

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us see if you may know someone who thinks like this.

"I am not bad. In fact, I am a pretty good person. I do not abuse my spouse, children, or anyone else. Do not shortchange my employer, or cheat on my taxes. I do not abuse substances, and have no criminal record. Keep my lawn mowed. Help out in the community. Go to church pretty often, even on a humid summer Sunday, and I give to charity from time to time. So, because I am a pretty good person, and God knows it, Jesus has the sense not to ask me to do anything different than what I am doing.

Anyway, Jesus must have his hands full with others. Like wife beaters. Prostitutes. Drug dealers. White-collar criminals. Lazy derelicts. So, because I pretty much do the right thing...as opposed to those others who do not and really, really, REALLY need God's help. Jesus is not going to go poking his head into my business and ask me to do something different than what I am doing."

Right? Nope... It is all wrong, and today's gospel reading is a prime example of the correction. Jesus has this annoying habit of calling people, whether their life is a moral disaster or moral example. He is interested in something besides improving behavior. Instead, he wants all people, regardless of their behavior, to become his disciples.

Well, we often hear of the drastic changes in life...like dramatic conversion stories. Such as the murderer, the drug dealer, the gang leader... all of them come to faith and live a different life when God through Jesus comes in. Drop the switchblade, and lift high the cross!

But for the rest of us? Answering the call to discipleship often means setting aside what is good, or at least what is legal and respectable. The parent, the doctor, the business leader all come to faith and live differently than before because their old lifestyles have been scrambled. Again, Jesus asserts his priority, not only over the worst in human experience, but over the rest as well. These are the stories of Coach John Wooden, or NASCAR owner and former NFL coach Joe Gibbs. Instead of drop the switchblade, it is drop the golf clubs and lift high the cross!

It can be disconcerting. But no one ever promised that it would be easy.

Today's gospel gives us some insight....into what is really an interview. Show of hands...how many here have been interviewed, like for a job or a position? Have any of you also served, on other occasions, as the interviewer? OK, can we agree that the biggest need is to somehow demonstrate or convey the level of earnest desire in order to "nail" the interview?

If you are interviewing for a position....the cell phone is off...you did not have garlic at supper the night before...you are groomed and dressed appropriately. You want to look “all in” with full commitment and interest, with no distractions or hesitation.

So here, Jesus is interviewing candidates for discipleship. One candidate asks permission to return home and bury his father, who may be dead already. But, maybe, the candidate wants to put off discipleship until he has seen his father through old age and into the cemetery. In any case, Jesus does not give permission, because discipleship has priority. There is somebody else to care for this father, and somebody else to bury him. The one invited to discipleship must follow.

The next makes a similar, but less dramatic appeal: "Let me first say farewell to those at my home." Here again, Jesus gives a thumbs-down. This person also needs to hit the discipleship road, and do so immediately.

What Jesus says at this point does not make sense: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." But think on it this way...when an animal is pulling a plow, the farmer must focus on a fixed point ahead in order to plow a straight line. Looking back when plowing causes the farmer to swerve, resulting in a crooked furrow, the mark of an amateur...and the crooked furrow sits there all season, making the farmer look foolish. To look back while on the discipleship road is no less foolish.

Jesus respects marriage, speaks out against divorce, pays attention to children. He honors the family, but he does not make an idol out of it. For him, family arrangements stand or fall on whether they promote or hinder discipleship.

Jesus calls us out. It makes sense to us when he calls during those times when our lives are a wreck. But he also calls us out when it is all good, the American dream fulfilled. In either case, he is inviting us into a deeper allegiance to himself...wanting to break our addictions, whether to drugs, alcohol, material possessions, success, or respectability. He wants us to find our true freedom in him. It is to this he calls us, invites us. Our way is to follow him...to Jerusalem, to the cross, and beyond.

It does not matter who we are...it is easy to come up with excuses. Some sound highly moral, but what we call love and duty are sometimes what Jesus knows to be the voice of addiction speaking, our fear of a different future, our refusal to die that we may live. We may not want to stop our slavery to possessions. If we stop, we may end up thankful to God for simple gifts...and then we may want God more than the stuff we have. It can unsettle us to follow Christ in a consumer culture.

We may not want to stop our worship of our family. After all, if we stop, we may recognize members of our family as people in their own right, living lives outside our own. If we stop our worship of who we think they are, then we may struggle to love them for who, in fact, they really are. It is unsettling to follow Christ in a culture that debases the family and yet puts it on a pedestal.

But the most insidious addiction is not to those fantasies, or others like them. The most insidious addiction is to cheap religion. Christianity without a cross. The distortion of a friendly Jesus with no wounds in his hands...a religion that denies suffering rather than travel through it. Easy faith.

He heard that in today's gospel, when one candidate for discipleship pipes up and declares: "I will follow you wherever you go." His answer is uncertain. Jesus does not accept or reject him, but rather advises him...talking in a funny way about accommodations. Wild animals have their places to stay; he does not. Jesus talks about accommodations because he believes this candidate will not follow Jesus just anywhere, but rather he will follow Jesus wherever he, the candidate, wants to go. Someplace with comfortable accommodations. He and Jesus are not following the same road...as Jesus goes where his father wants him to go.

Today, we have talked about excuses in place of discipleship. Most of us, when Jesus calls, pull out one excuse or another...or do not even answer the phone when he calls. The never-ending grace of God...the eternal love of God for us...is that, still, Jesus always keeps calling us...waiting for our souls to answer. What makes people faithful is not utter freedom from excuse-making, complete deliverance from addiction, but instead the lively realization that God remains bigger than our particular bogeymen, and that Jesus keeps inviting us to discipleship is a voice louder and sweeter and more insistent than our excuses...very convincing to us, but very lame to God.

All this in the Name of the God who works all the time with our excuses for delay and avoidance because, here on earth, there is nobody else to work with other than the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.