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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle A

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

CRIPTURE: Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 15:12,16-20; Luke 6:17,20-26

One of the things we are invited to do as followers of Christ is to be filled with great joy and great peace. I think it's easy for us to see that these are gifts we all long for; we don't have to be told we should pursue them. Everyone would like to be filled with joy, praise and thanks for a life that is good. It's interesting to me that Christianity, when seen in its healthiest form, is definitely designed to help us reach that goal of peace and joy. Happiness, wholeness, fullness. But the difficulty we have with this is the way in which we receive these gifts. It is a great mystery. We often seek them too directly and not in the way Jesus has taught us. Let's look at this whole issue of how it is we are to reach the goals that we long for deep inside our souls. How do we reach them? How did Jesus show us the way to reach them? Let's begin by looking at this gospel because it marks a very interesting and very important period in the life of Jesus. He has just spent the night in prayer, on a high mountain. Jesus has turned to his Father and begged him for insight and wisdom as to know whom he could call as his apostles. They were to be his missionaries, to go out and continue the work.

One of the things that Jesus was extraordinarily sensitive to was that he was called to create in the minds and hearts of people a new way of seeing their religion, their faith, their God. He was coming to save the lost house of Israel. Jesus wasn't going to count on himself to continue this work; rather, he was going to count on a few to start it and continue it - and to let it spread naturally through healthy contagion. People would get "caught" with this teaching Jesus was going to give the twelve disciples. Jesus chooses the twelve, and he comes down from the mountain to a level place. This idea of a "level place" is an interesting metaphor for Jesus to choose to preach this very important sermon. A level place on an incline is certainly a place of rest. He wants to talk to his disciples about how in this process they are going to find help, rest, and comfort. Now if this is considered to be one of the first official homilies or preaching to the disciples, it's a very fascinating beginning. It's almost as if Jesus said, "Okay, now let me get something straight at the very beginning. This is very important. If you don't get this teaching down, you are going to have a really hard time embracing the way I am going to teach you." Jesus starts off by saying the most bizarre things. He looks at his disciples and says, "If you feel poor, if you sense a feeling of poverty, (which I think is another way of saying 'if you feel you are not enough for this task,') you are so blessed. If you feel hungry, (meaning if you don't find that the way I am inviting you to work and live is going to

sustain, fill and nourish you) if you are going to go into this situation and expect yourself to be filled all the time and not hungry and not longing for something, you are also very blessed. You have to know that you have to experience hunger. You are not always going to be fulfilled." Then Jesus goes on to say that if the disciples, who are being sent into the world to do the work, won't make it if they don't expect to be misunderstood, ridiculed and rejected, even treated as outcasts in some people's minds. They are really blessed if they understand this is part of the process. Jesus also says something interesting when he says: "If you can embrace your poverty, your hunger, rejection - if you can accept all of that - then you are going to find fulfillment, riches, wholeness, and acceptance." That's very strange language. It's just backwards. We would think (and I know many of us as Christians have fallen into this trap as I have) that if we give our lives over to Jesus, if we tell Jesus we want to do what he wants us to do, then there is a part of us that expects to be feeling very rich and full. Feeling very capable of everything that needs to be done. And everyone is going to love me. If I am a very good priest then I think everyone is going to say, "Oh, he's a wonderful priest. I love him so much." We often enter into situations with that kind of expectation.

Jesus tells us that if we go into this process thinking that this way of life is going to make us rich, capable and super-strong, and we are going to have a lot of people around us loving and adoring us - we are going to be sad, empty, and poor. And we will not experience joy. What is Jesus saying? I think what Jesus is trying to say is that there is something extraordinarily important about knowing how to get to this place of fullness. And we don't get there by deciding we have to be full on our own. If we want to get to a place of effectiveness, we don't develop our skills so that we can be extraordinarily effective. This is counter to almost every other way in which we work in this world in terms of skill and talents. If we want to be good at something in this world, we have to go out and perfect it. We have to work on it. If we want to be good at doing something, we have to practice at it. We have to discipline ourselves so that we can fine-tune our skill. But in the Christian walk, what is so fascinating is that it all begins with its opposite. Powerlessness. Knowing that we don't have enough to do this work is the beginning of real power. Emptiness. Knowing that we are empty and not capable of taking care of everything is the beginning of really feeling full. Being able to endure misunderstanding and rejection is the beginning of finding security and peace. What Jesus is trying to say is that this whole Christian way of life is based not in success in the way the world thinks about it. Rather, the whole Christian way of life is based in something quite different: trust. Trust in someone who makes us full. Trust in someone who makes us effective. Trust in someone who gives us a sense of value.

