22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time C “Wheel of Fortune”

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Bishop Robert Barron in his book, Heaven in Stone in Glass writes about how in some Cathedrals in Europe, if you look closely, sometimes you can find the wheel of fortune depicted in the art. I have shared this with you before so you know I am not talking about a casino game or television program. The medieval wheel of fortune has something very important to say to us in the Spirit life. There are four interesting figures depicted around this wheel. The fellow on top says in Latin, “Reigno” “I am king, I reign”. There is an unfortunate chap on the side, falling down, who says, “Regnavi, I used to be king, I used to reign” Then at the bottom, there is this pitiable pauper who says, “sum sine regno, I have no power. I don’t reign.” Then, as we continue our journey up the wheel of fortune, there is this arrogant fellow who says, “Regnabo. I am going to reign. I will be king.” And the wheel of fortune goes round and round and round. If you are the pauper, well, that’s ok, there is only one direction from the bottom and that’s up. If you are power hungry, seeking fame, you may get it, but it won’t last. If you are master of the universe, well, good for you, you won’t be forever. Round and round the wheel will go, where it will stop for you, nobody knows. The neat thing about the wheel of fortune is: anyone who walks through the Church doors walks into a place where princes and paupers are both welcome. They can look up and place themselves somewhere on the wheel.

At the center of the wheel of fortune, however, who do you think we find? None other than Christ the King, himself! The invitation of this medieval artwork is, if you find yourself someplace on the wheel of fortune in life, going round and round, the invitation is to stop living on the edge of the wheel. Rather, go to the center and find Jesus, who alone transcends the wheel of fortune and the fickleness of life. Jesus Christ, we recall, was just as divine when he was born in poverty as he was in heaven. Jesus was just as much royalty on Good Friday and he was on Palm Sunday. No matter where Christ found himself in life, he transcended the wheel of fortune. The invitation is similar to St. Theresa of Avila who encourages us to discover the interior castle, where Christ dwells, who alone can help us transcend the fickleness of the wheel of fortune. And we see Jesus talking about the wheel of fortune in the Gospel today, don’t we? Jesus says, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” For those whose lives revolve around the wheel of fortune, this makes sense. Sirach tells us, “My child, conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than giver of gifts.”

Humility, it seems to me, isn’t false self-abasement. Humility isn’t making show of how lowly I am. Humility, it seems to me, is rather a kin to honesty. Being humble means standing on the humus, a word that means “ground”. A humble person is grounded, he or she has an honesty about who they are, that no matter where life takes
them, riches or poverty, they transcend the wheel of fortune by being centered, grounded in Christ. A great exemplar of this is Mother Teresa.

And as you know, many of our parishioners will be joining me in Rome for Blessed Teresa’s canonization next weekend. When you read about Mother Teresa’s life and read some of the letters she wrote, it is interesting how Mother Teresa revealed quite spectacularly that she placed herself at the bottom of the wheel of fortune in her relationship with Christ. Did you know that? She placed herself at the bottom! It seems incredulous to us, no? And it is clear from her letters that she wasn’t being disingenuously pious or “fake” in her humility. Her humility was real.

My take is, like many saints before her, God helped her to feel what the poor and dying she served felt like inside. With the heart of a mother, she felt for her children. One of Mother Teresa’s name sakes is St. Theresa of Avila. St. Theresa of Avila wrote how she once felt exactly what it meant to be in hell. How can this be, a saint experiencing the pains of hell? Her response to that suffering was something quite remarkable. She said that she would suffer hell for all eternity if this would save just one soul from that awful place. Theologian Hans urs Von Balthasar argued that St. Theresa mystically participated in the passion. She felt what Jesus felt on the cross. Jesus identified himself with us for the sake of our salvation, taking on our situation and the communal prayer of the human race, “My God, My God why have you abandoned me?”

That Mother Teresa felt this way at times, in my opinion, does not lessen her sanctity. On the contrary, I think her letters make her more human and more accessible to us. Newsflash, the saints are human, right? This is why their examples are worth following. How are we to follow their example if they are not human? And that brings us quite speedily to the point. In Mother Teresa’s darkest spiritual moments, ask yourself, how did she respond? As Mother Teresa found herself at the bottom of the wheel of fortune, how did she respond? Did Mother Teresa go to the casino like some of us might do? Did she tie one on in a bar so to forget her problems in a bottle? Did she take her Order’s credit card and max it out on a cruise in an attempt to escape reality? Feeling the way she did at times, did she try to spin her wheel of fortune in vain desperation in ways we often do? No. She responded to her place on the wheel with humility, grounded and centered on the terra firma of Christ the King. Existentially, she experienced herself at the bottom of the wheel, and behold, the last has become first, and so can we if we learn from her example.

A good spiritual reflection therefore this coming week could be: where am I currently on the wheel of fortune? Are you the king or queen of your mountain, on top of your game, well, that’s good, one day you won’t be. Are you the unfortunate pauper in the spiritual life, having every kind of bad luck? Well, sorry about that. The good new is the wheel of fortune can only go up from here. A more meaningful question we can ask ourselves is: How well am I grounded in Christ, regardless of where I find myself on the wheel of fortune?
My friends, a powerful doorway to a deeper relationship with Jesus is the holy Eucharist. In the Eucharist we see the all powerful, all knowing and eternal majesty of God fully and truly present to us in what appears to be simply bread and wine. That’s humility. The all powerful God loves us so much that he wants to be as close to us as food and drink. When we receive Christ into our hearts at Communion time, we receive an invitation. Where ever our lives are at right now. No matter if things are going well or going badly. No matter where we find ourselves on the Wheel of Fortune: God wants to be incarnate in our hearts through Holy Communion. No matter if we are on top of our game or at the bottom of our game, the invitation is to transcend to the center, and become grounded in a relationship with Jesus Christ, who alone transcends the fickleness of life.

Despite what Madison Avenue tells us or Wall Street promises us, the truth is every one of us here today will experience every side of the wheel of fortune at some point during life. Every one of us will be praised at some point or another. Every one will be wounded at some point or another. Even the risen Christ had wounds. His wounds however no longer hurt when he showed them to Thomas, did they? Quite the contrary, they became glorified wounds that had the power to heal other people’s wounds. And so, we can ask ourselves, “What is my wound?” What are the wounds I carry that require transformation by Jesus’ touch? On the edge of the wheel, there is no healing. The invitation this Sunday is to stop living our lives on the fickle periphery of life. When we stop living on the edge of life, we will start moving to life’s rich center as humble disciples and welcomed dignitaries of the Kingdom of God.