

There is only one thing necessary

Homily for Wednesday September 28, 2022

Wednesday 26th of Ordinary Time

Many years ago a guard in charge of a lighthouse along a dangerous coast was given enough oil for one month and told to keep the light burning every night. One day a woman asked for oil so that her children could stay warm. Then a farmer came. His son needed oil for a lamp so he could read. Another needed some for an engine. The guard saw each as a worthy request and gave some oil to satisfy all. By the end of the month, the tank in the lighthouse was dry. That night the beacon was dark and three ships crashed on the rocks. More than one hundred lives were lost. The lighthouse attendant explained what he had done and why. But the prosecutor replied, "You were given only one task: to keep the light burning. Every other thing was secondary. You have no excuse."

Temptation is a choice between good and evil. But perhaps more insidious than temptation is conflict where one must choose between two good options. The lighthouse keeper in our story found himself in such a conflict situation. So also are the would-be disciples in today's gospel story.

Jesus' appears to be unreasonable in his single minded focus when he responds to those who want to attend to important family matters before following Jesus. So how do we make sense of this passage?

We need to interpret it through the lens that states in the end there is only one thing necessary. And while burying one's father and saying goodbye to one's family are good in themselves, Jesus uses this situation to teach a most essential lesson – to follow him is the one supreme good. Think of it this way.

Our faith holds that each of us—lay people, the ordained, and the consecrated—have a vocation. In the root of the word "disciple" is the word "discipline," and this is what Jesus asks us for in this Gospel passage. He admonishes us to keep our focus on the Lord and his Kingdom. Our love for everyone else, including those in our families, schools, workplaces, and communities, should overflow from that first calling, a love that consumes our whole heart

Jesus reminds a would-be follower that "the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." Jesus did not mean this literally because other passages in the Gospels (Luke 2:7, Mark 4:38-40) show Jesus resting or sleeping. Jesus meant that our commitment to the mission, the work he gives us, will require our undivided attention and effort every single day. If we wish to follow him, our discipleship will require detachment, focus, and discipline

Jesus' unnamed interlocutors, each in his own way, raised family obligations as reasons for delaying the beginning of their mission to follow the Lord. Jesus' answers indicated that those obligations do not suffice as excuses, and even can keep us from "proclaiming the Kingdom." Should we shirk our duties? No. Instead, it is of primary importance that we stay close to Jesus and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, discern his will in every moment so that when choosing between two goods, we align ourselves with what Christ is asking of us.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks about this one thing necessary when in paragraph 44 we read:

“Man is by nature and vocation a religious being. Coming from God, going toward God, man lives a fully human life only if he lives by his bond with God.”¹

I’ve referred to this man before Dr. Peter Kreeft, a prof at Boston College in the department of Philosophy and one of the most astute and wise men I have ever heard speak or read: When he was six years old he had a eureka moment where is realized the point at the heart of today’s gospel. He describes a conversation with his father this way.

Dad, everything they teach us in church and Sunday school, all the stuff we're supposed to learn from the Bible—it all comes down to only one thing, doesn't it? I mean, if we only remember the one most important thing all the time, then all the other things will be O.K., right?"

He was rightly skeptical. "What one thing? There are a lot of things that are important."

"I mean, I should just always ask what God wants me to do and then do it. That's all, isn't it?"

Wise men know when they've lost an argument. "You know, I think you're right, son. That's it."

I had perceived—via God's grace, not my own wit, surely—that since God is love, we must therefore love God and love whatever God loves. I now knew that if we turn to the divine conductor and follow his wise and loving baton—which is his will, his Word—then the music of our life will be a symphony.²

Let us pray: Lord, you desire for me to follow you. Clear my own pathway to your Kingdom: help me to distinguish between those things that make it easier to follow you and those things that make it more difficult. Help me to encourage others to stay focused on your Kingdom.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 44.

² <https://peterkreeft.com/topics/three-ideas.htm>