It's interesting that when we enter into this world, we enter as children. We are radically trusting. I can't think of a child who is very young that I have talked to who has ever told me how fabulous Jesus is in their life and how wonderful God's grace is and how it sustains them. No, they project all of that onto all of the adults around them: "My mother is there for me. My mommy and daddy love me. My teachers take care of me. They sustain me. I can't make it without them." And so, we begin with a natural leaning on human beings. Notice in the reading from Jeremiah that we are listening to the prophet speak words that are almost the opposite. They are words a child couldn't comprehend. He is saying that if we trust in our parents, we are doomed, cursed. If we trust in the people around us who are going to take care of us, we will never grow in our spiritual lives. We have to trust in something other than human beings. I think there is a natural progression, where as we grow and develop, there is a kind of disillusionment that comes about trusting in humans. At the same time, it strikes me that as we grow and become age-

appropriate for this kind of wisdom to sink into us, we do begin to shift our focus as to where we find our value, our dignity and our strength. The other day I was thinking about the fact that if we have experienced abuse from an adult as a child (especially from a caretaker such as a parent, a teacher or a priest) one of the things that is so devastating about that kind of abuse is that it comes too soon in terms of ripping away a child's support system. The most dangerous thing about adults abusing children is not so much the act in itself (although that is certainly bad enough) but what is so devastating is the way in which it robs the child of the ability to trust. If your trust is damaged as a child with regard to your ability to trust another human being, it is going to be very, very hard for you to trust in God. To trust in anything outside of yourself. So often, abused children or abused people tend to be abusive. That means they are basically out there trying to use people to satisfy their needs or wants. Or to make others the source of their value. It can create a tremendous selfishness that gets really in the way of any kind of real intimacy.

Real intimacy is not based on our needing somebody else as much as it is based on our desire to give to someone else. To share life with someone else. To trust in someone else. Not as our source of strength, but as something quite different. We are invited to imagine that there is a power - divinity - living within us, living around us, living as part of us - that we are to drink in as our source of strength, our source of satisfaction, and our source of boundaries that keep us from being damaged by people who don't understand us. We need to trust in the mysterious way in which the divine power, an extraordinary gift, is our rock. But that doesn't happen when we are really young. It happens when we get older. In the reading from Paul to the Corinthians, he tells the people that unless they believe in the resurrection of the body, they can't believe in the fundamentals of Christianity. It all depends on the understanding that Christ was raised from the dead. I used to think that this meant, "Do we believe in the resurrection. Do we believe it literally happened. Do we believe that his body that went into the tomb came out. Do we believe he was dressed in white. That he spoke to the disciples and the women who came to the tomb?" If we don't believe in that, we don't have any hope or faith. I thought, "Well, that seems strange." But it's not about just believing in the literal resurrection of Jesus, which I truly believe in. It is more than that. It is about believing in the process.

The process of Jesus' dying and rising is an invitation for us to believe in the process we find described in the gospel. That is simply: In dying, we rise. In letting go of the need to be rich and full from the things around us, we become truly rich and full. The act of dying and rising is the same action. This is difficult to explain. If we have ever met anyone very selfish, very egotistical, and very caught up in the things they have accomplished, we can discern that those people are basically living in this world without ever experiencing death. They don't know anything about the dark side of this whole process of how they get to a place that makes them extraordinarily effective with other people. Nothing is more difficult than working with someone who is trying to give you something, but you have to constantly have to honor them as the gift-giver. You constantly have to give them affirmation for the wonderful things they are doing. Otherwise, they lose hope. That's a good indication that they don't believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. They don't believe that it is out of their poverty that they are strong or rich. They don't believe in the basic paradox. This idea of the death and resurrection of Jesus is not a mystery of our faith; it is described as the mystery of our faith. If we don't understand this, then nothing makes sense. So often people will blame God or become angry when things don't go the way they want, when things are taken away from them that they really depend on for their value. They will see God as mean and nasty, ugly and horrible. Unfaithful. After all, they say, "If I have done what I am supposed to do, why don't I get what I need?" And yet, so

many times what we are looking at is God gently trying to break that tie to things that are not really fundamentally the source of our strength, our value, our richness - whatever you want to call it. It's got to be based on something other than how things are going on the outside, our relationships.

