The Mass of the Holy Spirit has been a traditional opening exercise at Jesuit colleges and universities for centuries, a time when we come together to ask God’s blessings for the year that is ahead, and invoke the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God’s wisdom, on the work of this university. Today is also, however, the Twenty-fourth Sunday of the Year in the Church’s liturgical calendar, and Fr. Holland and I agreed that we would use the readings for that day. This juxtaposition of liturgical events offers an interesting challenge to the preacher!

Today’s gospel asks us to identify with two experiences: the experience of being lost and the experience of being found. I suppose there’s a sense in which one can say that part of the life of
the mind that universities are about is finding: finding out about our world, about our culture, about ourselves. And a condition of possibility for learning is admitting that you don’t already know: that you are, in a certain sense, at a loss to know what you want to know, and that you need to find a way to know it.

Of course, a scientific, rationalist approach to learning has confidence in our ability to know, and with justification. Knowing, at least at a certain level of knowledge, is what the disciplines are about, and here at Fairfield we not only expect you to master these disciplines, but we evaluate you on your success in doing so. We expect that you will know something – indeed, a good deal – by the time you graduate, and this through your own diligence as well as by our efforts as your teachers. But I hope one of the things you will learn here are the limits of scientific ways of knowing in relation to what the Christian tradition has always called Wisdom with a capital “W”: the gift, and, indeed, the personification, of the Holy Spirit. This Wisdom is not a
knowledge that we wrest, to use the Baconian image, from nature, but rather a gift we receive as from a loving Father.

To understand Wisdom as a gift, I think we need to return to the experience of lost and found presented in today’s gospel. The lost that scripture has in view is existential or, in religious language, spiritual: being lost as part of the human condition, the way life is to its very roots. Moreover, this existential feeling of being lost carries with it a sense of alienation: the fear that we can never connect with each other, to say nothing of being able to connect with any kind of deeper meaning in the universe; and not only that we cannot connect with one other, but that we are fated to misunderstand and even to injure one other: that men and women, blacks and whites, rich people and poor people are at enmity and can never understand but only hurt. In an older religious language we might talk about original sin: the sense that John Henry Newman describes of the human race as being involved in some terrible calamity wherein the way things are bears so little relation
to the way things ought to be that we know something awful must have happened to make it this way.

The Christian tradition does not, of course, dispute the part of our experience that identifies with being lost. But being lost is not the heart of the Christian message: being found is, and that’s where today’s gospel connects with an experience of Wisdom as gift that it is sometimes difficult for our contemporaries to understand. For while being lost is part of our existential condition that many can relate to, being found is a concrete and particular experience of someone’s initiative in our regard – in this case, God’s -- that we must accept if it is to happen. For Christians, this is the great, this is the extraordinary thing about the gospel, especially this gospel: not that we are lost, which any reflective person understands well enough, but that in Jesus Christ, God, like a loving parent, has made the effort to seek us out and find us in the only way we can be found: by taking on our own flesh and living our life and suffering our death. Through our relationship with Christ, through the intimacy that Christ’s life and death establishes between us
and God, we believe that we, and, indeed, the whole world, are saved from meaninglessness and alienation and brought into relationship with one other and with God and with the purpose for which we and the world were created.

How can we in the lives we live have this experience of being saved from meaninglessness and alienation? How can we move from the sense all too familiar to us of being lost to the experience of being found? To show us how this happens, the liturgy today offers us both metaphors and an example. The three parables in today’s gospel, but most of all, of course, the classic parable of the prodigal son, are metaphors for God’s activity in the world. These parables are about God’s activity in the world to seek us out and find and save us. The parable of the prodigal son is one of the most beautiful and powerful in the whole New Testament. The image of the father, seeing his wayward son from afar off, and running to embrace him, is deeply affecting for us. For it speaks to one of our most profound personal experiences: either of finding unconditional acceptance where we have desired
it most; or to one of our deepest hurts in being denied that acceptance. And this forgiving, accepting father, Jesus is saying, is who God is: what we have always longed for, but perhaps have never yet found in our lives.

The second reading of the Sunday cycle does not always relate to the gospel, but today, Paul’s letter to Timothy is a perfect complement to the parable of the prodigal son. Paul is telling a story in this passage about being lost and then found, but it is not a parable: it is his own story of Christ finding him; the story of one who went from being a person of anger and violence to one who experienced his life and his mission as a gift from the Lord who had sought him out.

St. Paul was not special or exceptional in the experience he recounts. The incarnation of Our Lord means that God still seeks out each one of us individually to rescue us from the meaningfulness and alienation of our lives, to give our lives a meaning and a purpose born of the Lord’s love for us.
The spiritual life to which Christian faith invites every one of us is about letting God find us, but so, too, is the intellectual life in a Christian context. Christian learning is not only about mastering a subject, it is also about opening yourself to God’s quest for you, and letting God transform you so that you will understand who you really are, and what there is for you to do in this world from God’s point of view.

Are you letting this part of your education happen here at Fairfield? Do you believe that a relationship with God is possible and an important part of your life? Are you finding time in the business of your lives as students to listen to God’s call? Are you taking advantage of the opportunities offered to you here to worship, to pray, to make a retreat, to talk to someone about what’s going on in your spiritual life? It is not just a metaphor, but the most profound truth of our lives to say that, like the father in today’s parable, the Lord sees you a long way off, and runs out to meet you, to clasp you in his arms and kiss you tenderly. God asks
nothing more than that you accept what he offers and to respond, like St. Paul, with what is in your hearts.