

The Roman Catholic Parishes of  
St. Margaret Mary, Herscher  
St. James the Apostle, Irwin

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

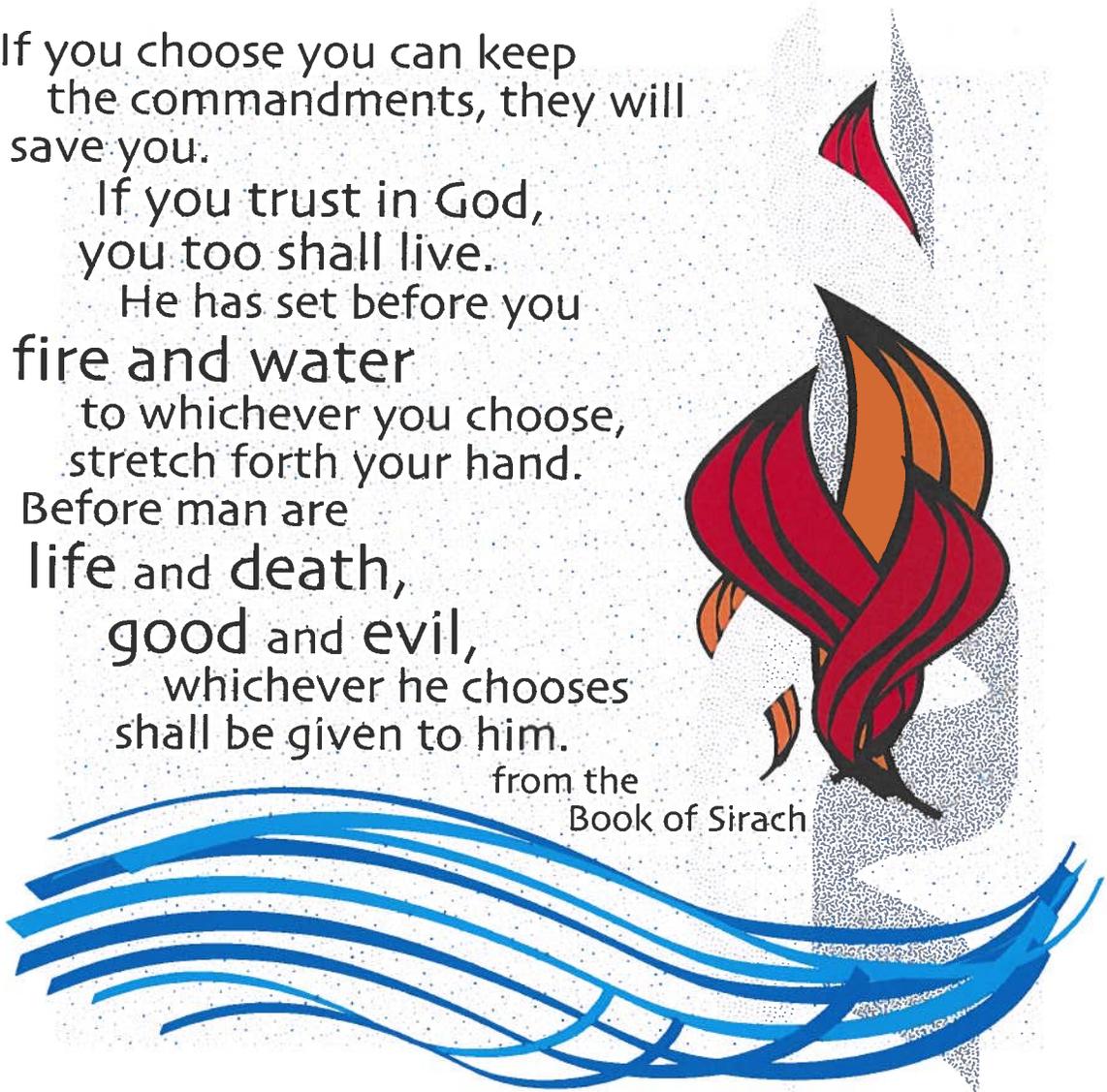
FEBRUARY 14-15, 2026

If you choose you can keep  
the commandments, they will  
save you.