The challenge of the Christian walk, the challenge to find this incredible gift of peace, is all in this area of dying. Of believing in our powerlessness. Of believing in the inability of the world to really satisfy us. When things go wrong, we sense that we have been dumped by God. When we are caught in that way of thinking, it blocks everything. It blocks the growth. It blocks the movement. Our challenge is to embrace this great mystery of death and resurrection. When Jesus came into the world in the incarnation (and Christianity is fundamentally incarnational) we are looking at a figure who is not just simply walking this earth as a sign that God is curious and interested in our lives down here. Rather, it is someone who is trying to show us what it is like to be human. There is nothing clearer about the life of Jesus, particularly when he did good, life-giving things for people, that there was another group ready to kill him. Especially after he had won the awe and admiration of the crowd. Do you think that was just an experience Jesus had, as if we don't have that experience, too? We always have that experience. Just imagine how limiting it is when that kind of negative reaction is seen as something that is wrong, when, in fact, it is inevitable. If it is inevitable, we have to be strong enough to deal with it. The way we become strong enough to deal with it is to shift dramatically from a kind of childlike dependence on the environment and the people around us for our sustenance to something that is much bigger. Much more consistent. And fundamentally designed to be the one and only source that really sustains us and brings us this gift of peace.

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Choose Life...in Christ

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Suppose someone among you were to pose this pointed problem to me: "I should like to expand my Catholic existence, deepen my spiritual life. Right now I'm what you'd call a good average Catholic. I rarely miss Mass, even when I sleep in on Sunday and the Redskins are playing that afternoon. I keep all Ten Commandments, however sticky the sixth. I listen respectfully to pope and bishops, though the contraception bit is a corker and the pastoral on the economy is hard to swallow. I'm a reliable family man, though my teenage children think I'm a cross between Hitler and Danny De Vito. I'm honest in my business dealings, no matter what my colleagues do. I'm generous at collection time, even try to support my pastor in the style to which he'd like to become accustomed. But I'm dissatisfied; there's something missing. Sometimes I feel I'm that Pharisee in the temple recording his virtues; for all his fidelity to the law, the Lord was not happy with him. How does a busy man or woman begin to be better than he or she is?"

Where to begin? I suggest that today's three readings can be uncommonly helpful if we want to know Christ *more* clearly, love him *more* dearly, follow him *more* nearly. And so my three points are simply (1) Sirach, (2) Paul, (3) Jesus.

I

First, Sirach. Here is a book of Israelite wisdom, written about 180 B.C. The author? A respected, well-traveled teacher who ran an academy for young Jewish men. He tells you that the Lord has shaped you with a fearful power: the power to choose. "If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice" (Sir 15:15).¹ You cannot blame God for the bad choices you make, for the sins you commit.

The heart of your power to choose? The critical decision for every human person: "Before [you] are life and death, and whichever [you] choose will be given to [you]" (v. 17). It recalls the Lord's words to Israel in Deuteronomy: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19).

"Choose life." But "life" here does not mean merely x-number of years, does not mean "Choose to be 80 or 90 or 100." "Life" here means "loving" God, "obeying" God, "cleaving to" God (Deut 30:20). This it is to be genuinely alive. And "death" here is not a fatal stroke, heart arrest. "Death" here is idolatry in its thousand shapes—putting any creature on a pedestal and worshiping it: money in the millions or sex on demand, power over your brothers and sisters or the applause of the masses.

If life is what you really want, then you have the Lord's promise through Moses: "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart...so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut 30:6). Is this what you really want? Then God will work in you the change, the conversion, that makes it possible to fulfill the law of love. In fact, if you really want it, God is already at work in you.

II

So much for Sirach: Choose life. What the apostle Paul adds is a Christian dimension: The life you choose is life in Christ. It goes back to what Paul calls the "secret and hidden wisdom of God ...[which] none of the rulers of this age understood" (1 Cor 2:7—8), a wisdom so profound that only Paul's "mature" (v. 6) can grasp it, men and women who have been taught by the Holy Spirit.

What is this "hidden wisdom" which Paul declares "God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (v. 10)? Very simply, it is God's plan of salvation—how a God whose name is Love planned to recapture our love, recapture the love of a sinful humanity, not by force but by the crucifixion of God's own Son. It is a plan, a love, that sheer human reason, however brilliant, could never conceive or believe. In fact, in an outburst of fascinating imagination, Paul declares that if the authorities who crucified Jesus had known that God's plan would be realized through the humiliating death of Jesus, "they would have tried to frustrate it by letting him live."²

By the death of Jesus you and I are alive. Not alive in the sense that I can eye the sky at night and hear the harmonies of Haydn or Lena Horne, smell a spider lily and drool over Domino's pizza, touch my fingers to a face I love. That life I can live without Christ and his Calvary; that life is open not only to Mother Teresa but to Rambo and James Bond. The life I cannot live save through a crucified Christ is a threefold power: the power to believe what the eye cannot see, to hope for what the heart can hardly imagine, to love as Jesus loved. It is Paul's passionate cry to the Christians of Galatia: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

