

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 25, 2019
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

Unless it is a holiday, the trash in this neighborhood is collected on Thursdays. You've seen how it works. Everyone has their trash bins at the curb and the sanitation truck drives down the center of the road (or the center of each side of the road on streets that have median strips). The workers go to the curbs, roll the bins to the truck, empty the trash, return the bins to the curb and move down the street. All in all it is a very efficient operation and we have to be grateful for those sanitation workers who endure the heat of the summer, the cold of the winter and all kinds of precipitation year round. Yes, trash collection works very well, unless you are trying to drive down the same street as the truck. As you know, Memphis side streets are not incredibly wide. We can usually maneuver down the center of the street if there is a car parked to the left or to the right – but on trash day, that's a different story. Here you have an extra wide truck stopped right in the center of the street. Driving along without a care in the world you find yourself stopped in your tracks. Do I have enough room to get my car around this truck on the right? On the left? Is there another street to turn on? Will the truck be able to pass my car if I just stay right here? Add a few parked cars on the same street and you begin to wonder why you didn't pay more attention in geometry class as they tried to teach you distance and angles and width and depth.

In today's gospel, Jesus seems to be playing a geometry teacher of sorts. Asked if only a few people will be saved, Jesus answers rather cryptically, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate," he tells them, "for many will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough." That's puzzling, isn't it? Entering through a narrow gate isn't really about strength, it's about geometry – either something or someone is narrow enough to make it through the gate or they are not. They can push and push and push all they want to, but they cannot make a square peg enter a round hole – just as you and I cannot make a car that is 6½ feet wide fit through a six-foot opening. Yet the image in our gospel passage is about more than geometry.

Recall that Jesus lived in Roman occupied Palestine. There were wide areas of arid farmland dotted with a few towns, villages, and cities. Most of the cities, and some of the towns, were heavily fortified. Like Jerusalem, they were surrounded by tall, sturdy walls. Visitors and those doing business entered through huge gates which usually stayed open unless the city was under siege. The followers of Jesus, for example, could travel with him – entering each city in a huge throng of people. With gates that wide, with a crowd that large, there was no opportunity to check paperwork or collect tolls or otherwise impede the flow into the city. If the gates were open everyone and everything passed in and out of the city without incident. But if the gates were closed – well, there were a few other passageways, but they were difficult to reach and there were soldiers monitoring them, ensuring that friends could enter, but that foes

were kept outside. And if they couldn't decide if you were a friend or a foe – well, you were kept outside. So entering through the narrow gate was about more than being physically capable of squeezing through. It was about being able to demonstrate to the gatekeepers that you were indeed a friend and not a foe.

In this context, the rest of the gospel passage makes more sense. The master of the house is much like the gatekeeper. Those who wish to enter are knocking, seeking to prove that they are friendly – they ate and drank in his company after all. But the master isn't taking chances. "I do not know where you are from," he tells them. These people aren't willing to be true friends, aren't willing to be identified as belonging to the household – they are just casual acquaintances until trouble comes along – and then, well, trust me, I'm your best friend. We've all known people whose family wouldn't give them the time of day when they were alive – but when it comes time for the reading of the will – well, their grief just cannot be measured. In today's gospel, Jesus is warning us not to be disciples like that. Strive to enter through the narrow gate, he tells us. Be a full time disciple, someone who is with Christ in good times and in bad – someone who lives the gospel day in and day out. Don't be a part time disciple who is only around to eat and drink in his company, but who hits the road when the gospel becomes inconvenient, or politically incorrect. You'd be amazed at how many faithful parishioners we have when it comes time to schedule a wedding or a baptism, though many wouldn't recognize our church without lilies or poinsettias. And, of course, many more people come to Mass on Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday when we are giving something away. Each Sunday, each day we offer them the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ – but that's not enough for them. There are plenty of Catholics who wouldn't dream of sharing their faith with others in the workplace – or letting their faith impact how they conduct business. They leave Christ at the doors of the church. They won't bring him into the school or into the workplace – but these same people wouldn't think of turning their cell phones off when they come to church. It's perfectly OK for work to interfere with Mass – but heaven forbid that faith should interfere with business. That's what part time discipleship looks like in our time. That's what it means to knock on the door, but to avoid the narrow gate. And most of us fall somewhere in the middle – we pass through the narrow gate when we have to, but we don't really strive for it. We're more than part time disciples, but to call us full time might be stretching it. That's where we need to grow. We need to hear and to reflect on this gospel in prayer just as much as those on the sidelines of faith. We need to be challenged to live our faith more than once in a while, more than once a week, or even more than once a day. Discipleship must be our constant task. When we get to heaven, we want the Lord to be calling for us by name. We don't want him to say: I do not know where you are from or even you look vaguely familiar, but I can't quite place you. A disciple is more than a passing acquaintance or a long lost relative. A disciple is at home with the Lord. Are we full time disciples? Will the Lord recognize us?