

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

[*2Kings* 4: 8-12a, 14-16; *Psalms* 89; *Romans* 6: 3-4, 8-11; *Matthew* 10: 37-42]

To enter the message of Sacred Scripture today, I invite us to ponder one particular effect the pandemic is having on our lives. I am thinking specifically of the restrictions placed on hospitality. For example: long-term care facilities cannot welcome visitors; provinces might be quite strict about which travelers will be allowed across their borders; and requisite physical distancing limits the number of people welcomed in buildings, even churches. In these and other contexts, the welcome we extend is limited and selective. The reason is concern for self-preservation, both individual and collective. The virus is a threat to health, so we try to exclude it by not allowing in those who might carry it.

As we ponder the sacred texts this morning, we realize that the same dynamic of defensiveness may be operative within us regarding the Word of God and those who carry it. Through our reflection on the Scripture passages, the possibility dawns on our consciousness that at times we might very well perceive God's Word to be a threat. When this is the case, concern for self-preservation will place barriers to the Word's entry, and put limits on our capacity to welcome its message and those who speak it.

This might at first seem strange to contemplate. God is love, after all, and His Word that comes to us in Jesus is that which leads to everlasting life. How could this in any way be a threat? Why would we ever hesitate to grant unbounded hospitality to anything God would say to us? Well, let's consider our response to these words we hear Jesus speak this morning: "[Whoever] does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me." How do I respond when I hear that? We can be sure that when the disciples first heard those words, it gave them pause, to say the least. A person sentenced to death by crucifixion was forced to carry the cross beam on his shoulders through the city, amidst jeering and mocking crowds, to the site of crucifixion. This is the fate that Jesus knew awaited him, a destiny he willingly and lovingly endured for our sake. Here Jesus is saying that his disciples must be ready and willing to follow the path that he trod, namely, that of complete self-denial so as to live for God and for others. In other words, he is teaching that if we wish to follow him to eternal life, we must first die. Death here refers not only to that which brings an end to our earthly journey, but also to the multiple deaths to self that we must undergo while we live on earth. As St. Paul spells out clearly, from our union with Christ brought about by Baptism, the pattern of our Lord's life becomes the blueprint for our own. His pattern was death to self in order to live for God. We, too, then, precisely as disciples of the Lord, must be prepared to take up our cross by dying to ourselves and to all that is contrary to the Gospel, in order to live fully for God and to serve his saving plan for the world. How do I respond to this? Am I willing to grant hospitality to this teaching, or is the instinct for self-preservation activated? Do I tighten restrictions at the border? Am I tempted to lower the "seating capacity" so that there is no longer room in me for these words that challenge me to my very core?

We can make those questions concrete. What attachments keep me from living fully my Christian identity? Of what must I let go in order to die to myself? Am I held bound by fear of separation from family if I follow where the Lord leads? Is my attachment to reputation so strong that I cannot give witness before others to my Christian belief? Have I become so fixed within a pattern of thinking and behaving that I am closed to Christ's teaching whenever it challenges what

I value? Pondering such questions helps us to see where the inclination to self-preservation is overpowering our desire to welcome the Lord and causing us in consequence to be only selectively hospitable to his Word. This is dangerous, because as Jesus says, it is only by losing life for his sake that we shall, in fact, find it.

And what about extending welcome to those who carry the Word? People known to bear a lethal virus will not be allowed across the threshold. If God's Word is perceived as a menace to my chosen way of life or my preferred worldview, then those who carry that Word will be kept at arm's length. The invitation to welcome both the Word of God and its messengers courses throughout the Bible. An ancient example is given in our first reading. The hospitality afforded by a wealthy woman and her husband to the prophet Elisha models the openness we must all have to God's Word and therefore to those who announce it. Who are these messengers in our day?

That Jesus does choose and send emissaries is evident when we hear him say this to the apostles: "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." To grant hospitality to one commissioned by the Lord to bring us his Word is to welcome both Jesus and the Father. That's no small matter. This challenges us to examine the hospitality we extend to those persons and means by which God's Word reaches us: Sacred Scripture, the Tradition of the Church, the preaching and teaching of ordained ministers, the witness of the saints or the testimony of believers. Do we allow these across the threshold of mind and heart, or do we enter lockdown in order to keep them out? If self-preservation protocols are used to block entry, then we have to ask: what messengers are we, in fact, allowing in? To what Internet sites, social media platforms, magazines, etc. am I giving my attention? In what conversations do I willingly participate in the kitchen, the living room, the staff room, the boardroom, the work site, or the book club? These vehicles and situations can be ambassadors of attitudes, mindsets, and ideologies often antithetical to the Gospel. They lead us away from fidelity to our Christian identity and baptismal call to welcome, hear and heed God's Holy Word. Who, then, am I letting in?

After a few months of dealing with the virus, the question of when travel restrictions and entry protocols will ease is on everyone's mind, but the answer is uncertain because of our abiding wariness of the virus. After a lifetime of being with the Lord, we know instinctively that there is absolutely no reason to fear His Word. He loves us, so we know the words he speaks, however greatly they challenge and transform us, are ones of love that lead us to eternal life, the reward he promises to those who welcome "the prophets, the righteous, and the disciples" who announce his teaching. The time to remove all barriers to his Word is now. Let us welcome readily, joyfully and without restriction the Lord and his every word, and follow without fear wherever he leads us.

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