

I've always been a great admirer of Abraham Lincoln. Not only was he a great president – he was a truly wonderful man. He also had a great sense of humor. He was able to laugh at himself, and especially at his appearance. He was a very plain looking man. One story that Lincoln used to like telling on himself was this: “Sometimes I feel like the ugly man who met an old woman traveling through a forest. The old woman said, ‘You’re the ugliest man I ever saw.’ ‘I can’t help it,’ the ugly man said. ‘No, I guess not,’ the woman admitted, ‘but the least you could do is stay home.’” It takes a great deal of character to laugh at yourself like that. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Jan-Mar 2015, p. 32)

First, a little background on the gospel text. An interesting question is posed to Jesus: “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” Notice the question is not “Will I be saved?” or “How will I be saved?” Will it be only a few, or will it be many, or will it be all? The background for this question is the belief among many Jews of the time that in the age to come all the people of Israel, by the very fact they belonged to Israel, will be seated at God’s banquet. Now the prophets were never in agreement with that. But many Jews believed that their blood and social connections --like temple worship and synagogue prayer-- would be an automatic IN to God’s kingdom. But the prophets used a different criterion – how we treat the poor. And Jesus belongs to that prophetic tradition. Jesus puts the petitioner’s question into a larger picture. There is a door leading into the house where Jesus and God are holding a banquet in the age to come. Everyone is trying to get in, and there is a traffic jam because the door is narrow. Then the owner ‘gets up’ (the resurrected Jesus arises) and solves the problem -- by shutting the door!

Needless to say, this does not stop the frantic rush for entry. It escalates it. People beg for the door to be opened. “Lord, open to us.” The Lord refuses because He does not know where they come from. They reply that He DOES know where they come from. They are fellow Israelites – connected by geography and blood and temple. But the Lord still insists He does not know where they come from. “Knowing where you come from” obviously means more than being fellow Israelites. These people who rely on these superficial contacts with Jesus for entry into the banquet are commanded to depart. They fall into the opposite category of where they thought they belonged. They are not righteous.

The initial question has a bias – it sounds like the answer should be “yes, just a few will be saved.” But Jesus says “Forget about numbers and put your mind and heart into the disciplined work of striving to enter.” The door will not open because we are well connected, for example, just because we were baptized.

The Lord only recognizes His own. He knows us -- if we are like Him. This likeness is not on the level of shared ethnicity. The Lord knows those who come from the same spiritual place as He comes from. “I do not know where you come from” means there is no spiritual link between the people wanting to be admitted and the one who can open the door. Jesus comes from a heart set on God – a heart that cooperates with the divine Spirit to love all people. *This* is the room where the banquet is being held, and the door to this room is narrow.

Entering through the narrow door begins with striving. It is not easy to center our heart on love of God and neighbor. It is not easy to love people we disagree with or do not like. The poor and needy are often difficult and a challenge; some of them are illegally here. To love everyone is a lifelong discipline that must accompany all other adventures. Most people do not take it seriously and do not engage in it. But in every culture of the world – there are people in the tradition of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who eat the food of this

kingdom possibility and grow strong. The Lord will know where these people come from and He will open the door.

But we often want it on our own terms. We want to stride into the feast because we did the 9 first Fridays or Saturdays; wore a green scapular, did the Divine Mercy chaplet faithfully or came to Mass every week or even every day. All wonderful and good things. But who did we BECOME in our day-to-day living? Did we become a loving, mature, forgiving adult? Or just a grumpy old man or lady? Did we love God – AND neighbor? Did we learn the great lesson of grace – that what begins in striving is only fully accomplished in surrender. All salvation comes from God, and every picture of the life to come is simply how we focus on what is essential in the life we are leading in this very place and at this very time. We have to know in our heart what Jesus knew in HIS heart – divine love makes brothers and sisters of us all. When we know this, the Lord knows us; and the narrow door becomes the widest of gates. (all of this adapted from John Shea, *THE RELENTLESS WIDOW*, p. 233-234)

