

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN
GOD'S
NEIGHBORHOOD



PRACTICING
THE LENTEN MEDICINE
OF FORGIVENESS

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INTRODUCTION

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WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood is a film that chronicles the encounter of a TV host who makes welcoming into an art form with a wounded journalist who struggles to forgive his flawed, abrasive father. This modern-day parable of reconciliation amidst dissention was perfectly timed for our contentious, divisive times. As Mr. Rogers puts on his implicitly symbolic red sweater, one can sense him emulating the Holy Spirit of St. Paul's words: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another" (Col 3:12-13). In a popular culture dominated by programs celebrating competition, superiority, and exclusion, Mr. Rogers celebrates cooperation, commonality, and inclusion. True faith is far less interested in who is chopped, eliminated, or voted off the island than who is included, affirmed, and welcomed. Forgiveness is rooted in neighborhoods, places where diverse people of various gifts and shortcomings form welcoming, mutually supportive communities. Forgiveness is not ignorance of flaws, but looking past weaknesses toward the surpassing prize of holy communion. In the end, along with their red sweaters, disciples of Christ "put on love."

LENTEN REFORM SCHOOL

Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. –2 Cor 5:17

There is something to be said for “old school mentality” in life and faith, for Jesus encouraged us to bring from our storerooms the new as well as the old. Faith calls us to balance traditional Lenten spirituality with new ways of thinking and acting, not just reforming the student, but the school itself. If Lent is divine reform school, we begin by reviewing its curriculum, discipline, and mission statement. Whatever self-reproach is taught in our Lenten classrooms should be matched by holy self-esteem. If we enter this graceful academy disheartened by our unruly past, we should also be inspired by our bright future. Moreover, Lenten disciplines geared toward punishment may be duly recalibrated to elicit transformation. Let us not beat ourselves down, but build ourselves up. If we are truly a new creation in Christ, we direct our Lenten prayer and action toward becoming the wonderful new person God imagines us to be.

*Merciful God, may I follow your lead in casting my sins
behind my back to look ahead.*

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

LOVE AND SORROW

The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel. –Mark 1:15

In its eagerness to tug heartstrings, popular culture sometimes spouts dubious platitudes about love. A prime example is the iconic romantic philosophy uttered in the 70’s novel and film, *Love Story*: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” God’s love story in scripture certainly includes tender moments but makes no apologies for its insistence that love of God and neighbor require the humility to express sorrow for our failings. The presumption of some automatic, invisible transmission of repentance runs counter to the efficacy of sacraments and the tenets of human communication. Sacraments are outward manifestations of internal spiritual realities. Faith demands tangible signs and the human

heart requires sensate expression. Forgiveness without visible contrition is like communion without bread or marriage without rings. We must not simply feel our sorrow, we must formalize it. True love should be joyful and forbearing, but must sometimes also be sorry.

Spirit of Christ, fill me with the fire of love and water of sorrow.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

THE NARCISSISM OF REGRET

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died. –Luke 18:19

“Couлда, shoulda, woulda” is the mantra of regret. We replay the memory tape in search of an ending that pulls imaginary victory from the jaws of defeat. There is grace in the sincere desire to make every effort fruitful, but unbridled regret risks the narcissism that every action can turn out perfectly or every choice make us the hero. Faith calls us to amendment, not flawlessness. Jesus did not waste time berating himself over his delayed appearance for Lazarus, but centered on what he could do once he arrived. By harnessing the demon of regret, we may not resurrect lost opportunities, but we can raise the spirits we may have buried. Meanwhile, we find solace in the prayer of Thomas Merton: “I don’t always know the right thing to do, Lord, but I think the fact that I want to please you pleases you.”

*Meek and humble Lord, help me embrace my faults
as a springboard to compassion.*

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

WHEN THEY ARE NOT SORRY

One of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus. –Luke 23:39

Jesus was crucified between two thieves. The unrepentant thief is often eclipsed by the good thief’s salvific repentance, but nonetheless raises a vital question: “Can someone who is not sorry be forgiven?” Experience confirms that not everyone feels remorse for their sins. Quite

the opposite, some wrongdoers seem dispassionate, smug, or even amused in their actions. Polling the theological jury renders a split decision. The Hebrew Scriptures celebrate a God “slow to anger” who also furiously smites the wicked at Nineveh, Sodom, and Gomorrah. Jesus asks the Father to pardon his unrepentant executioners, but gives permission to treat obstinate sinners like tax collectors. The late Cardinal George of Chicago once insisted, “Not even God can forgive someone who is not sorry.” In some respects, forgiveness resembles many faith ideals in which we live a mystery with no clear answers, but with love and justice as our primary guides.

God of compassion, guide me in my treatment of unrepentant persecutors.



First Sunday of Lent

RETREAT BEFORE ADVANCING

Filled with the holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert. –Luke 4:1

Before beginning his earthly ministry, Jesus embarks on a lengthy retreat in the desert. The Messiah sent to reconcile a reportedly angry God with flawed humanity wisely begins by stepping back for the perspective and peace of solitude. We who embark on the Lenten journey of reconciliation with God and neighbor would be wise to emulate such patient, bracing example. Anger is too often aggravated by hasty words and division is exacerbated by rash action. If calmer heads and hearts are to prevail after a dispute or injury, it behooves us to retreat before speaking or acting. Spiritual retreats allow diatribes to be dialogues, attacks to become surrenders, and retribution to give way to reconciliation. Ordinary bread requires time for the dough to rise, but the Eucharist has no leaven but us, for faith instead needs time for personal reduction to yield the bread of holy communion.

