

AUGUST 21ST, 2016: TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 66:18-21 Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13 Luke 13:22-30

Most of us don't like to hear the word "discipline," especially when it's applied to us. We presume it's geared to take away our freedom, and in the long run always comes with some sort of punishment. Yet a typical dictionary definition of the term says it's simply the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior. So when the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes about the "discipline of the Lord," he's simply talking about the unique rules and behavior patterns the risen Jesus expects us to obey.

Growing up Catholic, I methodically learned all the dos and don'ts my catechism listed. But being a typical, concrete thinking child, I concentrated on the don'ts, especially since they were hooked up to the fiery punishments of purgatory and hell that scared the bejeebers out of me. Unlike the dos, the don'ts were hard to forget. Though the Hebrews' author reminds us that "whom the Lord loves, he disciplines," not only didn't I feel much love coming out of the pages of my catechism, I secretly envied my Protestant friends who didn't seem to be restrained or burdened by any fear of committing mortal sins.

Yet listening to today's first and third readings, it's clear that the discipline to which both sacred authors refer doesn't restrict our behavior; it expands it.

Active shortly after Israel's 6th century BCE Babylonian captivity, Third-Isaiah is concerned not only with encouraging the recently freed Jews to return to the Promised Land, he wants them to come back to their ancestral home with a new mentality toward Gentiles. No longer are they to regard them simply as "non-Jews:" people incapable of having a meaningful relationship with Yahweh. God's now including these foreigners in his/her plan of salvation. Unbelievably, some will even be included in the special category of priests and Levites: individuals who were granted their special ministry and privileges by birth. No one went to the seminary to become a priest or Levite; they were born that way. Yet now Yahweh's saying that some Gentiles are by nature just as important as some Jews. I'm certain a number of holy, pious Jews would have petitioned the Holy Office – had one existed back then - to have Third-Isaiah officially declared a heretic. Such openness certainly wasn't the divine discipline they'd learned and followed as children. The prophet was now demanding they expand their behavior to now be open to Yahweh working with all people, not just the Chosen People.

Because of our emphasis on the don'ts of our faith, it's easy to overlook the fact that the historical Jesus demanded similar discipline from his followers. Today's Lucan pericope leaves us little wiggle room. "There will be wailing and grinding of teeth," Jesus warns, "when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out." The "saved" will include people we presumed were nowhere near being listed in that category. Neither belonging to the "true church," saying the right prayers, or knowing all the rules and regulations will save us. Our only hope is to imitate the mentality of Jesus.

"People will come from the east and the west," Luke's Jesus insists, "and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God." His salvation rule of thumb can be easily summarized: "Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Ironically the "narrow gate" for entering God's kingdom among us revolves around our developing a very broad mind, something many of us conveniently forgot when we were studying Jesus' dos.

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AUGUST 28TH, 2016: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 3:17-18, 20, 28-29 Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a Luke 14:1, 7-14

Most of us take movie background music for granted. Even we old-timers have grown up with it, rarely reflecting on it's being an artificial element. Yet, *Jaws*, for instance, certainly wouldn't have become the great classic film it is without John Williams' suspense filled soundtrack.

The problem is, as far as I can tell, that none of us have special music playing in the background as we live our lives. What we take for granted in movies, we omit from our day by day existence. Such things just aren't there in real life.

But that's not totally correct. In some sense, Scripture is the background music our faith lives. To those who read and study this special library, it's always there, giving significance to our following of the risen Jesus, constantly running through our minds like a movie soundtrack.

Even before that First Century CE Galilean carpenter began his itinerant preaching ministry, followers of Yahweh were familiar with such a soundtrack. About 500 years before Jesus' birth, the Torah – Scripture's first five books – had taken the form with which we're familiar today. Through the years, other books, like Sirach, were also added to the themes faithful Jews surfaced as they tried to give themselves over to Yahweh's will. As we hear in today's first reading, humility, wisdom and almsgiving were always playing in the back of the minds of true Israelites. They gave deeper meaning to the life of all Jews.

Of course, as I mentioned above, music isn't actually playing as we live our lives. It only plays when we want it to play. Most of the time we don't reflect on the important things, people or situations we daily experience until long after we encounter them. Luke's Jesus seems to take that for granted. Though the risen Jesus' soundtrack doesn't automatically become part of our personal soundtrack when we awake each morning, he wants us to do what's necessary to have it kick in.

According to Jesus, there's significance in everything we do, even to where we sit during a formal dinner. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet," he insists, "do not recline at table in the place of honor." Somehow we're to be so honest that we appreciate not only our own importance, but also the importance of others. That's biblical humility. "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He even expects us to concretize that humble theme music when we throw a party. "Do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather . . . invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you."

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews certainly turns up the volume, putting our simple Christian actions on a level of symbolism anyone would enjoy hearing. In the ordinary events of our lives, we can actually "touch" the God among us, come in contact with "the spirits of the just made perfect," and even encounter the risen Jesus.

But perhaps the music which best keeps us on the road the risen Jesus expects us to take is in the last line of our gospel passage: "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." This creates the soundtrack for all Christian lives. We constantly look beyond. If we don't, then as Paul said in I Corinthians, we're the most ridiculous of all people. We're going through life without hearing the music which gives meaning to that life.

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