

Pentecost III; Proper 4a
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Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

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This past week, I attended a meeting of the Commission on Ministry. One of our recent seminary graduates was being interviewed, and during the usual round of questions, someone asked him, If you were at a bus stop, and someone saw your clerical collar and asked you what Christianity is all about, what would you tell him if you only had three minutes?

The questioner, a priest in our diocese, is a fervent evangelical. He wanted a short, direct answer ...an answer that spoke the Gospel with clarity, taking into account the urgency of sharing the message of Jesus Christ with the whole world.

The seminary graduate being asked this question is a former philosophy professor. Short, direct answers are not in his repertoire.

You can already sense the sort of impasses into which we were headed, can't you?

Bishop Lawrence saved the day by interjecting that he would say to the man, Sir, if you really want to know, I'm afraid you're going to have to miss your bus!

I share this little story with you because it gives us insight into an important aspect of today's Gospel.

What does Jesus require of us?

If, as Jesus says, Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord” shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, then it seems clear that “lip service” Christianity is woefully insufficient.

And to understand why, we have to look at some fairly different assumptions. Even within Christianity itself.

For example, when an Evangelical Protestant is asked, Are you saved? ...a very short answer is expected. “Yes” or “no” is all that is required.

A well-informed Catholic, on the other hand, might reply ...Yes, I am saved... but I am also being saved.

Evangelical Protestants generally emphasize a moment when, having confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior, they are eternally assured of everlasting life.

Catholics believe that we are marked as Christ's own in baptism, but that salvation is a process. It is not a “reward” ... it is not our Spiritual 401K in which we invest, hoping one day to enjoy its benefits.

Rather, it is a gift that begins at the font, and is marked by spiritual growth and joy that extends even into eternity.

We are born as sinners, that we well know. Thanks be to God, Christ has interceded for us by his atoning death and glorious resurrection. And as we live into the new life that he gives us, more and more, little by little, we are changed... and we become who God intends us to be... we become more and more who we were created to be.

But it is not enough just to say Lord, Lord, we must also live as Christ calls us to live.

And so, in the Gospel of Matthew, we have the Sermon on the Mount in Chapter 5. And just a few verses ahead of today's Gospel, in Chapter 7, we are given the "Golden Rule".

It is interesting to note that, before Jesus, Judaism generally stated this law in the negative. Hillel, one of the great First Century rabbis put it this way: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah. All else is interpretation.

But for Jesus, it is not sufficient to merely "do no harm" it is also critical that we do good to our neighbors....to do for them what we ourselves would wish or desire.

And so that our lives can be constructed for good works, we must first build on the Firm Foundation which is Jesus Christ Himself.

The parable of the wise and foolish builders from today's Gospel sounds so much like the stuff of Vacation Bible School songs, doesn't it? It seems simplistic. (The rains came down and the floods came up. We all remember it!)

We all know that it is foolish to build houses in the sand. No one would build a house so close to the ocean that it could potentially be washed away.... Surely no one would build an entire city below seas level, trusting the Army Corp of engineers to keep the water out...would they?

OK, so maybe it isn't such a simple and obvious parable!

But what we do need to know is that the Palestine in which Jesus lived was a very dry place in the summer. A builder might very well think that he had found a most suitable lot indeed. But in the winter, when the great rains come, he might find that the lot which seemed perfect in summer has become a river bed in the winter.

Again, when we build our lives on Christ, it is not a rash "Britney Spears-at-the-Las Vegas-Wedding-Chapel" kind of commitment.

It is not enough just to say "Lord, Lord"... we must live as Christ enjoins.

By Loving God with our whole heart, mind and soul...

By doing good for our neighbor... whether next door... or in the Dominican Republic...(as our medical mission team is about to depart).

By living lives of authenticity... so that we consistently reflect the same values, regardless of whose company we find ourselves in.

By availing ourselves of the spiritual graces of Word and Sacrament.

By keeping the company and fellowship of the Body of Christ gathered...

THAT is the rock on which our lives are built.... on which the Church is built.

And when we live in such a way, we do not have to wait to see Jesus. He will not be a stranger for whom "Lord, Lord" is but a formal title of respect. He will have been our companion and dear brother, our fellow traveler on our earthly pilgrimage. And having known him on earth, we shall surely know him in heaven.

Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father.

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AMEN