

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 7, 2025

If you have ever seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* you may remember a playful scene where the husband, Tevye, keeps asking Golde, his wife, "Do you love me?" And in her first response is, "Do I what?" The lyrics are quite humorous, and fun to watch if you have the time. But I thought of that song a few months ago when in the Gospel at a weekday Mass where we heard the story of Jesus, appearing to the disciples after the Resurrection and asking Peter three times, "*Do you love me?*" Reflecting on today's Gospel, I can hear the Lord asking that a question again. "Do you love me?" And I would just wonder if that might be the question that is the basis of our judgment when we meet Jesus face-to-face at the end of our journey here on earth.

We know all, all, have to give an account of our life. And there is very little doubt that what is laid out in that account will give a clear indication of what we valued in life, what we loved. And there Jesus will stand saying, "*Do you love me?* Or perhaps, "*Have you loved me*", or "*How have you loved me?*" What poverty it would be to have look Jesus in the eye and say, "I love you, Lord, but not as much as I love this other thing, or not as much as I loved I myself." In today's Gospel, Jesus demands to be our first love. Not the second or the third or somewhere down the line. He demands to be our first love and in strikingly strong language, He tells us that people come to Him without "*hating father and mother, spouse, children, brothers, and sisters, and even their own wife, they cannot be his disciples.*" Although we can get over that hurdle of the word 'hate' by assuming that Jesus used the word rhetorically, it's still a very strong statement. He didn't stumble over that word or accidentally use it. He chose it making a strong point. We should have a strong aversion loving anything more than we love Jesus or putting anything ahead of

Him or before Him in our life. We should hate anything that gets in the way of our putting Jesus of absolutely first.

It might be good to make it distinction here. It's not always the 'thing' that is the problem. So, for example, if I have an inordinate love of rich food or my favorite music, and I prefer that or I seek that more than I see friendship with Christ, it is not the food and the music that are a problem. It's not their fault, right? It's my disordered attachment to those things. That's the problem. That's what I should hate. I should hate my disordered attachment to those things, because that's what gets in the way of my putting Christ first. Likewise, if a person put children or grandchildren before Jesus, before we ask for person to start 'hating' them, you would ask that person to put their attachments in proper order. God first, and then others. St. Benedict said, "Christ is the center of all Christian life. The bond with Him takes precedence over all other bonds – familial, social. We can prefer nothing to Christ." I thought that distinction was fairly obvious, but I just wanted to make that clear – not to hate a particular thing, but rather out attachment to that thing or that relationship.

So when it comes to these things that get in the way of our putting Jesus first in our life, I don't think we are merely talking about the occasional things that pop up - situations happen, like you are having a bad day and you go to the bank and you snap a little bit of the teller, instead of being patient and kind and loving as Jesus would have you be. That kind of thing may be an obstacle in the spiritual life, but it's not the kind of thing that you look at that you really need to worry about. It happened once. Rather, what we want to look at are the patterns in our life, patterns in our life that point to a mis prioritization of our desires and love. I will give you a few examples. Having a casual attitude about the Sunday Mass

obligation. Another is being in an irregular relationship. Perhaps having a marital relationship with someone without the Church blessing on their union. Or being always geared for money; always money, money, money. Or having a complete, or nearly complete lack of self-denial. Always saying 'yes' to every urge, every impulse, every desire that we can experience and never saying 'no'. Maybe it is a strong habit of self-preference where it always comes back to me, how I think about things and what I want. It could be the use of contraceptives or pornography, or turning to self-gratification, anything else that is contrary to God's design for human sexuality. It could be using other people for our own gain or advantage. It could be the habit of speaking ill of others. It could be a disproportionate interest in sports or other things. So, I think it could be a number of other things, obviously. But I don't need to point out all of these things, just in the sense that, you know, there's a connection to sin there, but that they are all indicators - that these are patterns in our life. They're all indicators of something being out of order in our heart. They are indicators of places where the Lord is inviting us to look to Him first instead of something else. And Jesus is not in this Gospel saying, "If you don't think that you have what it takes, you should walk away now." He's not saying, "Look, I am only taking the strongest of the strong. If you don't make the cut, might as well go home." But I think He is telling us out we have to be serious about these things. We have to take a hard look at our life, make our good examination, and not just once, but on a regular basis to see how we are putting Christ first and what are those areas where we are not.

It is interesting in the Gospel the two examples or illustrations that Jesus gives about constructing a tower or the king marching into battle. He uses the phrase, "...*first sit down. Which of you wishing to construct a tower do not first to sit down to calculate the cost. Or*

what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide...”
What is that “*sitting down?*” For us, perhaps it's our daily prayer. Because sitting down and not just rattling off a few Hail Mary's but really taking a look at this issue in our life, the cost of discipleship. Taking stock of these different things in our life that are vying for our heart, grasping for our attention and our devotion, maybe recognizing that we don't always put Jesus first in absolutely everything. But then crying out to God asking for the grace to put Him first. And towards the end of the gospel, the king marches into battle finds that he doesn't have the strength overcome his enemy. *“While he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms.”*

Perhaps that represents our crying out to God and asking for the grace to put him first. We might recognize, “I know I need to put you first Lord but help me. I am not walking away from being your disciple. I need your help Lord to put things in proper order in my life.” In those times of prayer where we have sat down and considered, maybe you will hear the voice of the Lord *“Do you love me?”* Perhaps he doesn't sing but do you love me? Do you love you with your whole heart? Do you love me more than anything else? Will you put me first in your life? Will you be my disciple?