If you trust in God,  
you too shall live.

He has set before you  
fire and water  
to whichever you choose,  
stretch forth your hand.  
Before man are  
life and death,  
good and evil,  
whichever he chooses  
shall be given to him.

from the  
Book of Sirach



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Weekend Masses:

St. Margaret Mary	Sat. 5:00 pm	Sun. 10:30 am
Sacred Heart	Sun. 7:30 am	
St. James	Sun 9:00 am	

Confessions:

St. Margaret Mary	Sat. 4:15 pm -4:45pm
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Church Mailing Address: 207 E. 5th Street Herscher, IL 60941 Phone: 815-426-2550

Quotable: "The best proof of love is trust."

—Dr. Joyce Brothers

First Sunday of Lent			February 21-22, 2026	
Liturgical Schedule	St. Margaret Mary Saturday, Feb 21 5:00 pm	Sacred Heart Sunday, Feb. 22 7:30 am	St. James Sunday, Feb. 22 9:00 am	St. Margaret Mary Sunday, Feb. 22 10:30 am
Celebrant	Fr. Ron	Fr. Ron Deacon Ron	Fr. Ron	Fr. Ron
Ushers	Dave Emling Brent Fulton Gery Wright Roger Jensen	David Kirkpatrick James Mallaney	Duane Papineau Jerry Ogrentz Mary Offerman Arlen Hansen	Darren Lovell Larry Wolles Sean Riordan Dustin Truetner
Lector	Rob Landeck	Erica Parsons	Kelly Buente	Corinn Wheeler
Eucharistic Minister			Kelly Buente	
Servers				Sydney Weldon
Greeters			Greeter—Donna Benicky R. Leader—The Peerboltes	

### Mass Intentions for the Week

#### Monday, Feb. 16 (SMM)

8:00 am +Lionel & Loretta Schneider (Joanne Hart)

#### Tuesday, Feb. 17 (SH)

8:00 am +Inez Crawford (Terry Buckley)

#### Wednesday, Feb. 18 (SJ)

8:00 am +Gerald Bernicky (Dennis & Sue Ann O'Connor)

#### Friday, Feb. 20

8:00am +Emma "Mikey" King (Mary Ann Wagner)

#### Saturday, Feb. 21 (SMM)

5:00 pm +Denise Jepsen Blake & Jim Jepsen (Kathy)

#### Sunday, Feb. 22

7:30 am (SH) +Ryan Gagnon, Renee Gagnon, Curtis Riley Jr,  
Arvelle Dal Canton (The Family)

9:00 am (SJ) +Dolores Clodi (Dennis & Sue Ann O'Connor)  
+Cindy Frerichs (Gary Devine)

10:30 am (SMM) All the Parish Family

### Looking Ahead

#### Wednesday, Feb. 18—Ash Wednesday Masses:

8am—SJ 12pm—SH 7pm—SMM

Friday, Feb. 20—Stations of the Cross 5:00pm at SJ

Friday, Feb. 20—K of C Fish Fry Herscher Legion  
4:50—7 pm

Pastor— Fr. Ron Neitzke- 815-426-2550

Deacon – Ron Gagnon— rjgckg@aol.com

Home—815-933-4077

Parish Email – smm\_sja\_sh@yahoo.com

TriParish web page – [www.triparishcatholics.org](http://www.triparishcatholics.org)

Like us on Facebook triparishcatholic communities

Tri Parish Church office –Barb Riker 426-2550

Julie Bisailon 426-2550

Bulletin – Debbie Jensen - 426-2550 debjen04@gmail.com

Religious Education –

St. MM – Jill Fulton [jfulton.stmm@gmail.com](mailto:jfulton.stmm@gmail.com)

