

Homily

13th Sunday in OT A 7.2.17

Fr. Todd Molinari

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Sunday we continue our formation as disciples of Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew, which builds on the readings from last week: Holiness and growth in being adult and responsible disciples only comes from hearing the Word of God and allowing it to give us life. As we hear in the Mass today, this openness can also lead us into new directions where risk and freely leaving behind what is comfortable are the way to life.

In both the first reading from 2 Kings with the story of Elisha visiting the childless couple and Jesus' teaching that true discipleship can only go hand-in-hand with renunciation of one's immediate family, we are presented with radical and open-ended visions of following the God. For Elisha, he responded to the call to be a prophet and this was characterized by leaving his parents and forsaking marriage - not because these were considered bad, but rather because God called him to give his entire freedom to the vocation of being a prophet. His freedom to follow the life-giving Word of God bears fruit: He is given hospitality by the barren woman and her husband, and in return he offers the blessing of God: Their hospitality - which symbolizes that they affirm the Abrahamic covenant - is a sign of faith and is life-giving. Because of that their affirmation of the covenant with God will give life - literal new life. In Ancient Israel, the barrenness of a couple who then through faith are blessed with a child is a common motif for the faith of Israel. What is new here is that alternative forms of life - voluntary renunciation of family and marriage becomes the hallmark of the prophetic order, which is a new and God-given form of living in a covenant relationship with God in the people of Israel.

Jesus continues this prophetic tradition by teaching us the same: "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me." This is a pretty radical claim. Jesus had no time for anything that would hold back his disciples from being totally and freely committed to being his followers. It is a type of renunciation that goes against the grain: We usually associate Christianity with the family hearth, the warmth of family times together. And true enough, Jesus spent much of his ministry with families and never once said family or marriage were bad things. But his teachings show us that something else is going on here: It's the question that anyone seeking God has to face during their life: What is really important to you? What really holds you back from seeking joy and fulfillment in life? What ties you down? What are you afraid of? Jesus puts these questions in the starkest relief by citing the prophetic tradition of the ultimate way of giving yourself to God. He is saying that the stakes are as about as high as you can imagine when it comes to being his disciples. Yet how often we dumb it down, smooth the sharp edges of his teaching and make his claims banal and trite.

As we approach the altar to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, we are also receiving this teaching with an openness of heart and a willingness to take it seriously.