

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16A
<i>Response</i>	For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 89:2-3, 16-17, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 6:3-4, 8-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 10:37-42

The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us to the third part of Jesus's missionary discourse, his discourse to the disciples, the 12 apostles, in chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel, where he's giving them instructions about what they are to do as he sends them out on the mission to proclaim the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God. This is the last Sunday where we are going to be looking at this missionary discourse. The Gospel for this week is the final verses of chapter 10 in Matthew's Gospel, so we are looking at Matthew 10:37-42, and the theme here is really on the cost of discipleship and the rewards of hospitality toward Jesus' disciples. This is what Jesus says:

He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever

gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."¹

Okay, so what's going on in this passage? I will make a few points here. Number one, remember that the context of these words we just heard from Jesus are his instructions to his 12 apostles, or his 12 disciples. Although we tend to use the word disciple in a really broad sense to mean anyone who is a believer, in a first century Greek context — in Jesus' setting in the Gospels — the word disciple, *mathitís*, literally means a student or a learner. So in this context Jesus is describing his intimate circle of the 12 disciples, the 12 students that he has chosen among all his followers to be entrusted with his own authority and to go out and to imitate him by preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. So when he talks about disciple, that's the primary meaning in its context here, the mission of the 12 disciples. Now in that context he is talking to the disciples about their own discipleship and about the demands of following him, and he begins with this really shocking statement that “whoever loves his father or mother more than me isn't worthy of me,” in other words, “isn't worthy to be my disciple.”

Now it's hard for me to stress just how radical that would've been in a first century Jewish setting, in particular because of the Decalogue, the 10 Commandments. So if you go back to Exodus 20 and to the Decalogue, the 10 Commandments that God gave to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai, one of the things you're going to notice is that the first three Commandments are about God and about honoring him, not blaspheming, and what not. But the second set of commandments, the last seven, are all about love of neighbor and your relation with others. The very first one of those second set of commandments is “honor thy father and thy mother,” it's the fourth commandment. And in Hebrew the word there for honor, *kavod*, literally means to glorify or give glory to your mother and your father. So the idea of honoring one's father and mother was like the fundamental commandment in your relationship with other human beings. The first obligation you had as a person was to give glory and honor to the people who gave life to you, namely your mother and your father. So for Jesus, a rabbi, a teacher and a

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

prophet, to come to his disciples and say “if you love your father and your mother more than me you're not worthy to be my disciple,” would've been an absolutely shocking claim, because what Jesus is essentially doing is kind of turning the tables on not just social customs, but on the Decalogue itself, which would put your relationship with your family, and in particular with your parents, as being of the highest importance. And Jesus is saying “no, no, no, your relationship with me, your love for me, exceeds that of your love for your parents. It's more central and it's more important, and if you love them more than you love me you can't be my student, you can't be my disciple.”

So again, just translate that for a second into a contemporary setting. Imagine if you walked into a college classroom and the professor came out on the first day of class and said “okay, before we begin, I need to let you know something. If you don't love me more than you love your parents you can't be a student in my class.” Everyone would be shocked because obviously that professor would be demanding an extremely radical and unheard of level of commitment from his students to him, and not just commitment, but love, and that is really what Jesus is saying here. So that is the first point here, Jesus is bringing the discipleship discourse to an end with a shocking demand, but it doesn't leave it there, he says even more.

He also says that “whoever loves sons or daughters more than me isn't worthy of me.” And I think it's understandable, even apart from a knowledge of the Decalogue, it's natural for mothers and fathers to put their children at the very center of their lives, to love their children above all others. And yet Jesus is saying “you can't love your children more than you love me.” Again, what prophet would ask such a thing? What teacher would ask such a thing? Well, the Jews would've known that if you go back to the Old Testament, the only person that ever demands not just that kind of allegiance, but that kind of love, is the Lord himself. And they would have known it because every day, several times a day, they would have prayed the great prayer in Deuteronomy 6 known as the Shema, “hear O Israel.” Deuteronomy 6:46 reads as follows:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

