

St. Ann's Novena – Day 1

Wed. July 18, 2012

*Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16* Discipline – Deep Listening

In nine days the 2012 Summer Olympics begin in London. In nine days this annual novena to St. Ann ends. The two cities are 3600 miles apart. London has a population of over seven million. Bethany Beach has a year-round population of two thousand, although with increased traffic and people in the summer, it may seem like seven million.

During the next nine days you will watch some of the games on TV. You will see athletes from around the world compete for gold, silver and bronze medals. You will witness their years of perseverance to their sport and rigorous preparations for this memorable moment in their lives.

I am going to use the Olympics as a doorway to spiritual renewal during this novena. I will present nine spiritual exercises for the soul equivalent to the physical exercises athletes use to train for the Olympics. We will look at some basic human habits that frustrate the kind of personal relationship with Jesus, the divine Son of God who coaches us in the life goal toward human wholeness and fullness. My purpose is to connect the Olympics with our spiritual roots. It was a Catholic priest, Henri Didon, who gets credit for the official Olympic motto, *citius, altius, fortius* (faster, higher, stronger).

Each homily will begin with a story from the book of my own life and what I did with it that produced some good spiritual fruit. That story will honor Jesus as the divine coach in my life.

The first story happened in 1984. I was in graduate school at CUA. During the weekends I helped out at a parish and became friends with Joe & Jackie Bellanti and their five children. At that time Dr. Bellanti was chief of Pediatric Medicine at Georgetown University Hospital. In the spring of that year they invited me to a dinner party at their home in Bethesda. At that time my ego needed major conversion surgery.

Knowing that the party-goers would be members of the medical community I decided to dress in my Sunday best. I wore my best black suit, with a starched Roman collar, hiding a dress shirt with French cuffs and Maryland State cuff links. Jackie greeted me at the door and escorted me to the patio and showed where the open bar was located. After I got a glass of wine, I turned and noticed an elegant looking gentleman walking toward me. He was about 6'2", in a tailored made suit and a noble carriage.

He greeted me then proceeded to ask about my relationship with the Bellanti's. My balloon-sized ego was thrilled by this audience of one. I proceeded to tell him about my studies at Catholic University and the Master's degree I was working on. Then I told him about the great theological minds teaching me; Fr. Avery Dulles, Fr. John Ford and Sr. Mary Collins. Then I told him that Fr. Berard Marthaler accepted one of my term

papers for publication in a catechetical journal. For fifteen minutes I extolled the accomplishments of Fr. Paul Mast, graduate student. Then Jackie Bellanti walked over with a tray of appetizers and innocently said, "Fr. Paul, I see that you have met Dr. Jonas Salk."

I am laughing with you now, but I assure you that I wasn't laughing then. It was a classic case of divine comedy. I was not left feeling humiliated. I was left feeling humbled. Here I was standing in the presence of a medical scientist who had impacted the quality of my life with the Salk vaccine.

He never drew any attention to himself. He never talked about himself. On the contrary I was the center of his attention. I recovered quickly enough to hear a whispering voice inside me say, "*Don't you want some of this great man's humility?*" In answering YES I discovered the spiritual lesson in that experience, namely to desire his humility was to desire God as the true source of his humility.

God had placed Jonas Salk in my life that evening to coach me how to acquire that kind of humility so others will desire it when they encounter the God of conversions in me.

Now let's bring that story into conversation with the reading from Isaiah to see what spiritual practice we can work on mastering as Olympic athletes master the physical skills for their sport.

These few verses are part of a number of oracles uttered by Isaiah against the pride of Assyria; punishment is foretold as well as the deliverance of Judah. The historical setting is during the reign of King Sennacherib, surrounding the second and last invasion of Judah.

Yahweh has used mighty Assyria as an instrument to chastise the chosen people. The Assyrians were commissioned by the Lord of history to plunder Judah and "to trample them down like the mud of the streets."

The arrogant Assyrian king thinks only of annihilating the foe; his ego is so inflated that he hasn't the faintest notion that a divine lord is using him to attain a divine purpose.

The Assyrian king boasts of his self-sufficiency as though he alone were responsible for his victories,

*"By my own power I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am shrewd. I have moved the boundaries of people, their treasures I have pillaged, and, like a giant, I have put down the enthroned. My hand has seized like a nest the riches of nations; as one takes eggs left alone, so I took in all the earth; no one fluttered a wing, or opened a mouth, or chirped."*

Then Isaiah asks two rhetorical questions mocking the presumptions of the Assyrians.

*Will the axe boast against him who hews with it?*

*Will the saw exalt itself above him who wields it?*

The great prophet seems to imply that a fever will consume the arrogant king's liver and he shall waste away with the disease.

It is easy to tell a humble King from an arrogant King. It is easy to tell a humble athlete from a proud athlete. All Olympic athletes have no choice but to listen to their coaches. But, not all Olympic athletes listen to the voice of a divine coach. You only know the difference by their humility. It is a fruit of interior, spiritual growth which can only be achieved by the practice of wanting a piece of God for you that is revealed in others.

The Assyrian King dismissed the prophet Isaiah and paid dearly for his stubbornness. The spiritual practice Isaiah coached him to master was the practice of listening. The King failed miserably.

There is a story of the hostess of a cocktail party whose guests were so self-absorbed that when she passed the canapés and said, *"Have one, please, they're toasted arsenic,"* several guests absentmindedly thanked her and asked for the recipe.

