

Homily
18 Ord C
St. Bernard Church
July 30/31, 2016

Our readings for this weekend should make us a little nervous.

Saint Paul says in the second reading that we should seek what is above, not what is on earth. In our Gospel, Saint Luke says much the same thing, that it will not go well for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.

It's in the Gospel of Saint Matthew that Jesus directs us to seek first the kingdom, and then God will take care of our basic needs.

There's another passage in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 14, that continues with this theme.

In that passage, Jesus says to the crowds,

“Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion?”

We like that line. Jesus appears to be supporting our fondness for good financial planning.

But then Jesus throws us a curve. He closes his speech by saying:

“In the same way, every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.”

He pulls the rug completely out from under us. If we want to be a follower of Jesus, do we really have to give up all our possessions?

These sayings from the word of God are troubling. They raise issues which are especially challenging for us in America, the richest nation on earth, where we are so often measured by our income and our possessions.

What I hear said so often is that it is not having wealth that is a problem for Christians. It's being attached to our wealth and our possessions that can be a problem. I've heard some really good people say this and then add, “I'm so glad I'm not attached to my wealth and my possessions.”

This raises a couple of problems. First of all, if we're not attached to our possessions, maybe we should prove it, by getting rid of much of them.

The second problem is that there are millions of people in the world very much in need of the basics of life, food, clothing, housing, an adequate level of health care. If we have more than we need, whether we're attached to our possessions or not, shouldn't we find a way to share more of our resources with those in need?

According to the Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel, our very salvation depends on how we answer this last question, how we respond to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the poorly clothed, the sick and the imprisoned.

So what does it mean to renounce our possessions? What should we give away? How much can we keep?

In the earliest Christian community, described in Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles, everyone sold their property and possessions and divided them among all according to each one's need. Is that what we're supposed to do?

Here is how I would answer that question.

First, we should never let our desire for wealth, for more than our basic needs, interfere with our faith in Jesus. We should surrender control of our lives to Him, and not push Him out of the way when it comes to what we call getting ahead in life. We have to be very careful about this, because it's easy to compromise our faith in Jesus and not fully realize it. We have to live by acknowledging our dependence on him.

This means, very clearly, living much differently than most people in our country. It means being made fun of, even by people in our own family and by our friends. Saint Paul says in 1st Corinthians that a truly spiritual person looks foolish to others.

Second, renouncing our possessions means living simply. It means not having much of anything beyond what we need for the basics of life. There is no hard and fast rule for this, but again we have to be careful about playing games with our decisions.

Of all the people I have ever met, there is one person who was by far the most peaceful, the most serene, content person I have ever met. His name was Bill. He absolutely radiated peacefulness. He was never anxious, never stressed, about anything.

Bill was like a spiritual mentor for me. When I met him, he was in his 70's. He was short, bald and had a raspy voice. He always reminded me of Yoda in Star Wars. He had an amazing amount of wisdom.

Bill lived very simply. He was comfortable, but he had no extras. He was a retired school teacher. He taught high school in Oklahoma, so his retirement income wasn't that great.

I can assure you that Bill would have never traded places with any other person on the face of the earth. He was a very spiritual man. He was very generous with everything he had. He entrusted everything in his life to God, knowing that what God would give him would always be sufficient and lead him to greater spiritual riches. His faith in God was the source of his peacefulness.

I can say that beyond question that Bill was the richest man I ever met. I would love to be as rich as he was.

To me, being like Bill is the answer to what it means to renounce our possessions. There is no good reason, no good excuse, why any of us could not live the way he did, and experience the deep joy and peace that he experienced every day, every moment, of his life.