

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
November 5, 2006

“It’s not the end of the world, but you can see it from there.” That was the well-known description among the priests of the “heard of by all, actually seen by few” town of Benkelman, legendary in the Lincoln Diocese because it is the farthest of the farthest out parishes. I remember well my first trip out there, after I had gotten the letter of assignment and was hauling my first load of belongings to my new home. West out of Lincoln, on a long drive through Grand Island, then Kearney; then Arapahoe, and by then, I was growing weary. Then there was a long succession of little towns, one after another, each one seemingly more distant than the last. Finally, McCook: this was it, this was the west; I had to be almost there. I saw the first sign out of McCook: Benkelman, 50 miles. I thought, you’ve got to be putting me on. It was the first of many, many trips back and forth, each one seemed shorter than the last as I became accustomed to the drive, but that first time; man, did this seem like a big state. I thought of the people back in the days of the 55 mile an hour speed limit, when they hit the border of Nebraska on the Interstate. If it didn’t, the sign greeting should have said, “Welcome to Nebraska. Get comfortable: You’re going to be here a while.” And the state motto should have been, “are we there yet?” No, we’re not there yet; we’ve got a ways to go before we get through this state and move on to the next.

In today’s Gospel, one of the scribes questions Jesus about which is the first of all the commandments. And Jesus tells the man, who himself has a good understanding of Jesus’ answer, “you are not far from the kingdom of God.” Now, the kingdom of God is not a spot on the map, but it is an apt analogy; being close to it is more a state of soul, and so the state of this man’s soul was very close to God. And so it is with all of us: we are either very close, or very far, or at some point in between, but all of us are somewhere in our spiritual journey relative to the kingdom which we ought all to be seeking. How was it that this scribe was so close? He recognized, first, that we are called to love God with all our hearts. That sounds easy enough; but is it really all that easy? How do we love God with all of our hearts, when we know full well that we have room in our hearts for other loves as well? To love God with all our heart means that in all those other things and people we love, we recognize in them a gift given us from God. We see each person in our lives as a unique blessing, and we thank God for the people and the things which bring our lives meaning and joy, because God placed them here; they are a reflection of his goodness towards us. And, it means that we would continue to love the giver, God, even if he were to withdraw from our lives those things and people we love. If we love God with less than all of our hearts, it will likely manifest itself in a sense of entitlement, or thanklessness; seeing his gifts in our lives as things which we simply deserve, or which have become ours through our own merit. The next part of the commandment is to love God with all of our soul; if the heart indicates our affections, the soul is indicative of the will; are our decisions, our acts of the will, all in

conformity with God's will, for us and for others? If we do not love God with all of our soul, it will become evident by regularly placing ourselves in near occasions of sin, which shows what is essentially a kind of contempt for the soul, placing it in danger of separation from God. The next part of the commandment: love God with all your mind: study the faith, use our minds to ponder the mysteries. Conversely, do we ever use our minds to pursue interests which are not only *not* God-centered, but which are actually opposed to him? To engage in superstition, or even to use our intellects to take in blatantly anti-Catholic "entertainment," is not loving God with our whole mind. And finally, we are to love God with all our strength; are we using our strength: our muscles, our hands, our lips, our energy, to serve him, or does our energy go only towards things which seem pleasing to us, but are displeasing to him?

The more we do in conformity with God's plan, the closer we inch to that kingdom of heaven; sort of like a board game in which we move our piece closer and closer to the end, and win the game. But salvation is no game; and what's more, it's not necessarily a constant move forward. We can just as easily move farther away from our goal, and we become especially vulnerable to that if we lack knowledge of our faith, or if our knowledge is devoid of understanding, because it was when Jesus saw that the scribe answered with understanding that he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom. What's the difference between knowledge and understanding? Knowledge is simply the facts, understanding implies awareness of why the facts are what they are. It's the jump from merely knowing what the Church does, teaches, and believes, to knowing why. The second reading this weekend, from Hebrews, is all about the priesthood of Jesus Christ. All Catholics (I hope) know that we have priests; but why do we have priests, and not just ministers, like everybody else? Why is the priesthood limited to men? Why are priests celibate? I don't know how many times I've heard someone say that the priesthood is limited to men because "it's an old-boys club; or the Church just hates women." A perfect example of knowledge without understanding. They've got the basic fact right—that only men can be ordained priests—but don't know, and maybe don't want to know, the rationale behind the fact. The Church teaches that Jesus intended the priesthood to be all male—evidenced by the fact that from among his followers, who were both male and female, he chose only men to be apostles—because this priesthood would not be an independent, autonomous priesthood but one which is solely a sharing in Jesus' role as priest. And in his priesthood, Jesus stands in relation to his Church, which is his bride; it's a male/female dynamic, but one which is not about sex but about self-giving, and receiving; the sacrificial giving of the priesthood is received by the Church; and this in turn generates new spiritual life. And many of those who turn to a handy, philosophically lightweight argument such as "the Church doesn't like women," not only miss the point: they place themselves in danger of coming to hate the institution that God willed for their salvation.

"And to love your neighbor as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." This was the next insight the scribe had into the kingdom. Love of self implies first of all self-

preservation; we love ourselves primarily by not endangering ourselves. So we are to love our neighbor in the same way, by not doing anything which will endanger him. We are called to protect our neighbor from physical dangers, and so we should help to build up a society of laws and protection for the most defenseless and innocent and helpless among us: protect the lives of the unborn, and the newly born; come to the aid of those who lack food and shelter and clothing. And we may have honest disagreements about how to help those who are in need and how best to protect the lives of the innocent, but it's imperative that we be involved in the discourse if we are truly to love our neighbor. But more important even than the physical is the spiritual: if we would preserve our neighbor's soul, we would do nothing, nothing to lead him into sin. And if it's wrong to lead our neighbor, whom we perhaps barely know, into sin, how much worse is it to lead those whom we love into sin? And here again, when we make some sacrifice of pleasure or pastime or behavior for the sole purpose of not giving scandal to another, we are getting closer to that kingdom.

We know that man is not capable of being so good as to gain heaven; heaven, after all, is attained not through goodness but through God's grace. But even though Jesus opened the gates of heaven for us, it doesn't follow that we'll follow him in; that part is determined by us, and that determination is made by our choices in life. Even if we don't become so good and so holy that we actually see heaven in this life, before we die, doesn't it make sense to be ready at the end to make that leap into eternity, and to be as close to the kingdom as we can be? It isn't easy to love God with ALL of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and we will probably spend our lifetimes trying to do better if we set ourselves to achieving it. But it makes sense to try to achieve it, so that we move closer and closer to our ultimate goal. Are we there yet? No, but we're getting there or we're losing ground. But to love God with every fiber of our being will get us closer and closer.

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