

I owned a game called the Space Maze Classic Labyrinth back in the 1970's in which the object was to steer a little steel ball through a maze, controlling the direction both to the left and right, as well as up or down. It took dexterity, because the maze contained nearly forty holes into which the little steel ball could fall. At first, I never got past the first turn or two, but eventually saw improvement. I came so close on so many occasions, only to choke in the last turn. I have no idea how many attempts it took me to conquer the maze game, but eventually I did, and it felt great!

Other times in life, we run out of chances. If you speed enough, you'll get pulled over on the side of the road; if you take a chance on the parking meter, you'll get tagged. If your baseball team loses enough games, your team will be eliminated from the playoffs. Today's Gospel speaks to us of the uncomfortable topic of squandering the last chance. There is a proverb: “The only time you run out of chances is when you stop taking them.” While during life this may be true, at some point we will die, and we will undergo what is called the particular judgment. St. John of the Cross said: “At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.”¹

Today's Gospel account follows on the heels of last week's parable about the dishonest manager, with only a very brief two verses separating the accounts. It further illustrates the teaching of Jesus about the prudent use of material possessions, as you will recall the mention of “eternal dwellings” from last week. These “eternal dwellings” remain our calling, but so often we confuse worldly wealth for the eternal dwellings of God.

¹ St. John of the Cross, *Dichos* 64

In this account, the rich man ends up being tormented. But is the rich really tormented by Lazarus, or is he tormented by the realization of his own past? He calls Abraham “Father” as if he has this intimate spiritual relationship. He is calling out all the stops in his vain attempt to gain sympathy for his position. He is insisting on his kinship with Abraham, “the father of all Hebrews.”²

The Rich man’s callous attempt at redemption is too late. This is without question a sad realization and one that forces us to confront a reality in our life. Our choices in life have consequences, some of them eternal, and our loving Father in heaven is also a just judge. He will respect the freedom of our decisions, but we do not possess an infinite number of them. Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. Particular judgment happens at the moment of death, neither a moment sooner, nor later. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, and other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny that can be different for some and for others.³

This account is gut wrenching— on a human level, we may be rooting for the rich man. After all, he is making a last effort. How could the Lord ignore his plea? But consider it from the perspective of Scripture: “It is appointed to men to die once, and after that comes the judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27) Or again in St. Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians, “Each one will receive his pay, according to his works” (1 Cor 3:8). Following these Scriptures, the early Church Fathers taught that “souls are judged when they depart from the body...”⁴

² cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIV, Chapter 10.22

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #1021

⁴ Saint Augustine, *De anima et ejus origine*, 11, n.8. “Who is so obstinate against the Gospel as not to perceive those things in the parable of that poor man carried after death to Abraham's bosom and of the rich man whose torments are set before us?”

Judgment is a scary concept, but it mustn't paralyze us. God does not want us to live our lives as if we were on the brink of losing our souls. But we do need to be attentive to the reality that our decisions matter. If we trust in God's mercy and accept it into our lives, we can experience tremendous freedom. As Saint Paul noted, the time has come to "lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called." This is the Good News of Jesus Christ; this is our calling.

As a priest, I am very aware of the sacred duty entrusted to me, and I can easily shrink under that weight, if my prayer life does not support me. As priests, we ought to be held to a high standard of conduct, as we should, and it is deeply disturbing when it becomes apparent that this has not always happened. Early this past week a very disturbing article appeared on the MPR website, detailing a long series of events culminating in clerical misconduct, as well as the obvious troubling signs that preceded the crime. The people of God are hurting, and so too are we priests. Please pray for the Church; please pray for a strong and decisive response that will bring about needed change.

Because before there is healing, there must be change. We can pray for people, but there are also consequences for actions. But far from scaring us, we need to be motivated to draw near to God, He who is our hope and our salvation. We place our hope in Christ, in him and him alone. And we must pray to use the words of Bl. Mother Teresa, to "cling to Jesus," for when we do so, we will be protected, we will stay on the right path, exactly where the Lord wants us to be.

Today's Gospel is not intended to scare you or to frighten you, but it is intended to shake us from our complacency and remind us of the seriousness of our choices in life. Cling to Jesus, and through our lives of faith and good works, let us answer his invitation with a resounding Yes.