

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B

Kyle MacDonald of Montreal is a guy who knows how to trade up. He began with one red paper clip, and bartered it over the internet for a fish pen, which he then bartered for a ceramic sculpted doorknob, which in turn led to a camping stove, a generator, a beer keg, a snowmobile, a trip to the Canadian Rockies, a supply truck and a recording contract. Eventually, he had an afternoon with Alice Cooper and a movie role in his bartering arsenal; the movie role in turn led to a house in Kipling, near Montreal. It was definitely an ingenious way to move from being the possessor of a paper clip to the possessor of a house: trading up by offering something of lesser value in exchange for something of greater value: it's really just a matter of finding somebody who either has something of value that they don't really want, or who just really values some things in ways that the rest of us just don't get. Incidentally, I can actually kind of understand the bartering journey, except for a couple of strange trades: the camping stove for the generator, and anything for the afternoon with Alice Cooper and the Kiss snow globe. But, as they say, the heart wants what it wants.

In the Gospel reading today from Mark, Jesus summoned the Twelve and sent them out on their first missionary journey to preach repentance and heal the sick. He gave them several instructions, one of which was to stay in whatever house they first entered in a town; stay there until they left. It might have seemed more logical for them to move around from house to house; you know, kind of ingratiate themselves with a whole lot of different people. But Jesus knew that their mission was not to curry favor in any way, but to give witness to the power of Jesus, power which he was sharing with them. He didn't want them to start falling into the trap of "trading up": getting to the town or village, finding a place to stay, but then moving up to something nicer, a bit more accommodating, as soon as they are given the opportunity. It would have been real easy to climb up the social ladder over a short period of time; after all, it's just as easy to befriend rich people as it is to befriend anybody else. But Jesus wanted his Twelve to stay focused on the mission, rather than on the accommodations. They were not to take along a lot of extra supplies because part of their witness was that God would provide for them: if they really trusted in God's providence, they wouldn't be in need of any backup. With this commissioning, they were being told how to travel: light on security, heavy on trust in God.

I've always held that everything's a trade off, and I do really believe that. As material as well as spiritual beings, we occupy time and space, and so if we choose something, we have no choice but to not choose something else; this is why we really cannot have our cake, and eat it, too. Time spent here today is time which you are not spending at work, at recreation, or sleeping; by being here, you have opted to not be at the lake, or at home on the couch. But there are other, more significant trade offs in our lives as well. The prophet Amos noted to Amaziah, as Amaziah was trying to run Amos out of the district, that Amos was never a prophet by trade. He was a simple shepherd, and dresser of sycamores; he took care of lambs and trees. But God asked him to trade in that life for a life of service to God, by prophesying to Israel about their misdeeds and about the consequences of their actions. Answering God's call meant that Amos could not, at least for that time, continue to live and work as a shepherd. Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens." They traded in the lives and routines they had before coming to know Christ for every spiritual blessing in the heavens; what a trade-up! And the Apostles, they gave up their work and their families for the Gospel; thus Jesus warns them not to trade in their Gospel for mere social status as they made their travels.

In this world of all sorts of various exchanges, it's an unfortunate reality that many people have traded in their faith, and they have done so for things which inevitably are of much, much lesser value. Jesus told the twelve, take nothing for the journey but a walking stick: no food, no sack, no extra money; be willing to let go of the things which make you feel secure. They were to wear sandals but not an extra tunic: be willing to do without any extras which may make you more comfortable for just a time. Wherever they entered a home, they were to stay there; sacrifice the nicer accommodations you might find with others so that you may hold true to your mission. If *they* were to face temptations to trade in their faith for passing things, how much more might we be tempted, in an age of such material wealth? How easy it is to trade our faith for security: holding on to our extra money, not trusting God enough to share with others and with the Church what he's shared with us. But it is a trade off, and if we hold back from God under the guise of wanting to be more secure, we secure a very fleeting world, at the expense of our trust in God. How many people trade in an hour a week at Mass or time spent in regular prayer for the comfort of staying at home, or getting more rest, or enjoying more sports on TV; for so many often pointless pursuits, man is tempted to give up his worship of his Creator, give up time marveling at his Savior's sacrifice, and give

up sharing in the graces merited for him by his Savior upon the cross. And how tempting it is to deny our faith in order to curry favor with others, how easy it is to keep silence when our faith is attacked. I was recently left to defend my decision to not attend the an invalid wedding ceremony, as if I'm supposed to just set aside my entire belief system so that somebody else can, I don't know, boast of having an extra guest; we're often asked to deny our beliefs in order to make others feel more comfortable. But what's the cost? Can we believe for one minute that this is the denial which comes without any price? Our God is an all-knowing God; each time we choose comfort, security, or favor with man over our relationship with him, that relationship is diminished; not because God loves us any the less, but because we have shown what we are willing to trade for worldly things; shown just how much our love for God is worth to us. And I'm here to tell you, anything we gain in exchange for our relationship with him, is never a trade up.

We know of people who are called social climbers: the ones who look for ways to move up the social ladder, make friends with more powerful and purportedly more important people, gain favor with those who might be in a position one day to do them a favor, hobnob with the rich and famous. It takes a little bit of calculation and a considerable amount of effort to go about any real social climbing, but many do so. It's probably not the worst thing in the world, either; if somebody wants to trade in their friends in the nabe for new friends in upscale settings, that's their choice, and they're free to make it, just as Amos made his choice, the Ephesians made theirs, and the Apostles made theirs. But if we have the ability to climb, shouldn't our priority be the spiritual ladder? Think about what real climbing, like rock climbing, entails: Using your strength to hold on to your spot, thinking about where you need to place your hands next, and your feet next, preparing for your next move and them making it very carefully. Maybe that's the way we need to be in our spiritual lives: what is it that we need to do next to continue our ascent? The Church offers us so many different ways to keep climbing: reading Scripture, taking classes, daily Mass, devotions, Holy Hours; the Church is a well of graces which can never be exhausted. Consider it: maybe it is time to trade up again, give up a bit more of the temporal in pursuit of the spiritual. Some comfort here, some security there: maybe we can trade those things in, and end up with a still deeper relationship with Christ in their place. Maybe in this journey through life, it's time to go a bit lighter on those things which make us feel secure and comfortable in the worldly realm and heavier on those things which can actually draw us closer to God.