

The Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 21, 2016

There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call the Twilight Zone.

Entering into the Twilight Zone is what Jesus' disciples and listeners must have felt like when Jesus answered one of the most important questions we as humans can ask in a way that must have shaken all of their deeply held beliefs.

For them it would have been as if they had asked the question, "Is it Tuesday?" and he responded by saying, "Seek ye first the newspaper taxi."

So when they ask who will be saved, they are completely baffled by his response, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate."

A narrow gate? Where did that come from? And what is it a gate to?

They had forgotten that God's ways are not our ways. Jesus points this out at the end of our Gospel passage when He said that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The kingdom of God turns the established order upside down. Salvation isn't reserved to any one group or Church but is open to those who are able to pass through the narrow gate.

But if we're honest with ourselves, we often don't want to squeeze through some narrow gate. We want to coast through the big, broad one – the gate of self-service; the gate of ease and comfort; the gate of power and influence.

And that's why the gate is called "narrow." Because few people naturally choose it.

To put it another way, Jesus invites us into his own version of the Twilight Zone; an inverted world, one that seems turned upside down. In this world, we are infinitely loved by a God who pursues us and welcomes us into an intimate relationship distinguished by such virtues as generosity, service, and mercy. It's a relationship defined by the word "love."

You see, love, by its very nature, takes us out of ourselves. That's what marriage is all about. That's what raising a child is all about. That's what family is all about.

Love is about solidarity, not individualism. It's about community, not aloneness. It's about sharing, not taking. It's about service, not self-satisfaction.

But our natural response to all this is to say that it's too hard, too difficult, too demanding.

Jesus' response to our natural reaction is captured in the first word he uses to answer the man's question: strive.

In the original Greek, the word connotes engaging in an intense struggle and effort against great opposition. It is similar to the word describing the passionate anguish that Jesus himself endured in the agony in the garden.

Strive. Struggle. Endeavor. Attempt.

These are the words that the disciples of Jesus are to take to heart.

Strive to "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate." Strive to "Forgive seventy times seven, as your Father does." Strive to "Seek first the kingdom of God." Strive to be among those to whom the Lord will say, "I was hungry and you gave me food."

To enter through the narrow gate is to follow Jesus, to love what Jesus loved, and to live like Jesus lived.