



## Preaching Resources

### CELEBRATION:

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### ROMAN LECTIONARY

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
*Acts 8:14-17*  
*1 Peter 3:15-18*  
*John 14:15-21*

### REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
*Acts 17:22-31*  
*Psalms 66:8-20*  
*1 Peter 3:13-22*  
*John 14:15-21*

### ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
*Acts 17:22-31*  
*or Isaiah 41:17-20*  
*1 Peter 3:8-18*  
*or Acts 17:22-31*  
*John 15:1-8*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned an M. A. in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

## The Gift of Promise

In the movie “Mary Poppins,” the two children, Jane and Michael Banks, jump into bed after having spent their first day with their amazing new nanny. Once in bed, Jane asks, “Mary Poppins, you won’t ever leave us, will you?” Full of excitement, Michael looks at Mary and adds, “Will you stay if we promise to be good?” Mary smiles at her two new charges and replies, “Look, that’s a piecrust promise. Easily made, easily broken!”

Most of us will also probably recall “Promises, Promises,” a popular song from the ’60s. Composed by the prolific Burt Bacharach and brought to life by the memorable talents of Dionne Warwick, this lively song compared promises that are kept with promises that are broken. “Their kind of promises” (i.e., the empty and unfulfilled ones) “can just destroy a life, take all the joy from life,” sings Warwick, claiming to be “all through with promises, promises now!” Then the great singer continues, “promises, promises, *my* kind of promises can lead to joy and hope and love — yes, love!” These latter promises are not “piecrust promises.” On the contrary, they are authentic, sincere and fully realized; these are like the promises made by Jesus to his own. Those promises, *Jesus’* promises, could certainly, as the song says, “lead to joy and hope and love — yes, love!”

One of Jesus’ promises is featured in this Sunday’s Johannine Gospel: the promise of his own continued support and presence in the person of the Paraclete or Spirit of truth.

When considering all the things that Jesus could have promised his own, the promise of the Spirit becomes all the more significant. Certainly, it was in Jesus’ power and it may even have been the unspoken wish of his disciples that he would promise them an easy mission, spent among people who shared their traditions, a mission that they could exercise from the relative comfort of their own homes and hometowns. Jesus could have promised his disciples fame, popularity and a warm welcome from those to whom they reached out with the good news. Jesus could have promised his followers power to dominate, power that would cause the rulers of the then known world to fear and envy them. Jesus could have assured his own that they would be immunized against hostility, prejudice and against ignorance that heaps rejection and ridicule upon that which is unknown, different or unfamiliar. He could have promised peace without a price and justice without hard work and sacrifice. He might have promised good health and longevity to those who hoped to live to see his return. Jesus could have promised those who gave themselves over to his ministry a life without suffering and pain. But all of these promises, however appealing, would have been nothing more than piecrust promises, easily made, easily broken. All of these promises pale into insignificance when compared to the promise Jesus *did* make and keep: the promise of the Paraclete or Holy Spirit. A person, a presence and a power like none other, the promised Paraclete would remain with the disciples and continues to remain with and within those who love and believe in Jesus.

As is reflected in today’s Johannine Gospel, the Paraclete enables those who follow Jesus to retain their union with him and with the Father. So

*... charity must be paired with social justice such that the ministry of Jesus remains alive in the church.*

also will the Spirit of truth prompt Jesus' disciples to keep and obey his commandments.

As defender, as advocate, as teacher, as counselor, guide and constant companion, the Spirit guided the first disciples of Jesus in undertaking a universal mission. That mission, first begun in Judah, was extended by the disciples into the rest of their world through the efforts of Philip, Peter, John, etc. In today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Luke recounts some of the first inroads made among the Samaritans. The zeal of the first disciples challenges us to a similarly zealous concern for those in faraway places who suffer from natural catastrophes such as earthquake, tsunami and mudslides as well as catastrophes devised by human hatred and injustice, e.g., ethnic cleansing, war, tribal conflicts, trade embargos that starve the poor, etc.

In today's second reading from 1 Peter, the ancient writer reminds us that the Spirit also enables believers to endure the suffering that comes from doing good. Those who do so are thereby venerating Christ who continues to make good on his promises, giving the Spirit to all who ask. This gift of the promise of the Spirit marks the first of five precious gifts from God that we, the praying assembly, will celebrate during May Next week — the gift of an *agenda*.

### ACTS 8:14-17

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." So said the father of Latin Christian theology, Tertullian (ca. 145-220). Although he is not mentioned in this excerpted text from Acts, Stephen, one of the Hellenist deacons, had recently been stoned to death for criticizing those who continued to reject Jesus as the Christ. Calling his brother and sister Jews "stiff-necked people" (Acts 7:1), Stephen had proceeded with a polemical summary of Israel's history, pointing out all the instances in the scriptures of their infidelity to the plan and purposes of God. William Willimon (*Acts*, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1988) suggests that Stephen's no-holds-barred speech reminds the

May 1, 2005

## Easter

### Sixth Sunday

#### *The Gift of Promise*



church that one of the most significant aspects of our legacy from Israel is its ability to use its own scripture as a means of self-criticism and as an impetus to growth. For his efforts in this regard, for being the messenger of an undesirable message, Stephen was killed. His dying was not in vain, however. In him, we see an example of the words of Tertullian. By virtue of his martyrdom and the ensuing persecution, the church moved outward from Jerusalem.

Today's first reading recounts the spread of the church to Samaria. Philip's reception among the Samaritans is dramatically told as Luke insists that all were attentive to his words and works "without exception" and that their rejoicing rose to fever pitch. How remarkable that those ancient enemies of Israel (2 Kings 7:20ff; Ezra 4:1-5; Sirach 50:25-26) who refused Jesus and rejected his message (Luke 9:51-54) were so enthusiastic in their welcome of Philip. Their change of heart could only be attributed to the Spirit. But Luke tells his readers that the Spirit did not come upon the Samaritans until Peter and John came from Jerusalem to pray and impose hands on them. Most scholars agree that verses 14-18 probably do not re-

flect an historical event. Rather, the trip from Jerusalem by Peter and John served to underscore the authority of Peter, the Twelve and the Jerusalem church and to illustrate that all church growth occurred under their auspices.

In attesting to the significance of the Samaritan mission, William Barclay ("The Acts of the Apostles," *The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1976) suggests that this initial outreach affirms that the church was consciously taking one of the most important steps in its history by acknowledging that Christ is for all the world. Barclay suggests that this narrative affirms what Christianity can bring to the world: 1) the story of Jesus and the message of the love of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ; 2) healing of bodies as well as of spirits. Christianity addresses and answers all human needs; 3) joy such as the Samaritans had never known.

Luke describes that joy as being at "fever pitch." While rock stars and some others among the glitterati can evoke similar reactions among their crazed fans, how many of Jesus' contemporary disciples can similarly rouse and excite with their message?

### 1 PETER 3:15-18

Whereas Philip, Peter and John are featured in today's first reading from Acts as witnessing to the good news of salvation through their words and works, the recipients of this excerpt from 1 Peter are being challenged to witness by remaining hopeful, gentle and respectfully patient even while suffering for being Christian. As Beverly Gaventa (*Texts for Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY: 1995) has explained, the historical situation behind this suffering probably did not arise from widespread, organized persecution of Christians by Rome. Unlike the Book of Revelation, with its veiled polemic against the empire, the positive assessment in 1 Peter of the role of human institutions, including the emperor and governors (2:13-15), reflects a general sense of satisfaction with the government. Probably,

the suffering referenced here arose in the form of sporadic local harassment against a group regarded as marginalized zealots.

In today's second reading, the author offers zealous Christians guidelines as to how to deal with their suffering (vv. 13-17) and a Christological background against which to understand and accept it (vv. 18-22). A natural consequence of faith and an intrinsic aspect of following Jesus, suffering should be borne as Jesus bore it — blamelessly, humbly, gently and without the seething anger and lust for revenge with which many endure their lot in life.

The ancient author no doubt had in mind the verbal portrait of the Isaian suffering servant whose innocence spoke volumes about injustice and about the power of self-effacing love. Realized in the person and saving mission of Jesus, the Servant is held out as a model for all who suffer for doing what is right and good. An unnamed author once compared suffering to knowing a foreign language. If people know only one language, they are tempted to think that everything they communicate is understood. However, if forced to translate an idea into another language, they must consider various possible words to use and their various shades of meaning, as well as all the other elements of the language. Suffering is like knowing a foreign language because things that one usually takes for granted must be thought through in new ways in a time of suffering. For those who have lived with and accepted suffering, a door of ministry is opened wide to a world of hurting people. Jesus was willing to open himself to suffering and subsequently opened the door to all the world's suffering people who can find their solace and healing in him. The author of 1 Peter challenges Jesus' followers to do likewise, all the while knowing that they will be supported and sustained by Jesus' promised gift of the Spirit.

### JOHN 14:15-21

Two friends traveling together on vacation decided to visit Niagara Falls. As they drove from Lake Erie to

the falls, they were filled with awe and admiration at the size and power of the Niagara River. They were particularly impressed with the rapids just above the falls and stopped there to take in the view. From there they could see the massive cloud of mist that always hangs over the precipice.

One of the friends remarked to the other: "Without a doubt, this is surely the greatest unused power in the world."

"Ah, no, my friend, not so!" the other said. "The greatest unused power in the world is the Holy Spirit of the living God."

Jesus wished his disciples to know and avail themselves of the power of the Spirit. This is quite clear in the Christian scriptures and particularly in today's Gospel, wherein the promise of the Spirit is made. This text is part of the lengthy farewell discourse (John 13-17) that most scholars agree was largely the work of the Johannine author. Carefully, thoughtfully, the evangelist gathered together the meditations and reflections of his community regarding the sayings and teachings of Jesus in an effort to help them to live in communion with Christ in the decades after his death and resurrection.