III

Now all that is quite broad; it doesn't tell me what to *do* if I choose life. What Sirach and Paul propose on the level of principle—choose life, live life in Christ—Matthew brings down to bone-and-blood reality. Here we have part of the Sermon on the Mount. Now don't think of the Sermon as a single event where Jesus proclaims at one sitting all that Matthew has in three chapters—all those beatitudes and biddings, commands and counsels that occupy 105 vibrant verses. A masterful editor, Matthew has pieced together all sorts of material from different sources, from different pronouncements of Jesus—stitched them into a coherent whole that confronts the Christian with what it means to follow Jesus.³

Today's extract from the Sermon includes three injunctions in which Jesus takes us a giant step beyond the covenant struck on Sinai: how to fulfill, how to perfect, commandments five, six, and eight.⁴ On Sinai God proscribed murder, adultery, and false witness. On the mountain of the Beatitudes Jesus demands a good deal more: "Unless your uprightness, your holiness, exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). And don't think of the scribes and Pharisees as lax; quite the contrary. The lifeblood of the Pharisees was the law of Moses: not only the written Torah but the oral as well, interpretations of the written law after the Exile. A Jew would be saved, the nation made holy, only by knowing the law thoroughly and following it exactly: Sabbath and feast days, ritual purity, tithing, dietary laws—all 613 imperatives. The Pharisees were strict; Jesus is stricter still.

Take commandment five: "You have heard that it was said to men and women of ancient times [to the generation that first heard the law from Moses], 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother [or sister] shall be liable to judgment ..." (Mt 5:21—22). What is Jesus doing? He "shifts the ground from the act of murder to the emotional prelude to murder, anger."⁵ He is trying to get inside us, get at the roots of immoral activity, at the emotion that triggers the fatal act. That is why Jesus insists: before worship, friendship; before litigation, reconciliation. That is why he would agree with St. Paul, "Don't let the sun set on your anger" (Eph 4:26).

Now Matthew's five verses are not a rounded treatise on anger. Jesus does not distinguish a righteous anger, an anger justified by circumstances, the anger he himself experienced when he drove the buyers and sellers from the temple, the anger with which he looked at the hardhearted worshipers in the synagogue so ready to accuse him for curing the sick on the Sabbath. He does not discuss neurotic repression of anger, the kind of repression psychologists say leads to mental illness. He does not explain how you reconcile with someone who spurns your outstretched hand. He does not put a time limit on parents' anger when their daughter is gang-raped. He is simply trying to lift his followers from a narrow legalism to a new integrity, a gospel wholeness. He wants us to be aware how dangerous anger can be, justified or not. If you don't believe it, you haven't been watching your Movie Channel or the nightly news. Violence and murder—these stem not only from cold-blooded Mafia types but from the anger, the rage, the hatred of good people.⁶

Take commandment six: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27-28). Wow! If this doesn't wake you up, nothing in the Gospels will. And if you are unhappy with the text, you have only three

alternatives: (1) Jesus never really said it. (2) He said it but didn't really mean it. (3) He meant it but not for a sophisticated culture like ours. Don't waste valuable energy on any of the three. Jesus said it; Jesus meant it; Jesus meant it not only for Peter and Judas but for cultured dudes like you and me.

What is Jesus trying to do? Once again, he wants to (a big word) interiorize a command of the law, internalize it. I mean, he goes from the external act to the internal stimulus. It is not only the visible act of forbidden intercourse that is destructive; just as destructive is the lustful heart—perhaps even more destructive. For, as Jesus said on another occasion, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt 15:19). "To look at a woman as an object of lust is to violate the respect due a human person."⁷ To look lustfully is worlds apart from looking lovingly.

Once more Jesus is raising his followers, raising you and me, to a gospel wholeness. Disordered desire in any human context is unchristian: in money as well as sex, in power as well as fame. Look within, Jesus counsels you; find out what drives you, what motivates you, what triggers the deeds you do.

Take commandment eight: "You have heard that it was said to men and women of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all...Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No' " (Mt 5:33—34, 37). Here Jesus is combining two commandments: (1) You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain; (2) You shall not bear false witness. On Mount Sinai God forbade perjury. On the mountain of the Beatitudes Jesus moves far beyond perjury. In your everyday living, he says to his followers, be straight-out honest. Say yes when you mean yes; say no when you mean no.

