to the needy. He gave freely, without thinking about himself and his own needs, without keeping something left over for his own use. And always, when the monk gave of his wealth, he found it doubled in value in what neither thieves can break in and steal nor moths and rust can corrode: the inexhaustible wealth of eternal life. The key is, give it all away, and thus invest your talents for eternal life.

The evangelist addresses a comfortable community in the city, and he preaches the gospel in language that his community would understand. The

evangelist, in the teaching of Jesus, is aware of the challenges that wealth and comfort can pose to living the gospel.

The opposites in the parable are the bright “children of this world” and the “children of the light”. How do we use our resources to gain friends who, when we are dismissed from the present life, will receive us in an eternal mansion? How can we, “children of the light”, operate prudently to gain life eternal?

St. Benedict counsels us: “Run now and do what will be of profit for all eternity” (RB prol.44).

Three Hairpin, Switchback Curves

On a steep road up a mountain to Happiness, the goal of many pilgrims, the road is narrow, rough, and heavily travelled, with cars, pickups, busses, motorcycles, and trailers. Where the road isn't paved, there's gravel, and the potholes and bumps cause accidents; stretches of road are under construction. In the ascent, a person can never accurately calculate the time of arrival. When was little, I was impressed with the tight curves in the road, the poor visibility, and when I looked down the cliff on my side of the car, I could see at the bottom of the gorge or cliff the vehicles that had veered off the road and had crashed tragically on the rocks below—metal, plastic, and glass cadavers piled up, now immobile in their frustrated ascent. How many travelers had left home in hopes of arriving to the peak, and, due to a mishap or wrong turn, never arrived at their destiny?

In this road there are three extremely dangerous, switchback curves. About 5 miles up the road, the hairpin is named “Forgive God”; at the tenth mile, the curve is “Forgive Your Neighbor”; and another 10 miles farther, a particularly treacherous curve is known as “Forgive Your Self.” These perilous curves are where tragic accidents happen in this road to Happiness.

On milestone 5... what is the curve called? There we must negotiate things difficult to face in the big picture of life: terrorism, global warming, nuclear armament, drug trafficking, poverty, earthquakes, child abuse, and

random violence—scourges on a massive scale that don't require our forgiveness, but they cause us to wonder about why so much useless destruction and anguish in a world created by a good God. The answers to such questions are beyond comprehension, but they have a lot to do with our relationship with God. Also, turning into oneself, this is the curve where the traveler asks God: "Who am I and why am I the way I am? Why is my Self such a contradiction at times, why can't I accomplish the things I need to? Why is my body the way it is, my feelings so volatile, my intelligence so scattered, my hips, my belly, my skin, my childhood, my adolescence, and my family—why is this who I am? Questions like these touch the question of God in my life, God who permitted or designed this odd collage of details in my personal growth and development. This curve, requiring a motorist to pay close attention to the road ahead, is called Forgive God.

At mile number 10 in the road... what is the curve called? Forgive Your Neighbor is a lot like Forgive God, but it still requires expert driving skills. Approaching this 180-degree curve, we need to slow down and ask, with Peter in the gospel, "How many times do I have to forgive my offender?" to which Jesus answers, "Every time, totally, and from your heart." Crimeny! How can that be? It's as if Jesus put up a warning: Danger! Don't apply the brakes on your pardon, or the results may turn out fatal!

Some people think that to refrain from forgiving others who hurt us doesn't contradict Christian love. Such a posture has no gospel basis. At times, the memory of some evil suffered goes back to early childhood—it's not rare for children to suffer hurt—and sometimes terribly—by their parents or other persons. Child abuse leaves deep scars that open time and again during life, and here, too, the grace of pardon must be applied. Every single human I know has suffered some unfairness or some failure in life, even in "good Catholic families." I'm not referring to the carelessness, the weakness, and the stepping-on-toes that is our daily bread. I mean heartless aggression where people are victims. One response to a personal assault is to freeze the forgiveness, play the victim role, particularly when we feel humiliated or threatened. But beware of the danger housed in the heart

where we treasure the unforgiveable like a dog hoards a bone. This is a serious error, to convince ourselves that holding on to resentment is not a sin. Yes, it is sin, and it can even swell to be a serious fault. If it's not attended to, it grows like a cancer and the metastasis invades our whole being.

When we were young, we probably didn't experience the effects of our lack of forgiveness; we were more flexible, and forgiveness was part of the program of our growth. But with the hard knocks of experience, that strongbox of bitterness and resentment becomes more stubborn, and it affects all our life—how we respond to other persons, how we talk and think. If we don't apply the brakes, we may lose control, careen off the narrow shoulder of the road, and plunge to our death.

