

Can't have it both ways

I must admit, part of this gospel is rather troubling: *If we love our parents/kids more than we love him, we are not worthy of him.*

St John Chrysostom wrote, *"It is holy to render one's parents every honor, but when they demand more than is due, we ought not to yield."* But then, to save the parents' feelings, Chrysostom adds that they are not being put in the second place to their son or daughter but to Jesus, that should ease their feelings." There you go mom and dad!

+There's a Roman Catholic church in New York City Delay Plaza where a 200-pound plaster statue of Jesus was stolen. Thieves broke in and took it. Being a Roman Catholic church, Jesus was part of a crucifix.

But they unbolted him from the cross and took him. The guy responsible for the artwork in the church was perplexed by this. He thought, *"Why would anybody only steal the Jesus and not the whole piece of art, the whole crucifix?"*

That's indicative of our culture, isn't it? We want Jesus; we don't want the cross. We want all the benefits of faith. We want the assurance and comfort and joy, but we don't want the other side. We don't want the self-sacrifice and suffering.

We don't want the cross. But that choice is not up to us. At the heart of Christianity is *the paradox* that Jesus speaks of here.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells His disciples and He tells us, that the way to follow him is to *take up our cross*. We are a religion of the cross and of all that it stands for. The cross is a sign of our personal relationship with our Savior.

*Saint John Paul II once said: "We are invited to look upon the Cross. It is the privileged place, where the love of God is revealed. On the Cross, human misery and divine mercy meet"

I don't believe that Jesus expects us to go looking for crosses to bear. There are plenty of crosses that come our way as a part of our lives. Some are small; others wound us to our core. During our lives, we are faced with disappointments, hurt feelings, embarrassment, pain, fear and grief.

Jesus never promised us that things would be easy. He knows that we will struggle with the weight of our crosses. He understands that at times our burdens will seem to be too much for us. But offered to him, it becomes our means of redemption.

*French writer, Paul Claudel, once said, "Christ did not come to do away with suffering. He did not come to explain it. He came to fill it with His presence." Suffering saturates the human condition. Suffering spares no one; it's just *what we do with it* that differentiates us.

Jesus knew our human tendency to avoid pain and suffering, so he reminds us of the inevitability of suffering in life and the relationship between love and pain. Suffering is deeply connected to love. But to love is also to suffer, like when a spouse of 50 years dies. To prefer not to suffer, in a life marked by loss (as all our lives are in this world), is to prefer not to love.

*“What a morbid religion you have!” a man of another faith said to a priest. “All that emphasis on suffering and death can't be good.”

But suffering and death do not stand by themselves, for a Christian. We are never to think of them as if they were the whole story. We never think of Christ's suffering and death without thinking of his resurrection. The last word is not suffering and death, but “that we might walk in newness of life.”

This pattern (death-resurrection) is stamped on our whole being. However, there is no deep life *without* a lot of dying to oneself. The false self, the self-made self and its false pride: has to die – or rather burst, because *it is* nothing real but only a bubble. “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

The irony of gospel is that if we are always seeking for our own life, we can also lose our life, our family/parents and even life with our Lord.

+A story can help us understand. The company threw a lavish dinner party to honor its CEO on his retirement. His rise to the top was amazing; his management of the company through good times and bad times was flawless. Everything he touched turned to gold. Through his tireless efforts he made himself the company's senior manager; and the stockholder's very wealthy people.

After dinner, the CEO addressed his remarks to the young up-and-coming executives: “*I know each one of you wants my job –and I'll tell you how to get it. Last week my daughter was married –and as I walked her down the aisle I suddenly realized I didn't know the name of her best friend, the last book she read, or her favorite color. That is the price I paid for this job.*”

+I am one of six children, so my parents had a lot of dying to do in order to raise us and find true life – as every good parent or spouse must do. At a family gathering of siblings, grand-children, cousins, in-laws and like dad said, “*If it weren't for Pat and me, none of you would be here.*” *In giving life, he found life surrounded him.*

We may throw God a bone every once in a while, like going to Mass now and then, but ultimately Jesus says it's not going to work. It's just the opposite.

It's the person who gives up his life, who surrenders to God, who keeps none of her desires for herself but lays it down before God, who will find real life and life abundant. If we are honest, we are afraid to do so, as we like our sins too much. “What will he take from me?”

*C. S. Lewis in his classic book *Mere Christianity* put it well: *Christ says: Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want you. No half measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there.*

Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires that you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked, the whole outfit. And I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself. My own will shall become yours.

This is why he has come—to turn the world, including our world, upside down, coming to demand full allegiance but in so doing, finding our true life in it.