As today's Gospel indicates, the Johannine community of the late 90s recognized that the promised Paraclete or Spirit was for them all that the historical Jesus had been for his disciples during his earthly ministry. Just as Jesus had been the way, the truth and the life (last Sunday's Gospel), so would the promised Spirit be life and truth and the way in which believers would know and be united with God in the

post-resurrection era. As a source of truth (v. 17) who is always with us (v. 16), the Spirit enables the church to search sincerely for what is right, good and just. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that mistakes can be, have been and are being made. As Thierry Maertens and Jean Frisque (*Guide For the Christian Assembly*, Fides Pub. Inc., Notre Dame, Ind.: 1973) have pointed out, "the real marvel of assistance from the Spirit of truth is not that no error has been committed by the church, but that, above all errors, the church has never been deserted by the truth of God. The fact is that the truth in the church is not the result of reflection but a gift!"

Having promised and bestowed this gift upon his followers, the Johannine Jesus also bestowed a new responsibility to be for the world "another paraclete." In that capacity, the church, like the Spirit, is to be a power to be tapped by the world. To those in the darkness of sin, the church, as paraclete, should bring the light of healing and forgiveness. To the poor, the church, as paraclete, is to seek out and ease their poverty where it originates. Symptomatic relief is not enough; charity must be paired with social justice such that the ministry of Jesus remains alive in the church. Unlike the impressive Niagara Falls, whose power is largely untapped, the church, as paraclete, is to harness all its energies and resources so as to lay these at the feet of all in need. Jesus has promised us the power to do so, and the presence of the Paraclete makes all things possible.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

*Paraclete* is the Greek word for an advocate who comes to one's side to give help and counsel. This advocate might be imagined as a personal lawyer who advises us as we negotiate life's difficulties. The early Christians were familiar with being arrested and taken before court officials because of their beliefs. The promise that the Holy Spirit would help them give witness was deeply reassuring.

Imagine that you have been arrested and accused of being a Christian. First, would you be guilty as charged? Second, if you had to defend yourself, what would you say?



## Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA: (Gospel) “If you love me and obey the commands I give you...” “He [the one] who obeys the commandments he has from me is the man who loves me.” The (somewhat sobering) citation of obedience as indication of love.

BACKGROUND NOTES: The obedience/love connection of the commandments stories: Exodus (20:6) and Deuteronomy (5:10). 1 Jn 5:3: “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.” (In the context of keeping God’s commandment by loving one’s sisters and brothers.)

HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS/KEY IDEA: Uh-oh. I’m not all that perfect in keeping the commandments. Could it be that I don’t love God? But I’m sure I do. Pretty sure. I don’t always feel it. What do you feel like when you feel love for God? I’m young, with lots of time to get better at keeping the commandments.

STARTER: In old folklore, a young girl who wanted to determine her boyfriend’s love would pull the petals off a daisy, alternating, “He loves me” and “He loves me not.” The statement that fell on the last petal would be the truth. Not exactly scientific or even sensible. What would have been a better indication? What is the indication or “evidence” of our love for God?

LEADING QUESTIONS: You know for certain that some people love you. How? How do they show it? (Think beyond girlfriend/boyfriend, close friends.) When Jesus says that keeping his commandments is proof of love for him, what’s your reaction? Relief? Confusion? Slight discouragement or guilt? Desire to do better? What are the commandments Jesus himself gave us?

DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE: \* the “image” of obedience in our culture: weakness or strength? \* the obedience/loyalty/faithfulness connection \* the tension and apparent contradiction between obedience and adolescence or young adulthood — the time of venturing out on one’s own, making one’s own decisions \* the second half

## HOMILY

Michele Chollet

### Spirit in the Sky?

Do you know the song *Spirit in the Sky*, by Norman Greenbaum? I was at a funeral many years ago where that was the “theme song” of the deceased, a quite remarkable man. It seemed appropriate in that setting. This song plays in my head when I think of the Holy Spirit, the main focus of these Easter season readings leading up to that ultimate “Spirit fest” — Pentecost.

“Prepare yourself, you know it’s a must/ Gotta have a friend in Jesus/ So you know that when you die/ He’s gonna recommend you to the spirit in the sky, spirit in the sky.”

Perhaps this is not a bad synopsis of John’s Gospel today, if not its central message. You need to be a friend of Jesus in order to get that “recommendation,” to receive the Spirit. The promised Spirit of truth and love will flow into us if we keep Jesus’ commandments.

During his life, Jesus both promoted and reinterpreted the Mosaic Law. But one thing he was always clear about: The “greatest” commandment of all is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and then to love your neighbor as yourself. Love, love, love! If only it were easy! Oh, it is easy (most of the time) to love those who love us, but love of neighbors? Love of God? Not easy, either one.

Who is my neighbor? Those who share my skin color, religion, zip code or education? What about those outside my comfort zone? I don’t actively dislike them, but I avoid situations where I would get

to know them.

Not so with Philip, who is described in today’s reading from Acts. Phillip is in Samaria of all places, with those well-known infidel Samaritans, shamelessly proclaiming Christ to them. What made him think he could bring Jesus’ presence into those sinful, heretical lives? Perhaps it was Jesus’ own example of regularly dining with tax collectors and sinners or talking with the Samaritan woman at the well. How about us?

The Samaritans in our lives need the good news also. They are the poor, or people we distrust, the parts of town we won’t venture into after dark, the ethnic, racial or religious groups we simply cannot accept, the sick, the grieving, the unstable and unclean. Yet these people, too, are our neighbors and fall under Jesus’ commandment of love.

Jesus first provides us with the love we need. The love of God, self and neighbor are always linked. They grow together. Love grows outward, not inward. If love pulls us out of ourselves toward the other, it is of the Spirit.

In two short weeks we will hear about the Spirit’s descent as tongues of fire on the disciples. Are we asking to be set ablaze with the love of God, self and neighbor? As Jesus suggests today, love is an active verb, not just a head-trip, an intellectual exercise. Just as Philip proclaimed and healed among the Samaritans, we too must make love an active pursuit in our lives.

of 1 Jn 5:3 — “And his commandments are not burdensome.” \* the indwelling of the Spirit promised in connection with keeping the commandments

MEDIA LINKS: \* “Mold and make me with Your fire / Consume me with Your love / Until Your will is

my desire.” (4 Him, contemporary Christian group.)

QUOTATIONS: “Ah, how skillful grows the hand / That obeys the Law’s command.” Longfellow. [“Hand” as symbol for one’s entire life? “Skillful” at Service? Contentment?]

# Ascension



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### ROMAN LECTIONARY

Ascension of the Lord  
*Acts 1:1-11*  
*Ephesians 1:17-23*  
*Matthew 28:16-20*

### REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Ascension Sunday  
*Acts 1:1-11*  
*Psalms 47 or Psalm 93*  
*Ephesians 1:15-23*  
*Luke 24:44-53*

### ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

Ascension Day  
*Acts 1:1-11 or Daniel 7:9-11*  
*Ephesians 1:15-23*  
*Luke 24:49-53*  
*or Mark 16:9-15, 19-20*

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## The Gift of An Agenda

**D**o you remember Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech? Delivered at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated, King's speech resonated with hope and conviction that a new day was about to dawn, and, with it, new assurances of civil rights for African Americans. "I've been to the mountaintop," declared King, "and I just want to do God's will. God's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land ... and I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything ... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Five years earlier in another of his memorable and moving speeches, King had described what he had envisioned on the mountaintop. "I have a dream," shared King, "that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ... I have a dream that ... we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nations into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood" wherein "we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together" (August 28, 1963).

King's dream and his mountaintop vision would have remained just that except for the fact that he came down from the mountain and marched on the streets of Selma, Atlanta, Washington, etc. in order that his visions and dreams

be realized. Today's feast of Jesus' ascension challenges believers to do likewise. Although the disciples of Jesus may have been tempted to remain in the relative safety and rarified atmosphere of the mountain in order to preserve the experience of the nearness of Jesus, that was not to be. As Jesus instructed, they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth (Acts, first reading). With Jesus' own authority, they were to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing and teaching them, all the while assured of the presence of Jesus (Matthew, Gospel) ... all the while compelled by hope and inspired by God's wisdom and insight (Ephesians, second reading). Nowhere did Jesus say that his disciples should stand off at a safe distance and critique the world. On the contrary, following his lead, Jesus' followers were directed to immerse themselves in the world, making its burdens their own, its suffering theirs to alleviate. Today, Jesus' disciples are to do likewise.

Mountaintop experiences are necessary, of course. Mountaintops are places where visions are born and fed. Mountaintops, both real and virtual, are places where discussions take place, where committees are formed, where agendas are made. But the best-laid plans are of no avail unless believers are willing to go down from the mountain and realize their visions and dreams by translating words into works, decisions into deeds and proposed goals into achievements. On the mountaintop, talk is easy and even cheap, but going down from the mountain in order to "put up or shut up" — therein is the challenge.

Today, as we continue to live in the interim between Jesus' two advents, that challenge remains our own. Karl Barth (*Karl Barth, Theologian of Freedom*, Clifford Green, editor, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1991) once referred to

*Nowhere did Jesus say that his disciples should stand off at a safe distance and critique the world.*

May 8, 2005

## Ascension

### Solemnity

#### *The Gift of An Agenda*



this interim as a “significant pause” between the mighty acts of God. During this pause, it is the church’s task to wait, to pray, to witness, ever mindful of the question asked in today’s first reading: “Why do you stand here looking up at the skies?” This question implies that there is a mission to accomplish and that the church should be adamant in its intent to accomplish Jesus’ agenda, secure in the promise of his presence.

In the opening verses of Acts (verses that constitute today’s first reading and the theme of today’s liturgy), Luke has managed, explains William Willimon (*Acts*, John Knox Press, Atlanta: 1988), to reprove both the enthusiasm and speculation of uninformed apocalypticism as well as the despair and stodginess of a church without apocalyptic hope. There is also reproof for any church that wistfully longs for some departed leader as if that church existed simply as a memorial society for a dead Jesus. In the meantime, there is the promise that the same power that equipped Jesus for service and for suffering shall be bestowed upon those who follow him in faith.

