

Living with Contradiction
Homily for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Gospel MT 10:37-42

Jesus said to his apostles: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple— amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."

By Deacon Joe Bell

A few weeks ago I posted a cartoon by Len Jones on my Facebook page. The cartoon shows a man in the Bible section of a bookstore telling the salesperson, "What I really need is a translation that won't leave me feeling guilty, convicted, or in need of making some kind of decision." My brother, Chris, who is a smart aleck (it runs in the family) responded, "One without contradictions would be nice, too. Although not necessary." Now, my brother knows the Bible well. In fact, he is very smart and I don't think I would have passed some of my college courses without his help. But just knowing what the Bible says is simply academics. It would be like reading love letters that were not written to you. You know what the lovers say, but it doesn't affect your life; the words don't speak to your soul. My response to my brother was, "Not even life is without contradictions. Who would want to read a book like that?"

You see, the Bible is not simply a collection of books that tell us what to do, or what not to do, as many people suppose. The books of the Bible were written out of the deep and complex human experience of a varied people and diverse culture who, like us, struggle with the complications of life. The Bible doesn't present us with easy answers because the perplexing questions of life cannot be answered just like that.

My brother's veiled accusation, that the Bible is full of contradiction, is spot on. And the Bible simply refuses to flinch from those contradictions. Perhaps we pause when it comes to contradiction because we prefer easy answers. But the scriptures refuse, unapologetically, to overlook or dismiss the contradictions of life.

But if the Bible is, as some have described it, a love letter from God, then the contradictions in the Bible are meant, like everything else in the romance of God's communication with his creation, to speak deeply to our souls. And so, like Jesus' use of hyperbole, or exaggeration, his style of teaching through parables, his often mystic language in John's gospel, the abundance of parallelism, or the age old convention of using common folk to confound the powerful, Jesus uses contradictions to speak to our souls.

So, as in today's gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Or what about, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Aren't we taught to love others? Don't the Commandments tell us to honor our fathers and mothers? Is Jesus then telling us that we can abandon our parents in preference to Him? Can we choose between loving Jesus and loving others? And if we are told that we are unworthy if we love our closest relatives more than we love Jesus, then what does that say about our love for the poor, or the immigrant, or the sick, or the prisoner, who are often strangers? And herein lies the mystery of love hidden in this contradiction.

Love is a cross. And whoever does not take up his or her cross and follow after Jesus is not worthy of Jesus. Our love for our fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and for all the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters will always be imperfect, will always be tainted by selfishness and perhaps even pride, if it is not first and foremost motivated in us by the love of Jesus Christ. The cross, the total self-giving of Jesus Christ for each one of us, is our model, our standard of love for our families, our friends, for strangers, for the outsider and even for our enemies.

This is exactly why Jesus says, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Here is a contradiction for you; we spend and spend on our desires and our whims, hoping that things will fulfill us. The experience of life shows us that things will never make us whole or complete, yet we continue to pursue the disordered pleasures of this life. Jesus shows us a better way. Lose those things that you think satisfy you. Let go of those selfish tendencies and attitudes for his sake, and then you will

find real fulfillment in life. What Jesus is asking us to do is to lose those things that we think make for an authentic life. For Jesus, an authentic life is one that accepts our imperfections, seeks the good of others, indeed, a life that can be lived with contradictions.

Well, if you're weak like me; I can't even say no to a bowl of ice-cream, what Jesus is asking is impossible. But let's look at how Jesus' command to take up the cross is contrasted. What does Jesus mean by "take up your cross" or "lose your life." At the end of today's reading he says, "And whoever gives only a cup of cold water

to one of these little ones to drink because the little one is a disciple—amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward." In Greek, the word little ones is actually "mikron." We use that word to mean something very small; microscopic. Little acts of kindness can be a cross to carry and a very effective way to lose my life. When I hold back on criticizing someone, when I choose to stop and acknowledge that homeless person, when I answer back with a kind response to a criticism on social media, when I choose to do without a simple pleasure for the sake of someone else, when I consider the point of view of someone else, rather than thinking I'm always right, these, and so many other little things can be ways to bring a cup of cold water, can be ways to learn to love the way Jesus loves, can be ways to find my life by losing it.

Esther de Waal, an Anglican Benedictine says this in her book *Living with Contradiction*, "Here I am faced with a relationship with God which is asking me to be open to him in whatever way he chooses to reach me. This asks me to be vulnerable to his word minute by minute. If I am to live this way it prevents me from imposing any neat or safe pattern on my life. I have to learn to live with the contradictions and try to see that at their heart lies the mystery of God, a God who is both certain and unpredictable, utterly safe and yet also surprisingly explosive" (136).

