

As human beings as we grow up we are not sure we want to deny ourselves anything by putting someone else, first in our lives. In today's Gospel we are asked to make a total commitment, not to a person, but to God by denying ourselves and taking up a cross and following Jesus. This is unbelievable. It does not sound like the good life. In fact, Peter can't believe his ears when Jesus, the one he professed to be the Messiah, tells him that he, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is to suffer and be killed. This was not Peter's understanding of the Messiah nor is it the world's understanding of a Messiah. And not only is Jesus to suffer and die, but so will his disciples. In fact, Jesus told his disciples that only those who lose their life for his sake will find it.

What does it mean to lose one's life in order to find it? What is the good life and what does it take to live it?

You can have it all — intelligence, wealth, beauty, family — and yet lose your life. That was true for Ethel du Pont Warren, wife of Franklin D Roosevelt, Jr. Ethel had beauty, wealth, and family, yet at 49 years of age she committed suicide. How sad it is when someone loses his or her life by taking it. Yet many choose this way to end a life of misery. Suicide is an extreme way of losing one's life. There are many less dramatic ways, such as drug and alcohol abuse and becoming chemically dependent. Also there are other addictions like gambling. Then, too, there are even more subtle ways of losing one's life, such as spending hours sitting in front of a screen, either a television screen — watching the soaps, talk shows, quiz shows, and sporting events or a computer screen. The present CO_VID 19 is currently stress testing the impacts of technology on our lives. In addition, there are those who lose their lives to their work, seeking success in terms of recognition and/or wealth. We all know people who have lost their spouses and their children along the way under the pressure of the drive for success in the world.

We can lose our life through suicide, various addictions, by sitting in front of a screen, and/or giving our all to be successful in the world. These are not the ways Jesus calls us, in today's Gospel, to lose our lives in order to save them and achieve the good life. For we can take and take for ourselves and even be successful in the eyes of the world, but what do we gain? Nothing! A self-serving life is empty, futile, unsatisfying, and a meaningless existence. Perhaps that kind of life can be compared to the Dead Sea. It receives fresh water, but it has no outlets. It receives and receives but never gives. Consequently nothing can live in it or around it. Instead Jesus calls us to lose our lives by giving and denying ourselves.

One cannot read the New Testament without realising that Jesus expected his disciples to deny themselves. When he called his first disciples — Peter, Andrew, James, and John — he expected them to leave their boats, their families, their comfort, and their security to follow him. That was true of his other disciples as well. He called them out of relative security into radical insecurity, out of a life that was predictable into one that was unpredictable. He offered no security, no guarantee of success, no prescribed program. Like Abraham in the Old Testament, they were simply asked to leave everything to go where he called them.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we too are called to deny ourselves. Basically denying self is dying to self, removing oneself from the centre of our life and putting Christ there. It is taking our eyes off of ourselves, our trials and tribulations, our heartaches and headaches, and focusing them on Christ. It is like the discovery Copernicus, the sixteenth-century astronomer who discovered the earth is not the centre of the universe. Rather the sun is the centre and the earth revolves around the sun. When Christ is the centre of our lives, things are different for us. We die to self.

Losing one's life in order to find it means denying self not only for family and friends but also for strangers. Losing one's life to find it also includes taking up a cross.

Incidentally, taking up a cross is not a burden we must carry, but one we choose to carry out of our love for Christ. It is voluntary suffering for the sake of others. This is what Jesus did when he died on the cross. He said,

“No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord.” This is the kind of suffering Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel — “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Problems, tragedies in our lives, our own weaknesses are not crosses but may be consequences to our misuse of freedom or are the results of being mortal. How we choose to handle these problems may be a cross if we choose to use the situation to serve others.

Over the years there have been followers of Jesus who have chosen to take up a cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer chose to return to Nazi Germany in 1939 and share the sufferings of his people rather than teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

It is not only the famous who have chosen to take up a cross. People do that everyday. They choose to stay with their alcoholic or otherwise disabled spouse, or they choose out of love to leave them in order for the person to face him or herself to get the help he or she needs. I know parents who have sacrificed much for their children in order that they may go to University.

I was told that anthropologist Desmond Morris was once asked by a student, “What were some of the earliest signs of civilisation in a given culture?” The student expected the answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fishhook or a grinding stone. But Morris answered, “A healed femur.” He explained that non-healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle — survival of the fittest — reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person’s hunting and gathering until the leg healed. Thus compassion is the first sign of civilisation.

As Christians we are prompted by our love for Jesus Christ to get involved in the lives of others. It demonstrates our faith, the belief that life is not to be hoarded but spent on others as Christ spent his life on us. A cross then is carrying something that we don’t have to carry, doing something that we are under no obligation to do. But because of our faith, we do it.

Jesus asks, “What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life?” To bring that closer to home — what will it profit you if in becoming wealthy you have no time for family or friends, no time to enjoy the beauty of nature, to smell the flowers, or to look at the clouds? Or what profit is there in becoming a great scholar or scientist if you never feed the hungry, help the sick, or even be aware of the misery in the world? What gain is there in being an A student and having no time for volunteer work at school, at church, and in the community?

When we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, there is the danger of a cross. There is the danger that life will be upset, that it will be loaded with the burdens of others, burdens that we are not under compulsion to take up except by the compulsion of our love for Christ.

The good life happens when we totally commit ourselves to God, when we use whatever power, money, and position we have to serve others. For it is in serving others that we live the good life. We are left with the promise: “Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Amen.

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