

Homily for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
September 8th, 2019
By Deacon Bill Pitocco

Jesus is making two things clear to us today. First, he wants us to have no illusions about following him. His path is a hard path. Our nature is fallen, and to get back up again, even with his grace helping us, is going to be hard. It will involve self-sacrifice and suffering: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." That is the obvious lesson in this Gospel passage. We can never let ourselves forget it.

But there is another lesson too, equally worth our attention. Jesus is teaching us that following him involves more than feelings and ambiguous inspirations. We are supposed to use our minds, to put our creativity and intelligence to work in the adventure of following Christ. This is clear from the examples Jesus uses. The builder and the warring king had to channel their enthusiasm through the filter of reason.

Christians must do the same. The emotional excitement that comes from a retreat or a pilgrimage or a special grace-filled encounter with the Lord is like the blossoms on a cherry tree. They bloom quickly and they immediately give off a sweet aroma, but then you must persevere all summer before the fruit matures.

Love, even the lasting love that comes from friendship with Christ is similar. It is often born amidst intense emotions, but it matures through

sweat and suffering, and those can only be endured with the aid of reason and conviction - both of which go deeper than mere passing emotions. Following Christ is more than following a whim; it is a long-term project that deserves and engages the whole person.

My father's parents were immigrant Italians and quite poor. My mom's parents were second generations and doing very well - both sets of grandparents were at Christmas together one year and my Mom's father gave my grandmother a mink coat. Later that night, when my dad's parents got back to their house, my dad's father gave my grandma a gift of her own. He looked a little disenchanted and told her that even though it wasn't a mink coat he knew she had wanted this gift for some time.

For forty-five years he worked as a machine operator to provide food, clothing, heat in the cold Northeast and the shelter of a 600 square foot apartment. For the same 45 years, she cooked the meals, cleaned the house and "hand" washed clothes; they raised a child together, they experienced hardship and joys together, they had learned to trust each other, to have faith in each other and to hope in each other! When she opened that gift, 45 years after their wedding day, she immediately got up and hugged my grandfather and said, "I love you"! She was so happy to have been given a centerpiece for their kitchen table that she had always wanted; a beautiful white and gold bowl filled with plastic fruit.

I use that story because it contains a deep truth. True love is more than feelings, true love is about a lifetime of giving oneself. The same goes for our love for Christ. If we want to become mature Christians and grow in wisdom and grace, it needs to become a real friendship that engages and affects our whole lives. To follow Christ means to work hard building up his Kingdom. To follow Christ means to work hard conquering ourselves!! To follow Christ means to roll up our sleeves and get down to business.

We often fail to utilize our reason and creativity in our own growth in holiness. Doctors are always reading up on the latest medical research. Athletes are constantly striving to maximize their performance. Professors never tire of refining their expertise. Can we say the same about Christians striving to be more holy; to be more like Christ? Too many of us, unfortunately, are satisfied with what we have already achieved in the area of holiness.

Throughout my schooling and first 3 years as a Deacon I can tell you have become much holier – but I also can tell you that now that I clearly recognize what holiness is supposed to be, I still have a lot of work to do!! But I also know that Christ has so much more for me to discover and become! And it's the same for all of us! He just needs us to do our part, and that includes using our intelligence and creativity to identify the habits of mind, heart, and body that are inhibiting our spiritual growth, and to work on replacing them with habits that will spur our spiritual growth.

We are called in this life to identify the root of our sins and failings. Usually it's one of the seven deadly sins; Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Laziness, Anger, Envy and Pride. We are called to identify the most common manifestations of that root sin in our daily lives. What does it look like and when does it show up? Are we like Philemon, is there someone who wronged us that we need to welcome back? Are we like Onesimus, running away from a problem or problems that we need to face? Are we filling our minds with the word of God and using it, like Paul, to be the peacemakers!

Our job is to identify these and choose to form habits that will reverse those manifestations and gradually loosen our root sin's grip. Because they are like giant weeds in the garden of our souls!! They steal the nutrients that are meant to feed virtues like wisdom, courage, and generosity - the kind of virtues that produce interior peace and lasting happiness. The point is that the Lord doesn't want to do all the work for us. His grace is the most powerful weed killer ever invented but he wants us to do our part too.

In a few moments he will enter our bodies and our hearts and fill us with his holy presence! A moment of intense emotion and excitement. As we receive him today, promise him that this week we will apply our intelligence and creativity to be a better Christian: that we will do the work we are called to do to be holier. All he needs is for us to do our sincere best; he'll take care of all the rest.