

I

Catholic Comedian Drew Carey once said something that I think is quite funny. I hope no one will think it's sacrilegious. Carey asks, "So what's the Pope doing with bodyguards and bulletproof glass? Is he afraid someone will shoot him? [Is he afraid] he'll die and go to heaven? That would be horrible, huh?" Then Carey adds, "If the Pope's afraid to die, what chance do we have?"(1)

Interesting thought. I doubt that the Pope is afraid to die. I'm sure the bulletproof glass is so he can continue leading the Church as long as possible. But he is a human being, and most of us want to hold on to life as long as possible. That's why today's lesson from God's Word is so important.

Jesus' popularity was beginning to ebb. Those who had followed him in the beginning were falling by the wayside. Perhaps the novelty had worn off. Perhaps, with opposition rising, people were becoming afraid to be identified with the Man from Galilee. Whatever the case, it was a time of decision for those who were left.

Jesus surveyed those who had deserted him. Then he asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

As so often, it was Simon Peter who answered for the rest, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter hit it squarely on the head: "You have the words of eternal life." Make no mistake-- this is why hundreds of millions of people of every nationality, race and color bow at the name of Jesus. He has the words of eternal life.

We live in a dying world. We shall not linger on this too long. It is too depressing. But everything about us is dying. There is nothing in this world that stays the same. There is death and decay built into every particle of this universe.

When we are younger we think life can go on forever. But as we get older, we see it is not so.

Some humorous soul has compiled a list of hymns for the crowd that's getting on in years-- not that anyone in this congregation qualifies! Anyway, here is his list:

1. Precious Lord, Take My Hand, and Help Me Up
2. It is Well with My Soul, But My Knees Hurt
3. Nobody knows the Trouble I Have Seeing
4. Go Tell It on the Mountain, But Speak Up

And my favorite:

5. Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah, I've Forgotten Where I Parked (2)

As we get older we start seeing changes in the world around us--and sometimes these changes are unwelcome. Friends die. Neighborhoods die. Even an entire way of life can die. Even when we're young, we can grow disillusioned with a world of uncertain values and unfulfilling lifestyles. Many young people feel alone and afraid. Some even feel ashamed because they are part of a culture that has embraced unhealthy forms of sexuality and alcohol and drug use. And so all of us, young and old, come to Jesus. Why? Because he has those wonderful words of life.

Words like, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Mat 10:29-31, NRSV) And remember these words, "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2)

In a dying and decadent world, Jesus reminds us that there is something more, something of infinitely greater worth that awaits all who trust in him. He has wonderful words of life.

His words remind us that even the smallest person's life can have a great impact on the world. If this world has meaning, if our lives have meaning, if it is true when the smallest sparrow falls from the sky the Father is aware of it, doesn't that say that who we are and what we do is important--no matter what our limitations?

Many years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner and his wife lost their teenage son to a rare disease. We grieve all the more deeply over the death of a young person because he or she never got to reach their full potential. But their son's death was not the end of his influence. Many years after their son's death, Kushner and his wife learned that more than half of his high school classmates had memorialized him in their college essays as "the most unforgettable person" they had ever met. This young man's attitude toward his own life and death had been so impressive that dozens of young people were still influenced by him. (3)

The greatest heresy of which you and I can be guilty of is not a lack of faith in God. The greatest heresy is a lack of faith in ourselves and what God can do through us. Even the smallest person in the kingdom of God is of infinite value. Even the person with the most severe limitations can impact others. This is why the words of Jesus are so refreshing and life-giving. He tells us that our lives matter.

I mention this because how we feel about ourselves will determine the effectiveness of our witness to Christ. There are many people who latch onto Christ because they are disgusted with themselves. And that's good. We need to reach out to him when our self-esteem is dragging the floor. But if we stay disgusted with ourselves, we can never be effective in reaching out to others. Christ has too many followers who feel helpless, defeated, impotent. Let Christ deliver you from your feelings of low self-esteem. Let him speak to you words of life about who you are and what he has done in your behalf.

