

Mark 8:31-38/Feb. 25, 2024

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What does it mean to you when Jesus says – If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me?

I think there are some things that we have to clarify.

#1 – We are Jesus’ followers. We are not Jesus. We are his followers.

Now, that has a few connotations. First, we are not the Savior, Jesus is. He saves us. Second, being a follower means being a student. Students walked behind their teacher, aka Rabbi, and walked in his footsteps. So, what he does, we do. Very much like follow the leader. Third, Jesus knows the Way. Not us. He is our guide.

I had a German exchange student when I was in Nebraska and she would always walk ahead of me. Drove me crazy! She had no idea where she was going, so why was she taking the lead? I have no idea, but then when my German family came for a visit, my younger cousins did it as well.

That resulted in either them constantly having to look back to see if we were still behind them or for us to yell after them to come back or go a different way.

Aggravating!

If you have no idea where you are going and you are in a foreign place, let the one who knows the Way lead, right? I’m just saying.

#2 – Deny yourself. Oy. That one causes all sorts of issues.

How many of you know a martyr? They never think about their own needs, well, that’s not true, they do think about their own needs, but then make a big show about denying themselves for your benefit.

I am starving. I could really use that last chicken leg, but no, you take it.

If it were a silent movie there would be a lot of this <arm over forehead> - “No, you. You take it. I’ll be okay.” And then they would pass out.

That is not what Jesus is getting at. That actually falls back to what we talked about on Ash Wednesday – don’t put on a show for other people, have a relationship with God.

So, when we deny ourselves, what we are doing is putting the needs of someone else above our wants. Get that. It’s not giving up what we need, but what we want. If you’re starving, eat the chicken leg!

When you are on an airplane and they are doing the oxygen presentation, what do they say – put your mask on first before helping anyone else.

You need that oxygen; without it you cannot help someone else. So, be sure your need is met and only then can you help someone else. We do not deny our needs.

What we deny is our wants. If we are on an airplane that has lost cabin pressure and we decide that we want all the oxygen for ourselves, just in case one of the masks doesn't work, and we let all the people around us pass out because of our want, well that goes against what Jesus is saying.

Deny your want so that those in need can have what they need. That is part of the Lenten fast. I want my Nespresso, but others need clean water.

Speaking of water. I always carry a small cooler in my car filled with snacks and water, and this time of year socks. Yesterday I was heading home from an ordination and got off on Federal. I was surprised to see so many men standing at the top of the ramp. Then I remembered that there are 40,000 Venezuelans in Denver right now and they are looking for ways to get some money. And the thing I will say about people from south of the Border, they work hard and they get creative in ways that they can support their family.

So, when I got to a stop, two of them came asking if I wanted my windshield washed. I just washed my car and shook my head no. I then took a drink of water and one of them mimed the motion of drinking water, which suggested to me that they needed water, so I rolled down the window and gave each of them a bottle.

I didn't need my windshield washed, but I did have the water that they needed, so I gave them each a bottle. If you have something someone needs, share it. I didn't need that water. I had my own bottle, so I shared.

And I will say, if you are giving things to people on the street who are asking for help, tell them what you have to give and then ask them what they would like. I roll down my window and tell them what I have and then ask them if they would like any of it. If not, all well and good. If so, yay. I was able to meet a need.

And sometimes their need is just someone seeing them, talking to them, and offering a word of encouragement. It is huge to feel cared about, even in the smallest of ways, especially when you are feeling ashamed. And, it takes a lot of courage to ask for help when you feel ashamed.

I had one man on Dry Creek actually cry over some snacks. He was that grateful. And even though I told him he could have all he wanted, he only took a couple of snacks, and kept saying, "God bless you," which was really nice, but I am already blessed. That's why I share the gifts God has given me.

I don't share my gifts because I need God to bless me, which is actually another aspect of denying ourselves. Denying ourselves is giving God the glory.

