

23rd Sunday in ordinary time (C)
September 7 & 8, 2013

All Saints Church
Rev. Fred Daley

Thy Kingdom Come

In today's Gospel, we can see that great crowds were traveling with Jesus that day. We can assume some were curious to see and hear him, because he was becoming well-known. Perhaps some wanted to be healed and all sorts of other reasons. They were flocking to Jesus in the same way that people go out of their way to see a TV celebrity or sports personality or head of state. I can still remember, when I was teenager, shaking hands with Bobby Kennedy at the Syracuse airport when he was running for Senate in 1964!

But Jesus suddenly turns and faces the crowd, and gazes intently at them, and then says: "If any of you come to me without hating your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even your very own life, you cannot be my disciple." ...Just imagine how many people walked away at that point!

Then Jesus said: "If you are not willing to carry your own cross and come after me, you cannot be my disciple." Those folks knew what Jesus was talking about – getting nailed to a cross was a popular method of capital punishment in those days. ...Just imagine how many *more* people walked away at that point! And then Jesus said: "Unless you are willing to renounce all your possession, you cannot be my disciple."

Maybe no one was left to hear that one...!

My sisters and brothers, we've heard these 'hard sayings' of Jesus all our lives, at Mass when they come up in the Liturgical Cycle and in our own, private reading of the Gospels. Just what was Jesus trying to say to the crowds that were following him and just what might Jesus be trying to say to us as his followers at the beginning of the 21st century? Obviously, everybody didn't walk away back then or we wouldn't be here today.... Just what was Jesus getting at? A couple of stories might help:

One day dad went to call Jamie to get out of bed and get ready for school and Jamie cried: "Poppa, I don't want to go to school today." Poppa said: "Jamie, give me one good reason why you shouldn't go to school today." Jamie said: "Because I *hate* school and all the teachers pick on me." Poppa said: "Jamie, I will give *you* three reasons why you must get out of this bed right now and get ready for school: #1: it's your duty!

#2: you're 42 years old! and

#3: you are principal of the school!

This story really does fit into the homily... but first – another story:

The author, John Sanford tells of Albert, who is in his early 40s, and is in a job that offers no creative, financial or promotional opportunity; he's deeply depressed and goes for some counseling. It becomes apparent that Albert is very intelligent and very gifted and creative but has given up all hope of further personal growth because he has an overwhelming sense of responsibility to care for his mother. Behind that sentiment hides the powerful personality of his domineering mother – a very emotionally manipulative person.

Now we're getting a hint of what Jesus was talking about. The problem for Albert is he does not "hate" his mother sufficiently. He is so emotionally bonded to her that he cannot become his own person.

(Our 42-year-old Jamie sounds emotionally like a child in kindergarten and may be beyond help... that may be the subject of another homily!)

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Biblical scholars tell us that the word "hate" in the Aramaic and Hebrew language can mean: *"detached from," "indifferent to," or, "not preferring."* In the context of today's Gospel, Jesus is saying: "You cannot be my disciple if you are too attached to your family, your possessions, or even, your very life." In other words, Jesus is saying in today's Gospel that: "You cannot be my disciple unless you are able to let go and let God."

Fr. Richard Rohr, in his newest book: Falling Upward, expands on this Gospel notion of "hating family." He says that many people are kept from mature religion, from truly being able to follow Jesus, because of the pious, immature and rigid expectations of religion put on us by our family, our extended religious family, and our culture. To break away from the way the majority of people in our culture and religion think – the expected way of thinking – is not easy and it wasn't easy for Jesus either. In Mark, Chapter 3, we see that when Jesus' family heard of the unconventional ideas that he was teaching they went out to take charge of him and bring him home because they thought he had gone mad.

