

The Tested Heart

Homily for September 11th and 12th 2021
24th Sunday Ordinary Time

There is a verse from the book of Proverbs that I want to consider as we think about today's Gospel reading. It goes like this:

***The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
but the LORD tests the heart.***

A crucible is a vessel, usually ceramic, employed for heating substances to high temperatures. It was used mainly for the refining of silver and gold. Notice that the Proverb is using the crucible in a comparative way. Just as the crucible is needed in the refining these precious metals, so the Lord tests the human heart so that it too can be refined.

The comedian Yakov Smirnoff immigrated to the United States from Russia. Upon entering a supermarket for the first time he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to my self, "What a country!"

Smirnoff is joking but Peter assumed something about Jesus somewhat similar. We are with the Christ, now we will rock this town and go from victory to victory. We are told Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Why? Peter believed the kingdom of God could be obtained instantly by force. Peter has a worldly view of the Kingdom and Jesus is speaking about a heavenly kingdom. Jesus makes it clear there is no such powder and disciples of Jesus Christ are not instantly born but are formed over a long period of time through the crucible of much suffering.

Peter began to discover on that day what the Proverb had succinctly stated centuries earlier:

***The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
but the LORD tests the heart.***

So how does the Lord test the heart? By prompting us to realize that in this world there are two ways to live. According to the reasoning of humans, that declares there should not be pain and suffering, or according to the way of Jesus where we acknowledge that through our suffering we are invited into the place where our hearts can be tested and refined.

Now think about this with me. In the Gospel reading for this Mass. Jesus is making a distinction between a believer and a disciple. A believer is a person who might genuinely believe in the existence of God and in Jesus as God's Son. But the believer will be less inclined to see how suffering is incorporated into their life so they can participate with the Lord in the testing and refining of their hearts.

Jesus in our text is not addressing believers, but rather disciples and is emphasizing that discipleship will involve a certain kind of cross and suffering. It might be the suffering we are experiencing because people ridicule and mock our Catholic Faith. It might be the suffering resulting from the weight of the trials we experience in life. Whatever the cause of the suffering, the disciple is that person who is willing to take up their cross and follow in the way of the Lord.

But the human instinct is to block suffering and pain. As anyone who has experienced grief can attest, it isn't rational. So often we really don't know how to hurt! We simply do not know what to do with our pain.

The great wisdom tradition expressed by Jesus in today's Gospel and Isaiah in our first reading is trying to teach us that grief and suffering are not something from which to run. It's a disorientating space but can also be a space, a time of transformation. In fact, we can't risk getting rid of the pain until we've learned what it has to teach us and it—grief, suffering, loss, pain—always has something to teach us! Unfortunately, most of us, men especially, have been taught that grief and sadness are something to repress, deny, or avoid. *We would much rather be angry than sad.*

Like Peter we want to rebuke those who say suffering cannot be avoided and therefore must be embraced.

Perhaps the simplest and most inclusive definition of grief is “unfinished hurt.” It feels like a demon spinning around inside of us and it hurts too much, so we immediately look for someone else to blame. We must learn to remain open to our grief, to wait in patient expectation for what it has to teach us. When we close in too tightly around our sadness or our grief, when we try to fix it, control it, or understand it, we only deny ourselves its lessons.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian (303–373), a Doctor of the Church, considered tears to be sacramental signs of divine mercy. He instructs: “Give God weeping and increase the tears in your eyes; through your tears and [God's] goodness the soul which has been dead will be restored.” What a different kind of human being than most of us. Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi reportedly wept all the time—for days on end!

The “weeping mode” really is a different way of being in the world. It's different than the fixing, explaining, or controlling mode. We are finally free to feel the tragedy of things, the sadness of things. Tears cleanse the lens of the eyes so we can begin to see more clearly. Sometimes we have to cry for a very long time because our eyes are so dirty that we're not seeing truthfully or well at all. Tears only come when we realize we can't fix it and we can't change it. The situation is absurd, it's unjust, it's wrong, it's impossible. *She should not have died; he should not have died. How could this happen?* Only when we are led to the edges of our own resources are we finally free to move to the weeping mode.

The way we can tell our tears have cleansed us is that afterwards we don't need to blame anybody, even ourselves. It's an utter transformation and cleansing of the soul, and we know it came from God. *It is what it is*, and somehow God is in it.¹

¹ <https://cac.org/the-gift-of-tears-2021-08-03/>

This discovery of the meaning of suffering was the experience of St. Peter. From rebuking Jesus for his prediction of the Cross as a man in his early twenties, the mature St. Peter can write these words:

now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ^{so} that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.²

No doubt our first Pope had Proverbs 17:3 in mind when he wrote these words. In your suffering may you hold on to what we have considered today about suffering and please remember

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but the LORD tests the heart.*

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (1 Pe 1:6–7). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.