God gifts us so that we can help others. And God gifts us with, not just stuff, but our very being. Our being is a gift and that gift includes the gift of vocation, which brings me to the next part – take up your cross.

This “take up your cross” phrase has been wildly misused. On the one side we get the martyrs who make a scene of giving up things for someone else, and on the other hand we also get those who use it to abuse others. “Jesus says take up your cross, which means you have to do this for me. You are a Christian which means you have to do this or that for me!”

No. It doesn't. Let me clarify that right now. Sometimes you cannot fill the need someone has, and you most certainly do not have to fill a want.

We would have people pass through Buffalo, WY, who would drop by the Church looking for stuff. Buffalo is located where I-25 ends at I-90, so being on two interstates a lot of people pass through.

This one man came into St. Luke's and started demanding things of me. He said because we were a Church, we had to do whatever he asked of us. And I was like, um no. This is what we can do, that is something we cannot. Finally, he left. I gave him my lunch, but we did not give him what he was demanding, because we didn't have the means.

Which brings us to the important aspect of vocation.

Notice – it is take up your cross and follow Jesus. Your cross.

Do not take up Jesus' cross. Only Jesus could die on the cross of Gethsemane and be resurrected. That was his call, not your call. It was his vocation, not yours.

We pick up our cross and follow Jesus by going where Jesus is calling each of us to be with our own call. He is calling us to join him as we are. Not as he is or someone else is, but as who we are.

Jesus gave up his life and picked it up again for our salvation. He was able to do it and he did. He saw our need for salvation, was able to meet that need, and so he did it. That was his cross, his call.

Do you think Jesus wanted to die? I don't think so. Being nailed to a cross is pretty horrific. But we needed his death so we can have resurrection. So, he gave up his want to live for our need of resurrection. That is what we are to emulate.

So, each of us has been gifted for our own vocation, which is different from other people's vocation. And when I say vocation, I don't mean only a job or career. Vocation is larger than that. Our vocation includes our skills and our passions, our material good, and the relationships we have. Our vocation is based on all of the gifts God has given us and how we use them in the world for the good of others.

So, what do you have to share in the world? You! Not someone else. You.

What is your vocation? What are you passionate about? What are you skilled at? What do you have in your possession? Who do you care about?

How might you be used for good in the world? How might you meet a need in the world? A need that no one else could fill, because they do not have the passion, personality, stuff, or relationships that you have to do it? That's your cross.

And do be careful, because sometimes we want someone to take our gift, but they don't need it. Remember, vocation is taking what we have to meet a need. So, if you really are called to give something, find the place where it is needed. Don't create the need, find the need.

God saw our need for God's presence with us, so God filled that need. God gives us what we need. And through us, God fills the needs of others. Christians are little Christs, following behind Jesus, carrying our own crosses, the ones with our name on it, for the sake of others.

So, what does your cross look like? Your cross will look different than mine, because we are different people with different experiences and gifts, but they both fill a need in the world. You fill a need!

And, I promise, I will never force my cross upon you just as Jesus isn't forcing crucifixion upon you. And, you should never thrust your cross upon someone else. Your cross is your cross. And if your cross isn't your cross, then you need to figure out what your cross really is.

And I beg of you not to just be nice. A vocation is not about just being nice. I only did it to be nice. No! That is not a call. That is not the cross. That is martyrdom, in the negative sense.

Being kind, on the other hand, is to say I have this gift to share that fills a need and then sharing it. This is God's gift to me and I want you to have part of it because I know you need it. Kindness. It's different from "just being nice." Kindness is a cheerful giver.

Jesus didn't ask anyone – hey, do you want me to go die on that cross for you? No. He said, I am going to die on that cross for you and then be resurrected on the third day for your salvation, because you can't do it. I can. You need me.

Jesus knew his call and he followed it, because he knew our need, he knew how to fill it, and he wanted to. He wasn't forced into it. He wasn't just being nice. He was called into it – it was his cross and he took it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.