No need for angst, for anxiety. Presidents can still swear to uphold the Constitution; courts can still administer oaths about "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth"; Jesuits can still vow poverty, chastity, and obedience. In our sinful, imperfect world we still need a certain number of public binding oaths. This is not Jesus' concern. He is saying to his disciples, to such as have chosen to follow him, to you and me: Your sincerity, your honesty, your freedom from hypocrisy, as well as your respect and love for one another, should "make a simple 'yes' or a simple 'no' a sacred expression of truth."⁸ Ethicists may still reason about mental reservations, discuss when a lie is not a lie, even contend that sometimes a lie is legitimate. Jesus is not lecturing Jerusalem on moral theology. He is telling us what it means to follow him, to be his disciple: With God's grace we can do more than avoid sin; we can struggle to be other Christs, to live the Sermon on the Mount. It may take a lifetime, but what else is a Christian lifetime for?

Good friends all: I have set before you three examples of "Choose life," three facets of high Christian living, three ways of living that stretch three of the Ten Commandments. The problem is, these three examples are just that—examples. The Sermon on the Mount is chock-full of the paradoxes that make up "life according to Christ." When Lent comes later this month and you're searching for a penance with teeth in it, you might mull over Matthew 5—7. Discover what it means to be poor in spirit and a peacemaker, meek and merciful; what it means to turn the other cheek and love your enemies; what it means to serve God and not money, not to be anxious about tomorrow, not to judge another, to enter life by the narrow gate, to build your house not on sand but on rock.

I make no apology for these hard sayings, simply because the spirituality I suggest stems

not from me but from *numero uno* among homilists, our Lord Jesus Christ. I set such spirituality before you because to do otherwise is to deceive you, to mislead you into thinking that Catholicism is a creed you repeat each Sunday, a homily with three sugar-coated points, Bethlehem's crib without Calvary's cross. I set it before you because you are capable of living it. I set it before you because you are not ordinary men and women. You believe: I mean you affirm that the Word you hear is God's Word, proclaim with an amen that the wafer in your hand and on your tongue is Christ the Lord. You hope: I mean you confidently expect that the life in and with Christ that is yours now will never end. You love: I mean you try to live not for your individual selves but for the God who shaped you to a divine image, try to live for every Lazarus who lies outside your gate pleading for the crumbs from your table.

If that is so, then the Sermon on the Mount is your charter for Christian living, for Christian choosing, for choosing life. It's tough, I admit—but not much tougher than Wall Street or "L.A. Law."⁹ No need for despair; quite the contrary. If you choose life, if you choose Christlife, you start with Christ in you—Life with a capital L. Enjoy it; enjoy ...him.

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Before You Are Life and Death

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

I don't know how you reacted—or even if you reacted at all—to the Old Testament reading: "Before [you] are life and death, and whichever [you] choose will be given to [you]" (Sir 15:17). Tell that to the waves of Haitians vainly trying to escape hunger, fear, and gunfire. Tell that to the Muslims in Bosnia, dying by the thousands from Serbian massacre. Tell that to the children of Somalia starving to death, legs like storks'. Tell that to the Sudanese, a half million dead from war and famine. Tell that to the people of Armenia, prosperous under Russian rule, threatened again with genocide by their neighbors. Tell that to the children of America, one out of five "living" below the poverty line. Tell that to the hundreds of men on death row for vengeance' sake.

Choose life? There is something of a contradiction here. It is not solved by saying that Ben Sira was speaking to faithful Jews, not to the unfortunate down the ages. The words are addressed to all of us who claim to be alive. So then, three questions: (1) What is this "life," what is this "death," which Ben Sira claims we have the power to choose? (2) What, if anything, does the New Testament add to the Old? (3) How does today's Gospel concretize all that?¹

I

First, Sirach's "life and death." "Life" here does not mean primarily the period from conception to your last breath. Ben Sira is not saying that, if you want to, you can choose to live like Moses for 120 years, or like Grandma Moses for 101. What "life" means Moses told the Israelites while they were struggling toward the Promised Land: "loving the Lord your God, obeying [the Lord], holding fast to [the Lord]; for that means life to you" (Deut 30:20). This is what the God of this chosen people meant by being alive. And "death" in our text is not my last gasp on earth. "Death" is idolatry in its myriad modes:

not only the Israelites in the desert worshipping a golden calf, but our contemporary idols from possessions to popularity to power. In God's eyes, to die is to set up a creature in place of God.

That is why the Psalmist can say that the Lord's "steadfast love is better than [sheer] living" (Ps 63:3). That is why the more spiritual of the Israelites preferred above all else "the happiness of living his [or her] entire life in [God's] temple where one day before [God's] face, consecrated to [God's] praise, 'is worth more than a thousand' [Ps 84:10] elsewhere."² That is why from the darkness of exile Ezekiel could cry out: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn back from their ways and live, turn back from your evil ways" (Ezek 33:11). To be truly alive was to turn to God. And listen to the prophet Amos: "Thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live" (Amos 5:4). For Israel, to be alive was to be searching for God.