There are some of fellow veteran now need to know about Jesus and hope. They need us to give them words of life. I speak of our Afghanistan veterans. Not since Viet Nam do we have a large number of veterans who will feel betrayed or that their sacrifices did not have

value. They need us to hold them up when. We also need to remind our nation that our has stopped having God as the center of our lives. Not religion but God should be the center of each person's life. We God removed we have lost our desire to help others because we have become a nation of people self-centered. We have to get out there and spread the good news and do it with joy.

Matt Weinstein, in his book, *Managing to Have Fun* tells an interesting story that deserves to be broadcast widely.

He said he was running through the streets of Berkeley with his friend Dale Larsen. Dale is a clinical psychologist, and although they had been friends for a long time, they had never gone running together before. After stretching, they began to run and had only gone a few blocks when Matt noticed that Dale reached into the pocket of his shorts, took out a handful of coins, and threw them over his shoulder. The first couple of times this happened, Matt pretended not to notice. But after a while it began to drive him crazy--so he finally asked Dale, "Dale, what is the story with the money? Why are you throwing coins into the street?" Dale laughed and proceeded to tell him about an amazing psychology experiment nicknamed, interestingly enough, "The Good Samaritan Study."

"In the study, researchers positioned themselves across from a pay phone and studied the people who made phone calls. One of the first things they discovered was that almost everyone who makes a call looks in the coin return after hanging up to see if any coins happen to be there. The urge is irresistible: you just have to look in the coin return to see if the machine has mistakenly returned your money! This behavior gave the researchers an idea. The next day, they randomly put coins in the coin return slot, so that some of the people who used the phone actually did discover money. The researchers then hired a young woman to walk by the phone at the exact moment that the subjects were hanging it up. When the young woman walked by with her arms full of books, she pretended to stumble and drop them on the ground. Astonishingly, the researchers observed that the people who found money in the coin return were four times as likely to stop and help the woman pick up her books than were the people who found no money in the coin return. They concluded," writes Matt Weinstein, "that when we feel good, we tend to do good, which also means that the helping impulse is transferable. In other words, if you do something good for another person, he or she is much more likely to do something nice for someone else, causing one small gesture to result in a giant ripple effect." (4)

Notice those words: "when we feel good, we tend to do good . . ." Many people identify themselves with Christ's ministry, but they never reach out to others. Why? It is because Christ's spirit, Christ's acceptance, Christ's empowerment have never penetrated their hearts.

The disciples knew they could never leave Jesus. Oh, they had the freedom to do so, but they would never have the desire to do so. Because, in him, they had found life. They felt good about themselves in his presence, so they could feel good about others. They felt pure in his presence, so they could have pure motives in relating to others. They felt his love and so they could be loving. Simon Peter answered for the rest, "Lord, to whom can we go? You

have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

How do you feel about Jesus this day--and how do you feel about yourself? Some of us feel like sinners--and we are, but he has taken away our sins. Some of us feel inadequate, but we do not take comfort in our completeness, but in his. Some of us feel resentful. We wonder why life has not been more fulfilling. We wonder why we do not experience his goodness in our lives. Could it be that we have not opened ourselves completely to him? Could it be that we have not completely listened to the words he would say to us? Could it be that our spiritual and emotional lethargy is a result of our fear of total commitment to his purpose for our lives?

Permit me, please, to illustrate with a truly strange analogy. According to the fossil record, the oldest known mammal on earth is the opossum. This is unusual, because the opossum is not a particularly hardy animal. It is not very fast or smart or aggressive, and it has few ways to defend itself. So how has the opossum survived so well in this hostile world?

For starters, the opossum will eat anything. There is almost no substance that it finds inedible. Also, the opossum is not susceptible to any diseases. It even has a built-in resistance to certain types of snake venom. But the single most effective defense mechanism opossums possess is the ability to "play dead." When threatened by a predator, opossums react by falling into a coma-like state, which can last up to six hours. Most wild animals will not eat a dead animal, so the predator often leaves the opossum alone. (5)

In the southern U.S. people use the expression, "playing possum." It means that people are immobile, feigning death. That reminds me of many Christians.

