

Cost of Discipleship – Homily for 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 9-8-13

I recently celebrated a funeral for a remarkable human being, a man who deeply loved Christ and the gospel. He and his wife raised two children, welcomed 25 foster children in their home, worked to reach out to the homeless, opened their home to the lonely, developed a foundation that would build a housing development for the struggling, and much more.

I began the homily by asking the question, "How does a person like Steve become such a human being as he became?" This was one of the most difficult homilies to preach because the man we were celebrating truly lived the gospel in a way that most of us are not able to do. He "walked the talk" to borrow a saying that really found a home in the heart of Steve.

I answered the question by simply stating the obvious: he became this humble, compassionate human being by allowing Christ to live and breathe in the center of his heart. The love of Christ was at the center of Steve's very being and it was from this Love that he loved his wife, children, friends, the poor, the neighbor. Jesus doesn't want us to hate anyone, especially spouses and children. A better translation would be, "Do not love anyone else or anything else more than me, but make your love for me at the heart of your very being." It is from our love of Christ that our love for all other people, including family and friends, emanates.

Every relationship we have will eventually come to an end but Christ will be our constant companion; he will carry us into our next life and escort us into the presence of all the people we have loved. But living with Christ at the center of our lives means accepting the cross of not allowing any other reality to push him off to the side. Our tendency will be to always place too much emphasis on the people around us for our inner sense of security, identity, and acceptance. The truth is that no human being can ever complete us or answer the deepest yearnings of our hearts.

Keeping Christ at the center of our lives means letting go of our attachment to other people, even those to whom we are deeply committed. The cross is the challenge to always love Christ first and to choose him and his gospel first, even at the cost of a relationship. Christ's call in today's gospel is absolute and uncompromising. He even goes so far as to ask us to consider the cost before deciding that we want to become his disciple.

But there really isn't any other choice if one wants to live the gospel as Steve lived it...to the full!! He became who he was because he loved Christ passionately. When we live out of Christ's Love, we become living beatitudes and our love multiples like "loaves and fishes" making everyone our neighbor. When we live out of Christ's Love, everything changes: marriages become stronger, our relationship with work and career is balanced, parishes become vibrant, our politics change, we want peace and an end to violence.

The cost of discipleship means surrendering to Christ and allowing him to take the center stage within our hearts...and keeping him there. It means letting Christ have the final word on all our decisions. It means never allowing anyone or any possession to be the passion of our lives.

By accepting the cross and struggling to make it a reality in our daily lives, we become human beings who see God in every person, we love the poor and will do everything to help them, we can "move mountains" and "uproot a redwood tree." The cost of discipleship is living life on Christ's terms and not our own.

Before Steve passed gently away from a tough battle with cancer, he asked his children, nieces and nephews to write down how they wanted to live their lives and how they could make the world a better place for others to live in. Their responses all hovered around one word: GIVE. We make a difference when we GIVE of ourselves. The cost of discipleship is giving one's life away, trusting that we will receive back a hundred times more spouses and children and family and friends...a return well worth the cost.