

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

September 4, 2022

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.)

Please, don't panic after hearing that gospel. Like a typical first-century rabbi, Jesus is utilizing hyperbole (or exaggeration) to get his disciples' attention and to instruct them on certain key points. Clearly, he means business when he says repeatedly, "Anyone who does not do such-and-such cannot be my disciple." But, we must interpret the Lord's teachings correctly in order to understand what he's truly demanding of us as his disciples.

I assure you, Jesus does *not* want any of us to *hate* our brothers and sisters, or our parents and our children. Nor does he want us to hate ourselves. To "love" one person and "hate" another was a common biblical way of expressing *favoritism* toward one person over another. For example, in the Book of Genesis, the patriarch Jacob is said to "hate" his wife Rachel and "love" his other wife, Leah. What that really means is that he loved them both, but he had a special affection for Leah over Rachel. Likewise, Jesus is not demanding that we hate anybody, but rather, that we love him *more* than anyone else.

Next, I doubt that anyone, in ancient or modern times, would try to interpret "carry your own cross" literally. Obviously, Jesus would not require his disciples to seek crucifixion. Rather, he's speaking about what *his* cross represents – namely, suffering and voluntary sacrifice – and he's trying to connect those ideas with Christian discipleship.

The last demand also needs to be taken with a big grain of salt: "Anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." To our knowledge, Jesus never insisted that his disciples give away all their belongings in order to follow him. Though *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 all of their personal property to support the poor among them, renouncing all our possessions is *not* a general prerequisite for following Jesus.

What Jesus is doing here is laying out three conditions for genuine Christian discipleship: putting Jesus first, above everyone else; committing wholeheartedly 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 take those one at a time.

All authentic Christian relationships *should* have Christ at their center. Of course, most don't start out that way. Many of our most important relationships are family bonds. Others are initiated by a variety of merely human factors, including physical attraction and shared interests. But, if we want those relationships to flourish and to bear fruit in our lives, we need to learn how to put Christ at the center. That means seeing Christ in all of those 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 Jesus 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 spousal 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. His two parables make this teaching more concrete. Jesus does not want disciples who merely talk a good game but then walk away from their commitments when the going gets tough. That's like the person who plans an ambitious building project and then abandons it midway through construction, because he realizes too late that he never had the financial resources to finish the job. Jesus wants us to take a good, honest look at ourselves and ask just how committed we are to the Christian way of life. Just as a king does not go into battle without first assessing the strength of the enemy, so we should not embark on the journey of discipleship without first assessing the challenges ahead and the moral fortitude that will be required of us to face those challenges.

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 are ready to make their 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 hand over our lives to the Lord, to "carry our own cross," and to follow wherever he leads us. From time to time, we may need to re-evaluate how well we're bearing the weight of those crosses and how certain we are that they're worth carrying. We may even need to repent for the times that we have chosen the way of selfishness instead of the way of discipleship. This gospel can serve as a call to re-assess our blessings, our numerous challenges, and any resentments that we may feel, so that we may shoulder the cross again, with renewed zeal and conviction.

One way to take up our cross is to *put down* the things that inhibit us from following Jesus. Material possessions are not the *only* threat, but they *do* become a problem for many. 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, as we have heard in recent weeks, is not to sell everything and go live in a hollow tree in the forest, like our beloved St. Bavo. What's needed is perspective and honesty about how we can use this world's goods to bring us *closer* to Christ and to one another.

Jesus certainly got our attention today, but his demands are neither radical nor impossible. In fact, they are very wise and quite helpful for anyone who wishes to follow him.