

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*, the main character Jean Val Jean steals silver from a priest who took him in for the night. Val Jean is caught by the police. He lies to the police by telling them that the priest gave him the silver as a gift. The police then took Val Jean to the priest to corroborate his story. Val Jean standing in front of the priest probably thought that he was going back to prison. The priest's response was probably not what he expected it to be. The priest told the police that Val Jean had told the truth and that he forgot to take the rest of his gift – two silver candlesticks. After the police left, the priest tells Val Jean that he needs to take the silver and become an honest man.

The priest's reaction probably isn't what we expect. Jesus' words in today's gospel text are words that we probably don't expect, let alone hear. Jesus tells us that he has come to earth to bring division, not peace. Families will be divided: Father against son; son against father; mother against daughter; daughter against mother; in-laws against each other.

What is Jesus telling us? Jesus is telling us that there will be divisions because there may be some that believe in him and some who do not. Some may choose to follow him as disciples, and others may not. We decide whose side we are on.

In the gospel text, the people can predict the weather but they can't recognize God's presence and work in Jesus. There is a sense of urgency about having a relationship with God. Fred Craddock explains the urgency:

“The people, say Jesus, are quite clever in reading weather signs but are blind to the sign from God: the ministry of Jesus among them. In fact, the time of God is now and is so urgent with meaning and importance that common wisdom dictates that everyone attend immediately to his or her relation with God.”

The time of God is now. What can we do to strengthen our relationship with God?

The gospel lesson for today is found in both Luke and Matthew. The Gospel of Matthew says almost the same thing as Luke, but it focuses on the relationship aspect in a different way. Matthew focuses on people taking up their cross and following Jesus. The focus is on living your life for the work of God in the world.

How can we strengthen our relationship with God? One way to strengthen our relationship with God is through our relationships with other people. And not just people that we know well, all people, even those we don't know. Our hospitality towards others is important in being a disciple.

Back to the opening story about the priest and Val Jean...the priest showed hospitality to a man who was on parole from prison – a man that no one wanted to help. And as I described before, when the police brought Val Jean back to the priest's house with the

silver, the priest gave him two silver candle sticks and told Val Jean to take the silver and make an honest life for himself. The priest showed great hospitality and the love of God in the forgiveness that he gave to Val Jean. Val Jean changed his life after that moment.

What are ways we can be more hospitable towards others? We might open our homes to someone we know that needs a place to stay for a night. We might give food to someone who needs it. We may welcome a stranger in our midst. In our neighborhoods, at work, at school, or at church we can say hi to a new person, ask them how they are doing, where they live, we can take an interest in them and welcome them. We may ask someone new to our community if there is anything that we could help them with – especially if they are new to the area and don't have any idea where things are. We could recommend a doctor, dentist, or a mechanic. We could invite a neighbor, friend, or family member to worship, church events, youth events, or Sunday school.

What are other ways we can be hospitable towards others? We can support our local homeless shelter. We do provide meals for project echo. Our youth had a rock-a-thon and helped raise money for the shelter. We can help those in our community that are having difficulty making ends meet.

Another way that we could be welcoming to others is to not gossip. We could avoid talking about someone that we don't know or refrain from speaking ill about someone we may not like. We could encourage others to get to know someone before something negative is said about a person. We might say positive things about a person who is being picked on by others.

After Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew that he came to divide and not to bring peace he tells them about the reward for hospitality. He shared with his disciples that those who welcome others welcome him and whoever welcomes him welcomes the one who sent him. When we welcome others, we welcome God in our midst.

Jesus can divide us. There are always going to be those that believe in Jesus and those that don't. No matter which side we are on, we can and should be welcoming to all people. When we show hospitality to others, we show God's love. People may change their lives when they are welcomed and feel cared for. God welcomes us with open arms, we should do the same.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding be in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.