

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 24, 2020

My dad's older brother George was a Jesuit priest for about ten years and then he not only left the priesthood he actually left the church altogether and began calling himself an atheist. I think for the rest of his life he seemed to harbor some resentment toward the Church. When I was ordained to the priesthood, he sent me a card that I thought was a little snarky. I don't remember every word that he wrote in the card, but I remember that he wrote "Enjoy your new avocation." In other words, "Have fun with your new hobby." I took offense. Here I had just finished five years of seminary, laid down my life on the floor of the Cathedral offering myself for Christ and His church and Uncle George was treating it like I was taking up skeet shooting or pottery or something. May he rest in peace.

After eighteen years in the priesthood, I still think his jab was a little rude, but I realize that it is not impossible for the priesthood to become something of a pastime. A priest can begin to treat his ministry like a job, a career or something apart from who he is, and the life God has given him. To tell you the truth, the same can be said about all of us as Christians. Our discipleship can become something of a hobby; something we tend to when we have time; something we truly want to be present in our life and yet something that is in some way distinct from our identity. It can become something auxiliary to us; something on top of who we are. We can come to think of the practice of our faith as something very important to us but not of the essence of who we are, something absolutely necessary.

In the Gospel someone asked Jesus, "*Lord will only a few people be saved?*" Who knows what made the person ask this question? Maybe the person thought he was already part of the 'in crowd' - one

of those who would be saved, and he was asking for other people. Perhaps he was looking out to the rest of the world saying, “What do you think about those people over there? Do you think they are going to make it?” A lot of people even today even in the Catholic Church have something of a preoccupation with the question of whether someone else is going to be saved and don’t get me wrong, we care very, very, very much about the salvation of other people. But none of us will ever have enough information to make that judgment from where we stand so I think there are better ways to spend our time.

Maybe this person in the Gospel was honestly just asking, “Lord what are my odds for getting into heaven? What are the odds that I could be saved?” And if the answer comes along ‘very few’ or if the Lord responded and said ‘Don’t count on it’ or something like that, the person would take a fresh look at his life, I am sure. Jesus does answer the question. He doesn't say, “Oh, I assure you that those others over there? They are out of luck.” He doesn't point to the others at all. So perhaps that is not what the person was asking a question about. And Jesus doesn't say to them, “You've got it made. You are in. Don't worry.” He answers with a commandment, an exhortation. An imperative: “Strive! Strive.” He says, “*Strive to enter through the narrow gate for many I tell you will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.*”

Striving whether in the in the priesthood or in the Christian life can't be a part time thing, can it? If we are striving for something we don’t just strive when we have time for it – we are constantly committed. We are going after something. We are searching for it. Striving speaks of something serious; something weighty. It is not something to be terrified of. Jesus isn't threatening with these words, but it would seem based on what He is saying here that salvation is not cheap.

Salvation is a 'free' gift. Perhaps we could say it is free but not cheap. It costs us something to receive the gift that is freely given. That may seem counterintuitive. It costs us something to receive the gift that is freely given. The gift of the gift does not depend on us – it doesn't depend on our work, on our performance. The gift is freely given but from our perspective it takes something in order to receive it. And that is the striving. That is the striving to enter through the narrow gate. It is the opening of our hearts each day. It is the eager pursuit of friendship with God. It is the Christian life. It is the fullest living possible of the life of discipleship; it involves a commitment to prayer; the faithful service of our neighbor; the heartfelt worship of God consistently; it means death to sin; persevering in the struggle against sin. All the things that constitute the Christian life. They demand something of us. All of this demands something of us. Salvation is not cheap. We must strive and strive and strive.

Maybe there are some places in our life, some ways in which our Christian life, our spiritual life is sort of off to the side or we make some distinction between our spiritual life and the rest of life. It may be in the context of family, career, social life, leisure time. We tend sometimes to compartmentalize. We will say "I will tend to my faith now. But now I want to do something else." It's not a question of making room, of making space in our life for God. It is not how everything in our life relates back to our life of faith, our relationship with God, because there isn't any part of our life that God doesn't want. He wants the whole thing. He wants the whole thing.

Strive! That is a powerful word. A powerful exhortation from the Lord in today's Gospel. It is spoken to each and every one of us. Maybe some of us are saying, "Lord, what am I supposed to do? What do you want me to do? How am I supposed to be spending my days and weeks?" Maybe sometimes we are saying, "Well, surely Lord you are

not asking for something more from me?” I don’t know. I have a hard time looking at a crucifix and saying that. “Lord, surely you are not asking more of me?” He wants all. He wants all. How can we do it? Today the answer to that question is ‘strive.’ Give yourself to this journey of the Christian life. Do not hold anything back but ‘be all in.’