

“Lord, will only a few people be saved?”

Jesus was passing through various towns and villages as he made his way toward Jerusalem – teaching along the way. At one point, someone asked him: “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” and Jesus responded: “Strive to enter the through the narrow gate.”

My guess is that most of us were taught that “the narrow gate” is the gate that leads us into _____??
... heaven!

And, my guess is that most of us were also taught that “the wide gate” is the gate to _____??
... hell, “...where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth...”.

In The Lord’s Prayer, we pray “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven...” and Jesus was focused much more on birthing the Kingdom, the Reign of God, the Realm of God *here on earth*. He wasn’t obsessed with how many people are going to get to heaven... he was much more concerned about *bringing heaven to earth*; much more concerned with endeavoring to bring about the world that God intended: heaven on earth. In fact if we look at the four Gospels, Jesus makes it very clear that the door to heaven is a wide door, an open door where all are welcome. Saturated by mercy and unconditional love, God is a merciful God who has so much patience. God is greater than sin! No one should lose heart!

“Lord, will only a few be saved?” *Jesus essentially ignored the question and focused on people being saved here on earth!*

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Jesus came to save us from sin, and sin – as we know – is selfishness, greed, violence, hatred, revenge, jealousy, envy, lust, etc., etc., etc.. Sin is sin because it brings about hell: hell in our hearts and hell in our world... Just ask someone who is enslaved to an addiction... they’ll let you know about hell. A fond saying in 12-Step Circles is: *‘Religion is for those who are afraid of going to hell, spirituality is for those who have been there...!’*

When we look at our own lives, experience tells us that sins are sins because they bring about suffering and pain in our own lives... and in the lives of those around us. When we look at the world, we see people are living in hell because of sin: poverty, hunger, violence, war are global sins: *hunger is hell, war is hell, poverty is hell... .*

A painful image of hell on earth is the photo, published in The New York Times yesterday, which has since gone viral, of a suffering 5-year old boy in Syria, covered with blood, who had just been pulled from the wreckage of a bombed building. Since the photo was circulated, word has spread that the boy's 10-year-old brother died from the injuries he incurred in the bombing.



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Sisters and brothers, Jesus desires that we all be saved from hell – hell in our hearts and hell on earth; that we all live a fully human life. As disciples, we are called to follow the way of Jesus in our personal lives, and work with other people of goodwill to ensure that all people have the opportunity to live fully human lives.

Today's *Letter to the Hebrews*, reminds us that growing into what God hopes for us, is a process that requires discipline and hard work; and can be painful. As the Gospels show us, the Kingdom of God – on earth as it is in heaven – is like a banquet that we will enjoy, only to the extent that we love what God desires and desire what God offers.

Jesus, in today's Gospel, has a strong warning for religious people that: every person and all people are invited to the banquet of love. The people who are locked out of the banquet – in today's Gospel – are locked out because the kind of banquet they want, *doesn't exist* ... They desire an exclusive banquet, where only the religious, only the pillars of religion are welcome... They pride themselves on belonging to an exclusive club (sometimes called: The Church), with membership requirements that they themselves have written... .

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There is a wonderful movie, produced in 1987, Babette's Feast, which in a beautiful way symbolizes what the banquet of life – the kingdom of God – is all about. (And, by the way, it is Pope Francis' favorite movie!)

Babette's Feast is the story of a Frenchwoman who winds up in a remote Danish village, with people who are bigoted and mean... and, very religious.

One day, news arrives from Paris that she has won a lottery prize of 10,000 Francs. She spends the whole sum to offer the community a French banquet ... a *jubilee* for the palate: turtle soup, quail, caviar, fine wines and champagne, elegant pastries, and exotic fruits. A feast that slowly thaws the souls of the diners... a handful of men and women, burdened with a sense of sin; fearful of the 'last judgment,' made melancholy by rancor and terrorized by the very thought of enjoying themselves.

Their faces are gradually transfigured under the impact of the flavors and smells of the fine food: the diners' spirits rise and they start to breathe again. Set free – they come to a vision of life that they had never imagined before. "Mercy and truth have come together, rectitude and hope have exchanged kisses..." concludes one of the guests – raising his glass – "... because God doesn't impose conditions!"

Our God is a God of joy and happiness and life; not a tormenting disciplinarian.

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Another powerful image of the Kingdom of God on earth being like a banquet where all are welcome comes from our Pope Francis' recent initiative making sure that at least some of Rome's homeless people don't miss out on a summer holiday. Each day, a Vatican van, drives 10 people on a 20-mile trip to the beach! The Vatican provides swimsuits and towels so they can enjoy a dip in the sea or sunbath. On the way back to Rome, they stop at a restaurant for dinner, and sometimes Pope Francis himself is on-hand to serve the pizza! Msgr. Konrad Krajewski, who drives the van, stated "We are certainly not saving the world with some of these initiatives, we are not solving the problems of the homeless in Rome, but at least we're restoring to them a little dignity."

As is more well known, Pope Francis has also had showers installed in the Vatican's public restrooms, so the homeless can have access to them and has made barbers available one day a week to provide hair-cuts for them. The Swiss Guard has been directed to distribute hot meals to homeless people at the Vatican stop of Rome's Rail System.

Just a few days ago, Pope Francis surprised 20 former prostitutes by knocking on the door of their safe-house shelter, operated by the Church for women in Rome who have been rescued from their pimps. He met and chatted with each woman and blessed them. He's repeatedly decried the human trafficking behind such prostitution as a "crime against humanity."

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Sisters and brothers, each week we gather at this banquet of life – where all are welcome – to receive Jesus ... so that we can go out of these doors... to be Jesus for others; participating in the banquet of life that all people – without exception – deserve.

"Lord, will only a few people be saved?"
Jesus ignored the question... !