

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

Those who love us tell us the truth. Even if the truth hurts. Jesus loves us with a great bounty of truth, but we can be sure not everyone receives such love with gratitude. Our readings challenge us to widen the door of mercy and admittance to many who've been -- or perhaps felt -- uninvited and unwelcome. In our homes, in our church, and in Heaven Itself.

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, girth. Size. Dimensions. Luke's Gospel pursues the theme that 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 could 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 belong to God; 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 now. 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.

Some of us here believe that divine admittance is based on "If you go to church, you'll go to Heaven." What's the expression? "Sitting in a church every Sunday doesn't make you a saint any more than sitting in a garage for an hour makes you a car!" They will 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: 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 regarding siblings and children: 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. The best way to deal with this is to ask ourselves what professors ask students, "What is the lesson to learn here?"

Discipline does train us: the discipline of sports; the discipline of studies; the discipline of learning a new job; even the discipline of prayer and learning how to love. Thinking of our education in discipline, I appreciate Pope Saint John Paul II's description of love in his book, "Love and Responsibility." He writes:

"Love should be seen as something which, in a sense, never just 'is' but is always only 'becoming.'" Our relationships are evolving, becoming what they should be. Even with the best of discipline, though, Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that only a few will be saved. Who WILL be saved?

Episcopal Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, one of my favorite personal heroes, said this: "We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."

Which reminds of a quote by the singer popular in the 1980's named Bette Midler who sued a commercial company for using her music without her permission. She said, "I do have my standards. They may be low, but I do have them." I never thought I would reference God, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Bette Midler all in the same paragraph!

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.

I close with this meditation, a brief poem. The author is unknown:

"I dreamt death came the other night and Heaven's gate swung wide.

An angel with a halo bright ushered me inside.

And there to my astonishment stood folks I had judged and labeled

as "quite unfit," "of little worth," and "spiritually disabled."

Indignant words rose to my lips but never were set free,

for every face showed THEIR surprise -- Not one expected ME!" AMEN!