Although the response to Jesus’ gift of an agenda for the church is not included in any of today’s readings, a glance backward through history will attest that many have sought to make his agenda their own. What Luke does tell us is that after receiving their agenda from Jesus, the disciples, together with Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers and some women, gathered together in the upper room and devoted themselves with one accord to prayer (Acts 1:13-14). Prayer was what would support and sustain them during the “significant pause” between the mighty acts of God. Prayer, prayer alone and prayer together continues to support and sustain all of us who are trying to be faithful to the gift of Jesus’ agenda.

### ACTS 1:1-11

Calling the feast of Jesus’ ascension an “endlessly problematic” one that “admits of no simple or single explanation,” Walter Brueggemann (*Texts for Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995)

suggests that the problem consists in explaining what happened to Jesus’ body after the resurrection. More acute an issue, however, is how the church would continue when Jesus was no longer present. Luke deals with both issues in this ascension narrative.

Brueggemann also insists that the ascension narrative reveals the early church’s struggle to voice a reality that lay far beyond all of its explanatory categories. Struggles and problems notwithstanding, at the heart of the ascension story is the fact that the community, that fearful, bewildered, waiting and praying community, had no power of its own. It possessed none and could not generate any for itself. It had no cause for self-congratulation. Yet, power was given that caused that fragile little community to have energy, courage, perseverance, imagination and untold resources completely disproportionate to its size. That power was given as a result of Jesus’ resurrection and return to God. With the gift of an agenda that would take them to the ends of the earth, Jesus also shared the power of the Spirit.

Twice in today’s first reading, the gift of the Spirit is announced (vv.

5, 8) as a power that will infuse the church, fire its energies and help in realizing the agenda Jesus gave. That agenda will include being Jesus’ witnesses throughout the world. As William Barclay (“The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1976) has suggested, a really authentic witness does not consist of words but deeds. Barclay recalls the reaction of reporter Henry Stanley upon meeting missionary and explorer David Livingstone in Central Africa. After spending some time with Livingstone, Stanley wrote, “If I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all.” The witness of the man’s life was eloquent and irresistible.

Also included in the act of witnessing to Jesus is the possibility of dying for the faith. In Greek, the word for witness and the word for martyr is the same (*martus*). To be a witness means to be loyal in giving living testimony to Christ, despite the cost. One of many such witnesses who have blessed the church simply by their being was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While in prison for opposing the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and professor, wrote the following: “To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way ... on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man — not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us” (*Letters and Papers From Prison*, Macmillan, New York: 1972). It was evident in his life and death that Bonhoeffer was such a man. Truly a martyr, truly a witness of Jesus, when Bonhoeffer was condemned to die by hanging on April 9, 1945, a doctor at the Flossenbürg extermination camp wrote of him: “Through the half-open door ... I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer ... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again prayed ... in the almost 50 years that I have worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.” The same Spirit that

moved Jesus and Bonhoeffer and so many others continues to move and empower you and me.

### EPHESIANS 1:17-23

What Luke narrated so poignantly in the first reading from Acts and the psalmist has celebrated in today's responsorial is also reaffirmed by the author of Ephesians in today's second reading: that the risen Jesus ascended to heaven and is now enthroned in a position of sovereign authority above all and over all creation. As Walter Brueggemann (*Texts For Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995) has explained, both the psalmist and the epistolary writer invite believers to understand the festival of Ascension anew. This feast is not about getting the body of Jesus off the earth; it is a dramatic moment when the presence of Jesus in the church is converted into a large, cosmic rule. Rooted in liturgical language, this claim for God and for Jesus envisions significant political repercussions. All earthly rulers are indeed under God's feet (Ephesians 1:22). God's agenda, as we know, is characterized by mercy, compassion, forgiveness and caring. Enthroned over all, God and Jesus change the political climate and the modes of power previously enjoyed by princes, kings and queens. The sovereign kingship of God necessarily revamps all other forms of governance.

Affirmed in today's second reading is God's sovereignty and, with it, that of Jesus over those entities that were thought by some to wield power on earth or in heaven. Principalities, powers, virtues and dominions (v. 21) were heavenly or angelic powers whose origins are to be sought in the pagan mystery cults, where they are venerated as deified agents directing human affairs. Even these, insists the author of Ephesians (and Colossians 1:16), are subject to and subordinate to Christ.

With a nod to 1 Corinthians 12, the ancient writer concludes this prayer with a reference to Christ who is the head of the church, which is his body. William Barclay (*The Letter to the Ephesians*, *The Daily Study Bible*,

The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK: 1976) has suggested that "body of Christ" is the church's greatest title. Perhaps this title could also be called the church's most pressing agenda, for if we are truly Christ's body, then, by virtue of our union with him and in him, the church is quite literally the hands that do Christ's work, the feet that serve his purposes, the voice that speaks his words and the heart that loves, gives and forgives as he loves, gives and forgives. Today's Matthean Gospel will feature Christ, the head of the church, sending forth his hands and feet and heart and voice into all the world.

### MATTHEW 28:16-20

Called the Great Commission by scholars, these verses that conclude the Matthean Gospel offer not only a clear mandate but also an endearing and encouraging promise. Paired with the agenda that the disciples of Jesus are to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing and teaching the good news without discrimination and without stinting, is the pledge of Jesus: "know that I am with you always." What greater comfort could there be than in knowing and believing in the constant presence of Jesus? What greater guarantee that the work we are given to undertake can, indeed, be accomplished by virtue of that presence?

Matthew's Jewish readers would no doubt have appreciated the resonance of Jesus' promise to God's own, promised to the chosen people from the beginning. These words of encouragement were extended to all whom God

called to service. To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to David, to Isaiah, Jeremiah and all the prophets, the same words, "I am with you," translated into courage, tenacity and strength for the task at hand. Spoken by the risen Jesus, this promise of presence brings readers of the Matthean Gospel full circle to its initial proclamation of good news in Matthew 1:23: "And they shall call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God with us.'"

It would be a mistake, insists Douglas R.A. Hare (*Matthew*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1993), to regard the promised presence of Jesus as a gift restricted solely to the first disciples or solely to missionaries. This promise is surely made to the church as a whole — not only to clergy but to all the people of God. As in Mt. 8:23-27, the little ship of the church, battered by life's storms and unforeseen calamities, knows that it is never left to depend entirely on its own resources. The Lord Jesus, the risen, ascended, enthroned and gloriously powerful Lord, remains with the church. Literally, Matthew described Jesus' abiding authoritative presence as with us "all the days, right up to the consummation of the age." Contemporary translators have rendered this qualifier simply as "always," but Hare says that adverb does not preserve Matthew's intent. "All the days" emphasizes the daily nature of the presence of Christ — each day, every day, day by day. The church, despite its history of conflict, infidelity, corruption and sin, provides the surest evidence that Jesus' promise has been kept. That same promise continues to be kept even today.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

A theology professor told his students to read the entire Gospel of Matthew. In the next class he said, "Raise your hand if you read all 29 chapters." Hands shot up around the room.

"Impossible," the professor declared. "There are only 28 chapters."

Today's Gospel reading comes from the last chapter, Chapter 28. The last four lines of the book are Jesus' final words to his apostles, spoken in the last moments before he ascended before them. It is a happy ending to the book because it concludes with Jesus' promise: "And know, I am with you always, until the end of time."

## Preaching to Youth

*Jim Auer*

*(For Seventh Sunday after Easter)*

**KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA:** (Gospel) “For these I pray ... for these you have given me.” “It is in them that I have been glorified.” The tender, big-brotherly concern and affection of Jesus for the apostles and his pride in them is directed likewise toward us.

**BACKGROUND NOTES:** The setting, the Last Supper discourse, is significant — shortly before the passion and death of Jesus, seemingly a strange time to speak of glory; and shortly before all but one of the apostles fled and abandoned him, again seemingly a strange time to speak of Jesus being glorified in them.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS/KEY IDEA:** Admiration for the humanness of Jesus in his genuine affection for the apostles, but in a somewhat abstract manner because they may not see in the apostles all, including themselves, who have been chosen and called and who follow.

**STARTER:** Jack was a star running back and point guard for his high school. His younger sister was far less athletic but played for her grade school volleyball team. She was surprised one Saturday morning to see Jack in the stands watching her play and asked him, “What are you doing here?” “Why wouldn’t I be here?” he answered. “We’re family — and you make me proud.”

**LEADING QUESTIONS:** Who has made you feel valuable and treasured? Who has told you, “You make us proud”? Intellectually, we know Jesus sees us this way, but do we feel his concern? Do we rely on it daily, especially if life turns rocky?

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE:** \* All our good actions (no matter how routine and ordinary) give glory to God. \* We need to remember and try to feel the affectionate concern of Jesus for us. \* The misleading feeling, especially when challenges arise or things go wrong, that we are in this alone. \* The daily, continuing concern of Jesus for us now; it didn’t end when

## HOMILY

*Fr. James Smith*

# Breaking Boundaries

When Jesus ascended to heaven, he broke the boundary separating heaven from earth. The crossing of boundaries is a recurrent theme in history: Israelites crossing the Red Sea, slaves crossing the Ohio River, Caesar crossing the Rubicon. And when Caesar decided to do that, he said, “The die is cast” — meaning that he had entered a whole new space from which there was no returning.

Another aspect of boundaries is exclusion. The 48th parallel keeps North Koreans north; the scrimmage line keeps teams out of a neutral zone while the halo protects punt returners; personal space is protected by an unspoken, unmeasured rule — about 2 feet for Americans. Closer than that without invitation we call “in your face.”

Boundaries have the useful function of separating things and people that need to be separated. The same seems true on all levels of existence. Humankind has always felt the need for a special boundary between itself and God. We Christians don’t feel this separation much because of Jesus, but it was the primary fact of ancient religions. The Greek myth tells it best. The gods led a wonderful life on Mount Olympus separate from mortals on earth — they were imitating rich mortals in mansions who led lives separate from their slaves in hovels.

But one young god felt sorry for mortals, so he stole fire from the gods to make earthly life bearable. The other gods got angry at Pro-

metheus for breaking the impassable boundary between them and mere mortals. They chained him eternally on a lonely mountain.

