

Homilies for the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

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Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Sirach 27:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45

I'm obviously a fan of the mystic Hildegard of Bingen and her music. Her music is haunting, and extremely mysterious and beautiful to me. One of the parts of the text in the song we just listened to, "Shepherd of Souls," is important for me in beginning this homily. I want to translate the text for you. It is a prayer to God, who is called the shepherd of our soul. Hildegard calls him "the first voice, by which all of us have been created." Here is the request the prayer makes: "May you now be willing to release us from our miseries and our frailties." Release us from our frailties. That is a cry, I believe, coming from the heart of every human being who strives to seek something that is wonderful. I think the Christian life is wonderful. I think we are all called to a wonderful, rich, full way of life in which we become great sources of life for one another. Anyone who strives for something like this is going to experience their own frailties, their weaknesses, their limitations. And so, when we turn to God and say, "Please, help me to deal with these weaknesses and these frailties," it's extraordinarily important to understand that God will do that — but it's also very important to understand how God does this. The most common misconception is that this God of ours, if he were really the God he says he is, will enter into our lives and make us really strong. We won't be frail anymore. We won't be caught in weakness anymore. We won't sin anymore.

My brothers and sisters, I want you to hear this: This God of ours, this kingdom we are called into, is not something like the movie Pleasantville, where everything is perfect and idealized. God is not calling us into this perfect world where everything is just flawless. Where everything works so smoothly. Where there is no real pain or suffering or struggles any longer. Where our frailties all disappear. Where everybody becomes just exactly what they are supposed to be. That is the way our egos, or our human spirit, would like to imagine the kingdom. In fact, when Jesus came into the world it was so clear that his vision of the kingdom was anything but what conventional wisdom expected. This is what got Jesus into such deep trouble with the religious leaders of his day. The one thing that is so fascinating about the life of Jesus is that fundamentally all those who were inside the temple, all those who were the acceptable people, all those who were supposedly the "good" people, did not accept Jesus. None of them did. The only ones who accepted Jesus were the frail, broken, miserable outsiders. The people who couldn't get it together. The people who were considered to be messed up. The losers. They all understood the message of Jesus. That's a fascinating element in this whole story — and to ignore it would be a terrible mistake. Let's look at why it is that the people who were most drawn to Jesus were the people on the outside and who would have been most in touch with their

weakness and their frailty. In the reading from Paul to the Corinthians, he says that the “sting,” the really difficult thing about the experience of not being enough — another way of describing the experience of dying, of not being complete, of feeling limitation — all of that is based and founded in the law. What that says is that if the law weren’t demanding something, if there wasn’t a call to wholeness or goodness that the law proclaims, we wouldn’t feel weak or imperfect. It’s striking to me that the goal the ego asks us to submit to, the goal the human spirit is asked to give over to — is found in the rule and the law.

The law is that fundamentally, bottom line, you and I have to be life-givers to one another. We have got to be lovers. We have to be caretakers. We have to be people who are concerned about our brothers and sisters. We have to be generous. That’s what the law requires. It’s so amazing to me that those short, ten laws we have called the commandments got amplified into six hundred and thirteen laws! It’s easy to see that the human spirit is often prone to making life much more complicated than it really is. In any case, we need to notice in the Scriptures, in the story when Jesus enters into this world, that the people who were most likely to be drawn into his message were the people who were powerless. How is it that God invites us to imagine being powerful? The great irony, the great twist, is what Jesus tells us: The way you will really be powerful is if you really do believe you are powerless. If you really do believe you can’t do this on your own. That is the fertile ground; that is the basis for the way in which the Christian message works. Let’s look at that for a minute, because one of the things we see in the readings today is a call for integrity. The first reading talks about how you can always tell something about someone by that which comes out of them. In other words, the reading from Sirach speaks about a sieve being shaken. The husks stay in the sieve; the valuable pieces of grain fall out. When it’s all mixed together, you don’t notice the husks so much. But once you begin to shake it (and I love that image of being shaken!) and once life gets shaky, that’s when you begin to figure out who people really are.