So this was what elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus calls the greatest commandment, the commandment to love God with all one's heart, all one's soul, all one's strength, above all others; and yet now Jesus is saying "I want you [speaking to the disciples] to love me with that kind of radical and supreme love." So what's going on here? Well this is one of those times in the Gospels where Jesus doesn't explicitly declare "I am God," but he does implicitly reveal that he is divine, because he's making a claim on the love of the disciples that only God himself could make. He wants them to love him radically, completely, totally, above the love of parents and above the love of children. And if you don't do that, he is basically saying you are not worthy to be my disciple, which only makes sense if following Jesus means following God, because it would be following that great commandment from Deuteronomy 6:4-6. So he's demanding divine love, the kind of love that God alone can demand, on the part of his disciples.

But he doesn't stop there, it's not just the love demanded by Jesus that is radical at the end of his discipleship discourse, it's also the sacrifice that's demanded by Jesus that is radical. So what does he say in these next verses? He says "whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" and that "whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for his sake will find it." What does that mean? Well, I think given the passage of time, we have come to regard Jesus's words here in Matthew 10 as a kind of metaphor for accepting the sufferings that life brings to us. So if someone gets ill or they have a financial struggle or they are just having difficulties in life, we can exhort them to "take up your cross and follow Christ." And that's a completely legitimate interpretation of Jesus' words. Disciples are to lovingly and generously accept the suffering that comes their way as part of being united to Christ crucified.

But in its original context, again, it would've had more meaning than that because for Peter and James and John, the first disciples, the cross wasn't yet a metaphor for suffering. The cross was a Roman method of execution that was widely known as the most brutal, the most shameful, the most painful and most disgraceful way to die. And in that sense Jesus is telling them here "be willing to be executed for my sake and if you're not willing to be executed for my sake, if you don't willingly suffer the shame and the pain of the cross, then you're not worthy of being my student, you're not worthy of being my disciple." So Jesus here is putting suffering and the loving acceptance of suffering as a kind of criterion for even

being one of his students, at the very essence of what it means to be his follower. And then when he makes this statement “whoever finds his life will lose it,” what he is basically doing there is elaborating on what that means to take up the cross. So if he says “someone finds his life,” what does that mean? Well if you find something that means you're seeking, right? If you find your wallet it is because you are looking for your wallet, you had lost it. So when Jesus says “whoever finds his life will lose it,” what Jesus is describing there is someone who is seeking to preserve and hold onto natural life, onto physical life, and so if that's your goal, that's where your heart is, if you're entirely focused on finding and keeping and preserving your natural life, you are actually going to lose it.

But whoever loses his life, in other words, willingly gives up their natural life for his sake — that is the qualification, and elsewhere in the other Gospels it will say “and for the sake of the Gospels — will find it. It is the paradox of the cross, in other words. It's precisely by laying down his natural life on the cross and being willing to suffer and die that Jesus then gets it back through the gift and the grace and the glory of his resurrection on the third day, when he's raised to new life, and he will never die and in which he will no longer suffer. And that's what he is really promising to the disciples here. He is introducing them to the cost of discipleship and to the paradox of the cross. The reason the cross is at the center of the Christian life is not because Christianity is some sadistic religion that takes joy in pain and suffering, but because rather that Christ, by going to the cross, has transformed suffering into love and that love is the only way to heaven, love is the only ladder to heaven. The cross, St. Rose of Lima said, is the only ladder to heaven. And therefore, you can't be a disciple of Jesus without the cross. There is no Christianity without a cross, and there is no discipleship without being willing to lose your life for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the Gospel. So again Jesus is bringing the discourse on discipleship and mission to a dramatic and climactic closing here by putting the cross right at the center of his message.

