

HOMILY

The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary time

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The mark of a great leader is the demands he places upon his followers. The Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi offered his men only hunger and death to free Italy. Winston Churchill told the British people that he had nothing to offer them but “blood, sweat, toil and tears.” Jesus spoke of the necessity of total commitment—even to the point of death. He conveyed this in no uncertain terms when he said to his Disciples, “*You must take up your cross and follow me.*”

In a way, the demands that Jesus makes upon his followers are extreme. Christianity is not a Sunday morning religion. It shakes our foundations, topples our priorities, pits us against friend and family, and makes us strangers in this world. We sing “What a friend we have in Jesus,” but we must understand that on many occasions he is not our friend but our adversary.

In today’s Gospel passage from Luke, we learn that a large crowd was traveling with Jesus. Now in large crowds, you will have many motives. Some in this crowd are following Jesus because they have seen Jesus feed a multitude of people and they are waiting to be fed. Some are following because they have heard of Jesus’ ability to heal and they are waiting for an opportunity to approach him and be healed. Still others are following for the excitement. Only a few are truly committed to his teaching.

Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them what is involved in a true commitment. At this moment the crowd learns, and we also, that to follow Jesus **we must establish our priorities**. Too often we allow things to stand in the way of that which we consider important. And so...

- ◆ Hobbies interest us more than our children.
- ◆ A job takes precedent over a marriage.
- ◆ Television or computer displaces family conversations over dinner.

We have the best of intentions, but the priorities we know to be vital to a good and happy life never get carried out in our day-to-day living.

Someone has calculated how a typical lifespan of 70 years is spent:

Sleep 32.9% or 23 Years

Work 22.8% or 16 Years

T.V. 11.0% or 8 Years

Eating 8.6% or 6 Years

Religion is a whole 6 months out of 70 years. That's 7/10 of 1% in a lifetime of 70 years.

When put in these terms, we see how little a priority spiritual matters occupy in our lives. To follow Jesus we must establish our priorities. We must count the cost and we must be willing to pay the price. In no uncertain terms, Jesus told the crowd, *“Any of you who is not willing to give up everything cannot be my disciple.”*

Could it be any clearer than that? If you should choose to follow, there is no life immune to that call.

- ◆ Abraham gave up his son.
- ◆ Moses gave up Pharaoh's court.
- ◆ Peter gave up his family and their fishing business.
- ◆ Matthew gave up the lucrative profession of tax collector.
- ◆ Paul gave up his position as a prestigious Pharisee.

None of us, clergy and laity alike, can escape the need to establish our priorities, count the cost and pay the price. I have often wondered what would have come of the Church if Jesus' Disciples had not made those ultimate sacrifices; if they had not paid the price of discipleship with their very lives. Where would the Church be? Geographically, Christianity is the most widely diffused of all faiths, and a third of the earth's six billion people claim Christ as their Lord. What kind of church would we be if the twelve had put down their crosses?

Several years ago, in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he would leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision. He decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans of the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included. It was a masterpiece. But then someone said “Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?”

The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the wall, and then he gave each family a lamp which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship. “Each time you are here,” the nobleman said, “the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God’s house will be dark.”

That’s a great story, isn’t it? And it makes a significant point about the importance of our commitment and loyalty to the Church.

The poet, Edward Everett Hale, put it like this:

*I am only one,
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything
But still I can do something;
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something I can do.*

Let me ask you. What if every member of our church supported the church just as you do? What kind of church would you have? What if every single member served the church, attended the church, loved the church, shared the church, and gave to the church exactly as you do? What kind of church would we be?