We recognize that as merely a story to negotiate the impasse between God and humans. But we have more than a myth. We have the historical event of God breaking the boundary by sending the divine Son to become one of us. There is now free access between God and humans, and the traffic runs both ways.

Jesus’ appearances after his death are described in different ways to express the fact he had really died but was now really alive. He appears to them differently on the shore, in the Upper Room, at Emmaus. It seems as though Jesus drops in on their world from his own world. But the fact that at first they don’t recognize him and then suddenly do suggests that he was there all along but they couldn’t see him.

If Jesus lives among us invisibly, then he is our constant companion, and we can recognize him by focusing on him. How do you imagine Jesus in your life? Do you recognize him only in times of crisis or do you see him in everyday happenings? Is he present only in sacred moments as at Mass, or at other times? It’s worth spending some time thinking about. Because it comes down to this: Jesus is either an occasional sacred visitor in our otherwise secular life or he is our constant companion in whom we “live and move and have our being.”

he “completed his work on earth.” \* Our need to ask for and expect in faith God’s support, strength and guidance. \* The frequent upside-down-ness of the Christian life: glory in defeat, strength in weakness. \* Our being in the world (and called to transform it) and yet not “of” the world.

**MEDIA LINKS:** \* “Winter, spring, summer, or fall / All you got to do is call / And I’ll be there, yeah / You’ve got a friend.” (James Taylor, “You’ve Got a Friend.”)

\* “Lean on me, when you’re not strong / And I’ll be your friend / I’ll help you carry on.” (Bill Withers.)

# Pentecost



## Preaching Resources

### CELEBRATION:

A Comprehensive  
Worship Resource  
[www.celebrationpubs.org](http://www.celebrationpubs.org)

### ROMAN LECTIONARY

Pentecost  
*Acts 2:1-11*  
*1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13*  
*John 20:19-23*

### REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Day of Pentecost  
*Acts 2:1-21 or Numbers 11:24-30*  
*Psalm 104:24-34, 35b*  
*1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 or Acts 2:1-21*  
*John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39*

### ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

Day of Pentecost  
*Acts 2:1-11 or Ezekiel 11:17-20*  
*1 Corinthians 12:4-13 or Acts 2:1-11*  
*John 20:19-23 or John 14:8-17*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned an M. A. in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

## The Gift of the Spirit

Midway through May, the praying assembly celebrates the gift of the Spirit, the gift promised by Jesus and bequeathed to his own, enabling those who love him to realize his agenda in their lives and in the world. Life force of Jesus and the church, the Spirit's limitless reservoir has yet to be fully tapped. As Edward Hays (*Psalms for Zero Gravity*, Forest of Peace Publishing, Leavenworth, Kan.: 1998) has observed, we Christians faithfully profess our fundamental belief in a God who is a community of three, Father, Son and Spirit. It is true that since Jesus' physical departure, the predominant presence in the church has been the Spirit of the holy. Yet, in day-to-day living, disciples seem to focus more on God as Parent or God as Brother than on God as Breath. While periods of charismatic interest rise and fall like ocean swells, the absence of the Spirit, especially in the area of ongoing prayer, is notable.

To remedy that lack, Hays suggests that believers consider opening themselves to the Spirit of God as an energy booster. For some, coffee is the energizing agent that starts them humming each morning. For others, it's the "Breakfast of Champions." For still others, it may be a brisk walk or a workout. But for believers, there is also the Spirit of God, ever present to breathe new life and new hope into a welcoming, waiting heart.

The Spirit, continues Hays, was the "hidden engine" that propelled Jesus into the desert or up the mountain or off to a deserted place to commune with God. The Spirit prompted Jesus to attend dinners with outcasts and sinners. The Spirit enabled Jesus to stand up to the religious and political authorities of his day.

Wrapped tightly as a prisoner in perfumed burial cloths, Jesus appeared powerless in death. But the same Spirit of life that had overshadowed Mary and conceived Jesus in the womb rendezvoused with Jesus, says Hays, to do the same in the womb of the tomb. Bending low and breathing hard, the Spirit infused new life into a lifeless Jesus, catapulting him out of the grave in an Easter ascension that led him forever beyond the grasp of death. Calling Jesus' rising the greatest prison break in history, Hays reminds us, on this day of Pentecost, that the same escape is promised to you and to me.

The Spirit is ever present not only in death but also during life, making possible those achievements that most of us hope for but never truly think will be realized — the establishment of a universal peace that promotes the dignity and well-being of each and every person from the cradle to the grave; a pervading social justice rooted in charity and in our relatedness to and responsibility for one another; that the teachings of the Great Sermon be translated into our lives such that the words on the scriptural pages become not mere ideals but principles and values by which we live. Too often we settle for less, arguing, as did the first disciples, that such things are beyond human reach. Jesus' answer in all three synoptic Gospels is the same: "For human beings, it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God" (Mark 10: 27; Matthew 19:26; Luke 18:27). Because the Holy Spirit is the gift that makes all things possible, therefore, we pray anew today in

*Calling Jesus' rising the greatest prison break in history, Hays reminds us, on this day of Pentecost, that the same escape is promised to you and to me.*



the prayer words of Edward Hays, to be aware and appreciative of the gift of the Spirit with and within:

*“Blowtorch Spirit-Giver of gifts, who descended as flaming tongues on the disciples knotted together in prayer, come now aflame in me.*

*Twist my tongue into a fiery knot, so tight as to be speechless.*

*Give me no foreign mystical tongue to amaze and astonish all, but the tongue of a wonder-rooted tree, whose bark sings with silver gray silence, or the mute tongue of an awe-struck rock, whose poetry is forever petrified.*

*God’s Spirit of Holy Construction, who lovingly builds up the Church, gently clamp my teeth together, lest my tongue tear Christ’s Body to pieces.*

*Guide me to listen instead of speak, so I can understand rather than stand over*

*By so silencing my talking ego, may I become speechless, a Spirit-tongued love, who reverences and nourishes awesome life.”*

To pray this prayer and truly to desire what its words express is to be free from incarceration in the cage of ego, says Hays. This freedom is one of the many gifts of the Spirit that we humbly, gratefully, joyously celebrate today.

## ACTS 2:1-11

When this passage is read in tandem with the Babel narrative of Genesis’ primeval history (11:1-9), it will be abundantly clear that Luke regarded the Pentecost event as reversing Babel’s babble. In the Genesis narrative, the diversity of the languages served to alienate and separate the people who, by following their inflated egos (v. 4: “come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves”), had sinned against God. Now, however, and by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit, humankind is represented as united; their earlier separation has been transcended by God.

By naming the various nationalities of the peoples who experienced the Pentecost event, Luke featured the

May 15, 2005

# Pentecost

## Solemnity

### *The Gift of the Spirit*



early church as diverse and multicultural. Nevertheless, and through the power of the Spirit at work in Peter et al., each one present heard the good news of salvation proclaimed in his or her own tongue. Luke’s listing of the nations can be traced on a map of the ancient world. By ordering them in this manner, Luke intended that his readers understand that from east to west, from north to south of the then known world, all heard and understood.

Rather than simply fix our attention on that early multicultural church, Latino theologian Miguel De La Torre (*Reading the Bible from the Margins*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 2002) suggests that we also focus on today’s church. Are our parishioners from “every nation under heaven”? If not, why? Is homogeneity caused by racism or prejudice, whether historical or contemporary? If we live in a culturally diverse city or town and yet everyone in church looks the same, then the church has failed to emulate what it is called to be ... not a melting pot that homogenizes its various cultures but a thriving welter of diverse persons who generously share their gifts and themselves.

When we are tempted to think that the diverse and multicultural charac-

ter of the early church is impossible to emulate, we must remind ourselves that we are not alone in our efforts. Just as God’s Holy Spirit drove the early believers to forge a union among them that no one had imagined or envisioned, so also does that same Spirit continue to blow and breathe in contemporary believers in Jesus.

Pentecost also challenges us, insists Eberhard Arnold (“Spirit of Fire,” from *Innerland: A Guide into the Heart of the Gospel*, Plough Publishing House, Farmington, Penn.: 1999), to be willing to experience what the earliest Christians experienced — the revolution of all things and the reevaluation of all values.

When this Spirit was given by the risen Christ, says Arnold, everything was overturned and set on fire. All the disciples were filled with a burning love that drew them irresistibly and for always together. This love became in them a “holy must.” If we ever hope to resurrect the mutually respectful multicultural character of the early church, we cannot do so without the same “holy must” to fire and guide us.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:3-7, 12-13

Personnel directors and job interviewers have become fond, in recent years, of asking prospective candidates questions that reveal something more than educational background or employment experience. One such question is, “If you were an ingredient in a salad, which ingredient would you be?” From their answers, employers try to discern which job applicant might prove to be the best employee.

Naturally, the answers can be as diverse as the respondents. For example, one may view himself as the lettuce or matrix that supports the salad’s other ingredients. Another may see her role as that of a tomato, bringing color and juiciness to the mix. Some may choose to be represented by the crunch of a cucumber that adds a touch of cool refreshment to the salad, whereas others may opt to be the onion that packs a bite and has the capacity to reduce the diner to tears. Another may choose to be the arugula that gives a



peppery kick to the dish. Whatever “salad-fixing” one may choose to be — carrots, celery or even bean sprouts — it is the salad’s dressing that accents each ingredient and gathers all their various tastes into what is usually a delicious concoction.

As an analogy, this may offer a way of appreciating ourselves as variously gifted and unique individuals and the power of the Spirit to gather us together into a cohesive and mutually complementary whole. Part of Paul’s lengthy correspondence with his converts at Corinth, this excerpted text is part of that section of the letter in which the great apostle sets forth his theological categories for evaluating spiritual gifts in the church. Richard B. Hays (*First Corinthians*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1997) has discerned the following outline of Paul’s thought in 1 Corinthians 12: 1) The Spirit empowers all Christian confession, vv. 1-3. 2) All manifestations of the Spirit have a common source and a common aim, vv. 4-11. 3) All the parts of the body that is the church are diverse and interdependent, vv. 12-26. 4) The various gifts and offices in the church are to be manifested and exercised for the good of the whole, vv. 27-31.

