

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Isaiah 66:18-21

Psalms 12:5-7, 11-13

Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

Luke 13:22-30

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Tough Gospel today. Someone asks Jesus if it is true that only a few people will be saved, and Jesus answers, "Try to come in through the narrow door. Many, I tell you, will try to enter and be unable." Tough words. For a start, that word "narrow" grates a bit. Narrowness isn't generally a quality we admire in doors. It has connotations of phone booths and the back seats of compact cars. Narrowness seems claustrophobic, even suffocating. We want some elbowroom, some breathing space. We're a bunch of spiritual Gene Autrys singing, "Don't fence me in." When we enter the Kingdom of God we'd like to be like John Wayne coming through the great, wide, swinging doors of an old West tavern with the whole posse tumbling in behind us.

But Jesus says, "narrow," so "narrow" it's going to have to be. What could he mean? Maybe part of what he means can be got at in the statement, "Life is not a pass/fail course." You remember pass/fail courses. You start the school year full of good intentions. You won't let the fact that one of your courses is pass/fail effect the amount of work you'll do in it. You resolve to work just as hard in your pass/fail course as in the ones that are graded. But when crunch time comes, good intentions go out the window. You end up doing just enough to avoid failing, and give the rest of your time and effort to the courses in which you're going to be given a specific letter grade.

Our life of faith is not a pass/fail course. We can't let ourselves fall into

the trap of lying in our beds at night and thinking, “Oh well, that’s another day gone without breaking any major commandments. Maybe a couple of venials this afternoon, but certainly nothing mortal.” When it comes to the life of faith, that’s just not good enough. When we think about what the Kingdom of God is supposed to be like, and compare that to the situation our world is in, it’s obvious that complacency just isn’t an option. Under these circumstances, if at the end of the day we haven’t worn ourselves out trying to make our world more closely resemble God’s Kingdom, if we haven’t spent our day trying hard to be an occasion of Christ in the lives of people God sends our way, we just haven’t made the grade.

Maybe it would help to think of “narrowness” in terms of focus. Instead of letting our life and our efforts be diffuse, we have to focus-in on the task at hand. If we are to be the light of the world, we can’t be satisfied with a kind of general glow. Rather, we have to focus the light of Christ in us into something like a laser, that will cut through apathy, hopelessness and sin - our own and the world’s.

Another hint to what Jesus means can be found in his words about the master of the house saying in effect, “Look, I’m not going to let you people in, because I don’t *know* you.” So ultimately the life of faith is about a *relationship*. Now obviously our master already knows us better than we know ourselves. So faith is about our response. It’s about our *knowing* the master.

Once we have acknowledged that faith is a relationship with our loving God, we can take what we know about loving *human* relationships, and consider how that applies to the life of faith. What might the “narrow door” mean in this light? Some time ago, in an airport shop, I saw a cover of *The New Yorker* magazine that depicted a wedding. The bride’s attention was happily focused on the minister, but the groom was distracted. He was looking up at the

hovering wraiths of several beautiful women who were waving goodbye to him. They presumably represented the women he might have known and loved in the future were it not for the commitment he was making to the woman standing by his side.

In this sense marriage represents a *narrowing* of love's focus. Instead of broadcasting affection, a person who marries pledges to pour his or her love into one person now and forever. The loving commitment to this one person becomes the context of love for others. But where a certain variety in love may be sacrificed, there is a corresponding increase in the depth of love that may be attained.

This truth regarding human relationships has a spiritual analogue. I once heard the great Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor refer to the old piece of Eastern wisdom that says in life you have a limited amount of time to dig. You can use that time to dig several shallow holes, or one deep one. The implication is that in the spiritual life the best policy is to narrow your focus and dig deep.

In Christ we have been given the opportunity to know and love the living God, in prayer, in scripture, in the Eucharist and in one another. If we avoid distraction and complacency, and enter through this "narrow" door, we will find that it opens out onto the widest possible experience of what it is to be a human being, especially beloved by the Creator of the universe. We will have elbowroom, and to spare.