

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel thought for the home*  
*September 3, 2017 - 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matt. 16:21-27*

The word *gospel* comes from a word that describes a positive communication or good news being communicated. It refers to a message that contains something good, something pleasing to hear. Like my grown son saying to me, "Dad, I just got a raise. You don't have to send me money anymore," or when my dentist says to me, "David, no cavities this time." Yes, these announcements are good news or "gospel" messages to me.

The New Testament contains four gospels, each of which contain hundreds of mini-gospels. Some describe the wonderful deeds of Jesus like that time he fed thousands who had gathered to hear his inspired words with only five loaves of bread and two fish. Or when he called his friend, the recently departed Lazarus, from his tomb and Lazarus came forth with a big smile on his face. We expect the gospels to give us many instances of good news.

In the gospel for today we hear the words of Jesus that Peter (who often responds to Jesus in ways like we might) did not want to hear. After hearing Jesus describe what was going to happen to him, Peter says, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing will ever happen to you."

What was it that Peter did not want to hear? (And that we might not want to hear either?) It was that Jesus was going to suffer a terrible ending and that he would die on a cross. Peter knew that this was a terrible way to go. It was humiliating, degrading and yes, a death involving great suffering. In Peter's mind, this was not "good news." it was the opposite.

The response of Jesus to Peter is both clear and unsettling. God has a plan for the life of Jesus. It involves "carrying his cross" and his eventual death. According to Jesus, this is good news. This is because in God's plan for Jesus and for everyone else, there will be times of suffering, of taking up our own cross and following Jesus. For the most part, we will not have to go looking for our cross. Crosses are given to us. For some, the cross involves physical suffering, for others it may involve emotional struggles. But through our sufferings and difficulties, we will find a deeper, a better life that is given to us by God.

So, in this gospel reading we learn that God's ways may not always be what we might choose. With faith and hope, however, we can be transformed into something wonderful, something that makes us more alive and closer to what God intends for us.

David Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel thought for the home*  
*September 10, 2017 – 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matt. 18:15-20*

Some words of Jesus seem like they are written with indelible ink in our minds and hearts. Today's gospel includes one of my favorites, one that I like very much, but also find quite challenging. Although Catholics are not known for remembering Bible verses, most will recognize this one. "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Matthew 18:20.

This part of Matthew's gospel deals not only with God's relationship with us but also our connection with each other. To put it simply, God wants us to get along with others, our family, our neighbors, the people we work with, the people who add up our grocery bill, strangers we encounter while walking, people who have annoying pets, government officials and our parish priest (if we have one).

If you are like me, living in positive relationships with others isn't always easy. Sometimes I find this among the hardest challenges of my faith. A French philosopher once said that hell is *other people*! I don't subscribe to that view, but I can imagine someone saying that.

The constant desire of God's Spirit is that we get along with each other, help each other when needed and if we find ourselves distanced from others, we should try and grow closer. God works like a gravitational force drawing us toward being a loving community. Who said that we should love one another as God loves us? We should all know the answer to that question.

For many, this desire of God begins with family. And at times, family ties can become quite difficult. In families, there is often tension over simple things like who gets the most stuff or who does the least work. Family life can easily be the place where we turn mole hills into mountains. A stray word or a simple "look" can ignite tensions.

But let's not forget that there is also a very positive side to these words of Jesus. Not only is God there in our difficulties, God is also present during our good times with others. Pope Francis is on record reminding families to have fun, to have parties. One of his favorite words is "joy." Joy is a gift from God. It's a sign that God is not only present in us but also between us. When we celebrate a holiday (a word derived from the words "holy day") think of God being there with you. Remember that the first miracle of Jesus happened at a wedding feast where he kept the celebration going in a rather remarkable way. In sharing happiness and good food, God is there to enjoy it with us.

David Thomas, PhD

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel thought for the home*  
*September 17, 2017 – 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matt. 18:21-35*

Every time I read today's gospel passage, part of me says, "Jesus, aren't you exaggerating when it comes to matters of forgiveness?" We all at times exaggerate - it's part of our nature. Maybe Jesus also does the same.

