“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, cannot be my disciple.” My guess is that hearing words like this from Jesus shakes us up a bit and leaves us wondering. I mean, how could someone who spoke so much about loving others say something like this?

Well, here is one of those instances when a little study helps. You see, among the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, there was a common way of expressing one’s unwavering commitment to a person or a cause. It was to say that you hated anyone or anything that could compromise that commitment in any way.

It’s kind of like this. I once read of a man from Atlanta who told how he and his wife went to New York to see the play My Fair Lady. It was so popular that they had to buy the tickets months in advance. They had great seats, center stage, seven rows from the front. As the performance began, there was only one open seat left in the house – the one right next to this man from Atlanta. He wondered how this choice seat could be left unoccupied. So, at intermission, he leaned over and spoke with the woman who occupied the next seat over. He remarked about how much in demand the seats were and wondered if she had any idea how that one seat came to be left unoccupied.

The woman responded, “As a matter of fact, these two seats are mine. When we purchased the tickets my husband made me promise that we would let nothing get in the way of being present for this performance. “So why isn’t your husband here?” he asked. “Unfortunately, he died,” she said sadly. The man told her that he was sorry for her loss and then asked why she hadn’t gotten a close relative or friend to come with her so she wouldn’t have to sit alone. To this she replied, “Oh, they’re all at the funeral home.”

Of course, initially the man was shocked by this – the woman missing her husband’s wake to see My Fair Lady. But she went on to say, “My husband didn’t make a lot of money. He knew how much I wanted to see this show. And he had worked so hard to be able to buy these tickets. And I promised him that I would be in this seat for this performance come hell or high water. I was at the funeral home all day with my family and friends, and I hate that they refused to understand why I had to do this. And I hate that they tried so hard to convince me to stay with them, because I just couldn’t break my promise to my husband to be in this seat tonight.”

This is the kind of hate that Jesus is talking about in the gospel. It’s not that the woman had a deep personal loathing for her relatives and friends. She really loved them very much. What she had a loathing for was whatever her family and friends had been doing to keep her from fulfilling what she believed to be an absolute obligation – and she had to reject those things if she was going to keeping that promise to her husband. This is how Jesus was using the word hate in the gospel with regards to family members. He was saying that if we are going to be his disciples, then following him must be our first priority, our ultimate concern, our most fundamental commitment – one that we won’t allow to be compromised by any other thing – not even the most precious of other things.

In fact, at the end of the gospel, Jesus says that we must renounce everything else in order to be his disciples. Perhaps a better translation might be that we must give everything else up if we are to follow him. But even here, Jesus is speaking of the giving up of things in a way very different from what we usually mean by this. Usually when we think of giving something up, we think of doing without it.
But the kind of giving up that Jesus is speaking of in the gospel is not like this. How could he possibly expect us to do without our families, our friends, and our most necessary possessions?

Well, the short answer is, he doesn’t. When Jesus speaks of the giving up of people and possessions, he isn’t speaking of abandoning them, but rather of giving them up to him. In other words, if following Jesus is our ultimate concern, then all things are to be seen in and through him. So to give up our families and friends to Jesus doesn’t mean that we love them less, but rather that we love them more - - not as a means to an end – not because of what they do for us, not for what we get out of loving them, but because we know that this is the best thing we can do for them. Giving them up to Jesus means that we will love them as he loves them. So when we give the people of our lives up to Jesus, that is, when we begin to see them in light of our connection to him, love is not lost but rather it is expanded, purified, and made far more wonderful.

A good example of this is what we find in our reading from Paul’s Letter to Philemon. This is a fascinating story. Onesimus, Philemon’s slave -- driven by his longing to be free -- had run away. Among the Romans, this was a serious matter, even punishable by death. Fortunately for him, Onesimus had found his way to Paul and under Paul’s guidance had become a Christian. And during the time that Paul was under house arrest, Onesimus had been instrumental in helping Paul to carry on his ministry.

But Paul realized that Onesimus had wronged Philemon and had to make things right. So he sent Onesimus back to him – but with a special request – that Philemon receive Onesimus back, not as a slave to be punished, but as a beloved brother to be cherished. In other words, Paul was asking Philemon to do what Jesus calls all who would follow him to do – that is, to give Onesimus up to him. Paul was asking Philemon to see Onesimus in a new way – to love him as Jesus loves.

On this Labor Day weekend, as we celebrate the value of work for human life, I think it would be good to reflect for just a moment on our work in light of today’s gospel. When I speak of work, I mean not only paying jobs, but also work at home, or studies at school, or participation in sports or the creative arts. Many of us know how easy it is to become so completely devoted to any of these things that it compromises our commitment to Jesus, and to living the life he calls us to live as his followers. Well, through the gospel today, Jesus says that we must hate even our work if we are to be his disciples. Now, as I have already said, this doesn’t mean we should loathe our work. But it does mean that we should renounce whatever it is about our work that keeps us from following Jesus faithfully.

No, Jesus isn’t calling us to give up our work – at least not in most cases. But he is calling us to give our work up to him – to start viewing our work as a way of serving God, and to start treating those we work with and for as people who are loved by God. He is calling us to start reflecting on how we can fit our work into life with him, rather than how we can fit him into our work life.

In giving our work, along with all other things, up to him, we will find that we do not lose anything at all. Instead, we will find that our lives are enriched immeasurably.

Fr. Rod Damico
September 4, 2016