It's like the old joke about the man who died in church. Paramedics carried out six people before they got to the right one.

Our lives lack spiritual vitality. They lack joy, they lack life. I believe the reason is fear--fear of total commitment to Christ and a refusal to hear and believe his wonderful words of life.

One Christmas years ago, a letter was addressed to Santa Claus. It was intercepted by a postal clerk in England. The clerk suddenly realized it was written by his own daughter, who was quite young. The girl told Santa that recently her little brother, Charlie, had died. She asked Santa to take Charlie's presents up to heaven so that he would have something to play with. And then she told Santa of her parents' deep grief. She asked Santa to bring something that would help her father stop crying so much. She wrote, "I heard him tell Mommy that only eternity could cure him. Could you give him some of that?"

We all need some of that, don't we? Some eternity. That's why today we have come to spend time with Jesus. Only he has the wonderful words of eternal life.

1. That's Really Funny! (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2000), p. 79.

2. <http://www.preaching.com>

3. Harold S. Kushner. *Living a Life That Matters* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), p.142.
4. Simon & Schuster, 1997.
5. By the Bathroom Readers' Institute. *Uncle John's Ahh-Inspiring Bathroom Reader* (Ashland, OR: Bathroom Readers' Press, 2002), pp.77-78.

II

“You gotta be kidding me!”

Isn't that the almost universal reaction when we hear, say, that Tom Brady is no longer a Patriot, or Max Scherzer will not be pitching for the Nationals, or Trae Turner is going to Los Angeles, or Washington's early love, Bryce Harper, was traded? It feels so much like betrayal. Of course, think of what happens when whole teams disappear, as the Dodgers did for Brooklyn, or the Giants for New York, or when the Baltimore Colts went to Indianapolis. Leo Messi leaving Barcelona? “You gotta be kidding me!”

We have an instinctual feeling that loyalty should be returned, that the adulation we pour upon a person or a team makes a claim on them. We have shown you love. How dare you not love us back?

But isn't this one of the basic dramas of all human experience? Perhaps it's played out most personally and painfully in divorce when people risked their lives, affections, and futures on another person and things fell apart. Certainly this is the pall that covers our military leaving of Afghanistan, just as it felt when Saigon fell decades ago.

This is also the underlying drama of the Scriptures and our relationship with God. God has shown such generous love and such gracious redemption to us, but how so we treat God in return? The first reading gives an “all or nothing” choice to the Jewish people; when things are put in those terms, the decisions we make seem clear. But often the basic choices we make do not stand out so boldly. We rather drift in and out of feelings, sometimes hot and sometimes cold, until it's clear, in the end, where we stand.

Today we finish our reflection on the very long and powerful chapter 6 of the Gospel of John in which Jesus, having multiplied bread for hungry people, tells them that this is a sign of the way God's generosity is being poured upon them, a symbol of the way God is giving his Son, Jesus, to be eternal life for every person. When people hear this, they find it too much and begin walking away. How can Jesus be our bread, our food, our life?

When Jesus asks Peter where he stands, Peter bluntly says that the Apostles have no where else to go because no one, other than Jesus, has the words of life. No one can better show us how we stand with God, now and forever, than Jesus. As the second reading shows, Jesus' faithful love is the norm of all faithful love. Yet what seemed clear to Peter seems so fuzzy for so many people today. “Where else can we go?” And people seem to be answering, “lots of places, lots of alternatives,” because following Christ seems not to be high on the agendas of many people. Yet God's love endures, like the love of true lovers as we hear in the second reading, with a loyalty and fidelity that cannot be broken, only ignored. And it stands before our world today as a perpetual invitation. Wherever we may be considering, or whatever we think is important, God's love and covenant stand forever, reaching out to the heart of every person, inviting us into that love. That love endures, for sure, because after we have looked at every half-baked alternative for our lives, God insists that we know that divine love is always there to draw us back and fill us.

Jesus comes to us as Bread of Life. We pledge ourselves to him every time we come to Mass and unite ourselves with his faithful love. We are saying, with Peter, that we will stay with Christ. Perhaps our greater faithfulness can be a witness to others and a way for them to also experience the solid food of God's unbreakable love.

