

[Wisdom 9:13-18b, Psalm 90; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33]

Do you have what it takes to be a disciple? Don't panic: You don't have to "hate" your family. Remember: the word "hate" which Jesus uses in the context of this Gospel translates as "to love less." First priority, requiring our greatest love and attention: God. How do we get to God? Through His Son, Jesus Christ. By making time and giving the effort to get to know Him, fall in love with Him and serve Him.

Second priority: your relationships. Love them less than you love God.

Frankly, it's awkward no matter when we read this teaching. I mean, how many of us really hate our families? Sure, certain family members get on our nerves once in a while. We have falling-outs from time to time for all sorts of reasons: political or religious differences, lifestyle choices, insensitive remarks made in the heat of an argument, as well as real injuries suffered at the hands of those who can hurt us deeply because we love and trust them the most.

But even when a spouse, parent, child, or other relative disappoints us terribly, the majority of the time we still don't find it in our hearts to hate them. Something in us still yearns to be reconciled and reconnected. There is no peace until the mending of bridges starts and the healing has a chance to begin. Even if it isn't possible to receive that person back into our lives again, we know we need the balm of divine forgiveness to close the wound that remains between them and us. Because, at the end of the day, no matter what that other person did or failed to do, we're still family, and that is the strongest bond in the world.

Third priority: your material and financial possessions. That means being ready to "renounce" your possessions. In classic spiritual language, it is called "detachment." You put your material possessions in proper priority.

Fourth priority: you! It's been said that we find out who we are, we learn what we are called to be, and we discover that in taking care of ourselves, in reaching out to our families and to those in need, and putting all of our financial and material possessions at the service of the Lord, we learn that God is there the whole time. Love God, love others, and love yourself.

Jesus is up against tribe-and-clan mentality, people who put blood ties ahead of any and every concern. Love, and avenge your people, and regard warily everyone else. Two thousand years later, this translates into a different language, but with the same bigotry and racism: You don't want to marry HIM; he's Italian. You don't want to date her, she's Polish. This one is for Jewish people: You're bringing home a goim, a shiksa? (a non-Jewish person).

How can you be a Republican? How can you be a Democrat? You know what they say about Muslims... What do you mean your fiancé is not Catholic?

Brothers and sisters in Christ do not have the luxury of defining their loyalties so narrowly. So, of course, love everyone as a Son or Daughter of God, or as a Brother or Sister in Christ. Consider it your starting point for the love of all people to follow. Doing all of this just might be the Holy Cross that God is challenging us to pick up and to carry with His Beloved Son.

Perhaps we might even have to die on that Holy Cross as He did. But we know that this is not the end of the story.

Jesus does not teach hate and self-loathing. Jesus is commanding us to put ourselves and our relationships all at the disposal of the will of God. What does that mean? It means: how can I bring my family members and other relationships closer to God? How do I myself draw closer to God and to God's will for me and for my family?

That is a good starting point. Every morning, when we first awake, ask ourselves while standing, sitting or kneeling in prayer, "Lord, here I am. What is it You want me to do to be closer to you? What do you want me to do and to say to bring my loved ones closer to you?" Being a disciple of Jesus is no small or easy task. It will take standing apart from family ties. It will mean denying your very self. It will mean rejecting materialism. It may mean being rejected by others. Prioritize. Persevere. Follow Him.

A reporter was interviewing the winner of a local triathlon in which contestants do a 1.5-kilometer swim, a 40K bike race, and then run a full 10K to the finish line. The winner was bent over, hands on his knees, panting, just moments after his thrilling finish when the reporter asked, "What does it take to

win a triathlon?" He looked up, sweat pouring from his face, and said, "Everything."

Jesus was making the same point about finding our way to heaven. Half measures won't work when it comes to entering into the kingdom of God. It will take everything we have -- and then some. Thankfully, once we have given all we've got, God is more than happy to supply the "and then some."

None of us serve as God's counsel, yet through wisdom, witness, and the teachings of God's own Son, divine plans are revealed to us.

Your questions for this week to reflect upon:

When have you felt the most unsure of the next best step? Have you ever felt confident that God's wisdom set your path straight?

Who are the modern-day Pauls in your life -- disciples that through example and some urging help you to do the right thing?

What relationships -- to people or things -- prevent you from putting Christ first? How could you shore up the foundation of your faith?

September 8 is traditionally observed as the Birthday of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus entrusted His Blessed Mother to us, making us all family, all related, all sons and daughters of God. May she intercede for us.

Happy Birthday, Mary! AMEN!