Prince of Peace, lead me to a calming oasis in the desert of anger.

REPENTANCE IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. –Luke 15:21

It is both unsettling and amusing to watch public figures attempt to apologize. The verbiage employed in all types of confessional boxes speaks volumes about the inner disposition of penitents. To soften the penitential blow, the words “sin” and “crime” are typically diluted by terms like “mistakes” or “errors in judgement.” When public statements are issued after scandals, officials gravitate to the passive voice—“mistakes were made”—as if some mysterious impersonal force was responsible. Adam set the tone early on by blaming his disobedience on both his partner and his God: “The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, so I ate it.” Eve in turn points to the serpent, a strategy since translated for modern convenience: “The devil made me do it.” True repentance is expressed in the active voice, requiring both humble admission of personal sinfulness and overriding faith in divine mercy.

Divine Master, grant me humility to own my failures and confess my sins.

GOOD AND BAD SEEDS

A good tree does not bear rotten fruit,
nor does a rotten tree produce good fruit. –Luke 6:43

Good and evil are great mysteries that can never be fully unraveled. One perennial question about virtue and vice is their origin. Are good and evil instinctive or learned; fruits of nature or nurture? The gospel genealogy of Christ suggests that good family trees produce good fruit. The modern science of genetics introduces the possibility that spiritual traits can be inherited along with physical properties like height or gender. Does this mean that wayward children can be justified in blaming their parents—or even God? Do mentors of an unruly child face the impossible task of restoring fruit that is “rotten to the core?” We should not let this vexing mystery paralyze us in despair or surrender. Faith

knows the wisdom that “grace builds on nature,” but also celebrates the transformative Spirit through which alcoholics recover, convicts go straight, and Saul is converted to St. Paul.

Creator God, let your grace build on nature and my nature submit to grace.

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

PRIMACY OF CONSCIENCE

Behold, you desire true sincerity and secretly you teach me wisdom.

–Psalm 51:8

The Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, states: “Deep within their conscience humans discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves but which they must obey. For humans have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Conscience is a person’s most secret core and sanctuary. There one is alone with God whose voice echoes in one’s depths.” Another document, *Dignitatis Humanae*, teaches that persons “must not be forced to act contrary to their conscience.” The Catholic catechism echoes this teaching: “Human beings must always obey the certain judgment of their conscience.” Pope Francis stirred controversy when he reaffirmed the primacy of conscience in difficult moral situations: “Priests must inform consciences, but not replace them.” According to the Church’s own instruction, then, it is possible for a person to act in good faith contrary to the teachings of the Church.

Good Shepherd, may I hear your voice in the depths of my soul.

Thursday of the First Week of Lent

MANY GIFTS; ONE SPIRIT

To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit if given for some benefit.

–1 Cor 12:7

Spiritual giants can elicit contrary feelings. Sainly inspiration is sometimes accompanied by a humbling sense of insufficiency. After viewing the Mr. Rogers film, one critic came away feeling like “a lousy human being.” Emulation is natural to faith, so we may implicitly feel

called to become carbon copies of virtuous souls. There are many roles to play in God's kingdom, however, and not all of them are genteel or idealistic. The reign of God needs both lambs and lions—Francis of Assisi and Joan of Arc. The gospel is best served by agents of both calm and outrage, trust and suspicion, peace and battle, diplomacy and revolution, philanthropy and redistribution, law abiding and civil disobedience. This is not a *carte blanche* for violence or cynicism, but an embrace of the adage that “it takes all kinds,” or as Paul writes: There are many gifts in one Spirit.

Gracious God, grant me wisdom to discern my gifts and grace to share them.

Friday of the First Week of Lent

FORGIVE ME NOTS

Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?
—Matt 18:33

What do you do when someone you have wounded refuses to forgive? Scripture and tradition have much to say about the Lord's attitude toward the unforgiving but offer sparse counsel for how penitents should cope with such rejection. Estranged relatives, exiled citizens, and social or religious outcasts are examples of those who feel the weight of unforgiveness. Many others have tasted this unhappy fate after making numerous apologies and peace offerings to no avail. A wise *U.S. Catholic* article offered deceptively simple advice when faced with the stone wall of anger or rejection: “Forgive yourself.” Pardoning oneself, of course, is hardly simple. Sometimes, in fact, it is the most difficult forgiveness of all, for good people are typically hard on themselves. After exercising the due diligence of repentance, however, forgiving ourselves and moving on can be the single, most efficacious road to healing and recovery.

Merciful God, help me to forgive myself when others refuse me.

BAD COMPANY

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves. –Matt 7:15

We may hear this bitter epitaph in the wake of some tragic fall from grace: He or she “hung out with the wrong crowd.” Christianity is channeled in community, but so is “organized crime.” Disciples of Christ gather in parishes, monasteries, and families because virtue thrives in groups. Similarly, evil festers in gangs, syndicates, and cartels. The line between grace and disgrace can be the distinction between a congregation and a mob. We do well, then, to carefully monitor the company we keep. Sometimes people “fall into” the wrong crowd, but other times they are consciously recruited. Just as the church eagerly enlists new converts, evil is tenacious in drafting apprentices. The internet has power to disseminate goodness, but it is also an insidious tool by which evil is more easily propagated and proliferated. We must be increasingly vigilant and wary, especially for our youth, even as we promote the grace of Christian community.