II

Second, what, if anything, does the New Testament add to the Old? Very simply, life at its acme is life in Christ. This is not pious sentimentality; it is the only thing that makes Christian sense. Let me explain.

You know what it means to be alive on a sheerly natural level, simply as a human being. You are not genuinely alive simply because there is life in you. This powerful insight was captured decades ago in a novel by Gabriel Fielding. As the review in *Time* magazine put it:

The title of this exciting new novel [*In the Time of Greenbloom*] sounds like an archaic phrase in celebration of spring. But Greenbloom is a man, not a season. Greenbloom is awareness, sentience, ceaseless war on man's most deadly enemy, which is not cancer or heart disease, but habit—all the routines of thinking, feeling and doing that enable humans to get through life without living it.³

I am not genuinely alive simply because there is life in me. Simply because I watch a time clock from nine to five, or a Late Show from eleven-thirty to one. Simply because my standard of living is high, my cholesterol low. Simply because I offer the Sacrifice of the Mass each day, or am perpetually poor, chaste, and obedient. Simply because I sit at a CEO's desk or build bridges, wash diapers or trump aces. Simply because I eat and dance, weep and laugh, curse and bless. Simply because I am going through the motions of living—"all the routines of thinking, feeling and doing that enable humans to get through life without living it."

The point is: I am not genuinely alive simply because I am not medically dead. What I do must have meaning for me. Whether I do it once or a thousand times, be it dull or exciting, comedy or tragedy, entertainment or crucifixion, what I do must be humanly done. I mean, it must be compounded of intelligence and love. There must be understanding in it, and heart...Otherwise 90 years are no better than nine—only longer. Otherwise I can be replaced—by another machine.

But in the Christian scheme of things, understanding and heart are not quite enough. Every dictator from Herod to Hitler, from Attila the Hun to Saddam Hussein, has had purpose and passion, has been amazingly alive, whether he has focused on newborn babies in Bethlehem or on aged folk in Auschwitz, on powerful Romans or on defenseless

Kurds. Sinners can be astonishingly alive, especially in their sin: Saul "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1); young Augustine "in love with love"⁴ in semi-pagan Carthage; every fictional devil with the morals of James Bond. Unbelievers are often amazingly alive: an artist at her easel, an archeologist at his digs, a man or woman who thrills to love. Here is life, and not routine; here are mind and heart, purpose and passion. And still it is not enough. For, in the Christian vision, to live is to "know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [God has] sent" (Jn 17:3).

But, as the apostle John makes clear, to know God, to know Christ, is not a matter of mind, cold intellect, book knowledge. John put it bluntly: "Whoever does not love does not know God" (1 Jn 4:8). I do not really know God unless I love God; I do not really know Christ unless I love Christ. Oh yes, I can know *about* God, *about* Christ, from intense study; but this is not the same as knowing *them*, not the same as a close encounter, an intimate relationship. I shall not get to heaven because I am a theologian, or even because some of you generous folk give "high fives" to my homilies. I shall get to heaven only if I love God, if I love Christ, above all else, only if I love the human images of God and of Christ at least as much as I love myself. It is then that mind and heart, purpose and passion, reach Christian heights; it is then that I am alive in Christ. It is then that, as the New Testament declares, my "life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3), I "share in God's nature" (1 Pet 1:4), the Spirit of God "dwells in" me (Rom 8:11), and "nothing in all creation can separate [me] from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38). It is then that I can say with St. Paul, "For me, living is Christ" (Phil 1:21).

A fifth-century pope and preacher, Leo the Great, used to challenge his listeners, "Remember your dignity." May I too urge you, "Remember your dignity"? Whoever you are, whatever your station in society, however much you lack in mind or body, in personality or power, through a God-man who died for you you have been graced to choose life—to live the life that Christ lives.

III

This suggests my third question: How does today's Gospel concretize all that, bring it down to the nuts and bolts of everyday living? Our brief Gospel passage⁵ is part of the Sermon on the Mount that has confronted us these past few Sundays. Now you may debate till doomsday whether that "sermon" contains only absolute commands, or is a mixture of commands ("Don't commit murder or adultery") and counsels ("Never swear an oath"; "Don't let your fasting be known to others"). A legitimate discussion for some disenchanted evening, but not the core of the Christian question. The heart of the matter is not, what must I do to get into heaven, how little can I do and still sneak past St. Peter's portals? The heart of the matter is, what does it take to be a disciple of Jesus, to see him more clearly, love him more dearly, follow him more nearly? What does it take to be what the disciples of Jesus, you and I, were told to be in last Sunday's Gospel, "the salt of the earth, the light of the world"?

