

Daily Gospel meditations for the week of April 30-May 4, 2018

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John 14:21-26

“Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (Jn 14:23).

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*, Pope Benedict XVI quotes the reflection of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux on this verse, “We have come to know a threefold coming of the Lord. The third coming takes place between the other two [*adventus medius*] ... his first coming was in the flesh and in weakness, this intermediary coming is in the spirit and in power, the last coming will be in glory and majesty.” Pope Benedict XVI points out this does not change our expectation of Jesus’ return in glory at the final judgment, but rather reveals that our present time is not devoid of God’s living presence. Jesus’ “middle coming” occurs through Scripture, through the sacraments, especially the most Holy Eucharist; and the everyday events of our lives. Who has not encountered God in the song of the lark, in the smile of a loved one, or in the warmth of the spring sun after the coldness and darkness of the winter.

The Psalmist felt the insignificance of humanity when he surveyed the sky, the moon and the stars, saying, “What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them” (Ps 8:5). But now Jesus tells us that because I love Him, and try to live according to his word, that God lives within me, within all of us. I cannot comprehend love and compassion and benevolence of this magnitude, for “I am not worthy to carry his sandals” (Mt 4:11).

When I walk into a room, do others experience the presence of God within me? When someone walks into St. John Paul II Church, do they feel the presence of God, not just in the tabernacle, but in the living, breathing body of Christ composed of our parishioners? They should. With God’s help, I pray that we truly become the physical body of Christ in our world; that people both within and outside of our church feel drawn toward us, attracted by the love, acceptance, and serenity God instills in us.

## John 14:27-31

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (Jn 14:27).

School shootings. Drug overdoses. Human trafficking. Nuclear threats. I turn off the TV, numb and nauseous, and pick up my Bible and read verse 27 of John 14. Lord, you cannot know what’s going on down here. Fear governs our world. Build higher walls; build more bombs; kill them before they kill us. Yet, as I stare out the window, a butterfly lands on the sill, flexing its black and blue wings in the sunlight, and so I read on. “And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe. I will no longer speak much with you, for the ruler of the world [Satan] is coming. He has no power over me ...” (Jn 14:30). A gentle breeze stirs the wind chimes to life, and my breathing slows. “... but the world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me. Get up, let us go” (Jn 14:31). The afternoon sun melts the icy bands of fear constraining my heart as I hear Jesus’ words echoing in my soul, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. You heard me tell you, ‘I am going away and I will come back to you’ ” (Jn 14:28). And I pray, “You’ve got this God. Please help me be part of Your solution rather than part of Your problem. Amen.”

John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit” (Jn 15:1-2).

For someone who grew up on a farm, I have an exceptionally brown thumb. A friend once gave me a houseplant with the encouraging words, “You can’t kill this”, but she was wrong. My friend grows beautiful flowers, soaring shrubs, and stately trees which she cares for meticulously, ruthlessly it seems to me. She prunes shrubs mercilessly, dead-heads flowers zealously, and trims limbs from trees that detract from the overall form of the tree. Her aggressive work has produced a garden that is literally picture perfect. Her roses soar over trellises and arbors while mine slump and slink across the ground. Her shrubbery spirals gracefully upward toward God, while mine spirals out of control.

Our respective gardens illustrate the metaphor Jesus uses to describe himself and the work of the Father. Jesus is the true vine and the Father the vine dresser (Jn 15:1). So I enter the confessional with my head down and my face red, and begin to pull out the weeds and rot that have taken root in my soul. God will prune the ugly and gnarly parts of my life, if I permit Him, and I too will soar and blossom under His care. I will abide in Jesus and He will abide in me and I will bear much fruit (Jn 15:5). I will be part of the Garden of Jesus here at St. John Paul II Parish; a beautiful and vibrant garden in which Jesus abides; a garden in which people should delight to come and walk, filled with peace and compassion; an echo of the Garden of Eden available to all who desire to behold. This is God’s promise, if we submit to his loving care.

John 14:6-14

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, then you will also know my Father” (Jn 14:6-7).

This is the big announcement, the moment of revelation that separates Christianity from the other Abrahamic faiths (Judaism and Islam), for although they know God, they can never know Him as Father. It is this statement of God’s Fatherhood that reveals that God is love; that God is a loving relationship of Father and Son; and a few verses later Jesus reveals the Holy Spirit also resides in this divine, loving relationship (Jn 14:26). This is the culmination of God’s revelation throughout salvation history. God revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 11-35); revealed his name to Moses (Ex 3:4-15); and, that death might not be the end of life to Ezekiel (Ez 37:1-14) and Daniel (Dan 12), but it is only through Jesus that we learn that God is love and relationship. People may know God in other ways, but they can never know him as Father other than by the Son.

It is through this revelation that we have the privilege, the honor really, of entering into a legally binding family relationship with God as His adopted sons and daughters; a covenantal relationship, a sacramental relationship. This is the New Covenant that Jesus came to institute (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8); that each and every one of us, through our own free choice, through our free consent, is adopted by God, our Father. As Scott Hahn describes it, “Jesus didn’t just come to save us **from** Hell, but to save us **for** adoption into God’s family and eternal life with Him.” WOW!!!!

John 15:12-17

“This is my commandment: love one another as I love you” (Jn 15:12).

Father Raymond Suriani said, “God loves just as we are – but too much to let us stay that way.” The entire story of salvation recorded in the Bible shows God gradually leading humanity to become the people he created us to be. Moses recorded God’s expectation of humanity worshiping Him alone, and to respect the property, dignity, life, and reputation of family and neighbors (Ex 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21). By the time of Jesus, the seven commandments regarding people and property were condensed to “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31). Jesus expanded the definition of neighbor in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) to anyone in need, regardless of ethnicity, race, or status. In today’s Gospel, Jesus expands the definition of love to “...love one another as I love you” (Jn 15:12). To be sure we understand what he means he explains, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13).

Only a few hours later Jesus “walked the talk” he gave here, giving his life for us; giving his life not only for the men and women he knew in his physical lifetime, but for all throughout eternity. Do I love like this? I can barely make myself slow down to allow a car to merge into traffic ahead of me. How can I give my life for someone when I won’t go near enough to them to see the fear flickering in their eyes, hear the pain in their cries, or smell the festering wounds in their heart? Pope Francis said “The shepherd should smell of his sheep”, but that applies to all followers of Christ, not just our priests. God loves as we are, adopts us into his holy and divine family as we are, but then he expects us to live and love as he does; guiding us, leading us, supporting us each step of the way.