Everybody lives listening to something, music, chatter, noise, sirens, etc. But few live a life attuned at a deeper level, the kind of listening where we focus on what people are not saying when they say something. Until we do, we live less than a full life. We engage people from the position of framing our next response rather than listening to what is stirred in us by what they're saying. Like my story with Dr. Jonas Salk, we remain deaf in one ear.

Spiritual therapist Robert Wicks writes that, *"hearing is an easy, passive process, but listening requires energy, motivation and patience."* While most of us are born with the gift of hearing, listening is a gift we must nurture. Helen Keller had to acquire that kind of deep listening. When a newspaper reporter asked her if there was anything worse than being physically blind, she replied, "Yes, having sight, but no vision." Those are words from someone who had to cultivate the gift of deep listening.

King Sennacherib heard, but didn't listen. He couldn't clear out the inner static caused by the voice of his ego from the voice of the prophet Isaiah.

Today, find some solitude where silence can form a "place of grace." Tune out the outer noise so silence can help you tune in to the places in your heart where God is hiding and waiting to speak a word of hope, conversion, healing for you.

Lee Iacocca, a former president of Chrysler Motor Co., once praised the success of the Dale Carnegie program, which improved his public speaking ability. "I only wish," he said, "there was an effective program for listeners."

Today, say over and over, "I am a spiritual Olympian. I am working at mastering the art of listening. I will begin by stilling my heart so I do not miss the moment when God, my divine coach, will speak through an ordinary event or person."

St. Ann's Novena – Day 2

Thursday July 19, 2012

*Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19* - Discipline - Discernment

In January 1996 I made my first 30-day retreat according to the Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola at the Jesuit Retreat House at Gloucester, MA. 1996 was the year of the northeast blizzard. I arrived in a snowstorm, left in a snowstorm and in between two other snowstorms dumped a total of 65" of snow on picturesque Gloucester. Since I am not a lover of the season of winter, I was not humored by this display of divine comedy. After being confined indoors for the first three days, I became addicted to a voice that said, *"What are doing here? You could be making this retreat at the Dominican Retreat House in Miami, Fl."*

I nearly gave into that temptation. But on the third day, after the first storm passed during the night, I made a morning meditation in the chapel. It had a large bay window on the east side of the house facing the ocean. Walking into the room I was drawn to the window to behold the winter scene on the outside. It looked like a Thomas Kincaid painting. Snowdrifts the size of mannequins were leaning on the sides of the house. Braces Rock, which resembled a giant naval submarine, jetting out from the shoreline about fifty yards away was snow-capped, giving it the illusion of being an amusement ride at a winter theme park. The sun was beckoning attention in a cloudless sky and the white caps of the Atlantic turned the ocean into waves of gypsies dancing with abandon.

As I turned to find a seat in the chapel I noticed a vase of baby roses next to the tabernacle on the bay window shelf. I stopped, taken aback by their presence. I found myself talking to them,

*"Hello,"* I said, *"How long have you been here and I have missed because I have only been looking out the storm outside?"*

That morning I shared that experience with my spiritual director, Sr. Nancy Sheridan. Later that afternoon when the snow was plowed away, she drove into Gloucester to a florist. She placed a long-stem yellow rose outside my door. Attached to the stem was a card with this message:

*Paul may God use this rose to draw you away from outer storms so you can attend to inner storms for the remainder of this retreat.*

During the next 27 days that rose occupied the window shelf of my room as three more storms churned outside. I watered it, talked to it and contemplated it. It never shed a petal. For the past 16 years I bring a yellow rose into my house to replay the grace of Roses in my life every January.

My spiritual director, Sr. Nancy Sheridan, coached me how to discern the false voice so I could attune my heart to the true voice of God's spirit who revealed surprising graces to me throughout the remaining 27 days of the retreat.

Let's bring this story into conversation with the reading from the prophet Isaiah.

The historical background of this oracle is the fate of Israel's enemy, Moab.

The prophet contrasts a strong city, *Jerusalem*, with the city of chaos, *Moab*.  
"Your name and your title...." Is an express of the holy city's dependence upon Yahweh.

Other Lords refers to earthly rulers and their alien gods.

Isaiah concludes not with a vision of national revival; but an explicit hope in the resurrection of individuals.

"*They who dwell in the dust shall awake and sing for joy;*" either the morning dew, which brings vegetation to life, or the dew of the heavenly regions of light.

This is one of the few references in the Old Testament to the mystery of faith rooted in the resurrection of the dead. It was a fruit of Jerusalem's total surrender to the will of God, their total dependence upon Yahweh for life, sustenance, deliverance, victory.

They needed Isaiah to coach them in listening to the true voice of their living God. I needed Sr. Nancy Sheridan to coach me in discerning the difference between the false voice and the true voice competing for my heart during a 30-day retreat.

The Olympic athletes all have coaches who help them to discern how to compete and win in their sport. Who do you have to help you discern how to live fully?

Discernment is taken from the Latin word meaning; to separate. When we apply that definition to ourselves, people with interior lives, it means separating the false voice from the true voice.

We only know which voice we listen to by the fruits we taste in our souls. If there is restlessness, sadness, conflict, control, resentment, unforgiveness, then the evil spirit has possession of our soul. If there is peacefulness, contentment, joy, delight, hope, then the Holy Spirit has possession of our soul.

The best place to learn simple lessons about discernment is in the produce section of a food market. Be contemplative the next time you're there. Watch people practice discernment by the way they select banana's, strawberries, tomato's, cucumber's, onions, garlic cloves. They're picky. Make that, we're picky about our fruits and vegetables.