OK, so what? As Catholics, we tend to grow up with questions of salvation as part of the air we breathe. I grew up with the question of salvation. I learned it very early. “Who will be saved?” and “How are we saved?” intermingled with other even more important questions like “How late can I stay up tonight – it’s not a school night!?” and “May I have a dish of ice cream?” Sometimes the questions of eternal life didn’t much darken my mind for long periods of time. Church – and Catholic school – insisted that “wanting to go to heaven” should be the driving force of life. This motivation was bolstered by the usual commonsense arguments about the brevity of life and the permanence of life after death. “Is an eternity of pain worth a moment of pleasure?” As any 13-year old facing temptation knows, my answer was generally yes!

But this concern with afterlife, especially avoiding afterlife damnation, was softened by a strong emphasis on the love and mercy of God – and going to confession to be better prepared and practiced on the heavenly journey. Although I heard stories about how the fear of hell scared some people, I was never traumatized by afterlife prospects. I learned as I got older that a lot of that sense of the goodness of God and the world we live in came from the love my parents gave to me. So heaven, hell, and purgatory were just an accepted part of my theological landscape. (IBID, p. 235-236)

Third, the question of salvation is a good one – as a starting point. But at some time in life, we should move to bigger questions. Someone once asked Fritz Pearls, the feisty psychologist associated with the human potential movement, if he was saved. Pearls quickly countered with, “I’m trying to figure out how to be spent.” This smart-aleck remark can be most helpful with this gospel. We want to figure out how to give our lives to something larger than our own ambitions. Are we striving to be holy – or striving to be a success in the eyes of this world? Success is what this world is about. Holiness is what eternal life is about. Are we raising our children to be a success? Or a saint? Success will serve them for 50-80 or so years on this earth. Sanctity will serve them for all of eternity.

Salvation will flow from a life of self-giving. There is no need to go after salvation directly. In fact, too much concern about afterlife salvation almost inevitably degenerates into some form of works-righteousness. If I do this, then God has to do that. The gratitude and gift of grace is overshadowed by the triumph of our supposed merits.

There is a Buddhist saying, ‘After you cross the river, you no longer have to carry the canoe.’ Our concern with the afterlife can be a canoe. When we are paddling that canoe, we can develop a strong interest in the spiritual life and struggle with questions that are important to answer. But then we need to move on. The fact that we are no longer paddling the afterlife canoe does not mean that we are drowning. It had done

what it needed to do. It led us to the next step of our spiritual development. We come to an appreciative appraisal of where we have been and where we are going. The canoe of afterlife salvation had brought us across the river. We no longer need to carry it.

But what exactly is the other side of the river? Where does it bring us? We become deeply concerned about who we are and what we are truly about. Who am I really? Do I love God – and do I know down to my toes that God loves me? And is that authentic, true understanding of who I am in the sight of God – is it put into action and love of neighbor – especially the poor, the alien, and the vulnerable? Does it lead me to be a peacemaker, one who forgives easily, who praises quickly, who extends compassion to all we meet? In other words, are we becoming more like Christ? We can never stop growing and simply throw up our hands and say “this is as good as I get.” That is to give in and die.

So we ‘strive to enter’ the world of a deeper and more profound consciousness, the border of eternity and time, the authentic space from which the steady pressure of God’s grace changes the hardened habits of our hearts and the stubborn structures of society into a community more like the Kingdom of God. The reality of grace and God’s love – and our ever-constant struggle to live it out more deeply -- becomes the major thrust of our lives. The question of afterlife salvation will take care of itself if we take care of the spiritual striving in this life – the struggle to love with a large and spacious, God-like heart. This is the canoe we all need to eventually be paddling. And the fact that we are all here at this particular moment, means that we are paddling together. Let us strive to be good to one another, lest we tip over! Amen. (IBID, p. 237-238)