

Friday, I saw a high school kid walking to LW in his gameday varsity football jersey, and I saw the lights and heard the crowd that night. It took me back to my own first varsity football game my senior year. I'd played football on the sophomore team, but then had dropped out of football, concentrating on basketball. But I went back to football my senior year. I was starting defensive end that September night in 1978. I was both excited and nervous in the hours before kickoff. How would I do under the bright lights? I clearly remember, as we warmed up that night, looking down the field at the Mercer Island team. They sure seemed big. That was always the way it was for me. Before every game the opposition always seemed bigger than us – bigger than me.

A few months ago a parishioner came to me to discuss a situation at work. He works for a large tech company and was worried that, as the company's culture changed, he, as a faithful Catholic, wasn't going to be welcome anymore. He might even lose his job if he didn't actively support certain ideas regarding sexuality and identity contrary to his

beliefs. He was feeling the pressure of being a Disciple of Jesus in our world. Perhaps you are as well, in this or other ways.

It's easy to believe we possess some virtue because we desire to possess it, or we make resolutions to that end. But how many soldiers believe they're courageous – until they go into battle and really find out? How many of us think we're honest people – until it would take a lie to save us from financial disaster? We talk tough in practice, but how will we perform in the game? We never really know until we're tested.

So, what about the virtue of faith? In the Gospel today we hear seemingly harsh words from Jesus. "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Jesus is here speaking to "great crowds." The Greek is "*okloi polloi*." It translates literally as "many crowds," as in several distinct groups of those listening to Jesus. And, since Jesus is speaking of the qualifications for being His Disciple, we can think of those groups being divided by the depth of their

relationship with Jesus. Among those listening to Jesus were certainly committed followers. But there were also those who were interested in this strange Rabbi without being deeply committed. And some, no doubt, who were just curious to see about what all the fuss was about.

As Jesus continued His travels, preaching the Kingdom of God and healing the sick, all these groups would eventually be tested. The Gospel tests all of us. It will give us that crisis needed to really test our faith. By the time Jesus died on Calvary those “many crowds” from the Gospel would all be sifted out. Some would stay, most would leave, but staying always came at a great cost. “Everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.” Here Jesus is not saying that all physical possessions would have to be abandoned in order to be His Disciple, but He does mean we have to put Jesus first, even before the closest family ties.

When Jesus says we must “hate” our parents, spouse, children, to follow him, think in terms of those situations within families when

children say to a parent, “I hate you!” or “You hate me!” because the parent has restricted the child’s freedom, or otherwise made a decision for the child’s good that’s not accepted by the child. To do something a loved-one rejects or doesn’t understand, this is the “hate” Jesus is talking about. And following Jesus may mean doing something or going somewhere your family, and others, can’t understand or accept.

So, how do we know we are truly faithful to Christ? We can say we are. We can make resolutions and recite Creeds. But until being faithful to Jesus exacts a great price from us, we can’t know for sure. In this church today there are just as many distinct levels of relationship with Jesus as there were in the “many crowds” of the Gospel. The curious people won’t pay a price to stay with Jesus. They don’t even claim to have faith. What about those who may identify as Catholics, but whose faith is fragile and thin? They may find that the pressures of identifying with Jesus and His Church force a deeper decision upon

them: do I want to stay with Jesus, or walk away? And those of us who think we're truly committed Disciples – are we sure?

In the Gospel passage today about the builder of the tower and the King marching into battle Jesus assumes that a disciple will “sit down and calculate the cost” of following Him. So, here's a question for each of us to sit down and consider: What price would be too high for me to continue to walk as a Catholic Disciple of Jesus? Or, “What am I not willing to give up to remain faithful?” What about convenience? If the Catholic faith became inconvenient would I stop practicing it? Or, what about pleasure? If following Jesus would restrict my pleasure in some ways, would that be enough to leave? For some of us it might be reputation. How does my Catholic faith impact my standing in my society? Could I stand to be ostracized for the faith? Or let's go back to that parishioner I was speaking about at the beginning of the homily. Would I give up advancement at work, or even my job itself, if it contradicts my faith? That could happen. What if it's even a choice

between Jesus and my very life (“If anyone comes after me without hating even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”)?

To help with that first question, try this second one: “What is the biggest, hardest thing I’ve sacrificed up to now, to remain with Jesus in His Church?” In other words, have we really been tested yet? We can’t be completely sure where we stand with Jesus until we are. That’s a real blessing of this time of sifting that we live in. It offers us clarity. We have a greater chance to prove our faith --which is one of the best ways to grow in it. Faith increases in proportion to its cost. It shrinks when it’s cheap.

So, it’s game time. Maybe your job isn’t on the line yet, but how big does the opposition to your discipleship look to you? I think back to my pre-game Friday night jitters. Are they fear or just nervous energy that will disappear when the game starts? We’re each about to become much more Catholic, or much less. The lukewarm middle isn’t going to be much of an option anymore. How are you going to do?

That first game was a blur. I made some tackles, got beat some, felt the next morning like I'd been in a car accident. But it . . . was good. We'd lost 13-7 in overtime, but I was committed, I wanted to play even more. Maybe we've passed our faith tests so far – but maybe those tests haven't been very hard either. I don't know in your case. But we'll all have a chance to find out soon enough. Stand strong and play the game hard. We can do this. Our opponents aren't as big as they look. It'll be worth the cost to follow Jesus.