Learn how something as ordinary as food shopping can teach you about being picky with decisions and choices that affect the interior life. The results are either you're

tasting the soar fruit of anger, envy, pride, jealousy inside, or choices that will result in your tasting the sweet fruit of interior freedom, delight, forgiveness, hope, and happiness also inside.

The people of Jerusalem needed Isaiah to coach them into being dependent on God for victory over Moab. I needed Sr. Nancy Sheridan to coach me how to discern being centered in God, who worked many miracles in my life in the winter of 1996.

Let the God of the Israelites be a coach for you in learning the art of discerning how the decisions and choices you make either enhance or diminish our living more fully the gift of life on this side of death.

St. Ann's Novena – Day 3

Friday July 20, 2012

*Isaiah 38: 1-6, 21-22, 7-8* - Discipline – Reverencing Tears

In 1997 I completed a two-year academic program at Neumann University earning a Certificate in Spiritual Direction. During the final semester the class had to do a course in Supervision. By then we were seeing a few people regularly for direction. Each of us had to write a Verbatim on a session, detailing things about the directee, the focus of the session, body language, etc. Our supervisor, Sr. Janice Edwards, would use the verbatims as a teaching tool, forcing us to reflect on our style of direction.

When it was my turn to be in the fishbowl I brought a verbatim about a direction session with a mid-aged woman and mother of two children. She was not getting any support from her husband in making sure their children got to church or religious education. During the session she broke down and wept.

My brain said to my right arm, "Reach out and hand her some Kleenex." I did and she wiped away the tears. When we got to that part of the verbatim, Sr. Janice stopped and asked me to role play that scene with her. I played the directee and she played the spiritual director. When I started to get emotional and weep, she moved closer, held my hands and said, "Tell me about those tears. Where are they coming from?"

The deeper I went inside, the more I found God as the source of the tear. Since then I have never used Kleenex during spiritual direction sessions. Rather than having people wipe them away I now invite them to reverence their tears as sacred ground.

Let's bring that story into conversation with King Hezekiah's weeping in the first reading.

This is an account of Hezekiah's sickness and recovery. This happened sometime during the 7<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. The king is suffering from boils and ulcers. Isaiah delivers an oracle about his impending death. Then the prophecy turns into a liturgical hymn in which Hezekiah weeps about his suffering and misery and then praises God for restoring his health and adding fifteen years to his life.

The prophet Isaiah becomes the healer, ordering a poultice to drain the boils and ulcers.

Hezekiah asks for a sign. The sign that is given needs clarification. Certainly Isaiah can't pretend to be divine and move the sun. It was King Ahaz, Hezekiah's predecessor who constructed a sundial, consisting of moveable steps, to be used to measure time.

While Isaiah was talking to Hezekiah, the sun's shadow had already moved ten steps. Isaiah promised to reverse the forward direction of the shadow by bringing the distance back ten steps. To that end he had the sundial steps adjusted.

In our culture weeping suffers from an image problem. It makes us appear weak, whiny, or soliciting pity. Yet, it is vital that we weep. Weeping enlarges our heart making room there for the grief or misfortune of someone else. The spiritual meaning of weeping is that it opens a door into a room of hope, turning people who weep into people of hope.

Hezekiah's weeping got God's attention. God intervened to rescue him from the guilt and shame of his behavior that spiraled him into hopelessness. The medical remedy Isaiah prescribed healed the king's physical ailments. But, gaining the attention of a God who looked at the source of his tears, healed the king spiritually. The sting of Hezekiah's sorrow enabled him to weep and his tears kept him from yielding to despair.

He found God in his shame and not removed from it. Olympic athletes who, in their training, fall and hurt themselves weep because they fear they may not recover in time to compete. They rebound because they believe their suffering is not the end of their story.

Therein lies a profound spiritual truth about our faith journey. Suffering does not defeat us because we believe in divine power that is hidden in our suffering. It is we who have to discipline ourselves to look for God there. In his weeping, King Hezekiah, was no doubt looking for God to help him find a way out of his guilt and shame.

We are a people that believe our God hears the cries of the poor. In his book, *Night*, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel gives a riveting account of how God suffers with humanity.

At the Buna Concentration Camp some prisoners engaged in sabotage. The commandant decided to teach them a lesson. He had three gallows erected for executions. First there was roll call in the assembly place. SS officers surrounded everyone, machine guns trained on the entire camp. Three victims in chains were ushered onto the ground. One of them was a little boy looking like a sad-eyed angel.

Allow me to read his account of the execution on page 61:

*"To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. The Lagerkapo refused to act as executioner. The three victims mounted together onto the chair. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.*

*"Long live liberty!" cried the two adults. But the child was silent.*

*"Where is God?" "Where is He?" someone behind me asked.*

*At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting. "Bare your heads!" yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.*

*Then the march began. The two adults were no longer alive. But the third rope was still moving: being so light, the child was still alive.....*

*For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.*

*Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?"  
And I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is He? He is here --- He is hanging on this gallows....."*

The spiritual exercise today is to reverence our tears so we can find him in the hurt and pain stirring the tears. When that happens we find God weeping with us. They are the sacred ground where we can empty ourselves and allow God to coach us how to enter the pain of others.

King Hezekiah wept because he had let God's people down. His tears told God that he was sad not only for himself but for the people he cheated out of righteous leadership. His tears gained him access to the divine. When we find God in our weeping then we do not yield to despair or hopelessness. Rather, our tears open a doorway to the divine who then invites us to cling to a hope that beyond our hurt a new future is possible.

