

September 5, 2010  
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 9:18-18b  
Philemon 9-10, 12-17  
Luke 14:25-33

Our Sunday gospels in recent weeks have been focusing on Christian discipleship: what it really means to be a follower of Jesus.

We've heard that having lots of stuff but not being "rich in what matters to God" is a losing proposition. Disciples should be like servants awaiting their master's return from a wedding. Now Jewish weddings in Jesus' time could last for several days, but that didn't mean that the master would never get back. And speaking of masters, Jesus also said that if a person was entrusted with much, much would be required of them. Can we imagine being entrusted with anything more important than Jesus' own mission? Yet, just when we think we have this discipleship thing all figured out, we get a couple of warnings: "some who are last will be first, and some are first who will be last...every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

There is no one more exalted in the Christian community than Jesus' mother, Mary. Mary's own life was not always easy, but her words, as we heard on the day of her Assumption, echo some of the finest thoughts and teachings of her people. Mary's example gives us courage and perhaps some insight into Jesus' strong admonitions in today's gospel about giving up one's family, carrying one's cross and renouncing all of one's possessions.

Here we see some of the exaggeration that the ancient rabbis and teachers used to make a point. And the point that Jesus has been making over and over again is this: nothing is more essential, more crucial, than faithful discipleship.

One of our Christian Initiation Team members says he's a practicing Catholic, because he still doesn't have it all right. I think this statement sums up discipleship pretty well. Discipleship is a process--it's a journey--we won't ever arrive at perfection. But that doesn't mean we should quit the journey. Our baptisms have committed us to making it, and I believe it's a truly meaningful way for any human being to live.

Jesus was undoubtedly tough on his audience. What was the setting for this teaching? Luke writes that "great crowds" were with him. On the previous Sabbath he had had dinner at the home of a prominent Pharisee and had told a parable about dinner guests. People who were invited to a big dinner had all sorts of excuses about why they couldn't come. The host got fed up and ordered his servant to bring back poor, sick, disabled and homeless people so that they could enjoy the meal. The host was particularly concerned about having a full house and he wanted his servant to be certain that there were plenty of people present. But the guests he had invited originally would not have a single bite. This was clearly a parable about the Kingdom of God and who would most likely be found at the heavenly banquet.

Notice two things about this parable. No one had invited themselves to the dinner. Invitations came from the host. It's what we believe about God. Our call to discipleship is a divine calling. Everything good in our lives has been made possible by God. The folks who were invited first never made it to the dinner, because they said they were just too busy. And that's where Jesus' warnings to the crowd come in. If they and we are too occupied with all of the daily details and concerns of our lives, we'll miss the big picture and never become effective disciples. The two mini-parables about planning ahead send us the same message.

Busyness: unless we're very poor, very ill or no longer able to care for ourselves, we tend to be busy. Always something to do—often too much to do. Never a spare moment. And organized churches add to it. Just read our bulletin, look at the flat screens or listen to the announcements some weeks. We're taught to feel guilty and inadequate if we're not constantly doing something. Busyness can be therapeutic, of course—it can help us get through tough times.

But busyness can also be shortsighted. If we're doing enough things, especially good things, we won't have to stop and think about who we really are, what our purpose in life really is and how we're part of something—someone—infinately greater than ourselves.

It's not that we should do nothing. We were made to be doers, co-creators with God. But without a realization of who we are and whose we are, what will all of our activities amount to in the end? We need to remember that we exist in the first place because of divine love. This is the foundation for discipleship. Without it we won't have the resources to build anything that will last.

Because we have done such a "good" job messing up our world, faithful discipleship will sometimes be challenging and painful. That's what Jesus was referring to when he talked about carrying one's cross and giving up one's possessions. Our journeys may not be easy in worldly terms. His was not. The incidents described in this part of Luke's gospel occurred on Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem. And we know what awaited him there. But we also know it was not the end of his story.

So where does the church come in? Church, of course, is the people, the living body of Christ. When we gather together, we can connect with the divine. And we believe that there's power in the community. Energy for the work of discipleship.

Let's get back to Mary. She didn't sit around and do nothing. But every so often, Luke tells us, she "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." She remembered her calling and lived it out, even when it was hard. We would all do well to imitate Mary, who is our blessed Mother, an outstanding disciple, and the Patron of this holy community.

Amen.