Light of the World, gather me in your community of light.

Second Sunday of Lent

BE WHO YOU ARE

He was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. –Matt 17:2

Sometimes the transfiguration is miscast as a transformation from the human to the divine or from the ordinary to the extraordinary. In reality, the disciples did not witness the Lord changing into something different, but unveiling his true self. A theology colleague had a license plate that featured the acronym: *BWHOUR*. This is the challenge of faith and the miracle of transfiguration. We are not called to violently reshape ourselves into some alternate character, like forcing a square peg through a round hole. Rather, the Lord wills us to discover our truest, deepest self, our “heart of hearts,” and mold ourselves into that per-

son. There are many paths up God's mountain and many faces required to fully embody Christ in the world. If we are the block of granite and God is our partner in sculpture, we cooperatively chip away everything that distorts our most authentic, holiest self.

Transfigured Lord, sculpt me in the image of your glory.

Monday of the Second Week of Lent

DIGGING IN THE DIRT

The love of money is the root of all evils. –1 Tim 6:10

There is truth in the epistle that names money as the root of evil, but it is not the whole truth. Some covet other types of currency like power, control, vanity, or anger. Lent begins by signing us with dust, for this is a season for “digging in the dirt.” Peter Gabriel wrote a song by the same name about his abusiveness in a relationship. The lyrics include specific examples: “Don’t talk back; just drive the car! Shut your mouth; I know what you are!” The song is rightly unsettling, but exhibits the stark honesty and humility required for the “dirty work” of personal reform. Humility is related to the Latin and English term *humus*, which means “ground,” or “from the earth.” Lent is a season to dig below the topsoil of our souls to discover the root of our personal evil.

True Vine, help me dig deeply to discover the root of my sin.

Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent

GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

Why spend your money for what is not bread;
your wages for what fails to satisfy? –Isaiah 55:2

In the 1986 film, *The Mission*, a mercenary slave trader seeks redemption for his sins. A Jesuit confessor suggests a penance that involves climbing to the mountain village he has violently oppressed while dragging the heavy armor of his trade by a rope. The mercenary falls several times on the arduous journey, moving one of the monks to

mercifully cut the rope while imploring, “He’s had enough.” Ignoring this reprieve, the mercenary reties the rope and resumes his grueling ascent. Observing this, the Jesuit leader suggests that only the penitent truly knows when a penance is concluded. This commitment to spartan redemption is duly rewarded at the top of the mountain by a celebratory reconciliation whose joy matches the anguish invested in it. Cheap grace yields bargain basement mercy. When acquiring forgiveness, like so many treasures, we typically get what we pay for.

*Merciful God, teach me not to settle
for cheap forgiveness over amazing grace.*

Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent

THE IMBALANCE SHEET OF LOVE

These worked only one hour, and you have made them equal
to us who bore the day’s burden. –Matt 20:12

There is a natural give and take in relationships, for love instinctively looks for fairness and balance. Often, sometimes unconsciously, we keep an internal score: “I watched the kids last weekend; this weekend it’s your turn” or “I got you out of a jam last year; now I need a bailout.” Unfortunately, life does not always play by those rules. In any relationship, there comes a time when the balance is thrown way off by unscripted events like unemployment, debilitating injuries, or emotional trauma. Through no choice of their own, some partners or friends face challenges that require uneven sacrifice. I learned this truth when my wife was diagnosed with Parkinson’s. At such times we practice the “forgiveness” of giving with little return to the best of our ability and God’s grace. We are all workers in God’s vineyard and sometimes love throws out the balance sheet.

Gracious God, expand my heart to give without return when necessary.

THE DUTIFUL CUSTOM OF REPARATION

If I have extorted anything from anyone,
I shall repay it four times over. –Luke 19:8

Forgiveness has sometimes been portrayed as “free of charge,” easily obtained for as little as a shrug and a prayer: “No worries!” Such portrayals are offered with noble intentions and appealing graciousness, but both scripture and Catholic teaching beg to differ. Zacchaeus finds salvation by assuring the Lord that he will offer four-fold repayment for his financial exploitations. The Catholic Catechism is quite specific about the duty of reparation after harming the welfare or reputation of another: “Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm—e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries. Simple justice requires as much.” World travelers love duty free customs, but to enter the kingdom of God, the faults we carry are like contraband for which it is customary to pay dutiful reparation.

*Redeemer Lord, increase my will to pay for the damages
inflicted by my actions.*



NO EXCUSES

Depart from me, all you evildoers! And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. –Luke 13:27-28

In our practice of merciful pardon, it is useful to remember that forgiveness is not an excuse for immoral or criminal behavior. To say “I forgive you” is quite different from suggesting that what someone did is okay. Forgiveness is not the spiritual equivalent of a *Monopoly* “get out of jail free” card. It is quite possible, then, to forgive someone and still sue for damages or testify to send a felon to prison. To practice both gracious forgiveness and due punishment is to seek the delicate balance between God’s mercy and justice. We do not know what form divine justice may ultimately take, but the concepts of judgement and punishment are firmly embedded in scripture and tradition. We do not find redemption without cost or communion without price. Kindly people sometimes excuse offenses too easily, but our merciful God does not shrug in the face of injustice.