St. Ann's Novena – Day 4  
Saturday July 21, 2012  
*Micah 2:1-5* - Discipline - Perseverance

Ever since the clergy sex abuse scandal became public in January 2002, I have been publically pilloried for suggesting that it is a pro-life issue and that the bishops themselves practiced a form of pro-choice when they decided to choose protecting abusive priests rather than innocent children. I have written and published on this issue and preached about it often. I have paid a high price from clergy who have shunned me and from laity who have criticized me. I know what spiritual suffering is like when one decides to speak prophetically. In this respect I know what Micah endured as a prophet.

Micah was the last of the four great prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. He was a fearless champion of the cause of the oppressed and the underprivileged. His father's name is not recorded, giving reason to believe he probably belonged to the peasant class. Like his neighbor, Amos, he attacked in a direct and forceful way, the socio-economic abuses of his day. It was a period when the wealthy landlords were oppressing the peasant landholders. If there were a case of history repeating itself, it sounds like our current economic scenario. He not only called for social justice, but condemned the religious priests and prophets in collusion with the merchants and the judges.

External worship and ritualism were flourishing but religious ethics were ignored. Micah – a man of blunt and unpolished language – could not remain silent while the stench of social justice wafted through the region.

In these few verses, he attacks the capitalists who are guilty of exploitation and corruption. Wealthy landowners have been dispossessing the poor by illegal means, even during the night hours these men without principles burn the midnight oil and plot ways to rob the underprivileged.

Their plans will be frustrated because God has a counterplan.

Then Micah lists the specific and unpardonable crimes. Since wealth consisted in real estate, land monopoly was a common vice.

Employing the metaphor of a yoked ox, Micah proclaims that the divine punishment will take the form of slavery and exile. The prophet envisions the occupation of Palestine by the Assyrians; the land will fall under their jurisdiction, and they will allot it.

The irony is that the monopolists who have been dispossessing the weak will one day be dispossessed by the invaders. The reference to marking out boundaries by lot means that the greedy and unjust landowners will enjoy no inheritance in Israel when the land of Palestine is apportioned by the invading forces.

Micah was a man of perseverance. Ignored, ridiculed and threatened from all sides, he bravely soldiered on. When the chips were down, when his strength was depleted, when a voice told him to quit, he pushed on. He transcended his rejection and ridicule by the people by yielding only to the voice of the God who called him to be a prophet. He cultivated perseverance by the way he responded to the trials in his life.

He is at the top of a long list of “saints of perseverance.”

- Elizabeth Bayley Seton
- Helen Keller
- Viktor Frankl
- Nelson Mandela
- Vaclav Havel
- Anne Frank
- Dave Dravecky
- Randy Pausch
- Vincent Talafero

These are spiritual Olympians whose stories coach us how to persevere; how to wait for God to break through our lives and rescue us, on terms other than our own.

Micah was not looking to be rescued. When he endured humiliations during his prophecies, he was learning how to wait for God to teach him what more he must surrender in order to find more of God hidden in his waiting.

Invite the prophet Micah to coach you today in growing in the grace of perseverance. It is the fourth grace of this novena that will help us uncover God in waiting, in patient endurance, keeping in mind that the one who endures walks a path toward ongoing conversion of life.

St. Ann's Novena – Day 5

Sunday July 22, 2012

*Jeremiah 23:1-6 & Mark 6:30-34* - Discipline - Compassion

Seven years after I was ordained I suffered from a bad case of *Burnout*. I collapsed from exhaustion, tricked by a false voice that seduced me into believing that I was everybody's savior. During five days in the hospital, for tests and recovery, I rested deeply enough to be converted by a true voice that said, "*Yes, Paul, there is a God and it's not you.*"

It was a poignant moment for me to be the object of God's compassion. It was just the opposite of what put me there, namely being so compassionate toward others, that I became physically and emotionally depleted. I had such a high output of pity for others that I didn't invite God to replenish the output with his pity toward me. Eventually, I ended up drinking from a dry inner well. Seeing God, as divine physician, practicing compassion on me in a hospital bed was a radical conversion experience. It was like receiving a spiritual antidote and it was powerful enough to keep me interiorly healthy and balanced ever since. I have never returned to the hospital for Burnout since.

Warning and compassion, the twin aspects of the prophet's mission, are both clearly manifested in the Old Testament and gospel readings today. How to keep them in balance is God's part in the life of his prophets.

The warning is first and it is blunt and terrifying for anyone who shares the privilege and burden of pastoring. While kings and priests rule and lead, the prophets offer God's perspective on that leadership, and Jeremiah's judgment is critical and harsh. False prophets, priests and kings are all indicted here. They have abandoned their true ministry and failed to teach the people the true demands of the covenant and the right practice of religion. The false prophets particularly have deluded evildoers into thinking God will bless them. Jeremiah, as a true prophet, is to reveal these charlatans and name the consequences of sin.

Two promises are made. First God will establish order from chaos and appoint true shepherds to serve the "remnant" God will salvage from the exiles. The second promise is that from the stump of David's royal line God will raise a "righteous shoot," who will rule wisely and put a face on God's justice. This future Messiah will embody integrity and be called, "our justice."

The gospel reading contains one of the most poignant lines in scripture: *they were like sheep without a shepherd*. No matter how unfaithful future shepherds behave, there will always be one faithful shepherd who will not mislead, who will not desert the flock. The eternal shepherd has come and will never leave the flock.