Notice also that Paul insists in verse 7 that the Spirit is given to each member of the community. All are gifted, not just a few leaders or gifted prodigies, and all are gifted not simply for personal enlightenment or enjoyment but “for the common good.” Integral to the community’s common good is an appreciation and acceptance of one another’s differences and a willingness to recognize the power of the Spirit in gathering Jews and Greeks, slave and free, rich and poor, male and female into one body.

This image of the body of Christ offers the church of the 21st century a vision of authentic community in which all enjoy their individual freedoms and a challenge to more genuine interpersonal sharing and support.

### JOHN 20:19-23

Jesus did not construct a church or contract that a church be established. Some suggest that Jesus did not even found the church, but that it

evolved and developed only after his resurrection by those who wished to institutionalize his ministry. Without entering into this argument on one side or the other, the Johannine evangelist features the risen Christ in today’s Gospel as breathing forth the Spirit on his own, thereby creating the church that would survive him and sustain his saving works until his return. There can be no doubt that the evangelist links this breathing forth to the creative event of the *ruah* or wind or Spirit of the living God breathing over the formless wasteland, the abyss, in order to bring forth the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). Just as God’s Spirit created life where there was none, so the Spirit of God, at work in Jesus, created the church.

Today’s Gospel is the first of two upper-room appearances of the risen Jesus. As Charles Cousar (*Texts For Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995) has pointed out, this passage contains all the “ingredients” for the making of the church: the company of the disciples; the presence of the crucified, now risen Jesus; the sending of the church into the world; the gift of the Holy Spirit; the bestowal of peace and the mission of forgiveness of sins. With the coalescing of Easter, Ascension and Pentecost and the particulars of this appearance, the close continuity between Jesus and the church is clarified. Just as Jesus was made incarnate and sent into the world with a mission, so does the

church make incarnate the Spirit of Jesus and carry on his mission. Just as Jesus declared the gift of forgiveness of sins, so the church continues to make the experience of forgiveness known and available. Although the word “church” or *ekklesia* does not appear anywhere in the fourth Gospel, this narrative makes clear the belief that the church finds both its model and mandate in the person and mission of Jesus Christ.

Because of these gifts of model and mandate, Karl Rahner (*The Great Church Year*, Crossroad Pub. Co., New York: 1994) once suggested that Pentecost deserves as great a celebration as Easter. After all, Pentecost is the fulfillment of Easter. Pentecost reminds us that God lives in us, sanctifies, strengthens and consoles us. The center of all reality, the love of God has become our center, our heart. True and absolute reality lives in our nothingness; the strength of God vitalizes our weakness: Eternal life now lives in mortal beings.

That is the good news of Pentecost — the message that God loves us and has blessed us with the divine presence. But, asks Rahner, do we hear this message and grasp it in faith? “I do not mean to ask whether we doubt it intellectually,” insists Rahner. “But rather, has the message penetrated our hearts? Is it really there — in the bloodstream? Is the good news of Pentecost in our hearts as the light and strength of our lives? And do we live by this message?”

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

Thrill-seekers are now paying \$100 per hour to don baggy jumpsuits, helmets, goggles and knee pads and jump off into a 10-story high column of up-rushing wind. It’s called skydiving without the airplane trip. Huge vertical wind tunnels are among the new attractions at theme parks around the world. They are powered by huge fans that create hurricane-force winds of over 140 miles per hour that can hold the flying jumpers aloft while they, like leaves in the path of a blower, twist, roll and somersault on the currents.

Pentecost is described as a mighty wind. If it requires a kind of audacious act of daring for a thrill-seeker to jump into a column of air, how much more courage is required of us to entrust our whole lives to the Holy Spirit? But, if we act with faith, then like those in the giant wind tunnel, once we jump, we will discover that the Spirit holds us aloft.

## Preaching to Youth

*Jim Auer*

**KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA:** (1 Cor) “There are different gifts but the same Spirit.” “The body is one and has many members, but all of the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ.” Treasuring gratefully the particularity of our unique gifts and respecting those of others, all as manifestations of the Spirit of God.

**BACKGROUND NOTE:** (Acts) “How is it that each of us hears them in his native tongue?” Luke’s powerful native tongue metaphor beautifully complements and illustrates Paul’s “different gifts ... same Spirit ... one body” instruction and analogy. The infusion of the Spirit respects and works with the individuality of each recipient.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA:** Attraction to the idea of rich diversity, without fully realizing how radically it contradicts the sometimes prevailing, unspoken notion that only one way of acting and thinking is really cool.

**STARTER:** “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” — meaning, it only appears greener. Analogy: “grass” stands for each person’s particular gifts; the fence is un-climbable and unbreakable. Why keep staring at the “other” grass? What would happen to one’s own grass?

**LEADING QUESTIONS:** What did you get for your 0th birthday? [Gifts in seminal form at birth.]

**POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE:** Our gifts are among the building blocks of our specific sanctity. \* At the same time, these gifts “are given for the common good.” We may think our gifts are simply a matter of “just me doing what I do” and not appreciate them. Others’ gifts may seem more important, dramatic, exciting, fulfilling, etc. than our own. Learning from and being inspired by others is valid; wishing to be exactly like them is not. Due to human imperfection, the exercise of different gifts can sometimes cause friction, even in the Body of Christ.

## HOMILY

*Fr. James Smith*

### Love on Fire

Today we celebrate the birthday of the church. Ancient tradition has it that the church was formed on Calvary from the pierced heart of the dying Jesus, but that she actually began her mission on Pentecost. Because it was not until Pentecost, when the Spirit of Christ enlightened the minds of the disciples, that they fully believed. It was not until the Spirit pushed them into action that they were able to preach the Gospel that God had made a new covenant with humankind.

The idea of covenant, or alliance, is a central theme in scripture. If religion is a relationship between God and people, the basis of that relationship is a covenant, the everlasting guarantee of that relationship. The only thing that makes religion possible is the fact that God has entered into a covenant with us.

The key episode of the Old Testament is the Covenant on Mount Sinai, where, in the midst of wind and fire, God gave Moses the rules of the covenant: “I will be your God, you will be my people.” But the ultimate fulfillment of that covenant occurred on Pentecost, when, in the midst of wind and fire, the Holy Spirit appeared on the scene.

The apostles had hidden themselves in the Upper Room. They had created a ghetto within a hostile environment; they were praying for their lives against the people who had murdered their Master. They were terrified. But suddenly, they were filled with a Holy Spirit; they

began preaching with the assurance and authority of fire. The divine wind swept them off their feet, drove them out of their safe hiding; the divine fire set them ablaze with zeal for God’s Kingdom.

The blaze that began on Pentecost has gone through the centuries, growing, spreading, scorching. We have, on occasion, tried to escape from it, tried to ignore the beauty and terror of this raging energy. We have tamed it into a cozy, fire-side religion. In doing so, we have domesticated God, we have transformed the fire of the Upper Room into a flickering vigil light before the tabernacle.

But whatever we do, try as we might, the Spirit blows where it will. And we must finally be saved by fire, as St. Paul said. Jesus warned that he came to cast a fire on the earth; and we are called to be spirits of that flame, kindling others to spread the fire.

Now, fire is fanned by wind. That is the work of the Spirit — to fan the love of Christ into an uncontrollable blaze. Like wind, the Spirit cannot be captured or contained; it is neither liberal nor conservative: It is simply free. Like air, the Spirit is everywhere, ready to create a whirlwind when conditions are right. The peace that Christ came to give is not the absence of conflict — it is the eye of a tornado. Real peace is that deep-seated conviction of being free, Spirit-filled daughters and sons of the free God.

**MEDIA LINKS:** In the film “The Incredibles,” Elastigirl, Dash, Violet and Dad (Mr. Incredible) regain courage to exercise their specific superpowers (gifts) but find that the unity of family love is the greatest superpower of all, whereas envy leads Syndrome to hate what he first admired in Mr.

Incredible.

**QUOTATIONS:** \* “Be who you are and be it well.” Saint Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life. \* “It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.” (Maya Angelou.)



## Preaching Resources

**CELEBRATION:**  
A Comprehensive  
Worship Resource  
[www.celebrationpubs.org](http://www.celebrationpubs.org)

### ROMAN LECTIONARY

Trinity Sunday  
*Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9*  
*2 Corinthians 13:11-13*  
*John 3:16-18*

### REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Trinity Sunday  
*Genesis 1:1—2:4a*  
*Psalms 8*  
*2 Corinthians 13:11-13*  
*Matthew 28:16-20*

### ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

Trinity Sunday  
*Genesis 1:1—2:3*  
*2 Corinthians 13: (5-10) 11-14*  
*Matthew 28:16-20*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned an M. A. in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

## The Gift of Relationship

**W**e've all heard the stories, read the reports and have even seen movies or documentaries that portray the unspeakable suffering of growing up without the blessings of relationships. Too frequently, the evening news carries yet another segment detailing the tragedy of this child or that. The BBC once shared the story of a 9-year-old boy who had been kept isolated in a small garden shed since the age of 2. The boy was an illegitimate child whom his mother found burdensome and a source of shame. He was discovered when a 10-year-old named Ethan was visiting his aunt who lived in the London suburb of Wimbledon.

When Ethan heard strange noises coming from the neighbor's garden shed, he was curious and began to investigate. The shed was padlocked and its window was painted black, but there was a large makeshift letterbox on the door. Ethan peeked through its open slit only to be overwhelmed by a sickening stench. Just as he was about to turn away, he saw a pair of wild frightened eyes staring at him through the slit. Bolting out of the garden and back to the home of his aunt, Ethan told her what he had found.