God of wisdom, instill in me the balance of mercy and justice.

FORGIVENESS FROM AFAR

As for those who do not welcome you, when you leave that town, shake the dust from your feet. –Luke 9:5

Forgiveness is sometimes spiritually linked with *reconciliation*, but they are not synonyms. To forgive is to offer pardon, but to reconcile is to invite some form of reunion. The ideal of God’s kin-dom strives for the communion of saints, but the temporal realm of human limitations includes irreconcilable differences. My high school chemistry teacher warned about the danger of combining volatile chemicals. Moreover, faith and reason are wary of mingling certain individuals to avoid external combustion. After devastating injury by violence, betrayal, or abuse, the hope of reconciliation gives way to the wisdom of forgiveness

from afar. Divorce in marriage or life is not the Christian ideal, but it can be a benign enterprise for the sake of an overriding peace. We may say to such people: “I forgive you. I do not hate you or wish you harm. Go in peace...away from me.”

Incarnate Lord, guide me to discern when to forgive from a distance.



Third Sunday of Lent

JUDGEMENT DAYS

Come see a man who told me everything I have done. –John 4:29

It is our Christian duty to avoid judging others, but judgement can sometimes be a daily requirement or job description. Teachers assess student performance; parents discipline unruly children; and juries render verdicts. Moreover, at one time or another all of us are bound in conscience to form judgements about the businesses we patronize, the mentors we admire, and the candidates we support. Over time we learn to distinguish between benign and unseemly judgment. Faith seeks the delicate balance of judging individual actions more than overall character—condemning the sin, but not the sinner. In the film, *Gandhi*, a vengeful Muslim insists, “I’m going to hell,” to which Gandhi wisely replies, “Only God decides who goes to hell.” Final judgement is the prerogative of the divine, but temporal judgment is part of discipleship. We aspire to the wisdom of Solomon as we exercise God’s judgment with humility and faith.

Living water, I thirst for the wisdom to judge rightly and justly.

RE-MEMBERING AND RE-COLLECTION

I pray that they may all be one. –John 17:21

In *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, a reporter asks Mr. Rogers how he relates to children with such patience. Fred Rogers suggests that the secret is to remember what it was like to be a child. This simple counsel is also a key to unlock the door to forgiveness. When we feel anger toward someone who has hurt us, perhaps the first step toward reconciliation is to recall times when we ourselves were thoughtless, careless, or mean. As we recollect our own failings, the door is cracked open to understand the faults of another. Jesus came to gather God's people and bid us to "give thanks and remember." To recollect is to gather God's people in the peace of holy communion. To remember is to once again welcome lost members of God's family. When we forgive others, we do Christ's mediating work of re-remembering and re-collection.

Good Shepherd, guide me to gather the lost and scattered in your mercy.

A BOTTOMLESS CUP?

I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. –Matt 18:22

One might rightly fear that the Lord's merciful arithmetic is subject to exploitation by sinners who know too well how to play the game, like freeloading patrons who sit for hours at diners indulging in bottomless coffee. Perhaps the gospel call to continual forgiveness is more general than specific. Faith bids us to adopt an overreaching forgiving posture, but not to shrug off endless particular offenses. To forgive the same offense without limit runs the danger of evolving mercy into license. Indulging malice may unintentionally sanction it and overlooking greed can implicitly enable it. The bonds of any marriage—whether professional, fraternal, or sacramental—can be jeopardized rather than

strengthened by unmitigated pardon. Faith calls us to challenge as well as forgive, a spiritual art known in monastic communities as “fraternal correction.” If our dedication to forgive sin is unshakeable, so should be our commitment to confront it.

Saving Lord, teach me to both correct and affirm my neighbor.

Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent

MORAL PROJECTION BOOTHS

They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders,
but will not lift a finger to move them. –Matt 23:4

Psychology describes projection as the tendency to export one’s faults onto others in order to render oneself guiltless. Projection is easily recognized when one individual, religion, political party, race, or country claims all the credit or virtue while assigning all the blame or fault to another individual, religion, party, race, or country. Jesus reserved his harshest condemnation for hypocrites, for they are master projectors. Projection is in danger of reaching epidemic proportions in our country where ideologies have been polarized and finger pointing has become an insidious art form. Forgiveness is impossible from a projection booth because the will to forgive is rooted in an ability to recognize another’s sin in myself. Projection not only short-circuits forgiveness, but derails the mutual cooperation essential to doing good. Sinners enter the kingdom of God first because they exercise the humility to share accountability for realizing the reign of God.

*Compassionate Lord, may I forgive others
by first recognizing their faults in myself.*



ROLE REVERSAL

Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders.
—Luke 15:29

The parable of the Prodigal Son celebrates divine forgiveness that exceeds human standards, but abundant mercy sometimes evokes confusion or annoyance in mere mortals like the faithful son. The unintended consequence can be an implicit role reversal by which the repentant sinner becomes the hero and the wounded victim is cast as the villain. A startling example of this recasting is one spiritual writer's reflection that berated the unforgiving in no uncertain terms: "Why is the refusal to forgive the act of an imbalanced person?" The pastor who quoted this author went on to accuse the unforgiving of finding "dark joy" in nursing their wounds. Being a victim is no badge of honor, but it does not deserve more censure than the one who initiated the conflict. If faith offers compassion to those who fall from grace, it surely extends equal patience to those who struggle to forgive.

