

**Twenty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**September 9, 2007**

I have been a guest preacher and presider here at St. Ignatius, on and off again, for almost thirty years—since the time of Fr. Tom Lannon as pastor. But this is the first time you will now have the pleasure of my company on a more regular basis. I keep saying that it's my worst nightmare come true: my close friend of almost 40 years, Fr. Bob, is now my boss! (Of course, he keeps saying it's really his worst nightmare!)

So since I started my regular schedule of work this week, I really wanted today's homily to be fun, uplifting, humorous, and light. I wanted you to see my pleasant side. Then I read today's gospel. Good grief, could it get much more depressing and harsh? Even one of my favorite theologians, Charles Shultz, couldn't give me help with a Peanuts cartoon.

Our friends who study scriptures for a living refer to this section of Luke's gospel as "the hard sayings." Hard, indeed! "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers, sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be a disciple." "Whoever does not carry his own cross cannot be my disciple." "Anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." We don't often hear the word "hate" in the gospels, do we?

The good news, according to one of our more prominent scripture scholars, Dan Harrington from across the river, is that these words are "an obvious

exaggeration.” I immediately thought it must be a translation error. But then I checked about seven different translations of this passage. All seven translate the Greek word *misei* as hate. So the bad news is that if it is an exaggeration it was done by either Luke or Jesus himself. Someone is making a very strong point here about the cost of discipleship. There is always a cost to following Jesus into the kingdom.

So much for my plan of doing a pleasant and uplifting homily! The two little parables that get sandwiched in between these “hard sayings” are precisely about taking into account the cost of being one of his disciples before setting out on the adventure. Because it will cost. And you don’t want to make the investment in the building if you don’t know if you can finish the project. Any investor knows that. Nor do you want to wage war without carefully weighing the size and strength and persistence of your enemy. Just about everyone in the United States knows that these days. Everything has its cost, doesn’t it?

But you might be thinking, like me, that the rewards of following him, of becoming a real disciple, must be tremendous. It must be worth it. I bet the real disciples feel great despite the cost. That’s what I tend to think, especially when I’m in one of my rare optimistic moods. But then reality sets back in quickly, as it did last week as I was preparing these comments. There on the cover of *Time*

magazine for the first time since she won the Nobel Peace prize back in 1979 was none other than Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Now here is a woman who took today's gospel quite literally. She gave up all she had, left family, friends, her religious community, gave away all her possessions, and carried her cross with "the poorest of the poor" on city streets and in slums. Many idolized her and called her a living saint. Surely her reward must have been great.

Her reward, indeed, may be great, but it turns out she rarely felt that consolation. Listen to her own words penned over the course of almost 50 years. "The silence and the emptiness is so great—that I look and do not see—listen and do not hear." As she starts her ministry in Calcutta she writes: "I call, I cling, I want—and there is no one to answer, no one on whom I can cling, no, no, no one. Alone. Where is my faith? Even deep down in there is nothing but emptiness and darkness....I have no faith." And much later in her life she writes to one of her Jesuit spiritual directors: "Tell me, Father, why is there so much pain and darkness in my soul?"

The cost of discipleship can be, indeed, very high. And there is never any guarantee that you will ever even get to *feel* good about it. So perhaps the real message of today's gospel is simply to be a realist about Jesus' call in your own life. Be a realist. Not the eternal optimist whose glass is always half-full. "Be

happy with Jesus!” Nor the dour pessimist whose glass is always half-empty. “All life is drudgery...and then you die.” Be the realist. The realist recognizes that in either case, looking at either the optimist’s or the pessimist’s glass, the damn glass is twice as big as it needs to be. That’s realism.

I presume by now I have sufficiently depressed you all. I do apologize, but you have to work with what you are given. Take some consolation from today’s first reading from Wisdom; it has the same message couched more philosophically: “Who, really, can know God’s counsel or who can conceive what the Lord really intends?” “Scarce do we guess the things on earth, and what seems within our grasp we find only with difficulty.” Mother Teresa learned that the hard way. And who really has known the gracious presence of Wisdom?

But Wisdom is the Holy Spirit of God whom Jesus gives to all who believe. “And thus the paths of those on earth are made straight.” Hear the invitation again today. And do not be afraid. Discipleship does cost, but I am with you always. Peace!