

## **Reflection, August 24-25, 2019, 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

John Rietschlin

On Tuesday evening of this past week I had dinner with about fifteen other members of L'Arche Ottawa in one of our L'Arche homes. We were celebrating the birthdays of two of our members--one, a woman from Latin America who lives in the home--and the other a man who, for the past ten years, has volunteered to cook dinner in that home one night each week. We had the good fortune that one of those among us was a great guitar player. As the meal ended, he began playing and soon quite a number--people with and without disabilities--were dancing enthusiastically while others sang and laughed. It was a wonderful, joy-filled, and simple evening celebrated among friends--much like other celebrations that most of us have enjoyed over the years.

Eventually, it was time to go, but no one really wanted this magical time together to end. In the gathering darkness some of us lingered together outside the home and talked about how much fun we had--how singing and dancing together brought so much life--about other times and places where we had similar experiences. One long-time member of the community recalled that an important part of L'Arche Ottawa's early history was a regular coffee house where friends and members of the community gathered together. Lately, however, it seemed that such gatherings were less frequent as people stayed in their homes watching television or bingeing on Netflix or were distracted by social media even when together.

I thought of this evening as I began to prepare this week's Sunday reflection. What a contrast from today's Gospel image of the one knocking on the door of the house--seeking salvation--and hearing the voice of the Lord within say, "I do not know where you come from." What a contrast between our joyful, inclusive gathering, and the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" that Jesus warns his hearers awaits them if they do not follow the path to salvation through the "narrow door."

But what can this strange and foreboding language--entering through a narrow door or knocking on the door of a house whose owner does not know us--really mean? I think that there are a few clues scattered through today's readings. Permit me to point out three.

First, in today's Old Testament reading, taken from the very last chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet makes a final prophecy predicting a grand transformation bringing together people from all the nations of the earth to worship the Lord as one. It would have been hard for the Jewish people of

Isaiah's time to hear and to believe that their God could want to unite them with all the other nations--after all, they were God's "chosen ones." How could they accept this? This prophecy was spoken more than 2500 years ago. Yet, as we look around our world today we see similar intolerance for those who are different--racism, Islamophobia, homophobia, bigotry--these words and these realities are far too familiar.

In Luke's gospel at the end of today's text we read that "people will come from east and west, north and south and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed some who are last who will be first and some who are first who will be last." This sounds very similar to the prophecy in Isaiah--people from all nations may enter the kingdom. Apparently, many will get through that narrow door that Jesus warns about. How is this possible?

We get a clue in the letter to the Hebrews which speaks of the importance of accepting "the discipline of the Lord" so that it might "yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness." Now I don't think that Paul is suggesting that God is sitting on high like a great circus ringmaster putting us through our paces. It seems to me that the meaning here is much more prosaic--that as we live our lives we will face suffering, obstacles, the needs of others--this is inevitable--we are each called to respond openly and generously to the unique experiences that come our way--this is our vocation.

How will we respond? Jesus showed us the way. He gave himself to the limit of his human capacity. He turned to God in prayer to remain faithful to his vocation, to receive the wisdom and compassion he needed to live it, and the strength and courage to face its suffering. This is a path that is open to every human being, no matter their culture, religion or ethnicity--this is the narrow door. It is by following this path that any and all may pass through it--creating the kingdom of God here on earth and then continuing after death to live for eternity in that kingdom.

Of course there are obstacles, distractions that may cause us to falter. Our society urges us to pursue wealth, beauty, career success, power and influence as the route to security and happiness. In our insecurity we may fear those who are different, see them as threats to our own safety and success--even as an enemy or an invader. Distracted by all of this, we may not even see the narrow door--or we might reject the life choices, the discipline, the vocation of service that would allow us to pass through it.

This past week, the people of Ottawa have been celebrating Capital Pride. Sadly today sexual orientation and gender identity are still the focus of much bigotry and exclusion, as we know; religious teaching is often a

major source of this. For many years, the St Joe`s community has consciously and deliberately attempted to be a place where people of all sexual orientations are welcome--building that part of God`s kingdom. This has been a part of our collective journey.

As we go out into the world this week after mass, I invite each of us to give thanks for the vocation that God has given us, the `discipline` that has come with that vocation, and the grace and strength God offers us to live it. It is in accepting all of this that each of us passes through the narrow door of the kingdom of God...along with the myriad of others from all nations who are so different than us...and yet so very much the same.

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