

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 24 & 25, 2019

All Saints Parish, Syr., NY
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Here we are again...reprimand and punishment, “wailing and grinding of teeth...” and apparently (according to some scholars) some versus that are omitted from the readings because they are just too harsh to conform to our idea of the Good News...

Yet, as Theologian Michelle Becka suggests, such words and images seem oddly pertinent in a summer when harsh images go around the world: remember our poster of drowned two-year-old Valeria with her father in the Rio Grande? And now the image of this little one sobbing uncontrollably when her father was taken in the ICE raid in Mississippi two weeks ago. A summer too in which globally – nuclear-arms control treaties have both been violated and terminated, and here in our Nation, yet more gun violence A summer with new restrictions being placed on those seeking-asylum at our southern border ...the very place they are seeking entry into a land that has always promised safe-haven and a better life.

What can we draw from our readings on this beautiful, but troubled late summer Sabbath in 2019?

Both the first and second readings were addressed to people – not so unlike us – confused and disheartened because of frustrated expectations and disappointment that their world was not living up to the prophetic promises made by their ancestors. Isaiah is responding to the longing of the people for the promised salvation of Israel. His attempt to “comfort” them was to try to get them to understand that the promise really includes all the nations... not just them... and it’s fulfillment awaits that. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, tries to encourage a community of early Christians, disappointed that the second coming just wasn’t coming.... by attempting to convince them that this seeming ‘punishment’ is “for their own good.” Was intended to teach them “*discipline*” – that is: that the promise will come true only if and when they keep *acting* as “*disciples*” ... but that’s really hard when you see only grief with no end in sight.

Doubts are spreading... The issue is faith... how to hold the prophetic faith to carry on the mission...?

Today’s Gospel from Luke introduces the moment of decision... faith is necessary for sure... but salvation is not simply a state of mind. It requires a decision and action... Today we find Jesus, filled – as we’ve heard earlier – with exilic (prophetic) zeal to set the world on fire with his vision of the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven... on the road to Jerusalem, the center point of the earthly authority of his day – both civic and religious. As we know, and I have to believe *he – being the astute character we know him to be – had a pretty clear idea*, that while he wasn’t exactly spoiling for a fight... this journey was to culminate in a climactic confrontation with the power structures that for varying reasons opposed his inclusive mission of mercy and vision of justice for all.

.... All along this journey ‘passing through the towns and cities’ Jesus is teaching and healing...by word and example exposing the hypocrisy of the religious and political power structures both of which laid “heavy burdens on” – bullied, regulated and enslaved – the people... and aware that he was indeed fomenting division. And: people were clearly paying attention: the Jewish authorities for sure...who were increasingly worried about this rabble-rouser; who was suggesting that the way things were, wasn’t necessarily how they had to be...; and the people who witnessed the healing and heard the teaching... and wondered, could this be the one? / the Messiah?

Just before our passage today, Jesus has shared the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven... teaching that the Reign of God, the kingdom of God, is characterized by growth and change... transformation... Depending on the listener... a promise and a challenge... an assurance or a warning...

The tension – the urgency is rising, and so the question – pretty naturally – is asked: Will only a few be saved? ... The unspoken concerns behind this question... seem to be: if only a few are to be saved – as the strict religious code and the domination of the Roman Empire would suggest, what's the point of resisting? Of holding on to the promise of liberation of old? On the other hand if everybody is just "in" – as Jesus' message of healing and mercy might have suggested... what's the point of following any kind of morality at all? Is there any other alternative? A choice needs to be made. As usual, Jesus' message lies in the alternative.

Indirectly addressing the questions (both spoken and unspoken), Jesus uses what to his hearers would have been a very matter of fact and accessible metaphor: "Strive to enter through the narrow door..." The main entrance to Jerusalem (and other cities) at this point in time would have one high, wide central gate... with two lower, narrower doors or gates on either side. The wide, center gate allowed carts and camels and all manner of goods, entourages, military platoons and other traffic to pass. Anyone who wished to enter – who had no baggage – could avoid the traffic and congestion, and waiting, by entering through either one of the narrow gates. [Kind of like traveling with just a carry-on bag...].

Jesus is pretty pragmatic here, counseling that it's a distraction for us to worry about the numbers getting 'in' – when rather we should strive – work at – letting go of what might keep us out... our own excess baggage ... whatever that may be from the personal to the collective: ego, prejudice, pride, greed, materialism ... racism, sexism, ableism, ...nationalism, exceptionalism; including, importantly, our own presumptions of who is to get in and why... "Some who are last will be first and some who are first will be last ...".

Restrictions on salvation don't come from God, but from our response to God's invitation. It's up to us... our choice to "strive" to let go of anything that could hold us back; anything that is irrelevant to the mission; that gets in our way. And a core part of Jesus' message is directed to the power structures: it is pure wrong for any authority to create obligations that are themselves obstacles... that keep people out – rather than streamline the way in.

The counsel to "let go" of our baggage, of course, means it's not easy or seemingly "fair"... that's why our second reading instructs us not to be discouraged... When Jesus asks us to "strive" to enter the narrow gate, it may seem like a punishment... divesting ourselves of our "baggage" is not so easy [traveling with only what fits in a carry-on bag is not my strength!] ... but it is freeing. Several times over the past week or so as we've been preparing for the Garage Sale, I've had conversations with numbers of you who have shared stories of your struggle in deciding which precious items (seems this particularly involves books...) you are really ready to let go of... but, ah: then the freedom! As one friend put it: "I actually have space to move in my own house again! I suspect Jesus slipped pretty easily through the narrow gate..."

