

35 Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A July 2, 2017
2Kings 4:8-12,14-17 Psalm 89 Romans 6:3-4,8-11 Matthew 10:37-42

Puzzles can provide us with a great way to relax. As we look for the right pieces to connect together, we realize that every piece of the puzzle is important in order to form a complete picture. Even without one piece, the puzzle appears incomplete.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives the Apostles two more pieces of the puzzle about what it means to be His disciple. The two teachings in this Gospel reading are: one about carrying our cross and the other about hospitality. These pieces help form the total picture of what is expected of those who follow our Lord. Once again, the puzzle pieces define human relationships. Jesus offers clarity on how true disciples of Jesus must dedicate themselves wholly to Him.

As we examine the first piece of the puzzle to see where it fits into the total picture, we see it is in the form of a cross. There was a cost to the first Apostles and there is one for us today. Jesus describes three crosses that we must bear for Him. The first cross is "whoever loves father or mother more than Me is *not worthy of Me*". Jesus wants His disciples to love their parents, *but* they are to love Him even more. In the second cross Jesus says, "whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is *not worthy of Me.*" Likewise, as much as Jesus' disciples love their children, His disciples are to have even greater love for Him.

And finally, Jesus says, "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow Me is *not worthy of Me.*" Jesus uses crucifixion as a metaphor for what His Apostles must be willing to endure for His sake. His Apostles knew what it meant for a person to take up his cross because crucifixions were common occurrences in first-century Palestine.

Each of us has a form of cross to carry. The cross Jesus bore carries the weight of the sins of the world. The cross each of us carries by our discipleship joins our suffering with Jesus and makes our cross bearable. There is no need to make a cross, or to look for one. The cross we have is hard enough for us. What we have to do is take up our cross. Our cross is not made of wood but of our burdens and sufferings.

There are many people in our community carrying very heavy crosses of illness, unemployment, addiction, loneliness, aging, bearing cruel gossip, children who have left the church, and conflict within the family. The cross for others may be pain in body, heart or mind, while the cross for others may be humiliation and persecution because of the faith they profess. There are also the invisible crosses of depression and grief. Sometimes the most painful cross of all is the one in which we have no choice, for example, living with a difficult person or with a sick person or with an alcoholic.

Know in your heart that Jesus loves you and that He will help you to carry your heavy cross. The size and weight of the cross is not the important thing. Rather, it is the carrying of the cross that is important and essential. Ask Jesus to help you carry your cross of burden. The promise of Paradise can help to make the cross not so much of a burden but a joy. The Jesuit priest, Dan Schutte's hymn expresses it well, "Only this I want: but to know the Lord and to bear His Cross, so to wear the crown He wore."

In the second piece of the puzzle we notice that it is in the shape of an "H." H is for the word hospitality. It is regarded as a sacred duty and the equivalent of welcoming Jesus Himself. In the First Reading, a couple makes the prophet Elisha welcome under their roof and as a result are rewarded with the gift of a son as an indication of how precious hospitality is in the eyes of God.

St. Martin of Tours is an example of hospitality to a brother in need. Martin highlights the truth that hospitality for others is actually love for Christ. While Martin was serving in the military, he was on guard duty on a bitterly cold winter night when a poor man, shivering and clothed only in tatters, stood before him. Martin whipped off his cloak, drew his sword, cut the cloak in two pieces and gave one half to the beggar. That night in a dream Martin saw Christ clothed in the part of the cloak he had given away to the beggar. He heard Christ say, "Martin has clothed me in this garment."

Hospitality and kindness towards our brothers and sisters should be a true expression of our faith. There are six places just in the last paragraph of today's

Gospel where Jesus expresses the importance of hospitality, of welcoming others. Following Jesus involves putting His way of welcoming into practice.

In our community, this means everyone should feel welcome here and there should be no strangers or outcasts. To be hospitable does not mean making them like us. It means accepting them as they are. Hospitality is not so much about open doors as about open hearts. In our community and in our world many people are crying out for a “cup of water” of kindness, a smile, a word of appreciation, of welcome or a phone call.

In extending a “cup of water” of hospitality to other people we are following in the footsteps of Jesus who has room for everybody in His heart. Those who welcome others with hospitality, welcome both Jesus and His Father.

In this celebration of the Mass Jesus is welcoming us. In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is Jesus hosting us and we are His guests, His spiritual brothers and sisters. We should feel welcome and at home here in Jesus’ House. God accepts us for who are, and therefore, we should accept one another for who they are without judgement. When we leave here after Mass we should go out and be God’s host to others.

After hearing today’s Gospel, we realize that Jesus is *not* setting up new rules to make people’s lives even more burdensome, but rather He is explaining the essential meaning of discipleship. We are all called to bear our crosses for Christ. The love Jesus has for humanity means the cross and the way of discipleship. But that cross and that way of discipleship are both our life and resurrection. Furthermore, we are all called to witness to God’s love in the understanding, compassion and hospitality we extend to others. Hospitality is not just an optional extra. It is at the very heart of Jesus, the very heart of the Gospel. To welcome the stranger is to welcome Christ Himself.

Jesus brings all the pieces of the puzzle together as He defines even further the Covenant bond we have with Him. Jesus makes the puzzle complete. He gives us the whole picture of discipleship without any missing pieces.