III

Former heavyweight boxer James (Quick) Tillis is a cowboy from Oklahoma. Tillis fought out of Chicago in the early 1980s. A deeply religious man, Tillis is remembered as the first boxer ever to make Mike Tyson go the distance in the heavyweight division.

Tillis had his disappointments as a boxer, but evidently they didn't rob him of his sense of humor. He still remembers his first day in the Windy City after his arrival from Tulsa. "I got off the bus," he says, "with two cardboard suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stopped in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, and I looked up at the Tower and I said to myself, 'I'm going to conquer Chicago.' When I looked down . . . the suitcases were gone." (1)

What a way to begin a boxing career. But Tillis did not quit. He didn't accomplish all he set out to accomplish, but he was no quitter.

Some of the people who followed Jesus were disappointed. As we've noted before, they were expecting one kind of Messiah, but Jesus introduced them to a different kind of Messiah altogether. Let's think for a moment about the background of today's text.

A few weeks ago we dealt with the feeding of the 5,000. Actually 5,000 was the number of men who were fed. There were children and women who were there as well, bringing the number of persons that Jesus fed upwards of 10,000 people.

But how did Jesus have that many people following him in the first place? Well, he had been healing people like Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood. And he had been sending his disciples out with power and authority and they were casting out demons and healing the sick (Luke 9:1-6). And consequently his ministry was going viral, if you can say that about a movement that is being spread person-to-person no twitter or internet..

People were following him because he was meeting their needs, including the need to be fed. This made him so popular with the people that they wanted to make him king. This was not what Jesus was sent to do. He wanted to be King of their lives, not king of their country. That would have been a mistake. We see time and time again what happens when people take over countries in the name of religion. They are more apt to fulfill Satan's goals than God's goals. Again, Jesus wants to be King of our lives, not king of our country.

And so we come to our lesson for the day. The writer of the Gospel of John explains the situation like this: "From this time, many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Notice that it does not say that many in the crowd turned back or many that he fed turned back. We would expect that. Like many people today, there will always be people who church hop. They will keep shopping until they find a church that gives them exactly what they want.

No, we could understand it if John said that many of the 10,000 turned back, but what he says is, "From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." This means some of the church's [Knights, Lectors, EMHC Sunday School teachers, choir members and

ushers] turned their backs on him. The ship was taking on water and in danger of sinking. At least, that is how it would look to the casual observer.

What it was, though, was a right-sizing of Jesus' followers. Sometimes in order to have a body that is moving in the right direction, you have to run a few people off. It's true! We don't often admit that in church. But some people are actually a detriment to the kingdom of God. It is impossible for any church to move forward if the highest principle it has as an organization is to keep everyone happy.

There are some who try to control the church because they are the big donors. Others have a long time history in the parish. Others know the bishop. Still others are on the parish council and forget they are an advisory group. If they don't get their way, they threaten to leave. A good pastor shows them the door. A more charitable pastor (not me) asks them to pray about it.

but their stranglehold over the church was broken. And sometimes that has to happen for a church to move forward. We don't like to see anyone leave the church. Every believer is precious to God. But even Jesus couldn't keep everyone happy. He didn't try to. He wanted only those who were committed to the cause for which he was sent. When he started talking about the cost involved, his broken body and shed blood, and calling them to take up a cross, his words fell on unreceptive ears. But those who stayed with him, those who were committed to the end are still celebrated to this day. Without them there would be no church 2,100 years later.

It hurt Jesus to see many who been with him for much of his ministry turn their back on him. They had been with him when he healed the lame, gave sight to the blind. They were there when he fed the 10,000. Could they not see that he was the One who was to come? Even if he did not meet their expectations of what a Messiah ought to be, could they not see that he was the Savior of the world? Could they not see that there never had been another like him? But I've got to ask us another question: Can't we see who he is, as well?