Precisely here the going gets rough. For Jesus is not satisfied if I never commit an external action that violates God's law: if I never take an innocent life, if I never steal someone else's wife. Jesus gets to the roots of immoral activity: what goes on in the human heart. He knows how often violence stems from anger, the emotion that triggers the violence, the feelings that overwhelm reason. If you don't believe it, you haven't been watching your Movie Channel or the nightly news. And so Jesus goes beyond what has been commanded before: "You have heard the commandment imposed on your forefathers,

'You shall not commit murder...' I say to you, 'If you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment' " (Mt 5:21—22). That is why Jesus insists: before worship, friendship; before litigation, reconciliation. That is why St. Paul could counsel his Christians in Ephesus, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph 5:26). Wise counsel-for married life, in your office, on the corridors of Georgetown, wherever.⁶

Jesus knows that sexual immorality is not merely an external act. It is not only the visible act of forbidden intercourse that is destructive. Equally destructive is the lustful heart—perhaps even more destructive. Jesus put it bluntly on another occasion: "Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person" (Mt 15:19—20). Today's front pages confirm the Christian gospel: To look lustfully is worlds apart from looking lovingly.

These are but two examples of "Choose life," life in Christ, Christian living that goes literally to the heart of the matter. Lent is just ten days away. If you find yourself searching for a Lenten penance both provocative and potentially productive, forget the Slim-Fast, "I Can't Believe It's Yogurt." Mull day by day through the *whole* Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 to 7. Discover what it means to be blessed, happy, fortunate in God's eyes; how you can possibly love not only those who admire you but those who hate your guts; how to pray with fresh insight for God's will however much it hurts, for forgiveness on such as have hurt you; how to store up treasures not on earth but in heaven; how to enter life by the narrow gate; how to build your house not on sand but on rock. It's cheaper, and far more effective, than phoning the late-night psychics for an intimate chat.

Good friends in Christ: An Off-Broadway play called *Jeffrey* features a gay young actor-waiter. He grew up thanking God for the joy of sex; now he curses God because "life is suddenly radioactive."⁷ Terribly sad, of course; beyond me to experience or to judge. But what is still sadder is a widespread Christian failure to recognize a different, a richer radiant energy, the Christ-life that radiates within each of us who has been baptized into Christ. If you are living it consciously now, thank God. If not, then for your joy now and for ever...choose life. Not the edge of living; surrender any idols that hold you captive. Choose life in its fulness; choose life in Christ, life with Christ, life for Christ. As we New Yorkers say, "Try it, you'll like it."

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Will It Be Chablis Or Zinfandel?

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

This evening I simply must share with you a cartoon. It was sent by a friend. It pictures two characters, a patient and his doctor. The patient is halfway back in his chair, his mouth wide open. The doctor, his depressor on the patient's tongue, is staring into the man's mouth. His diagnosis? "I see your problem, Reverend. You have a three-point sermon lodged in your larynx."

Yes, an accurate diagnosis: I have another three-point homily lodged in my larynx. This time I want to begin in Jerusalem with Ben Sira, move on to Corinth with St. Paul, end in Washington with you and me.

I

Our journey begins in Jerusalem with a book and its author. The book is titled *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*. Ben Sira spent his life studying the law, the prophets, other segments of God's revelation; he was a respected scribe and teacher; he ran an academy for young Jewish men; he traveled much, came in contact with other cultures and wisdom traditions. About the year 180 before Christ he committed to writing the essence of the wisdom he had imparted by word of mouth. Why did he write? To show how superior the Jewish way of life was to the Greek, that genuine worship was to be found primarily in Jerusalem, not in Athens. The book itself is a compilation of this teacher's class notes! The bit of wisdom that Ben Sira confronts us with in today's extract is basic. You are free men and women, he tells the Jews of Jerusalem. You can choose to do good, you can choose to do evil. So, if you stray into sin, don't blame it on God, "God made me do it." When the Lord created you, He created you with free choice. "If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice" (Sir 15:15). But what, for Ben Sira, is this choice between good and evil? When you come right down to it, what is good and what is evil? Now comes a sentence to scotch-tape to your refrigerator: "Before [you] are life and death, and whichever [you] choose will be given to [you]" (15:17). But what is life, and what is death? Listen to Moses in Deuteronomy, the law Ben Sira knew by heart: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." How? "By loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and cleaving to Him; for that means life to you..." (Deut 30:20). "But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day that you shall perish" (v. 17). To choose life is to choose love; to live is to love God, a love shown by obedience: Walk in God's ways, obey God's voice. To choose death is to choose other gods; to be dead is to worship idols, anything and everything that is not the one true God.

