

The Cost of Discipleship

There is an old Chinese tale about a woman whose only son died. In her grief, she pleaded with a monk renowned for his holiness:

“What prayers, what magical steps do you have to bring my son back to life?”

Instead of sending her away or trying to reason with her, the monk said: “Fetch me a mustard seed from home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow of your life.”

The woman set out at once in search of the magical mustard seed. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door and said: “I’m looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me.” They told her: “You’ve certainly come to the wrong place;” and then began to describe to her the tragic things that had befallen their household.

The woman said to herself: “Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?” She stayed to offer would help and comfort she could, then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow.

But wherever she stopped, whether at hovels or palaces, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. Ultimately she became so involved in ministry to other people’s grief, that she forgot her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that *in her compassion*, she possessed the “magic seed” all along.

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Brothers and sisters, today’s Gospel is about our own journeys for the “magic seed.” Jesus commissions 72 (a symbolic number) messengers to go before him to prepare for his arrival in towns along his journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus instructs the 72:

1. To keep focused on the ways and values of God; travel light and accept the simple hospitality of those they visit; offer blessings and gratitude to their hosts.
2. To proclaim peace amid “the wolves”!
3. To offer hope and healing - not judgment or condemnation
4. To find satisfaction, not in what you have done God’s name; but rejoice in what God has done through you.

God used the grieving woman to bring peace and comfort to others who were grieving. She became what the spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, calls a “wounded healer.” Spiritual giants say we have the potential to be compassionate to others, to the extent we have suffered the passion in our own lives.

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Sisters and brothers, on this Independence Day weekend today’s Gospel challenges us – as Americans and Catholic Christians – with a critical question: What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus *today ... now*? For we who are descendents of the 72 mentioned in the Gospel?

Jesus commissions us, in the midst of our hurting and broken world, to proclaim peace – peace that is centered in embracing Christ’s attitude of servant-hood and his spirit of compassion. Peace that enable us to bring forth the good that exist within everyone, peace that is returned to us in extending the blessing of peace to others. This is what is meant when we greet one another with “Namaste.” The peace activist and spiritual writer, John Dear describes discipleship to Jesus today as “solidarity with the poor; adherence to nonviolence; love for everyone; being connected to some sort of Community... (we can’t be Christians alone) ... a parish, small faith group, etc.; public action for justice; contemplative prayer; Eucharistic celebration – as we’re doing right here, right now – and worship of the God of Life.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns in his landmark work: The Cost of Discipleship, shortly before he was executed by the Nazis, that our discipleship can become comfortable and cheap – sort of “Christianity-lite.” We can become a safe and silent group, avoiding controversy and risks, a Christianity that has lost its edge: a Christianity that is main-stream and does what is expected of us by the dominant culture; a Christianity that has become private, personal, with few social ramifications. ... Sort of like having the Bible in one hand and the Flag in the other. Being assimilated by the culture, rather than critiquing it... being salt, yeast ...having the courage to speak out.

It’s hard to imagine, but we know, ... Christian disciples obeyed Hitler rather than the Gospel and incinerated millions of human beings;

- Christian disciples enforced racist apartheid in South Africa;
- Christian disciples supported and carried out disappearances, torture and executions by death-squad soldiers in El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina and elsewhere;
- Christian disciples have no trouble today, supporting weapons of mass destruction and violence as means to stop violence.

Bonhoeffer warns that it’s easy to blindly privatize our faith, and in the process, become disciples of our culture rather than disciples of Christ.

Pope Francis pointed this out last Sunday when asked a question about the Orlando massacre, that the Church itself needs to apologize for its treatment and attitude toward our GL BT sisters and brothers; apologize for its treatment and attitude toward women; apologize for its turning the other way in the face of child sex-trafficking; and apologize for the blessing of weapons of war.

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Sisters and brothers, a clear reading of the Gospel challenges us to make our discipleship to Jesus count. It draws us to *let our lives be disrupted by Jesus' vision*. Bonhoeffer renamed the Christian vocation for our times as “costly discipleship” – we’ve got to take some risks, we need to stand up and be counted – even if it causes some personal upheaval and relinquishment of our security and blind allegiance to our culture, and even, our Church.

In other words: as individuals and as Parish and as Church, if we don't fee the cost of discipleship, we probably have yet to become true disciples

I'd like to share an example. Last weekend, we reflected in our Homily on the tragedy experienced in Orlando. Our LGBT Taskforce with prayer and discernment, were moved to formulate a letter to our Bishop expressing disappointment at the fact that the Church of Syracuse had remained silent in the face of this enormous tragedy – that touched many so personally. They shared their letter with our Pastoral Council, who affirmed it. I'd like share the letter:

*Most Rev. Robert J. Cunningham
The Chancery
240 E. Onondaga St.
Syracuse, NY 13202*

Dear Bishop Cunningham:

We are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Catholics, along with parents, friends and allies of the LGBT Community. We are writing you to express our dismay and sadness at the glaring absence of any statement of sympathy and support from our Diocese for the victims, their families and friends of the recent mass shooting in Orlando.

With this tragic event occurring in June, the month that has come to be celebrated in the U.S. as LGBT PRIDE Month, and coming as it did, on the eve of the Central New York PRIDE Week in Syracuse, we feel strongly that this is an important opportunity – especially in this Jubilee Year of Mercy – to show the Catholic Church of Syracuse in solidarity with all God's children – particularly, with God's LGBT daughters and sons. We believe a public articulation of caring and sympathy by you, as head of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse, would be a powerful sign of the kind of compassionate Church Pope Francis is continually calling us to be. Such a statement would also be in keeping with Pope Francis' timely words on Sunday: "The Church must say it's sorry for not having comported itself well many times, many times. I believe that the church ... must say it's sorry ... to this person that is gay that it has offended,' said the Pope."

By remaining silent with respect to this loss in the LGBT Community, we appear out of step with all people of good will who are genuinely horrified by this senseless tragedy in Orlando – and, indeed, by all prior mass shootings. By choosing to remain silent, rather than expressing sympathy for the victims and their loved ones; urging forgiveness for the troubled young man who committed this horrific act; reminding the public to refrain from blanket condemnation of all Muslims; and urging U.S. lawmakers to pass sensible gun legislation, we show ourselves to be an indifferent body with no credible follow-through on our teachings and belief in a God of unconditional love.

We sincerely urge you, our Bishop, to issue a public statement of sympathy, support, and love relative to the Orlando shooting. It is never too late to step forward in faith and show God's compassionate face in this very troubled world of ours.

Respectfully, All Saints Parish's LGBT Taskforce

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In conclusion, John Dear, in his book Jesus - The Rebel sums up the requirements of discipleship in today's world. I invite us to reflect on his words, as a sort of meditation, as we look into our own hearts:

“Discipleship to Jesus, according to the Gospel, requires that we love enemies, demand justice for the poor, seek liberation of the oppressed, visit the sick and imprisoned, topple the idols of death, resist militarism, reject consumerism, dismantle racism, create community, beat swords into plowshares, and worship the God of Peace. If we try to engage in these social practices, we will feel the *sting of discipleship* and the Gospel will come alive.

“On that day, we will know what it means to be Jesus' disciples.”

Amen!