

August 25, 2019

Twenty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time

Many of us grew up with one parent being stricter and the other parent being more lenient. As kids we knew that our chances for getting what we wanted were greater if we went to our mother. Mom was our first “go-to”. Our hearts sank when Mom said, “You need to go ask your Dad first.”

Sometimes that is the way we approach the scriptures. People sometimes think of the Old Testament like the stricter parent with more rules and less compassion and that the New Testament and especially Jesus and his teaching as being the “go-to” for compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Life in general and the Scriptures in particular are more nuanced than those simple categories of one being more strict and the other being more compassionate.

Notice what we hear in today’s readings. We read from the last chapter of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 66. If we read Isaiah in its entirety, we see that Isaiah repeatedly offers a message of great hope and promises that a messiah will come. The people of Israel too often fail to recognize and trust in God’s message. There are many ups and downs. Israel suffers defeats and setbacks because of their sinfulness, God acts as a strict parent and punishes them and then calls them back. After one struggle after the other, God does not abandon them but rather offers them a great promise that people of every nation to them, “to Jerusalem, my holy mountain, says the Lord.” And from these foreigners he will choose priests and Levites. We can find some of the greatest messages of hope, compassion and inclusion in Isaiah.

Then we read from the 13th chapter of Luke Jesus’ words that our minds tend to edit out. Someone asks Jesus, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” Most of us would like Jesus to say, “No worries, salvation is for everyone! Relax; I got this one covered for you.” Instead he says, “many, I tell you will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.” Then he gets even more personal, “you will stand outside knocking and saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’” The reply will be “I do not know where you are from.” Doesn’t it sound like Jesus is not just closing the door but that he is slamming the door in our faces? At the Penitential Act, we prayed the prayer of our Church, the belief of our Church, “Lord Jesus, you came to

gather the nations into the peace of God's Kingdom, Lord have mercy." How does that proclamation fit with what we hear Jesus saying that only a few will have the strength to pass through the narrow gate?

Those who have the strength will pass through the gate. What is our strength, or even better, who is our strength? There can be a danger for those who are members of a community of faith. One real danger is when people rely on their own strength, which can lead to people thinking that they are somehow superior to others. One of the earliest heresies of Church was Gnosticism, the belief of some Christians that they had superior knowledge over others. If we approach our faith from a place of pride or arrogance, we may find ourselves knocking at the door and saying, "We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets" and the Lord will say, "I do not know where you are from. Depart from me all you evildoers."

The strength that it takes to pass through the narrow gate is not our own. Our only strength to open the door is Jesus. We start with equal footing with everyone. We are all sinners and none of us has the power to save ourselves. We have not hope for salvation without Jesus and his cross. His cross the key that unlocks the door to the narrow gate. Many cities in the ancient world had narrow gates so that travelers had to unload all their possessions and most especially their weapons before entering the city. Only those who take off the load and the weapons of pride, of any sense of privilege or entitlement, will be able to pass through the narrow gate and open the door.

One of the great traditions of Catholic prayer life is to do a daily examine. The Examine includes reflecting on the blessings that God gave us in the day, blessings that came to us freely, independent of our own efforts. Then to look at the ways we have sinned against God and all sin really comes from pride. Original Sin entered the world because Adam and Eve believed the lie that our way was better than God's way. The examine helps us to every day take off the load of pride, to ask Jesus to help us to grow in humility.

Jesus path is one of humility. When we decide to follow him we must do everything we can to take off the heavy load of pride in our lives. Our very salvation depends upon it.

