

Sermon – September 9, 2007

PUTTING GOD FIRST

This morning's Gospel brings us Jesus at his most radical and most provocative.

Luke reports that “large crowds” were following Jesus as he journeyed toward Jerusalem - perhaps including those he had healed, those he had attracted by his inclusive parables of the invitations to the messianic banquet, and perhaps also “groupies” who were expecting to be spectators at a triumphal march into Jerusalem which would end with the overthrow of the Romans.

Instead, they got a stem message on the very high standard expected of **disciples**, as opposed to mere followers. Disciples must put love of Jesus ahead of love of family, ahead of love of possessions and even ahead of self-preservation at all costs: when Jesus said people must “carry the cross and follow me,” crosses were not items of jewelry but means of execution. The most extreme language Jesus is quoted using in this passage (about “hating” one's parents) is a Semitic idiom not to be taken literally. Genesis 29:31-33 and Deuteronomy 21: 15 use “hate” to mean “less preferred”, and the parallel passage to this in Matthew's Gospel, 10:37, quotes Jesus as saying - to the 12 disciples, not to “the crowds” - “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” *That can be taken literally.*

Nevertheless, as in the Gospel passage from two weeks ago (Luke 13 :22-30), Jesus is making it extremely clear that just giving him lip service or an occasional thought does not qualify someone to be a *disciple*. Discipleship requires discipline and setting priorities, and Jesus wants to be our first priority.

Relatively few followers of Jesus since the first centuries have taken this passage completely literally - St. Francis comes to mind - but Jesus' apostles and other core followers did, and without their extreme faith, we would not be Christians.

Moses also was very clear with the people of Israel about the temptations to worship other gods besides the one true God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, sustained them physically and spiritually in the wilderness, given them the sacred Law and inspired leaders as well. As soon as the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River, they would be tempted to adopt the customs of the local farmers as they became farmers themselves: namely, pagan fertility cults and all the abominations which went with them.

Now, it's not likely that too many Americans currently feel tempted to worship Baal, or Chemosh, or Molech, or Astarte, some of the pagan deities whose cults seduced even the likes of Solomon.

However, if a person's "god" is *whatever they put at the center of their life*, Americans in the 21st Century *are* tempted to worship wealth, or fame, or power, or popularity, or "success", or the people they think have those things. Now, *none* of these things are bad in themselves - only if any of them are the most important thing in a person's life.

Power as such isn't bad, but when it is placed first in the place of God, things get *sacrificed* to it just as surely as animals (and people) got sacrificed to the ancient pagan deities. People who worship power are likely to sacrifice principle - and sometimes the careers of other people: "You're takin' the fall" is not just a line from a Bogart movie, it's a practice by some powerful people who want to stay powerful no matter what it costs - someone else. Some people even use their power in ways that ends up destroying their own careers. Not all politicians in New Jersey seem to have gotten this message yet, even with a very effective and busy US Attorney prosecuting corrupt officials.

People who worship wealth have greed as their creed, and may sacrifice their family time, ethics and laws on the altar of their worship of wealth.

And so it goes. Even people who put family ties at the *center* of their lives court disaster by treating as God someone or some people who are *not* God. If a family member knows that you really would "do anything for that person", that warps *both* the family member *and* you. What, exactly, might he or she ask or demand that you do next if you are really acting as though you *worship* them - i.e., put them (and their wishes) first above any other considerations? That risks turning them into a dictator and you into a slave - as some families which revolve around an addict can attest.

Only God is God. Only God, of all those we love or could love, *always* has our true best interests at heart - and only God is able to *deliver* what is always in our true and ultimate best interest. Salvation means reconciliation with God and ultimate healing within ourselves, between ourselves and others and with the whole creation. No one else can deliver ultimate and permanent healing, ultimate bliss, ultimate relationship *with* the ultimate font of love, power and righteousness in the universe. Only God can deliver.

Of course, worshipping the only one who is worthy of worship has other advantages. If we (literally) idolize *a person*, we may someday be shocked and let down to discover that the person had used steroids, lip-synched a concert, used an uncredited ghost-writer, plagiarized, or otherwise was a fraud. Mortal, fallible human beings all, to some degree or another, commit sins - and the best ones may be among the most vulnerable to the sin of pride.

Loving "success" first - perhaps the most American of all idolatries - will actually frustrate us. Have you noticed that, over the years, someone always seems to keep "moving the goal posts back" so that "success" is defined differently than it was defined when we were younger? Read Money magazine and the income those writers consider to be a mark of "success" has risen far faster than inflation. In addition, loving "success" first and foremost may make us feel hollow if we think we have achieved it; "is this all there is?" is a question a lot of people ask. And if people *don't* feel hollow after worshipping success, it may be because they don't realize how shallow they've become.

The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis once wrote to a friend, “It is not your business to succeed, but to do right: when you have done so, the rest lies with God.”

To me, that's a relief as well as a challenge. What do you think?

Loving God first will always stretch and challenge us. In today's Epistle, St. Paul urges the recipient of his letter, the slave-owner Philemon, to act totally contrary to his culture and Roman law and step out of his economic and legal status and put his status as a Christian first - to welcome back *his escaped slave* Onesimus as “a beloved brother”. Not only that, Paul says that though he, Paul, is “bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.” This was indeed an act of faith on the part of Paul, challenging Philemon to put his Christian faith first - almost as much as it was for the slave to go back to his legal owner bearing this letter! Only by meeting in person and both putting their faith first could slave and slave-owner become brothers in Christ in a radically new way which totally challenged the existing social and economic order. What happened when they met again? Maybe that's a story that is told in heaven.

Loving God first will always challenge and stretch us, and we are likely to have questions we struggle with and even may not find answers to in this life. Loving God is neither boring nor easy, but our relationship with God is our ultimate source of identity, wholeness and life in its fullness.

Jesus was not being mean or cruel or full of himself when he challenged those who wanted to be his disciples to put their relationship with him first in their lives; *he was being honest*. If people tell you they are thirsty, tell them where the good water fountain is. The easiest fountains to settle for and perhaps the most popular ones do not have **the water of life** flowing from them. Some fountains are tasteless, others quickly run dry, some are thirst-inducing instead of thirst-quenching, and some are even toxic.

Only by following Jesus can we find the water of life. And Jesus starts by coming to *us* where we are and offering us a drink, just as he did to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. In a way, it's dangerous to accept his offer of a sip, because after a sip from the water of life, nothing else will satisfy us.

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