Human shepherds can fail us, as we know from the recent clergy sex abuse scandal. The sad news is, God's flock suffers when human shepherds squander the privilege of their office. The good news is the heart of Jesus always stirs with pity.

This is an intimate scene between teacher and disciples: Jesus wants to hear the report of their missionary journeys. They have returned from the front lines and debriefed with the master who sent them.

Jesus discerns it is time to get away and rest. After a tour of duty, they deserve some R & R. They try to escape in a boat to a deserted place. But the demanding people harass them. Their feet are faster than the oars. They arrive before the disciples. When Jesus goes ashore and sees the crowds, his compassion trumps his plans for R & R in a deserted place. A crowd foils their efforts to retreat in private. When Jesus sees them, that is, when he sees their need, he responds in love. When he sees them with his heart the agenda changes from reports and needing rest; to pity and extending compassion. Their need calls forth from him what he does best-----generously surrendering his needs so he can minister to the needs of others.

Compassion is taken from the Latin word meaning, “*to suffer with.*” When I had my experience of Burnout in 1979, I had to surrender and let Jesus suffer with me during my hospitalization and recovery. That was a radical conversion for me. It taught me a new consciousness about how to “suffer with others” who were burned-out or hurting or alienated in a way that I was being sustained by divine compassion, and like the apostles I learned how to stay in touch with that inner well of the compassion of Jesus. I have never been fatigued since. On the contrary, being on the receiving end of his divine energy is what fuels my inner tank of hope to share his life and energy with others.

Athletes competing in the 2012 London Olympics have inner wells of compassion. Their hearts will be moved with pity to come to the aid of their fellow athletes if there is injury or an accident or defeat. The personal agenda of winning a medal changes when life is threatened. Just as Jesus had his priorities straight, Olympic athletes have their priorities also. The heart knows when it is needed to comfort another heart when it is broken, or anguished, or desperate.

The spiritual practice today is *Compassion*. Whether it is practiced like Jeremiah as a warning or like Jesus as pity, it recalibrates the human heart and always conforms it to the heart of our compassionate God.

St. Ann's Novena – Day 6

Monday July 23, 2012

*Micah 6: 1-4, 6-8* - Discipline – Walking humbly with God

October 11, 2012 will be an historic day in the Roman Catholic Church. It is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of Vatican II. When I heard that Pope Benedict had called for a *Year of Faith* to celebrate the anniversary I had mixed feelings. Part of me was delighted that this occasion would jump-start new faith-sharing groups in parishes. Part of me was also disillusioned that some clergy and laity would mistake a *Year of Faith* for a Year of Religion. They are not the same.

Religion is institutions, creeds, doctrines. Religion is taught through a parochial school and catechetical system.

Faith is deeply personal, dynamic, ultimate. Faith is caught by the witness and virtuous living of others. A piece of God gets out of them and into us.

It is not a matter of having either religion or faith, but both religion and faith. For religion is faith's expression; it is a means to an end with faith being the end. Jesus affirms this in the scriptures. Every time there is a healing his words of comfort are: "*Your faith has saved you.*" He never said, "Your religion has saved you."

There is a great difference between learning doctrine or studying the Bible and living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. A story puts that into a certain perspective.

*Once upon a time a rabbinical student was arguing with his master over the interpretation of a passage in the Torah. The impatient student said, "I have been through the Torah 100 times." His master replied, "I am concerned about how many times the Torah has been through you."*

The spiritual truth is obvious. We are not saved by our memorizing doctrines or our worship in churches. We are saved by the love and anguish of God who desires to break into our lives time and time again and claim us again through the saving events of his son who is the ultimate source of changing our hearts and conforming them more and more to the divine heart.

The few verses in the first reading are the Magna Charta of prophetic ministry. The scene is set in a court of law of cosmic dimensions. The mountains, hills, and the foundations of the earth are to act as witnesses. The Hebrew God is the prosecutor and judge, while Israel is the defendant. God is bringing a lawsuit against his people.

Yahweh enumerates his saving acts on Israel's behalf, beginning with the Exodus and continuing to the Conquest. In the face of the Lord's indictment, Israel has no defense to offer.

Then Israel, the defendant speaks. What kind of sacrifices should they offer to appease God? Yearlings (calves a year old) were more valuable than the younger animals. This offering would have been made by the wealthy.

Cereal offerings were provided with oil. In the liturgy, oil was utilized for the lamps, for sacred anointings, and for purification ceremonies.

The first-born male child in a family enjoyed a special status; he received a special blessing and a double share of his father's property. The barbarous practice of child sacrifice was condemned by Mosaic Law.

Micah's prophetic words are a wake-up call. Sacrifice without interior conversion is futile. It is not a doctrine he espouses, but a way of life. The best way to honor the covenant with God is to "do the right thing," to "love goodness," and to "walk humbly with your God." But do this not out of duty, but out of love. This is how the chosen people can live in union with God and to serve him.

He is trying to help them reframe their special bond, special relationship with the divine so they can respond appropriately to God's interventions in their communal life.

A closing story might be helpful.

Paul Cezanne ranks among the world's greatest artists. Yet he painted for 35 years before receiving any recognition. When an art dealer finally discovered him and exhibited his paintings in Paris, Cezanne was overwhelmed. Entering the exhibition with his son he could not believe what he saw.

"Look!" he said to his son. "I can't believe it! They've framed my paintings!"