Gracious God, be as patient with my anger as with those who provoke it.

Friday of the Third Week of Lent

SORRY?

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall know mercy. —Matt 5:7

Socialization is the process by which members of a culture are taught what is normal or appropriate behavior. Vehicles of socialization include social media, television, magazines, and—oddly enough—games. Children at play potentially internalize the prevalent philosophy of many games that getting ahead requires sending players back, social climbing necessitates putting others down, and financial gain makes bankrupting others fair play. Some insist such games are harmless fantasy, but the burgeoning cultural gap between the haves and have-nots suggests otherwise. Socialization never claims to teach admirable behavior, but rather what is acceptable or natural. Without careful media-

tion, our youth can unconsciously adopt the assumption that there are not enough musical chairs for everyone and there can be only one “king of the mountain.” The gospel brand of socialization promotes fair play, cooperation, self-sacrifice, empathy, and the shockingly countercultural message that “the last shall be first.”

*Compassionate Lord, grow my empathy for the downtrodden
and mercy for the defeated.*

Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

WHEN TO LET IT SIMMER

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger. –Eph 4:26

Forgiveness may be likened to a family recipe that requires time and patience. At one point in *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, Mr. Rogers employs cute puppets to sooth the soul of an angry journalist. Frustrated, the writer bolts from the room even more unsettled. Perhaps pious counsel, mood lightening humor, and disarming toys are not always the first ingredients when preparing a palatable broth to facilitate healing. Forgiveness is a delicate culinary art in which timing is critical to avoid exacerbating raw emotions and burned psyches. Human sentiments must sometimes be allowed to simmer before serving. Paul’s epistle offers a noble ideal, but also allows for due anger providing it does not boil over into sin. Angels may conjure instant forgiveness, but mere mortals sometimes find it necessary to let the sun go down on anger to start fresh and calm in the morning.

*Bread of Life, heal me with the balanced diet
of patience with myself and others.*



THE DUTY OF INFORMED CONSCIENCE

If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying,
“We see,” so your sin remains. —John 9:41

In his autobiography, *Confessions*, St. Augustine recalls his famously self-serving prayer: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.” If a future saint can play fast and loose with moral responsibility, good people everywhere certainly face the danger of succumbing to the spiritual equivalent of “the games people play.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: “Conscience must be informed and moral judgement enlightened. The education of conscience is indispensable for human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teachings.” In reaffirming the primacy of individual conscience, Pope Francis stressed the distinction between conscience—where God’s voice is revealed—and ego, where we think we can do whatever we please. Maintaining the delicate balance of the primacy of conscience with the proper formation of conscience is vital for a responsible moral life.

Living Word, open my ears to hear your voice from without and within.

Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent

BEYOND OUR REACH

*At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad,
for he had many possessions. —Mark 10:22*

I treasure the affirming things my students said to me over the years, but I also reflect on their humbling reproofs. During one course a disruptive student responded to my correction with unapologetic annoyance: “I cannot wait to get out of this class!” Some of our greatest lessons are not in textbooks and the moral of this story was clear: “I always cared about my students, but I could not always connect with them.” Parents, counselors, AA sponsors, and friends have similar en-

counters with the limits of sincere regard and outreach. Differences like personality, age, attitude, experience, and priorities can derail our best intentions. Jesus reached out to the rich young man, but his potential disciple declined the invitation. One poignant greeting card featured an image of an open hand above a wise, bittersweet prayer: “If only all the hands that reach could touch.”

True God, give me love to keep reaching when I fail to touch.



Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

SPREADING THE GUILT

Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.
—John 8:7

Guilt assumed a somewhat deserved bad name after the Catholic preoccupation with sin during the age of *Do black patent leather shoes really reflect up?* Nonetheless, there is a place for guilt in healthy faith. Guilt is like money; a useful tool frequently utilized the wrong way by the wrong people. The Pharisees were eager to cast stones until their own culpability was thrown into the mix. Too often the innocent berate themselves for trivial offenses while the wicked feel little remorse for egregious sins. Saints frequently reviled themselves as the worst of sinners simply because they held themselves to such high moral standards. Faith is all about spreading the good news and the just stewardship of our possessions. Perhaps the overburdened are also called to distribute the guilt, graciously sharing their undue burden with self-righteous sinners too eager to cast stones.

*Divine Judge, let my guilt be a motivating tool
rather than an enervating burden.*

GO AND SIN NO MORE

Then neither do I condemn you. Go and do not sin anymore. –John 8:11

Lying stunned on his back after the football has been pulled away for the umpteenth time, Charlie Brown might beseech the Lord to command Lucy to “go and sin no more.” Jesus is surely aware that human fallibility makes faultless living unlikely, so perhaps this exhortation references the issue of whether one can be pardoned for an ongoing sin. Alcoholism is an illness rather than a choice, but destructive alcoholic behavior cannot be fully forgiven until rehabilitation is sought. Similarly, slander cannot truly be pardoned until libelous behavior ceases. In civil law such crimes are called “ongoing enterprises” and in faith they represent a habit or pattern of sin. Those who commit to reform or conversion are certainly subject to occasional relapses, but unchecked or unbridled behavior cannot expect or merit forgiveness. That is why a firm purpose of amendment is hallmark requirement for forgiveness.

