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)