

Who Do You Love More?

Intro. Joe wasn't a member of our parish. I met him through mutual friends. He had recently retired after a long career in the Navy driving ships. He moved back to where he grew up on the Suwannee River. In conversations I learned Joe had never been married, although he had several opportunities. He told me part of it was he had fallen deeply in love with the sea and he focused on that life, a true sailor's reason. As many of you understand, no matter which branch of the service, long months on deployment are hard on relationships and family. So Joe decided to focus on the sea. He eventually met and married a wonderful woman in our parish. It is difficult to balance more than one major focus in life. Just ask not only people in the military but also parents, nurses, doctors, pastors, most everybody.

I. The words of Jesus in this gospel echo a similar passage from John's gospel when the Lord asked Peter if he loved the Lord "more than these," meaning did Peter love the Lord more than he loved the other disciples. In today's gospel, the seemingly harsh words were a challenge to his disciples to put the Lord and his mission of evangelization *first* in their lives. Placing the relationship of God above the relationship of father, mother and child was a shocking statement to the disciples because the Jewish culture highly values family bonds. Another way to say it is, whoever loves others more than God is not *ready* for him or his mission [M. McGlone, *NCR*, 6/12-25/20]. It was the Lord's way of making a strong point to the disciples as they prepared to go off on mission. They needed to focus on the Kingdom of God first [G. Gutiérrez, *Sharing the*

Word Throughout the Year, Orbis, 1997]. They soon realized how that focus strained or broke some of their relationships. It certainly put them at odds with people in their time and led to many being martyred.

Concl. Having a strong commitment to God has always put a strain on his disciples. To proclaim “there is an alternative to the way things have always been,” [M. McGlone, *NCR*, 6/12-25/20] is to invite other people’s scorn, anger and even injury. When it is obvious we follow the Lord, people are challenged; some respond with love while others with hate. When we love God, his love multiplies in *our* lives and overflows into the lives of others. We have seen and heard about many people who risk their own lives in service to others. A recent story talked about parents who are nurses. Their two daughters became nurses because of the devotion to

service of others they saw from their parents. They now work in the same hospital together. I don’t know what faith they practice if any, but I think they embody the commitment the Lord asks of his disciples today. Putting others first is putting God first. It is a different kind of love, the love God has for us. It gives energy to our mission, but loving God also means facing suffering – the cross - and still proclaiming the Kingdom of God every day. We can love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind and still love our family and friends. The more we do that, the more worthy, the more ready for him we become.

Fr. Michael Pendergraft

June 28, 2020