It was almost as if he saw them anew for the first time. Micah attempted to do the same thing in his prophecy today to God's stubborn people. His call to walk humbly with God was his attempt to reframe their relationship with the God who has always walked humbly with them in their history of being a chosen people.

As we draw closer to the Olympics this week, weave the image of "walking humbly with God" into your faith walk today. It is a discipline we all need to refine as we focus during this novena at becoming spiritual Olympians.

St. Ann's Novena – Day 7

Tuesday July 24, 2012 – Feast of St. Sharbel Makuluf

*Micah 7:14-15, 18-20* - Discipline - Forgiveness

I have an older brother with whom I have been estranged for a number of years. It began about five years ago over decisions I made about our mother's healthcare. We are at different places on the spiritual path. His DNA is to be negative, bitter, jealous, angry, and sarcastic. My DNA is to be positive, hopeful, tolerant, affirming. The differences in our personalities are so glaring that it is a mystery to me that we are related. I have forgiven him seventy times seven times for the times he has slandered me to family and friends and antagonized me to fall into the same traps. That forgiveness has kept me free inside from spiraling into similar behaviors. By avoiding those emotional traps, I have been able to accept the truth that his issues are not my issues. That interior freedom has allowed me to invite Jesus to companion with me and keep me moving forward on the spiritual path.

Micah has turned pessimistic and seems to have taken a U-turn on his spiritual path as a prophet.

Once again he denounces the covetousness and violence he perceives on all sides. He can't find a righteous man in all of Jerusalem. Judah is on the brink of invasion. Assyria and Babylonia will conquer the holy city and send the people into exile.

In chapter seven Micah offers a prayer from the time after the return of the exiles to their attempts to reform themselves.

The Lord is addressed as *Shepherd of his people*; they ask him to bring them out of the dark forests and into fertile pastures.

Carmel is the splendor and fertility of this mountain on the coast of Palestine. Bashan was a fertile region in Transjordan, famous for its oaks and forests; it was ideal for growing wheat and raising cattle. Nearby Gilead was also famous for its oaks, pines and pasture lands.

The closing verses are addressed to the God of forgiveness. The book of Micah ends by recalling the promises of the covenant binding Yahweh and the patriarchs. The Lord has pledged his "faithfulness" and "grace" to the Israel of old and he will not renege now.

Underneath Micah's prophecy is an ultimate truth about a piece of divine DNA. God punished his people with humiliations, defeats and exiles. Yahweh was hurt when his people were unfaithful, when they did not love him back the way he deeply loved them. But, in the end God always had the capacity to forgive his people.

As people with interior lives we live caught between two voices. The voice of the culture says that some sins are unredeemable; that some failures and mistakes, especially big ones cannot be mended, that we cannot be made whole again. The other voice of the Judeo-Christian tradition, however sees forgiveness as an obligation. Jews and Christians hitch this obligation on a theology that reveals a God who is *“slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents in punishing.”*

God’s DNA is compassion and mercy. The power of divine forgiveness is especially evident in the ability to distance the offender from the offense – “as far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us (Psalm 102) – a euphemism that suggests that the distance is marked by infinity.

When that piece of the divine DNA wiggles its way into our lives and finds a home in our hearts then we behave like God and practice true forgiveness as a debt that has been paid, a slate that has been wiped clean.

When the community required Hester Prynne to wear a scarlet letter **A** to acknowledge her adultery, it was clear that her neighbors perceived that a debt was still pending and that they were deficient as forgivers. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s **Scarlett Letter** is a powerful story that exposes mean-spirited people who continue to embarrass and harass the offender. To her credit, Hester Prynne rose above them all, accepting the unfair double standard that accused her and ignored her male partner. She maintained her grace and dignity.

God’s forgiveness toward his sinful people restored their grace and dignity. With new self-esteem as the chosen people they held their heads high again and God took pride in them again.

Today’s discipline in our novena journey to become spiritual Olympians is forgiveness. Is there someone you need to forgive so God can free you of that inner prison and show you how to move forward on the spiritual path? When the 2012 Olympics are over the athletes who didn’t win medals will have to forgive themselves so they can move on and return home with heads held high knowing that winning new self-esteem is just as precious as an Olympic medal.

I’ll close with a story about the healing power of forgiveness.

Many years after the Holocaust two friends met by accident on a street in Tel Aviv. Both wondered if the other had survived. They had grown old and the passing of years had taken a toll on their aged features. At first they didn’t recognize the other. But, once they did, they embraced and cried seeing each again. They sat down at a café table, had coffee and told stories about the passing of the years. Finally, one of them said, *“Have you forgiven the Nazis for what they did to us in the war?”* The other one tightened his lips and in an angry tone of voice, said, *“Good God, no, I continue to hate them every day of my life.”*

His friend replied, softly, *“I am sorry to hear that, for they still have in the camps.”*

St. Ann's Novena – Day 8  
Wed. July 26, 2102 – Feast of St James  
II Corinthians 4:7-15 - Discipline – Sabbath Living

In 1994 Hollywood made a movie entitled – “Forrest Gump.” It was extremely popular and garnered eleven Oscar nominations winning for Best Picture, Best Actor for Tom Hanks and Best Director for Robert Zemeckis. Forrest Gump was a character whose innocence and transparency converted the heart of everyone he met. The popular line in the film was: *My momma always told me that life was like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get.* I tweaked that line into a title for a retreat: *The spiritual life is like a box of chocolates; it's not about what you get but what you do with what you get.*

Let's bring that spiritual insight into conversation with the first reading today.

