

[Readings: 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16a; Psalm 89; Rom. 6:3-4, 8-11; Matt 10:37-42]

One of my favorite classic musical movies is “Fiddler on the Roof.” The basic premise of the movie is how Tevye, an Orthodox Jewish milkman living in a small, forgotten Russian village in the early 1900’s, watches his world of “tradition” be challenged on every side. His three eldest daughters get married during the course of the movie. But all three do so outside of the established “tradition” of the matchmaker. The eldest daughter does not rely on the matchmaker, but on true love, and is married in the traditional Jewish ceremony. The second marries a man who is Jewish, but is an atheist. Tevye bends for the first two daughters, but cannot with the third. She elopes with a man who is Russian Orthodox. Tevye puts his faith and his religion above family.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples plainly: No love can be higher than your love for me. All relationships must be put in proper priority. None can be higher than one’s relationship with God. Not even family love -- a teaching that upsets most of us, since we really do love our families and hold this bond as quite sacred.

Even dearer: We’re told we can’t hold our own lives as more precious than the loyalty we owe to Jesus. That’s because we are asked to evaluate our lives in light of the crosses that life throws at us. Jesus makes specific reference to the crosses we are facing right now. Unfortunately, the initial reaction for us when we are asked to take up our cross is to see it as a burden.

But before we jump to that initial reaction, think for a moment about THE cross. The cross -- because of Jesus -- is not a burden, but a sign of victory and love. So, if we then think about Jesus telling us to take up our symbol of victory and love and follow Him and serve others, then it is not such a burden. Our lives of service to God and others should never be seen as a burden. It may be challenging, but it is never a burden.

In our First Reading, the challenge faced by the woman in the story seemed like a burden, until she was encouraged to do it in faith. The result was that the situation worked out better than she planned. Her approach to the situation was filled with faith and courage. She was promised that all would work out and it did and so it can be for us. Our problem is when we view our lives only as filled with insurmountable challenges.

We see everything as if we are being burdened and inconvenienced. The result is that we react that way. We never approach things with joy, but an exhaling of air in exasperation. That’s when we are challenged to respond with loyalty. Loyalty to God, to our faith, to God’s Plan.

Loyalty is a quality we value highly. We want our friends to be loyal. We expect our families to be. We hope for some modicum of reliability from bosses or employees. Even the President expects loyalty. In fact, every meaningful relationship involves loyalty to be viable. We pledge allegiance to the flag, acknowledging our citizenship.

We support our parish financially as a sign that we're members who value what happens here.

Pledging allegiance and choosing loyalties is another theme of our Readings. A woman of influence and means informs her husband that she'd like to make an investment in a certain Hebrew prophet, Elisha. As a citizen of Shunem, this is an irregular alliance. Shunemites and Israelites didn't get along. The woman remodels her house to make room for a prophet she hopes to have as a frequent guest.

In another century, Saint Paul assures us that our Baptism unites us not only with Christ-life but also with Christ-death. Here's an allegiance we might not knowingly be pledging. Loyalty to Christ provides astounding benefits, including resurrection from the dead and newness of life. But we get there by way of surrender, un-spelled-out suffering, and death to self-will. We are warned!

Once upon a time, the great emperor Constantine was given a vision. He was shown a cross in the sky and was told by the Lord, "by this sign you will conquer"; and he did. It is by the same sign that you too will conquer over every challenge you face in your life.

Pick up your sign of victory and love and head into the day. With this sign, you can overcome personal and professional problems. You can overcome money issues and you can overcome fear or addiction issues. You can put your illnesses and limitations in perspective. We can put COVID-19, our broken economy and our racially fractured nation in perspective. Our faith, our hope and our love will conquer the atheism, the despair and the hatred that is being stoked in our cities and in our homes.

We pick up our crosses to find the strength we need to bring light to the darkness of the world and to provide hope to the hopeless. We simply can't be good ministers and servants of the Gospel unless we take up the cross, the sign of victory and love. AMEN!