Richard Rohr points out that one of the major blocks to truly becoming a disciple of Jesus (and we could say, truly becoming the person God intends us to be), what Thomas Merton would call our "true self" is:

"...the collective, the crowd, our society, or our extended family. Some call it the 'crab bucket syndrome:' you try to get out of the bucket, but other crabs just keep pulling you back in. What often passes for morality or spirituality in the vast majority of people's lives is the way everybody they grew up with thinks. Some would call it conditioning or even, imprinting. Without very real inner work, most folks never move beyond it."

Richard Rohr points out that it takes a huge push, much self-doubt and some degree of separation from people, to find our own soul and our own destiny, apart from what mom and dad and culture and religion always wanted us to be and do. To move beyond family of origin stuff, church stuff, cultural stuff, flag and country stuff is hard work.

But, my brothers and sisters, Jesus pulls no punches: we *must* “hate” our home base in some ways, in order to make choices beyond it.

It’s interesting that the great teachers and founders of religions – Buddha, Joseph, Moses, Jesus, Sufi saints. Francis, Clare, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, the four church women killed in El Salvador – all leave home, go on a pilgrimage to far off places – not just physically, but they move away from all that is familiar, all the validations, securities, illusions, prejudices, smallness that home and family and religion and nation can imply; and how often it is their parents, the established religion of their time, spiritual authorities and even civil authorities who fight against them.

What does all of this mean for us gathered here today as followers of Jesus in the beginning of the 21st century? In our personal lives, Jesus is telling us that we have to get out of the crab bucket, out-of-the-box, if we are going to become the person God intends us to be. But what does all this mean for our church, our culture, our global village? In light of the crisis in Syria that we reflected on last week, we are reminded that our age is characterized by problems of life and death, not only for individuals, not only for whole nations, races and civilizations, but a matter of life and death for the entire human race. We are aware of the problems that threaten the survival of humankind on this planet: militarism, population explosion, the destruction of the environment, the dominant system’s goal of profit over people, resulting in the addiction of greed, where few in the world have so much, and the many have so little, and the list goes on. To the extent that we are not in denial, we are aware too that the traditional, conventional methods of solving these problems just don’t seem to be working anymore (if they ever did) and that organized religion has been of very little help, and in fact, in some cases has tended to make matters worse.

My sisters and brothers, Albert Nolan in his classic book: Jesus Before Christianity, tells us that it just so happens that Jesus of Nazareth faced a world in crisis – even if it was on a much smaller scale. He lived in an age when it seemed that the world was about to come to an end. And it was in reading the signs of his time that Jesus set out on his mission. With what was an unparallel leap of creative imagination, Jesus saw a way out, and even more than a way out, Jesus saw the way to the total liberation and fulfillment for humanity; a way out and total liberation of that world – and here’s where the rubber meets the road – which requires radical and dramatic changes in the values, concerns, thought-patterns and ways of life in the global village. And Jesus called this new way of living: the realm of God, the reign of God, the world as God intended it to be.

This new way of living, is described in page after page of the Gospels: we are living in the realm of God when we love every person and all people without exception; we are living in the realm of God when we work for justice for all people. We are in the realm of God when our hearts go out in compassion to the millions who are starving, oppressed, dehumanized and rejected. We are living in the realm of God when we recognize and reject the forces that are working against humanity. We are living in the realm of God when we refuse to let the values of money, possessions, prestige, status, privilege and power become gods in our lives. We are living in the realm of God when we reject violence and militarism as ways to solve problems.

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My sisters and brothers, the task for us as Christians in 2013 is the same task that emboldened the work of the Apostles: to fall in love with Jesus and to fall in love with his mission; to absorb and embrace his recipe for the salvation of the world and to join with other people of goodwill to make this vision a reality. To the extent that the vision of Jesus becomes a reality (and, by the way, the essence of this vision is contained in most of the world's religions to an amazing degree), and despite the magnitude and complexity of our problems today, humanity can be and will be liberated from evil, misery, frustration, fear and injustice. And we pray for the coming of that world every time we pray the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

I'd like to conclude by sharing one of my favorite prayers, from the Jesuit Pedro Arrupe:

"Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."

Amen.