In the reading from Sirach, the prophet also speaks in terms of the imagery of clay. Just as a piece of clay is really tested when it’s heated to a high degree of temperature, you and I are basically tested when we are under pressure. We don’t have to look very far to understand this. There’s a way in which I can imagine myself as being a patient, kind, generous person, and then give me a certain set of circumstances where I am really under pressure and really pressed and dealing with something I can’t control — and at times all of that patience, supposed goodness and self-control goes right out the window. I become a screaming, picky person. Which is the real person? I think the real person, the real heart of who we are, is always exposed when we are under a lot of pressure. It strikes me that Jesus is constantly trying to show people that this is who they are. They are people who, when under pressure, aren’t able to function very well. That’s being powerless. I am not powerful enough to deal with life, with the way it really is. The greatest asset we have in this journey of spirituality is reality. If we can just embrace what is, we are going to be so much better off. The great enemy to the spiritual life is illusion. Once you buy into an illusion, then your spiritual journey is radically impeded, and you are not going to be able to go very far. One of the great illusions is that if God is really the God he says he is, he is going to make you and me very powerful. We are going to be filled with all of this wonderful inner strength to get everything done. We are just waiting for the day when we feel strong enough so that we can step out there and do all of this stuff. Well, here’s the problem: What Jesus needs, what the spiritual life invites us into, is to be in a disposition where you and I feel, know and understand that we are not enough. That the situations we are called to deal with are simply over our heads. Let me explain very clearly what those situations are. The fundamental situation that we are in as humans is this: You and I are

called to have a major impact on the lives of others. That's what we are called to be here for — an impact. The ego, the human side of us, would like to say, "Okay, I will do that. I will fix, change, I will explain things. I will take my children, and I will fix what they mess up. I will teach them how to fix their lives, and I will make sure that I can explain things to them. I will change them."

What is interesting is that as human beings it is true you and I can fix, change and explain. We can make life better when it comes to things. When something is broken, I love being around people who want to fix it. If something isn't working because people who don't understand what is going on, I love being around people who will explain it so that things function better. A lot of times things need to be changed, because the way they are is not complete enough. Fixing things, changing things, explaining things — these are actions we perform on a regular basis to make the life we are living flow better. But can you really fix someone else? Can you really change someone else? Can you be assured if you explain something to someone else that they will really know? I don't think so. What God is trying to say to us is, "That's my work. That's the work of the Spirit." God has invited us into a way of being, a way of living, where we are not capable of doing the core work. The way we do it is to rely solely and completely on his Spirit moving and animating within us. We trust in that Spirit to be enough. It always remains mysterious. We are never in charge of it. We are never in control of it. That's a tough place to be for our ego. It's a tough place to go. It takes radical trust — and a comfort level with not being the source of the work. That's why I think Christianity, that's why I think spirituality is more rare than I wish it were. It is so difficult for us in our humanity to be comfortable with that. It takes radical trust in the reality of something we can't quantify, we can't touch in a literal sense. We can't explain how the Spirit works.

Jesus was so effective in making an impact on people's lives. He was so extraordinarily effective in changing people. When people would say, "Oh, you are so good," as the rich man does when he comes up to Jesus, the minute he says this, Jesus replies in a surprising way. Jesus says, "What do you mean, good? Why do you call me good? Only my Father in heaven is good." It's a way of saying: "If you think I am effective in what I am doing, just realize that effectiveness is coming through me. It is not in my control. It's not my stuff. It's my Father's stuff working through me." Right away, Jesus is always trying to set the stage. Notice in Jesus' inaugural address to his disciples, which we heard two weeks ago, that he is always going back to the source of power. Jesus tells the disciples, "Blessed are you who are poor, who are hungry, who are sad." Why does Jesus say this? Because he knows that the outsider is the one who will listen. The weak person is the one who is the most fertile for him to enter into and to make a difference. So he is saying, "Blessed are you who know that you are not enough. Blessed are you who know that with all of the world around you and all of your talents, you know that this is not enough. Blessed are you who know that your life can't really feed you, that it is not enough." When we enter into the real world — which includes the presence of the Spirit — then it is enough. That's when the promises are revealed to those who realize they are not enough. They will be the full ones. Those who are full on their own, meaning they are filled with the illusion that they are enough, are going to be miserable. That's the twist of the gospel.

In the gospel passage from Luke, Jesus says some very interesting things that will sum up his inaugural work with his disciples. Jesus has been working with them for a short time, and today he gives a short list of teachings. Before you can do the work you are asked to do, you have to really understand it. You have to see things as they really are. Can a blind

person guide another blind person? Jesus says to his disciples: “I understand that there are a lot of people out there who don’t really see or understand my kingdom. So what I need you to do is to see it and understand it.” Right away, Jesus is saying that if his disciples are going to be effective, they are going to have to learn from him. They are going to have to let Jesus show them things. They have to allow Jesus to enable them to see what is. Then, Jesus says: “If you are going to be in charge of helping people, changing people, getting them to see their weaknesses or faults, the essential prerequisite to taking any kind of speck out of your brother’s eye is to make sure that the beam is out of your own.” I love that image! It is so beautifully honest and direct. We can’t do this work of helping people, of giving life to people, unless we have first received it. We can’t heal unless we have first been healed. We can’t change — a part of the process of transformation — unless we have been transformed ourselves. What Jesus is pointing to is that all of these insights, all of the ways we might experience healing or transformation, do not come from us. If we are really honest, we know that these insights come to us.

