

## TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

Wisdom 9:13–18b • Philemon 9–10, 12–17 • Luke 14:25–33

### I.

I realized that it's the twenty-fifth anniversary of my high-school graduation in a roundabout way.

I read an article that the great movie, "The Shawshank Redemption" (1994), is celebrating its silver anniversary.

It came out the year I graduated from high school.

I was heartened to learn that "The Shawshank Redemption" is the top-rated film on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB).

By the way, the movie will be in theaters on September 22, 24, and 25.

"Shawshank" is a movie about the quest for freedom, both interior and exterior.

It's story about acceptance, making amends, moving forward, and living fully.

I love that one line in the movie:

"You better get busy living or get busy dying."

In other words,

we have to decide for ourselves how we're going to live, what we're going to do with our lives.

### II.

That decision takes us to the Gospel, where Jesus states that a would-be disciple must decide to follow him:

"Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? ...

In the same way, anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple."

The decision to follow Christ involves renunciation for the sake of generosity and freedom—being able to follow God without anything getting in the way.

“If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother,  
wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life,  
he cannot be my disciple.”

Generosity and freedom are related.

The “calculation” and consideration that Jesus urges in regard to discipleship is the conversation that St. Paul has with his interlocutor in the Second Reading.

That Second Reading is from the Letter to Philemon,  
the shortest of St. Paul’s letters.

Paul is writing, from prison, perhaps in Rome, to Philemon,  
the owner of runaway slave from Colossae, Onesimus.

Philemon is a leader in the local Church.

Onesimus has become a Christian as a result of meeting Paul in prison.

Paul speaks of “my child Onesimus,  
whose father I have become in my imprisonment.”

So, Paul is sending this letter with Onesimus, who is returning to Philemon.

Paul urges Philemon to free Onesimus but doesn’t oblige him to do so,  
“so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary.”

A brief exegetical detour and commentary.

It’s true that, in this letter, St. Paul does not outright condemn slavery,  
which was an ancient institution.

It should be noted, too, that this ancient slavery was not based on race,  
and in that sense was different from the African slave trade  
that emerged in conjunction with the discovery of the Americas.

It's likely that the expectation of Jesus' imminent return—the Second Coming—meant that leaders like St. Paul saw no need to engage in a debate regarding slavery.

Regardless, the Letter to Philemon urges equality based on Christian faith.

St. Paul exhorts Philemon in regard to a hallmark of discipleship: generosity.

That abundance of goodness, freely given, of course imitates God, who is infinite goodness and mercy.

Generosity requires a heart that is not tied down with other things, that is willing to look beyond itself and its own wants.

“Perhaps this is why he [Onesimus] was away from you [Philemon] for a while, that you might have him back forever,  
no longer as a slave  
but more than a slave, a brother,  
beloved especially to me, but even more so to you,  
as a man and in the Lord.

So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me.”

Generosity provides comfort to those who suffer, and helps them to see beyond their difficulties.

It provides strength to take the next step.

For me, that calls to mind a wonderful scene in “The Shawshank Redemption,” when the protagonist, Andy Dufresne, manages to blare over the prison loudspeakers for all to hear one of Mozart’s operas, “The Marriage of Figaro.”

The inmates all stop what they’re doing and instinctively look heavenward, savoring and absorbing this beauty they have been freely given.

It’s a moment of freedom amid their confinement.

Generosity and freedom: moving beyond oneself, out of oneself.

We have an expression of that truth here at the cathedral: this beautiful edifice, and also the mellifluous music played here.

This weekend, the parish choirs are beginning their work for the season.

In gratitude for their hard work, and their gift to the parish,  
I will bless choristers at the end of (tomorrow's Masses) this Mass.

What they provide generously is a treasure;  
music becomes a deeper form of prayer.

The work they do as volunteers expresses their dedication to God  
and facilitates a more profound worship.

St. Augustine—who else?—said it magnificently:  
*cantare amantis est* (singing belongs to the one who loves).

So, an encouragement: sing throughout the Mass;  
it's part of the full, conscious, and active participation the Church seeks.

Also, be sure to thank those who make the beautiful music possible.

Remember, too, that the sung parts of the Mass  
—the Gloria, the *Sanctus*, the Preface Dialogue, and the Lamb of God—  
are the most important,  
because they belong to the Mass itself.

In other words, we don't just sing at Mass; we sing the Mass.

The beauty we experience here, in the Eucharistic Sacrifice,  
which springs from generous hearts,  
impels us toward freedom.

So that we can become more like God out there,  
serving others out there without thinking about ourselves.

Living supremely for God in Christ Jesus.