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32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Most teachers recognize it by the second week of classes. Good coaches can spot it by the second practice. Most managers pick up on it in the first week of work. I'm talking about the difference between the serious student, and those who are half-hearted about education; the serious athlete, and those who just want the honor of being on the team; the serious worker, and those who only want a paycheck. Half-heartedness is a disease that seems to have always been part of the human enterprise. It has contributed to broken families, run-down neighborhoods, and collapsing communities. It creates inferior production and undermines the economy. It makes for a terrible waste of talent, dead-end careers, boredom, loss of morale, and zest for life. Half-hearted people can disappoint and even annoy us.

This was a particular problem for Jesus. He cautioned his followers that God prefers us hot or cold. Jesus says in concrete and vivid language that he himself becomes "nauseated" when we are lukewarm. He also stated forthrightly that he expected his teachings to create divisions, and that to enter his kingdom required full-hearted conversion to a new way of life. And yet, the reality of religious life for Christians throughout history is that there is often too much half-heartedness. While we easily recognize and detest the half-heartedness we see in others, many of us somehow seem to be able to tolerate it to a great degree in ourselves when it comes to the practice of religion.

In the wonderful little book Tuesdays with Morrie, the dying man speaks to his former student Mitch about getting satisfaction in life. Morrie says to Mitch, "*Do you want to know what really gives you satisfaction? Offering others what you have to give.I don't mean money, Mitch. I mean your time. Your concern. Your story-telling. It's not so hard. There's a senior center that opened near here. Dozens of elderly people come there every day. If you're a young man or a young woman and you have a skill, you are asked to come and teach it. Say you know computers. You come there and teach them computers. You are very welcome there. And they are very grateful. This is how you start to get respect and how you get real satisfaction in life, by offering to others something that you have.*" Morrie shares this wisdom with his former student,

a wisdom he has learned in his life, but a wisdom which has long been articulated in the Bible and in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition.

We are reminded of this wisdom today in the scriptures, as we hear two beautiful stories about generous women. Each of them is held up for our admiration. Each of them has been immortalized by the performance of simple acts. Each of them has earned a permanent place in the Scriptures by offering to others what they had to give.

- In the first reading, the widow of Zarephath provided for the needs of the prophet Elijah by giving him a cup of water to drink, a bit of bread, and a little cake. Her reward for these simple acts of generosity was more than she was expecting! She had a permanent supply of flour and oil from that day on, enough to feed herself and her son.
- In the gospel reading, Jesus praises the generosity of another poor widow. In comparison to the rich contributors, this widow was only able to make a small contribution to the Temple. But in the eyes of Jesus, her contribution was much greater than that of the rich. She offered what she had to give. The lesson Jesus is drawing from this incident seems to be that God does not expect us all to make the same contribution to establish the kingdom of God on earth. However, God does expect each of us to have our own unique impact on the world.

These two examples are full-hearted people, giving of all they had. They are not half-hearted about what they do. Another piece of wisdom seems to be that happiness goes hand-in-hand with full-heartedness. If you want to be happy, “give it all you’ve got”. Half-hearted, wishy-washy efforts in anything we do rob us of energy and effectiveness. That is why our parents often told us that if we weren’t going to do a job right, we shouldn’t do it at all. Half-way measures are often worse than if no measures are taken in the first place. This applies especially to the way we live. If we love life, we should expect to live it to the fullest. If we love people, we should love them completely, as they are, not in bits and pieces or only when we feel like it. If friends mean a lot to us, we should cherish them as treasures and work to deepen our relationships. If we have a job to do, we should put ourselves into it with full attention and care.

And if we have a Jesus to follow, then we should follow him with dedication and focus. We should really listen to his word each and every day, and listen with our hearts so that our hearts can be affected. But my fear is that some of us are internally divided. Some of those who are

baptized will say that their relationship with God is the most important thing to them, more important than any of their human relationships, more important than their job or their material possessions. But when critically examining how much time and effort goes into that relationship with God, it is often more half-hearted than some of their other endeavors. I remember talking some years ago with a Catholic here in Frederick County who, unashamedly, had a bumper sticker on his car that read, “*The one who dies with the most toys...wins!!*” There is nothing half-hearted about that... but it portrays an enthusiasm for the pursuit of material possessions that Jesus would not share.

I clipped this story out of *Maryknoll* magazine written by a priest who was working among the very poor in Bolivia, South America. He said: “*On First Communion Sunday in Cochabamba, the Maryknoll Sisters always prepare hot cocoa and cookies for the children afterwards. At each place they put several cookies on a paper napkin. Invariably, even though the communicants are hungry themselves, they will eat only one cookie. They wrap the others in a napkin to take home to their brothers and sisters, because they are so poor*”.

Picturing that scene almost makes me cry. What has happened to us, and to our children? Those who have next to nothing somehow know what is important and remember to share. Those who have almost too much don't feel they have won unless they have all the toys. As baptized Christians we are quite capable of closing our mind and heart to the Word of God. Think how often the Word that we hear at the Eucharist here has demanded we turn away from false idols such as wealth and power. Think how often that Word has summoned us to be faithful and to be people of integrity-- in giving our word, in carrying out our work, in fulfilling our baptism and marriage vows. Think how often that Word on the lips of Jesus has summoned us to heal, not hurt people; even to forgive those who have injured us. And how often that Word has commanded us to worship and adore the Holy One, faithfully keeping holy his day, if only through an hour at Mass, thereby revering the God who made us.

Every day we can shut out God's Word from the way we work, from the way we speak to each other, from the way we make money and use it, and from the way we manage our time and our talents. We can be full-hearted in seeking the influence of that Word in our lives, or we can seek full-heartedly to “die with all the toys”. And half-heartedness in any direction will get us nowhere.

So, where does your heart lie?