I often think about what I am doing right now in your life. I am sitting here, talking to you. Why would I believe that my words, my insights, would have any major impact on you. I am just sitting here explaining some things to you. If I am explaining to you, I am hoping that maybe that will change you. And if it changes you, maybe that will make an improvement in your life. If I really believe that this is all about the words I am using, the images I am conveying, if I think that this explanation is “going to do it,” I am really not in touch with reality. All I am doing is setting a stage. All I am doing is enabling your ego and your sense of what this all is, is to clarify my words. I have an important role, but the transformation — the change — is not because of these words. It’s not because of what I am doing literally. That’s always the work of the Spirit. My gut awareness now (and it hasn’t always been there; I will admit that) is that this work is partly mine. I am creating the environment in which Spirit can work more effectively. It is so exciting to me to believe that this work is absolutely not in my hands, but in God’s. He works in your life in ways that are far beyond anything I would be capable of as a human spirit. The challenge is to know that transformation, the work of the spiritual life, is always totally in the hands of the Spirit. The Spirit is the one that changes hearts. We create context. We create an experience. We create an environment in which that can happen more readily and effectively. And certainly, awareness is a key issue. Words are important, images are important — all of that is important. But it is so interesting that we often confuse who the real source is behind the transformation. As we finish this short period of Ordinary Time before we enter the First Sunday of Lent next week, we should be open to this incredibly solid, rock-hard foundation that Jesus gave to his disciples. We need to feel this solid foundation and take it into this wonderful season of Lent, which is focused on transformation.

I would like to close my reflection today with this prayer, from the text of an antiphon composed by Hildegard of Bingen:

Holy Spirit, life that gives life and moves all things
You are the root of every creature
You cleanse all things of impurity, wiping away sins and anointing our wounds
You are the radiant and admirable life
Awakening and reawakening all things.
Bless us, Father, with a greater awareness of this great gift.

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Do Not Be Anxious?

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

In the movie version of Giuseppe di Lampedusa's historical novel *The Leopard*, there is a sharp piece of dialogue. The story opens in May 1860. The Bourbon kingdom of the Two Sicilies is about to fall; Palermo will soon be taken by Garibaldi. The Prince of Salina and Jesuit Father Pirrone are riding to Palermo in a carriage—the priest to visit a Jesuit house, the prince to visit his mistress. On the way the prince expresses his concern about the political and military situation. The priest consoles him: "Your Excellency, don't worry!" The prince turns on him angrily: "*You* dare to tell *me* not to worry? Christ promised you, promised the Church, immortality. He did not promise immortality to us, to our social class."¹

I was reminded of that scene as I mulled over today's Gospel. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink" (Mt 6:25)? Tell that to the starving in sub-Saharan Africa! "Do not be anxious about your body, what you shall put on" (ibid.)? Tell that to the shelter people in the District of Columbia! "Do not be anxious about tomorrow" (v. 34)? Tell that to the 15,436 U.S. Steel workers who lost their jobs with the new year!

We have a problem here—not artificial, terribly real. It is the problem of God's providence, His care for the human creatures He has fashioned in His own image. Let me confront the problem in three stages. First, a bit of background: the first reading, the snippet from Isaiah. Second, the Gospel text: What was it saying then? Third, a look at ourselves: What is today's Gospel saying now? So, from the Old Testament to the New Testament to the contemporary Christian.

I

First, the text from Isaiah. Our two verses are part of a dialogue between Yahweh and Jerusalem. In this section of Isaiah (chapters 40—55) you have what scholars call the Book of the Consolation of Israel.² In 587 B.C., Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians. City and temple were destroyed; the kingdom of Judah was reduced to a Babylonian province; thousands of Jews were deported to Babylonia. The most astonishing aspect of the Exile was the way Israel kept its faith alive, its law alive, its identity alive, its consciousness of continuity with the past—more alive than did their sisters and brothers back home in Palestine. Still, there were days of discouragement, of despair, days when the exiles could not help but ask: Has Yahweh failed His people? Are the gods of Babylonia superior to our God?

