

Saturday, August 20, 2016 Sunday, August 21, 2016 Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading: Isaiah 66.18-21; Psalm 117; Second reading: Hebrews 12.5-7, 11-13

Gospel Acclamation: John 14.6; Gospel: Luke 13.22-30

Our city is full of celebration. The Tragically Hip played here on Thursday night and many participated in a variety of ways on Saturday night as they gave their final concert. Many venues and parks were crowded with people celebrating the final concert while anticipatorily mourning the changes that will come as Gord Downie's life moves from life to death to life. The PRIDE parade begins at 1pm Sunday afternoon. Parishioners who are part of the LGBT and Straight Alliance here at St. Joe's will be marching in it; they also provided a wonderful cake for everyone after the 9:30 Mass. Our brothers and sisters who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer invite us to join them and celebrate. We celebrate the diversity of human expression and the call to love and be loved. Our readings today are amazingly suited to this celebration and help us know that all are called to love and be loved as God loves us.

In the first reading, Isaiah says the Lord "is coming to gather all nations and tongues". Then Isaiah identifies all the various ways people will come to the Lord "All your kindred from all the nations . . . on horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and on mules, and on dromedaries". Isaiah shows us that people come to the Lord in many different ways. He even speaks of others being called to be 'priests and Levites'. This must have been very unsettling to the Israelites. People outside their community may be called to leadership.

The 2nd reading sounds like a reprimand. I hear a reminder to remain faithful, especially when we are struggling. It speaks of the discipline of fidelity. For years I thought of discipline as punitive. However I found a definition that I think is more aligned with God's discipline as noted in this reading. Discipline can be defined in terms of training and education. It can be that which cultivates the soul, especially by correcting mistakes and curbing passions that could become compulsions and separate us from God's love.

The Gospel speaks of the 'narrow door': "strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able". Does this mean that some will be able to enter God's Kingdom and some will be shut out? Do you notice that Jesus doesn't answer the question? The question was "Lord, will only a few be saved?" Perhaps Jesus is telling us to remain faithful to our call, to live in relationship with Him and one another. Our call is to use the many gifts God has given us to build the Kingdom and to support one another while staying in relationship with God.

Have you experienced times in your life where the 'narrow door' was present and you struggled? What helped you?

One of my narrowest doors happened many years ago. My 4 year old daughter was very ill. She was in intensive care at Sick Kids in Toronto and had been there for 5 weeks. A medical emergency occurred about 4am while I was in the ICU with her. The attending physician was sleeping in a nearby room and came to suggest yet another surgery. I said, "No." To be honest I was very frightened and yet I knew in my heart what was being done wasn't improving her health. The doctor gave me the list of possible outcomes of my decision and asked if my husband would agree with me. It was no longer clear if we were prolonging life or prolonging death. The doctor decided not to call John and followed my instructions. A few hours later her oxygen levels rose to almost normal for the first time in 4 weeks. How did I make the decision? To be honest I'm not sure. There was a felt sense that it was the decision needed and it kind of fell out of my mouth. At the time we lived in community and people in our parish, family members and people we didn't even know were holding her in prayer. A few months prior to her surgery, her Godparents had been on pilgrimage in their native India and lit candles and prayed for her at every church they entered. The faith of all those people and their prayers helped me have the courage to make a very difficult decision. Knowing that my daughter was held in God's love, regardless of the outcome, was stronger than a need to keep doing medical interventions that seemed to cause her

to lose ground after each procedure. Was that decision inspired by God's Spirit? Was the ability to be honest about the situation a gift?

It can be challenging, even frightening to use our gifts. Sometimes we have a hard time acknowledging what they are. And, if we can't acknowledge them, we may not be able to use them fully. We are often taught that it is wrong to name our gifts; it is almost sinful to do so. But how can we refuse to acknowledge the gifts we have been given and deny those around us the expression of those gifts? Our gifts are given to us; they are meant to be used for all.

A quote that comes to mind is one from Saint Irenaeus. In the 2nd century he said "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God." Many of us have only heard the first half of this quote "The glory of God is man fully alive . . ." The second portion ". . . and the life of man is the vision of God" is essential if we are to recognize the essential fidelity to remain in relationship with God. Fidelity to our relationship with God enables us to use our gifts fully for the Kingdom. This implies using them for our families, our friends, our workplaces, our communities, our country . . . using them for others and for ourselves in faithfulness to God who gave us these gifts. It implies a reciprocal loving relationship between me and God, between you and God, between us and God.

Here at St. Joe's we are blessed by diversity. Many of us come from 'away'. We are multi-hued and speak many languages. Many members of the LGBTQ community in our city call St. Joe's their spiritual home. This week let's take the time to celebrate our many reciprocal relationships and pray for the fidelity needed to reflect God's love for each one of us, to enter the narrow door of fidelity and relationship and celebrate that God loves us and graces us such that our lives are the vision of God.

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