



Take Up the Cross and Follow Me

Matt 10:24–39

“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”

June 25, 2017

Thought for the Week

Scripture: Jeremiah 20:7–13, Romans 6:1 -11, Matthew 10:24-39

When you read the gospel for this Sunday or hear it proclaimed in church, I am quite sure you will immediately notice that the theme of Jesus' conversation with his disciples is all about self-confidence; he's telling them that even though they may not have much of a background in Scripture or theology, they still have much to commend them. Well, He might have said, you are truly my disciples and you will do many good things to proclaim God's kingdom. In hindsight, of course, we know now that they did set the course for the future of Christianity.

Setting that aside for a few moments, let me speak of the importance of self-confidence in the real world. When I was still a youngster in the sixth grade, we were studying long division. The teacher assigned to us a page of problems and asked us to take them home and finish them. Being a dutiful child I worked hard to do them correctly, brought them back for the teacher's observation. As she sat at her desk doing the corrections, I noticed a scowl grow across her face and hoped it was not my homework she was concerned about. Sadly, it was. Every answer was incorrect. With her red pencil she drew a broad line across each sheet of answers and then, would you believe this, she hung the answers on the bulletin board for the entire class to see. There was some whispering and snickering while I wished I could simply disappear under my desk.

I can remember that event clearly to this very day; indeed from that moment forward and throughout my academic career I worked tirelessly to ensure that math was my best subject. Were it not for my dedicated turnaround and mastering all aspects of mathematics that I encountered, I would have been lost. I doubt that I would have entered the engineering and architectural studies if I couldn't master mathematics. I wanted to relate that tale because it is an example where a few moments of instruction and encouragement by the teacher could have saved me much embarrassment, even anger. The teacher may have responded that it made me a better person, but I would have to argue that it was, in essence, negative encouragement and not something for a teacher to be proud of.

Turning now to the gospel for this Sunday, we can begin to see some similarity to this tale. There seems to be some anxiety on the part of Jesus' disciples. They were asked to follow him but had no idea of where they were going or what they were being asked to do. They were uneducated peasants with no scriptural background or preaching skills. So, Jesus set about giving them a bit of encouragement: "Don't let people intimidate you (make fun of you)" he said. "Are not two sparrows sold for next to nothing? And yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. You are worth more than a whole flock of sparrows. Do not be afraid of anything."

We are not told in the gospel how the disciples of Jesus responded to this encouragement but we know from history that they went forth, preached and made converts in all parts of that Near Eastern world. I think there are a few lessons to be learned from that event as related in the gospels. So, what could we learn? First of all, I think we should always try to see the better part of our personality while also realizing we are not perfect.

Secondly, if we happen to be a parent, a teacher, a coach, or a counselor; we should make every effort to see within the character of the person who has come to us for advice and encouragement. There may be some deep anger or bewilderment or embarrassment in the conscience of that individual. This may be a turning point in that persons' life if the caring person can see a glimmer of hope and success hidden there.

Now, I do not know if I would have ever become an aero-space engineer if my teacher had spent 15 minutes with me in private working out that long-division problem, but I do know that I would not have had to sit at my desk and feel hurt during the ordeal. Indeed, if she had put her arm around my shoulder and said, "Hey, Paul, you will be a great mathematician some day; here is the way to start!" If she had said that, I may not have remembered it all.

Still and all, I am happy that I buckled down and became a respected architectural and engineering Manager. Now why is it that I still have so many bills at the end of my paycheck?

Stewardship and the Cross

Do you ever think about how you experience the cross of Jesus Christ? Do you ever think about the power of that cross in your daily life? Is the cross even relevant to your life? It is to stewards of the Lord, who recognize the hope Christ brings through the gift of his cross. They acknowledge that for them, the cross is their *only* hope.

Being good stewards of our life in Christ is not easy, but to embrace the cross is not only countercultural, it seems absurd. Then again, we cannot avoid what Jesus said to his disciples: "If you wish to come after me you must deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you wish to save your life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake you will save it" (Luke 9:23-24).

The cross is more readily embraced by people of faith who suffer, are poor, broken, or are the victims of such things as violence, oppression or natural disasters. They see the cross as the hope, that no matter what has happened to them, God will see them through. The Father did it for Jesus who hung on the cross, so surely their sufferings will be redeemed by Jesus' sufferings.

Where people possess much material abundance, comfort and leisure, however, there is a tendency to de-emphasize the cross, to draw away from it. They can't touch it or feel it so they wish to "save" their lives by looking to other things: power, wealth, fame, relevance, or being the center of attention. What is preached about the cross from the pulpit sounds good, but in reality, something more tangible is desired.

Christ emptied himself completely in humble obedience, allowing himself to suffer and die out of compassion for the world (Philippians 2:6-11). Good stewards follow his example and work day-to-day to empty themselves and live compassionately; most noticeably by sharing their lives with others.

As we approach the summer season let us ask the Holy Spirit for an even deeper awareness of the cross in our lives. Let us find hope in the cross and pray that as we embrace it, we too will experience in a special way the joy of new life in the risen Lord.