

It's late summer in D.C., all right! The weather has heated up outside, and even with the AC working well, it's beginning to feel awfully hot in here!-- Last week, Jesus was on about bringing fire to the earth (Lk 12:49-56). Today we're up against a locked door, with weeping and gnashing of teeth, while all sorts of other people (we can only *imagine* who!) eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and we ourselves thrown out.

In my early days of late summer preaching, I used to wonder, with some exasperation: doesn't Jesus ever just relax and go to the pool? Well, if any of those dinners he enjoyed with taxpayers and sinners, or even Pharisees, was a pool-side party, the gospel writers left out that part of the story!

So, here we are. And in the couple of weeks I've been away on vacation, the word from Jesus *seems*, at least, to have shifted from hospitality and inclusion to something rather foreboding: a narrow door one must strive to enter through, but that may well be shut and locked by the time you get there.

All this comes in response to an anxious question from the crowd: "Lord, will only a few be saved?" We don't know who the questioner is, but we can make an intelligent supposition.

- Someone who's been listening carefully to Jesus on hospitality and inclusion, including, recently, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom"? Someone grateful and hopeful for herself and her loved ones? Probably not. Such a one would more likely ask something like this: "Lord, am I hearing you right—are you saying the kingdom of God is open to *anyone* who seeks it, regardless of background or status?"
- More likely someone who's actually *hoping* that only a few will be saved. Someone who feels entitled to admission himself based on past association ("We ate and drank with you, and you taught in your streets."). Someone with a good, clean record, and a pretty clear idea of who *should* be admitted—the qualified, competent and credentialed like himself—and who should *not* be admitted based on *their* record, background, or status.

"I can't go in there with *those* people!" Can't you just hear it? Can you also hear *yourself* saying those words? I know I can hear that voice in me. Each one of us has someone, or a whole group of someones, we do not want to be in the room with, if we can help it—and definitely not for eternity. Maybe it is a political figure. Maybe immigrants, legal or illegal, or people who don't want to mix with immigrants. Maybe a relative, or friend, a business associate, or even a member of the Church, someone who did you wrong or let you down, and you don't ever want to lay eyes on them again, let alone share the heavenly banquet with them. Maybe it is a gay bishop, a lesbian priest; or maybe it is people who don't want to be in the room with people who don't want to be in the room with a gay bishop or lesbian priest.

We *all* have people we would, at least secretly, be happy to learn will find the door is too narrow to squeeze through, and has been bolted shut when they knock. I hear Jesus saying to each one of us who would like to winnow his guest list, *You are the one who needs to strive to enter through the narrow door*. Oh, my. Is it feeling a little warm in here to you, or is it just me?

Such a paradox, that narrow door. We *think* the door is narrow because the requirements for admission are so high—that we need good marks for behavior, maybe this above all. And in a way it's true, The requirements *are* high, because what God requires often is counter to our own agendas—our *self*-interest, our pride, our lack of trust. What is required? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus said to one who asked about inheriting eternal life (Mt. 22: 37-39; Mk. 12: 29-31; Lk 10:27-28).

The paradox of the narrow door is that all we need to pass through it is a heart as big as the heart of God, as big as the heart of Jesus, with room for *all* corners of every stripe, with room for *all* the neighbors we have from Jesus (*cf.*, Hymn 602)—*all* those people who “will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.. Now *that* is something to strive for; it doesn't come easy.

The way in to the realm of God looks narrow to us because our perspective is narrow; we are so narrow-minded. My hunch is that from the other side of the door the reality is quite different. That it is obvious from there that everybody who wants to come in will fit through, with ease, as long as we are willing to come in together, shoulder-to-shoulder, hand-in-hand with the folks we thought we could despise, the ones we were sure didn't belong, until we met up with Jesus, by whose grace we begin to see with fresh eyes.

Today's gospel ends with a familiar saying of Jesus: “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” Having moved up, after marrying, from the back of the line (as a “T”) to near the front of the line (as a “B”), I still like the sound of that. I remember what it was like at the back of the line as a little girl, craning my neck to see what was happening up front. Well, I'm entitled, now, to be near the front. That's the way *our* rules work. In our system, the race goes to the swift. Not so, we begin to suspect, with God. With God, the race goes not to the swift, but to the slow. Not to the strong, but to the weak. Not to the long distance runner, but to the halt and the lame.

That's the kind of thing about God that strikes us, sometimes, as unfair. When we've worked so hard to serve God and all God's people, when we have striven to keep on coming through the narrow door, aren't we entitled to a little more consideration? Some way to measure or predict what our place will be? Don't the saints, at least, deserve to be first in line? (Though, of course, the saints would be the *last* ones to want to be *first*, actually.)

We could learn something here from AA. At an AA meeting, the most important person in the room isn't the one you might expect. It's not the person leading the meeting, or the opening speaker. It's not even the person with 30, 40, or more, years of sobriety. The most

important person in the room is the one who just stopped drinking yesterday, or last week, or who may still be in her first 24 hours of being sober. The one whose only experience, wisdom and hope is in being able to admit, *My way isn't working. I can't stop drinking by myself. I need help.*

The old-timers do, indeed, have plenty of invaluable wisdom, experience and hope; it just doesn't *entitle* them to anything or make them better than anybody else. There is an expectation that they will share what they have learned—usually the hard way. They always have something to learn, though, something to be reminded of, by the newest, most important member: *We are all always beginners.* The way of recovery is always one day at a time. No one has earned a place at the head of the line.

All of this is also true of the way of following after Jesus, through the narrow door. Henri Nouwen said something similar about prayer: we are always beginners, even the most disciplined and faithful among us. No one has the key with all the answers; no one is entitled to first place. It is by admitting our need for grace, our for help in narrowing our ego, our preconceptions and prejudices, that we find our way through the narrow door into eternal life. Not only at the end, after death, but here and now, in the midst of this life.

The gift that the newcomer brings—whether to AA, or to the community of faith—is something that in Buddhism, and the practice of yoga, is called, “beginner’s mind.”¹ Just beginning to figure out what this is all about. Full of questions, aware of not having all the answers, or any answers at all. Open, curious, looking with fresh eyes, listening with new ears. Wanting to know more, to come closer, to be on the path of life.

It’s not only at the beginning of faith, or of a new practice, that we have this “beginner’s mind.” We find ourselves in this place again and again. When we are faced with a new situation, something unexpected, or when we are filled with doubt, for any number or reasons or no apparent reason at all. Our reaction is often to think there is something wrong, that our faith isn’t strong enough, or we aren’t wise enough, even after all these years. We may want to hide, at the back of the line, say, or to find some way to cover up our confusion. It can feel like being in the midst of a huge storm, with the foundations of the house shaking, and we begin to panic: *Where’s the door? Do I really believe there is one? Why can’t I find it where it always used to be? Do I really want to strive to go through it? Where will I be then?*

But doubt, questions, uncertainty are nothing to be afraid of. They are only new faces of the beginner’s mind, as we begin again—again and again. The thing to do is to go back to the beginning: “Be still, then, and know that I am God.” You will never know it all. You will always find you have to depend and trust in God. No matter how far along the path you have come before, you will be surprised again and again to find yourself escorted, from the back of the line, through the narrow door, once again the newest arrival at the great festival gathering, with all those folks, likely and unlikely, and innumerable angels, welcome in the realm of God.

¹ Alice Despard has written something about this in the Sept. Newsletter.