Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

Old St. Pat’s, 2022

We are fascinated by lists, alternately finding them

a source of entertainment, information or inspiration.

 Long Before David Letterman’s celebrated top 10

 List have tickled our collective funny bone there were.

For example, widely circulated list of the top signs

 you were going to have a bad day, including:

* The bird singing outside your window is a vulture,
* Your twin sister forgets your birthday, and
* Your 4-year-old tells you that it’s *almost* impossible to flush a grapefruit down the toilet.

Some lists underscore our competitive spirit

So is the number one quarterback of all time

 Johnny Unitas or Tom Brady?

Is the best Superbowl commercials of all times

Budweiser’s singing frogs?

three octogenarians asking, “where’s the beef”?

Or the talking e-trade Baby?

Aside from their entertainment or commercial value

 Science demonstrates that those ubiquitous “to-do” lists

 Not only contribute to our productivity

 But also to our mental well-being.

 So whether we are telling our Alexa to take a memo

 Or telling Siri to put something on our to-do-list

 Creating such lists not only make us more productive

 But also contribute to our health.

 Early in the 20th century the Soviet psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik

observed that waiters could easily recall diners’ orders

before they had been served

 But once the dishes had been delivered

 Their memories erased who had the steak or the soup.

 She concluded that we remember things we need to do

 Better than things we’ve done.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 More recent studies demonstrate

 That while tasks we haven’t done yet do distract us

 Just making a plan to complete them can lower our anxiety

 And make us more effective.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What prompts my diversion into “to-do” lists is today’s gospel

 Which at first blush seemed like a not very orderly

spiritual to-do-list

 After the briefest of parables about the blind leading the blind

 We get wisdom about disciples and teachers

 And being trained up.

 A quick pivot brings us to that famous proverb

 About splinters, eyebeams and hypocrisy.

 But soon we migrate from beams to bad fruit

 Figs and thornbushes

 With a final breathless turn to a micro-discourse on good and evil

 And the interconnectedness of hearts to mouths.

 So is Luke instructing us

to create a spiritual to-do-list that includes:

* keeping our mouths in check
* Not jumping too quickly to judgment
* admitting spiritual blindness
* Being less hypocritical
* And cultivating good not rotten fruit.

Given the research that even having a list reduces anxiety

Maybe Luke is simply trying to lower catholic blood pressure

By creating this list for us …

 Or maybe he is bequeathing this handy inventory

 That comprises all we need to do to be saved:

 check all of the boxes and heaven is ours.

If you watched any of the Olympics

you were treated to robot videography:

Those high-flying cameras

providing amazing bird’s eye views

 of everything from the opening ceremonies

 to Nathan Chen’s winning free skate program.

Analogously it might be helpful

to zoom out from these six verses in Luke

And catch a bird’s eye view of this whole chapter.

Doing so we discover that these disjunct verses

Are the closing volleys from Luke’s version of the Beatitudes.

For over 30 some verses we hear Jesus’ famous discourse

 About blessedness and curses,

 Love of enemies and adversaries

 Generosity and Compassion.

Today we have these last few verses

 A kind of closing chapter

 On this mini manual for discipleship.

 Through this discourse Jesus does not provide

 a fool proof check list for eternal life.

 No checklist will get us to heaven.

 That path, as Luke outlines, belongs instead to discipleship.

It’s not easy being a disciple of anyone;

 having Jesus as your teacher is especially challenging.

 Evidence suggests that Jesus broke the teacher mold

For his time.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 Unlike other rabbis he did not have a stable home or income

 Rather he called his disciples into an iterant life,

never sure if they had a place to sleep

 Or even food for the next day.

 The petition in the Our Father for daily bread

 Might have been a practical request

 By followers of this very impractical Rabbi

 Whose hand to mouth existence

 Often made for lean pickings for his inner circle.

 If following Jesus wasn’t tough enough

 This very impractical rabbi expects his own students

 To themselves become teachers

 Of his radical message of inclusion and sacrifice.

 So the good news and the bad news today

 Is that enlisting as a Jesus disciple

 Automatically enrolls us in the Christian equivalent

 Of the “teach for America” program

 Baptismally recruited as life-long student-teachers

in this divinely established “Christ-corps”

 perennial apprentices to the Master teacher

 whose tutelage we never outgrow.

