

The Nazareth Page
A gospel thought for the home
July 2, 2017 - 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 10:37-42

Are you a list maker, someone who puts together a daily or weekly, or for whatever space of time you want, a list of things you want to accomplish? A to-do list. For instance, you might write: Mow the grass, arrange my sock drawer, visit my sick aunt, clean out the inside of my car, write a note to my congressperson, pray quietly for fifteen minutes, bake a pie, weed the flower bed, say one nice thing to my spouse - well, you get the idea. In today's gospel Jesus suggests a few items to place on our personal list of things to do.

At the top of the list, he asks us to place God and God's will for you. That will involve, in general, doing in your life what Jesus did in his. Specifically mentioned, carry your cross. Saying that to his disciples most likely did not earn him a round of applause. They were okay with putting God first, but the cross part was not something they were excited to hear about.

Then Jesus lists a few things that could get in the way. Family or job demands could block the need of putting God first. So could anything else that becomes so consuming that we can't think of anything else. This could create deep worries that cause us great stress. We could become obsessed with politics, the state of the church, the stock market, the performance of our favorite team, our desire to shed a few pounds.

At the end of today's gospel, we find a most curious suggestion: Give a cup of cold water to a little one. In my view, this is not a throwaway line, but rather is intended by Jesus to awaken us to a way - a very important way - that truly serves God.

Recall that in the time of Jesus, children were not thought of as worthy of attention by adults. Seen, yes, but not to be listened to. One time a group of small children tried to get close to Jesus but his disciples tried to push them away. It was as if these disciples thought that small children would get in the way of Jesus, distract him from the important things he was about, make too much silly noise. We know what Jesus did. He scolded his disciples for their narrowness. He even went on record saying that for such as these little ones, the Kingdom of God was being created. They were to be first and not last. You can imagine what those disciples talked about later that evening when Jesus was elsewhere.

With God first on our list, all the rest is not easy to figure out. The first on the list is God. Everything else, even the *smallest* task, is also important.

David Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel thought for the home
July 9th, 2017 – 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 11:25-30

Here are some wonderful gospel words. "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." May we all believe them.

It can be very hard being a good parent or grandparent or even a good friend these days. Maybe it was always so. I can only speak for myself. I worry about the media and its many messages of put-downs of good people, the glorification of violence and its constant message to buy this or that. And there are all those drug commercials. Tell your doctor you want " ... " Happiness will be yours.

I worry about the example set by once trusted leaders in both church and society. As I said, it's hard remaining hopeful today. It's such a challenge to care for those we love in what sometimes seems, a very deceptive and dangerous world.

Two messages come in today's gospel that are helpful. First, Jesus speaks of children, even infants, being able to sense God's love. This means that God cares for the young as well as the old. God is always our primary helper. God is with us in our attempt to be good parents and grandparents, neighbors and workers -- to do what's good and right and helpful.

Second, God does not ask us to carry life's burdens alone. There is help immediately available from the One who can lift the entire Universe with one finger. We only need to ask for help -- not as a sign of weakness, but as an expression of the way it is! We're not to struggle alone. It's not *all* up to us. God wants to help.

Toward the end of today's gospel comes another often heard, but not always appreciated, message from God. "I am gentle and humble of heart." That's Jesus talking about himself. That's Jesus talking about God. God is gentle with us. God is not a hard taskmaster, a tireless tyrant, a master who only wants us to be slaves. No, that's the opposite! God wants. God wants us to survive, to do our best, and to know that we are always cared for by God.

God is also "humble of heart." Humility is that posture where we acknowledge exactly who we are. It does not mean we lower ourselves unless we have mistakenly attempted to change places with God. Humble of heart means that God has raised us up. Here is a thought that has been said in the church from the time: God became flesh in Jesus Christ. *Jesus became human so that we would become divine.* The church has always taught this. The challenge for us is to believe it!

David Thomas, Ph.D.

The Nazareth Page
A gospel thought for the home
July 16th, 2011 - 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 13:1-23

Think about the miracle of life that is contained in a single seed. In the seed is found the wondrous mystery of life. Some seeds become trees, some generate beautiful flowers and some become the grain that is the basis for the food we eat. So much is contained in a single seed!

In the middle of the oceans stand islands that have been formed by fiery molten rock rising from the center of the earth, eventually bursting above the water to form new land. For thousands of years these new landmasses are nothing more than congealed rock. Their surfaces are barren and lifeless. That is, until a few long-distance flying birds soar over the land and excrete from the sky, you guessed it, seeds.

