

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus First”

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Of all the Sunday Gospel readings we encounter during the three-year cycle, this can be a very tricky one to preach on. Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” This is the same Jesus who spoke about love of God and neighbor. He even told us to love our enemies. Now we have a commandment to hate those who are closest to us. What gives? Jesus also challenges us, “...anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.” I like possessions. Any of you like possessions? This is the same Jesus who told us not to bury our treasure in the sand and gave us parables like the pearl of great price. However, most controversial of all, Jesus tells us that unless we pick up our cross and follow him, we cannot be his disciple. Think about what he is saying. The cross is an instrument of torture that kills people. Any takers? Raise your hand. The claim Jesus is making here, of course, is that following him is a more important value than even prolonging our lives. That is a very bold thing to say. Jesus is driving stakes into the heart what most every person who has ever lived values most; our love of family, the love for the things we own and even the love for life. What are we to make of it?

My take on it is this. When we are sleep walking through life and need to be awakened, we sometimes simply need a slap in the face, something to wake us up. This is what Jesus is doing to us here with his words. The rhetorical device he is using is called hyperbole. It is exaggerated speech that is meant to shake us into a new spiritual consciousness. Clearly there is nothing wrong with loving our mothers, fathers, or spouse and children. Clearly there is nothing wrong about valuing our lives. However, Jesus is making the bold claim that a relationship with him is better than even these good things. Why can he make that claim? He can make that claim because with enough passage of time, all the good things we enjoy the most, like our life, the people we love and all our possessions, all of it will ultimately be taken away. It is inevitable.

You see, here is the inconvenient truth about life that we sinners tend to intentionally forget or otherwise choose to self-medicate to avoid thinking out it. Without any choice in the matter, we are born into this world, we live for as long as the time we have, and then we eventually die. While we live, if we are lucky, we develop beautiful and loving relationships with others along the way. Some of these relationships help define who we are and our priorities, like our relationships with family. We discover in life however that even the closest relationships we value are very fragile. Because we are mortal, eventually we will stand at the grave of the people we love the most if they don't stand at our grave first. What Jesus is telling his disciples in our Gospel reading is that only he has power over sin and death, so following him ought to be our priority. When Jesus becomes our priority, our relationships with ourselves and with family members will find their proper place. We also start treating the people in our lives with greater love and respect. Here is a great way to understand this. Do you want a good strategy on how to ruin your relationships with family members and friends? Treat them like possessions!

With enough time, they will hate you for it. When we put Jesus first in our relationships with family and friends, recognizing the people in our lives as gifts instead of possessions, are relationships become far better.

An even better way to understand what Jesus is getting at, anyone who has ever been prepped for surgery at a hospital knows that at a certain point in that process you come to realize that you don't even own the hospital gown you are wearing. Moments like that in life can feel like a slap in the face. These moments wake us up and remind us that, at the end of the day, the only thing on earth we really own is our faith. If you don't believe me, count all the times you ever seen a hearse towing a U-Haul. How many of you ever seen a hearse towing a U-Haul. Not too many of you I would imagine. Because we cannot take anything with us, when you are in a hospital room prepping for surgery or facing your own mortality, or the mortality of a loved one, there comes a point when we finally realize that faith is the only possession worth having. If we do not have faith in those moments, that would be the worst experience of impoverishment imaginable. Our Gospel reading this weekend is therefore very good medicine. It is good to be reminded that in all things we need to put Jesus first in our lives even when this also means we need to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. When we put Jesus first, all our possessions, relationships and life experiences will find their proper place. When we put Jesus first, we even start living our lives more for others than ourselves. When we put Jesus first, we become more and more generous to those in need and become less indifferent. When we put Jesus first, life becomes far more beautiful and worthwhile than we could ever experience otherwise. As Christians, we put Jesus first because Jesus in fact put us first before all other consideration. He alone is our way, our truth, and our life.