



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

This morning we have a very difficult text to work with. Other than Jesus saying that after His death He will rise in three days, there is not a lot of really "good news" here. It is not one of those feel-good text where we hear that Jesus loves us or Jesus heals us or that He has come to save us. Instead, we hear a list of what Jesus expects of us. And in hearing that we find some very famous lines in the text. Today I would like to concentrate on Jesus' expectations of: "Denying ourselves! Taking up our cross! Following Jesus in suffering, rejection, and death! This text is almost enough for me to want to go back to our weeks of bread, bread, bread. But we are not going to do that. Tough as this text is, we need to think about these requests or calls of Jesus, and I think we will find that they are even harder to do. We also, need to see if we can find the Gospel, the "Good News" in this text.

First, some background about this text. It comes in Marks Gospel between two blind man stories, Jesus healing a blind man at Bethsaida and another blind man, Bartimaeus at Jericho. Truth be told this is significant as Jesus is dealing with his struggling disciples who are blind to the truth of what He is trying to teach them. Peter shows that he has caught a glimpse of the truth when he calls Jesus the Messiah. But going on Jesus finds that Peter's vision was distorted by his prior understand of messiahship.

Our story continues with Peter rebuking Jesus that he cannot die, for that is not what leaders, kings and Messiahs do. Jesus sternly corrects Peter in front of the others by telling him that Satan has filled him with human things and not the divine things Jesus is trying to make all of the disciples understand. And this is the crux of our lesson today. Therefore, Jesus said that "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross, and follow me." Pretty clear cut or so it seems. So how do we go about doing those three things today? What does that look like in our world in 2024?

Denying ourselves has to do with our will. What is the controlling factor in your life? Is it your will or is it Jesus Christ? Our will would tell us that we need to do anything we can to preserve ourselves. Self-preservation begins and ends with me, me, me. All things are centered around what I want and what I do. However, Christ calls us to deny that instinct at all costs. The world calls us to be ego-centric, but Jesus calls us to be Christo-centric. This idea is certainly not what the world pounds into our heads each day. Our culture tells us to focus on ourselves; being beautiful in the eyes of others, reaching to the sky, gathering personal wealth, taking care of yourself and all your needs first and foremost. With those attitudes it is difficult for the world to understand that life is not to be focused on self, on the “me” and “getting mine” but rather those thoughts are to be denied. We come to gain life, when we deny what culture teaches us and become focused on Jesus. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Verse 35

Here we must be careful not to have a desire to be a Christian just so we can save our own life. That would be no different than purchasing a big “fire insurance” policy before our house mysteriously starts on fire and then doing a few good works. We all know that we cannot buy our way into heaven and that there is no policy big enough to get us through those pearly gates. So, if you are only after the benefits of being a Christian and not really ready to deny yourself and follow Jesus, your faith is most likely shallow and not real faith. Our call from Jesus is to deny ourselves, fully and wholly giving it over to Jesus.

And next we are to “take up our crosses.” Do you have a cross? Not just a cross on a chain around your neck, but the one Jesus invites us to take up. This has nothing to do with the hardships we all suffer, but rather the cross Jesus calls us to take up has to do with the conscious choice to live and act in ways that share in the suffering of others. We take up the cross of others and bear it, just like Jesus took up His cross on Calvary. That means that at 3 am when the neighbor calls to come help him get back in bed, we do it. It means that when we see an accident with people hurt, we stop to help. We deny ourselves and help others no matter what. The neighbors needs come first, so we must be conscious of them and act faithfully by sharing in their suffering.

And our James reading this morning tells us that our helping others needs to be blessing not a curse by bragging about other’s downfalls. Rather, we should quiet our tongue and create a blessing rather than leave them unbridled and return to the world of building only ourselves up. A story I read this week.

There was a minister, priest, and a rabbi. These three clerics in a small town had become good enough friend to take a fishing trip together to northern Wisconsin. While they were there, they became even more cordial than they had been and began to talk about their innermost thoughts. The priest confessed that he had a terrible time with his vow of celibacy and occasionally slipped off incognito to visit the strip joint in a nearby town, (Where 51 ends and the Fun begins!). The rabbi confessed that he too had a problem within his tradition, he LOVED bacon, and every so often would indulge himself with a huge and secret plate of bacon and eggs. The pastor remained silent for a long time. Finally, when pressed by his brethren to reveal his weaknesses, he said, “Well, since you insist, I am going to tell you. I just love to gossip, and I can hardly wait to get home.” Sharing someone’s suffering is certainly not gossiping about it. This next story is a better story for us to remember this morning.

There was a youth group that traveled to a big city to work with the homeless. When they arrived the youth got out of their bus and started handing out gifts of candy and sweets to the homeless who had gathered to greet them. One man looked quite disgruntled. He approached one of the students and said sternly, "We don't need candy, what we need are socks." The youth was stunned. He realized that candy and sweets were what they young people wanted. They had been thinking more about themselves than about those who they were called to serve.

So, the youth, this kid, sat down on the curb and took off his shoes and socks and gave his socks to the man. The other youth saw this and did the same. And for the rest of the week no one in the youth group wore any socks, they gave them all away. They denied themselves and took up the cross of common need and shared suffering. WOW. Thanks to Edie Buttrick for this story!

These youth, by taking up their crosses were actually doing the next call from Jesus, to follow him. Scripture tells us so many stories about things that Jesus did when He walked the earth for 30 some years. His encouragement by example, to reach out to the least, the lost, and the lonely can easily be copied today. We all have socks to give and much, much more.

In fact, I think that we have some socks in those baby kits or layettes that we will bless in a few minutes. Our WELCA group has been following Jesus all year as they used their time and talents to put together quilts and kits. They followed Jesus example of helping those less fortunate than themselves.

Question, when was the last time you went to the movies or maybe got engaged in a movie at home in your living room, that was really, really good and you actually got lost in the moment. The movie takes you outside of time and transports you outside of yourself until you are lost. Has that ever happened to you? That is why say for example, the Star Trek moves are so popular. They take you away from your life for 90 or so minutes and you can hardly wait to get that feeling again and so you stand in line to see the latest sequel to that movie.

Well, that is what Jesus calls us to, in the whole of life. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves. He calls us away from thinking solely about ourselves our wants, our desires, our demands. Jesus calls us away from a focus on human things that are all about "me", "me", "me". And we focus then on the fact that it is really all about Jesus. That focus, that denial of ourselves, moves us to join in the suffering of our neighbors.

Jesus calls us to live life "sockless" and to pick up our cross and follow Him. Our caring and compassion for others is when we lose our lives in the moment, for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of our neighbors in need. So go out and deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus, and tell everyone that He is truly the Messiah! AMEN