Homily, 31 August 2014

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. ... the word of the LORD has brought me derision and reproach all the day.

Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God ...

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Henry poured the cream in his coffee, grabbed a napkin, then picked up his cup and looked around for a table. “Hey there's Josh,” he said to himself. He went over to his table and asked, “mind if I join you?”

Josh looked up from his phone and smiled and said, “no, not at all Henry ... have a seat.”

“Where's Betty?” Henry asked as he sat down.

“She's on retreat this weekend. I'm on call, so I couldn't go.”

They’d been chatting for a while, when Henry tilted his head and, looking at Josh’s neck, he asked, “What’s with the chain? I thought you couldn’t stand to wear wristwatches or any kind of jewelry. You don’t even wear your wedding ring.”

“I haven’t changed,” said Josh with a grin. “It bugs me, but it’s supposed to: it’s a crucifix. I wear it now and then ... kind of as a penance. I started wearing it during Lent a couple of years ago, and every so often I get it out and wear it other times too.”

He pulled it out from under his t-shirt and held it up for Henry to see. It was just a small crucifix, grey metal ... nothing fancy. Then he tucked it back beneath his shirt.

They sat for moment or two, sipping their coffees.

“So ... “ said Henry, “tell me about it.”
“Well, like I said, I started it as a Lenten thing: just to remind myself about the season and make me think about the passion and what Jesus did for me.

That went okay, but sometime later I began thinking about that passage where Jesus said that whoever wished to be his disciple had to take up his cross and follow him. That’s mostly why I wear it now.”

“Okay ...” said Henry.
“So ... right now, I guess, you’re carrying your cross. What’s up? You don’t seem sick, no disabilities, I know you and Betty and are doing okay ...”

“Uhmm ... that’s not really how I think of the cross,” said Josh. “If it was just some problem, some physical or financial difficulty, then you’re right, I really don’t have much of cross to bear.

But I’m not sure that’s the right way to look at it, at least not for me.

The cross was designed for torture and death: you’re hanging there pretty much naked, dying, and people can just watch and jeer. It’s hard to make crucifixion something noble.

Jesus died for our sins because he loved us and wanted to save us from death. I think the point was: that the Cross didn’t have the last word. So what does it mean to take up your cross and follow him?: I’m still trying to work that out.”

“Hey, if you haven’t worked it out, I’m not sure I’ve got much to say ‘cause you’ve thought about it a lot more than I have,” Henry replied as he slowly shook his head.

Josh sighed. “Here’s where I’m at: the cross is death; it’s what can separate me from God -- if I let it ... if I don’t follow Jesus. The problem is: sometimes I tell myself that the cross isn't so bad, that it’s not really so heavy. You know Henry, sometimes I kind of like it.”
“So, when I get too comfortable with my sins, or even tell myself I’m not of much of a sinner, it’s time for me to wear this. It reminds me to choose life, not death.”

“That’s funny,” said Henry. “Odd, I mean. I’ve been thinking about how often I do the wrong thing just because it’s what everyone does, what everyone expects. Last week a couple of the guys wanted to play golf, so I let him talk me into calling in sick the next day. Why did I do that?

“Who wants to be called a goody-two-shoes,” said Josh, “... or a coward, or a prude, or a virgin. We really do worry about conforming ourselves to the world. But it’s not just other people, it’s me too. Sometimes I’d rather go watch a football game than go a wedding, or I tell myself that a quick peak at a little porn doesn’t hurt anything, or that I don’t have to apologize because I didn’t really start the argument. It just goes on and on.”

“So let me see if I’ve got this right,” said Henry, “the cross isn't the troubles in your life, it’s the dark side of you, your sin. You can’t really get rid of it, and the only way you can keep it from killing you is to drag it behind you and follow Jesus.

“Yeah ... that’s about right. It’s not about the troubles per se, but how I respond to them, or to the expectations of the world, or to my vices. Jesus will keep me safe from my own cross, if I let him: if I listen to him, follow his example. But it starts with me. I have to realize that I have a cross to bear.”

So ... why are you wearing your crucifix today?”

Josh didn’t respond, he just looked at Henry.

“Oh ... sorry,” said Henry, “that’s none of my business. Actually it’s kind of cool, you wearing that crucifix like you do. I’ll have to think about it myself. Want some more coffee?”

“No,” said Josh, “This is my third cup, and I told Betty I’d go help her mom with some chores today, so I’d better get going.”