Some biblical scholars believe that St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is actually two letters. In both of the letters Paul is on the defensive. Outbursts of anger, precipitated by injury and suffering, replace the cool-headed Paul in I Corinthians.

By the time St. Paul wrote the first part of the second letter strong opposition to him was brewing. The instigators were Jewish Christians attacking Paul's authority as an apostle. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Corinthian church had to decide between Paul and his rivals. They were torn between two leaders.

What St. Paul offered the Corinthians that was radically different from his rivals was the discipline of not letting weariness or other difficulties overcome him. He maintained an inner luminosity that attracted others to him. Ultimately what they came to desire was the source of that inner glow, namely, the presence of Jesus Christ, dead and risen in Paul.

I call this SABBATH living. It is rooted in the Genesis tradition of the Creation story that on the seventh day, God created *menuha* ----- tranquility, serenity, peace, rest, in the deepest sense of healing stillness. Only after the birth of *menuha*, was the circle of creation made full and complete. Sabbath living invites us to step back, *and see what is good in the messes of life.*

A story might be helpful. It is taken from the first edition of “Chicken Soup for the Soul.”

*A nuclear physicist was once asked why he could analyze a problem then find a solution so quickly. He said it had to do with a childhood experience that involved his mother. One night he tiptoed quietly down the stairs, opened the refrigerator door and reached in to grab a half-gallon bottle of milk. It slipped out of his hand and smashed into a thousand's pieces, spilling milk all over the floor. He froze. A few minutes later, he heard footsteps coming down the back stairs. His mother turned on the light, walked over to him and said, “John, what a wonderful mess you have made here. Why I have never seen such a splendid broken bottle of milk before. What we have here is a failed*

*experiment of little tiny hands trying to carry a half-gallon bottle of milk. Let's clean it up together then tomorrow we will go outside and practice how to avoid this again."*

He said that by withholding judgment and not scolding him, his mother taught him a powerful lesson of how to engage the messes/problems in his life; namely, learn from them in order to avoid repeating them.

That is one of the spiritual benefits of SABBATH living. To slow down, to rest, to acquire again that piece of divine DNA that looks at things and sees them as good. St. Paul had to learn that spiritual lesson with what he did with his anger toward the Corinthians.

For over two years, I served as a spiritual director for several victims of clergy abuse and some parents. As I listened to stories of horrific sorrow, there remained a persistent voice inside that helped me to lean on a belief that there is an unquenchable resilience hidden in every broken and bruised spirit. My ministry as a spiritual director was to help them find that resilience again, and reclaim an inner glow that had only been dimmed by the abuse, without being snuffed out.

There is a profound scene in the movie *Amistad* that puts a celluloid face on this spiritual truth. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century several slaves from West Africa, who mutinied and commanded a slave ship, are brought to trial in Connecticut. The leader of the slaves is Cinque. During the trial he is shown flipping through pages of an English Bible. It is full of colored pictures of Jesus and his interaction with people during key events of his earthly ministry. In one scene he turns to a fellow slave next him and says, *"This must be the white man's savior."* *"Why do you think that," the fellow slave asks. Cinque then turns the pages pointing to pictures of Jesus with a halo and says, "Because wherever he goes, the light follows him."*

SABBATH living restores that inner luminosity, that hidden wholeness, to our busy and stressful lives. It makes it easy for that piece of the divine DNA in us to glow with the peaceful presence of God within.

In these few verses from his second letter to the Corinthians, it sounds like the inner glow in St. Paul is waning. His trials and sufferings are wearing him down, until he processes them through the sufferings and trials of Jesus. Then he sees a redemptive side to them. Only when he interfaces his sufferings with the sufferings of Jesus does he receive the revelation that the messes of life should not just make us tired; they are the pathways to make us happy.

There is much truth to the wisdom saying: *We do not see things the way they are; we see things the way we are.*

When I ask people, how are you, I can't tell you how many times I hear: *Father Mast, you don't want to know. You don't want to hear my woes. I'm so tired.* When was the

last time somebody said to you: *I have so much happiness how much can I share with you?* I love using the line: *"If I was any happier, I'd be twins."*

A thousand times a day, in a million different mediums, TV, radio, newspapers, websites, telemarketers sell one single message: You are not enough, you do not have enough, you are not happy until you have what we are selling. Against this daily diet of selling unhappiness, once a year you come to a novena to hear something counter-cultural: You are the light of the world, God's DNA is clemency, wherever you go the light follows you, forgiveness is the antidote to being interiorly enslaved, and today "you are persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed, afflicted but not broken."

Olympic athletes have to discipline themselves to attune their inner lives to that voice of fortitude and hope. That is a discipline we struggle with every day as we walk the spiritual path. As people with interior lives, we engage the struggle with eucharist, prayer, novenas, pilgrimages, contemplation, service of others. The spiritual fruit of this discipline is having tired hearts converted into contented hearts.

Invite St. Paul to coach you today in the discipline of transcending earthly struggles in order to see the redemptive side to them. Ask him to help you reclaim a sense of SABBATH rest to your hectic lives so that you can walk among the ruins of your desperations, and see what lives, what is struggling to blossom among the messes of your lives. When we get to that place on the spiritual path then we see things and messes and others with God's eyes; and we see that it is all good.

St. Ann's Novena – *Day 9*

July 26, 2012 - *Feast of St. Ann*

*Jeremiah 2:1-3, 7-8, 12-13* - Discipline – Renewing Covenant

Today a novena ends in Bethany Beach, DE. Tomorrow the 2012 Summer Olympics begin in London, England. But, even when these Olympic Games end, a whole new generation of athletes prepare for the 2016 Olympics in Rio. Similarly a novena ends but our spiritual walk with God and others continues.

