

In today's gospel, Jesus is trying to teach his disciples that commitment for the future is not the same as making a commitment right now. Jesus is teaching us that commitment is what transforms a promise into reality. But a commitment made for a future time is nothing but a plan, and somehow it's always easier to promise to do something later.

Jesus will tell each of us what he wants us to do, but we don't always hear him and it can be very difficult to get started. Even the stories of some of our great saints show that. Remember the prayer of St. Augustine as a young man, he prayed "Oh Lord, make me pure, but not yet!"

Even the great prophet Elisha hesitated when he was chosen, but when Elijah challenges him, he shows he knows what commitment is by sacrificing everything he has, even cooking his oxen and giving the food away so that he was free to follow Elijah.

When I look back at 25 years of being a deacon, this gospel makes me feel a little guilty when I think of how it all started.

I was in my early thirties, and I went to church regularly, and like a lot of young adult Catholics, my faith was formed in childhood and never really matured or changed as I was maturing and changing. I had learned to deal with "the world" and I had relegated spiritual things to the realm of the "nice but impractical".

I helped out at Church, I took my turn as a lector and spent some years playing the guitar for the youth choir, but it was almost more of a social experience than a spiritual one. If you had asked me I would have told you that I believed, and that my faith was important to me, but I couldn't have told you why, and I couldn't have shown you where it was making a big difference in my life.

I believed God might be tempted to show himself to someone who was really, really holy, and He might even be willing to grant a wish or two with a miracle if you were a very special saint. However for the rest of us ordinary Joes, well, we just had to be satisfied to know that He was there.

I really didn't expect to have a relationship with God or Jesus, and I never really expected to be holy enough to get much attention.

Imagine my surprise when that long distance relationship suddenly became very up-close and personal, and in the quietest, most unexpected way!

One Sunday, I was sitting in the balcony pews during mass at St. Catherine of Sienna parish. A young man named Deacon Leo was assisting Father Joe and he read the gospel and preached the homily. I'd never seen a deacon at church before and it turned out that Deacon Leo was assigned to the Parish for six months but it was almost an accident that I saw him because it was unusual for me to be at the main church.

You see, my family belonged to a satellite parish that normally celebrated mass in the local school gym and I was only there because a scheduling problem made me miss the normal mass.

I was vaguely aware of the title of Deacon because my brother had been one briefly on his way to becoming a priest but I never really thought about what it meant.

I watched with interest as he carried out his duties and as I looked down at what was happening a message came to me quietly, but quite clearly that said “You could do that!”

At first, I was confused because I didn’t even really know what THAT was! I had some faint recollections about the beginnings of a “permanent” Deacon program in Toronto but I couldn’t remember much about it. It was all slightly muddled - but then it hit me very clearly that the message said “YOU”.

The thought was not “I could do that” but rather “You could do that!” Through all the sensations bubbling up in my brain I knew that the message had come from the outside, it was not just my own thought, and I knew what it meant! I also knew immediately that this called for a commitment, and so like many before me who found themselves in this situation, I tried stalling tactics!

“Lord,” I said, “I’m too young, my children are too young, I can’t give this kind of time to the Church, there are too many things I have to do! Ask me again when I’m forty, that’s it – when I’m forty – I should be ready by then.”

Part of me couldn’t believe that I was talking back to God as if He actually spoke to me! I couldn’t admit this to anyone or they would come to take me away. But in that moment the feeling of the presence withdrew and I felt as if I had received permission, as if a voice had said without speaking “All right ... for now.”

I wasn’t sure how to react and I was afraid of what I would have to face if I looked at it too closely, so I stopped thinking about it, and soon I forgot about it.

We moved to a new parish and a new house and our children grew and the years passed. One day, my wife Barbara held a wonderful “Life begins at 40” party for my birthday with all our friends and family there. Things were comfortable and I was looking forward to a fine future where many things were falling neatly into place.

The next Sunday at mass, as I sat quietly after communion the message came again, softly, not a voice but clear words just the same – “You’re forty now!”

Nothing else, no explanation – no details, just that quiet thought, “You’re forty now.” But I remembered it all from the last time as if it had just happened, and I knew this time there was no escape. The same feeling was there, the same presence, the same meaning in the word “You!”

“Lord,” I said, “No promises, but I’ll look into it.” ... and so the journey began. It wasn’t always easy, my wife Barbara wasn’t sure at all, but I couldn’t have done it without her and she helped me all the way through, and when my son found out, he said “Dad’s already preaching all the time, are they gonna give him a licence to do it?”

But being a deacon has made my marriage stronger, it has brought my family closer together, my son even admitted that “Dad listens a lot better now!” It has taught me that true happiness comes putting the Lord first and serving others, not from accumulating stuff.

Many times I have looked back at that call and I realized how gently and slowly it happened. The Lord helped me learn that these things will happen His way.

I consoled myself with Matthew's gospel that tells the parable of the two sons, the first son refuses to obey the father but then changes his mind and does what he's asked, and Jesus says, he did his father's will.

I've never regretted it, and I've met a lot of wonderful people. In fact, the brother of our own Mary Badali, Deacon Sal, was in my ordination class. I may have been slow on the uptake, but I have at least lasted 25 years and the commitment that took some time to get started has been fulfilled. And I have been given so much in return.

We are each called to follow Jesus in our own way and each of us will have our own timing as part of God's plan but we can start our commitment today by receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. We can make the commitment by joining with him in body as well as spirit.

If we make the commitment to listen to Jesus in prayer, then we will hear what he is longing to tell us in our hearts.