Sacred Heart – Rhonda Berns – 426-5015

St. James—Tanhya Osenga [tosenga81@gmail.com](mailto:tosenga81@gmail.com)

Parish Nurse – Jackie Eberle – 815-421-4048

Prayer Line—

SMM -Janice 815-426-2574 [Jdstreefarms@aol.com](mailto:Jdstreefarms@aol.com)

St. James— Mary Offerman—602-670-8888 (call or text)

Sacred Heart-Marilyn Pfeiffer 815-955-8246 (call or text)

Terri Weakley— 815-514-8171

Question of the week: In what aspect of my life do I need to accept God's wisdom and the Spirit's guidance and change my behavior?

**Collections Weekend of Feb. 14-15, 2026**

St. Margaret Mary—\$ 1,733

St. James—\$ 1,307

Sacred Heart— \$ 1,658

Thank you for your generosity!

**Gospel Shorts— Love Lessons**

Around the time for Valentine’s Day, Jesus, through the good lesson in Matthew 5:20–37, gives us a gift of four love lessons.

These lessons are not your usual sweet and sentimental Valentine, but real-life directions for better relationships. Jesus says love shows no hostility, is not predatory, is faithful and is unconditionally truthful. It is a gift that will deepen the love we share with everyone.

**Reflection - Myth and Fact**

**Myth:** Curious children should never be allowed to ask people about their disabilities.

**Fact:** Many children have a natural, uninhibited curiosity and ask questions that some adults might find embarrassing. But most people with disabilities won’t mind answering a child’s question.

You’re invited!!! Council of Churches is hosting a Senior Luncheon at the Villa’s on Wednesday, February 25th at 11:00. Suggested donation is \$10. Harp music will be our entertainment. Please spread the word ! We hope you can join us and bring a friend...or even your spouse!!! To register please call Jackie at 815-421-4048

**Ash Wednesday Masses:**

St. James 8am

Sacred Heart 12 pm

St. Margaret Mary 7pm



**Parish News:**

**All Parishes—**

- ⇒ Herscher Council Churches looking for drivers to deliver meals in Herscher please call Jackie Eberle 815- 421-4048
- ⇒ **If you would like your statement of donations to the church for tax purposes, please call the office.**
- ⇒ **Adult Education will resume in the fall.**
- ⇒ Envelopes are in the back of the church, if you don't see yours please call the office and we will get them to you.
- ⇒ The next prayer meeting will be held on Monday, February at St. James at 7pm .
- ⇒ Tri-Parish Office Hours— Our office hours are Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday 9am—12 pm.

**St. Margaret Mary—** Next CCW Meeting will be 3/16. 7PM, Night-In Italy will be held 4/9/26

**St. James—**

**Sacred Heart—**

**Statue donation plates**

Now that the statues have arrived at St. Margaret Mary and St. James, we would like to put together the plaque recognizing all the donors. If you contributed to either of the statues, please contact the office (815-426-2550) and let us know how you want your name plate to read. A suggestion would be “gift of the (your family name) family, or “in memory of (your loved one’s name). Please let us know at your earliest convenience so we can begin this process.

**A Lenten Opportunity**

The Christmas Season is over for another year. Was “Jesus the reason for the season” for you? Maybe now is the time to start feeding that Christmas light so that it burns brighter in your life all year. The Season of Lent will be here before you know it. Lent is a time for inner conversion of our hearts as we seek to follow Christ's will more faithfully. It’s an opportunity to reflect on how our walk with Jesus is unfolding. Do you hear him calling? Jesus never wants us to walk alone; rather, he wants us to walk arm and arm with each other. Something to try on the Mondays of Lent is the Stations of the Cross at St. James 6:30 pm, followed by the Prayer Meeting at 7:00 pm. We again invite you to come and see; there is no commitment. Come join us during the first five Mondays of Lent, beginning on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, as we experience growth in our spiritual life through prayer, scripture, and song.





