An Unexpected Heaven
Twenty-Fifth Sunday In Ordinary Time 2017

Reflection By: Deacon Paul V. Hursh

While I was still in the early grades of parochial school the Sisters of St. Joseph instructed us that Heaven was like the best place we could imagine. This wasn’t hard for me to do - I imagined an endless amusement park. I doubt that the sisters intended to evoke this image in me, but this image persists in my memory, even though I don’t really believe that Heaven is about being entertained. The truth of the matter is that Heaven, regardless of what we may imagine, will probably not match our expectation.

For most of us we may believe that Heaven is a future reality – part of some cosmic reward/punishment system. I can’t help but believe that Heaven is as much a present reality as it is a future state. Jesus instructed his followers that the Kingdom of God is within us and that the Kingdom of God is now. (cf Luke 17:21 & Matthew 12:28) Perhaps he taught this so that we
would not delay in building the Kingdom that ‘is already, but not yet.’ This tension, between the present and future, is a time to “seek the Lord while he may be found, call to him while he is still near.” (Isaiah 55:6) It is the same tension St. Paul writes of to the Philippians that makes him desirous of a life in Christ and the gain of the next life after bodily death.

We all, knowingly or unknowingly, seek that deep and intimate relationship that has always been our truest connection with our Source – it is what drives all our desires. We may unwittingly seek this love in all the wrong places, but in the end it will be the summit we think of as Heaven - if God's will be done. I do not deny Hell; it is just that Hell is not God's will for any of his children. Even the wicked and the scoundrels are called to forsake their thoughts and wayward desires to receive the mercy offered in Isaiah’s prophecy. This is why we will not only be surprised by what Heaven is like, but who we will meet there when we arrive. Today’s parable gives a hint of what Heaven is like, and even whom we will meet there when we arrive.

This parable like all parables is told to demonstrate how our ways are not God’s ways. We may believe that heaven is part of a reward/punishment system that is assigned based on our good deeds in this life; clearly this is not supported by this parable. It may be as shocking for us today as it was for the workers who labored a full day and received the same pay as those who worked only a few hours. Shouldn’t the reward be proportional to the effort? The answer would be yes if this were a reward/punishment system, however this is not what heaven is about. Heaven is an invitation to enter into a relationship with the divine and God’s gracious mercy is available to all and is received in equal measure with God’s forgiveness. All we need to do for our part is to be desirous of and ask for what is freely given. This is the biggest surprise. To realize how close heaven is when we finally choose Christ and follow Jesus. As Pope Francis wrote in Joy of the Gospel, “whenever we take a step toward Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms…. How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost!”

The challenge in all of this is to remain focused on developing our relationship with God and not to become preoccupied with others or our behavior and making judgments as to who is deserving of God’s love. Developing a relationship with God is, to be sure, based on how we treat others and how we choose to serve the kingdom. It is in developing our service to the kingdom; that we advance our relationship with others and with God. This leaves us where St. Paul was caught; torn between his desire for the life to come and duty to serve the present – the kingdom now and the kingdom to come.