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No Contest

Spooky Gospel. I am not going to lie. How is this good news?

What is Jesus saying? Someone asks him, Will only a few people be saved?@ but rather than Jesus reassuring the questioner, he warns him. Perhaps even scares him, or scolds him.

For he is asking the wrong question. Jesus= answer steer him straight: Don=t worry about how many will go to heaven, focus on getting in yourself. Perhaps the questioner is asking for reassurance. How good do I really have to be to get across the line? I once had a friend a bright student but who had no interest in a philosophy course he had to take, ask his professor, What do I need to do to get a C in your class?@ Not a smart question to ask a teacher. Similarly, moral theologians have asked whether it is good enough to get into heaven to simply avoid doing evil. So long as I have not committed a mortal sin, isn=t that good enough for me to get cross the line?

Jesus response is effectively: don=t coast, keep pedaling. God loves you as you are, but that does not mean he wants you to stop trying to be better. Its like love. True love means to love people for who they are, not for who they could be. But that does not mean that if you are loved you don=t need to work on yourself anymore, that now you can sit back and coast. For who you are includes trying to become better than you are. Start to coast and you are no longer who you were when you were pedalling, you slow down, perhaps moving so slowly that you fall down. Its true for biking, its true for skiing, its true for life.

Now there is *something* reassuring about Jesus answer. Its not totally frightening. After all he does not say that you *have* to enter through the narrow gate. He says you have to try. Those who are locked out are those the master of the house does not recognize. They recognize him. They have heard about him, they may have even been at some of his parties. They know *of* the master, but they do not *know* him personally. Its like religious belief. The important thing is not whether your beliefs *about* God are true, but that your belief *in* him is true, in other words, that *you* are true to him and to yourself, and to family and friend, neighbor and stranger.

In effect, Jesus is telling us to take our lives seriously. It *is* the only one we have. Don=t squander it. Wake up, don=t sleepwalk through life. Its easy to distract ourselves from our own lives by comparing them with others. Its tempting to make ourselves feel better about ourselves

by remembering how many others are doing so much worse than we are. But that=s pride. On the other hand it is also easy to beat up on ourselves by thinking of how many others are doing so much better than we are. But that=s envy.

Life may be a struggle, it is always a challenge, but it is not a contest. There are winners and losers in life but the criterion for success or failure is not how many are behind me, or how many are ahead, but who *I* have become. The criterion for success or failure is how I have responded to my *own* calling, what I have done with the unique collection of talent and circumstances that is my life, how I have used what I have to offer, to contribute to the lives of those around me, near and far.

There are winners and losers in life, but life is not a contest. Thinking it is, creates a purient interest exploited by tabloids and talk shows. I know there are celebrities and politicians whose public success dwarfs my own, but the tabloids assures me, they are not happy. I love to hear how the private lives of billionaires are a train wreck. Or how the publically powerful are privately weak or conniving. I am only too painfully aware of my own mistakes, my own weaknesses, my own vices, but news and talk shows, and now social media, can assure me, there are plenty of others who make me look like a living saint.

Salvation is not cheap, it is free. But being free does not mean it is easy. On the contrary, as Paul reminds us in the second reading, salvation calls for paying attention, paying attention to how God is speaking to us in our particular circumstances and through the particular individuals who people our life. And Paul reminds us that God can speak through pain as well as joy, through sickness as well as health, through tragedy as well as triumph, though in times of suffering and tragedy, God=s grace may be visible only in retrospect. I have presided over my share of funerals and I have listened to many eulogies, from siblings, children, old friends. Its my favorite part of the service, listening to those near and dear chose just the right words, tell the perfect little story that captures the character of the beloved whose passing they mourn. It is striking to me how much good one can say of someone, perhaps anyone. Our task is not to keep score, but to keep working at it. Gerald Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit poet has a wonderful line about Christ: AI greet him when I meet him, and I bless him when I understand.@ Our lives do not always make sense to us, but our faith assures us that if we keep watching and listening, God will reveal himself, wonders will happen, miracles will occur. Don=t miss them.

Life is a joy, but it is not a lark. We owe it to ourselves and to those around us to take ourselves and our lives seriously. To keep trying to do better, to be better. We are each unique--comparing ourselves to others always ends up being a matter of apples and oranges. Only I can be me. Only you can be you. We should not be comparing ourselves with others to learn how well or poorly we are doing. For many who think they are first may discover they have been standing in the wrong line, while some who feel last, may be surprised to find themselves invited to the head table at the heavenly banquet.