**Obscure saint of the week: St. Aristobulus of Britannia (Feb. 15)** was one of the 70 disciples sent out to preach Christianity at the beginning of the Church. He was a missionary to the British Isles. He is mentioned by Saint Paul the Apostle in the Epistle to the Romans (“Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus.”)

He was a martyr.

**Obscure saint of the week: St. Artemide (Feb. 15)** was one of three sons born to Albino Vecchi and Luigi Zatti. His was a poor family, and the boy had to drop out of school at age nine to work for a wealthy neighbor. The family eventually immigrated to Bahia Blanca, Argentina to find work, arriving in Buenos Aires on February 9, 1897. There Artemide worked in a tile factory and attended a local parochial school run by the Salesians. He felt drawn to the Salesians, and at age 20 entered their seminary, Casa di Bernal.



Artemide contracted tuberculosis while caring for a young Salesian priest with the disease, a man who would die from it in 1902. He was sent to San José Hospital for what little treatment there was in that day, but with little hope. With his friend and unofficial doctor, Father Evarisio Garrone, Artemide prayed for the intervention of Our Lady, Help of Christians, offering to dedicate his life to the care of the sick; the young Salesian was miraculously and completely healed.

He kept his promise. He worked in the San José pharmacy and learned about hospital management from Father Garrone. Upon his mentor's death, Artemide took charge of the hospital, and what time he could spare from his administrative duty was spent caring for patients. Today the hospital is named in his honor.

### Questions Catholics Ask

**Who decided we should have holy days of obligation and what they should be?**

Every Sunday is essentially a holy day. That is, Catholics set aside the first day of the week to “abstain from those labors and business concerns” which are an impediment to worship, joy, works of mercy, and proper relaxation of mind and body. Each Sunday becomes for us a “little Easter,” commemorating the Lord's Resurrection. Certain other days on the liturgical calendar have come to share the obligatory pull of the Sunday observance. But how was it decided which events qualify for this attention?

As early as the second century, Christian communities celebrated the feasts of local martyrs as standard observances. By the fourth century, the Western church added Christmas to this list, and the Eastern church included Epiphany. Both feasts went universal within a century. Special feasts caught the religious imagination, and the liturgical calendar exploded with commemorations of other events in the life of Jesus, as well as that of his mother, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul. As holy days multiplied locally, popes and bishops tried to untangle and clarify the level of importance of each. In 1642, Pope Urban VIII all but banned the forming of new mandatory feasts. What was left was the work of dialing back the number of feasts that claimed this non-negotiable character.



When the 1917 Code of Canon Law was issued, ten holy days of obligation were officially recognized. These included the feasts of Christmas (Dec. 25), Epiphany (Jan. 6), Ascension (Thursday, Sixth Week of Easter), Corpus Christi (Thursday after Trinity Sunday), Holy Mary Mother of God (Jan. 1), Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8), Assumption (Aug. 15), St. Joseph (Mar. 19), Sts. Peter and Paul (Jun. 29), and All Saints (Nov. 1). Local bishops' conferences have the authority to transfer or remove these obligations, which they may do circumstantially—as when a particular feast falls on a Monday—or permanently.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has permanently reassigned Epiphany and Corpus Christi to Sunday observances. All but nine U.S. dioceses have done the same to Ascension. The USCCB has removed the obligation from the feasts of St. Joseph, and Sts. Peter and Paul. Which leaves only five holy days not on Sundays that most U.S. Catholics are asked to remember and observe: Christmas, Solemnity of Mary, Immaculate Conception, Assumption, and All Saints.

**Scripture:** Genesis 2:1-3; Mark 16:1-2; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1; Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47; Hebrews 10:24-25; 12:28

**Code of Canon Law:** See canons 1246-1248

## The Sunday Gospel in Everyday English

“Don’t suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the scriptures—either God’s Law or the Prophets. I’m not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God’s Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God’s Law will be alive and working.

