

Homily for Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 20th/21st, 2022

By Deacon Richard Hay

There is a form of data science these days called analytics - the study of data, both current and historical, around various activities to determine a possible outcome. It's being used a lot in our modern world. I think Jesus's followers were asking for the analytics about their chances to make it to heaven in today's gospel.

Analytics are used in sports, businesses, supply chains, data management and many other areas. The intent of examining these numbers is to predict a future outcome. Sometimes it works and sometimes it misses the mark.

In other words, as many of us already now, the future is unpredictable. Unexpected situations and outcomes are part of life.

During His ministry, Jesus brought such a unique message to the people about baptism, salvation and the descriptions of the rewards of heaven, things that they had never heard before in such detail. So it's not surprising to hear this question get asked.

I suspect many of us would be curious too. Are we doing enough to get to heaven - are our odds - are the analytics in our favor? Is there any way I could increase my chances of being saved?

Well, if we were expecting an answer out of today's gospel it's not forthcoming. Jesus instead talks about the path to heaven through the narrow gate not being an easy one.

In this image of a narrow gate, there's a real sense of just how hard this passage would be for any of us. For me, it's like five or six lanes of traffic trying to merge into just one lane - not an easy process, right? In reality, it's not meant to be easy - getting to heaven that is - not the traffic. It will take work, effort, sacrifice, and strength on our part to pass through the narrow gate.

However, the question remains, can we improve our odds of reaching a heavenly reward?

Would we be OK if the answer is maybe? Remember, there are no guarantees in life - so we need to strive towards that ideal. However, God has given us the tools to move towards that narrow gate.

First – God loves us unconditionally no matter who we are or what we have done. That unconditional love is ultimately manifested through Jesus and his death on the cross. We should receive the love of God as a pure gift as part of our strength for this journey.

Second – God gives us His grace through the sacraments. While there are some sacraments we can only receive once, sacraments such as the Eucharist and Reconciliation can be received over and over again. Of course, that means more grace is received as we make those sacraments a regular part of our faith life. They are powerful gifts – full of God's grace – which we need to sustain us each day and to fulfill his call to love.

Third – our church community is a sign of God's love for us because we are not meant to make this faith journey alone. It is intended to be travelled with our family, friends, and fellow Christians. Coming to Mass each week, or more often, if possible, not only allows us to receive the body and blood of Christ regularly, but also enables us to connect with others who are on the same journey – towards heaven through the narrow gate. Journeys are much easier to accomplish when we share them with others.

Fourth – While the Mass is the source and summit of our faith and an important part of that faith, it cannot be the only thing we all do in this world as Christians.

In James we hear – “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” and just a few verses later, James concludes this passage by writing “So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

Is our faith dead? This is a question each of us needs to look at and evaluate whether we are doing enough for those less fortunate than ourselves. Are we venturing out so we can see Christ in the faces of the poor, the lonely, the hungry? Are we doing something about it? Are we being the hands and feet of Christ in our world?

Faith requires the physical action of getting out there and helping others. For some of us this might feel uncomfortable – and that is OK. However, to get started, our parish has so many ministries looking for our help, all we need to do is ask and find out where our time and talents are needed.

In fact, starting next month for the first time since COVID, we will have our parish ministry fair after some of the Masses. This will be an excellent opportunity to learn about all the wonderful ministries our local church is involved with, and you just might find your opportunity to help others through one of them.

Now, going back to the suggestions I have shared, they can all help us make this journey through the narrow gate, but they are not a checklist nor are they a guarantee either.

However, let's consider a starting point for all of these suggestions. In this past Friday's gospel reading at the daily Mass, when he was asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said:

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." Immediately following that he also added that the second greatest commandment was that "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The love of God and love of our neighbors is the core of all we should do as Christians. Therefore, if we love God, we love our neighbors and by loving our neighbors we love God. We can love the lord our God by

being faithful to His commandments, receiving His graces through the sacraments, and performing works as part of our living faith.

Strengthened by those things, we can then turn and love our neighbors as ourselves. From there this beautiful cycle of love just keeps repeating.

Then, just maybe, we might increase our own opportunity to receive God's love and graces to make that difficult journey through the narrow gate and have the spiritual strength that journey requires to be one of God's chosen who will hopefully one day join Him in heaven.