

"FIRST IMPRESSIONS"

23rd SUNDAY -C-

September 7, 2025

Wisdom 9: 13-18; Psalm 90;

Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14: 25-33

by **Jude Siciliano**, OP

Dear Preachers:

I will be tempted to apologize to the congregation this Sunday after reading this gospel passage. What a "turn-off" it seems, with its talk of "hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even [your] own life." Then it goes on to say that unless we "renounce all [our] possessions," we cannot be Jesus' disciples. On first hearing, people may wonder if Jesus came from another planet. He certainly sounds far removed from our lives—especially for those of us who work hard to love and care for our aging parents, making decisions about their needs: Should we bring them into our homes? Arrange home care? Place them in a nursing facility? We help with medications, accompany them to endless appointments, visit often, and stay in touch. So what is Jesus talking about when he says we must "hate" our parents?

And what about "hating" spouses? (We can assume Jesus means "spouses" in general, not just wives.) In a society where nearly half of marriages end in divorce—and where dioceses and parishes work hard to support and strengthen marriages—how are married couples, or those preparing for marriage, supposed to hear such words? The list of "hatings" goes on in this passage, but you get the point. Could Jesus really mean such harsh statements? And if he does, are we truly ready to renounce all possessions to follow him? Do we know anyone who has? And if they have, who is paying their rent, feeding them, and covering their health insurance?

This is where a little research helps. Commentaries point out that the Greek word translated as "hate" does not mean rage or hostility as it does in English. Rather, it suggests a "lesser love," or a detachment that allows one to turn away from people or things that pull us from discipleship. God calls us to love—certainly including parents, spouses, children, brothers, and sisters. Remember, Jesus told his disciples to love even their enemies. Surely he also expects us to love those closest to us. Notice, too, that right after speaking about "hating," Jesus mentions the cross. Here, bearing the cross does not mean simply enduring life's unavoidable hardships, but rather the pain that comes from freely choosing to follow him on the road to Jerusalem—and to suffering.

Still, Jesus is placing real demands on would-be disciples. Let's not assume his original listeners found these words any less shocking than we do. They may have been poor, but they cherished possessions too. Family life was, if anything, even more central to their identity than it is to ours. In Jesus' day, belonging to family, clan, and religious group was essential. Social standing, honor, and reputation were bound up in these networks. To walk away from family ties was, in effect, to lose one's identity.

But earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus had already described the new family he came to create: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it" (8:21; see also 11:27–28). In other words, his followers form a new family, united not by blood, but by their commitment to God's Word. This means that other ties, even those most precious to us, must become secondary. In this new family we find ourselves alongside people of every background—those with wealth and those without, the respected and the overlooked. As we heard two weeks ago: "Some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Clearly, this is not "business as usual."

Such mixing can be unsettling. I remember once walking through a prison yard with new volunteers from a nearby parish. They had given up their Sunday morning with family to worship with inmates. One volunteer looked around at the hundreds of men milling about and said, "This is really stretching me." That word—"stretching"—said it all. He was finding himself pulled beyond his comfort zone, worshiping with people he never expected to call brothers. But he returned

month after month and came to speak of the inmates as "my brothers at the prison." Following Jesus had stretched him into a new world, a new family.

But Jesus warns: don't take this lightly. Think it over. He compares discipleship to building a tower—are you prepared to finish the project? Or, to a king going into battle—do you have the resources to succeed? Both images—building and battle—are sobering. Building suggests a long process, often unfinished, like our own discipleship. We are still "under construction," works in progress. The battle image highlights the cost and struggle involved. Discipleship requires sacrifice and sometimes painful choices. We have already said "yes" to following Christ, but we will be asked again and again to make decisions that put our discipleship on the line—decisions that may place us at odds with family, friends, or cultural values.

Do we have the resources to stay faithful, to endure the consequences of our choices? On our own, probably not. None of us has enough wisdom or strength. And that is why we gather here, week after week: to hear the Word, to be nourished at the table, to find strength in one another. Look around—this is our new family. We may differ in politics, wealth, or background, but here we are, called sisters and brothers in Christ. That stretches us, doesn't it? Just as Jesus said it would, when he invited us to make him the first priority in our lives.

Click here for a link to this Sunday's readings:

<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/090725.cfm>