Jesus offers a wonderful account of forgiveness by using an example from the world of loaning money (which remains an issue in our world). Let's suppose, he says, that someone's had a large debt payment due, say \$1000, but through the "compassion" of the one who loaned the money, he was forgiven that large debt. Then that same forgiven person turns around and will not forgive someone who owes him only a dollar. He even has that person "tortured." This is not a pleasant scene. Clearly, there is something very wrong going on.

Once again, the gospel uses Peter to represent a certain kind of common sense that might be a reaction to what Jesus had said. The question raised by Jesus concerns how much we should forgive those who have offended us in some way or who owe us something. Knowing that Jesus is likely thinking of a large number, Peter suggests that we should forgive seven times. "Seven" is also a biblical number representing "a lot."

We know what comes next. Peter's number is well short of what Jesus was calling for. "How about seventy-seven times seven?" Jesus responds. Peter quickly does the math. He realizes that this is *really* a large number. And he's right. When it comes to matters of forgiveness, our generosity is to be virtually unlimited. And that's because God's mercy and forgiveness is so generous. Jesus is not exaggerating.

Common sense and social custom are powerful influences as we make decisions each day. We also feel we are in the right when guided by the virtue of justice in our dealings with others. But Jesus seems to be saying that there is another way to react when it comes to matters of forgiveness. Pope Francis teaches that mercy is the fullness of justice. When we ask for God's forgiveness for our sins, failures and misdeeds, we are not to think of ourselves as beggars but we are simply asking for something God wants to give us.

And if that's the way God is with us, we should also be that same way with others. This is one of the most difficult aspects of being a follower of Jesus. One thing seems certain about this challenge. We will not lack opportunities to forgive. Sometimes we even should forgive ourselves. That's okay. God already has.

*The Nazareth Page*  
*A gospel thought for the home*  
*September 24, 2017 – 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*Matt. 20:1-16a*

Equal pay for equal work. That's the way it should be, It's a matter of justice. It's a principle that is part of Catholic social teaching. Unfortunately, sometimes women receive less than men, immigrants less than citizens. Years ago, I came upon a print-out of the salaries of various professors at the school where I taught. I wished I had not seen it because I learned that some of my co-professors were receiving much more salary than I was. Some of them even taught fewer classes and students. A seeming matter of inequality became quite difficult for me to accept.

That's why today's gospel is often difficult to understand. Some workers labored all day in the landowner's vineyard in the hot sun while some worked but an hour or so. And they all received the same wage. In other words, equal pay for unequal work. We wonder, "What's going on?"

First, let's admit that this is the least-liked parable in the gospels. Some might wonder why Jesus, who is usually in top form, communicates a parable that seems, on the surface, at least, ridiculous. Or unjust. If we focus only on it from the standpoint of the workers who worked the whole day or on simple economics, we would be at best confused, or worse, disturbed.

Here's the way some scripture scholars work their way out of this dilemma. They say that we should place our focus on the landowner, who represents God. This focus allows us to simply attend to the attitude or motivation of God, which is one of generous love to each and all of us. This interpretation of God can be difficult for those who make the false assumption that God has favorites. God doesn't.

We think about accomplished artists, brilliant scientists, outstanding athletes, talented performers and celebrities and draw a totally false, and even dangerous conclusion that those people are more blessed, and therefore, more loved by God. They aren't. They *are* loved by God, but no more than anyone is.

So, making comparisons between ourselves and others regarding God's blessings is a toxic act. It breeds envy and jealousy. It can cause us to overlook or diminish the blessings each of us has received. Put another way, it can be depressing. Recall when the disciples argued about who was first in God's Kingdom. They were each hoping it was them. Imagine their response when Jesus said that whoever was last was first. Comparisons among individuals can even infiltrate families. Good parents don't have favorites. Nor does God.

David Thomas, PhD