Merciful Lord, steel my resolve to change my ways.

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent

SPIRITUAL PINATAS

To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well.
–Luke 10:36

A frequently misunderstood gospel passage is the Lord’s instruction to “turn the other cheek,” as if Christians are holy doormats delighted to “take one for the team.” Actually, turning the other cheek is not a strategy of passive surrender, but of active resistance. Christians brave blows to confront injustice, not excuse it. Civil rights activists like Nelson Mandela, Susan B. Anthony, and Cesar Chavez endured insults, injury, and prison with an underlying attitude, not of rancorous cynicism, but of deep faith in the basic goodness of humanity. Gospel methodology shrewdly employs suffering to peel back layers of institutionalized

injustice and reveal a core of decency. Accordingly, even hardened evils like apartheid, segregation, and sexism give way to reform once sufficiently exposed and embarrassed. Disciples of Christ become spiritual pinatas in order to pour from their wounds the spiritual sweetness of peace and justice.

*Crucified Lord, grant me strength to bear
the blows that foster peace and justice.*

Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent

MONK IN THE MIDDLE

Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.
—Matt 5:9

Just as it is no fun to play the primate in a game of “monkey in the middle,” the same is true in faith and life. It is typically easier to take sides than to stand the middle ground. One devastating side effect of our polarized society is the demise of mediators and mediation. Our “one nation under God” has slowly devolved into a political battleground of red and blue states. Conciliation is increasingly rare because our ideologies have been neatly split into right and wrong with precious little compromise. Being a mediator requires the rare ability to listen to both sides without judgement or deference. Mediators succeed when feuding parties each confide in them with complete confidence that they have found a trusted advocate. Jesus assumed the redemptive role of mediator between God and humanity and calls us to the same ministry between warring factions, relatives, and believers.

Prince of Peace, give me a heart to stand the middle ground.



FACING THE APOLOGETIC MUSIC

Jesus, looking at him, loved him. –Mark 21:10

Growing up includes the bittersweet process of discovering one's strengths and weakness. In college I was trusted to lead a seminary group that sang for local community weddings. Because of my organizational deficiency, however, one appointment got buried on my desk during a hectic month. It was the most humbling experience of my young life to apologize to the newlyweds in person and return their check. I could have handled the matter more easily by mail, but conscience obliged me to face the missing music. A downside of social media is the danger of processing conflicts through Facebook instead of face to face. The sacramental alternative to the private rooms and veiled portals of confessionals is no accident, for grace thrives in personal encounters. Faithful penitents emulate the risen Lord who faced his wayward disciples in the upper room with a conciliatory message, "Peace be with you."

Divine Physician, make me a face to face instrument of healing.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

NOT TOO LITTLE TOO LATE

I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me,
even if they die, will live. –John 11:25

Human tragedy elicits heartfelt outpourings of "thoughts and prayers" from near and far. Faith knows the efficacy of spiritual communion, for many prayers are offered by individuals not able to make personal appearances. Still, times of need naturally beg the question of being called to do more. "Thoughts and prayers" can be a way of taking the easy road or maintaining comfortable distance. When we love both spouses in a divorce, learn a dear friend is dying, or know a proud neighbor in need, personal engagement can be awkward or demanding. Jesus held Lazarus in prayer from a distance but didn't resurrect him until he showed up in person. Faith celebrates the sacramentality

of personal presence. Jesus gave us the Eucharist as a corporal experience of ethereal presence. We should pray always while committing ourselves to appear in person when possible to avoid too little, too late.

Abiding God, make me a living sacrament of your presence.

Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent

DIVINE DUE PROCESS

If your brother does not listen, take one or two others with you, so that every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. –Matt 18:16

Due process is a gold standard for justice in civil law and the Church seeks to embody the spiritual equivalent of that ideal. Ecclesial institutions typically formalize due process through a department or office of conciliation. One diocesan website described the goal with these words: “The Office of Conciliation is a group of faithful Catholics, charged by the archbishop, in the name of the Church, and in service to the gospel to assist believers in settling their conflicts and thus to repair and restore table harmony.” Faith adds the additional layer of gospel spirituality to the mix, seeking not only justice, but the requisite peace: “The goal is to assist those engaged in disputes to settle those disputes within a context and a spirit of reconciliation.” Each Christian is called to afford divine due process to those who injure us so that we share the Eucharist in family harmony.

Gentle shepherd, may I offer others the same merciful rule of law that you afford me.



LIVING UP TO OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do and will do greater ones than these. –John 14:12

Our use of the term *responsibility* is not typically comforting or reassuring. When told that something is our responsibility, we typically hear that as a burden or task rather than an opportunity or possibility. When a parent, spouse, employer, friend, or pastor claims that we have failed in our responsibility, we feel more dismal than motivated, more a subordinate than a partner. Perhaps if we defined and deployed that term more positively, we would open untold paths to goodness. If we reminded others of their response-abilities, we might emphasize their potential more than their obligation and their gift rather than their burden. God calls us to live up to our response-abilities, to use our gifts for the common good and the transformation of the world in Christ. Let us declare to others the good news of their response-abilities so that the reign of God may be at hand.

