

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year C)
9-7-2025 Homily

I. Introduction

Jungle tribes in Indonesia would often try to capture wild monkeys, so that they could sell them to buyers from different zoos throughout the world. At first it was very difficult to trap the monkeys because they were very agile and suspicious of humans, but then the natives discovered an easy way of doing so. They would place a shiny object inside a bottle with a narrow neck or stem, and leave the bottle in a clearing in the jungle where it would be easily visible. Upon seeing it, the monkey would be attracted by the colorful item and reach inside the bottle, but there wasn't enough room to withdraw its hand while holding onto the object at the same time. The monkey could have escaped very easily just by letting go—but it wouldn't do that. It wanted the shiny object so much it would remain in that position, holding the object and being trapped by the bottle, until the natives came and captured it (Brother Andrew, *God's Smuggler*). Instead of the monkey possessing the item, it was the other way round. We must beware of this same danger; we are never truly free if we are possessed by or totally devoted to anything or anyone but God.

II. Development

In the Gospel Jesus says, "Anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be My disciple." Perhaps we can understand this better if we reverse the statement: we must renounce everything that possesses *us*. There's always a danger that our material possessions will come to own us, and that we'll start to place them ahead of other people and ahead of our relationship with God. Preventing this, by the way, is one of the major benefits of tithing, or giving 10% of our income to charity: doing so reminds us that our material wealth and possessions are ultimately gifts from God, and that we have the responsibility of sharing our blessings with those in need. Taking this or some other practical step to put first things first will help us grow in God's grace and peace. This is important to do, for Jesus makes it very clear that getting too caught up in material things is incompatible with being a Christian, and makes it impossible to take up our cross each day. The values of this world can easily enslave us; we have to remain free of false attachments by following Christ.

Not only can we get too caught up in material things; we also have to guard against possessiveness in our relationships. There's a difference between truly loving someone, which allows him or her to grow, and loving the person in a possessive or selfish way. This is the idea underlying the 2nd Reading from St. Paul's Letter to Philemon. Philemon was one of St. Paul's converts, a wealthy Christian who owned a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus ran away to Paul, who in turn wrote a letter to Philemon on the slave's behalf. In this passage Paul makes it clear that even if the society of the time allowed slavery, such a relationship of master and slave was fundamentally contrary to everything Christianity stands for, and he hints that the right thing for Philemon to do would be to grant Onesimus his freedom. Today, of course, we don't have slavery, but there may still be temptations to "possess" people—in our family, those who work for us, or anyone over whom we have influence or authority. Without even realizing it, we may be trying to use other people, to make them fit a certain mold or pattern, or to keep them from truly being or becoming themselves. Such temptations

must be overcome by genuine Christian love, and all our relationships must be fitted into our larger responsibility of responding lovingly to God. This is what Jesus means by “renouncing” our families and friends: namely, placing God first so that we have *true* love to share with others.

III. Conclusion

St. Francis of Assisi and several companions once visited the Holy Land in an effort to convert the Muslims who had conquered it. Not only did the Muslim clerics, or leaders, refuse to debate theology with them; they dragged Francis and his friends before the sultan and demanded they be put to death, saying, “Sire, you are bound to maintain and protect the law of Islam. We beg you, in the name of Mohammed, who gave it to us, to have these men beheaded.” Before the sultan could answer, St. Francis said, “Your clerics will not talk with me; perhaps they would be more ready to act. Have a fire lighted, and I will go into the fire with them, and you will see by the results which faith is the truest and holiest.” As soon as Francis mentioned this challenge, all the Muslim clerics quietly disappeared, being filled with terror at the idea of such a test. This led the sultan to remark with disgust, “I see that none of my clerics are inclined to face flames and torture for their faith,” and he ordered St. Francis and his companions to be set free (R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories and Quotes*, p. 61).

True spiritual freedom comes from self-surrender—but this sort of blessedness doesn’t just happen overnight; it must be a way of life. Jesus says that a man wanting to build a tower will first calculate whether he can afford it; a king entering into a war will first determine whether he can win it. The Lord’s point is that we must know what we’re getting ourselves into; to be His followers, a real commitment is necessary. God must come first—before the people in our life, before our possessions, before our hopes and desires and dreams. As the 1st Reading says, our plans are unsure; our deliberations are timid. Only through the power of God’s grace can we follow through on our commitment—and only if we try to place God first can we truly be happy.

Jungle monkeys reach for something shiny and attractive, and because they refuse to let go, they’re trapped. Is there anything in our life we’re allowing to enslave us—money, possessions, status, popularity, power, drugs, alcohol, sex, relationships, a need for control, or anything else? Jesus wants us to be free—so that we can truly love Him and one another. If we turn to Him in trust, He’ll give us the grace we need; if we try to place Him first, we will find the freedom and peace and joy we desire.