The depression of the exiles finds poignant expression in our first reading. "Zion [Jerusalem] said: 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me'" (Isa 49:14). That cry of despair from the people is countered by a strong affirmation from their Lord. Yahweh's union with His people has not been broken. Despite Israel's infidelities, He has not divorced her. Yahweh is faithful to His covenant and to His promises—a covenant and promises that make Jerusalem a particular object of His saving love. The figure Yahweh uses is striking. It is not the usual Old Testament figure, paternal love, the love of a father;

it is a figure far more rare:

Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should have no compassion
on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
(Isa 49:15)

This love like a mother's, this love greater than any mother's, is followed by another striking image: "Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands" (v. 16)—like a tattoo, a symbol of permanent attachment. Jerusalem's walls will be rebuilt; the city will have more people than it can hold; the nations that enslaved her will be her slaves.

Yes, Yahweh does care. He never stops caring, even when His children have ceased to care.

II

Second, the Gospel text: What was it saying then? To understand it, you have to replace it in its context. You cannot rip a passage out of the Sermon on the Mount, shout it from a steeple or proclaim it from a pulpit, and claim its meaning is self-evident. Something has gone before it, verses that lend intelligence to it, verses without which our passage does not yield its full meaning. This section of Matthew 6 (vv. 19—34) is a collection of Jesus' sayings. All the sayings have a common theme: singleness of purpose. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you must fix your eyes only on God, on serving Him; you should not let yourself be distracted from that even by what people may consider legitimate concerns.³

The first saying (vv. 19—21): Lay up treasures not on earth but in heaven. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (v. 21). Where you see lasting value, there will your interests lie. The second saying (vv. 22—23): Your eye must be sound, healthy; that is, your intention must be simple. This is the clarity of vision by which you see true treasure and serve only one master. The third saying (v. 24): You cannot serve both God and material possessions. The fourth saying (vv. 25—34) is our passage: no anxious care about food, drink, clothing, about your most basic needs.

In this context, what kind of worry is Jesus castigating? Not, I assure you, planning for the future. You don't sit back on your haunches singing "thy kingdom come" and expecting Avignone Frères to cater your next meal. No, you sweat as profusely as the unbeliever, plan as shrewdly as the pagan. What Jesus is blasting is the kind of worry that leads to a divided loyalty, leads ultimately to an exclusive concentration on possessions—where God takes a back seat in your Seville.

But this does not solve the most perplexing problem in today's Gospel. Jesus seems to be saying that if his disciples focus on him, if they make him the center of their existence, they will not want for food or drink or clothes. Perhaps not Lobster Thermidor, Perrier water, Calvin Klein. But you'll fare better than the birds, look almost as lovely as the lilies. Seek first the kingdom of God, and God will provide the necessities of life. If you walk the way of life God requires of His subjects, "all these things shall be yours as well" (v. 33).

The trouble is, God does not seem to provide—not always. The thousands who starve or freeze to death each day across the world are hardly all heathens or lukewarm Christians. They include men and women who have fixed their gaze on Jesus, who love God above all else and love their fellows as much as they love themselves. They trust in God for a loaf of bread, a scoop of water, a warm jacket—and they do not get it; they die in agony.

III

This calls for a third point: What does today's Gospel say to you and me? The answer would be simple if Jesus had limited himself to the striking question "Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit [about 18 inches] to his stature [or: a single hour to his life]?" (v. 27).⁴ If he had only said "Don't worry about your basic needs, about food and clothes. Why not? Because worrying about them won't do any good. It will merely irritate your colon, trigger your hiatal hernia, give you heartburn or a headache." Psychologists would nod sagely; unbelievers would see how sensible our Jesus is; and I could massage your tensions with the oil of positive thinking.

But Jesus says more: Trust in God, make me your only master, and you won't have to worry; you'll get everything you need. And our experience rebels: no, not true! Some get what they need and some don't; you cannot guarantee it. So where does that leave us? Did Jesus know what he was talking about?

There is much mystery here. How can there fail to be, when we are speaking of God, of His providence, of evil? I shall not dissipate all the clouds (even a theologian must bow before mystery); I shall rather suggest one way of looking at the Gospel that may prove of profit to you and me. It means leaving this liturgy for a moment and moving back 19 centuries, to the social situation of the early Christians.