Over the past nine days I have offered a set of disciplines that may help us stay focused on Jesus as a savior who desires to be a companion with us on the spiritual path.

We have reflected on these disciplines through the witness and ministry of the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and the apostle, St. Paul.

The first discipline was the art of deep listening. Just as Olympic athletes learn to listen to coaches, we learn the fine skill of listening to Jesus as a divine coach who desires to help us clear out the static of noise, stress and worry so we can tune into places in our hearts where God is hiding and waiting to speak words of hope and consolation.

The second discipline was discernment and how it affects decisions and choices that impact our interior life.

The third discipline was reverencing our tears. They are the sacred ground where we find that God is weeping within us and the tears free us from yielding to the voices of despair or hopelessness.

The fourth discipline was perseverance. It helps us uncover God in waiting, in patient endurance, teaching us a spiritual lesson about what it means to be rescued by God on terms other than our own.

The fifth discipline was learning how to be the object of God's compassion. Whenever we let God be a divine caregiver to us, that kind of interior surrender recalibrates the heart, conforming it again and again to the compassionate heart of Christ, the good shepherd.

The sixth discipline was learning to walk humbly with God, not out of religious duty, but out of the desire to fall more deeply in love with God.

The seventh discipline was learning how the power of forgiveness frees us from a grudge, or an inclination for revenge, so that the clemency piece of the divine DNA gets out of us and into others.

The eighth discipline was acquiring a SABBATH lifestyle, where rest and healing, restores balance to our busy and stressful lives changing our inner vision to see things as good.

This enables the divine DNA in us to glow again so that others will catch our renewed peaceful presence of God, thereby spreading the good news that we were made to be happy, not tired.

Finally, on this ninth day, the last discipline is renewing covenants. It involves renewing our desires to work on these disciplines one a month for the next nine months as a way of renewing our relationship with God as the center of our life and to be of better service to others.

In our sacraments, prayer, charity, novena's, pilgrimages, ongoing conversions, we proclaim that we desire to be in a relationship with God. These sacred traditions are the pathways that help us renew our covenant of love with the divine.

That was the mission of the prophet Jeremiah who lived through one of the most troubled periods of the ancient Near East. He witnessed the fall of a great empire and the rising of one even greater. In the midst of this turmoil, the kingdom of Judah, then in the hands of deplorable kings, came to its downfall by resisting this overwhelming force of history.

God called Jeremiah at a young age to be a prophet to Judah and to the nations during these political upheavals. His ministry lasted about 40 years and his book testifies that his interventions were numerous.

The few verses in today's reading are the oracles he preached under King Josiah. The main fault is the kings willingness to permit the worship of pagan gods, favored by alliances with heathens. They threatened the covenantal relationship with the true Hebrew God.

The first section of the oracle is a review of Yahweh's favor toward Israel, whose response has been only ingratitude. The greatest proof of God's devotion toward the chosen people is the Exodus followed by the conquest of the Promised Land. These define the relation between Yahweh and Israel. It is sealed in faithful love and mercy.

The tone changes in the second section. Idolatry is the charge against Israel. The pagan gods have no right of existence in her midst; no right to compete with faithful Yahweh. The accusations are directed to the priests who are responsible for the pagan sacrifices.

In the final section Jeremiah refers to *cisterns*. The scarcity of water in Palestine prompted the invention of digging underground cisterns to collect the winter rains.

Jeremiah uses the beautiful image of "*broken cisterns*" to define the futility of Israel forming political alliances with foreigners. Forsaking their alliance with Yahweh's covenant, Israel could expect only drought – severe punishment for turning their backs on the faithful God of their history.

After the summer Olympics finish on August 12, the athletes will experience something equivalent to an emotional drought. The high energy in preparation and competitions will give way to a dryness that will lie dormant inside them like an empty cistern. They will know when it is time to replenish the drought with renewed fervor and discipline in preparation for the 2016 summer Olympics.

For the past nine days you have filled your inner wells with the graces of this novena. Unlike the Olympic athletes practicing the nine disciplines, one a month, for the next nine months will help keep your inner wells from running dry. Even if you face an unexpected drought you can click on one of these disciplines, and like a computer program, you will access to God, who will be with you in the drought and coach you how to find you way back to the spiritual path.

By framing the novena through the medium of the Olympics I hope I have offered you some ordinary disciplines that can help you to become spiritual Olympians, faith people who are not competing for medals, but are working daily at winning God's attention and favor and blessing.

If we get better at that goal on this side of death then we have a foretaste of the mystery of eternal life on the other side of death. I hope this closing story gives you some inspiration in renewing that covenant with God daily.

*Once upon a time, a wise teacher conducted a town hall meeting. All the questions that people were asking had to do with life after death. The teacher didn't answer any of those questions.*

*On the way back to the monastery one of his disciples asked him: "Master, how come you never answered anyone's question about life after death." The wise teacher paused then said, "Have you ever wondered about those people who don't know what to do with this life, but they want another one that will last forever."*

*The pupil pushed his teacher and asked, "But Master, is there life after death or is there not?" The Master smiled and said, "Is there life before death that is the question."*

May the nine disciplines I have offered during this nine-day novena help you grow in the kind of spiritual practices where you discover again and again that Jesus Christ is the answer to both of those questions.