II

So much for the wisdom of Ben Sira. Move now more than two centuries ahead, turn to what you heard from St. Paul: "Among the mature we impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age.... We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God ... what the heart of no man or woman has conceived... [what] God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:7, 9-10). A wisdom the good, and loving heart of wise old Ben Sira could not imagine. The wisdom Paul imparts is ... God's own Son saving us by dying for us. God's wisdom is Christ; God's wisdom is Calvary; God's wisdom is a cross.

Here Paul has an intoxicatingly imaginative idea. "None of the rulers of this age understood this [wisdom of God]; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (v. 8). If the men in power had known that God's plan for our salvation was to be "achieved through the humiliating death of Jesus, they would have tried to frustrate it by letting him live."

In Paul's inspired vision, choosing life instead of death means, paradoxically, choosing life through death-life through the death of Christ. But not in some objective fashion: I living here in America, Christ dying there in Jerusalem. Christ's cross is here, erected over history, over my history. For the Christian, as Paul put it, "living is Christ" (Phil 1:21), living like Christ, playing my part in the saving work Christ began in his short life. Paul expressed it powerfully when he wrote these lines to the Christians of Colossae, a rather insignificant town in Asia Minor: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body ... the Church" (Col 1:24).

Paul did not invent that theology. It goes back to Jesus' own words of wisdom, "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10:38). It is not a summons to unrelieved sadness, to a Christian masochism, pleasure in being abused, "Hit me again, I like it." On the contrary. This is Christian realism. Realism because it

recognizes that, for all its joys, its delights, its occasional ecstasies, human living is not one long picnic, an endless merry-goround, Barnum & Bailey. It's tough. Life is tough; even love is a tough love. But the realism is Christian ... if. If Christians see it, joy and sorrow, as their sharing in the cross of Christ that even now redeems the world. Redeems the world through us. Through God's mysterious grace, what you and I do, especially what you and I suffer, touches another life, and that in turn touches another, until who knows where the grace stops or in what far place and time my suffering will be felt. Our lives are linked, far more intimately than we suspect.

III

This moves us to the District of Columbia. In today's liturgy it moves us to part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. To meditate on that "sermon" is to gather concrete ideas on how to choose life-life in Christ. You may argue till doomsday on which are commands and which are counsels; beyond debate is that all reflect life in Christ.

I must confess, I find Jesus ceaselessly embarrassing; I suspect most Catholics do. It's relatively easy for us not to murder; but how keep justified anger within bounds for Jesus' sake and still not repress it neurotically for psychology's sake? Adultery, thank God, is not in my catalogue of personal sins, but what of Jesus' "I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28)? I have never demanded "an eye for an eye" (Mt 5:38), but do I follow Jesus in not resisting evil when I still proclaim some wars just, when I've rarely if ever turned the other cheek, when I simply do not give to everyone who begs from me? It may surprise you that I have enemies, some who denounce me as dangerous to your orthodox health; but can I say in all honesty that I love them? At times I wonder as I wander.

Let me close with a story, a choice for life, for love of God, for obedience to God, that is very practical. (It may say different things to different worshipers among you; frankly, I hope it does.) The story was told by a man who had been assisting at Mass with his wife during the summer of 1994 in the Castro, the gay district of San Francisco. As he tells it, the priest presiding was slender of frame, balding in skull, thin of voice, half-reading from notes, but he had captured his congregation. He took a Gospel story familiar to us all and made it live in Northern California. The kernel of his story:

A man had a vineyard in the Napa Valley that had just been attacked by fungus. So, he went to his son and said: "Chablis, will you help me in the vineyard?" Chablis answered: "Yes, of course." But Chablis, distracted by friends, got in his red sports car, drove down to San Francisco and was never heard from again.

The man then went to his other son. "Zinfandel, will you help me in the vineyard?" Zinfandel replied: "No, I'm busy." But Zinfandel walked away, and had second thoughts. [Long pause.] He returned and worked the vineyard.

"God is in our second thoughts," the frail priest explained. "Not in the temptations that propel us to what is wrong. No, God is in those brief moments before we decide or act, those moments when we catch ourselves considering things; those moments we call ... second thoughts. So, at the Safeway store as you look over the wine aisle this week, ask yourself: When the temptations swirl about me, will it be Chablis or ...Zinfandel?"

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