If conditions are right, a million or so years later, the rock will be covered with plants and trees. Green leaves and grasses are everywhere. Life is abundant. All because of some accidentally dropped seeds.

Jesus loved to use images from nature to help us understand God's ways with us. Maybe that's because God, being the author of Creation, is present in those processes. Jesus came to show us all we needed to know about God. He not only spoke words about God; he himself embodied God for us. In Jesus's life, in his painful death and in his life-giving resurrection, God's immense love for creation, for us, is spoken in words of affirmation.

Yet words only travel their full distance when a hearer receives them. Jesus wanted his words not only to be heard, but also to become seeds of divine transformation in those who heard and accepted them. His words were to follow a path through our hearing to the good soil of our minds and hearts. His words feed the life within us.

To their children parents repeat or echo the words of God through their own words and deeds. Pope Paul VI wrote about evangelization and said that children can also communicate God's word to their parents. Are we parents listening for their words?

Remember that any word spoken with kindness is a word of God. Any word spoken in forgiveness is God's word. While it's true to say that God's word is in the Bible, it's even more true to say that God's word is in all the loving gestures expressed within the family and from the family to the rest of the world.

David Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel thought for the home
July 23rd, 2017 - 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 13: 24-43

Jesus seems to have anticipated some misunderstandings that we might have when he announced to us that God's kingdom was now beginning. For instance, when people heard about its beginning, they might have imagined what it would be like. After all, since God created the Universe, anything that God made would be magnificent and well beyond anything they might dream. In other words, think big!

They might also have thought that it would be flawless and that all who belonged to God's kingdom would be virtuous and perfect. They would all be honest, kind, just, hard-working, and all-loving. Bring on this kingdom, they thought. We need it right now. This world needs a great display of God's power so the bigger, the better.

Knowing then -- and now -- what's in our minds and hearts, Jesus used some important guiding images to give us a more accurate picture of how God's kingdom would appear. First it begins small. How small? Well, Jesus said, think of the smallest seed there is, the mustard seed. Looking at that seed would suggest that nothing much would ever come from that tiny seed. So, just as this seed produces such a huge bush, so too does God's kingdom grow. When thinking about God's kingdom today, it's probably best to think small. Or don't focus on size at all.

Now let's reflect on the matter of how perfect God's kingdom will be. Again using a vivid image, Jesus says that the kingdom is like growing wheat mixed with weeds. Everywhere you look, you see both wheat and weeds. The smart farmer doesn't try to pull up the weeds because they might extract good wheat. They grow just too close together.

These images suggest that God's kingdom is like most families - they are neither terrible nor perfect. Just average with average mess. Some days good, some days not.

And it's very good to remember this because we tend to expect God's work always to be big and perfect. Jesus is reminding us that God work is more complicated and more human. Usually God's work is small and messy. Just like family life. In fact, that's where God does some of the best kingdom work, in our families.

David Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel thought for the home
July 30th, 2017 - 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matt. 13:44-52

To be an Olympic champion is a great achievement. How overwhelming must be that feeling when standing atop the podium with a gold medal around one's neck. All those sacrifices and countless hours of training were all worth it!

But before the victory, what are the feelings? How does it feel during those countless hours of training when one could have been doing much more enjoyable activities? How difficult it is to give your all before any victory is won. And while preparing, one is not sure of the victory. As we say, "It's all up in the air." No future is certain.

Many philosophers have noted that giving oneself totally to *one thing* can feel very much like a wager. In that sense, one bets that one's effort will result in a specific outcome, which might or might not happen in the future. There's risk. There's uncertainty.

Jesus said that anyone who is committed to him will live in a certain way. Doing the right thing always rules out other possibilities. Today's gospel says it is like selling all that one has, and buying the field that might have hidden treasure, or purchasing a shell that might have a pearl inside. When we dedicate ourselves to following Jesus and serving others, it's like we bet our lives that Jesus is right.

Parents and grandparents and other care-givers know what it means to give up much to help others. The government tries to estimate each year how much it costs to raise one child from birth until adulthood. The figures are high. If parents have more than one child, the cost is even more. Unless they own an oil well or have won the lottery, parents sell all they possess to help support their children.

They give not only their financial resources, they give their time, their energy, their attention, the very substance of themselves for the betterment of their children. Good parents do this continuously and good parents don't count the costs. They are surely part of God's kingdom.

There are other examples of selfless giving for the sake of others. Many teachers, medical personnel, clergy and social workers give up large parts of their own lives so that others may live more fully. Only God knows the number of people who have given their all to follow Jesus. And some day we may be surprised to learn who these people are.

David Thomas, PhD