

## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

With unemployment high, and after observing Labor Day last weekend, many people who have work are especially grateful for it, and those who do not are hoping to find some. A good match is when people find a job they enjoy, one that uses their unique abilities and contributes to the lives of others. It's even better if their income helps not just themselves, but people such as a spouse and children, and if they can put something away for future needs and contribute to charities so that even more of society can benefit all from one job. Even without those financial benefits, people work because having a job feels better than not having a job. In my conversations, after people tell me what they do for a living, I sometimes follow up with, "Do you like your job?" Sometimes they just say, "It's a job"—which means "No." But they do it because something motivates them. Something inspires them even when they don't like the hours, the location, the coworkers, the boss, the duties or the pay. They'll still work because of some greater good. If we are fulfilling the reason why we live, we can put up with almost anything, even an unhappy job.

What motivates you? What do you live for? What would you die for? These questions drive today's second reading, the final passage from three months of excerpts from St. Paul's important Letter to the Romans. The Sunday lectionary gives us this heavy dose every three years. Paul has led us through a meditation on sin and grace, assuring us of redemption through Christ. He has shown that this new covenant is open to all—Jew and Gentile alike. Now near the end of the letter he gets reflective about what a person lives for and dies for.

In the last chapter, incidentally, which comes after the few verses we hear today, Paul sends greetings to his acquaintances who live in Rome. None of his other letters includes a list like this one. He lists by name over two dozen people, a couple of their relatives, and the owners of "house churches," homes where families gathered their Christian neighbors to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Sundays and to support one another. They used this network to sustain their faith. Paul had not yet visited Rome, but he did go there after writing this letter. He had been imprisoned in Caesarea and appealed his case to Rome because he was a citizen. Still in chains, he sailed around Sicily, traveled the Appian Way, a road that still exists today, entered the city, and was kept under house arrest. According to tradition, after the great fire of Rome in 64 AD, Nero blamed the Christians, and sentenced both Peter and Paul. As a citizen, Paul could not be put to death within the city walls. He was brought outside them to a secluded place where an executioner unsheathed his sword and severed the head of Saint Paul.

In the verses we hear today near the end of Paul's letter, perhaps surmising what lay ahead for him in Rome, he ponders what you live for and what you would die for. You know his answer. "If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die we are the Lord's."

This is worth remembering whenever we struggle to recall our motives. Why am I getting up out of bed? Why am I doing this homework? Why am I going to church? Why do I keep this job? The answer may be in what we live for, and what we would die for. Paul gave his life to seal the message he delivered at the end of his long and heartfelt Letter to the Romans.

Sunday, September 13, 2020