

We have become very comfortable with the popular image of Jesus. This is a Jesus that loves everyone, welcomes everyone, and makes no judgements. This image of Jesus is used to justify all sorts of sinful behavior. "I may be a sinner," a young reality TV star recently said, "but Jesus ate with sinners."

Yes, He did. But that does not mean that Jesus condoned sinful behavior. If my son was engaged in drug or alcohol abuse, I would still love him, still, "eat with him," but I would do everything I could to dissuade him from his self-destructive behavior.

Jesus ate with sinners to convert them, to encourage them to turn away from their sinful behavior, not to reassure them that they were OK just as they were. Yes God welcomes all people to Him, but on His terms, not on our own.

The Jesus we read about in today's Gospel is not the Jesus of the "I'm OK, you're OK" crowd. This is a Jesus that has come to divide fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. This is a Jesus that has come to set the world on fire with His divine love. And this is an image of Jesus we are uncomfortable with.

We are uncomfortable because this Jesus challenges us to make a decision, to choose a side. Will we follow Christ, and abide by His teachings, which are found in their fullness in the teachings of the Church, or will we go our own way choosing to put our own wants and desires above those of God?

Nothing is more important than our relationship with God. We were made to be in communion with Him, to be in a constant state of grace. This is where we find our true happiness.

Without that state of communion with God we can never find the fulfillment we so earnestly desire. Do you think the actress I mentioned feels that she is happy and fulfilled? Probably not. The very fact that she knows she is engaged in sinful behavior suggests that she knows better, but is enslaved to her chosen lifestyle. We can pray that she finds her way free.

Before Original sin, this communion with God, this state of grace, was automatic. It is how we were created to be. God originally created us with all the grace we would ever need to be eternally in communion with Him.

But the envy of the devil could not abide that. Our first parents were tempted to trust in their own understanding rather than that of God. Their disobedience robbed us of the grace that God intended for us. The Tree of Knowledge and its forbidden fruit was not really the problem. The problem was the disobedience.

This disobedience changed human nature, we became a fallen people, fallen from grace. And with that, sin and death, suffering, conflict, and frustration entered human existence.

But God sent us a savior to restore us to that state of grace. Jesus came to make all things new, that is, He came to restore all things to God's

original plan. By following Jesus and His teachings we can once again enjoy that state of grace we were made for, we can once again live in communion with God and achieve the happiness we were created for.

Nothing is more important than our relationship with God, not friends, not family, and certainly not our desire to do as we will.

But following Christ is not easy. To follow Christ is to put ourselves against the world. It brings us into conflict with social trends, other people's desires, and even our own sinful nature. These conflicts will find us whether we seek them out or not. Our job is to discern God's plan for us, and carry it out when we find it.

And it will come at a cost. As Jesus tells us today, choosing to follow him will divide families, and break some of our closest human relationships. Because in the mind of Christ, nothing is more important than our relationship with God. It is worth sacrificing everything for.

Few people know this as well as Joseph Fadelle. Joseph Fadelle was born Muhammad Fadel-Ali, and a recent english translation of his book, *Paying the Price*, recounts his horrifying journey from Islam to the Catholic faith.

Joseph was born into an Iraqi family at the time of Saddam Hussein's regime. At any other time his family would have been considered Islamic nobility and Joseph, named Muhammad by his father, was everything a muslim family could hope for in a favored son.

But while serving a stint in the Iraqi army, Fadelle met a Christian. This Christian was unlike everything he had always been taught Christians must be. Through a period of study, and a very specific dream, Fadelle became increasingly convinced of the truth of Christianity and began to fall deeply in love with the person of Jesus. This was radically different from anything he had experienced in Islam.

He was determined to be baptized a Christian but this presented problems. Under Sharia law, it is illegal to leave the muslim faith. It is in fact a crime punishable by death.

Fadelle had no choice but to enter into a marriage that was arranged by his father. During the early years of his marriage he continued to seek instruction and baptism. His frequent absences led his wife to believe he was cheating on her. When he finally told her the reason, she took their children and returned to her mother. But divine providence and prayer and fasting kept her from revealing why she had left her husband. Eventually she was overcome with a great desire to learn more about Christianity herself. In time she too left Islam and sought baptism, she would become Mary to her Joseph.

When Fadelle's brothers and father learned of his double life they had him imprisoned and tortured to bring him back to Islam. When that failed he was released to a sort of house arrest. But the guards grew lax and Fadelle was able to escape with his family into Jordan.

But even there he was not safe. His father, brothers and sister caught up with him, abducted him, and took him out to the Jordanian desert to

convince him to return to Islam. They argued with him and pleaded with him but when nothing worked, they shot Fabelle and left him for dead, but miraculously, he did not die.

There is something of a “Catholic underground” in muslim countries and through them, Fabelle, his wife, and his three children were permitted to fly out to France as refugees. Before they left, they were baptized into the Body of Christ. For Fabelle, baptism was the end of a thirteen year quest for a sacrament that most Christians take for granted. It meant giving up the wealth and status he would have enjoyed in Iraq and embracing a life of dependence and relative poverty in the middle of a French culture he barely understood.

Few of us will be called to pay the price that Joseph Fabelle paid to become Christian, but many, if not all of us, have made sacrifices of our own. Choosing to follow Christ in a fallen world, has consequences.

Frustration and discouragement are common ailments in our society today. We can become frustrated and discouraged when life does not go as smoothly as we expect it to. In fact the entire advertising industry preys upon our frustrations by trying to sell us “things” that promise to solve all our problems.

But Jesus reminds us today that our life here on earth is not meant to be trouble free. We will always have problems until we reach Heaven. If we engage in the battle of the spirit, seeking that grace, that communion with God, we will feel the heat of that battle because the devil still cannot abide our desire to be at one with God.

We should not be surprised when things don't work out as we planned, when we find ourselves thrown into the mud like Jeremiah or persecuted like Joseph Fabelle. We should not be surprised that we run into difficulties that appear irrational. We should not be surprised that our Father in Heaven has not provided for us a life of ease and comfort.

To be in communion with God, is to weather storms. Keep this in mind when frustration, discouragement, and discontent threatens to overwhelm you. Nothing is more important than our relationship with God. To be in a state of grace is a treasure and our strongest desire.

I will leave you with the words of Saint Joan of Arc. During her trial she was asked if she believed herself to be in a state of grace. Her reply?

“If I am not in a state of grace, may God place me there, and if I am, may God keep me there.”

Let us pray for one another that we may always strive to be in God's grace, no matter the cost.