16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Imagine walking toward Jerusalem with other pilgrims many centuries before the birth of Christ. You stumble up the hill toward the holy city, and you see the crowded Temple abuzz with prayer. All of a sudden, you experience doubt: "Who am I to climb this hill and enter that holy place?" The leader of your group gathers everyone outside the Temple and puts this question to God for them: "Lord, who may abide in your tent, and dwell on your holy mountain?"

That is the opening line of Psalm 15. Our cantor sang the answer to that question in today's responsorial. Society rewards us for seizing opportunities, but this question shows countercultural deference to the holiness of God and the place where he dwells. It takes considerable courage to ask the Lord, "Who is worthy to enter here?" And you better be ready for the answer.

Here's the catalogue of behaviors the Lord expects: "Whoever walks without fault; who does what is just, and speaks the truth from his heart; whoever does not slander with his tongue. Who does no wrong to a neighbor, who casts no slur on a friend, who looks with scorn on the wicked, but honors those who fear the Lord. Who lends no money at interest, and accepts no bribes against the innocent." That's the list of those who may enter the Temple and pass time on the Lord's holy mountain. Psalm 15 concludes about the person who does all these things, "Such a one shall never be shaken."

Note that all the criteria deal with how we treat our neighbor: what words we say to their face or behind their back, what people we hold with scorn, which ones with honor, and how we manage our resources. As we sang in the refrain, "The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord."

You can transfer this question into other scenarios. Consider your home. In some way, you have probably dedicated your home to the Lord and have encountered his presence there, especially when you pray. It's his dwelling place too. On your way home, your pilgrimage back to that holy place, when you get to the front door, and you realize God chooses your home as a place to encounter you, you may experience doubt. "Who am I to climb through that door and enter this place?" You are channeling the ancient question, "Lord, who may abide in your tent, and dwell on your holy mountain?"

Or you can transfer this question to its biggest application: your eternal home. Our life is a pilgrimage toward the dwelling place of God. Imagine standing outside the gates of heaven and asking this: "Lord, who may abide in your tent, and dwell on your holy mountain?" Well, it's people who are fair to their neighbor.

We sang this psalm today because of two accounts of hospitality in the other readings: Abraham offers a foot bath, a shady tree, and a meal to his mysterious guests. Martha prepares food for Jesus while Mary prepares her heart to hear his words. They all give examples of kindness to a neighbor—both friend and stranger.

At the end of Psalm 15, we don't hear what happens. Did the pilgrims find themselves unworthy to enter after hearing the necessary criteria? Or did they enter in thanks and joy as those who are never shaken? They all get credit for this: They had the courage to ask the question: Who am I to enter here?