You see, the Gospels were not written in a vacuum, in outer space; they often tell us what a Christian community was experiencing. In the early decades after the death of Jesus you had relatively small communities, and you had people who cared. Not that they never argued. Paul makes it clear that the Christians of Corinth were rent by "dissensions" and "quarreling" (1 Cor 1:10—11); Matthew "faced confusion, tension, conflict, and the destructive influence of false prophets within the community."⁵ Even so, most were conscious of being a community, the body of the risen Christ. And those who lived the Christian life, those who put all their trust in God, did experience what Jesus promised. They had enough to eat, to drink; they had clothes on their backs. The community saw to that. Read the Acts of the Apostles about the Church in Jerusalem: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34—35).

What I am suggesting is that Jesus was not laying the whole burden on his Father: You set your heart on God, and God will personally feed you. He will multiply loaves and fishes again, command drought in the Sahel to cease, raise the Dow Jones average and lower the unemployment rate. Not quite. In principle, the God who rained manna from heaven on the Israelites in the desert can ply the poor with sirloin strip and homogenized milk. But in practice, chances are He leaves that to His people, to the community, to us. Remember the strong section in the Epistle of James: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in

lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 2:14—17).

So then, when I look at the homeless in Thailand and our land, when I watch the soul-searing "Save the Children" programs on TV, when I see bloated bellies and staring eyes, might it not be time to stop asking questions about a God whose providence we fail to fathom, whose ways are not our ways, and turn my thoughts to the Christian community that is not really a community unless it cares? When so many Christians are crying out in despair "The Church has forsaken me, my Church has forgotten me," how honestly can we—we the Church—respond "Can a woman forget the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you"? We may argue till doomsday about God and the problem of evil; but philosophy should not be a cop-out from the compassion that calls us to play Christ to our crucified sisters and brothers.

It's not just a question of food and clothes. All around us are well-fed folk who are empty of heart, wasting away deep within. All around us are finely-furred men and women who are cold in spirit, icebound in a thousand and one fears, shivering in a dark night of the soul. And where is the compassionate community, the caring Christian?

Do you remember the legend of St. Christopher? Here was a man who was taught Christianity by a hermit in a desert, was told that, if he wanted Christ to show himself, he must lodge by a river and, strong giant that he was, must carry over the river all who might wish to cross. One night a child asked to cross. But the water rose, and the child on his shoulders was heavy as lead, grew heavier and heavier, till the giant was afraid they would drown. On the other side he gasped: "Child, you have put me in great peril. Your weight was as if I had all the world on my shoulders. No greater burden could I bear." The child answered: "Christopher, do not be amazed. You have borne on your shoulders not only the world, but him who created the world. I am Jesus Christ, the King whom you serve in this work."⁶

Almost three decades ago, in a remarkable poem, Anne Morrow Lindbergh captured the meaning of St. Christopher ("Christbearer") for our age. The poem is entitled "Saint for Our Time" and it runs as follows:

Christopher, come back to earth again.
There is no age in history when men
So cried for you, Saint of a midnight wild,
Who stood beside a stream and heard a child.
Not even Francis, brother to the poor,
Who, barefoot, begged for alms from door to door,
And pity-tortured kissed the leper's brow—
Not even Francis is so needed now
As you, Christ-bearer.

Christopher, we die
Not for lack of charity; we lie
Imprisoned in our sepulchers of stone,
Wanting your gift, O Saint, your gift alone.
No one will take the burden of the whole

Upon his shoulders; each man in his soul
Thinks his particular grief too great to bear
Without demanding still another's share.

But you—you chose to bear a brother's load
And every man who traveled down your road
You ferried on your back across the flood
Until one night beside the stream there stood,
Wrapped in a cloak of storm, a child who cried
And begged safe passage to the other side—
A child who weighed upon your back like lead,
Like earth upon the shoulders of the dead—
And, struggling to the bank while torrents whirled,
You found that on your shoulders leaned a world.

No wonder that the burden was so great:
You carried in your arms the monstrous weight
Of all men's happiness and all men's pain,
And all men's sorrows on your back had lain.
Even their sins you carried as your own—
Even their sins, you, Christopher, alone!

But who today will take the risk or blame
For someone else? Everyone is the same,
Dreading his neighbor's tongue or pen or deed.
Imprisoned in fear we stand and do not heed
The cry that you once heard across the stream.
"There is no cry," we say, "it is a dream."

Christopher, the waters rise again,
As on that night, the waters rise; the rain
Bites like a whip across a prisoner's back;
The lightning strikes like fighters in attack;
And thunder, like a time-bomb, detonates
The starless sky no searchlight penetrates.
The child is crying on the further shore:
Christopher, come back to earth once more.⁷

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