

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [A] November 15, 2020

All of us here today have at least two things in common: a heart that is beating right now and the intellectual awareness -- if not the emotional acceptance -- that one day our heart will stop beating, that is, we shall die. If the actuarial tables are accurate, about half of us will die suddenly and unexpectedly. The Lord will come to us, to use St. Paul's phrase today, **LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT**. Even when a death is expected and anticipated and inevitable, it almost always sends a sort of shock tremor through those left behind. It is always a sobering occasion and often a sad time as well. Death is probably the most mysterious part of our lives as Christians, because the Gospels and the other New Testament writings reveal so little about death and what happens after it -- except by using poetic language that we do not have to take literally. But one thing that does emerge through the poetry and that was already clearly taught by the Church in the first century of Christianity is that after death there is a personal judgment of the deceased. St. Paul put it quite clearly when he wrote in Romans, chapter 14: **FOR WE SHALL ALL HAVE TO STAND BEFORE THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF GOD; EVERY ONE OF US SHALL HAVE TO GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF OUR LIFE TO GOD.**

If we are to be evaluated after our death then, like every good and conscientious student, we probably want to know just what our final exam will cover. Well, if God is LOVE, as the apostle St. John wrote, and if the essence of leading a Christian life is LOVING, then quite likely the 16th century Spanish Carmelite mystic and Doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross, Juan de la Cruz, was right when he wrote that our personal judgment at death would be based on one thing and one thing only: our life-long effort, not necessarily our success, in LOVING.

But then a crucial question arises: what is meant by LOVING? Again, to return to the words of St. John the Evangelist: **GOD IS LOVE, AND WE KNOW THIS BECAUSE HE HAS GIVEN US HIS SON**. The essence and heart of loving then, is *self-giving*. Loving is allowing the good of someone else or the

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IJN OT- Siebenand - 2

happiness of someone else or the pleasure of someone else to take precedence over our own good or happiness or pleasure. Someone has well said: “when in love the other comes first; when in lust I come first.”

Sometimes our self-giving is motivated by feelings; we like the other person. Sometimes it is motivated by reason; logic tells us we should prefer the other person. Sometimes this self-gift is intellectual; sometimes it is physical; sometimes it is emotional. Often it is a mixture of all of these.

Every act of self-giving -- whatever its intensity, whatever its mode, whatever its motivation, whatever its duration is an act of loving. And the one thing that can most easily lower our grade on our personal final life-exam is our failure to have loved, or in a word, our having been selfish. All selfishness is sin; all sin is selfishness, self-centeredness, of some sort.

It is our personal vocation in life that gives us guidelines for our own unique self-giving and that shows us our personal format for loving. Note today in our First Reading taken from the Book of Proverbs, which tries to describe the perfect Jewish wife in Old Testament times, notice how many of the qualities presented are the simple self-giving of the wife to her husband and also to the poor and the needy.

Like the servants described in today's Gospel parable, we have all received the ability, the talent, to love, that is, to give of ourselves. But, like the servants, we differ in our capacities for self-giving. For some it is easy; for others it is difficult. Some have much to give; others, little. In many ways the evaluation by the master of his servants is also an image of the life-evaluation that each of us will someday undergo at death. Note that it was only the servant who, as it were, buried his ability to love, who stifled or denied it, who was berated and punished.

What God expects from us in life is our effort to love, to be self-giving, not necessarily success in doing so. Someone once said to Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa of Calcutta: “Don't you get discouraged that even with all the efforts of you and your Sisters there is still so much poverty and disease

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN OT - Siebenand - 3

all around you?” Mother answered: “What God asks of us is not success, but faithfulness in trying.” Likewise, from you and from me as well, God does not expect great achievements or great success, as the world judges. What God does expect is that we keep on trying to love, that we keep on trying to give of ourselves -- in the face of disappointment, failure, opposition, misunderstanding, and even oppression.

Finally, to not merely pass it, but to even ace, our last great final exam, at that moment of passage we call death, we need only to try to love to the best of our individual abilities NOW, to give of ourselves to the fullest of our capacity NOW. Then we will welcome the return of the Master. We will dread neither death nor what follows it, our personal judgment. For God will say to us what He said to the faithful servants in our Gospel today:
COME, SHARE YOUR MASTER’S JOY!