

Homily for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

September 7, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Wisdom 9:13-18b (Who can know the mind of God?)

Responsory: Psalm 90 (In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.)

Second Reading: Philemon 9-10, 12-17 (Welcome your former slave as a brother.)

Gospel: Luke 14:25-33 (The high cost of discipleship.)

I'm no recruiting expert, but it seems to me that if Jesus wants to attract disciples, he might need a more positive sales pitch. It doesn't seem wise to tell people to *hate* everyone who is dear to them, and even to hate their own life; to carry their own *cross*, which sounds like an invitation to be crucified by the Romans; and to renounce *all their possessions*. Who in his right mind would listen to that and say, "Sign me up, Jesus!"?

I wonder how St. Paul's friend, Philemon, would have responded if Paul had told him from the beginning, "Once you become a Christian, you will have to treat all other Christians as your brothers and sisters, *including any of your slaves* who convert to Christianity." By the time Paul makes that extraordinary request in his letter, Philemon is already a prominent leader in the Christian community and fully committed to the Christian way of life. He might be able to do as Paul asks, even though it will be a tremendous sacrifice on his part. But if Paul had foreseen this situation and explained it to Philemon as the *cost of discipleship* for a slave owner, I'm not sure that Philemon would have accepted the call.

I suspect that Jesus also was directing his message to people who were already committed to following him. He was trying to teach them an important lesson about the cost of discipleship. But, in order to interpret his message correctly, we need to understand his use of hyperbole. First-century rabbis often used exaggeration to get their point across. When Jesus says to "hate" the people closest to us and to "hate" our own life, what he really means is that we must *love him* more than anyone else, including ourselves. In biblical texts, to *love* one person and *hate* another simply means to *prefer* one over the other. Jesus is saying that we cannot be his disciples unless we put him first. He doesn't want us to hate anybody, but he *demand*s that we love him most of all.

Jesus' command to "carry our own cross" also needs to be understood metaphorically. The cross represents suffering and *voluntary sacrifice*, which are essential to the Christian way of life. If we wish to follow him, we must be willing to accept the hardships that come our way and the sacrifices that love demands of us. The last demand, likewise, needs to be taken with a grain of salt: "Anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." Although *some* people over the centuries have felt called to embrace a life of extreme poverty for the sake of the Kingdom, and the early Christian community in Jerusalem *did* offer up their personal property to support the poor among them, renouncing all our possessions has never been a general prerequisite for the Christian life.

What Jesus is doing in this passage is laying out three conditions for genuine Christian discipleship: *putting Jesus first*, above everyone else; committing to a way of *selfless sacrifice*, in

imitation of Jesus himself; and placing the pursuit of *heavenly treasures* above the pursuit of earthly riches. Let's look at those one at a time.

Many of our strongest relationships don't necessarily begin with Christ at the center. They come about through family bonds or physical attraction or shared interests, etc. But, if we want those relationships to flourish and to bear fruit, then we need to *learn* how to put Christ at the center. That means learning to see Christ in other people and appreciating how our shared connection with Christ can strengthen the human ties that hold us together. Jesus is calling our attention to the danger that many people face when they effectively squeeze him out of their relationships. Even the strongest bonds can begin to fray when that spiritual component is removed or ignored.

This is an especially important lesson for married and engaged couples. Young couples often pay too little attention to the role of *faith* in a healthy marriage. There are so many other things to consider, especially as they try to raise children, manage careers, and maintain a healthy marital relationship at the same time! Sometimes it can seem that there is little room for a personal relationship with God, much less a *shared* relationship with their spouse *and* God. Jesus' first admonition reminds us that our love for him must be our *highest* love. Our relationship with the Lord must be the foundation and source of our love for everyone else who is dear to us – whether spouses, children, parents, siblings or friends.

The cross is at the center of most close relationships, because we freely offer ourselves in sacrifice for the ones we love the most. Jesus' second admonition encourages us to embrace that selfless attitude *more generally*, to make it the hallmark of our daily lives. The parables about building a tower and attacking an enemy's army make this teaching more concrete. Jesus doesn't want disciples who merely talk a good game but then walk away from their commitments when the going gets tough. He wants us to imagine the sacrifices that might be demanded of us later and commit ourselves for the long haul.

When people are preparing for marriage or profession of religious vows or ordination, they have others who help them to reflect on the implications of their lifelong decision, to ensure that they're ready to make that leap of faith. But, Jesus reminds us that the Christian life itself is supposed to be a leap of faith. Regardless of our particular vocation, all of us are called to follow *wherever Jesus leads us*. From time to time, we may need to re-evaluate how well we're bearing the weight of our crosses and how certain we are that they're worth carrying. Hopefully, that self-examination will strengthen us to shoulder our cross again, with renewed zeal and conviction.

In addition to *taking up* our cross, we also need to *put down* the things that inhibit us from following Jesus. Attachment to material possessions seems to be one of the most common obstacles. The fact that Jesus brought up this theme so frequently in his teaching suggests that it has *always* been a cause for concern. The answer for most of us is not to renounce *all our possessions* and embrace a life of poverty, but to use this world's goods in such a way as to bring us *closer* to Christ and to one another.

Jesus' words today certainly grab our attention, but his demands are not meant to frighten us or to turn us away from him. Instead, their intent is to *strengthen our resolve* and to *clarify our commitment*, so that we may follow Jesus wholeheartedly.