Once the police arrived and demanded the key to the shed, they found a pitiable sight — cowering in the dark was the discarded child. Naked except for his long hair, the boy was filthy, hungry and unable to communicate except for frightened grunts. Though he was rescued and given special care, his back was so deformed that he never walked upright. Completely deprived of those relationships that lend a sense of self, offer security and create personality, the boy never regained his full human stature, either physically or emotionally.

But what has such a tragic experience to do with our celebration of the Trinity? Just as relationships are an integral and absolutely necessary aspect of authentic, healthy human growth and development, so are relationships an integral and absolutely necessary aspect of authentic, healthy and holy spiritual growth and development. Without human contact, the boy in the shed devolved and deteriorated. He didn't learn; he could not love. He did not realize his God-given potential because he had no one to affirm and guide his growth. While we can all join voices in decrying the cruelty and selfishness that would allow the loss of one of the most helpless members of society, the same indignation should be aroused by the loss of one's spiritual potential and growth. What we celebrate today on Trinity Sunday is the gift of God choosing to become known to us by offering each of us a share in the relationship that constitutes the three persons in one God. Without a willingness to share in the relationships that are God, we could become like the boy in the garden shed, alone, unfulfilled and spiritually stunted.

However — and this is the cause of our joy, particularly today — God has invited us in. God has created a welcome among the Persons of the Trinity wherein we will find our belonging and a secure rest in the love of a creative Father, in the warm, ever-present, revitalizing breath of an indwelling Mother and in the full embrace of a loving Brother who has taken our burdens of sin and weakness, suffering and death and has borne them for us as though they were his own. There, in the shelter of the fam-

*Without human contact, the boy in the shed devolved and deteriorated. He didn't learn; he could not love.*

ily that is God, we become who we have been called to be: children of God, heirs of heaven and brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Our relatedness to God necessarily relates us each to the other as members of the human family. If the gift of relationship is a necessary aspect of who God is, so also must our relationships with one another be valued as precious gifts for which we are daily grateful and which we are lovingly and continuously to tend. In reflecting upon our relatedness to God and to one another, Presbyterian preacher and author Fredrick Buechner (*The Hungering Dark*, Seabury Press, New York: 1969) does not offer his readers a conventional or traditional image to aid their understanding; no trio of interlocked circles or shamrocks for him. Rather, Buechner suggests that the web of a spider more aptly conveys the message of our relatedness. If you touch the spider's web anywhere, says Buechner, you set the whole thing trembling. As we move through and around this world and as we act with kindness, or with indifference, or with hostility toward the people we meet, we too are setting the great spider web a-tremble. The life that I touch will touch another life, and that, in turn, another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. God has set the spider web of all our relationships to trembling with love, with compassion and with a generous self-giving that sustains and supports each of us.

### EXODUS 34:4-6, 8-9

The term Trinity is never referenced as such in the Jewish scriptures and is present only in seminal form in the Christian Testament. The term as applied to God was first used only in the second or third century by the early church father Tertullian (ca. 145-220). Not officially defined until the great councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity may have been only gradual in development, but the experience of God as "triadic" was available to humankind from the beginning.

At the heart of the experience of

May 22, 2005

## Trinity Solemnity

### *The Gift of Relationship*



God, as reported in the scriptures, is the understanding that God is always in the process of self-revelation. Through the uncanny beauty, awesome wonders and magnificent order of the created universe, as well as through designated leaders, messengers, prophets, etc., the outward flow of self-communication on God's part invites a welcome and a response on the part of the believer. Revelation-and-response is the dual exchange that creates the rhythm of the scriptural story. God calls; humankind responds, but only because the very God who self-communicates with the human heart is the same God who creates in each heart the capacity to respond in faith. This triadic quality and triune experience of God characterized the covenant made by God with Israel through Moses; it became even more obvious in the new and eternal covenant made with all of humankind through Jesus.

Today's first reading represents the fulfillment of an earlier promise by God and should be appreciated in that context. In a beautifully sensitive and anthropomorphic narrative (see Exodus 33:18-23). Moses had asked, "Do let me see your glory!" Aware of Moses' great desire but also aware

of his limitations, God responded, "I will make all my beauty pass before you and in your presence I will pronounce my name but my face you cannot see, for no one sees God and lives." Then God instructed Moses to position himself in the cleft of a rock and promised, "When my glory passes I will set you in the hollow of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand that you may see my back." After this experience, Moses was instructed to meet God on Sinai with two stone tablets. It is at this point in the narrative that God's promise is fulfilled, as reflected in today's excerpted first reading.

Present to Moses and symbolized by the cloud (v. 5), the Lord God renewed the relationship that the Israelites had broken by their infidelity (see Exodus 34:1). Symbolic of God's presence in the wilderness and on Sinai, the cloud was also a feature of apocalyptic literature, wherein it was promised that one like a Son of Man would come upon the clouds to judge all the peoples of the earth (Daniel 7:13). Through the cloud on Sinai, God was revealed to Moses as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity" (vv. 6-7).

Also featured in the Christian scriptures, the cloud signaled the divinity of Jesus (Luke 9:34-35; Acts 1:9) and heralded the arrival of the last days (Mark 13:26). The early church fathers suggested that the cloud and the cleft in the rock were vivid portents of the incarnation. By virtue of becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus, God did not merely "pass by and allow humankind a glimpse of glory" (Exodus 33:22). On the contrary, the incarnation was the supreme act of self-communication whereby God became physically and personally involved in the human experience. On this feast of the Trinity, we celebrate God's personal involvement and relationship with us as Father, as Son and Brother, as Spirit and Life.

### 2 CORINTHIANS 13: 11-13

In his book entitled *A Confession*, Russian author Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)



offered his insight into the importance of love for sustaining the relationships within the human community. "People think," wrote Tolstoy, "that there are circumstances where one may deal with human beings without love, but no such circumstances ever exist. Inanimate objects may be dealt with without love: We may fell trees, bake bricks or hammer iron without love. But human beings cannot be handled without love, any more than bees can be handled without care. That is the nature of bees. If you handle bees carelessly, you will harm the bees as well as yourself. And so it is with people and it cannot be otherwise, because mutual love is the fundamental law of human life."

Paul would have agreed with Tolstoy regarding the necessity of love for forming and maintaining the relationships that make us a community, bound to God in triadic ties and to one another as well. This Paul reaffirms in today's second reading. Always the pastor looking out for the welfare of his charges, Paul calls for a mending of their ways. Earlier in his letters, he had referenced a veritable "hornet's nest" of problems and issues that were proving to be divisive and destructive: playing favorites regarding the appeal of certain preachers; an attempt to overlook the wisdom of the cross in favor of worldly wisdom; an incestuous relationship allowed to go unchecked; disputes over idol meat; wrangling over spiritual gifts; misconduct at Eucharist and doubts concerning the resurrection.

Carefully, and with respect for their humanity and their belonging to Christ, Paul corrected the mistakes of the Corinthians and never failed to encourage them to give themselves over to that quality of mutual loving that would maintain peace and harmony among them. That harmony, insists Paul, will assure the church at Corinth of the abiding presence of the God of love and peace. A consensus of scholars agrees that the "holy kiss" mentioned in v. 12 is probably a reference to the greeting of peace customarily exchanged at the breaking of the bread, or Eucharist. Indeed, the eucharistic gathering provided an appropriate context within which

to admit fault, repair relationships and strengthen the bonds of mutual reverence and love that would protect the unity and prompt the growth and development of a stronger community life.

### JOHN 3:16-18

Part of Nicodemus' evening encounter with the Johannine Jesus, this text offers a verbal portrait of God that is at once so surprising and disarming that the Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin would probably never have imagined it on his own. Calling Nicodemus "thickheaded" (a characteristic not unique to Nicodemus), Gerard P. Weber and Robert Miller (*Breaking Open the Gospel of John*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati: 1995) suggest that his vision of God and how God works was too limited. Of course, he knew of God's power to work in wondrous ways, but Nicodemus could not make the connection between what God had done for Israel and what God was continuing to do for all the world in Jesus. During that nighttime meeting with Jesus, however, Nicodemus was challenged to do just that — to surrender all his images, ideas and preconceptions about how God "should" act and accept the new and startling insights into the nature of God that Jesus offered.

With one brief statement, Jesus obviated all philosophical, theological and mystical musings about God that fell short of who God is and how God acts. In two simple words, Jesus

defined God's relationship with humankind: *love* and *life*.

God's love defies qualification or quantification. Beyond human understanding, God's love defies human logic in that it is a love that is heaped upon the sinful, weak and rebellious in order to cultivate a relationship that benefits not God the Lover, but those who are God's beloved. This illogical love was and is the hallmark of all God's dealings with humankind.

God's great love for an undeserving world was given its most personal and eloquent expression in the gift of Jesus. Human beings are the blessed recipients of God's gratuitous love, and our purest and best response to that love is faith, a quality of believing that translates conscious and deliberate choice into loving, committed, filial service. To believe is to know Jesus; to love and believe in Jesus is to have eternal life.

In a comment on this Johannine text, Martin Luther once described it as a "gospel in miniature." It proclaims fully, in only a few words, the incredible dimensions of God's love as well as the salvific consequences of that love in human history. This miniature gospel continues to witness to God's love in some of the most interesting places; it appears on signs held up by fans at sporting events and on the sides of buses and subway cars. As believers, we are to be living signs and placards that witness to the world of the great gift of God's love that we have come to know and experience in Jesus Christ.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

Dorothy Day, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, once wrote: "We have all known the long loneliness. And we know that the answer is love, love in community."

In serving the poor with a simple hospitality, Day encountered both the hard realities of the human condition and the essential Gospel message that God has come among us to form us into community. Community is where all our gifts and all our needs fit together and where our great diversity finds unity. Love in community is the answer to our most basic hunger — to belong, to be welcomed and cherished as we really are.

On this feast of the Trinity, we should not be surprised to know that God is a community of love. When we come out of loneliness into community, we model the inner life of God. In community, together in love, we reveal the image and likeness of God.

## Preaching to Youth

*Jim Auer*

KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA: Our reaction and response to “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life.”

