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Migrant families seeking asylum walk from a bus depot to a Catholic Charities humanitarian respite center just after being released from federal detention in McAllen, Texas, July 31. (CNS/Reuters/Loren Elliott)



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I'm sure for most of us, that Gospel seems quite grim, thinking that we have to hate our brothers and sisters in order to love Jesus. I can reassure you, at the very beginning, that in the idiom of the Aramaic that Jesus spoke, this was a way of only saying love more or hate less those whom Jesus is talking about — your brothers and sisters. He's commanding them you must love God most of all and everybody else less.

What the Gospel is about and what is very challenging is that Jesus is wondering, it seems to me, as he's walking along and the crowds are getting bigger and bigger, "Do these people really know what they're asking for if they want to be my disciple? Are they willing to make a dramatic change in their lives, in their values in order to follow me?"

Sept. 8, 2019, Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Wisdom 9:13-18b

Psalm 90

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

Luke 14:25-33

I think he was having doubts that everybody really was listening to what he was saying, and perhaps all of us are in the same situation. Sure, we've been disciples of Jesus all our lives, most of us, but have we really thought through what that means, how it should change our life if we're truly a disciple of Jesus?

Our first lesson today about wisdom helps us to realize that we really do not understand and cannot understand the wisdom of God unless we have the help of the Holy Spirit. There's a passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah that makes this clear, where Isaiah, speaking for God, says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts."

God's way of thinking is so different from ours that sometimes we fail to understand that to follow Jesus and the way of God he teaches, we have to make changes in our thinking and our way of acting.

St. Paul later on (hundreds of years later) in writing to the church at Corinth expresses somewhat the same idea when he tells the people there in this letter, "Here am I preaching a crucified Christ. I have to preach of Christ who allowed himself to be taken by his enemies, handed over to be tortured, nailed to a cross, crucified, died and all the time was loving those who were doing it." Paul says, "Here am I preaching this crucified Christ."

He says of the Jews that this is a scandal they could not get over. How could God allow himself to be handed over to enemies, tortured and put to death? No, that could never be. So for them it was a scandal they couldn't accept.

He says of the Greeks (by which he means the sophisticated, educated people), that it was just plain foolishness. Allow yourself to be put to death without any kind of reaction except to love the people doing it? That seems foolish. Yet Paul says, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

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The foolishness of God — what God does seems foolish, but it's wiser than our way of thinking, or this weakness of God is stronger than our way of thinking. It's a challenge to follow Jesus and to begin to live in what people would say, if you really take this seriously and live the way of Jesus, is foolish or weak. But yet if we're going to be disciples of Jesus, we must follow his way.

Of course, one of the things we could reflect on is how Jesus, at the end of his life when he was going through the garden and was accosted by those who were to arrest him and one of his disciples struck out with a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus said, "Put away your sword. Those who live by the sword die by the sword." He rejected any kind of violence. We've spoken about that before and how absurd it is that we threaten our whole planet with nuclear weapons and could go to war at any minute.

Today's second lesson might prompt us to think about another way of being a disciple that isn't so popular in our country, especially by our leadership. That is reaching out to those refugees at our border and loving them, welcoming them.

In a way, that's what Paul was asking of Philemon. He wanted him to change his whole attitude toward this person who had been a slave and to reach out to him as a brother, a family member. This is a dangerous thing what Paul was asking of Philemon because it was a capital offense for a slave to run away. If he went back to Philemon, as Paul was asking, and Philemon turned him over to the authorities, he would be executed.

Obviously, Philemon had never thought of it before of how he might have to free his slave. Becoming a disciple means that we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the human family and accept them and love them.

But even more, when it's a member of our own church, someone who is baptized as we are, who lives with the Spirit of Jesus within us — that's what Paul is reminding Philemon. He's asking him to take him back as a brother, a brother who shares the same life of Christ that he does.

Whether it's just members of our human family or brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a responsibility to reach out as Jesus did. "When I was hungry, you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was a stranger you took me in."

That's what Jesus taught us, that's what Paul was asking of Philemon, and that's what God is asking of us for our brothers and sisters at our border and for all of those who are homeless, hungry, or need help in whatever way. God is asking us through Jesus to reach out to them as brothers and sisters.

It was a hard choice for Philemon, but he did it, otherwise we wouldn't have that letter as part of our Bible. Maybe it's a hard choice for some of us to give support to those who are trying to come into our country. They're fleeing violence, poverty and hunger, and we need to open our arms to accept them.

To me, this is clearly part of being a disciple of Jesus. It comes through powerfully in today's lessons. As Jesus wondered about that crowd that was following him, "How many really want to be my disciple?", we have to ask ourselves where are we in that crowd? Are we still willing to say yes to Jesus, be his disciple, listen carefully to his words, look at his example, and follow him?

It's a tough question and requires prayer and profound reflection before we give our answer. That answer, I hope, will be for each of us: I choose to follow Jesus.

Editor's note: *This homily was given Sept. 8 at St. Ambrose Church, Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*