**21st Sunday C August 21, 2022 Deacon Frank Olmsted**

**Isaiah 66.18-21 Hebrews 12.5-7, 11-13 Luke 13.22-30**

**St. Cletus Parish 9:30 and 11:30 masses**

**Someone asked Jesus, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” This is not one person’s question, but anyone’s who’s tried to follow Jesus and felt the weight and difficulty of his teachings. Jesus’ teaching required a conversion of heart and lifestyle that was radical, counter-cultural, and focused on God, not on the world. It prompts questions. Will only those in my religion be saved? Will only those who understood and worshipped God the way I do be fit for the Kingdom of heaven? Is God’s bar so high that few will be accepted into the Kingdom of God? Is God’s standard low enough that most will make it, even me? As is often the case, Jesus does not provide a direct answer. Rather, Jesus addressed the process or journey toward the Kingdom. “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.” It’s not that God makes the way to heaven “narrow” or extra difficult so that only a few get through. It’s that the road to heaven looks narrow because it requires holiness, virtue, other-directedness, and responsibility while the pathway into sin and evil is wide open and appealing, and requires none of these. As St. Basil the Great put it in the 4th century, “Hell cannot be made attractive, so the devil makes attractive the road that leads to hell.” The narrow gates in life are not necessarily those gates through whom few people can pass, but the gates that require a lot of focus, energy, effort, and time to successfully get through them.**

**We run into to something like this a number of times in life. In college there are students who look for the easiest courses and the professors perceived to be the easiest graders so they can get through, get a degree, and not have it interfere with their social life and the party scene. They are good with that wide open gate of the world and all its distractions. There are others who hope to maximize their college years, learn as much as they can, and become productive citizens upon graduation. They undertake a rigorous course of studies, spend late nights in the libraries, and even open books on the weekends. They chose the narrow gate. A man and woman commit themselves to each other forever in the sacrament of marriage. A man commits himself to serve the people of God for the rest of his life as a priest; a woman commits herself to serve God’s people as a consecrated religious for the rest of her life. By their vocations, these people have chosen the narrow gate that asks of them permanent commitment, lifelong dedication and fidelity, constant hard work and vigilance, with certainly no guarantee of an easy road through life. That’s the narrow gate.**

**Who does God call to come to the narrow gate? The prophet Isaiah said, the Lord comes “to gather nations of every language. . . They shall bring all your brothers and sisters from all the nations as an offering to the Lord.” In the gospel Jesus said, “People will come from the east and the west, and from the north and the south and will recline at the table in the Kingdom of God.” Clearly God calls all peoples of the world to his eternal kingdom, not a few special groups, and because he does, we should understand that part of our responsibility is to give**

**constant witness to the gospel message.**

**Jesus is adamant that “striving to enter through the narrow gate” requires the utmost seriousness and deliberate decision on our part. Sometimes we like to claim familiarity and even friendship with someone we know only casually or met just briefly. We meet an important person at a sporting event, concert, or party, speak to them for a minute or two, yet in future conversations with friends, we talk of this famous person as if we know them well. We attend a talk by a popular author or celebrity and later wax poetic to others about this person and his thought, as if we were on a first name basis with him. Jesus said this won’t cut it when it comes to the kingdom of God. It’s not enough to say, “We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets. It's not enough to call yourself a Catholic or Christian. It’s not enough to know something about Jesus and the Gospel, but not live it. It’s not enough to show up at church some Sundays or have a cross hanging from your rearview mirror. Theologian Karl Rahner described it well in this analogy back in 1959: “Just as so many people go on saying what a wonderful composer and musician Bach is and yet listen to nothing but rock and jazz on the radio,” so it is that many Europeans will say, Oh, I am Catholic, “but no longer live it existentially?” They may be baptized, married in, and buried from the Church, but little if anything in their lives would suggest they were active believers in Christ. They veered away from the narrow gate. The very wide gate of the world caught them up, and it was, after all, attractive and easier.**

**And “then he will say to you, I do not know where you are from.” It can’t be good to hear this from Jesus. In Judaism you were always identified by, yes, your place of origin such as Bethlehem in Judea, but also by your lineage. You were someone’s son or daughter. You had a lineage that went back through many generations to of one of the twelve tribes of Israel and ultimately to Abraham and Sarah, the first parents in faith. When someone shows up at the gate and Jesus says, “I don’t know where you are from,” it doesn’t mean God doesn’t know who he is or whom his parents were, or in what location he was born. It means there isn’t much to be seen in him that would indicate he had a relationship with God, or if he did at some point, that he had lived it out in any visible way that gave witness to others. To those he said, “Depart from me, you evildoers.” Sins of omission are still sins. How many of us are willing to even whisper to a world that doesn’t want to hear it, that sin and evil are unacceptable and each of us needs to repent now? How many of us are willing to go into the secular culture like the great saints did and face the pagans of the world? Rahner noted 63 years ago, “We live in a pagan country with a Christian past.” Sadly, I think we can still say that today.**

**In a baseball game, there is only one place the runner on first base wants to be—crossing home plate scoring the run. To do that he must carefully watch the pitcher’s movements. If he tries to steal second, he may get scratched up and even spiked sliding into second. He will have to note exactly where the defensive players are positioned on each pitch. If he is racing around third and coming into home on a hard slide, he may get drilled by the incoming throw or trampled by the catcher, but he has to do it, because home is the only place he wants to be. It’s the only place that will mean anything in the game’s outcome. It is just so with us in our Christian faith. The narrow gate is where we need to be headed. It should be the only place we want to be and cross through. Yes, it’s all about permanent commitments, lifelong dedication and fidelity. It’s all about constant hard work and vigilance. It’s all about living the gospel and taking it those who may not want to listen. Isn’t it time to bring Christ back into our pagan culture? Let’s not say “We’re Catholic because we were baptized, or because we go to mass now and then, or because we say we are,” but because when people observe our lives, there is no mistaking it--no mistaking it at all. Our lives look much more like Christ and much less like the world.**

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