

The Celebration of Discipline

"Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" St. Mark 8:34

In the light of those words no one could ever accuse Jesus of getting his disciples under false pretenses. He painted no glowing picture. He first told the disciples what was going to happen to himself. And then he insisted that if they followed him the same thing would happen to them. To tell a person they must be ready to take up a cross was to tell them they must be ready to be regarded as a criminal and to die.

~~There are two ways that leaders get followers. Some use bribes,~~
they appeal to people's base and selfish instincts. But other leaders challenge people to self-sacrifice by appealing to their heroic instincts. When Winston Churchill stood before the Parliament in the dark days of May, 1940 he appealed to the heroic and courageous instincts in the heart of the British people. He challenged them to self-sacrifice and self-denial, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." And so Jesus challenges us. He does not promise us health and prosperity and popularity. To those who would follow him he says, quite frankly, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Nothing of any value is ever accomplished without self-denial. It doesn't make any difference what it is. The year after Kay and I got married we spent 6 months in England. The trip was one of the most exciting experiences in my life-- other than marrying Kay, of course.

But in order to enjoy that trip we had to live a life of self denial for a year. We denied ourselves all sorts of things so that we could afford to go. Every week we would save our money rather than spend it. We would have a celebration of discipline each week because we knew our self-denial was going to be worth-while.

But nothing is more exciting and worthwhile than knowing God and serving Christ and being co-workers with him in the building of the Kingdom of God; not even a month's vacation in England. Nothing is more worthwhile than the salvation Jesus purchased for us, but it cost Jesus his life and his reputation; he paid for our salvation by allowing his own intimate relationship with his heavenly Father to be severed. He took upon himself the guilt and shame of our sins so that we could be friends with God. ~~He allowed himself to die the shameful death of a criminal for the~~ joy of bringing us home to the Father in heaven. Jesus could not celebrate Easter before suffering on Good Friday and neither can we. If we want to be a part of the victory celebration of the Lamb of God and if we want to be co-workers with Christ in the building of his kingdom-- in the building of this particular church-- it will cost each one of us dearly. It will be worthwhile but we will have to deny ourselves.

Salvation is a free gift. That was the message of our Old Testament and Epistle lesson but out of gratitude for that free gift and for the privilege of serving with Christ we deny ourselves. This morning we need to ask ourselves, "What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ today?" What will it cost us.

Let me, first, give you some dramatic examples from the past and present. Look at what God has done over the last 2000 years through men and women who have denied themselves, taken up their cross

and followed Christ. Think of how women have been lifted up from being considered nothing more than property to being full members of the Kingdom of God. Do you think that has been accomplished without many a man and woman suffering persecution and ridicule over the years? Or think of how slavery was abolished in the United States. Do you think slavery disappeared by some kind of natural evolution? Slavery was abolished because brave and daring men and women, many of whom were Presbyterian lay people and ministers, were willing to deny themselves and follow Christ. They took run-away slaves into their homes and transported them by way of the underground railroad to freedom. It was against the law but they willingly risked arrest and prosecution; they were willing to be regarded as lawbreakers and criminals in order to ~~follow the way of Christ who died as a criminal to set those who were~~ slaves to sin free. I could go on to speak of the self-denial of men and women who built hospitals and schools and traveled to the outposts of the world to carry on the ministry of Christ by healing people in body and soul. They were not willing to go to heaven resting on flowerly beds of ease.

Today followers of Christ are still denying self, taking up their cross and following him. I think of the Fergusons in Argentina who have denied themselves a cushy life in the United States in order to take the gospel to people who otherwise may not have heard. I think of Mel and Nancy Isaac in West Irian, denying themselves because they have decided to follow Jesus. I think of the years that Stanley Wick spent in Guatemala sleeping on cold, hard, mud floors in the disease infested hovels of Indians.

I also think of Jack Elder and Rev. John Fife who recently have been

arrested for giving sanctuary to illegal aliens from Guatemala and El Salvador. Why do they do this? Is it because they are some kind of nuts? Are they wild-eyed radicals looking for ways to get into trouble? Is it because they are communists? No! It is because they want to follow Christ in his love for the outcasts of society. They know those illegal aliens face almost certain death if returned to Central America. They have chosen to take up their cross and follow Jesus Christ who chose to be identified as a criminal rather than to let you and me go to hell.

But what about you and me? . What would it mean for you today to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Christ?

Some of you may have money invested at high interest rates in companies who oppress their workers in the third world. Could it be that ~~Christ is calling you to deny yourself that higher interest rate and follow~~ him by investing your money at a lower interest and at higher risk which might help a man or a woman become economically self-sufficient?

Some of you may be living beyond your means. All that you have belongs to God but you are misappropriating his funds. You feel that you cannot satisfy yourself on the 90% that the Lord has let you use for your own needs and pleasures. So you are taking the 10% that he wants you to return to him and you are spending part of that 10% on yourselves as well as well as the other 90%. Christ calls you to deny yourself and follow Him in obedience for the joy of seeing your money used in the building of his kingdom.

Some of you may feel that you have been slighted by a family member or a neighbor or a member of this congregation. You feel offended and therefore you are holding back out of a misguided pride; you are sinking in self-pity and hostility. Christ says to you, "Deny yourself. Humble

yourself and follow me for the joy of reconciliation."

Some of you, perhaps, cannot resist the temptation to criticize and tear down your enemies, your family members, your neighbors, and your brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ calls you to deny yourself the pleasure of that criticism and negativism and to follow him by loving neighbor and speaking well even of your enemies.

Some of you are afraid of change. Who of us isn't afraid of change? So often we are afraid to exchange old wineskins, old traditions, old customs for new wine skins with the hopes of reaching out to people who have never been reached by those old methods. Christ calls us to deny ourselves the security of the old and familiar and risk something new and wonderful for him.

~~Some of you may be involved in illicit relationships. Perhaps you are~~ contemplating marriage to someone who is not a Christian. Maybe your marriage has become so unsatisfactory that you are especially susceptible to having an affair. Or maybe you are involved in a sexual relationship which God has forbidden. For your own sake and welfare Christ calls you to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him.

I don't know what it is in your life that is keeping you from being all that God wants you to be. But I do know this. God does not want to rob us of our joy. Christ came to give us abundant life. So whatever it is that God is telling you to deny yourself cannot be worth whatever it is that God wants to give you in its place. I think it was St. Augustine who said that most of us have our hands so filled with good things that we are unable to take from the hand of God the better things he offers us. Sometimes we have to put down even good and wholesome pleasures in order that God may fill our arms with even better things.

As we come to the Lord's Table listen to Christ. He is challenging you and me to a celebration of discipline. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

I recently came across this poem.

"The world I thought belonged to
me--
Goods, gold, and people, land and
sea;
Where'er I walked beneath God's
sky,
In those old days, my word was 'I.'

Years passed: there flashed my
pathway near
The fragment of a vision dear;
My former word no more sufficed,
And what I said was, --'I and
Christ.'

But, O, the more I looked on him,
His glory grew, while mine grew
dim;
I shrank so small, he towered so
high,
All I dare say was, --'Christ and I.'

Years more the vision held its place,
And looked me steadily in the face;
I speak now in humbler tone,
And what I say is, -- 'Christ alone.'

That is the authentic note of a true Christian. If our Christianity is such that it has cost us no pains to acquire, no self-denial to preserve, no effort to advance, no struggle to maintain holy and undefiled, whatever else it is, it is not the religion of him who said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.