

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year B: Dt 18:15-20; Ps 95; 1Cor 7:32-35; Mk 1:21-28
January 31, 2021
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For the last two Sundays, the Gospel focused on the calling of the disciples by Christ at the beginning of his mission to redeem the world, and challenged us to consider the importance of spending time with Christ in prayer and the duty to be “fishers of men,” who help to catch souls for Christ. In the second reading for this Sunday’s Mass, we hear from St. Paul a simple summary of two different ways to follow Christ.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul says, “*An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.*” This simple summary by St. Paul describes the basic difference between the married and the celibate forms of Christian discipleship.

Marriage, the Church teaches, is a natural vocation – we are called to it by our human nature (cf. *Catechism*, 1602). But celibacy is a *supernatural* vocation, one that is above and beyond nature, and it requires the sacrifice of marriage and family life. Married people, St. Paul says, naturally have many practical, temporal concerns, such as how to care for their spouse and how to provide for their family. But the unmarried person is free from these concerns and is thereby able to give more direct attention to God and to spiritual concerns. This, of course, is the reason for the Church’s rule of celibacy for priests, no matter how odd or unpopular it may seem in any age. Celibacy simply allows the priest to give more full-time attention and focus to God and to the spiritual and pastoral care of souls.

But each form of Christian discipleship comes with its own challenge. For the married person, the challenge is usually to find time to focus on God and the spiritual health of the soul. It is an undeniable fact that marriage requires a constant investment of self and attention to a spouse and family, and this often makes it difficult to find time to nurture the soul with prayer. Every Christian needs to pray, so the challenge for the married Christian is usually finding a time to give God undivided attention in prayer. And a great recommendation and goal for

the spiritual life of a married person is a weekly holy hour – an hour of time spent in quiet prayer with God, away from the demands and distractions of ordinary life.

The challenge for the unmarried Christian, on the other hand, is to maintain an undivided heart for the things of the Lord and to take advantage of the greater time to pray – to remain focused on God and the spiritual life, with disciplined and deep prayer. Many of my friends with young children often tell me how much they would love to get a time of peace and quiet to pray and reflect on their spiritual lives with God. They remind me not to take for granted the time for prayerful reflection that the priesthood allows. For us priests, the challenge is also to make sure that others benefit from our own ability to spend long time in prayer, such as by sharing insights into the spiritual life in homilies or conversations. We priests should be making the same investment of self to God and the spiritual life that married people make to their spouse and family. The fact is that God creates and calls some people to focus full-time on the spiritual life, in order to assist those who do not have such a luxury, due to the natural demands of work and family. This is how the two different forms of discipleship are supposed to benefit each other.

Whether a person is married or unmarried, the goal is to be faithful to God and to focus on the spiritual life to the extent that the vocation allows, while fulfilling the duties and obligations of the given vocation. It would be wrong for a married person to spend all day in prayer, just as it would be wrong for the priest or religious sister to spend all day focused on temporal concerns. This was the lesson of St. Francis de Sales in his famous spiritual work. He wrote, “Tell me, please, ... whether it is proper for a bishop to want to lead a solitary life like a Carthusian [monk]; or for married people to be no more concerned than a Capuchin [friar] about increasing their income; or for a working man to spend his whole day in church like a religious; or on the other hand for a religious to be constantly exposed like a bishop to all the events and circumstances that bear on the needs of our neighbour. Is not this sort of devotion ridiculous, unorganised and intolerable?” (*The Introduction to the Devout Life*, Office of Readings, January 24).

So, the goal is not for the married person to pray like a priest, or for the unmarried person to have a divided heart, but rather for each to give God the focus that his or her state in life allows, and to assist each other in being better disciples of Christ. This is what we can pray and hope will happen here in our parish of St. Julie’s.