

Since we heard the lessons for the Feast of St. Francis in place of the lectionary readings last week, we have a little bit of catching up to do with the Israelites. When we last heard from them, they had complained because they were hungry, so God sent manna and the meat of quails to feed them, and through Moses gave them instructions about how to collect it and how to eat it. They were to take as much as each of them needed, and they were not to leave anything until morning, except on the sixth day, when they were to put aside the leftovers so they would have food on the Sabbath. The point was not so much to teach them that God would provide what they needed, as it was for them to learn to trust and obey God.

Life wasn't easy for them. In many respects, their words and actions were like our own. They wanted what *they* wanted, from God, from Moses, and from each other. They didn't always get along with one another, any more than we do. So Moses—bless his heart—became their judge, listening to their disputes from morning to evening. Eventually, through the insights and advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses appointed God-fearing, trustworthy men as officers and judges to hear routine matters. The Israelites began learning how to live with each other in a more civilized way than they had ever done since their exodus began. Moses handled the difficult disputes and continued to act as the intercessor and mediator between God and the Israelites, and today we recall how God used Moses to deliver what we call “the Ten Commandments.” Later, the laws of the Israelites would become more complex, but these ten “words” gave them a moral code for their behavior, specifically for their relationship with God, and their relationships with each other.

As time went by, other laws were put in place to regulate the lives of the Israelites. We find these in Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy—613 laws that address specific situations, specific examples of right and wrong. They were situational, while the Ten Commandments were absolute. Over thousands of years, the laws of the ancient Israelites became the legacy and heritage of the ancient Jews. Their descendants were obligated to follow them, and the Pharisees became the enforcers. Somewhere along the way, while they dedicated themselves to keeping the law, they lost sight of the fact that these were not their laws, they were God's laws. When Jesus came on the scene, doing his new thing in ways that often defied those laws, their world was turned upside down. People in our day may best understand this in our own approach to the traditions we follow. Folks who are uncomfortable with change would argue to keep things the same; while those who are open to change would be watching Jesus with great interest, probably falling in behind him with little hesitation, despite what their religious authorities said about him. And it's also possible that those who were drawn to him were the very ones who at one time or another had been wounded by their religion.

In all three of the synoptic Gospels, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants follows Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday. God is the landowner who plants the vineyard, fences it, puts in a winepress, and builds a watchtower before leasing the vineyard to tenants and leaving them to care for it as God's stewards. Twice God sends servants to claim the harvest, and twice the tenants beat and stone them, even killing one of them. So God sends God's son to collect the harvest, thinking surely the tenants will respect him. But they kill him, too. We can see that it's a “slap in the face” summary of what the Pharisees have done with God's law, what they are doing in their opposition to Jesus, and even what their endgame will be. We don't need an interpretation of this parable, and the Pharisees didn't need one either. They got it. But they didn't respond to it.

Some of you may remember the 1981 movie, “Escape from New York.” It's set in near-future Manhattan, a city almost destroyed in a brutal war between more than 3 million convicted criminals and the United States Police Force. The island has been turned into a maximum security prison,

surrounded by a 50-foot containment wall. The bridges leading away from the island are set with land mines; walls have been built to block every possible way out; and the waters surrounding the island are charged with lethal electricity. Escape is practically impossible, but then, so is survival. Monthly food dropped into Central Park is the only assistance received from the outside, and every inhabitant of this living hell must rely on his or her own resources to stay alive. There is no law, and the only order there is found within the structures of gangs, collectives of criminals united in their efforts to make it from one day to the next.

Snake Plissken, very nicely played by a young Kurt Russell, is sent into this dangerous place to rescue the President of the United States, who was on his way to a world summit conference when his plane crashed in New York City. He was carrying papers crucial to the survival of this country, so his rescue is imperative. But Snake Plissken is a master criminal himself, and he is not there voluntarily. Explosive devices planted in his head keep him focused on the work he's been given to do. He has no question about his purpose, and he approaches it as if his life depends on it. Because it does.

Since the news broke on Monday morning about the terrible massacre in Las Vegas of fifty-eight innocent people, as well as the physical and emotional injuries inflicted on hundreds of others, I've been thinking and praying about the state of this world we live in. I imagine you've been doing the same—at least I hope you have. I often fear that we've become so accustomed to disagreement and hatred and violence that it's no more than a blip on our radar screens. I worry about what my granddaughters will face when they grow up. And I wonder about God. What must God be thinking about the way we live? And what does God's Spirit want us to hear today? Should it be a baptism homily or a requiem? An inspirational sermon of encouragement or a lamentation? I believe it's all of the above.

Along his Way, Jesus encountered three different kinds of people. There were those who didn't really need to be convinced; they were ready to put their journey with him at the forefront of their lives. The disciples were first, and there were others like them who knew immediately that he was the answer. He also met people who were marginalized because of illness, or ethnicity, even their status in life, people who responded to his acceptance of them. And then there were those who weren't interested at all, or who were intrigued but not willing to commit. And finally, there were those who couldn't let go of their possessions, or status, or their need to be in complete control—people like the rich young man, and, of like the Pharisees and other temple authorities, who held on to their laws and their practices with every ounce of their being. Each of us falls into one of those categories, although God may be the only one who recognize that distinction. We may not even recognize it ourselves.

Our good news is that God loves all of us, and the arms of Jesus are wide open to receive every one of us. The way we respond is entirely up to us; but there's really no middle ground. We're either all in, or we're not in at all. To paraphrase something I heard this week, we must give 100% of ourselves to God in Christ. Giving even 99.999% is not enough. It has to be a full and complete 100%. We give 100% when we accept, believe, trust, and following *without* exception. You'll remember that was the issue with the rich young man. He wanted Jesus on his own terms; he wanted to be the one who made the rules. And he found himself walking away.

How do we give ourselves completely, not only on Sunday morning, but especially in the day-in, day-out circumstances of our lives? Three ways come to mind, although there are certainly more than that. The first is to do what Jesus requires of us in the Great Commandment: to love the Lord our God, with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Everyone is our neighbor, regardless of whether we like them or approve of them or agree about anything under the sun. It's amazing what can happen when we simply smile at each other, and especially when we listen to one another. The second is to take our confession of sin seriously, making it from the depths of our hearts, and to make it regularly, whether it's here in the company of others, in the sacrament of Reconciliation of a Penitent before a priest, or simply one on one with God. A true

confession comes from staying so attuned to Christ that when we make a misstep, we feel like we've been hit with a baseball bat. In the confession, we're saying to God "I'm sorry, I won't do that again" and meaning it. Our blessing is both in God's forgiveness and the knowledge that God does not withhold forgiveness. The third way to apply our faith in the context of our lives is in seeking the company of other faithful people, for worship, for guidance and security for our faith, for fellowship, and for study—because we're never too old to learn and we can never know all there is to know about God in Christ—and because being with other faithful people gives us both an example to follow and a refuge where we can feel safe.

Unlike Snake Plissken, the character from "Escape from New York," no one has planted explosive devices in our heads to make certain we follow God's laws perfectly. The practice of faith is optional, and we're living in a time when many are choosing *not* to practice it. But the possibilities for our own lives and for the world around us should be more than enough to make us keep trying, to focus on the strength, courage, and affirmation we hear from in the quiet voice that says: "I am the Lord your God." That's what Jesus did!

Almighty and everlasting God, pour upon us the abundance of your mercy and give us the strength and courage to love and serve you, with gladness and singleness of heart, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*