

One of my all-time favourite television programs was M*A*S*H. In the early episodes, Frank Burns and Hot Lips Houlihan were an item. Often they were pitted against Trapper John and Hawkeye. In one such episode, Frank and Hot Lips had been trying to “do-in” Hawkeye but had failed. Hawkeye now had the upper hand, and Radar said, "Why don't you do to them what they were trying to do to you?" Hawkeye said in that laconic Alan Alda way, “Look at them! They're each just one-half of a person and when they come together, they barely make a whole person. They have enough troubles of their own.”

When I was working in another diocese, I became acquainted with a prominent religious leader whom I had admired. As we worked together and as I got closer to him, I became disillusioned because he did not seem to be the person that I had envisioned him to be. In fact, he was petty, verbally abusive, self-centered, and manipulative. He used people for his own selfish ends. If you ever crossed him, you were off his list forever. I was speaking to my dear friend at that time, about this individual, and in poetic language, once a teacher of preachers, he said, "What a shame it is that so big a man is so little. How tragic it is that such a large man cast such a small shadow.”

Half-people, casting small shadows. In our Gospel for today, Jesus is talking about people who are half-persons becoming whole persons. Jesus is talking about people who don't understand life. They just don't get it, but Jesus says that they can get life. It started as most everything starts in the Gospel of Luke, with Jesus in prayer. Verse 12 before our Gospel today, says that Jesus spent all night on the mountainside praying to the Father trying to ascertain the Father's will. After spending the night in prayer, he chose his disciples. Luke is speaking with theological geography in that Jesus came down from the mountain on a level plain with the people. This story is sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. He was with the people. Emmanuel, God with us.

As he came down from the mountain, he was teaching, preaching, and healing. The crowds closed in around him when Jesus stopped and said, "Wait!" And he uttered these words, "Blessed are you who hunger, blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who cry, blessed are you when people exclude you, and blessed are you who jump for joy when people reject you." And then he said, "Woe to those who are rich, woe to those who are well fed, woe to those who laugh, and woe to those whom everyone speaks well of." These words shocked them out of their theology of success and favouritism. They looked at each other and said, "What in the world is he talking about? He has just turned our entire world upside-down. What could he mean by all of this?"

And we ask ourselves, "What does he mean?" Does he mean that God hates the rich or that God hates the so-called blessed of our society? Of course not! God loves everyone! What he may be saying is that if our lives are centred around our possessions and the pleasing of ourselves by our resources, we may already have our reward. The word “reward” in New Testament Greek here means "paid in full." Isn't it ironic that in a day in which we supposedly have one of the best economies in the world, there is a yearning in the heart and soul of the Australian people for spirituality? Now I'm not talking about a spirituality that is always found in churches, but a hunger for spirituality. It is as if the entire nation is saying, "There's got to be more!" In fact there seems to be a direct correlation between the increase of our material prosperity with an increase in spiritual vacuity and mental illness. Perhaps Jesus is saying that if our lives are centred around only that which pleases us then we have all that's coming.

Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required." So often we forget that everything we have been given, life itself, our possessions, our resources, and our finances are given to us by God as a gift to be given to others. We are just a channel through which our energies and resources are funnelled to others. That is the purpose of the Church. The Church is to give us structure and discipline so that we may not only be ministered unto but we can minister and give our talents, resources, and gifts to others making their lives better. "To whom much is given, much shall be required," Jesus said.

Sometimes when we have everything, we simply don't feel the need for God. Those who are poor come to him with empty hands saying, "Oh, God, we have no one but you and you can have all that we have, which is nothing." Maybe Jesus is talking about making God the centre of our existence. We come to God not in what we have, but in what we have not. We come to God not in what we are, but what we are not. We place it before him and say, "Oh, God, here am I. I am yours completely! You are the centre of my life. All of my life is centred around my relationship to you. You are at the centre of my thoughts and actions. You are the purpose and direction of my resources. Here I am, God. Everything I have and everything that I don't have, everything that I am and everything that I am not, I bring to you."

And you say, "that sounds great, but I can't enter a convent. I can't join a monastery. I have bills to pay, a family to support, and a life to live! Don't talk to me about that kind of stuff. I can't live up to it. Life is not meant to be a joyless parade," and you are exactly right. In fact, the Talmud, a commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, says, "We will be brought in judgment to God for every good thing that he put upon this earth that we refuse to enjoy." You say, "Now, you've got me more confused than ever. Are we supposed to be joyful or are we supposed to be poor? I don't understand." I think he means that we are to put God at the very centre of our lives. We are to put our personal relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ at the very centre of our existence. It is the most precious gift that we have. Or as St Augustiine of Hippo put it: "Love God and do as you please".

Every thought and every action we extend is centred around our personal relationship to the living Lord, Jesus Christ. I think it means this: In our best of days when everything seems to be going well, we ought to enjoy life with fullness, joyfulness, exuberance, and extravagance. We ought to enjoy the marvellous life that God has placed before us, always mindful that there is a great danger when we centre our lives around what we have. That can become a distraction to our relationship with God.

I also think it means that in our worst of days when nothing seems to be going right we must remember that the final accounting has not occurred and we do not need to be weary in well doing because God rewards his faithful. A life surrendered to Jesus is the very best of all lives, and that will work in the best of your days and in the worst of your days.

I love the story that is told of a factory that was having problems with employees stealing. The company hired a security firm to help with the problem. They had guards posted at all exits and they were to check each employee as they left for the day. They searched their clothing and lunch boxes to make sure they were not taking anything out. Every day one guy came by with a wheelbarrow full of junk. Every day they stopped him and ploughed through all of the junk and rubbish that was in the wheelbarrow. It took several minutes every day to search through the junk. Every day the same thing, nothing but junk in the wheelbarrow. Finally, the security person said, "Look, fellow, I know something is going on. Every day you come through here and all we find in

the wheelbarrow is junk. If you promise to tell me exactly what is going on, I promise not to turn you in. Tell me what is going on." The fellow grinned and said, "I'm stealing wheelbarrows."

That story has two truths that I want to leave with you: 1) Things may not always be what they seem to be, at least on the outside, and 2) Don't go looking in junk and garbage for the most obvious answer to the meaning and essence of life. It's found in God's Word and Sacrament, its found in this Church, it's found in your neighbour, its found in your heart. As you give your heart and life to Jesus Christ, as you centre your entire existence around him, oh, the blissful joy and happiness that is yours.

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