

Something to Die For

One thing that I have enjoyed with my job is the opportunities I have to go and visit with the nursing home residents. I really enjoy hearing stories about their lives as they reminisce their younger years, growing up in times that were so much different than they are now.

I also enjoy hearing stories about my own family from my parents and grandparents. I recall hearing stories about my great grandmother Suzie. She came from Holland when she was only two years old. I remember one story she told me about my grandfather, whom only weighed two lbs. when he was born. She told me how she lined a shoe box with cotton and put him in the oven to keep him warm, similar to an incubator. This was the winter of 1906 so it is probably a miracle that my grandfather survived, to think of it, it is even a miracle that I am here today, because if his story had ended, mine would never have begun.

Anyway, my great grandmother was a very benevolent woman. She lived her strong Baptist faith every day. In fact, if we happened to miss attending a Sunday church service she would call to let my folks know she missed us, and then ask why we weren't there. One story that I marvelled at about my great grandmother is that she always opened her home to strangers. Back in the day, the homeless were referred to as Hobos. She would often share a warm meal and her hospitality for those in need, and less fortunate than she.

You see times were different years ago, much simpler, more neighborly, faith was strong, family life was centered on the church, friends would reach out to help their neighbors. This generation had its share of difficult challenges, as they lived through the depression, and World Wars, but they relied on their faith in God to get by.

Christ has said when you do it for the least of these, you have done it for me. And we all know the love that Jesus had for us. He spent his life serving others, healing them, feeding them...spiritually, reaching out to the poor, the sick, the unloved and unwanted social outcasts. In fact Christ loved us so much he gave his life to pay our debt.

In our scripture reading today, Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do people say I am?"

Peter answered "You are the Messiah."

Then Jesus told them that he must suffer and must die and that he would rise after three days. This was horrifying to the disciples. Jesus was their friend, their teacher, their Master, and they loved him, and the thought of him dying was more than they could handle.

Peter blurts out "Don't say things like that, Master, it's discouraging to hear you talk like that."

Jesus looks Peter in the eye and says to him "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind

the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Then Jesus calls out to the crowd and says "whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

This passage ought to make us a bit uncomfortable. Jesus came to die for us. That's how much He loved us. He laid down his life for us. Max Lucado can be quoted as saying; "nails didn't hold Jesus to the cross, Love did." He loved us that much.

Several years ago, the Red Cross in a small Oklahoma town posted signs all over town saying this:

I gave my blood, Christ gave his.

I gave a pint, Christ gave all.

The needle is small, sharp. The nails were large and dull.

The table soft, restful. The cross rough, painful.

The nurses kind, gentle. The soldiers cruel, mean.

The crowd applauds my sacrifice. "They that passed by reviled him".

Mine is for O Positive. His for positively all.

Mine at best, will prolong life for a while. His, without a doubt can save all forever.

Jesus died for us. What do we do in response to such love? The truth is, most of us could say.....not much.

There was an article in the news a while ago about a teacher's aide in Pennsylvania who had been suspended without pay for a year. She had worn a necklace with a cross on it to work. She knew that she was in violation of school policies when she wore the cross. She had been warned twice before. Still, this seems to be a little overkill to most of us, being suspended for a year without pay. What disturbs me far more, however, than a teacher wearing a cross to class in defiance of a school policy, is that so many people wear crosses that have no significance to them. They wear them as a mere decoration. It is one thing to wear a cross as a **declaration**, but its another to wear it as a decoration. What does it mean to us when we wear a cross? Does it mean that we are willing to die for Him, as He died for us? It would be interesting to interview people on the street. What does wearing a cross mean to you? Is it the same thing to wear a cross as it is to bear a cross?

The act of taking up the cross and following Jesus has been practically banished from our thoughts. Finding personal satisfaction has taken its place. In December we often complain about the growing tendency that has taken Christ out of Christmas. What we really need to be concerned about is the fact that throughout the entire Christian year the cross has been taken out of Christian living. Christ died for us. He died because He loved us so much. What have we given Him in return?

It is so evident that today's society is moving away from Christ, as seen by the declining attendance in churches today. Churches are closing. Gone are the days when your Great Grandmother Suzie calls you up to tell you she missed you in church, and why in Heavens sake weren't you there. We have gotten lazy about our faith. As a young child, I remember the Blue laws, where stores were closed on Sundays, because it was the Sabbath and we needed to keep it holy. Now we have Pop Warner football and cheerleading held on Sunday, to totally distract us from worship services. In my life time we have gone from wholesome TV shows to Reality shows, complete with adult language. We have taken God out of our schools too. We are a nation that was founded on Freedom of Religion to Freedom from Religion. Thank God our currency still states "In God We Trust".

Christ asks us to take up the cross, to become disciples and follow him. We need to encourage one another to walk in the steps of the Master, to help you be better disciples of Jesus Christ.

Many beautiful stories came out of the tragedy of the fall of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. This week was the 17th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks. On Tuesday, I was watching the news as they were recalling the event and they shared stories of sacrifices and heroism. None is more impressive than the story of Ron Fazio of Closter, New Jersey.

Fazio was Vice President of a company with offices on the 99th floor of Tower Two. When the plane slammed into Tower One, Ron Fazio made one of the best decisions of his life. He ordered his employees to evacuate the building. Even though the South Tower was safe, at the time, he insisted that his employees leave the building. He stood there and held the door open until everyone in his company had started down the stairs. They all made it down. So did he. But he remained outside Tower Two, helping others out of the building, holding the door, talking on his cell phone. The last anyone saw of him, he was giving his cell phone to someone else, after which the tower collapsed and no one ever heard from Ron Fazio again.

Ron's wife Janet and their kids have started a foundation to honor their father's heroism. It's called: Hold the Door for Others, Inc." In son Rob's words, "My Dad was a quiet humble man who died after holding the door open for others. As a family, we're trying to do the same thing, to help people move through the pain so they can begin to dream again."

That's the difference between wearing a cross and bearing a cross; the willingness to give your life for others. Please understand, I'm not against wearing crosses. But instead you need to understand the sacrifice represented by that cross. In a sense it represents Jesus holding the door open so we can walk through to life, eternal life that is.

Discipleship begins when you acknowledge Jesus as your Savior and Lord. It is so sad tht many Christians view a decision for Christ as the end of the journey. Now they're accepted. Now they can confidently say they will be able to walk through Heaven's door. Friend, the day you acknowledge that Christ is your Savior is the day you begin the journey of faith.

Everyone remembers Tom Landry, the longtime head coach of the Dallas Cowboys. He once wrote "I had a difficult time finding a purpose for my life. Football was my whole life, it was my religion. I slept it, I ate it, and I talked it."

But something was missing in his life and a friend met Landry and invited him to a Wednesday morning Bible Study. Tom was hesitant at first, but agreed to go because this man was a good friend. In the Bible Study Landry learned about the challenge of following Jesus, and it changed his life. Landry stated "When Jesus became REAL to me, I found real happiness and the most satisfying purpose for living."

Have you found God's purpose for your life? Have you acknowledged Christ as your Savior. Are you opening doors for others? Whoever wants to be my disciple, "said the Master", must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it.

Amen