Teaching is a harrowing profession

 particularly distressing for student teachers

– something I remember vividly.

 Its challenges are symbolized in the exaggerated story

 of a student-teacher’s imagined interchange

 with a supervisor encouraging them

 To take a teaching job in a metropolitan public school system.

 The would-be teacher summarizes:

"Let me see if I've got this right. You want me to go fill my students with a love for learning, and instill a sense of pride in them, modify their disruptive behavior, observe them for neglect, wage war on drugs and bullying, and check their backpacks for weapons of mass destruction. All the while I am supposed to teach them good citizenship, to fair play, how to register to vote, how to balance a checkbook and how to apply for a job. I also have to insure that all students pass the mandatory state exams, even those who don't come to school regularly or complete any of their assignments. Plus, I am to communicate regularly with the parents by email, text, phone, newsletter and report card. All of this I am to do with just a piece of chalk, a computer, a few books, a bulletin board, a big smile AND on a starting salary that qualifies my family for food stamps! You want me to do all of this and yet you expect me not to pray in the classroom … no thanks.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Now you might be saying to yourself

 I’m no teacher … and this is not a school

 It’s a parish, a worshipping community, a gathering of friends …

 But I would demure;

think about the multiple obvious indicators that OSP

 Is a school of discipleship,

 An institute of practical spirituality and Christian living

 Such as the many efforts in religious formation

 From Foundations to the RCIA process

 From retreat and reflection opportunities

 To the largest Catholic grade school in the archdiocese.

 OSP is not simply a lovely wedding venue

Or virtual destination for worship

It is a school of radical discipleship

Celebrating those values Jesus articulates in

the lesson plan of today’s gospel

which nudges each baptized to evolve

from pupil to apostles

from student to student-teacher in Christ

 and take up the harrowing task of mentoring others

 in gospel living and dying.

Joseph Laycock is a teacher, who works out at a martial arts gym.

He writes:

“Most of the regulars [at the gym] are amateur fighters with dreams of going professional. When they’re not here, some of them work as firefighters or bouncers. I’m definitely the only schoolteacher in the room.

My students take interest in my training. Sometimes I’ll enter the classroom with bruises or a slight limp from the gym… Every class asks me the same questions, “Have you ever beat anyone up?” And “Why are you a teacher instead of a professional fighter?” When I tell them the truth — that I have never been in a fight and have no aspirations to go professional — I get a range of reactions from disappointment to accusations of cowardice. “So why do you do it,” they always ask. [He answers:]

 I believe that life is a spiritual struggle. My battle is not against another fighter but against the unjust and apathetic system that is attacking my students. I get up at 6:30 a.m. and work at least a 10-hour day. I take students who have serious gaps in their learning — some of them can barely read — and I do my best to help them graduate from high school.…There is no point in pretending that this is an easy job.

 In martial arts, laziness, apathy and despair will cost you the fight. As a teacher, these traits are deadly for at-risk students.… When I work the heavy bag until I feel faint, or have a 300-pound stranger pin my face to the mat with his knee, I am cultivating the strength of will necessary to make a difference. Like everyone else in the gym, I am training for battle. My battle is every day, in every classroom, for every kid.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Piano: Here I am Lord

Luke’s shaping of Jesus’ teaching

 Into an instruction manual for would-be disciples

 Reminds us that announcing God’s reign is also a battle

 Quite often with ourselves

 A battle to model in our own living

 The discipleship that our baptism expects us

 To hand on to others.

 We gather in this place,

 To be strengthened in word and sacrament

 That we can continue to answer that call

 With whole heartedness and in deep faith

 Through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/10/the-psychology-of-the-to-do-list-why-your-brain-loves-ordered-tasks> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. W.J. Masicampo, & R. F. Baumeister, “Consider It Done! Plan Making Can Eliminate the Cognitive Effects of Unfulfilled Goals,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (20 June 2011, Doi: 10.1037/a0024192 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What he wanted, who he was* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 73ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have lost the source of this story. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://thisibelieve.org/essay/18333/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)