

23rd Sunday, Ordinary C

The uniqueness of Christianity is that we claim is that we have a relationship, a personal and abiding closeness to the person of Jesus.

We understand that through Baptism, we are made a part of the family of God. We become the sisters and brothers of Jesus and of one another. His Father is our Father, His Mother, Our Mother. And we know Him to be risen from the dead and alive, right now, seated at the right hand of the Father, that He is Fully Divine and Fully Human. We also believe that with Baptism, we are given the Holy Spirit so that we might be empowered to follow Jesus so closely, that those whom we meet should be able to see the Very Face of Christ.

The Christian is, in a very real sense, another Christ. We are to put on the mind of Christ and to do as He does in every situation.

So let me ask you this, does Jesus hate His Mother? Of course not. Mary was chosen by the Son from all eternity to be His Mother.

Does He hate His Father. Impossible! Jesus claims that He and the Father are One. Jesus cannot hate Himself.

Does He hate us? No. We only need to look at the Cross to know that He loves us more than any other ever could.

Love your Neighbor, love yourself, love your enemy. This is the teaching of Christ that we remember, that we more easily embrace. But....we cannot soften His words today by saying that He did not mean what He said. Jesus is not ambiguous, He means.....hate.

How then, do we reconcile the words of Jesus in today's Gospel.....

I think it is very important to stop for a second and say that it is never justified for anyone to hate in the Name of Jesus. That is an excuse for violence and suppression that too many Christians have used in the last

2000 + years.

But what does Jesus mean here? I would propose that we need to briefly look at three things to sort this out.

#1. Jesus is addressing us, but He is also specifically addressing the “great crowds” that are following Him. He has so far, healed the sick, raised the dead and fed the five-thousand with a little bit of bread and a couple of dried fish. He must have been extremely popular.

Given human nature, it only makes sense that there were, as there still are, those who will follow Him until the next fad comes along, or until they got tired of the hot Sun and all the crowds, or the pressure of society. Or until He says something too difficult to handle such as “unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you!” We humans are fickle. We occasionally, and easily grow luke-warm in our eagerness to follow Christ. Jesus, knows this, and is forgiving. Believe me, I know that. But He warns us of the cost of following Him and expects us to listen.

Which brings me to #2. Jesus also says that if we do not pick up our crosses, then we cannot be His disciples.

He warns the crowds as well as us, that, in choosing to follow Him there will be hard times in life, there will be sickness and death and injustice and bigotry and crosses that we cannot even imagine. We don't like to suffer and we certainly don't go out a look for it. But He makes carrying that crosses, a matter of our will to do so. We must do more than just tolerate our cross, we must love it. Jesus lets us know that up front.

#3 has to do with... happiness. We all want to be happy. It is a deeply etched human longing and there is nothing wrong with wanting to have happiness. Most of us are really good at putting on a “happy face” but let me ask you: Do you personally know anyone who is truly happy? Not just temporarily content, but happy, satisfied, filled to the brim with joy? You very well may, but I don't think I do. I wish I did, but I don't.

The reason so many are not happy is that we equate happiness with satisfying our egos. If I could just get this or that, then I'll be happy. Possessions, fame, honor, its all the same. Indeed, when we get what we want, whatever it is, we are at least temporarily happily. But we know it never lasts.

When we consider these three things together, our human fickleness, our wanting to avoid suffering and our desires to feed our often fragile and demanding egos, then we are left with a choice.

Will we cling to these things?....Will we stick with what we have?..... Or will we forsake them for something better, lasting and infinitely more valuable? Will we say "yes" to Jesus.... to... follow ...Him, ...no matter what?

If we say "yes" remember that there is a cost. We must take up our cross and we must begin to desire Jesus even to the point that we will hate anyone or anything that stands between myself and Christ.

It is a shocking way of looking at things, but what I think Jesus is telling us is that we must detach ourselves from those whom we love, and even our own lives, we must give up our dependence on them and ourselves to make us..... happy... We must stop seeing people as "usable" as tools for our desires. It is then that we will stop loving them (hate) for what they can do for us.

When we do this, something very, very radical happens. We become truly and completely.... free. Free to be happy.

We will be free of fear, free to embrace our crosses as Jesus did.

We will be free to know that there is something better .We will be free to follow Christ without holding back anything for our selves. We become free love unselfishly and without conditions.

We will love our parents, our children, our spouses, our selves in a new and wonderful way as if..... for the very first time.

We become willing and, most importantly, able... to lay down our very lives for our spouses, our children, our loved ones. That is the mystery of how we can hate, and yet still love all the more.

We cannot have this kind of freedom so long as we cling to anything but Jesus and His Cross of Salvation. It's a matter of seeking FIRST God's Kingdom. It's a matter of striving for Holiness. It is a matter of having, unadulterated and complete joy.

Now, I'm not even pretending that I have this kind of happiness, God's still working on me, ... but that doesn't make it less true.

The lives of every Saint, upon careful observation will bear out what I have said and what I am about to say.

The answer to our freedom, to our happiness is not an easy path, but it has been in front of us all along. The Holy Grail of satisfaction has been staring us in the face. Some of us for decades, and some of us not so long. St. Edith Stein saw it in Auschwitz. St. Maria Goretti saw it in the eyes of her murderer. St. Maximilian Kolbe and Mother Teresa and John Paul II...all Saintly examples of our own time saw it. They learned, they experienced, they lived knowing that in spite of all their suffering and their sacrifices, that when they contemplated the Cross to which Jesus abandoned Himself, united to the will of the Father... they saw.....a free, and a fulfilled person. They saw....a completely happy man.

And to the Glory of God.....we are called to see Him as well.