

13-OT-A

Today we hear Jesus coaching his Apostles on how to preach the Gospel on their missionary journeys. He describes the cost of discipleship and the rewards of hospitality toward his disciples.

I know Jesus' words seem strange to us now: "Whoever loves his father or mother more than me isn't worthy of being my disciple. If you love them more than me, you can't be my disciple." But it would've been an absolutely shocking claim in the 1st century, because he not only turned the tables on social customs but on the Ten Commandments.

It's natural for mothers and fathers to love their children above all others. And yet Jesus also says: "you can't love your children more than you love me." The Jews would've known - if you go back to the Old Testament, the only person that ever demands that kind of love is the Lord himself.

And they would have known it because several times every day they would have prayed the great prayer known as the Shema. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

This is one of those times where Jesus doesn't declare "I AM GOD," but he does reveal that he is divine, because he's making a claim on the love of his disciples that only God himself could make.

Then Jesus gives them a perspective on the cross. These days, if someone gets ill or has financial troubles or are just having difficulties in life, we can encourage them to "take up your cross and follow Jesus," and that's a completely legitimate interpretation of Jesus' words. We are to lovingly and generously accept the suffering that comes to us as part of being united to Jesus who was crucified. That's what it means to be his follower.

Then he tells us that if we're entirely focused on keeping and preserving our natural life, we are actually going to lose it. But whoever gives up their natural life for his sake will find it. That is the paradox of the cross. It's by laying down his natural life on the cross and being willing to suffer and die that Jesus is raised to new life through his resurrection on the third day. And he will never die and he will no longer suffer. And that **supernatural** life is what he is promising to his disciples here.

The reason the cross is at the center of our Christian life is not because Christianity is some sadistic religion that takes joy in pain and suffering, but because Jesus - through the cross - transformed suffering into love - and that kind of love is the only way to heaven. There is no Christianity without the cross, and there is no discipleship without being willing to lose your life for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel.

After hearing this, you can imagine that the disciples might be a little afraid to go out on their mission. But Jesus then talks about the rewards that hospitality toward the apostles will bring. They get their authority from Jesus, so whoever receives them is actually receiving Jesus himself.

This is where the Gospel connects with the story of Elisha in our first reading. It's an Old Testament example of hospitality for a holy prophet of God. It's a kind of anticipation and background for Jesus's words about hospitality towards his disciples - prophets and holy men in the New Testament.

So we are called to practice hospitality not just to the poor and the stranger, but also to those who come bearing the Word of God to us. Remember, prophetic people don't always fit into official categories. They aren't always bearing an institutional stamp of approval. Yet God often comes to us through people who may be strangers. And sometimes we are the stranger who brings God's presence to others.

Jesus emphasized that he can be found among the thirsty, hungry, homeless, sick; the prisoner and the outsider. We remember that when we encounter Jesus this way, we open

ourselves to God's presence in our lives. Strangers aren't just those who come from the outside; they can be as near as a member of our family who needs a welcoming, listening ear and accepting presence.

In every session of our Small Church Communities, there is a sometimes-unpopular question: "In what ways have you noticed God working in your life since our last meeting?" These "God moments" reported by group members usually include the description of an ordinary encounter with someone who brought God into their life. If you're ready to notice it - it does happen a lot. I hope you can find some time to get involved with one of our groups beginning in September. Sign-ups begin next month for our 18th season of our Small Church Communities.

In the current changes within our Archdiocese, one of the strongest recommendations to parishes is to increase efforts to build small groups to help with the change process. The data show that membership in a small group increases a member's chances of strongly recommending their faith and their parish to others.

So, what have we learned from the Gospel this week? We still need to honor our father and mother, we still need to love our families and our children, but the first vocation of the Christian is to "follow Jesus."

Those who seek happiness in life by pursuing their own interests will never be fulfilled. Only by giving yourself to God and to others do we connect with the supernatural life God wants us to have. Amen?

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- Deacon Jack Schaefer