

A List of Priorities

We are a people of lists. We make lists for everything. Grocery list; Christmas gift list; To-do lists; Top Ten Lists as popularized David Letterman; lists of our favorite movies, restaurants, and places to visit. On the internet, one can always find lists of where to go, the best teams in sports, best cities to retire in, or whatever else we could make a list about. Once these lists are made, then we rank them from best to worst; on a scale of 1 to 10; in terms of cost; as well as a host of many other criteria. I wonder if there is a list of the 10 best lists.

In our daily to do lists, the tasks are often ranked in priority. Once list is made in a kind of free-flow idea way, tasks are then ranked according to priority. Once the tasks are arranged by priority, then they are further arranged according to importance. The idea is to get the most important tasks finished first and then proceed to the tasks with lesser importance. The tasks that don't get done are carried over to the next day until they are completed.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives us a list of sorts. He tells us that God is to be #1 on all the lists. While what Jesus says gets translated as 'hate' it isn't in the way that we associate with 'hate' today. Rather, it is more of 'liking less' one thing over another. It isn't necessarily avoiding one thing, you just prefer something over it. For example, you don't 'hate' movie theater popcorn, you prefer to eat the nachos first. That said, Jesus is telling the crowds to have the right priorities.

What Jesus is saying is consistent with the Biblical message: the 10 Commandments start out by addressing our relationship with God in the first 3 commandments, then personal relationships are addressed in the last 7

commandments. What Jesus says echoes the first reading from Deuteronomy. By putting God first, by serving God, then the rest will follow.

Question becomes how do we do this? How do we know if we are following and serving a God whom we can't see? One way is to determine the motivation behind what we do.

- When we do something for someone, is it so that we gain some sort of advantage for ourselves; or is it to help meet someone's needs that cannot be met any other way or without our help?
- Do we put others down so that we may have our egos boosted or make our actions look better; or do we defend others as Martin Luther tells us we must do as we follow the 10 Commandments?
- Do we love our neighbors as ourselves because of the promise of eternal life for ourselves; or do we do it because in each other we see glimpses of God's presence and see them equally as a child of God as we are?

By understanding the motivation, it will indicate what our main priority is. Much like when Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also."

Many people will say the three most important things to them are God, country and family. Most of the time, we say God is #1, but it's on our terms. In "3 Dollars Worth of God" Pastor Wilbur Rees wrote with biting sarcasm the following describing the average man's view of God:

I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please

Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine.

I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant.

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth.

I want about a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.

I'd like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.

This is the kind of God that most people want, a God who does what we want God to do, when we want it done and exactly how we want it done; plus, it is not going to cost us too much.

Jesus tells us that this isn't what is expected of us if we really wish to follow Jesus. We are to give our whole self to him. Many times, our concept of following Jesus, of being a disciple is just enough of a disciple that doesn't upset our comfortable living too much; it doesn't upset our schedule; it doesn't inconvenience us; we want to be, as it has been called a minimalist Christians; what is the least that has to be done in order to be considered 'in.'

But if we give everything, give our all to Jesus, what will we get in return? The apostles asked this question later on in Luke's Gospel. What do we get out of following Jesus? Yes, Jesus tells us the cost is high - giving up even ourselves, but what is the payback? What are those blessings God promises those who follow Him in the Deuteronomy reading? Do we need more than just a promise of a good life, collectable only after we die?

We get the promise not only for eternal life, but also in the here & now. Remember, Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God. Most basically this means that we are no longer defined by others, but as a child of God. This assures us that we are more than what others say we are; or not being identified by the things that we have. We are identified by the relationships we have with God and each other. Those relationships are right when they are life-giving, hopeful and peaceful, the kind of peace that Jesus gives to us, not an uneasy peace that would seem to fall apart at the first sign of stress or tension, but a peace that things are fine; and if they don't seem fine now, they will be.

Jesus cautions us that being a disciple of His, of being a Christian isn't about the easy way. There is a cost to being a disciple of Christ. It ultimately means giving up control of our lives, to follow a way that most people are not willing to go. This way can be challenging, difficult and sometimes seemingly too difficult. But if you talk to anyone who has kept the way, followed Jesus as best as they could, keeping focus on Jesus, they will tell you that is a most rewarding journey.

One final note: this journey that we take in following Jesus is not one that we do alone. Being Christian is not an individual choice with a relationship only with Jesus. What we do or don't do as a Christian affects others. To illustrate this, consider this story in a sermon by Pastor Tim Zingale found on sermoncentral.com:

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision. He decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included. It was a masterpiece.

But then someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship.

"Each time you are here" the nobleman said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark"

This illustrates that our decisions about being a disciple of Jesus not only affect us, but they also affect the rest of our community. Being a true disciple of Christ means that we consider the effects of our actions on the community.

We see in this Gospel text and in similar passages, that Jesus wasn't about the numbers, wasn't out to see how big the crowds could get, reaching some critical mass and then things will really happen. Jesus was looking for totally committed followers, ones who put Jesus first, who will follow his teachings; seeing Jesus' example of what it means to give yourself for others, to others and ones who are willing to go the distance with Jesus, for Jesus. The question before us, as it was before the crowds that followed Jesus, are we willing to do that for Jesus?