

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time: Unless you hate.....

Let's start with the hardest part of today's Gospel. The Lord uses a word that is shocking coming from Him or from any of His followers. That word is hate. This word has no place in Christianity. We cannot allow it to be used in our lives, in our families, in our homes. When your Middle School child or grandchild says, "I hate my new science teacher. She is so mean. She gives us too much work. She is so unfair." You need to respond, "We do not use that word, hate. Maybe you dislike her methods, or even dislike her, but hate, no. If you can show us where she has been mean or unfair, we'll speak to her. But don't ever use that word hate in this house." We can feel strongly opposed to someone or to something, but we cannot hate that person or that thing. Hate is the antithesis of love. The Lord Himself in the Sermon on the Mount tells us "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.'*"

And, yet, here in today's Gospel we hear the Lord using that word that He Himself bans from Christianity, "*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.*" How are we to understand this? Is Jesus telling us that to be his disciples we have to be people of hate?

That simply does not follow. Now, many times priests and deacons overlook this passage and focus on the parables in the rest of the Gospel--the person constructing a tower making sure he has the ability to complete the project before he begins; or the King considering the size of his army before marching off into battle with another king.

But instead of glossing over the beginning of the Gospel, let's hit it head on. Let's break this down. Many times Jesus spoke using apocalyptic concepts and language. In fact there are whole sections of Matthew, Mark and Luke that are called the Synoptic Apocalypse. Here the Lord uses extreme phrases and concepts to catch people's attention, to get them emotionally involved. For example, *Matthew 24* speaks about the calamities of the end of the world, "*When you see the desolating abomination spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, a person on the housetop must not go down to get things out of his house, a person in the field must not return to get his cloak. Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days.*"

Today's passage is not part of the Synoptic Apocalypse, but the Lord is certainly using the word *hate* to catch our attention as he used extreme words in *Matthew 24* and the parallel passages in *Mark* and *Luke*. So, what is the Lord saying? Simply, he is saying that in comparison to our love for Him, all other love must be so inferior that it can be called the opposite of love.

This is still hard to fathom; so let's go even deeper. Who are you? Who am I?

Just reflect for a moment, who are you? Don't be satisfied with just saying your name. We are so much more than Susan Scott, Frank Smith or Joe Pellegrino. Go deeper. How do you define yourself? How do I define myself? If I, if you, are really and truly followers of Jesus Christ, then this must be the definition of who we are. Each one of us was created as a unique reflection of God's love, a love that became flesh at the Annunciation of the angel to Mary and became one of us on Christmas Day. Each one of us is a unique Son of God or Daughter of God. If this is not included in our definition of ourselves, then we are missing the whole point of the spiritual lives we received at Easter as a people and at baptism as individuals. "But," you may say "I am a husband a wife, a mother, a father, and so forth. Are not these part of the definition of who I am?" Certainly. When you made your vows in the sacrament of matrimony, when we priests made our vows in the sacrament of holy orders, we were transformed into new people. For priests, we call this a change in character. For married people there is an embrace of the sacrificial love of the Lord that transforms them into beacons of love. But priesthood, marriage, and Christian single life are all meaningless unless they are lived as an expression of our identity, as sons and daughters of God.

Who are you? Who am I? At our best, we are unique reflections of the love of God. Anything, anyone that prevents us from being that reflection of God's love is unworthy of our true identity. So, therefore, no one and nothing can stand in the way of our love of God.

When we fall into sin, serious sin, we become disjointed. We feel like we have been torn apart. We feel like we are not ourselves. And we are correct. Many times college students who had been active in the faith in high school will come to confession and say, "I've gotten into things I said I would never do. Now I feel so torn apart. I don't like myself very much right now. I like who I was and I want to go back to being that person." When we fall into serious sin, we destroy our very identity. We sacrifice being sons and daughters of God for a lesser, insignificant love, the love of ourselves. That is why today's difficult passage where the Lord uses the word *hate* is immediate followed by His command: "*Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*" Following the Lord demands the total sacrifice of ourselves for Him. This is difficult. This is a cross, a cross we gladly embrace because there is no greater good in life than union with God. So, like the man constructing the tower or the king contemplating war, we have to use our intelligence to complete the work of building up that portion of the Body of Christ that each of us has been created to make real in the world.

This takes determination. This take drive. We have to have the determination and the drive to be the people each of us has been called to be. We have to have the determination and the drive to be true to our identities. Anything that prevents us from our own unique ways of following the Lord is unworthy of who we are. When St. Perpetua's father pleaded with her to save her life and renounce Christ, she responded, "But father, look at that pot. You cannot say it is not a pot. I cannot give up who I am. I am a Christian."

And so are we.

Anything that keeps us from being who we really are, well, that we must hate.