

Homily for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - September 9

Wisdom 9:13-18b

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

Luke 14:25-33

Growing up in my family, HATE was a four-letter word.
Well, I suppose the word HATE has four letters in every household,
but at the Fleming's you simply did not use that word!
We couldn't even say, "I hate broccoli!"

And here's Jesus saying that if I want to follow him
I have to hate my father and mother,
my spouse and my children, my brothers and sisters
my very *self* - and everything I own -
if I want to be his disciple.

As I learned as a child, hate is a strong word
and Jesus wants to make a strong point here
- about the cost of discipleship.

What if we were to use a word more positive than hate?
Let's see if that helps us understand.

Suppose Jesus had said,
If you want to follow me, you must:
prefer me to your father and mother;
prefer me to your spouse and children;
prefer me to your brothers and sisters;
prefer me to your self
and *prefer* me to anything you own or possess.

Rephrasing does take away the sting of the word "hate,"
but it may leave us feeling just as uncomfortable
as did the "H word!"

What's Jesus trying to teach us here?
It's all about discovering what is our heart's greatest treasure
and Jesus is pretty clear about this:
he desires that we treasure, that we prefer nothing
more deeply than him.

But what does that mean to *prefer* God
to the people I love the most,
the very people for whom I'm responsible?
Aren't we meant to find God through the people in our lives,
and especially through those entrusted to our care?
Yes, of course we are,
but we need to be careful not to let those very people, or any good thing,
become our gods.

St. Augustine face this same difficulty in his life
and left us this prayer about his struggle.

*"Late have I loved you,
O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!
You were within me,
but I was in the world outside myself.
I searched for you outside myself and
...I fell upon the lovely things of your creation.
You were with me,
but I was not with you.
The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you,
and yet, if they had not been in you,
they would have had no being at all."*

Did you catch what Augustine is praying?

He's saying:

*The beautiful people and things in creation, Lord, your gifts to me,
even though they never would have existed
had you not made them,
those same things distracted me, kept me from you,
for I forgot that you gave these to me
as pathways to knowing you,
that they are not ends in themselves,
and forgetting that these were yours,
I made them mine.*

The Lord doesn't ask that we get rid of family and friends, or ourselves,
but that we *prefer him to them*,
that we see in them God's gifts to us
and care for them as treasured paths to God who made them.

It is not unusual in a culture like ours
for many to give themselves so entirely to those they love
that they forget and even lose God in the process.
If I, as a priest, am so busy ministering to the people in my parish
that I have no time for God - then I am too busy.
If our families are busy,
if I as a parent am so busy caring for my family
that we have no time for God - then we are too busy.

If I want to prefer God to all, then,
like the tower builder and the king in the gospel story,
I must see what I must let go of
and who and what I must care for,
and structure my life accordingly.

That's one reason why faithfulness to Sunday prayer and the Lord's table
is so important.

This time together to hear God's Word reminds us
of what God asks of us (and today the Lord asks a lot of us!)
and the sacrament we celebrate at this altar reminds us
of what God offers us.

God asks nothing of us that he has not already given us.

In Christ, on the cross, God preferred *us* to himself,
the Lord preferred us to his *life*
and emptied himself out for our sakes,
that we might have peace and have it forever.
Even now, in this eucharist we celebrate and receive,
God prefers us to himself
and in the bread is broken for us again
and in the wine is poured out again for us.
May we who are nourished by so great a love
prefer nothing to the One who loves us.

- *Rev. Austin Fleming*