So the invitation to enter the narrow gate is neither exclusionary... nor meant as a punishment. But – as Jesus goes on to emphasize – in a seemingly harsh mixed metaphor – it does require a choice ... we have to decide what's essential ... Let's try to follow the Gospel image: once the Master of the house has closed the door/gate and we knock... even though we “ate and drank with” him, and listened to him teach ... if we don't get rid of our extraneous baggage, we may be so concealed/overburdened by extraneous “stuff” ... that we're just not recognizable as disciples.

[It occurred to me that, Jesus' invitation is like those sweet party invitations we sometimes receive that say: “No gifts, please... your presence is enough”! ... Made me think about how I / we typically respond... do we believe it...? Am 'I' really “enough”?]

We might put it this way: entering the narrow gate requires getting down to the essentials: As Jesus – earlier in Luke's Gospel – made clear in replying to the scholar of the law who asked: “Teacher, what must I do to enter eternal life? And Jesus got the scholar himself to demonstrate that he – and we – really already know the answer: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”

There's nothing exclusionary in this: every spiritual and faith tradition holds to this “Ethic of Reciprocity” (aka The Golden Rule) that binds each and all of us together into the kin-dom of God! (Sociologists call it the “Paradox of Dependency”!)

As Isaiah, speaking the Word of God in our first reading, tells us: “I am coming to gather the nations of EVERY language. They will come to witness my glory... the distant coastlands that have NEVER heard of me or seen my glory. And they will declare my glory among the nations”!

The kindom of God is open to all... but we have to decide to enter (and not just mill about in the crowd with all our “stuff”): We must decide to love God *with all that we have and all that we are, and our neighbor ... all of Creation ... as our self!* It is in acting out of love in all our relationships: personal, social, communal, professional, political, that we individually and together make real God's kindom as universal here on earth as it is in heaven. But we have to keep our focus on the right question... What must I do to enter eternal life?

One of our most significant contemporary prophets, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister in her newest book THE TIME IS NOW, in exploring the essential, prophetic spirituality, vision and courage that Jesus continues to call us to in today's world, expands on our Gospel message:

She says:

“The only question is will we take up what we know is our moral and spiritual responsibility: to make the world a better place for all, to bring to life the fullness of Creation for all, to help bring about equality, safety, security and compassion for all.”

Sr. Chittister takes the title of her book from the prophetic warning – as Jesus stresses in today's Gospel – that the “time is now”... the clock is ticking... the environmental clock ... the nuclear clock ... children dying at our border... gun violence plaguing our nation... people enslaved to sex trafficking and addictions in our city – maybe even in our families; the rich keep getting richer and the poor go nowhere. Now is the time to “do something” (as the recent rally chant goes). We must decide... and

as Sr. Chittister notes, each of us has basically the same choices as did the people of Jesus' time (as well as Isaiah's audience and the early Christian Community to whom our second reading was written):

1. I can choose to just opt out of the struggle – stick my head in the sand and focus on my own survival; 2. I can surrender to – buy into the prevailing culture and focus on how to make it work for me; OR – here's Jesus' alternative – 3. I can refuse to agree to the oppression and injustice and work to over-turn it... .. And, yes it can still be, as our 2nd Reading puts it, “discouraging” when we don't see progress... just more grief, and wailing ...like the little one in our poster...

Theologian Becka acknowledges that: “It's important to recognize that we are all entangled in structural guilt. **But** it would be wrong to conclude from this that we will not be able to change anything, and that consequently it doesn't matter if we do anything at all”. She remind us of the words of Oscar Romero:

“We cannot do everything,
And there is a sense of liberation in that.
This enables us to do something,
And to do it very well.”

And, with the grace of God, we – individually and collectively as All Saints Parish – as Catholic Christian disciples of the Christ in 2019 ... continue to do all manner of things... acting out of love! NO “drooping hands or wobbly knees here”! Friday we were providing back to school basics for the kids of folks in treatment court, last week we brought not just a warm dinner with meat loaf and mac & cheese... but also fresh peach cobbler to the men at the Oxford Inn! Some of us regularly vigil at Katko's Office or at other public demonstrations, raising our voice for those who can't ... we're partnering with the Rescue Mission in getting the shelter for homeless LGBTQ+ adolescents ready to open, ... our Refugee Welcoming Team is everywhere our new Americans are... and this weekend especially at our Garage Sale!!! Our religious Ed. Program is gearing up for action... Our Stewards of Justice + Peace are planning a challenging poverty simulation, we're coming up on a book study to inform and nourish our energy for “boundless compassion,” ... the Hospitality Ministers lovingly prepare treats for us every week... and so much more... all while we continue our commitment to develop for ourselves, for our PCA and for our Diocese – a new model of being church in our troubled and changing times...a church that is inclusive, mission-driven, visionary, courageous and prophetic... Where not just *some* ... but *all* are truly welcome! And each one of us – in our everyday lives, leaving here where we 'eat and drink and (with all humility) listen to him teach,' show ourselves clearly to be Christ's disciples. All of it, as our Psalm today proclaims, “telling the Good News of God's kindom to all the world...”

In his Angelus message last Tuesday our Holy Father Pope Francis shared this: “To be Christians... to be disciples of Christ – is to live and witness to the faith in prayer, in works of charity, in promoting justice, in doing good. For the narrow gate which is Christ must pass into our whole life.”

Amen.