

13B 2021

Our culture emphasizes safety over thriving, avoiding difficulties over learning how to deal with them.

We seek, in other words, invulnerability and teach our children not to take risks.

Avoidance becomes the norm.

Rarely do we hear the adage, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

This desire for invulnerability and ease is not new, of course.

After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus slips away to get some needed rest, but when people wake up and find him gone, they get into boats and pursue him to Capernaum.

When they catch up with him, he tells them honestly and directly, “you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

In other words, they want Jesus to make life easy for them—food without toil—but he is trying to teach them how to love, and loving others is difficult.

It requires risk taking.

To refuse all risk is to close oneself off from others, to reject all love.

If we are to learn, we must experiment, and if we experiment, we are going to stumble at times.

The point is therefore not to be safe all the time, but to recover from our stumbles with integrity, to continue our journey along our path to a deeper relationship with God.

I, personally, would have been a narrow priest had I not separated from Christianity and spent some time studying Buddhism.

This shift from the familiar and well-trodden path involved significant struggle, risk, and *grief*.

I felt not that I had left the church, but that the church had left me.

Nevertheless, this was not a failure.

The experience opened me up to different ways of thinking and being,

which was essential because, if we are to love another, we must be able to step

respectfully inside that person's world, we must be able to understand him or her without feeling superior.

To accomplish this, we have to put aside our pet ideas and listen, listen for the feelings that a person is sharing.

Our *opinions*, on the other hand, are far less significant than people seem to think.

We are not here to convert people to our way of thinking.

We are here to learn how to understand and relate to others.

One of the most healing, helpful things we can do for others is to be with them in their grief, with them in their joy, not trying to change them, fix them, correct them.

That is God's job.

That is why I do not try to tell you what to think, but seek to stimulate you to think for yourselves and provide you with tools to build your own relationship with God.

Unfortunately, our culture does not encourage us in this project of understanding and compassion.

When is the last time you watched the news and thought, "What a great report. Now I really understand others better."

Even when that does happen, the revelation tends to be drowned out by people's opinions.

Without any understanding, we jump to what people should have done.

For those who lack a way of understanding the world's purpose such as that provided by religion, the threat of vulnerability feels even more pressing.

As a result, we have begun to elevate our opinions even above facts and want all the more for others to embrace them so that we will feel good about our own choices.

Opinions keep us *safely* barricaded from any challenges to our way of thinking and being.

We are more than willing to tell others what we think than what we feel because *that* would make us vulnerable.

I am not saying that we should have no opinions about matters, but that we should not let those opinions hinder us from seeing facts or others or allowing ourselves to be seen.

They should not keep us from understanding others or allowing them to understand us, from loving others or allowing ourselves to be loved.

They should not prevent us from being challenged by others.

Growth comes from doing the hard work of listening, not from being enthralled by opinions and those who would determine ours.

As Paul tells the Ephesians:

“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”

This is exactly what Christ does for those pursuing him to Capernaum.

He speaks the truth in love to those who want him to give them an easy way out so that they will not have to struggle, will not have to take risks, will not have to grow.

They want him to make them feel good without their risking anything.

Seeing this, he tells them, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

In other words, we are not here for ease, but for growth.

When they inquire about working for the food that endures, he explains, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

Even this has been theologically twisted to mean something easily achieved.

People have taken “belief in” and turned it into “belief that,” to accept something as fact.

“Belief in” means taking the risk to build a relationship with a person so that trust can grow, as when we say, “I believe in you.”

If we think that God is merely asking us to believe facts, when challenges come our way that those theological “facts” are unable to make meaningful, rather than questioning and struggling towards a more profound understanding of God, we simply feel shame, feel like failures.

“Belief that” seeks to avoid the journey, but it is through the journey that we learn and grow and build relationship.

There is a number of popular shortcuts to life’s challenges.

Some of us try not to care, not to have meaningful relationships in order to avoid being hurt, but that just spreads the loss over time.

We have lost in advance.

Some try to have power over others, the power to persuade, to manipulate, to control in order to keep themselves safe, but challenges persist that are beyond our control and we find that, when we have not invested in relationships in a way that provides us with companionship, there is no one there for us when we need them.

We have, in other words, surrounded ourselves with people who are in it for fun or gain, but not for sharing and compassion.

Very commonly, people seek to avoid engagement with life by imagining that they are superior, maybe not to everyone, but at least to *those* people.

Of course, each person has a different definition of who those people are.

We also find people who know better than trained experts, even better than God, like those who want to fix us.

If you look, you will see all around people who are more concerned about appearing superior than they are about compassion.

Just make sure there is not one in the mirror.

Still other people simply refuse to try because, if one does not try, then one cannot fail.

They do not want to live, but they do not want to die.

Sadly, we are made to feel like failures when we encounter a challenge.

Our culture tells us we should have avoided it and therefore now must hide it rather than deal with it.

We taught a generation of children not how to face life's challenges, but to avoid them.

In reality, of course, there is no way to avoid all challenges.

At best, we exchange one challenge for another.

It is true that some difficulties are brought upon ourselves, but many more are not.

Whatever their cause, dealing with them honestly and directly is the only way to grow.

All of these supposed shortcuts to invulnerability and ease—opinions, apathy, power, superiority, and withdrawal—are illusions that do not prevent challenges, but do prevent us from hearing others, from loving others, from dealing with what is.

They prevent us from growing, from thriving.

If you discover that you are avoiding something, it is your ticket to growth.

Rather than giving up something for Lent, try facing what is burdening you.

We can do the easy, useless thing, or the meaningful, difficult thing.

We either grow or die inside.

Growth requires vulnerability and struggle.

It requires putting aside opinions and listening to others, setting aside supposed shortcuts and addressing issues forthrightly.

When we hide from life, we hide from God,

and ultimately, only God can give us the bread that we need.

To receive that bread, we must embrace risk.