Now, what about the last lines of this gospel text? After laying that out you can imagine that the disciples might be a little afraid to go on mission because effectively what Jesus had done is given them a death sentence. Which by the way, most of them will end up suffering. The majority of the disciples, with the possible exception of St. John — there is some debate about that in the early Church — all met a martyr's end. Judas killed himself of course, but the other 11 disciples, with

John as an exception, all went to their deaths by martyrdom. So when Jesus — think about this — called the disciples to be his apostles, to be his primary students, he's calling them to death. He is calling them to suffering and to death, because they are going to imitate him in the most perfect way, which is through martyrdom. And that's really the reality of what it means to be one of his apostles.

Now with that said though, he doesn't leave it there. He also ends the discourse by talking about the rewards that hospitality toward the apostles will bring. And so he says to them, “whoever receives you [meaning the 12] receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” Okay, a couple of brief points about that. Notice here that the apostles do not go out and proclaim the Gospel on their own authority. They don't send themselves, they don't commission themselves, they receive their authority from Jesus. And so when they come and bring the Gospel, whoever receives them isn't actually receiving them, they are actually receiving Jesus himself. This is an extremely important principle for us as Catholics to remember in the context of apostolic succession.

The pope and the bishops of the Catholic Church are the legitimate successors of the apostles. In other words, your bishop or your priest had hands laid on him by a bishop, who had hands laid on him by a bishop, who had hands laid on him by a bishop, who went all the way back to the apostles. So whenever you receive a priest or whenever you receive a bishop in hospitality, you are in fact receiving Christ, because they have that authority from Christ to be identified with him; and not just from Christ, but from the Father himself, from God, since that is what Jesus is saying. I'm sending you, the Father sent me, so whoever receives you is actually receiving God, is receiving the Father. That is a powerful image of the missionary. In a sense then, the missionary apostle is a kind of “sacrament of God.” He brings Christ, he brings God into your midst, by bringing the authority and the message of Christ into your midst. So Jesus is saying that to the apostles, “you're not going alone, you're going with my authority, and therefore whoever receives you is going to receive rewards, is going to receive blessings.” So he gives the example, “whoever receives a prophet receives the prophet's reward and whoever receives a righteous man receives a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives a cup of cold water to a disciple receives a reward.”

Now I will pause there for just a second, because if you look and go back here, this is where the Gospel reading links up with the first reading for today. So if you go back to the first reading, the first reading might seem a little strange. It's from the book of Kings, 2 Kings 4. It is the story of Elisha — you hear it pronounced all kinds of ways but in Hebrew it is actually pronounced eh-lee-sha, but nobody says it that way so I will just say ee-lie-sha — who is the disciple of Elijah, and the shunammite woman. This is what the story says in 2 Kings 4:8 and following:

One day Eli'sha went on to Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to eat some food. So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food. And she said to her husband, "Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God, who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there." One day he came there, and he turned into the chamber and rested there.

And he said to Geha'zi his servant, "Call this Shu'nammite." When he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, "Say now to her, See, you have taken all this trouble for us; what is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?" She answered, "I dwell among my own people." And he said, "What then is to be done for her?" Geha'zi answered, "Well, she has no son, and her husband is old." He said, "Call her." And when he had called her, she stood in the doorway. And he said, "At this season, when the time comes round, you shall embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your maidservant." But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Eli'sha had said to her.

So what's going on there and why does the Church choose this reading for the first reading for the 13th Sunday? Well, I think the connection is obvious here. What the Church is doing is it's giving us an example of hospitality for a holy prophet of God in the Old Testament as a kind of anticipation and background for Jesus's words about hospitality towards his disciples who were also prophets and holy men in the New Testament. So just as when the shunammite woman offered a room and board and food to Elisha the prophet on a regular basis and she was rewarded with

