Peace be with you! “Do you understand what you are reading?” That’s the question the apostle Philip poses in our scriptures from the Acts of the Apostles. On the road Philip encounters a court emissary traveling on behalf of the Queen of Ethiopia. He was reading from the book of Isaiah. “Do you understand what you are reading?” That’s the question Philip poses to this royal courtier. “How can I, unless someone instructs me?”

“Do you understanding what you are reading?” In a few short moments, as bishop, I will hand Kurt Hadley the book of the Gospels with these words: “Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach.” Kurt Hadley’s public acceptance in his hands of the book of the Gospel means that – like Philip – he will initiate the question for all those he serves: “Do you understand what you are reading?”

In Holy Orders we speak in Latin of three “munera”: Teach, govern and sanctify. “Munera” often translates as “gifts” but its incorporation into modern languages provides richer layers of meaning: In German it refers to “münze” as coins received. In English we have the word “mint” where coins are stamped. Teach, govern and sanctify: that’s the stamp – the sacramental mark – of Holy Orders. Our coinage is Christ. Indeed, the liturgical gesture of handing the Gospel of Christ suggests that the teaching “munera” is the leading edge of all evangelization. “Do you understand what you are reading?”

As bishop I have become rather famous for assigning summer reading for the seminarians. At the top of the required list is Fr. Servais Pinckaers, who is perhaps the leading moral theologian of the post Vatican Council era. I was not always sure they understood what they were reading. Indeed, I was not always sure they were actually reading!

But Fr. Dan Steele, here with us today, did select a quote from the writings of Fr. Servais Pinckaers for one of our first seminarians posters: “We need no teachers to tell us that good fortune and joy will make us happy. But what we could never have discovered for ourselves is that poverty and suffering could be the most direct road to happiness and that Christ has chosen them as our way to the Kingdom.”

Kurt – with his biting sense of humor – simplified this quote to the simple phrase: “We need no teachers.” There is a kind of truth behind Kurt’s raw humor here. The world is awash in false teachers. False teachers today promote a Gospel of prosperity. False teachers today substitute the richness of Church community with a sectarian tribalism that cherry-picks selected Church
teachings in support of political ideologies of the left and the right. In the highest places of society false teachers want to divide us in a variety of ways labeling Mexicans as rapists and North American whites as racists. Note well: the very word “Devil” in English and “Diablos” in Spanish come from the same Greek root as our English word “divide” and our Spanish word “dividir.” The devil is always behind false teachers.

Long before the chattering classes coined the term “fake news,” our emeritus Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI while still a cardinal warned of a “dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.” “Ego and desires.” I would suggest that these words of Pope Benedict hold more import today than when he spoke them a little more than 13 years ago at the conclave that would later elect him pope.

“So you understand what you are reading?” The moral requirement for every teacher to ask this question is underscored with considerable weight in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Like all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy the imperative to instruct is listed under the seventh commandment: “You shall not steal.” Our failure to pass on the Gospel of Christ, our failure to ask the question of Philip means we are stealing. We are stealing from the poor in spirit and we are stealing from the materially poor. Our failure to counter “fake news” with the Truth who is Jesus Christ means we are stealing. As I have repeatedly stressed to our seminarians as well as our priests in advanced studies: You are the best teachers the poor will ever have. You are the best teachers any of us will ever have.

“So you understand what you are reading?” The area between Jerusalem and Gaza where Philip asked this question remains in the headlines of today. Political and religious strife, violence, prejudice and misunderstanding suggest that Gospel attitudes so essential for peace among people of every faith and every people still need to be taught and modeled by us as teachers.

This is why I am so grateful that Kurt Hadley came to us from the profession of teaching having served as a teacher in rural Alaska as well as here in Washington State. I am grateful for his mother and father here with us today – his first teachers of the faith. I am grateful to his family – what we might call the domestic church or teaching church. I am grateful to the band of brothers comprised by the seminarians of the Diocese of Yakima for the ongoing common prayer as well as the peer instruction you give each other. I am grateful to the many religious educators and teachers who taught Kurt how to read the Gospel in both English and Spanish. I am grateful to the seminary formators who deepened Kurt’s moral, spiritual and theological literacy. I am grateful to the permanent deacons and their spouses for their witness to permanent diaconal ministry. I am grateful to the many great priests here in the Diocese of Yakima who spark Kurt’s desire to be a priest.

As bishop I am grateful to all of you for making this Jerusalem to Gaza journey for all of us here in Central Washington and, Kurt, I am grateful to share with you the journey of faith yet to unfold. Peace be with you!