Almighty God, grant me the grace to live my response-abilities.

Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

THE INVALID IN US ALL

The Pharisee spoke this prayer to himself, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity.” –Luke 18:11

I worked at a parish that did not have designated handicapped pews so that the disabled could sit amidst the assembly. This made perfect sense, for honest reflection reveals that everyone is handicapped. Some disabilities are obvious, while others remain unseen. Veterans can be paralyzed from the waist down, but disciples may be too afraid to stand up for the truth. Down Syndrome involves mental disability, but so does obstinance. The blind need canes or dogs, while the prejudiced require sensitivity training. We have prosthetic limbs for injured athletes, but what restores spiritual amputees incapable of reaching out? Once

we identify a person as “in-valid,” we risk subtly presuming ourselves to be valid by default. Lent is a “hunting season” for our hidden disabilities. Once we name them, we restore our humble solidarity with the physically handicapped and admit our common need for handicapped spaces and the healing of Christ.

*Wounded Savior, help me take my place in the forgiving
solidarity of human fragility.*

Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent

BLACK SHEEP

The goat will carry off all their iniquities to an isolated region. –Lev 16:22

The Hebrew scapegoat ritual was a powerful exercise in communal purification. Following the Lord’s instructions, Aaron laid the Israelites sins upon the head of the goat before it was led it into the wilderness as a symbol of atonement. We could imagine a modern-day equivalent in which a symbolic list of sins was tied to a helium balloon then released skyward. Reconciliation, of course, is our sacramental ritual of mutual purification and unburdening. The problem arises when just one person is consciously or implicitly designated as a scapegoat. We call such individuals “the black sheep of the family,” members who can be assigned the sins of others in an unjust, unhealthy manner. The scapegoat is a rite of collective, not private purgation. Just as we fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another’s burdens, so do we embody God’s mercy by acknowledging our solidarity in both sin and mercy.

*Merciful God, let me celebrate your forgiveness with others
and not at their expense.*

Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent

FORGIVE AND FORGET?

I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sins no more. –Heb 8:12

The gold standard of forgiveness might be the exhortation to “forgive and forget,” but human memory simply does not work that way. When

the risen Lord appeared among the disciples in the upper room, he showed no signs of bitterness as he declared, “Peace be with you.” Do we imagine, however, that Jesus had forgotten about the betrayals, denials, and panicked runs for cover? Forgiveness is not a call to a repressive memory lapse, but an invitation to redirect our attention. Family gatherings drolly recount the time I frightened my youngest brother with a juvenile prank. Such incidents pale in comparison to hit and run accidents, Ponzi schemes, or sexual assaults. Our souls bear the marks of our wounds like physical scars. With varying degrees of effort and grace, however, these injuries can slowly fade through a gradual shift of emphasis. The modern translation of “forgive and forget” might be “forgive and refocus.”

Sacred Heart, retrain my eyes to dwell on goodness.

Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent

BEWARE THE MESSIAH COMPLEX

I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction.
—John 17:12

The benevolent character of faith makes it seem possible and commendable to save everyone, but it is vain and dangerous to try. Not even Jesus could save everyone, for earlier John’s Gospel notes the Lord’s failure to redeem Judas, “None of them was lost except the son of destruction.” The messiah complex is a noble enterprise rife with pitfalls. Cultural stories sometimes echo this dangerous ideology. *Beauty and the Beast* is a parable about a woman’s quest to bring out the gentle prince beneath a vile exterior. It is a well-intentioned quest, but many battered women have paid dearly with their health or very lives for their determination to realize this fairy tale. Some people are sadly beyond redemption for many possible reasons, including nature, choice, and circumstance. Sometimes faith calls us to let go, to seek distance rather than communion, so that we may live to love and serve another day.

*Humble Lord, grant me the meekness to accept
the times I cannot save another.*

NOT GUILTY AS CHARGED

He was given a grave among the wicked, though he had done no wrong.
—Isaiah 53:9

The *National Registry of Exonerations* lists over 2500 convicts set free for crimes they didn't commit. Together, these represent over 22,000 years lost in prison. A portion of these were rescued from death row, but our juridical history nonetheless bears the ugly stain of wrongful executions. As an innocent man crucified for our sins, our Lord can certainly relate. It could be argued that Christ's forgiveness of his executioners models the most shockingly costly form of forgiveness. There have been compensatory payments to exonerated convicts, but there is no way to fully repair the damage of undeserved condemnation that elicits lost innocence, youth, reputation, and dreams. On this day that we wave palm branches to hail the Lord's abounding innocence, we strive to emulate expensive divine mercy by forgiving those who wrongly convict us, imprisoning us behind bars of undeserved censure or exclusion.

Innocent Lord, grant me the grace to forgive wrongful accusers.



SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

His heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. —Matt 9:36

In recent history the church has arguably faced its greatest trial in the pedophilia scandal. Sadly, it has not been uncommon for stunned

parishioners to witness beloved pastors removed from their midst for being part of this ignoble legacy. The shame of exploiting the innocent has only been exacerbated by repeated denials and coverups, desperate attempts to maintain an illusory level of holiness at the cost of putting vulnerable children at further risk. The modern age of existential scrutiny has elicited numerous fallen idols, but the demystification of our spiritual parents is perhaps the most bitter pill to swallow. Navigating this crisis without losing heart or faith requires all the wisdom of scripture and pastoral practice available to us. Forgiveness does not come easy, but is aided by awareness of the complexity of a failure that is at once a sin, a crime, and a sickness. Sometimes sheep must become shepherds to facilitate due outrage, discipline, reparation, healing, and finally mercy.

