

Homily OT 23 – (Year C) – September 8, 2019

WIS 9:13-18B; PS 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14 AND 17; PHMN 9-10, 12-17; LK 14:25-33

There's a famous quote that's attributed to **St. Francis of Assisi** that we've probably all heard before:

“Preach the Gospel at all times; use words when necessary.”

There are **two major problems** with this quote.

The **first** is that—according **even** to **Franciscan** historians—there is not a single shred of evidence, anywhere, that *St. Francis himself ever said this*.

Secondly, the problem with such a *vague* saying as **this one** is that it **encourages** us human beings—with our **fallen human natures**—to *rationalize* cowardly Christian behavior. While the **intention** of the quote is **commendable**—namely, that our **Christian life should** obviously **exemplify Gospel virtues in a way that speaks for itself**—the fact is that too many Catholics interpret it to mean:

“Thank God I never have to talk about my faith and make myself or anyone else uncomfortable!”

Here's **another** example of how a **well-intentioned proposal**, which—when confronted with the reality of human weakness—has had **undesirable**, but quite **predictable, unintended consequences**:

Prior to **Vatican II**, Church law stated clearly that it was a serious sin to eat meat on Friday—not **just** Fridays during **Lent**—but **any** Friday of the year—**except** when a Solemnity fell on a Friday.

After Vatican II, the Church left the practice of **Friday abstinence** in place but removed the **legal penalty of sin** for eating meat on Friday, hoping to

encourage Catholics to abstain from meat on Fridays **out of their love for Jesus** rather than out of their **fear of punishment**.

The Church no doubt wanted to shift Catholic hearts from **obligation** to the “**honor system**”. The problem is that fallen human nature—yours and mine—is not always so **honorable**.

Now, instead of Catholics saying, “**Now I get to show Jesus gratitude, who gave us his flesh to save me, by abstaining *voluntarily* from meat on Fridays as an act of love rather than out of fear of punishment**” the average Catholic just said, “***Great! Now we can eat meat on Fridays!***”

The fact is, we are **still** called to practice **Friday penance** all throughout the year. But if you ask the average Catholic today, they’ll probably just tell you, “**Catholics can eat meat on Fridays**” ... without any qualification...or any reference to Jesus’ self-sacrifice. This laxity is rampant even among **priests** today, many of whom will **wolf down a Whopper** on a Friday without giving Christ’s Passion a second thought.

That’s the problem with **vague formulations**. Our weakened wills **love loopholes** and will go to **great lengths** to interpret the tenets the Christian faith in such a way as to **minimize the cost** of following Jesus.

Jesus, on the other hand, is anything **but** vague. In fact, his words are often **so starkly clear** that we are left with the **opposite** problem.

Instead of looking for the easy way out, as we tend to do with **imprecise** formulations; when Jesus speaks, we wonder if it’s even **possible** to meet his standards.

This passage from **today’s Gospel** is a perfect illustration:

Great crowds were traveling with Jesus, and he turned and addressed them, “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. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Lk 14:25-27)

A **mature** disciple will struggle to reconcile the **4th Commandment** —to *honor your father and mother*—with what **seem** to be the contradictory words of *Jesus himself* when he says we **can’t** come to **him** unless we *hate Mom and Dad*.

Why does Jesus speak like this?

Well, for starters, Jesus is a distinctly **Jewish** teacher...and the Jewish teachers of Jesus’ time used **hyperbole**—*exaggerated statements that seek to make a clear point without being taken literally*.

Jesus wants to show the **full cost** of being a disciple. So, he **rocks our world** with words that get our **attention**.

Now, if you ask the average person what the **opposite** of *love* is, most will say, “**hate**”. The point that Jesus makes is that our **esteem for**...and our **obedience to him** must be **so radical** that even the demands our most important **earthly** relationships must take a **back seat**.

What more stark distinction could Jesus have made, **then**, than that between “**love**” and “**hate**”?

And yet, we must be clear. Loving Jesus more than one’s family does not **necessarily** demand a break with one’s family. *But it might!*

Bottom line: It’s a question of **priority**.

I am amazed, in just the past couple of weeks, for example, by how many parents have lamented to me about how their **non-practicing Catholic kids** are making decisions that force *them*—the **practicing Catholic parents**—to choose between their **family** relationships and their **faith**. This is becoming more and more common these days—as the **spirit of entitlement** takes over more and more souls—and those who are on the receiving end of it know just how **gut-wrenching** it can be.

