

## “Just Pick Up Your Cross And Follow Me”

- I. Introduction. Just pick up your cross and follow me. In today’s gospel reading from Luke, Jesus shared a paradoxical but profound teaching with his disciples . . . “If you believe that I am the Christ, pick up your cross daily and follow me. You will then learn that whoever is willing to give up his or her life will find it.” As Jesus said to his disciples many times and in many ways, in losing ourselves we can discover who we really are and in dying to self we can be born again. But first, Jesus told his disciples, you must pick up your cross daily and follow me. It is no more – or no less -- complicated than that.
  
- II. Jesus is correct. We need His guidance on our spiritual journeys. How many times do we think we understand the journey we’re on only to later comprehend that we have needed a leader to help us go beyond our limited understanding? Let me give you an example:

A few years back, I was on a jungle trek with my son Jeremy in Thailand. I thought that I had all the necessary skills to undertake this trek. Was I naïve! I was the senior member of this trekking group in terms of age, and in the company of experienced trekkers from Germany, Holland, and Australia. It was on this particular trek that I discovered appropriate jungle attire does not include Nike tennis shoes. A part of this trip was taken riding an elephant. I had never ridden an elephant before, and when I first met my elephant, fear gripped me. This animal is huge, I thought. Consequently, when it came time to mount the elephant I was very tense. We were each to climb this hill and then kind of jump off the hill onto the elephant’s back. Because I was so tense, when I jumped I missed the elephant entirely and fell down into the space between the hill and the elephant. Now I’ve done it, I said to myself. But our guide who sat calmly on the lead elephant smiled and was very reassuring. “Don’t be frightened,” he said. “These elephants are very gentle, they know this trip backwards and forwards. Many others have not succeeded in jumping onto the elephant the first time. Try again and then just get comfortable and do what we tell you.” In other words, don’t make riding this elephant more complicated than it needs to be. What I required to make this a successful trek was a good guide to teach me what I needed to know and then walk or ride with me as I learned it. For those of us who are often inclined to try to find our own way, we need to be reminded that in our spiritual journeys we need direction.

- III. Jesus Christ is the guide for those of us who wish to be his disciples. What he teaches us is to shoulder whatever is happening in our lives as symbolized by the cross and move forward courageously carrying, but not excessively distracted by, that cross. Each of us has a somewhat different cross to bear. Some of us are carrying illnesses on our cross, or loneliness, or family worries on our cross. Some of us carry fear on that cross, while others of us carry pride. Sometimes there's judgment on our cross, self-judgment about something in our own lives or judgment of others because of who they are or what they have done. What Jesus was teaching us is not to let our crosses prevent us from moving on in our lives. We are not to let our crosses stop us from living or stop us from growing spiritually. In fact, there are actually times when our crosses once redeemed can become the source of God's grace in our lives and/or in the lives of others.
- IV. And how do we grow while carrying our cross? We learn to see the journey through the eyes of Jesus our guide and increasingly let our own self-preoccupations decrease. You see when Jesus referred to "saving our own lives" in spiritual terms he was speaking about being excessively self-focused. Conversely, when he spoke of "losing our lives" Jesus was pointing to the ability to go beyond ourselves and attach real importance to the needs of others. When a huge part of our life energy is self-focused, we close in on ourselves. We build high and thick boundaries around ourselves, and we become supersensitive to our own thoughts and feelings and increasingly immune to the gifts and needs of others. We close ourselves off and spiritually we begin to die. When these boundaries are taken down, deconstructed so to speak, we then see ourselves as an organic part of the world around us and we become spiritually connected and fed. When we open ourselves up in this way, we also let Jesus in and he helps us die to ourselves and become a new person. As this happens we see through his eyes. We lose our old self-oriented lives and find a much deeper life filled with forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption.
- V. When we see through the eyes of Jesus we see so much more clearly. Let me give you another example from my own experience. While I was working on my doctorate I took a summer-long seminar in Cali, Columbia. One evening, three of us were sitting at a sidewalk café eating dinner as the sun was setting over the Andes Mountains. There was a gentle breeze, and it was beautiful. We were almost finished with our meal when I looked down and saw a chicken bone moving. What I saw next startled me. A tiny hand had come up from below the table and was trying to take the bones off my plate. I looked under the table to see a child who looked no more than 4 years old, eating what was left on the bones.

I was shocked. The two other students with me had traveled quite extensively. Immediately they said “Act like you don’t see him. Don’t look at him. If you give him anything, he will never go away.” I remember so clearly that they never did look at the little boy. In an instant the café owner ran out and chased the boy away with a broomstick. I learned that Columbia is filled with abandoned children who live in doorways and under bridges. They scrounge for food and usually don’t survive past early adolescence. Many in Columbia and other Latin American countries believe that the huge problem of abandoned street children is insoluble. People believe that it’s better if they just don’t see these children. But Jesus sees them, and I believe that Jesus would have us see them as well.

VI. Conclusion. We die spiritually when we don’t see the full truth around us. We live when we see and respond. As disciples, we live in FISH pantries, we live in Vacation Bible Schools, we live in mission trips to build Habitat houses, we live in praying for one another, and we live in loving one another. Our Vestry has approved our moving forward with a Stephen Ministry here at Ascension, something you will be hearing much more about in the weeks to come. I believe that God will call many of you here this morning to become more open to seeing the needs within our own parish and to step out to be trained as Stephen Ministers in order to better respond to those needs. And as our recent parishioners who presented a minute for mission have told us, we derive much more from seeing and responding to the needs of others than they receive from us. Jesus’ words in today’s reading are at the core of the Christian gospel: We must take up our crosses and follow him, and, in following him, we begin to see through his eyes and love with his heart; we become new people.

Let us pray: Lord, give us the grace to move increasingly beyond ourselves to be able to see the world around us with your eyes and love those in this world with us with your love. Move us Lord to not become so pre-occupied with our own crosses that we miss the opportunity you give us to follow you and become more like you. Revive us, Lord, renew us, and give us your peace. Amen.