How terrible this curve, Forgive Your Neighbor, and pardon the faults that can never be justified. If we don't forgive, when we pray the Our Father, our lips might just burn like coals when we pronounce the words, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Applying the brakes to forgiveness makes us incapable of negotiating this hairpin curve. (If you feel helpless in this area of pardon, ask our loving God for the desire and the gift to be able to forgive. And remember always, forgiveness can't be reduced to how you or I feel about certain unpardonable faults done to us. Forgiveness is not a matter of feelings; it's a grace that conspires with our desire and intelligence.)

A third switchback curve on this ascent to Happiness is at mile number 20... What is it called? [Forgive Your Self] Perhaps we're more capable of forgiving God and our nasty neighbor than we're able to forgive ourselves. There's a noxious weed in the heart that sinks its roots in the original sin: the subtle consciousness that we are infected with evil, that we are somehow unworthy of real love, that we're unable to free us from ourselves. This sensitive area requires careful understanding, compassion, and patience—in a word, it requires a person to forgive him or herself.

When I hear the comment, "So-and-so is very demanding with herself but she's very patient with other people" —the truth be told, I don't believe

my ears. Mercy and compassion is all or nothing. If a person despises herself, she will despise others. Perhaps we have all heard the sigh of a companion or friend, "I just don't think I can ever forgive myself for that!" Well, gentle friends, such a statement is simply anti-Christian. We'd best apply the brakes as we approach this treacherous curve, hold firmly to the steering wheel, if we want to get to Happiness. If not, the lack of acceptance of our faults and weaknesses can steer us into a terrible accident. Oh, nobody denies that we are at times mean, tentative, clumsy, forgetful, incoherent, and we sin, but God's grace never abandons us; our faults are pardoned because we are—each one of us—infinately loved. So why do we have such a hard time forgiving ourselves?

Gentle Listener, The lack of forgiving God is not unheard of in the human experience. Holding back on forgiving our neighbor is more common. But the lack of forgiveness of oneself is the riskiest obstacle in our path to Happiness.

Now finally, after getting through the three hairpin curves on this ascent, we arrive at a toll booth, the entrance into Happiness. There's only one lane of traffic, and so many vehicles that—just what we want to avoid—there's a terrible delay. Typical me! I become impatient, because the vehicle ahead just can't seem to keep going, the motor dies and the driver keeps having to rev it up again; slowly he advances toward the toll booth.—too slowly. So I apply my pressure techniques. I flick on and off my headlights, I honk the horn, just a little at first, but then with more nerve. I ride his bumper. Then, after a long while, I get to the toll booth. At last, with the bill in my hand, I'll pay the fee and enter Happiness! The jalopy ahead pulls out, and I drive up. The attendant, Simon Peter, greets me, and refuses the bill in my hand, and says, "That's all right, go right on through!" and, to my great surprise, he informs me, "The driver of the car ahead paid the entrance fee for you." "But, who is that person?" I asked, to which he responded, "The one in that junk heap up ahead. You know something? He's the architect and engineer of this road, and his name is Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth."

Homegame

*Take the highway of the three hairpin curves to Happiness.
Take note of the dangers, the risks, the details and the delays that
make the ascent more difficult in each one of the curves.*

Let us prefer nothing to the Love of Christ.

May God bring us all together everlasting life.

Luke 19:1-10. Zacchaeus, Before and After

Context in the Gospel

- 18:1-8. Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Judge
- 18:9-14. Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled...”)
- 18:15-17. Saying on Children and the Kingdom
- 18:18-23. The Rich Official ... who became sad
- 18:24-30. On Riches and Renunciation (camel and the needle’s eye)
- 18:31-34. Third Prediction of the Passion
- 18:35-43. Healing of the Blind Beggar, received sight and followed
- **19:1-10. Zacchaeus the Tax Collector**
- 19:11-27. Parable of the Investment of Gold Coins
- 19:28-40. Entry into Jerusalem

¹ He entered Jericho and passed through the town. ² Now a man there named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector and a wealthy man, ³ was **seeking** to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. ⁵ When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” ⁶ So he came down quickly and received him with joy. ⁷ When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to stay at a sinner’s house.” ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man has come to **seek** and to save what was lost.” (≈ NAB)

Observations of the gospel:

- Jericho, the plaza, the shopping mall, the business world and the resort

- In a parable people left the holy city of Jerusalem to descend to Jericho; in Jericho, a blind received his sight (18:43)
- Etymology of Zacchaeus, from ancient Greek Ζακχαῖος, from Hebrew זכאי (*zakkay*), literally “pure, innocent,” which came from the verb זכה (“be clean, pure”). The “short stature” is both physical and moral.
- Tax collector and wealthy, of particular interest to Luke (12:16-21 and 16:1-8)
- The episode begins and concludes with the verb “search”; at first Zacchaeus “seeks” to see Jesus (v. 3); in the end Jesus reveals himself as the Son of man come to “seek” and save what was lost (v. 10). The encounter happens out of love of Jesus who overcomes every obstacle as he “seeks” Zacchaeus, whose initial search is purified and come to fruition; generic curiosity is transformed into a joyful reception of Jesus and the conversion of a public official, confirmed by the pledge to amend his ways. The Benedictine is one who *seeks* God.
- Note the vocabulary for movement. Jesus *entered* the town and *was going through* it; Zacchaeus made his appearance, *ran ahead, and climbed* a sycamore tree to *catch a glimpse* of Jesus. Jesus *looked up* and spoke to the shrimp up in the tree; he said, “Come down quickly”; he quickly descended.
- Twice **σήμερον**, today:
 - o 2:11, *Today* in the town of David a savior has been born to you.
 - o 4:21, *Today* this scripture has been fulfilled even as you listen.
 - o 19:5, *Today* I must stay at your home . . .
 - o 19:9, *Today* salvation has come to this house.
 - o 22:34, 61, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows *today*, you will deny three times that you know me”
 - o 23:43, *Today* you will be with me in Paradise.
-

Two glances converge, one from below, the other from above: little Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree to get a better vantage point, and the Son of God descended from heaven in search of those of small stature. Two glances with one thing in common, the search –to seek Jesus who seeks to save the lost (vv. 3.10).

Jesus and Zacchaeus meet, divine mercy contacts miserly, midget humanity. The “son of Abraham” collaborated with foreign political interests.⁷

⁷ Zacchaeus, short of stature, had risen high in the financial world. One might say that he was overly conscious of his small size, and thus he compensated for his inferiority complex by making a lot of money. He used extortion, the usual practice among the functionaries who bid for a contract with the occupying Romans to collect taxes. The wealthier he became, the more the public despised him, caught in a vicious

That quisling, rebel sheep had ascended the ladder to an executive position among the fiscal officers. The now head honcho had been bought –shades of Levi-Matthew, disciple of Jesus. When Jesus was passing through Jericho, the midget “wanted to see” him at any cost. But, on account of his size –physical stature reflected in his moral character– and hampered by the crowd, this little-big guy ran ahead and climbed a tree, a ridiculous perch from which to satisfy his curiosity, and meet a man, raised up and hung from the tree of the cross, would save humanity.

Had Zacchaeus earlier caught wind of this Jesus who had cured a blind person in Jericho? If the blind can be healed, why not a shrimp? Look at him in the photos, where shorties are always in front and “tallies” behind. But outside the photos, Zacchaeus had to stretch to see things right. Somebody was always in his way. So, for once, he ran ahead and climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of the rising star descended from heaven.

Might Jesus also have desired to see Zacchaeus? The gospel says nothing other than “The Son of man has come to seek and save what was lost” (v. 10). But how could he miss a mighty mouse of a man mounted like a target in a sycamore tree or like a rare bird that lights in the park and grabs everybody’s attention. Children climb trees, squirrels and raccoons scramble up trees, but a fiscal functionary? Unheard of! All Jesus had to do was raise his gaze, and that’s what he did. The gaze cast by the fisher of men caught a shrimp in a tree.

As we saw in the healing of the blind man in Jericho, the Greek word *anablepo* (v. 5) means “look upward,” “contemplate transcendental ideas”, or even “restore the sight”. Jesus raised his eyes to see a short man high in a tree; he glimpsed heaven in a human being (an unlikely place); he saw the face of God reflected in humans. This produced a new sensation in Zacchaeus who

circle that many people who suffer from low self-esteem get trapped in. The more they seek others’ recognition, the more isolated they become. Zacchaeus, the little giant of the tax collectors, carved out a name for himself by belittling others. By elevating himself, he separated from them. He needed the encounter with Jesus to envision things differently and change his attitude.

acquired a new stature. In Jesus' look, he discovered his true dignity which filled him with joy.

And what a sight! Zacchaeus was accustomed to harsh looks, judgmental, evasive eyes, scorn and mistrust. Rarely did anybody look at him a second time, and anyway these stares were supercharged with contempt: look there, a traitor to Abraham's race. Because people avoided him, Zacchaeus had sealed himself off in his career. Except for that one day when curiosity got the best of him, and he climbed a tree to see Jesus.

