As we approached this Father’s Day weekend, I reflected on today’s gospel with my father in mind. Many memories came to mind, but one stood out because I think it exemplifies what Jesus was speaking about when he said that those who would follow him must take up their crosses daily. It happened at our little league baseball game.

When I was in little league baseball, we had a very good team, so good that we had only one serious rival. McGorray Brothers Funeral Home was the sponsor of that team. Sounds pretty ominous, doesn’t it? And they really were our nemesis. Their star players were twin brothers – we’ll call them the B. twins. And their mother, Mrs. B, was at every game. Though we didn’t have adult managers and coaches on the field in those days because most of our games were played during the day, Mrs. B was definitely managing things from the stands. My dad was the one who coached our team at practices, though he couldn’t make most of our games because of work. But he happened to be in the stands that day. As usual, it was a hard fought game. But we managed to eke out a victory. Now Mrs. B was fiercely devoted to her sons’ team. She was very vocal during their games, and definitely didn’t respond well to the agony of defeat.

Well, right after the game that day, my dad overheard Mrs. B tell the kids on her team to pick a fight with us. I guess she thought that if her kids could give us a licking off the field, they would be more likely to give us a licking on the field the next time we played because of the intimidation factor. And the kids on that team were pretty intimidating. Many of them were big, strong kids who were from the toughest neighborhood in our city.

Well, when my dad overheard Mrs. B telling those kids to pick a fight with us, he went right up to her and told her that what she was doing was wrong. Of course, Mrs. B didn’t like this much and told my father to mind his own business. But he didn’t back down. And finally, she left in a huff with her kids, who were obviously embarrassed by the whole thing.

Now, to those who were looking on from any distance, it probably looked like my dad was the one being aggressive and antagonistic -- toward a woman no less -- when really it was Mrs. B who had been the antagonistic one. And he knew that people might get the wrong idea about what they had seen. But still he stood up to her for us. Actually, it was one of many times when my dad stood up to someone who was treating another wrongly, tried to calm them down, and to convince them that there was a better way to handle things. It’s one of the things that I have always admired about my father.

Of course, this is not an easy thing to do -- ever. And often, the results aren’t pretty, since no one likes being told that what they’re doing is wrong. In fact, this is what led to Jesus’ crucifixion, isn’t it? He stood up to the Jewish leaders of his day, telling them that they were treating people unjustly, that they were laying heavy burdens on people unnecessarily, and that there was a better way. But they didn’t want to hear it. And they definitely didn’t want others to hear it and come to the same conclusions. So they got rid of him, and in a way that would be intimidating to anyone who was even thinking about following his example.

But what they couldn’t do was to keep people from being moved by what Jesus had done on their behalf. He had stood up for them and was willing to pay the price. And this is what led to Jesus’ crucifixion. In our reading from Zechariah, the prophet was speaking of someone like this when he said, “They shall look on him whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son.”

These words have often been applied to Jesus because we see this kind of response to his crucifixion. Pierced to the heart by what had been done to Jesus, the criminal crucified alongside him came to his defense
and said, “This man has done nothing criminal,” and “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And looking upon Jesus, who had been pierced because he stood up for the people he loved and challenged those who were hurting them, to do what was right, a Roman centurion said, “This man was innocent beyond doubt,” and “Truly this man was the son of God.”

Sadly, often it isn’t till someone is crucified in some way for standing up to confront what is wrong, for the sake of those who are being wronged, that people are moved to stand up for what is right themselves. We only need to look at people like Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Mahatma Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela to know that this is true. Because of their willingness to stand up for those who were being treated wrongly, they inspired movements that led to people being freed from oppression and injustice, and freed to flourish and to be fruitful in ways they never could before.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he calls us to take up our crosses daily. And how can we look at what is happening in our country and in our world these days and not realize how important it is for us to do this? -- to stand up to those who are promoting hurtful things, things that are leading to an increase in hatred, bigotry, and violence, things that are forcing good people to live in fear and discouragement. It is so important that we take up our crosses and stand up for them and that we do it now.

Some of the good people who need us to take up our crosses and stand up for them are Muslims. Most Muslims in our country are peaceful, prayerful, and generous people. Many have served our nation in the military and in other professions that have put them in harm’s way. Many have contributed to the common good by virtue of their education, skills, and strong work ethic. And their great dedication to the practice of their faith – they are in the midst of Ramadan, a month of fasting right now -- is something that has challenged many of us Christians to assess the strength of our own faith commitments.

Our American Muslims are being maligned now because a few who have been radicalized and have strayed from the path of authentic Islam have committed terrible acts of violence, but certainly no more than Christians have, who have strayed from authentic Christianity. And these acts of violence have been condemned publicly by many Muslim leaders and congregations. Yet, at a time when it is essential that people of faith stand together and support one another, our Muslim neighbors are being treated with suspicion, as enemies who must be eliminated from the country they have helped to defend and to prosper.

It is essential that we stand up to those who are promoting such wrongful attitudes, for the sake of those who are being hurt by them. It is essential that we stand with our Muslim neighbors because they are the ones who can do the most to keep the people of their own faith tradition on the right path, and simply because it is the right thing to do.

In doing this we will be following the example of Jesus, who supported and spoke well of Samaritans, who were looked upon by many of his fellow Jews with hatred and suspicion. In fact, he even told a parable in which a good Samaritan was the hero – providing help for someone who had been robbed and brutalized – while the leaders of his own faith community had walked right by him. Jesus knew he risked the scorn of his fellow Jews in doing this, but it was necessary for him to do it if attitudes were ever to change and people would be able to live together in peace – contributing to each other’s lives rather than undermining them.

Today, through the gospel, he is calling us to follow his example – to take up our crosses and follow him – something that is seldom easy, but always good and right. And, on this Fathers’ Day, I am grateful to have a father who showed me how this can be done.

Fr. Rod Damico
June 19, 2016