

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
May 7, 2017 - Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:1-10

Today's gospel includes one of the most memorable and important lines in all the gospels: "I come so that they may have life and have it more abundantly." It's a great line for those of us who are "dreamers" and who look forward to enjoying better times. We may rarely be satisfied but that's okay because we can always imagine a better future. We like the song, "To Dream the Impossible Dream" but we focus only on the "dream" part and not the "impossible" part. We want "more abundance" but we are not sure what this means or how to achieve *our* personal "more."

Jesus was a dreamer and is very good at giving us ideas and images to help us understand the nature of living an abundant life. But his dreams may not equate with what we dream for. Here are some of my dreams: To live with good health. To have enough financial resources to make ends meet. To see our children and grandchildren happy and enjoying their lives. To know that poverty and hunger are being reduced around the world. To live in a world where there is less warfare and belligerence. To have my favorite teams do better in 2017 than in 2016. (Personal aside: I am a Notre Dame graduate.)

What would Jesus say about my list of dreams? My guess is that he would say that those were good dreams but they are not exactly what he was thinking about when he said that he was offering us "a more abundant life."

To receive what Jesus offered was to find it by passing through the Good Shepherd's gate. And that gate is a symbol for the kind of life that Jesus lived. So, what were his dreams for a more abundant life? The gospels give us a clue. To give of ourselves, our presence, our time and our resources for others. In other words, to help others live more fully as good people. To engage in the works of mercy like feeding the hungry (which means more than food) and so forth. We live "more abundantly" when we help others (not ourselves) to experience abundance.

This kind of help is available in families and in the everyday circumstances of our lives where we recognize the needs of others. So, when we desire the abundant life promised by Jesus, look for opportunities to assist others. Recall the words of Jesus: For in giving, we will receive.

David Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
May 14, 2017 - Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 14:1-12

I am at an age where some people are saying that I look like my father at the same age. I don't see that but I must add that I don't look in the mirror that much. In fact, the last time I *really* looked at myself in a mirror was when I was a teenager. And if I recall correctly, I wasn't impressed with what I saw.

Today's gospel has Jesus saying something like this: if we want to see "the Father," (this was, of course, a reference to God) we would see God in Jesus. "Whoever sees me has seen the Father." When people noted a seeming resemblance between my father and me, they were describing a physical similarity. Is this what today's gospel suggests about Jesus and his father?

The answer is yes and no. Yes, observing Jesus will give to his followers (and us, today) evidence of "what God looks like." But no, if we are limiting ourselves to something like physical similarity. Rather, to use a common Biblical image, when we look at the *heart* of Jesus (that is the love that is within him), we will see the heart of God.

One of the more common images of Jesus in modern Catholicism is that of the Sacred Heart. Church historians suggest that devotion to the Sacred Heart was created to counter an existing view in recent centuries that God the Father was more a stern judge than a loving father. Devotion to the Sacred Heart grew quickly in Catholic circles. People were drawn to the warmth and love that spread from the heart of Jesus.

It is not surprising that people would want to see even a small glimpse of God. Yet our faith teaches us that God is totally outside the realm of creation because God is the cause, the source, the origin of all creation. God is not part of creation. God can only be "imaged" in creation indirectly. Some will use the example of an artistic creation and say that something of the artist can be found in the artist's work. Fair enough. But we want more. And we should.

That's where Jesus comes in. Jesus was deeply connected with God. And the connection was so strong and so close that Jesus said that when he was observed, especially through his loving actions, we were seeing God. In fact, *we were seeing God*. This was indeed a bold assertion. Do we believe it?

David Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
May 21, 2017 - Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 14:15-21

What does it feel like to be an orphan? Due to widespread emigration and forced migration, today's world has an abundance of orphans. Their parents might have been killed in various civil wars or through starvation, which sadly is still rampant in some parts of the world. How ironic this is given that one of the major health hazards in prosperous countries is obesity.

Of course, there were even orphans during the time of Jesus. How many is only a guess but we do know that children who lost both parents were often left to find their own way. We can only imagine how lonely and how frightening it would be to not have the protection and care of a family.

Jesus wanted to assure his followers that God would remain with them no matter what. They would never be left alone. His physical departure from them would initiate another form of God being with them - and with us. God's Holy Spirit would be there - wherever they went, whatever they did. God's Spirit would dwell within their hearts.

So why do we need to be told about this? The answer is simple. We need to be reminded, over and over again, of God's immediate presence because we forget about this! In matters of the spirit, we are terribly forgetful. We all have the disease of *spiritual amnesia*.

The problem is not that God is absent because God is always with us. The problem is that we are often absent from God. We fill our God Spot (as some put it) with junk, with trivia, with idle gossip (Pope Francis recently mentioned this), with useless worries, with statistics of ball scores and batting averages, with noise from the barking of politicians and celebrities, with all the stuff that is sent our way through the media of our time.

So, what's the solution? First, we need to know that our forgetfulness of God's presence is not God's fault. It's ours. Our religious tradition does offer some time-tested remedies for spiritual amnesia. One is silence where we quiet the sounds around us and in us and think of God. Imagine God right next to us, which God is. Knowing this is *our* problem is part of finding God's Spirit within.

David Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for the home
May 28, 2017 – Seventh Sunday of Easter
John 17:1-12

When I listen to or read the Sunday gospel, I try to find a word or phrase that directly speaks to me. As they say, it "jumps off the page." Over the years, as I read the gospels, what I notice sometimes changes. This week the sentence that caught my attention was this: "I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you have given me to do." Jesus was praying to his Father during the Last Supper. For his disciples gathered around him, he was sharing with them how he understood his life and what he was called to do. He was summarizing his vocation.

Could we not also say much the same in our prayer to God? We each have come into the world with a purpose that was given to us by our Creator. We're not just numbers on a chart or a random group of creatures scattered here and there. We are persons who were thought about by God, as the Bible says, even before we were in our mother's womb. In that sense, we are individually known by God and created by God right from the start. We can trace our existence back to God's personal love for each of us. But that's not the whole story.

We are also created to know, love and serve God - as the catechism said on its first page. We are created to do something - maybe many things. One way the church has described this reality is by saying that we are called by God to specific roles that accomplish specific tasks. The "call" of God in *Latin* is the word "vocatio," which, translated into English is the word, *vocation*.

For centuries, the idea of vocation was restricted to specific roles in the church, like that of a priest or a vowed religious. But with Vatican II's expanded understanding of the church, the laity (which are most of us) were also said to have vocations. Referring to the words of today's gospel, we all are called to accomplish the work given to us by God.

So, what is your vocation? Some of us can be described as having a variety of vocations. Perhaps it includes being a dedicated parent. Or a good farmer. Or a conscientious business person. Or an astronaut, a truck driver or a dental technician. We can look upon all these ways of making a living as not only a way to make ends meet, but also a way to serve God in this world. In the end, we would all like to say with Jesus, that we have accomplished the work that was given to us by God.

David Thomas, PhD