Researchers tell us that, nationally, every week over 53,000 people leave the church never to return. (3) But even among those who remain, only about twenty per cent are really committed to their faith. Why is that? Is it that there are many casual worshippers who come a few times a year out of mere tradition and not because they really believe that Christ is the Savior of the world? Is that why there are so few who are willing to serve him?

Christ said, "For even the Son of Man, came not to be served but to serve others, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

An unknown writer quoted on the Internet tells of visiting a fast-growing church in Minnesota to learn from their staff. It was a privilege, he reports, to witness their passion for doing high quality ministry in Jesus' name. He left with some new insights and a renewed passion for the Gospel.

One of the phrases that he heard while he was there at that fast-growing church was, "We want our members to wear aprons, not bibs." That's an interesting phrase "aprons, not bibs." Here's what they meant: Bibs are for people who only want to be fed. Bibs are for those who are not yet

ready or willing to feed themselves. Bibs are for those who are more interested in being served than in serving. Bibs are for those who insist that the church exists for them and their needs. Bibs are for babes in the faith, those who haven't caught God's vision for the church, or those who are not yet of the faith. On the other hand, aprons are for those who have a heart to serve others in

Jesus' name. Aprons are for those who know that they are the church. Aprons are for those who don't mind getting their hands dirty. Aprons are for those who take the time daily to feed their spiritual hunger. Aprons are for those who are growing in faith, and hunger to help others grow.

Church growth consultant, Win Arn, interviewed thousands of Christians in America several years ago and asked them what they thought the church existed for. Eighty-eight percent said, "The church exists to serve my needs and the needs of my family." In other words, 88% of Christians in America are still wearing bibs. They believe that the church exists to serve them . . . not so they can serve the world.

On the night when he was betrayed, just hours before he was crucified, the very Son of God took off his outer garments, wrapped a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples' feet. When he was done he said, "I have just given you an example to follow." In other words, Jesus called his disciples to wear aprons, not bibs. In Matthew, Jesus is recorded as saying, "For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many." He also said, "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it." (4)

Jesus calls us to wear aprons, not bibs. The people came to Jesus to be fed, but when he challenged them to feed others, they weren't interested.

It hurt Jesus to see many who been with him for much of his ministry turn their back on him. He turned to the twelve who were left and said rather sadly, "You do not want to leave too, do you?"

And, of course, it was Simon Peter who answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." And that is why we linger here too. That is why so many of you have exchanged your bib for an apron; why you have decided that a casual involvement in the life of the church is not enough.

You are part of that inner circle who has come to believe and to know that Jesus is the Holy One of God. There is no way to be casual about such knowledge. If Jesus is the Savior of the world, how can we possibly give anything but our best? If he is the Son of God, how can we not give him our all?

In the preface to her book, *Amazing Grace*, writer Kathleen Norris tells of an evening when she was making a presentation concerning her book. A woman in the audience asked her a painful question. "I don't mean to be offensive," she said, "but I just don't understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose language does so much harm."

Taken aback momentarily, Norris struggled to respond. She understood the question all too well, for she had, herself, been distanced from faith for many years. She knew what it was to struggle

with the traditional language of faith. Suddenly she realized the troublesome word in the woman's question was the word "comfort." The questioner had asked her how she had found "such comfort in her religion."

Kathleen Norris answered that she didn't think it was comfort she was seeking or comfort she'd found. "Look," she said, as a rush of words came to her, "As far as I'm concerned, this religion has saved my life, my husband's life, and our marriage. So it's not comfort that I'm talking about, but salvation." (5)

I suspect that there are some of us who have grown all too comfortable in our faith. Even some of us who have been around the church for many years are still wearing bibs rather than aprons. Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

Have you come to that knowledge? Do you know what Kathleen Norris meant when she said her faith had saved her life, her husband's life, and their marriage? Is it that important in your life? Many who followed Jesus turned back. Only his most committed disciples remained. Are you part of that group?

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1. Today in the Word, September 10, 1992.
2. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1990), pp. 38-40.
3. Servant, Sum 1995. Cited in Current Thoughts & Trends, September 1995, p. 19.
4. Unknown author Cited at <http://www.mountainwings.com/past/11066.htm>.
5. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).