

Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c  
Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 16:21-28

This is the time of year when most of us are busy making plans. The fall is upon us and we are looking ahead at what will be required of us over the next few months and what we would like to accomplish. Perhaps our plans have something to do with successfully completing the school year that is just beginning or helping our children do just that. Maybe we have our eyes on a promotion at work or even a change in our place of employment or a change in living arrangements. Or there may be a health problem looming on the horizon that we know we need to address. And we may be looking ahead to the holidays and making decisions about how we will celebrate. Our heads and our imaginations are just full of plans ... which makes me smile ... because, as you've probably already heard, "If you want to find out about God's sense of humor, just make plans!"

The unexpected frequently happens and we are required to shift gears. But the one thing that most of us fail to figure into our plans is God. Where does God fit into what we are imagining? As followers of Jesus Christ, what are we being asked to do? How do our plans fit into what God is calling us to do? When we pause for this consideration, it can sometimes be a long pause! When the unexpected does happen, our reaction very often is: "I can't do that!" and sometimes it's: "I don't *want* to do that!" or even: "I *won't* do that!" Even Moses in our Old Testament lesson this morning argues with God when God calls upon him. Moses' response: "I can't do that. I can't go talk to Pharaoh. Besides, who in the world is every going to believe that you sent me to do that, God?" Those protests and that question didn't stop with Moses!! They still happen today. We can protest all we want. God has the answer to all of it. At the end of the day, our protests don't matter. What matters is whether or not we get up and go do what God sends us to do!

We learn this morning in both the gospel reading and in St. Paul's letters to the Romans, what the requirements are for us to be followers of Jesus Christ ... and they are pretty steep. German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an entire book called The Cost of Discipleship in which he pointed out that grace is not cheap ... it's quite costly. It doesn't come to us just because we say we believe. It comes to us, as undeserving as we are, when we continuously take our own inventory and redirect ourselves to follow the path that Jesus laid out for us.

And here's the path: deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Three steps

First Step. Deny self. We don't get to call the shots anymore. We can make all the plans we want, but if God hasn't been figured into the equation then we are serving our own self-interest, not the will of God. If our imaginings and our mental plans are laced with prayer, will God show us the way? That's the promise. Does God plant within our hearts and minds passions and dreams that coincide with God's plan is for us? Very often. And when we try our best at something and it doesn't work out ... when we fail ... perhaps that's God's way of letting us know that it wasn't his plan for us. Maybe it's God's way of re-directing us. Maybe that's God's way of saying to us, "No, that's not quite what I had in mind for you!" Denying ourselves doesn't mean that we will forever be stuck in some situation that is not fulfilling. Quite the opposite. Denying ourselves simply means that we acknowledge that we are ultimately not the one in charge of our own lives. We consciously and willingly and intentionally defer to God. We need to remember that God knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows what will be fulfilling and gratifying to us. God knows what will not only make us happy, but what will feed our souls. The paradoxical statement that Jesus makes "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" is about dying to self and the great soul nourishing experience that is. It may mean literally physical death, but that's not the requirement. We do not need to physically die for Jesus' sake. He's already done that for us. We do need to die to our own self-interest.

Step Two: Take up our cross. Many of us are burdened by responsibilities in life. Many of us have been presented with situations over which we have no control and to which we dutifully respond. We often refer to these as our 'crosses to bear' and, in many cases, they are. But Jesus says to us, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Perhaps these burdens and responsibilities are not our cross. Perhaps our cross is the To Do List that St. Paul outlines in his letter to the Romans that we heard this morning. This is a list of all the things we are to do in order to be able to follow Christ and to live the way Christ told us to live. None of these things are easy. Most are counter-intuitive ... the exact opposite of our natural inclinations. Many of them are counter-cultural as well. We get messages on a daily basis from the larger culture that we are supposed to behave in the exact opposite way of what St. Paul is telling us. Think about these things that St. Paul lists.

Here's our To Do List:

Let love be genuine

Hate what is evil  
Hold fast to what is good

OK. So far, so good. We can probably do these things.

Love one another with mutual affection  
Outdo one another in showing honor  
Do not lag in zeal  
Be ardent in spirit  
Serve the Lord

Still OK. We can probably do these things as well.

Rejoice in hope  
Be patient in suffering  
Persevere in prayer  
Contribute to the needs of the saints  
Extend hospitality to strangers

Getting a little harder, but we can probably do these things with a bit of a stretch

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them  
Rejoice with those who rejoice  
Weep with those who weep  
Live in harmony with one another  
Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly  
Do not claim to be wiser than you are  
Do not repay evil for evil  
Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all  
If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all

These are even harder yet, but we can probably manage to comply with these ... most of the time!

Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God  
If your enemies are hungry, feed them  
If your enemies are thirsty, give them something to drink  
Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good

OK. Now we are getting to the stuff that most of us find almost impossible, if not totally impractical to do. These are the things that may very well be met with “I can’t!” “I don’t want to!” and even “I won’t”. But these are the things that constitute our taking up our cross for the sake of Jesus.

Step Three: Follow Jesus. The cross we bear is the struggle we have to do the very things that go against all our instincts, but are the things Jesus asked us to do. We do them for Jesus’ sake. We go where Jesus sends us ... and it may be our own neighborhood, our own workplace, our own family, our own circle of friends, our own church. We follow Jesus wherever he leads us ... wherever he prompts us to go.

The Presbyterian minister and chaplain to the US Senate within recent years, Lloyd Ogilvie, has said that when God hears us say, “I can’t do that!”, God’s response is, “Well, I’m glad to hear that because through you, I can do that!”

It’s not that *we* can do anything with God’s help, it’s that *God* can do anything through us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.