BACKGROUND NOTE: This could be considered the central verse in Christian scripture; all other passages either lead to it or flow from it. “Jn 3:16” is frequently seen on signs along highways and on banners at athletic stadiums.

HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA: Intellectual assent with genuine gratitude but perhaps without full realization that this is the core reality of our very life and existence.

STARTER: Propose these two reactions to statements that will follow: a) “Yeah, I know, that’s real nice.” b) “WHAT? REALLY? YOU’RE ... NOT KIDDING? OH MY GOD! That’s almost too good to be true! Oh my God — I’m speechless!” Which one fits each of these statements: 1) “There’s a pack of bologna in the fridge.” 2) “You have just won five billion dollars.” 3) “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...”

LEADING QUESTIONS: What is your reaction to Jn 3:16? Has there been a time (e.g., a retreat or other religious experience) when you really felt the impact of that message?

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE: \* This message can be like the windowpane we look through but seldom notice because we’re focused on what’s outside (the details of our daily lives). \* God’s love is not a mechanical “company policy and procedure.” It is the passionate and active love of the Trinity.

\* Why and how we sometimes pray to the Father, Son and Spirit individually. \* Our need to appreciate and respond to this immense love.

MEDIA LINKS: Bruce (Jim Carrey): “How do you make someone love you without affecting free will?” God (Morgan Freeman): “Welcome to my world, son. When you get that one figured out, let me know.” (From the movie “Bruce Almighty.”)

## HOMILY

*Fr. James Smith*

# God in the World

John wrote that God sent his Son into our world to save it, not to condemn it. And those who believe in him will live forever.

But what is faith in these faithless days? Most biblical stories of faith are concerned with unusual happenings: curing lepers, driving out demons, raising people from the dead. And, further back, Abraham sacrificing his son and God speaking from a burning bush. What does faith have to do with ordinary people and things?

There is a great theological debate these days about the ultimate meaning of our world. On one side is the wonderful world of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, where matter is spiritualized and people are evolving toward perfect union with Christ. On the other side is the black-and-white world of Karl Rahner, where the City of Man and the City of God go their separate ways, and the final state of the church might be a return to the catacombs.

These are not just ivory-tower theories. They profoundly affect the way we do practical religion; they set up the religious climate we live in. The world has definitely come into its own — it is finding its way without God. People have come of age and have outgrown ancient deities. The sacred has become secular; the secular sacred. This may be good or bad; we may sorrow or rejoice. But nothing, including faith, will ever be the same again.

That is why each of us has to take up a faith-stance toward the world. And we better do it quickly: The world moves on as we flounder. And we have other problems to solve and people to meet and miles to go before we sleep. The world is already too much with us, yet we have to come to terms with it. Because faith exists only in this world that Jesus

came to save.

So, what is faith? Faith is saying “yes” to God. But that “yes” is said here and now, where the questions are asked, where the needs cry out, where God makes himself felt. Faith is the power that enables us to live in tension, even in pain. A person of faith does not ignore the facts of life. A person of faith is one who sees in the absurdities of life the raw material of a meaningful existence. Faith is believing in something you cannot prove and underwriting it with your life.

Faith is many things, none of them easy. It is seeing God in our world as surely as Abraham and Moses saw God in their world. But what makes us think it was so easy for them? When were you commanded to kill your child? And I have never spoken to God in a burning bush. Yet, if God exists, God must be as present here in this place as he was in Cana. Here and now there are sons to be sacrificed and bushes bursting with God, if we have eyes to see. God must be here and now or nowhere.

But we have loved the past too long. We have saved the faith but neglected to spend it. We have deposited it in creeds and hoped that our children would live off the interest, forgetting the fact that each generation must build its own faith from the ground up. We have lately learned that we cannot hand on bricks in place of faith. As Jesus said, “When a child asks for bread, will you give her a stone?”

Faith is saying “yes” to what *is*, not what used to be. And what *is* is getting more alien day by day to our faith. In the new world order and the new church order, there will be days that bring little joy or comfort. On those days, there will be nothing to do but cling with blind conviction to the vision we once saw clearly.

# Body and Blood



## Preaching Resources

### CELEBRATION:

A Comprehensive  
Worship Resource  
[www.celebrationpubs.org](http://www.celebrationpubs.org)

### ROMAN LECTIONARY

Body and Blood of Christ  
*Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16*  
*1 Corinthians 10:16-17*  
*John 6:51-58*

### REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Proper 4 (9)  
*Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19*  
*Psalm 46*  
or  
*Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28*  
*Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24*  
*Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28, (29-31)*  
*Matthew 7:21-29*

### ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

Proper 4  
*Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28*  
*Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24*  
*Romans 3:21-25a, 28*  
*Matthew 7:21-27*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned an M. A. in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

## The Gift of Nourishment

**D**uring World War II, the officers of the Third Reich's secret service forcefully recruited many 12- and 13-year-old boys into the Junior Gestapo. The harshly treated boys were given only inhumane jobs that they were to perform without rest or complaint.

After the war ended, most had lost contact with their families and wandered aimlessly, without food or shelter. As part of an aid program to rebuild postwar Germany, many of these youths were housed in tent cities. There, doctors and nurses worked with them in an attempt to restore their physical, mental and emotional health.

Many of the boys would awaken several times during the night screaming in terror. One doctor had an idea for handling their fears. After serving the boys a hearty meal, he'd tuck them into bed with a piece of bread in their hands that they were told to save until morning. The boys began to sleep soundly after that because, after so many years of hunger and uncertainty as to their next meal, they finally had the assurance of food for the next day.

Isn't this precisely the assurance Jesus gave to satisfy the fears and daily hungers of his disciples? Not only would the prayer he taught them be answered ("Give us this day our daily bread"), but Jesus also became the living bread from heaven and gave himself, body and blood, as eucharistic food for their continuing sustenance and support. Jesus, through his saving sacrifice on the cross, became the living Bread, blessed, broken and given to each of us to hold in our hand as assurance against the struggles and losses and hungers of this life. This gift of bread from Jesus provides not only the

food that nourishes our bodies but also the bread of his abiding and real eucharistic presence to nourish our spirits. Today we celebrate Jesus' gifts of physical and spiritual nourishment, gifts that hold at bay the demons of fear and want, gifts that enable us to have the security of living serenely each day and sleeping soundly through each night.

In today's first reading, the author of Deuteronomy affirms in us the understanding that the bread with which we are nourished does not satisfy mere physical hungers. Although these hungers are not to be neglected, and although it is necessary to nourish the whole person, the bread God gives also takes the form of a living Word that feeds the spirit and challenges and chastens the will. To live by the bread that comes forth from the mouth of God requires a willingness to listen, to grow, to change and to be transformed by the Word. This will require that we take the Word and all its challenges seriously and not selectively and that we remain continually open to being surprised and perhaps even stunned by the demands of God's Word in our lives, in our world.

Paul, in today's second reading from his Corinthian correspondence, recalls for the praying assembly the ancient tradition that those who eat together signify by their sharing a belonging to and a responsibility for one another. This bond is such that the unity shared is mutually valued and protected. If even ordinary shared meals can evoke a sense of communion

*After serving the boys a hearty meal, he'd tuck them into bed with a piece of bread in their hands that they were told to save until morning.*



and mutual caring, how much more does the ultimate shared meal, the Eucharist?

Today's Johannine Gospel affirms that the gift of Jesus as Bread was and continues to be a challenge to the faithful. Jesus' offer of living bread, i.e., his flesh for the life of the world, caused consternation, dissent and fractiousness among his contemporaries. They questioned and quarreled and some parted company with Jesus. Others clung to him and to his gift of living bread in faith. Unfortunately, even though the Eucharist has been "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen Gentium*, #11) for almost two millennia, the source of our unity is also the cause of our disunity.

To better appreciate the gift we celebrate today, Ray R. Noll (*Sacraments, A New Understanding for a New Generation*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, Conn.: 1999) suggests that we approach Eucharist as one would approach a perfect diamond, like the Hope diamond with its 64 facets. As we look at the "diamond" of Eucharist from different angles, each facet reflects some aspect of this great gift. Eucharist is at once a togetherness meal, a thanksgiving prayer, a memorial, a holy sacrifice, our holy communion and, as Thomas Aquinas has said, "a pledge of future glory." Amid the various dimensions that constitute Eucharist, past, present and future, there is also a continuing challenge to accept Jesus' gift as sacrament, as real, as genuine and as life-altering; or to relegate these gifts to the safe realm of the symbolic, where their challenge can be readily deferred. In celebrating Jesus' challenging gift of nourishment today and every day, let us also be aware that the sacred food Jesus offers also provides us with the strength and stamina to face the challenge of faith and proclaim with the man in Mark's Gospel, "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief!" (9:24).

## DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3, 14-16

"God is all to you: if you are hungry, God is bread; if thirsty, God is water; if darkness, God is light; if naked, God is a robe of immortality." These

May 29, 2005

# Body and Blood of Christ

## Solemnity

### *The Gift of Nourishment*



are the words of Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who did not discover that God was his all until midway through his life. When he did make that discovery, Augustine lived the remainder of his years passionately hungering for deeper awareness of God. When the Israelites whom Moses led out of slavery in Egypt were sojourning in the wilderness, they had a similar experience of God. God was indeed their all, one who fed their hungers, who guided their way, who healed and forgave their sins, who protected them amid the perils of the desert.

But like so many of us who grow accustomed to and even take for granted the many goodnesses of God, Israel had to be continually reminded of who God is and how God loves so as to remain faithful in their following of God's will. *Remember, remember* is the refrain that punctuates Israel's story ... *remember* God, *remember* God's deeds, and so *remember* who you are to be before God.

All of the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy may be appreciated as an *anamnesis* or an act of remembrance of the wilderness experience, but its central focus is on God, who made the trek and Israel's survival possible. Through all its trials — through hun-

ger, thirst, through saraph serpents and scorpions as well as through all its blessings of manna, quail and water from the rock — Israel was to learn dependence on God, trust in God and hope.

