

When I was working as an engineer, I used to love “Murphy’s Law” calendars. You may remember that Murphy’s Law stated that “Everything that can go wrong, will.” On the calendars there was some related saying every month. I distinctly remember one that said something like, “Give the most difficult job to a lazy man. He will find the easier way.” In our Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus does not seem to provide for an “easier way.” Instead, He says, “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....In the same way, anyone of you does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.”

Wow! What are we to make of this? If we look at what Jesus said and did, how He lived and suffered and died for our sins, and rose from the dead for our salvation, it is plain that Jesus is not promoting hate. But He is telling us that if we wish to be His disciples, following Him must come first before anything else, even when it comes to our closest loved ones, or even our own lives. We must be ready to sacrifice our possessions. Even when we modify the word “hate” here, Jesus’ words are still very strong, and challenging in so many ways.

Jesus’ words point out the truth of our first reading from Wisdom: “Who can know God’s counsel, or who can conceive what the LORD intends?” To put commitment to Jesus before anything else is definitely *not* the way of the world. To be willing to renounce all possessions goes contrary to conventional wisdom, especially when the economy is weak. To be willing to carry our cross is well... you know, crazy. I can only imagine what Philemon might have been thinking when he read a letter from St. Paul (see our second reading). It seems that Onesimus was a slave of Philemon’s who ran away, perhaps even stealing something. It also seems that somewhere along the line he encounters Paul, converts to Christianity, and becomes a valued helper of Paul. After Paul finds about Onesimus’ background, he may have persuaded Onesimus to go back to Philemon, with the aforementioned letter. So Paul asks Philemon to take Onesimus back, “...no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord. So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me.” Philemon is asked to forego his “rights,” so to speak, in the eyes of the world at that time (punishing a runaway slave), in order to practice his faith as a Christian (treating Onesimus as a brother).

I think Paul’s letter to Philemon illustrates how far-reaching Jesus’ words are meant to be. We often hang on to more than material possessions. We can be possessive of status and power. We can get so jealous of our “turf,” even in the church. We can be possessive in our relationships, seeking to dominate the other person. We can hang on to our resentments and a desire for revenge. Philemon may have been tempted to hang on to a desire to punish Onesimus once he got hold of him again. Are we willing to renounce these kinds of “possessions” as well? So often we look for a loophole. In the words of Alcoholics Anonymous, we try to find an “easier, softer way.” But Jesus calls us to commit totally.

How can we follow Jesus, if a total commitment is what is required? Again, look at the words from our reading from Wisdom: “Or who ever knew your counsel, except you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high? And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight.” Only by the grace of God can we do what Jesus demands of us! By the love of God in Jesus, we continue to receive that grace! Thanks be to God! Instead of what I read on a calendar many years ago, it can now be said, “Give the job of discipleship to a person of faith. He or she will find The Way.”

May God continue to bless us all, and give us the grace to follow Jesus.