“Trivialize even the smallest item in God’s Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honor in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won’t know the first thing about entering the kingdom.

“You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

“This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

“Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine.

“You know the next commandment pretty well, too: ‘Don’t go to bed with another’s spouse.’ But don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

“Let’s not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here’s what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

“Remember the scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights’? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’ Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

“And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong” (*from Matthew 5*).

## THE SEASON OF LENT

*Prepare your heart for the Lord*

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Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent for Catholics, a time of reflection and penance. The ashes placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross are a visible reminder of our sinfulness and our need for a spiritual renewal.

They also symbolize our mortality, serving as a reminder that one day we will return to dust. Although Ash Wednesday is not a day of holy obligation, it holds great significance as the start of the sacred Lenten journey.

“Lent is a journey of returning to God. It is a time to let go of the things that keep us distant from Him and to let ourselves be transformed by His love.”

~Pope Benedict XVI

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**  
See Ps 95:8

If today you hear his voice,  
harden not your hearts.

**Gospel** Matt 6:1-6, 16-18; L219

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.

When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others.

Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

"When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them.

Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

"When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting.

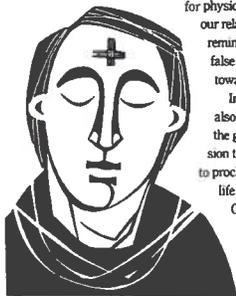
Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward.

But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you."

See Appendix A, p. 271, for the other readings.

**Reflecting on the Gospel**

It seems slightly ironic that on the day that we hear a command proclaimed to "pray to your Father in secret," Catholics receive an unmistakable symbol of our faith on our foreheads in the form of ashes. Of course, these ashes are worn as a visible reminder of an invisible truth, that our true home is not on this earth but is in heaven. Just as the grace of the sacraments is symbolized by material objects, such as water, chrism, and wedding rings, there is a place in our faith for physical reminders of truths relative to our humanity and our relationship with the divine. In wearing ashes, we are reminded of the call to turn away from the temptations and false promises of this world, and instead orient our actions toward living in eternal union with Christ.



In order to understand the fullness of this message, we also have to look at Christ's commands in other parts of the gospels. The work of evangelization is vital to the mission that we were tasked with as Christians. We are called to proclaim the good news and invite others into the love and life of Christ. We are commanded to spread the word of God to all of the ends of the earth, and the disciples were given authority to heal and to forgive sins.

Christ is not instructing his followers to live quietly; he is giving instructions to live boldly, humbly, and fully for the glory of God.

There is a difference, however, between proclaiming one's own good works and those of

Christ. Jesus warns in this gospel against public displays that draw attention to oneself, condemning actions done for others to see them or to win the praise of others. Our good works should direct others to draw closer to God who works through us. Our focus should remain on sharing how we have been empowered by the Spirit and given new life by the Son.

Those who live most closely aligned with God's will and who praise God's good works will not be known by what they say or the ashes that they wear. Instead, their faithfulness and devotion will be clear in how they live, emboldened by the Spirit to love as Christ did. The evidence of their devout prayer and almsgiving will be in the joy, generosity, gentleness, and hospitality that they show to others. When we live in such a way that our faithfulness to God is undeniable, the daily interactions that we have and the way that we proclaim the hope of eternal life by our actions become a bold proclamation of who we are as God's beloved. At the beginning of this Lenten season, may we seek to live in a way that proclaims the truth of the ashes that we wear—that we are called to turn toward God, love our neighbors as Christ did, and march boldly toward our final resting place with God.

