

21st Sunday
8/21/2022

THE OPEN BUT NARROW GATE

Jesus speaks of the narrow gate but it's not a closed gate, not now at least. The gate is open but it's narrow. It requires work to pass through. Jesus says to *strive* to enter through the narrow gate. The word used is the same word we use for agony; think of athletes working toward a demanding goal with every fiber of their being for a long period of time. Many are called but few accept and fewer commit. Jesus wants people to enter into it but it takes work, a lot of work.

It's been said that there are those who could be called nominal disciples or minimalists, those who simply want to do what is barely necessary and nothing more. *We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.* That's not enough. Entry into the Kingdom isn't automatic. The kingdom isn't a matter of mere physical proximity but also of spiritual proximity, by opening our hearts in faith and in love and letting Jesus not only make *a* difference in our lives but to make *the* difference in our lives.

It's not enough to say, *I went to a Catholic school.* A Catholic school is to help develop faith and love but it can't make our decisions for us. It's not enough to say, *My mother was so devout.* That's great for your mother but as one author has noted, God has no grandchildren. We are either children of God or not.

The way through the narrow gate involves lives of *intentional faith*, not accidental faith, not hit or miss faith, not cultural faith but rather lives of *intentional* faith where our faith is the rudder guiding the ship of our lives. To be a disciple requires discipline as the second reading reminds us. Jesus calls us to many things but he doesn't call us to be disciples in name only and he doesn't call us to be mediocre.

Lord, will only a few people be saved? This question is about quantity, how many. Jesus' answer is about quality. Let's be honest. This talk about the narrow is scary and the talk about that narrow way being shut is even more scary. In other words, we can miss the boat that we don't want to miss. Jesus' words about the narrow gate express not cruelty but his kindness. He speaks of the narrow way to

remind us that this is difficult, that it calls us to change, to conversion. For Jesus to *not* tell us about the narrow gate, to let us think that everything is easy, would be cruel.

In mercy, he speaks an important but difficult truth. To speak the truth with love is a work of mercy. In mercy, Jesus works to shake us out of any false sense of privilege we may have. While being reminded of that is frightening, it's also a gift that will hopefully lead us to ground our lives more in love and less in fear. Although Jesus states that it will be hard, even an agony, he goes on to speak about those coming *from the east and the west, and from the north and south*. It won't be a lonely place.

Centuries earlier, the Prophet Isaiah spoke of this universal aspect with people coming from different nations and languages. Not everyone in the Kingdom will look like us or even talk like us. It is a universal mission, and the word *catholic* means *universal*. The gospel speaks of a narrow gate but that doesn't mean we are to be narrow minded or for that matter, narrow in our heart, narrow hearted.

The gate is narrow because it is demanding. It requires commitment, self-denial, self-gift which is another way of saying love. It requires us to move forward with lives of intentional faith *and* love of intentional love. Truly loving God and neighbor. It often calls us to be counter-cultural, to go against the grain of our contemporary society. Now, not everything in contemporary society is bad but neither is everything in it good. So much of our world stands in need of what Christ and Christians have to offer them.

Pope Francis comments: One has to love God and neighbor, and this is uncomfortable! It is a "narrow doorway" because it is demanding. Love is always demanding. It requires commitment, indeed, "effort"...to live according to the Gospel. It takes a daily, all-day effort to love God and neighbor. The Lord will recognize us only for our humble life and a good life, a life of faith that resulted in good works.

Nothing takes the place of our own faith and love. Nothing takes the place of our own decisions.

The gate is narrow. That means we pay attention to our decisions. To pass through the narrow gate is hard, and yet we have many helps along the way, the word

of God, the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the lived wisdom and experience of the Church. We receive help through the seven sacraments and through the assistance of one another.

And we have friendship, true holy friendship. Friendship with Jesus expressed in how we live. Friendship with each other. We need people who will help us walk the narrow way. People who will both comfort and challenge us and we are to do the same for others. The purpose of any friendship is for people to lift each other up and not drag each other down.

This is a very practical gospel. It reminds us that our actions are important and that following Jesus, while rewarding, is also hard. It reminds us that we need the strength and encouragement of others who will help us walk the narrow way.

With God's grace, may we persevere and even agonize together to pass through the narrow gate that leads to the banquet of eternal life.