The most common example is a Catholic son or daughter getting married outside the Catholic Church and expecting their parents not only to **approve** their decision...but **also** to **attend the wedding**. What makes this so gut-wrenching for the faithful Catholic parents is **not** that they “**hate**” their kids—but precisely that they **love** their kids...**AND** they love *Jesus*.

Let’s pause here for a moment to revisit Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel:

Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. (Lk 14:27)

I’m always mildly amused by Christians—**Catholic or Protestant**—who, when **not** undergoing a severe trial in their life, will casually say, “**I just want to carry my cross and follow Jesus.**” I’m too polite to actually say what I *really* think in such moments...but here’s what I *would* say if **push** came to **shove**:

That’s a nice sentiment, and if Jesus had said, “Whoever does not carry his own *COMFORTER* and come after me cannot be my disciple”, then I would have no doubt about what you say. But the cross...the *real* cross? Do you *not* remember what Jesus himself did and said in the Garden of Gethsemane as he foresaw the *full weight* of the Cross that would be placed on *his* shoulders the next morning?

Let’s jump over to **Matthew’s Gospel** to jog our memories:

...Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to feel sorrow and distress. Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.” He advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt 26:36-39)

So, Jesus—*in his real human nature*—wavered...if only for a **moment**. Jesus—*God in the flesh*—had **fears** and **doubts**. And yet the **naïve**, **overconfident** Christian today says:

“I just want to carry my cross and follow Jesus!”

Now let’s go back to the question of **sons and daughters forcing their parents and other family members to choose between faith and family relationships**. The conscientious Catholic parents whose kids are getting married outside the Church, are torn apart inside. They want to support the sons and daughters they love, but the kids are asking them to endorse their **public scandal—*getting married outside the Church***.

Effectively, this is the message kids are communicating to their parents:

“I know what you believe, but this is what *we* want...and if you don’t *put your relationship with Jesus aside* and come to my wedding, then you don’t love me.”

They don’t necessarily **say** it that way. But **make no mistake**—that’s **exactly** what it *means*.

When parents ask me what they should do in such situations, I always begin by saying, **“I can only tell you how *I* see the situation. *I* cannot *tell* you what to do. Ultimately, *you* have to make the decision.”**

I also assure them that I'm not just judging their situation from the sidelines, comfortably untouched **personally** by such a dilemma. I have had to make difficult decisions like this **at least three times** in my own family, so I know what it costs to be forced to choose between my faith in Jesus and the expectations of family members.

The bad guy...or gal...in these situations...is **not** the faithful Catholic pinned into a corner. The culprit **is** the family member who is not only unwilling to put Jesus first in **their own** life, but who also expects **others** to **conform** to *their path of least commitment*.

I know a faithful Catholic couple—here in this parish—who sat each one of their kids down when they reached high school age and said to them:

Our highest priority is our relationship with Jesus, so please don't ever force us to choose between you and him, especially by getting married outside the Church and expecting us to attend the wedding. *We won't do it.* We're telling you this now, so you won't put us in that position and then get mad at *us* for standing firm in our faith. If you ever do this, *you* will be responsible for the consequences, not us. Do you understand?

This, my brothers and sisters, is what it looks like to “*carry one's own cross and follow Jesus*”.

Jesus certainly does not want us to hate our families.

But he does **not** want us to love them **without** the *truth*, either.

If Jesus himself blinked at the prospect of carrying **his** cross, it should not surprise us that **we mere mortals** are ready to flee from **our own cross** when we realize just how much it weighs.

Jesus' words are extremely challenging, **not** because he calls us to **hate** our family. Jesus' words are extremely challenging precisely because he calls us to **love** our family...*in the fullness of truth*.

The irony in all this is that if we **do** carry our own cross and follow Jesus, precisely **because** we love him—and **because** we love our families enough to “**preach the Gospel at all times**” *by the way we live our Christian faith*—the irony is that we may nevertheless be labeled “**haters**” because we don't conform to the twisted ways of the world...or to the **entitlement attitude of fallen-away family members**.

Jesus tells us that authentic love for others must first be **rooted in love for him**, and that we may occasionally find ourselves forced to choose between Jesus and our loved ones as a result.

Remember that Jesus also said this:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Mt 10:34-39)

For a **faithful disciple** there are no naïve illusions about the true cost of carrying our own cross and following Jesus.

But there is also a clear understanding that following Jesus with this kind of **unshakeable fidelity** *is* the path of **authentic love**, because it is the trail that **Jesus himself blazed** for us...by his **words**...and his **actions**...and his **uncompromising love** for us.