**Preparing to Proclaim**

**Key words and phrases:** Rend your hearts, not your garments

**To the point:** "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The season of Lent begins with the proclamation of our own deep need for God's mercy, summarized in these two formulae for ash distribution. In the first reading, the prophet Joel urges the whole community to return to God, young and old alike—not just in a superficial way, but with the whole of their hearts. The Scriptures this week should challenge and inspire

**YOU MIGHT CONSIDER THESE:**

Ash Wednesday is February 18 and it begins the Lenten season where Catholics are called to grow closer to Christ through prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Now is the time to start preparing for what you will take on or give up during the 40 days of Lent.

Here is a practical guide with 10 ideas to help get you started.

1. Think of what you typically spend a lot of money on. Do you buy too many clothes or eat out too often? Consider fasting from one of these and maybe donate the saved money to charity.
2. Take on 40 days of doing something particular like saying a particular prayer each day or doing 40 acts of kindness.
3. Pray before work. What is the first thing you do when you get to work? Check email? Consider taking 5 minutes to pray.
4. Attend week-day Mass once a week, or one extra day if you already go.
5. Pray the [Chaplet of Divine Mercy](#) every Friday.
6. Start a Lenten journal. Take some time each day in prayer and reflection on your spiritual journey and jot down what comes to you.
7. Fast from music on your drive to work and use the time to pray instead.
8. Limit time on social media.
9. Fast from snacking between meals.
10. Volunteer at a food pantry, soup kitchen or home

**Reflection—No Senior Citizens Should Forget These Things**

- Michelangelo completed his greatest work at age 87.
- Titian painted the "Battle of Lepanto" at age 98.
- Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes set down some of his most brilliant opinions at age 90.
- Verdi turned out "Ave Maria" at age 85.
- Goethe finished "Faust" at age 80. Tennyson did "Crossing the Bar" at age 80.
- Grandma Moses was painting at age 100.
- Bertrand Russell was active in international peace drives at age 94.
- Eamon de Valera served as President of Ireland at age 91.
- George Burns won an Academy Award at age 80.
- Albert Schweitzer headed a hospital at age 89.
- Bernard Shaw wrote the play "Farfetched Fables" at 92.
- Pablo Casals was giving cello concerts at age 88.
- Arthur Rubinstein gave one of his greatest recitals at 89.
- Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan served as President over 70.
- Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein and Galileo worked as scientists over the age of 70.
- Moses led the people to the Promised Land over the age of 100.



**BLESSED TRINITY COUNCIL**

**#15032**

**ANNUAL LENTEN FISH FRY**

**Friday February 20, 2026**

**Herscher Legion**

**Community Center**

**4:30 PM to 7:00 PM.**

**Meal Tickets:** \$15 for adults,  
\$10 for children (5-12)  
Children 4 and under eat free  
**Shrimp Dinners (one serving only) \$15**

**Event Raffle** \$300 Grand Prize,  
\$100 Second Prize,  
\$50 Third Prize

February 15, 2026

Written by  
THE  
FAITHFUL  
DISCIPLE

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sir 15:15-20 | 1 Cor 2:6-10 | Mt 5:17-37

### **GROW AS A DISCIPLE** | PRAY, STUDY, ENGAGE, SERVE

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." In Matthew 23:3-5, Jesus says, "Do and observe all things whatsoever [the scribes and Pharisees] tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice ... All their works are performed to be seen." What Jesus is inviting us to see is that to authentically live the commandments requires more than mere external compliance with the letter of the law. It's also not about putting on a show so that others think we're "holy." Rather, it's about the quiet, inner transformation of our hearts. The Gospel tells us it's not enough that we avoid murder; God wants to free us from anger and wrath. It's not enough to avoid unfaithfulness in marriage; God wants to give us hearts that are pure and free from lust. Our task is to open our hearts to the transforming power of his commandments which, if we live them, lead us to fullness of life.

