

[Readings: Isaiah 66:18-21; Psalm 117; Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30]

Many years ago, a priest friend asked me, which occupation will be most represented in Hell? He said, dentists, because of all the grinding of teeth! We hear elsewhere in the Gospel that the Great Sower sows the seed of faith with abandon on His own soil. It's His to scatter extravagantly and even to waste if that's His choice. Yet today's Gospel message seems to go in another direction. The open Door of Mercy is replaced with the metaphor of a Narrow Gate, through which many will find the way impassable. What's the difference between an open door and a narrow gate? In a word, size. Dimensions.

Luke's Gospel pursues the theme that for some, accumulating wealth, power, prestige, and even pious appearances acquires us nothing in the Bank of Heaven. Now comes the downbeat of that teaching: Not only does worldly advantage count for nothing useful, it actually be detrimental. It makes us too "big" to pass through the standards of Heaven. The untrimmed ego strives to enter Heaven in vain. Our riches and possessions do not belong to us; they belong to God and we are its stewards.

The next metaphor is even more devastating: that of the Locked Door! Once the door is barred, size doesn't matter at all. We can vow to go on a strict spiritual program at this point, but it's no use. The time for making the better choices has foreclosed. Even the Door of Mercy can't admit us if we've refused to seek it in the proper season, which is the season of the living, our time on earth.

A dear friend of mine was mostly confined to her home because of her many illnesses. Her medications, especially the steroids she was taking, has swollen her body, making movement difficult. She spent most of her time on the couch or in bed. But from there, she was an advocate for almost all of her neighbors in her coop subdivision, where rent was based on poor income. She was constantly on the phone, advocating for funds and services for her poor neighbors. Yet in spite of her generosity of spirit, time, and talent, she told me her heartbreaking fear was that on Judgement Day, she would stand before Jesus and be told, "I don't know you. I don't know where you come from."

I do not see Myself in you." I told her, "Honey, if YOU don't make it into Heaven, there is no hope at all for ME!" My dear Mother told me that she had read a book about a visionary who said that the road to Hell will be paved with the heads of all the unfaithful, sinful and evil priests of the world. I don't want to be one of those pavers!

Jesus tells us the truth in love, but not all want to hear this.

It's especially disconcerting to those who "ate and drank" in the company of the Lord -- a stunning reference to early Church members who thought that fidelity to the Table of the Lord was the be-all and end-all of Christian practice. This was the origin of the expression: "Go to Church, Go to Heaven!"

They find themselves treated no better than "evildoers"! Even though they showed up routinely, the Lord treats them like strangers!

What's worse, as we hear in today's First Reading, folks from all points of the compass will find welcome through that same door. Listen to who is going to be admitted ahead of us: foreigners, the unclean, the patently unworthy, sitting at the table with patriarchs and prophets. Oh, how this truth would have shocked those around Jesus! And it still does. If we hope to sit at the Kingdom table, the time to get in shape for that moral passage is NOW!

In today's excerpt from the Letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that the GOOD NEWS is that ALL of us are sons and daughters of God. Every one of us. Having said that, there is a key word that doesn't seem to exist much anymore: Discipline. The word itself means to learn, often the hard way. To be a disciple means to learn the way, how to do something.

I cringe when I hear the next words of our Second Reading: "He scourges every child He acknowledges." Please don't take those words literally. I believe with all my heart that God never does anything evil to the ones He loves. He does not stand with a whip lashing out at all of us. That's not how MY God operates. Life gives us the lashes. Life gives us the problems. Sometimes other people do. Sometimes we bring evil upon ourselves by our own bad choices and actions. Then we have to live with the consequences of those bad choices.

"Keep your nose clean," my dad and my first pastor used to say, "and you'll have nothing to worry about." That was his version of "Strive to enter through the narrow gate." It is good advice but not easy to follow.

Once in a while, I allow the little stresses of a day to get the best of me. Unlike Paul, I have a hard time seeing my trials as a form of discipline that builds character. I fall more in the "O woe is me" or the "please pass this cup from me" camp. I make halfhearted attempts to feel grateful and see the joy all around, but my resolve is weak and I end up snapping, whining, and complaining.

Anything to get my point across that I am not happy with the way things are going on a given day and it's everyone's fault but my own. You too?

Just when the chances of my making it through any of God's gates are nearly exhausted, someone shows up to assist in my salvation.

Recently it was a prayer at Mass: "Let us view the complexities of life with gratitude." I guess that's another way of saying, "Do not disdain the discipline of the Lord." Or as my dad would say, "Quit your bellyaching."

Discipline does train us: the discipline of sports; the discipline of studies; the discipline of learning a new job; even the discipline of prayer.

How does this jibe with what Jesus says? What it means is that simply knowing about Jesus is not enough. Would-be disciples are invited to a personal relationship with Him. His message is becoming more urgent: Turn away from your stubbornness and sin while you still have the chance.

Love or at least respect those whom you do not now love. Who is unwelcome in your heart? What will be your Christian response to them?

Remember last week, we learned that even family members will become divided if they place God ahead of family. We may need to take a "holy break" from those relationships that are unhealthy, toxic or dysfunctional.

But we also need to remember that people who are hard to love or hard to accept are precisely those who will help make us saints. Why? Because as the saints have taught us, if we can love such people as these, we can love anybody! Then the Great Commandment of Jesus to love God by truly loving others and by truly loving oneself takes root in our hearts, in our lives and in our community. Trials can be rich opportunities on our spiritual path if we see them as "discipline," that is, training in new ways of seeing and living. Can you name a recent trial that helped you be a better disciple?

Ego lowering is a big part of spiritual development. Do you take trials and disappointments as wounds to the ego that you defend against, or as ways to lessen your ego and rely more on God? How so?

The narrow way that Jesus points us to demands awareness and choice. It also demands patience with ourselves and with God. What in our behavior right now indicates we are choosing the narrow way? THAT is the ultimate question! AMEN!