

## Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time C Corpus Christi 2010

Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds were coming to Jesus. The movement he started with a dozen men was swelling with converts. How pleased the disciples must have been. They had risked all to begin with Jesus when there were few who had heard of him.

Now their investment must have seemed like a gold mine. They had gotten into this Kingdom business at the ground floor. The Kingdom movement was a mustard seed then.

It was a full grown tree now. How confident and successful they appeared, surrounded by popular appeal and growing numbers. It seemed that the sky was the limit now....until Jesus opened his mouth and said,

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sisters-yes even his own life - he cannot be my disciple."

Never saw that saying cross-stitched on a kitchen wall, have you?

Well, as you might imagine, that statement let the air out their balloon. What a career ending sound bite that would make on the evening news. "HATE" parents, family, siblings!"

Jesus, surely we misunderstood you. You are the one who held and blessed all children as images of the kingdom of God. Why are you making the conditions of discipleship so hard?

Why make us choose between you and our families? Couldn't Christianity be more successful and popular if you eased up on us all? Are you sure you know what you are doing, Jesus?

These were the questions, spoken and unspoken, by the disciples that day. Jesus, of course, knew what he was doing. But he wanted to make sure those following him knew what they were doing too.

What do we make of this hard saying of Jesus? Just this: He wanted the disciples to finish strong in the journey of following him. How do we finish strong?

**We finish strong if we begin honestly.**

Today, leaders and politicians have staff members who measure every word, examine it for political correctness, and spin the truth to the purpose of their employer.

The fatal flaw to be avoided is the embarrassment of offending anyone. Jesus had no such desire to "spin" the truth. He did not want to offend. But he did intend to shock his hearer into a higher level of commitment.

Jewish teachers of the first century often used overstatement and exaggeration with their disciples. Jesus wanted to alert would-be followers that the hill is steep in places that they will be asked to climb.

He would be doing them no favor to soft-sell the pressing need for absolute commitment to the kingdom of God. If someone begins the journey under an illusion of ease, that one is headed for certain disappointment. Disillusion is always the child of illusion.

In the animated movie, "An American Tale," a family of mice is headed to America aboard a ship. They have been told that there are no hardships in the new land.

All the way over the sea they sing: "There are no cats in America, and the streets are made of cheese. There are no cats in America, so we'll just do as we please."

You can imagine their disillusion when the mouse family arrived in America to find it populated with hungry cats!

Jesus knows that the crowd surrounding him is not ready for the journey that awaits them as his followers. It is relatively easy to confess loyalty to Christ when one is surrounded by a multitude that does the same.

It is quite another matter to confess Him when one stands alone, much less when one must stand in the face of a multitude who are antagonistic to the cause of Christ.

Christ came to call men and women to bear a cross, not just attend Palm Sunday parades. Jesus knows that if he does not prepare his followers for

the harsh times that may come upon them, they will wilt under the pressure and quit too soon.

This is the point of the twin parables Jesus told in today's lesson. The tower builder and the king going to war must count the cost before beginning. There is no shame to fail in the attempt of a great task. But ridicule is the price one pays for attempting a task foolishly.

Take the cross seriously, Jesus says.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian, who was shot April 9, 1945 by the Nazis for being a participant in the German resistance, said this at one time. "When Christ calls a person, he calls him to come and die."

**We finish strong when we stay focused.**

The saying about hating family is shocking, but not as shocking as it sounds to our ears. In the first century, "to hate" in such a comparative statement means "to love less than."

Matthew's gospel offers the same saying of Jesus, but translates it, "If you love your family more than me, you cannot be my disciple."

Is Jesus advocating a renunciation of all family loyalties? No. In a way, this hard statement is the supreme compliment to family ties. Jesus picked the most cherished, the most honorable of earthly relationships to illustrate a point.

He selected the family because it is the most honored of values. But even the highest and noblest of relationships must pale in comparison to the love and loyalty to God.

Will there be frequent conflict between these loyalties? Probably not, especially given the witness of the rest of scripture on the value of family.

But if a decision had to be made between God and family, or God and country, or God and your own life, Jesus is bold to say: Choose God."

Something, or someone, is going to be the first love of your life. If we would be followers of Jesus, as he followed God, he must be first-loved more than

our money, more than our ambitions, more than our sense of our survival, more than our family.

Why is such focused loyalty so important? Because no great feat or victory was ever won without unswerving loyalty to the cause.

Sir Edmund Hilary climbed Mount Everest by staying focused on the peak. He was not just walking around until he found himself on the top!

Top athletes choose one sport in which to excel, and devote themselves to that sport with practice and perseverance. Great pianists first devote their lives to practice, while their friends are outside playing.

How many of us never excelled in an endeavor because we could not come to the point of commitment? How crucial is such a devotion to the journey of faith.

Jesus was a finisher. At his death he cried, "It is finished." He did not quit. And now he calls us to follow in his steps. It is not always an easy climb, but it is the only peak worth giving your life.

It is not always a popular journey, but we will never be totally alone either. Christ will be there. And his presence will enable us to finish strong.