

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
August 13, 2006

Charity, patience, and kindness have their place in this world, but there are some places—in our cars, on the phone, and waiting in line, for example—where it seems they sometimes take a bit of a beating. I thought of this last week, as the lines grew long at the airports. Quite a few people complained about the wait, and I thought, you know, I'd gladly wait around for hours, days, if it meant that my flight was safe. What's the big deal, why get upset? But then I thought about how different it is when I'm waiting in line. Lines are not places which are conducive to patience. You stand there, or even sit there, and there's not much else to do but think, think about why the line's not moving, about why everybody ahead of you is taking so long, how *they must not have come prepared*, how it must be somebody else's fault that this line is moving so slowly. Not long ago, I was waiting to do a bank transaction in the drive through. Seemed like it was just taking forever, I couldn't imagine why those people ahead of me took so long, why couldn't they be ready like I was ready? I decided to time my own transaction, all prepared and raring to go; certainly I would take home the prize for speed. Well, I didn't. And the teller wasn't slow, either; it was my perception, and my having time to ruminate about my time being wasted that made me think that everybody else was so much slower than me. And how many times then we are not kind and considerate and courteous when we finally make it to the front of the line. How we act in certain situations can be a pretty good barometer of our patience, and it often is telling of our level of kindness and even our compassion. Something about waiting in line and having all that time to imagine how somebody else's incompetence is lending itself to my wait; driving around in a car, in my own little bubble in which I can grow angry at others without having to interact with them; on the phone, when I can yell but don't have to look them in the eyes; in all of these, kindness, patience, and charity are challenged a lot, and very, very often those virtues lose the challenge.

Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians to be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ. But before we can achieve those things, he asks us to root out all sorts of defects: all bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, he wrote, along with all malice. I look at his list, and I think to myself "lotsa luck." ALL anger, ALL shouting, ALL bitterness; this is not going to be an easy task. In some ways, our souls can be like one of those abandoned lots that no one takes care of anymore, filled with all sorts of weeds and debris, and the worse it gets, the less anyone wants to tackle it to clean it up. But it can be done, and the lot can again be made attractive. You start by pulling out the really big weeds, and they take a lot of strength and effort. But you get those big ones pulled out, and then you start on the next biggest ones; eventually, you reach a point where you can start planting some grass, but even then the dandelions sprout up, and you pull them up or spray them, and it looks like finally you're reaching the point where you have a nice, beautiful, plush lawn. But then you look closer, and you see the clover, or the crabgrass. At some point, it becomes maintenance, but the

maintenance never ends. And that's how it is in our spiritual growth as well: we start out trying to get rid of the big weeds first, the mortal sins. And sometimes, those can be tough to pull out, and even tougher to keep from growing back, because if the weed's that big, so also are its roots that deep. That's why serious sins require the graces which are unique to confession, and why we have to persevere with confession over time, because Satan isn't going to let go of us all that easily. But we make progress, and we clean up that yard which is our soul, but there's still all the imperfections scattered throughout: the bitterness, the angry feelings, the occasional lie of convenience or the cutting remarks. And we don't just say, eh, I'll learn to live with them; we keep working on them. And we know that we likely will never be perfect here; but we are willing to keep working towards perfection, because that's our goal, and it's our goal because we know that that's how we hope to live one day, when we reach heaven.

It's easy to look at that lot and think, I just can't do it. I can't get rid of all the weeds and all the junk, I don't have the strength. And if we weren't fit enough, or if we hadn't even had enough food to eat to strengthen us for the work or enough water to keep us hydrated, we wouldn't be able to finish our task. The same occurs spiritually: we look at our lives and our souls, and we know that our destination is perfection in heaven one day, but we think "can't do it." I can't make this journey; I don't have the strength to go the whole distance. And it is for this reason that Jesus gives us special food for the journey. It is for us as it was for Elijah, when God told him to "get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you." It's not the distance which determines if we'll make it, but whether or not we garner the strength to keep going as we make our way.

Jesus tells us that we will have the strength for the journey when he promises us the bread from heaven, no longer the manna which was known to the Israelites, but himself: "I am the Bread of Life," in the Eucharist Jesus will feed us and nourish us. The Eucharist is the ultimate nourishment for the soul, increasing our capacity to love God by building up sanctifying grace. In communion Jesus gives us strength for the journey, not magically turning us into saints whether we want to or not, because many have received our Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, but have blocked the graces of the sacrament with their own personal sins, which amounts to real resistance to the gift he offers us. Even when received with faith, communion doesn't make us perfect with no effort on our part; what Jesus does in the sacrament is make us strong enough to keep going, to keep working with God's gifts and graces so that we may become perfected one day. Struggling then is not the same as failure, in fact, failure comes when we decide to stop the struggle, and pause on the journey. But as it is with anything which requires effort, the answer to fatigue and tiredness is not to quit the effort, but to recharge so that the effort may continue.

We can't finish any task we face if physically we're passed out on the ground from lack of energy or strength. And as much as we may want to be rid of all bitterness, fury, anger, and reviling, and as much as we may intend to show kindness and compassion and mercy, we aren't likely to

accomplish our spiritual tasks if we're not being fed along the way. Jesus knew this, and offers us nourishment in the Eucharist which when received worthily and with faith, surpasses in greatness all other sources of strength, physical and spiritual. If you really want to live up to Paul's challenge as he lays it out for us in his letter to the Ephesians, consider this: If today you come up to receive communion, I invite you to say an extra little prayer today as you bow before receiving Jesus. Lord, make me more kind, as you show kindness to me by giving me yourself in the Eucharist; Lord, make me more compassionate towards others, as you show compassion to me in this Communion; Lord, make me more merciful towards those who have offended me, as you show me, a sinner, such great mercy in this Holy Food. Pray which ever one you need the most; I know mine will be kindness. This is the bread come down from heaven, given so that we may not die. Remember that with this Communion today, the journey will not be completed, but another step will be taken towards our destination, and even if we are not yet saints, if we've opened ourselves up to God's graces we are closer now than when we started. And we will always have the nourishment to continue until we reach our true home; with the food Jesus gives us, the journey will not be too long, and the strength we receive, which comes from Jesus, will be the strength we need to reach our destination.

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