

Homily, August 28, 2011
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63:2,3-4,5-6,8-9; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-27

*"What profit would there be for one to gain
the whole world and forfeit his life?"*



When I was a little boy, my younger brother and I used to spend many Saturday mornings at my aunt's house. We called her Auntie June, and she was my mom's oldest sister.

I remember one morning I was there and I must have been in a bad mood, which was unusual when I was at my Aunt's house. Auntie June was pretty cool. Although she never married and had no children, she was a schoolteacher and had been for years before I came along. She knew something about kids.

Well, she didn't scold me or put me in time out. She just said to my grandmother: "Where's Richard? There's a boy here who looks like him, but he's someone I don't know."

I remember how her remark caught me by surprise. It bothered me a lot, and probably made me even crabbiest. Anyway, I went out of the room, and must have given it some thought. When I came back, I was "myself" again and behaving better.

"Well, look," said Auntie June, "it's Richy!"

That incident stayed with me over the years, and I have come to realize that she taught me a simple lesson in spirituality ...

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Even as children we can grasp for the dark side of our nature turning away from the person God meant us to be. Everyone experiences such episodes, but it's not a place to linger. If it becomes attractive, whatever you think you will gain comes at the cost of your true life. Auntie June knew that.



It's an insight I encountered years later when I read Tolkein's great work The Lord of the Rings.

If you aren't familiar with the story, the Ring was an evil creation. It gave the one who possessed it great power and immortality. But the power was selfish, greedy and corrupting, although at first the possessor deluded himself that he could bend it to his will and do great good; the immortality it gave was a rejection of hope and providence. The life it gave was an eternal addiction to the Ring.

Weighed down by his task of destroying the Ring, Frodo offers it to Galadriel. She is one in whom the Ring's power could be fully manifested, enslaving the world in darkness and despair until the end of time. She struggled with temptation but finally rejected the offer, saying in soft, tired voice: *"I pass the test, I will diminish and remain Galadriel."*

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Our desire for influence, recognition, power, and security can also push us off the road that leads to life and onto the road that leads to death. I think that was the lesson Tolkein was trying to impart in his mythology.



Tolkein's insight, my aunt's insight ... it isn't new. It's quite old.

"You duped me, O LORD, and I let myself be duped," lamented the prophet Jeremiah. *"All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I must cry out, violence and outrage is my message; the word of the Lord has brought me derision and reproach all the day."*

Perhaps most of all, we are tempted into false lives by our desire to be accepted, to be popular, to be liked. The life of faith can be demanding, especially when set against the expectations of society. It's an ancient truth.

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Jesus rebuked Peter because he was grasping for a false vision of life. His true life was to be found in God's providence, and in a moment

weakness, he was willing to forfeit it. We know Peter's destiny. The Lord could not let him become a false guide. I don't think his rebuke too harsh. Countless lives hung in the balance.



In all these stories, there was a choice to be made: to live a falsehood, or to live one's true life. And in every case, the story turned out well, the right choice was made.

But think ... we make such choices all the time, some little, some big – and we often have trouble discerning, on our own, which choice is the best. Sometimes the littlest choice can take us a long way down the wrong path in life.

There is a saying: “*God knows us better than we know ourselves.*” It's not from the scriptures, but the sentiment is. One of my favorites is from Psalm 139:

*Lord, you have probed me, and you know me:
you understand my thoughts from afar.
Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it all.*

If we believe in God, we must be a people who pray. We must be open to an encounter with Christ like the one we read today.

Think of all the times Jesus spoke the truth to people who were straying: to Peter, more than once, to the Samaritan woman at the well, to the wealthy young man, to the Pharisees.

We can't encounter Jesus face-to-face way the disciples could. But he has sent us the Holy Spirit to be our guide and that is better yet. Recently I heard a Benedictine abbot say that solitude is the gateway to the soul, and the soul is the gateway to God.

There is that place deep within us, where we can always encounter God. And how appropriate that deep within us, where no one else can go, God will show us our true selves, and correct us when we stray.

In that way, you can keep your life, and gain -- not the whole world -- but the kingdom of God.

Please find the time to pray.