

**7th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Feb 19, 2023**

Why does living a life of faith have to be so hard?

That IS what it's supposed to be, right? Hard. Difficult. Painful. Impossible to get right. All those things. At least that's what it sounds like given what we just heard from the mouth of Jesus. Don't resist someone who is evil. Turn the other cheek. Give your tunic AND your cloak. Go the extra mile. Give to those who ask to borrow. Love your enemies. Pray for your persecutors.

Why does it have to be that way? Why can't it just be easy?

And truthfully, it doesn't seem so bad, at least from my vantage point. I live in a place many people from my homeland would love to live in. I have lots of people who constantly want to do nice things for me, want to help me out, want to buy me dinner, or treat me to some activity. I don't have to worry that I will suddenly be out of a "job". People share their deepest hopes and fears and personal stuff with me, trusting that it will go no further. I must say, I've got a pretty great life, one that doesn't cause me too much pain, too much disappointment, too much anguish. And so maybe living a life of faith isn't as hard as Jesus makes it out to be . . . Unless I'm not living one.

Now that might shock you, but it doesn't me. I wonder about it all the time. Maybe you wonder about it too, wonder if you really are being the disciple Jesus wants you to be. And the thing is, most of us (maybe all of us) are pretty good people, men and women who don't go around wreaking havoc on the world, people who don't get up each morning wondering how they might make someone's life miserable that day. But is that really the measure? Is that the benchmark? Or is that some kind of minimum threshold, one that gives us just enough spiritual security to sleep well at night?

Have we watered it down? Have we diluted the invitation of Jesus, the expectations, the dare-I-say commands? In other words, if living a good Christian life seems a little too easy, then maybe we're not really living one at all. A sobering thought. Maybe even a scary one. It's funny, sad actually how we often look for the minimum we need to do to achieve whatever it is that we want to achieve. And faith is often no different. How "good" exactly do I need to be in order not to jeopardize the destination I hope for? Can I just give a little? And forgive a little? And love a little? What's the price? I need to know.

Yet, in a very real sense, that is looking at the situation completely backward. My dear friends, we don't do the things we do SO THAT God will love us. We are invited to do the things we do BECAUSE God has already loved us, BECAUSE God has already given us more than we could ever think of or imagine.

To use an everyday kind of analogy - it's as if we've already won the lottery, won the Jackpot or whatever game you play. And we have more than we could possibly ever need. What do we intend to do with the "money", with our "winnings"? Will we keep it for ourselves, or will we use it to make the lives of other people better, use it to help those who need help, use it to make the world a better place?

In faith, we believe that Jesus has achieved that victory for us. We've already won. And so the good that we choose to do is not some kind of down payment for something we hope to attain down the line. Rather, the good that we do should ultimately be a kind of "thank you" - heartfelt responses from people grateful for all that God has provided, or is providing, and will provide. God loves us, and so we love. Not the other way around.

But why does it have to feel so hard, seem so difficult? I'd like to give a simple answer, but I'm not sure there is one. One factor, certainly, has something to do with The Fall, that through disobedience human beings did damage to the world and to future generations, rendering us unable at

times to know precisely what is right, and unable at times to choose it when we do know (sometimes called a darkened intellect and a weakened will).

And maybe faith is also difficult because it calls us to unite ourselves intimately with Jesus. That means walking where he walked and embracing what he embraced. His journey, by analogy, becomes our journey. And we know where that led him. And faith can also be difficult because it calls us to often act without considering our own interests, without giving in to deep-seated needs and desires - survival-type of instincts that have kept the human race around since the dawn of humanity.

But in the end, maybe doing what the Lord Jesus asks seems so difficult because, like so many things, we cling to them simply because we are afraid of losing them, afraid that they might run out. But, my dear friends, with God, there is no such thing. We can spend our entire spiritual "lottery winnings" and be assured that God will continually pour more into the account, continually bless us and provide for us over and over and over again.

And so maybe, if following the Lord seems a little too easy, and doesn't seem to cost us that much, maybe we're not truly responding fully to our God who has loved us first, not truly being grateful for a God who has won a victory for us in the only arena that matters. I know I can do more. Now I just have to get up the courage and will to do so.