Jesus' attitude and look were different from all the rest. He fixed his gaze on Zacchaeus and embraced the personal history of loneliness, aloofness, greed, and need. Suddenly Zacchaeus was shaken out of his comfort zone. This look was so different from the fierce glares. Maybe Zacchaeus had reached the point of ignoring the piercing looks, for the numbing pain that came with them, though he knew in his heart that he deserved cold contempt. But now, a look that neither hurt nor condemned, but rather opened his wound to heal. Jesus' eyes embraced him, melted his metallic heart, and invaded his aloof loneliness. Up till now as a public official he had exploited his uniform, a crook tolerated by his victims. But Jesus' look, like that of the Father, who "makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45), did not discriminate between sinners and the blameless. Jesus had come to Jericho that day to seek the sick not the healthy, to save sinners not the righteous.

Suddenly a profound consolation entered Zacchaeus, and he could hardly believe it. Neither could the crowd believe their ears. What next? Was Jesus really speaking to that scumbag? But Jesus not only saw Zacchaeus; he paid attention to him, called him by name, as if he had come to Jericho because he had an appointment with the executive tax official in a sycamore tree.

There's more. Jesus not only addressed the miniature big-man but invited himself into his home: "Zacchaeus, come down now,⁸ because today I must be a guest in your home." Suddenly, a heartfelt peace spilled over into joy. Zacchaeus scurried down and received the guest who had invited him into his own home, and his hospitality was more than just foot-washing or a cup of coffee, a coke, or afternoon tea. His testimony? "Lord, half my belongings I will give to the poor, and if I've cheated anybody, I'll repay him four times as much." Imagine, a politician returning what he had skimmed off from extortion and bribes! This is not a matter of a penny-pinching ten per cent, close fistedly counted out, like the Pharisee of another gospel, who with his fasts and tithing pretended to be righteous before God and acceptable in the eyes of his neighbor. Zacchaeus commits himself to four times more, a gesture that testifies to his conversion and proves he gives his very self to Jesus, in the person of the swindled and underprivileged. For Zacchaeus the bonus was to receive Jesus and be invaded by that wondrous look, and, on his part, to respond to others with the same grace that Jesus had awarded him. Generosity consists not in giving what is leftover, or giving what somebody deserves, but giving the very self. Mercy always pays the debt that misery might owe.

Thus, the glowering Pharisees grumbled between their teeth, "Look how Jesus visits the house of a thief." For sure, Zacchaeus was corrupt, but no less deserving of mercy, and Jesus' declaration rings true: "the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost." Only one remedy mends the tear and wound of sin: mercy, always bigger than our miserly heart, and always abundant where sin is found. Like the lady at Jesus' feet in Simon's house, first, the grace of pardon, and what follows is our grateful response. Forgiveness, then love. One day in Jericho, Jesus sought the sinner, who, once found, imitated Jesus and remunerated the victims of his double-dealing.

The gospel not only announces the good news of mercy but invites us to offer the same mercy to our confreres and guests. What does Saint Benedict

⁸ Jesus calls him by name. "Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry!" And the midget who wanted to be tall, descends, lands (gets grounded), connects with his humble, earthy nature (*humilis*). The transformation occurred not on the vertical axis but on level ground. Based on his contact with Jesus, the earthly man was transformed and discovered his true nature. Zacchaeus experienced salvation that friendship with Jesus affords; he assesses his own life on a deeper level, from a different point of view: "Zacchaeus, hurry down, for today I have to stay at your home."

counsel: *“By most fervent love therefore let monks exercise this zeal, that is, let them prefer one another in honor. Let them most patiently tolerate their infirmities whether physical or of character”* (RB 72). Let us rise from our littleness, open ourselves to the heart of mercy, so salvation might come and lodge in our heart and home.

As we place ourselves in Zacchaeus’ shoes, we receive a new identity and rejoice that Jesus, *today*, has fixed his gaze on us and called each of us by name. Our eyes, once fixed on our blessed “self,” are opened, and we look first to Jesus (“Zacchaeus... kept trying to see Jesus”, v. 3); afterwards we perceive human nature as it is. Jesus receives us and invites himself into our homes. This story invites us to conversion. Zacchaeus, changed in attitude and behavior, is overjoyed, and thus achieves greater appreciation of human worth.

This gospel is not just about little Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus, branded by his contemporaries as unworthy of salvation. It speaks to Luke’s community. Who of us doesn’t seek Jesus? Who would not go out on a limb and gladly receive Jesus in his home, and, in exchange, receive and duplicate the salvation that Jesus freely offers?