

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time: Gratitude and Discipleship

Wisdom 9:13-18b; Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Dear family and friends of the Co-Cathedral of St. Theresa Church,

Greetings of peace in the Lord!

The Responsorial Psalm reminds us that we have a God who never abandons us but remains our refuge in all times and seasons, a God who comes to rescue us when we call upon him, renewing our lives through his love again and again. It proclaims, "In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge" (Ps 90:1).

The fitting response and posture to being blessed by God's saving actions in our lives is gratitude. What a beautiful way to celebrate it in union with the Church's central act of worship, the Holy Eucharist, from the Greek word "eukharistos," which means thanksgiving.

In our parish community, gratitude is at the heart of our stewardship way of life. We serve and give because we recognize that everything we are, everything we have, and everything we do is a result of God's gifts. We no longer base our serving and giving on what others are offering nor excuse ourselves because we do not see others doing them. We serve and give proportionately to all God has given us through a consistent and honest offering of our time, talent, and treasure.

When gratitude is the heart and the reason why we do what we do, there is the joy of doing them. There is the profound joy of having done something for others. Indeed, joy is a divine gift that comes from giving and serving. Joy is the expansion of the heart. The heart expands, like open hands, when it is full of joy, but it constricts, like tightly closed fists, when it focuses only on itself. Close hands can never make a beautiful melody, but open hands do. (Try clapping with your closed hands.)

Further, gratitude enables us to go beyond mediocrity. It inspires us to make the best of everything, even amid the humdrum of daily life. Practicing gratitude opens our whole being to learn and understand the cost of discipleship mentioned in our Gospel this Sunday. Our Lord challenges us that if we want to follow him wholeheartedly, we must be radically detached from self-importance and wealth, even from our families and friends (cf Lk 14:26-27). It challenges us to put the family relationship as a secondary attachment and live a spirit of detachment from material things if we want to be his disciples. It is to practice letting go and letting God be God, beginning with the small stuff for a moment until we can bear the spirit of self-sacrifice and attachment to God, truth, and his will. We can discern the reason for doing this from the passage of the Book of Wisdom. We are reminded that "the corruptible body burdens the soul, and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns" (Wis 9:15). The excessive attachment to material things, even to people, can hinder us from giving ourselves entirely to Jesus. Life and material blessings are temporary, not lasting, no matter how beautiful and significant they may be. But our relationship with God is, which awaits its perfection in heaven.

Of course, it is easier said than done. There are daunting challenges along the way of our Christian discipleship on how far we can go in following Jesus. We are constantly tested on how far we can sustain our love for him. We are tried continuously on how far we can be faithful disciples. Often, if we choose to do the right and holy thing, it may cause discomfort or a cross we are to carry. But it is a good discomfort, for we don't want to regret not doing what is right and holy for Jesus later in life.

I just came back from my visit with my mother. I am thankful for all your prayers. I was with my mother for a month. Our family thought she wouldn't last long because she was frail and fed only with liquid, but she bounced back and is now eating solid food. I am very thankful that, at least for a month, I was able to serve her. I owe her prayers and the understanding of my ministry as a priest serving far away from her. When bidding her farewell, which I did five times, "Nanay, I am going back to Hawaii." She responded, "don't go home yet," while holding my hands. I said, "I will come back next year." She looked at me, raising her eyebrows with sadness, and said, "I know you will come back. Take care."

I consider that every time we bid farewell to our loved ones would mean a little act of letting go and letting God. Something inside of us is being taken or given away. In life, there are big and small moments of letting go and letting God. But I think being grateful to God helps us go through the "letting go and letting God" motion of life. Gratitude opens our hearts to God to touch our families and other people in ways beyond our imagination.

I think this must be St. Paul's disposition while in prison. He was sending Onesimus, a runaway slave, back to Philemon. He appealed to Philemon to treat Onesimus the way he would welcome and receive him in their community (cf Phil 1:16-17). Treating others as persons with dignity, worthy of respect, as brother or sister in Christ, is a tangible sign of Christian discipleship. It would be impossible to talk about discipleship without it or to carry it out without care for others; otherwise, it would only be a show.

On the other hand, like Onesimus, we are no longer slaves; we have been redeemed. The passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ have given us dignity as sons and daughters of God. We are to live this dignity in serving and caring for others in gratitude for God's blessings in our lives.

God bless you.

Fr. Manny Hewe
Pastor