

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C  
Wisdom 9: 13-18B  
Psalm 90: 3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14-17  
Philemon 9-10, 12-17  
Luke 14: 25-33  
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As we launch out into a new school year at the University of Portland, faculty, staff and students are busy making plans. Coaches are making game plans, professors are making lesson plans, the university is making strategic plans and undergrads are choosing meal plans. Providentially for us, the Scripture readings this Sunday have a lot to say about making plans: how to do it, why it is so difficult to do well, and how the difficulties can be overcome.

Our first reading, from The Book of Wisdom, takes it for granted that the key to good planning is to discover what God wants, and then to do our best to make it happen. Now that is very difficult to argue with. Discovering God's will and doing it has to be at the heart of any good plan. Of course the hard part is to figure out what, in a given situation, God actually wants.

Why is this so hard to do? The author of Wisdom says it's because each of us is burdened with a "corruptible body." I take this to mean that because each of us has a body, we have desires, and a tendency to equate what we desire with the will of God. "Surely," we think, "God must want what I want." And since our body is "corruptible," it is vulnerable. Because we are vulnerable, we are afraid. Like our desires, our fears can cause us to misinterpret God's will. The upshot is that our minds are so weighed down with all sorts of worldly concerns that discovering God's

will is supremely difficult for us to do. We can hardly figure out the things of earth, let alone the will of heaven.

But none of this excuses us from planning. Our Gospel makes it plain that Our Lord has little patience with kings who march into battle without a viable strategy, or builders who break ground without having adequate financing in place. At every moment, each of us has an obligation to take stock of our circumstances and to try to act for the best. In the face of our fears and our conflicting desires, aware of our limitations, we must consider, judge and act.

Our Second Reading gives us an example of this process in action. Paul has befriended a runaway slave named Onesimus. Onesimus is owned by a Christian named Philemon. Paul has decided that the question of Onesimus's legal status needs to be addressed. So, he sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter asking that Philemon regard Onesimus, not as a returned slave, but as a brother in Christ. It's hardly a foolproof plan, and we don't know if it succeeded, but Paul did his best. And so must we.

Given the difficulty of making our plans match God's plans, how should we proceed? With total commitment. The language in the Gospel about renouncing relationships, possessions and even our lives for the sake of discipleship makes it clear that our best-laid plans can succeed only if we hold nothing back. We need to overcome the temptation to allow our fears and conflicting desires to make us timid and ineffectual.

If we plan and act in good faith, God's grace can transmute our best efforts into something orders of magnitude greater than we have ever imagined. For instance, in our Second Reading, Paul's plan is to sort out his friend's relationship with Philemon. God's plan is to create Scripture that would be proclaimed from countless pulpits for thousands

of years. But if Paul hadn't come up with a plan and put it into action – if he hadn't given God something to work with – the New Testament would be short one book.

And so today and every day, we start with prayer, and then do our best to figure out God's plan for us. No doubt we will have conflicting desires and fears to overcome. Our plan will not be perfect, but let's resolve that it will at least not be timid or half-hearted. Then we will see what the Grace of God is able to make of our best efforts. Meanwhile, may God bless and inspire your plans, and prosper the work of your hands.