

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY

SEPTEMBER 8, 2019

Are we supposed to hate father and mother? Sweet Jesus, you can't really mean that! Even Matthew, in his gospel, had to clean it up when he says that you are not to love father and mother more than God. But Luke is very serious about discipleship and not displacing God as the center of life. But Hebrew writing was partial to hyperbole and it would probably be just as easy to say you are not to prefer anyone or anything to God.

Maybe it would help if we stepped back a bit and thought of it from a different, bigger perspective.

What Jesus is asking of us is to make choices, choices that matter in our lives. But this supposes that we have some meaning, some direction to our lives, some sense that our lives have significance and have some direction. What is my life all about? Since it often takes very long to really know ourselves, what we really want, what we treasure, this isn't an easy challenge. So the book of Wisdom tells us today:

We can hardly guess at what is on earth, and what is at hand we find with labor... Who has learned your counsels, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?

Wisdom is the gift we need to really understand what life is all about. And, so often but not always, it takes many years of living and much experience, to attain this wisdom. And the ways of God simply allude us.

Consider so many people on the Bahamas. They stand among the ruins of destroyed homes and possessions. What are they thinking now of what life is all about? Or think of the children and parents separated from each other on our southern borders. They have fled violence and ruins only to find misery. What do they think their lives are really about? How do people cope with these tragedies?

And, of course, we don't have to look far to find such difficult situations. Some people in this gathering have been forced to deal with upheaval, disaster, heart-breaking situations. It is amazing to see at times at how people can cope with pain and tragedy. And it is sad to see those who cannot cope or find meaning.

Hopefully we have also experienced great moments of joy, of ecstasy, of profound significance. Gazing on your new-born child for the first time; the moment you really know that you are really loved and accepted in the midst of chaos; experiencing a moment in nature when everything comes together. Have you not sometime stood transfixed before the setting sun, the sky ablaze in color, perhaps the sliver of a moon, Venus and Jupiter shining nearby? This is not just a passive experience of apprehending beauty. It is a matter of active participation in it. I have personally stood before such a sight and been overwhelmed by the deep realization that I am a part of this, that I am related to everything and everyone I behold.

I have come to realize that the prime sin is one of separation, the belief that I am separated (and perhaps superior) from others, from the people in the Bahamas, from Muslims, gays, blacks, from immigrants and those on our borders. We are all one. This is the lynch-pin of meaning of our lives. What happens to any people, or to the earth, happens to me.

The basic meaning of life for me is in relationship, the humility of knowing my place, and in love.

Jesus tells us that the way to find this unity, this oneness and sense of meaning, is to follow Him. Let nothing get in your way. Embrace Jesus. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. God became one of us to embrace everything that is human – joys and sorrows, feasting and being hungry, being misunderstood, betrayed, denied. And he has embraced a death, even a brutal death, to be one with all who suffer. We are then called to embrace our humanity fully, knowing this means joys and sorrows, pains and ecstasy, even death. But no one is alone in one's sufferings. Christ lives in each and all of us.

And this requires we make choices – choices for oneness and not separation, choices of accepting and helping each other whoever and wherever they may be. God will not rescue us from embracing humanity fully, as Jesus did.

The humility this calls for means we accept that “life is not about me; I am about life.” Life is bigger than me. But I am something bigger than me as well. I am part of Christ. All that I do affects everyone through Jesus.

The love this calls for means developing a life of compassion, of feeling with those who suffer as well as sharing the joys of others. If even family or possessions get in the way or hold me back from living compassionately, I must make a choice. Sometimes we must make choices that go against the thinking of those closest to us – our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, our neighbors, member of our political party, or other citizens of our country. Yes, this means facing change and not always have security. We may feel inadequate, lacking confidence, and not up to a challenge. Family, money, my own life must not get in the way. Being disciples means we are not alone. The Christ gives us his Spirit to move and live within us. Let us not be afraid.

Timothy J. Joyce, OSB, STL