Filled with the daily gift of manna, the Israelites were to look beyond the gift to the Giver and beyond all the other expressions of love to the God who loved them. By gratefully remembering all God's gifts, they were to become more sensitive and more aware of the much greater gift of God's Word. To that end, readers of this text are enjoined, "not by bread alone shall you live but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God."

A word may be spoken with the tongue or written with a pen; it may be a gesture or a series of impulses along a wire or even a signal bounced off a satellite. A word, then, is an external act that carries a meaning. A word of God is any expression from the divine source that signifies God's intent for humankind. Therefore, as Christians, we call Jesus the Word of God, for in him is God's supreme gesture and God's most eloquent expression of love. Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, has continued God's ongoing conversation with sinners, making the most sacred gesture — the sacrifice of himself on the cross — and speaking the most eloquent expression of love by giving himself as bread, as food, through the sojourn of our lives.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 10: 16-17

For greater clarity in understanding these words of Paul, it may prove helpful to examine their context as they form part of a longer exhortation (vv. 14-22) concerning Christian participation in social activities. As Richard B. Hays (*First Corinthians*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1997) has pointed out, some of these social activities included the sharing of a meal, such as Jewish meals in conjunction with sacrifice (v. 18) or meals given to honor a pagan god or gods (vv. 19-21). Each meal was thought to create a relationship of fellowship or *koinonia* among the participants



as well as between the participants and the deity being honored. To participate in a cultic meal could not be considered an indifferent or neutral act; on the contrary, it served as an outward sign of an inner allegiance and acceptance.

Therefore Paul was firm in emphasizing, for the Corinthians and for all his readers, the unique importance of their eucharistic participation. With language borrowed from the Jewish Passover meal, Paul described the cup of blessing of the Christian Eucharist as a participation in the blood of Christ. Similarly, the breaking of the bread unites believers as one *with* and *in* the body of Christ. In both acts (cup and bread, blood and body), those present participate not only in the eating and drinking but in all the saving moments of the Christ-event.

Notice Paul's shift from a sacramental and Christological understanding of the body of Christ (v. 16) to an ecclesiological understanding of that body as the church united with Jesus as its head (v. 17). Paul would have his readers appreciate the idea that the body and blood of Christ (the Eucharist) creates and feeds the body of Christ (the church). Moreover, participation in the sacramental body and blood of Christ meant incorporation into, participation in and responsibility for the body of Christ, the church.

Roland Faley (*Footprints on the Mountain*, Paulist Press, New York: 1994) credits Paul for reminding believers of the social dimension of the Eucharist. The one loaf is shared in Asia, Africa and North and South America. It is the one loaf of which the rich and the poor, the lowly and the exalted, the powerful and the powerless partake together; sharing the one loaf makes brothers and sisters of us all.

Within Christianity, there are no first- and second-class dining rooms because worship creates a sharing that goes beyond the altar and the pew into all the other experiences of life. At each eucharistic encounter, those who gather to share the one cup and the one loaf are called on to affirm their faith in Christ and in the community that is the church. When the eucharistic gifts of nourishment are offered, we

respond before eating, "Amen." To answer "Amen" to the sacrament of the Eucharist is also to answer "Amen" to the praying assembly there present and throughout the world. To answer "Amen" but to fail to live in accord with that response is a contradiction to the intent and purpose of the Eucharist, which is to sustain the communion of all believers with Christ and with one another in Christ.

### JOHN 6:51-58

In one of his thoughtful reflections on Jesus' gift of nourishment, Henri Nouwen (*Jesus, A Gospel*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 2001) emphasized the greatness and absoluteness of that gift. In the Eucharist, wrote Nouwen, Jesus gives all. The bread is not simply a sign of his desire to become our food; the cup is not just a sign of his willingness to be our drink. Bread and wine become his body and blood in the giving. The bread, indeed, is his body given for us; the wine is his blood poured out for us. As God becomes fully present for us in Jesus, so Jesus becomes fully present to us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. God does not hold back; God gives all. That is the mystery of the Incarnation; that, too, is the mystery of the Eucharist. Therefore, to persist in the supposition that the gift Jesus gave is merely symbolic or sapiential in character (as in, "the bread Jesus gave is that of his teaching") seems tantamount to a denial that God and Jesus have the power and capacity to give the living bread from heaven to

answer every human hunger.

Nevertheless, Jesus' gift, as narrated by the Johannine author, was met (see John 6:60, 66) at the outset and continues to be met by some with doubt, disbelief and a desire to dilute the incredible import of his giving. It is clear from their reaction to him that Jesus' contemporaries understood that he was truly offering himself as food and drink. In contrast to the synoptic accounts of the Eucharist, which refer to "body and blood," the fourth evangelist speaks of "flesh and blood." Raymond E. Brown (*The Gospel According to John*, Doubleday, New York: 1970) explains that "eating flesh and drinking blood" were actions that were totally abhorrent to Jews (see Psalm 27:2; Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; Jeremiah 46:10). "Flesh and blood" was also, however, a designation used in the Jewish scriptures to describe human life, flesh and blood meaning the living person. In the flesh and blood — that is, in the life — of Jesus, believers are fed; in that same flesh and blood, the Eucharist, believers encounter God.

In Jesus' gift of his flesh and blood as eucharistic bread and wine, we meet the Jesus of the cross, the risen Lord, the exalted Lord of all eternity, and we also meet and commune with one another. Let us eat and drink in faith, and let our faith be translated into that mutual caring, loving and giving that will offer authentic witness to each and every sacramental encounter with the Lord. Body of the eucharistic Christ: Amen. Body of the ecclesial Christ: Amen.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

There was a poor old man who could only afford soup for lunch each day. He always went to the same restaurant, and every time, he complained about only getting two slices of bread to go with his soup.

So the restaurant owner gave him three slices, but he still complained. Days later he was up to half a loaf. Finally, even a full loaf brought the same complaint, "Not enough bread!" Determined to win at this, the frustrated restaurant owner took a huge 2-foot-long loaf of French bread, sliced it lengthwise and buttered it liberally.

The old man asked, "How come you're back to only two slices again?"

Like the old man, we will never get enough earthly bread. What we really want is the bread of God's life in the body of Jesus Christ.

## Preaching to Youth

*Jim Auer*

KEY VERSE(S) and/or MAIN IDEA: (Gospel) “The bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” “He [the one] who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal.” “For my flesh is real food and my blood real drink.”

HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS/MAIN IDEA: It is probably realistic to note that different Catholic youth, depending on the depth of their religious instruction (beyond their control), may possess a full understanding of the Eucharist or something of a symbolic memorial view. While one homily cannot fill all gaps or provide all needed strengthening, it can be a step toward that goal.

STARTER: Some entertainment celebrities and sports stars are applauded for being so “down to earth” in person. “You’d never know he/she was famous or so important.” “It was just like talking with an old friend.” In Jesus, in the Eucharist, we have the instance of Someone who was and is literally “down to earth,” with and among us (Emmanuel).

LEADING QUESTIONS: If you were about to meet someone famous whom you admired, how would you feel? What preparations would you make? What would you hope for? How would you describe your meeting with Christ in Communion?

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE: \* Our understanding of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. \* Our reception of the Eucharist makes us physically closer to Jesus than even the apostles were — a breathtaking reality. \* Usually we receive the Eucharist in a community setting, a shared sacramental meal. This tells us much about how Jesus wants to be present among us. \* The real meaning of “reverence” — not necessarily a hushed silence based on near-fear, but a realization of whom we are meeting and celebrating. \* The many possibilities of “what to do” after receiving Communion, tuning out not being a good or reverential choice.

## HOMILY

*Fr. James Smith*

# Good, Better, Best

In today’s first reading, Moses reminds the people of how God kept them alive from day to day by sending manna from heaven. In the Gospel, Jesus says that he is the new bread from heaven that will keep them alive forever. Paul tells us how this happens: When we eat the living body of Christ at Mass, we become his body.

People do not live on bread alone. We can exist on bread, but to live a human life, we need to give things human values. Bread symbolizes the body of life; wine symbolizes the blood of life. Without these human interpretations, we are barbarians eking out a bare survival. The liturgy transforms these merely physical elements into religious realities: Bread and wine become the sacramental body and blood of Christ. Then we become the mystical body of Christ by eating and drinking his body and blood. The Mass thus situates our life on the boundary of heaven and earth.

Liturgy is rightly called “the work of the people” because it is our contribution to God’s creation. But liturgy, like everything else, is primarily God’s work. Liturgy brings all of time to bear on this present moment: It recalls the past, makes it effective in the present and anticipates the future. Jews celebrated their past deliverance from slavery, their present life in the Promised Land and their expectation of a future Messiah.

But since Christians have been given a Savior, he is now the center of our liturgy. At every Mass, we celebrate his death and resurrection in the past, his living among us in the present and his coming again in future glory. That makes hope the major chord of our liturgy — the expectation that God always has greater things in store for us. God’s actions in the past are

promises of even greater things in the future.

For the Jews, deliverance from slavery was good, but the Promised Land was better. The Promised Land was good, but the Temple was better. God’s presence in the Temple was good, but his presence in the flesh would be better. So they celebrated these past events in their liturgy, always hoping for more. Next year in Jerusalem!

If we are to have better liturgy, we have to believe that the future promises more than we have already experienced, that we can do even better things than Jesus did, because he said we could. We must believe that God brings the heavenly kingdom to earth through us, that because God hopes in us, we are obliged to hope in ourselves.

Remember when we thought that every one of us had a personal responsibility to each other and to the church and to the world? Remember when we believed that what we did mattered, that we had a mission in life? Whatever happened to all of that hope?

Scripture warns that “where there is no vision, the people perish.” Our vision has been blurred by the complexity of life, the confusion of values, the welter of insoluble problems. Scripture offers a vision: a kingdom of justice and peace and love — not someday in heaven, but here on earth, whenever we are ready to live that way.

Then when we come together for sacred liturgy, we have something to celebrate. But if we have not been inspired by some vision, if we have not done the work of the people all week, what is there to celebrate?

Except the work of God, which always goes on. And the hope that we will come to our work next Sunday better prepared to celebrate.