### **GO EVANGELIZE**

#### PRAYER, INVITATION, WITNESS, ACCOMPANIMENT

In our second reading, St. Paul speaks about some challenges we face when sharing the faith with others. There are those who are unable to grasp God's wisdom, which is different from the wisdom of this age. God's wisdom is mysterious, hidden, and can only be understood and grasped through a revelation of the Spirit. This is an important concept for us as evangelizers. Sometimes no matter how hard we try, no matter how eloquent we are at explaining something, those who are not ready to receive what we have to share will not be able to receive it. In order for others to understand the Gospel, the Spirit must open their hearts to receive it. While we are responsible to share the Gospel as well as we're able, it is up to the person before us to respond to God's invitation.

### **PRAY**

Accepting the Lord's teaching in the commandments requires humility, and understanding their true meaning and depth is the result of the Spirit's work in our lives. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you true insight to live the commandments with your whole heart. Consider using these lines from today's psalm in your prayer: "Open my eyes, that I may consider the wonders of your law. Instruct me, O Lord, in the way of your statutes, that I may exactly observe them. Give me discernment, that I may observe your law and keep it with all my heart."



Getty Images/antano

SPIRITUALITY

**GOSPEL ACCLAMATION**

cf. Matt 11:25

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth;

you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of the kingdom.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

**Gospel** Matt 5:17-37; L76A

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away,

not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter

will pass from the law,

until all things have taken place.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments

and teaches others to do so

will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments

will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses

that of the scribes and Pharisees,

you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

"You have heard that it was said to your ancestors,

*You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.*

But I say to you,

whoever is angry with his brother

will be liable to judgment;

and whoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,'

will be answerable to the Sanhedrin;

and whoever says, 'You fool,'

will be liable to fiery Gehenna.

*Continued in Appendix A, p. 270, or*

*Matt 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37 in Appendix A, p. 270.*

**Reflecting on the Gospel**

It begins with the tiniest gesture: an interested glance, the brush of a hand. Lifelong love builds from little expressions of care before it becomes total self-surrender to the beloved. At the opposite end of the spectrum, egregious acts of murder, betrayal, rejection, and deception begin with little sparks of anger, white lies, lustful looks. In today's gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to watch out for the little things that undermine their love relationships.

The gospel belies any notion that Jesus overturns the Mosaic law or that the God of the Old Testament is a harsh God who issues strict commandments, while the God of the New Testament is a God of love and mercy. It is the one and the same God of bountiful mercy who gave the law, to whom Jesus is devoted. Jesus insists on the enduring value of the law and his intent to fulfill the tiniest part of it.

What is new is his interpretation of the law, which at times was at odds with that of other religious leaders of his day. His is not a lax interpretation, but one that is even more demanding than theirs. To truly keep the law, one must go beyond it. Jesus speaks to his disciples about the little things that can erode their relationship with God and others and escalate into major offenses.

The formula "You have heard that it was said" introduces each of four commandments; this is followed by Jesus's invitation to go deeper:

"But I say to you . . ." First, he speaks of taking steps to defuse anger before it reaches a murderous stage. He gives three concrete examples. Primary is to avoid insulting one another. Then, if there has been a rupture in a relationship, a ritual action alone will not mend it. A face-to-face reconciliation must be sought. Finally, conflicts should not be allowed to escalate to the point of litigation.

The final section centers on honesty in relationships. If Leviticus 19:12 admonished, "You shall not swear falsely by my name, thus profaning the name of your God," Jesus says that relations among Christians should be so transparent that there is no need for taking oaths at all.

By instructing his disciples to watch out for the little transgressions, he did not intend to frighten them into obeying a God who was lying in wait to punish them for every peccadillo. Rather, he alerts his followers that little slights, left unchecked, can lead to major offenses, with dire consequences. By the same token, great love and greatness in God's reign begin with little acts of love toward the least brother or sister. One saint who epitomizes this teaching is Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Through her "little way," she resolved to love all those she encountered in all the routine and ordinary interchanges of everyday life. Her greatness was recognized by her canonization only twenty-eight years after her death and the bestowal of the title of Doctor of the Church a century later.

