

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) 2020

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In football, you “Tackle!” In baseball, you “catch flies...” In football, you “Punt!” In baseball, you “bunt...” Football is played on a “Gridiron”! Baseball is played on a “field...” In football, you “Score!” In baseball you “go home...” In football, you “Kill!” In baseball, you “sacrifice...” Baseball may be the only sport where you actually can hear this last word. It's one of the few places anywhere that you hear it in a self-centered, take-care-of-yourself, don't-worry-about-anybody-else society.

In our society, there are still Christians who sacrifice their lives for Christ and who really deny themselves and takes up their crosses. Think of the young man who wanted to be a lawyer, but his father died, and he had to leave school and work to keep things going at home. Think of the young woman who wanted to be a great doctor but was never admitted to medical school. Think of the businessman who had hoped all his life to make his business a great success, but the competition was much tougher than he had ever expected, and he soon found himself declaring bankruptcy. Think of the couple whose marriage is on the rocks. When it started out it was so sweet and good but now... now it's just not the same. There is not a person in any congregation who has not sacrificed a hope, or a dream as burnt offering on the high altar of the providence of God.

I think this puts today's Gospel in perspective. But, to make it a bit clearer, we have to recall last week's Gospel where Jesus asks the question “Who do you say that I am?” and St. Peter Says, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Then Jesus proclaims him “Peter” or “Rocky” for having answered with such faith. Then within minutes Jesus turns the conversation to what we just heard in this Gospel, where Jesus speaks of having to “suffer greatly from the elders the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” Of course, Peter rebukes this, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.” And Jesus' response, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does but as human beings do.” So, you see the progression here. The future was looking bright for Jesus' disciples. Peter had just made this great proclamation of faith and received the keys to the Kingdom. Jesus had promised that even the gates of hell would not prevail against them! Everything seemed to be moving forward. Yet, the thought of Jesus' passion and death was not the expected future. Peter didn't think the Messiah should have to suffer. Peter had Jesus' career path all figured

out. Jesus scolded Peter and called him Satan because he was trying to tempt Jesus away from faithfully staying with His calling. That's why Jesus told him: "you are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." The whole point of Jesus' coming was to teach us what He did and what He did was counter-cultural. So in a sense, what Jesus was saying to Peter was you are thinking culturally, but what I expect is counter-cultural. That's why Jesus goes on to say, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." What this means is that Jesus is pointing out the cost of discipleship. If we are going to call ourselves Christians, there is a cost and the cost is sacrifice. That is why the crucifix is such an integral part of our faith.

We are living in a time when we are losing the value of sacrifice and looking for any way to avoid suffering. Think of some of the things that we used to do as Catholics that were ways to build an attitude of sacrifice. Abstaining from meat on Fridays is a simple example. The Church never lifted this rule, but rather, said if you choose to eat meat on Fridays, then you must do some other form of sacrifice, but how many do? The idea of fasting outside of lent or Advent is very foreign these days, yet Jesus frequently said prayer and fasting go together. I've seen teenagers nearly cry when I take their cell phone from them for a one day retreat. The thought of such a sacrifice is terrorizing. People had larger families in the past because they were willing to sacrifice for the sake of their children. The point is, our Catholic Faith is structured around self denial so that we can build our wills to the point of being able to stand up for the big things when they come our way.

Sacrifice is the greatest expression of love, that's what the crucifix is all about and that's why Jesus was so upset with Peter. When we can sacrifice little things daily, we are becoming more and more counter-cultural, but we are also becoming more loving. Today we are so careful not to say anything that might hurt someone's feelings, even if it is the truth that could help them. Sometimes we need to sacrifice feelings for love, true love, by saying what might be better for the person. The sacrifice might mean that we are rejected, or ridiculed, or even face attack or imprisonment. It takes nerve to offend a friend with the truth; it takes nerve to offend an employer with the truth, and there are consequences to such actions, but such a sacrifice is the act of love that Jesus is calling us to. That's what Jesus means when He says, "deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

The fact is, many Christians are pleased that Jesus died on a cross on their behalf, but they seem to try studiously to avoid taking up a cross of their own. This was Peter's problem. He was thinking that if he could keep Jesus from the cross, he wouldn't have to face his own cross. I think we all know THAT, is not

reality. We ALL will face our own crosses and the way we carry them will depend on how much we are prepared to sacrifice.

So, perhaps we need to re-visit some of the basics and start denying ourselves of little pleasures, strengthening our wills, offering up, as the saying goes, so that when the real heavy crosses come, we will be better prepared to carry them in the counter-cultural way that Jesus taught us.