

Homily

August 21, 2022

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

22:25-35:23

The Ginther family grew up at 3924 Millersville Drive, 46205. All nine of us. Mom and Dad and the seven of us kids. It wasn't a big house, but it was adequate. The dining room was about 12 by 12, or 13, with a large table in the center for nine of us. When all the chairs were filled, we struggled if we had to get something from the kitchen or excuse ourselves for some reason. We struggled to get out from our place. Why? Because the walls were pretty close and you couldn't get around the chairs very easily. So, our father called the seven of us "knot-heads." Why? Because no matter how big a space there was on the other side of the table, which might afford ease of passage, we tried to go through the "knot-hole" between the chair and the wall. And you'd think we'd learn after the first time or two not to act like knot-heads. Well. We didn't. It's a fond memory. We still do it. (grin)

Our First Reading came to us from Isaiah Chapter 66. This is the culmination of the book, the entire book, Isaiah First, Second and Third. It is addressed – these 11 chapters towards the end, to the exiles who have returned home. They are a people who are struggling mightily to find comfort in their return because they returned to destruction. They're struggling to rebuild and reorient their lives.

In the midst of this, a number of times in these 11 chapters - but especially in this particular reading we hear today - the prophet offers them a purpose and hope. He says to them that God is about to use you. Fugitives that you have been, you will be sent to the nations. And God will **draw in** everyone through your **going out**. Those who are so drawn, they will rejoice and give praise to God. And some of them will even be made priests and Levites.

This is not a new theme for Isaiah. There is a nod to the universality of God's love throughout the book. In Chapter 2, when he says, "You are the light to the nations, the glory of the people Israel," he is saying *you are going to draw them in*. In Chapter 25, "On this mountain the Lord will destroy death forever." That's not just for the Israelites. It's also for everyone, for death is about everyone. And now again in Chapter 66.

Isaiah and the Lord in the Gospel look back through the lens of the personal relationships that God has had. First with an individual. We've heard of him this summer many times: Abraham, who had a very personal connection and relationship with the Lord.

Then Moses – the man who led the people through the Red Sea to the mountain, who encountered God face-to-face, on mountain and in tent, as he worked with God to create God’s people.

- And now the exiles, (fugitives) from that people who will expand from one people to all people.

All peoples are now to come to **God’s mountain**, his dwelling place among humanity.

This had to overwhelm the people of Judah and Jerusalem. All people? We thought we were the people. We’re going to draw them to God? Oh my!

In our Gospel passage there is an underlying theme, “Do not presume your salvation.” Luke, like Matthew, uses the image of the “narrow gate.” Mark, in another context, uses the image of the “eye of a needle.”

“Enter through the narrow gate.” Behind this urging of Jesus is a caution to some of his contemporaries who presumed that salvation was based solely on their being Jewish. At the same time, there is throughout the Gospel according to Luke, the struggle that Jesus has with the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, who reject him and his message, that they might retain their “place” in the Kingdom. Even at the expense of many. Both some of Jesus’ contemporaries and the religious leadership felt entitlement. Entitlement.

The narrow gate. Who can pass through the narrow gate? Well, as we’ve heard this summer, not one loaded-down with possessions. And not one with the swelling of entitlement, puffed-up with self-importance due to blood, nationality or religious rank or observance. So, who can pass through the narrow gate?

Fr. Gueric DeBona of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, in his commentary on this very passage suggests that the one who can pass through the narrow gate is a child. A child is small enough. A child is not burdened by property or position. A child is vulnerable, yet easily open to anyone else. Just watch kindergarteners. They’ll play with anyone. They’ll hold hands and go wherever they’re asked to go. Children don’t care. They have no preconceptions.

They could go through the narrow gate, possibly even hand-in-hand, because they’re so open. Children easily see the universal sweep of who we are as humans and carry no burdens of entitlement. They are the ones of whom Jesus says, “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them. For it is to just such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.”

My brothers and sisters, let me propose two possible takeaways for our personal reflection this week, based on the readings and this reflection.

First: The Church teaches that salvation comes through Christ Jesus and that salvation is a gift to “all people.” How God works that out in our multicultural, multi-religious world, is God’s to do. We, like the exiles and fugitives of Isaiah Chapter 66, are sent by God, out to the world to proclaim the goodness of God and his love for all people. Perhaps this is your point to ponder, “God’s plan of salvation is for all.” Is there anyone whom you or I would exclude from that gift? Do I even accept the universality of God’s plan?

Second: We all struggle with entitlement, just as Jesus found in his time. We either feel entitled, or we have been brutalized by others because of their sense of entitlement. Well, perhaps we feel entitled to salvation because we are Roman Catholics. Are we so entitled? Is not the salvation we live toward in Christ, proclaimed by the Church as a gift? Would I keep that gift away from anyone? Whose hand would I not hold going through the narrow gate?

There are other entitlements in our own time. And as I have prepared this homily this week, I have come up with a few. This is not an exhaustive list. It’s just the ones that have tickled my little mind.

How about the entitlement of the rich and famous? Some who think that just because they are rich and famous, they can get away with a crime.

What about white privilege and its hateful cousin, white supremacy?

Or religious privilege of one over all other religions? And we see that in the world today.

Or some politicians who see themselves as above the law? That’s a sense of entitlement.

Or black entitlement to reparations, that none of their ancestors were enslaved?

And then professional athletes, who feel entitled to great honor and respect, even though some of them, their lives are debased and lewd.

And then there’s the clergy. Did you think we (points to self) were going to get off? No. What about clergy who live off clerical privilege at the expense of God’s people? If you want to explore that, go to Ezekiel, Chapter 34. Every time it comes up in the Office of Readings, as it just did recently, it’s like, “Oh my! How do I measure-up? Do the people come first? Is their salvation the focus?”

As I've said, mine is not an exhaustive list. Others may have come to your mind. – Some that you feel entitled to and others from which you have been victimized. But no matter. If any of them stung as you heard or recalled, then perhaps reflection upon the “sting” is yours to pursue this week.