the blessing of a child right, so too now Jesus is saying to the apostles, “look, not only does whoever receive you receive me, but whoever receives you receives a reward, whoever receives a prophet receives a prophet’s reward, whoever receives a righteous man receives a righteous man’s reward, and whoever even gives you just one cup of cold water for my sake will will receive a reward.” They are not going to lose their reward there. So what’s the meaning of all this? What does this have to do with us? What kind of a message does this have for us today? I can't help but think here about the fact that Jesus knew in advance that his disciples, who were going to be missionaries, were going to need hospitality. They were going to need places to stay, they were going to need food to eat, and what he's doing here is encouraging a program of generosity and hospitality on the part of what today we would call the laity, people who live in the married state of life, who have a home, who have family, toward those who have consecrated themselves to the religious life or to missionary work, like priests and religious, nuns, sisters, and missionaries; because those people have given up the blessings and the comforts of home and family life and the stability of the lay state in order to go out and preach and proclaim the Gospel.

So I think that the message for us today — at least I would say the message for me in particular as a layman, as a husband and father, and those of you out there with families — is to ask yourself the question, have you opened the doors of your home to your priest, to your pastor, to nuns or religious that you might know — if they are not cloistered — living in the world as missionaries? Do you know any religious or any priest in your life that you could welcome into your home in order to show them hospitality, in order to show them generosity, in order to show them gratitude for their commitment to the Gospel, for their commitment to bringing the good news of the kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ to your family and to the world? This is something that is a real practical way for us to practice what elsewhere Jesus is going to talk about as almsgiving, as being generous not just with our time, but also with our possessions and with our food and drink and whatever else might be needed there, with money as well, to give to missionary organizations so we can help them in the spreading of the Gospel. That might sound like a really kind of practical application, but I think that's really what Jesus has in mind here. He's letting the disciples know that they need to encourage people to open their doors to them, not just to receive material blessings, but to

receive the spiritual benefits of welcoming Christ into your home in the person of one of his disciples.

You can think here too, for an analogy, it's very similar to what Jesus says about the poor in Matthew 25, the famous parable of the sheep and the goats. So he says “when I was sick you took care of me, when I was in prison you visited me, when I was naked you clothed me.” And they say “well when did we do this to you Lord?” “Well when you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” So that in a sense, in the parable of the sheep and goats, the poor and the needy and the sick become a kind of sacrament — I use that word with a little “s” — as a kind of outward, visible sign of Jesus’ presence. So that when you take care of the poor, when you give alms to the poor, you're really giving to Jesus. And the same thing is true of his disciples, of missionary disciples in particular, priest and religious who have consecrated their lives to the gospel. When you welcome them into your home, you are welcoming Christ into your home, and you are not going to lose the spiritual blessing that that will bring to you and your family. And I can attest personally that in my own life, whenever we as a family have welcomed our parish priest or pastor, a priest friend, or religious — we know a wonderful order of brothers, sisters, and nuns — into our house, they really do bring the presence of God, they really do bring the presence of Christ into your home. It sanctifies the home and brings a peace and a joy to the home that in itself is a spiritual blessing for you and for your family, especially for your children to see these missionaries and for them not to be some kind of distant ideal, but to be real people who are part of your life as a family. And I know it is a blessing to them too to come and spend time with families, to pray together and to eat together and to rejoice in one another's friendship and fellowship. However, remember, if you do that and you're going to give them a cup of water, be sure that the water is cold, because Jesus says in verse 42, “whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, I promise you, he shall not lose his reward.” So whenever the priests or nuns come over to our house I make sure that the water is cold.

So in conclusion then, what have we learned from the Gospel this week? A couple of points. First, with regard to the Christian vocation, as the Catechism says in paragraph 2232, “family ties are important,” we need to honor our father and mother, we need to love our families, love our children, but they're “not absolute.” In other words, the first vocation of the Christian is to “follow Jesus” (CCC 2232).

And in a special way, obviously those who live the consecrated life take that vow radically, and give up family and friends in order to follow Jesus. And then the second thing is just for us to practice hospitality, as Christians to just reinvest ourselves in the great Christian tradition of showing hospitality not just to the poor and the stranger, but also to the religious, also to the missionary, also to those who have given their lives for the sake of the gospel.