*Good Shepherd, lead me on the difficult path to admonish
and forgive our fallen shepherds.*

Tuesday of Holy Week

THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN

Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. –Matt 12:32

Peter and Judas are contrasting case studies in the possibilities and limits of forgiveness. Both disciples commit mortal sins of betrayal, but only one survives that potentially fatal flaw. After their respective falls from grace, Peter weeps bitterly and Judas hangs himself. Theologians speculate about the precise nature of “the unforgivable sin,” but perhaps the fate of Judas tragically suggests one possible meaning. Judas essentially gives up on grace and doubts the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit. In such cases, the unforgivable sin is not defined by God, but by the human soul that rejects hope. Once a disciple draws a line beyond which forgiveness is impossible, that surrender becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Lord who forgave his executioners was surely willing to forgive his betrayer, but Judas’ witness against the Holy Spirit effectively rendered his sin unforgivable and put redemption out of reach.

Gracious God, welcome me home to love’s permanent dwelling.

FORGIVING GOD

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? –Matt 27:46

It is tempting to imagine our crucified Lord as omnisciently aware of the “happily ever after” ending to his passion. Such thinking, however, denies Christ’s humanity and the stark reality of his wounded consternation: “Why have you abandoned me?” Forgiveness does not generally happen from our crosses, but from the depths of our virtual tombs where we review our fate and recalibrate our relationships with those responsible. If we credit God for life’s miracles and graces, the divine architect of this world also bears due responsibility for its debacles and disgraces. Children of God have free reign to confront God with the anguish of Christ on the cross or the brashness of St. Teresa: “If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them.” It renders our faith more real and personal to forgive God for undeserved crosses, returning the Lord’s gracious gift of mercy.

Forgiving God, may I afford you the same mercy you show me.

Holy Thursday

FEASTING BEFORE WASHING

Jesus rose from supper...then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet. –John 13:4-5

Many adults recall the parental instruction to “wash your hands before dinner,” but our divine parent has been known to flip the script. The disciples were at table with Christ before the Lord washed their feet. In the early church, reconciliation was not celebrated until after a convert was fully initiated through baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. As one theologian put it, “You cannot be reconciled to a table to which you don’t yet belong.” The Lord’s dinner invitation to Zacchaeus elicited a vow of reparation, not the other way around. Christ’s hospitality scandalized the self-righteous: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Current pastoral practice typically celebrates Reconciliation prior to First Communion. As we continue to seek the way

of Christ in sacramental practice, we recall that the Lord did not make repentance a condition of communion, but rather a transformative springboard to reconciliation.

Bread of Life, be the holy communion that inspires repentance.

Good Friday

THE ULTIMATE GAME OF THRONES

Father forgive them, for they know not what they do. –Luke 23:34

It is certainly gracious for the Lord to beg his executioners' ignorance, for in a certain sense they knew exactly what they were doing. As a gospel revolutionary who came to "cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly," the King of the Jews posed an imminent threat to both the political and religious establishments. The Chief priests and Roman officials played this ultimate "game of thrones" with deliberate and meticulous intent. The ignorance to which Christ refers is their blindness to his status as Son of God. We too fail to see the Godly image behind the cloak of humanity when we put ourselves above others and crucify them on virtual crosses with hateful words and cruel deeds. The Lord dispels our ignorance with a clear and direct assertion: "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

King of kings, may I reverence your royal presence in the poor and lowly.

Holy Saturday

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE

The old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. –2 Cor 5:17

Jesus employed many metaphors to reveal his identity and mission—shepherd, vine, bread, light, and water. We could easily add "bridge" to that list, for the Lord is truly a bridge from earth to heaven, from humanity to God, and from worldly kingdoms to the reign of God. On Holy Saturday the Church immerses new members in the waters of baptism and the faithful are sprinkled while renewing their baptismal vows. In those rituals our old selves pass away and we become a

new creation. If Christ is the living water, he is also the bridge under which our sinful selves pass in forgiveness and reconciliation. When we forgive others, we render their actions “water under the bridge.” Holy Saturday is the ultimate sacrament of such salvific passage, making us a new creation as we witness our sins washed away under the consummate bridge of Christ.

Redeemer Lord, wash my old self under the bridge of your love.

Easter Sunday

PEACE BE WITH YOU

Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them,
“Peace be with you.” –John 20:19

I became scrupulous as a child and kept a written list of my sins. It was both ironic and symbolically appropriate that I used a bathroom to update the list in private. One day my mother found the list and spoke with me about God’s mercy. The moment I tore up that list was the most profound experience of peace in my life. Such peace is the preeminent blessing of Easter. It is the gift that the risen Lord gave his fearful disciples in the upper room, effectively tearing up the list of their denials and desertions. It is not our sinfulness that binds us to the Lord like a debt of servitude, but the virtual bathroom of Easter that frees us for loving service. Easter immerses us in the healing waters of baptism so the we may be one with Christ in liberating God’s people with the peace of divine forgiveness.

Risen Lord, may I channel the uplifting grace of Easter peace.

