

You know, when you think about it, you and I are trapped in a very difficult situation. From the moment of our birth until our last breath we are stuck in the middle of a war. It is the battle between the will of God and the ways of this world, and the problem is that we cannot serve both. Most of the time I don't think we are aware of this, but sometimes, usually before a decision of some kind, we can feel ourselves being pulled in two directions. The Christian faith is about personal sacrifice. The world tempts us to love power and influence and control.

With that in mind I need to warn you that this sermon is annoying. Maybe they all are and you are too kind to say so! Anyway, today we hear some really tough passages, the world would even say totally unrealistic. These readings are at the very heart of the Christian faith, and therefore go against just about everything the world teaches us. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" Of course, the disciples just do not get it, and as we heard last week, this is when Jesus calls Peter "Satan" for denying what Jesus has told them. The truth is that we have as much trouble with it as Peter did because of that war we are in.

How do we do what Jesus is saying? Exactly how do we deny ourselves for Jesus' sake, what are some specifics? Well, our friend Paul answers the question in Romans. For a starter, how about, "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, love one another in mutual affection." That means that we let go of those resentments and petty complaints about other people that are so much a part of this life. It means for us to be honest with ourselves about our relationships and where we fall short of giving genuine love.

Paul goes on, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers." He is reminding us whose side we are on, that we are to center our lives on others, not ourselves. Paul means that no matter what is going on in our lives we try not to become negative or hopeless, but continue in prayer no matter what. There are times when it seems as if our prayers go nowhere, but we continue because prayer is based on faith, not feelings. We are called to give generously to the needs of others and behave as if no one is a stranger. Our challenge is that rejoicing, patience, prayer, and generosity do not happen when our own needs are our top priority.

Paul goes on to call us to be in harmony with one another. He says to not be haughty and to associate with the lowly as Jesus did. Associate means more than just tolerating, but talking with, listening to, and caring for those less fortunate, less educated, and less wealthy than we are. I love that he warns us not to claim to be wiser than we are. I'm not exactly sure what he means, but I assume it has to do with that sneaky sense of superiority we all can slip into from time to time.

Paul says, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." I love that he does say "if," so he acknowledges that sometimes it may not be possible, but we must make sure that we are not the *source* of the lack of peace. In our relationships with other people, we are called upon to not to allow the noise and anger and resentments of others to affect us. It is the peace of Jesus in conflict with the noise of the world.

And then Paul gets downright irritating as he says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Jesus is just as annoying when he said for us to love our enemies. The challenge for us is that we are living in a culture that insists that when someone hurts us we have the right and maybe even the obligation to strike back, and on and on it goes, each attack escalating and often spreading to others. A little later Paul reminds us who is in charge as he says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God." In other words, yes, there is evil in the world, and horrible things happen every day, but it is not our job to make everything right, but God's. Now wait just a minute here the

world says! If I followed that direction, I would be taken advantage of, abused, and mistreated, just as Jesus was. Yes, that is quite possible.

What Paul is talking about are examples of what Jesus meant by denying ourselves, picking up our crosses, and following him. Is it any wonder that many people will decide not to do so? Nevertheless, this whole teaching is at the absolute center of the Christian faith, and the one we struggle with the most because of the world we live in every day.

Remember that while Jesus sacrificed himself for us, he did not want to do it either. On the night before he suffered, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” The world whispered in his ear, “This is too much, don’t do it.” But then Jesus says, “But not as I will, but your will be done.” This tells us clearly that sacrifice always involves that inner struggle, even for Jesus who was just as human and you and I are. This thought of denying ourselves and picking up our crosses can be pretty overwhelming, and I don’t believe that God minds if we start small on this challenging road. How can we do that? Well, it can begin with a broken relationship we are in when we go to the other person in humility and with the desire to forgive. Now there is an idea that can cause our blood pressure to rise! Bear in mind that it makes no difference what that person’s response is because we have no power over that. Or, we can think of a cause we believe in and give up something we want in order to increase our financial support. When we are in a situation in which there are strong conflicting opinions, what if we lay ours aside? If there is someone we have wronged, no matter when, what if we go and ask for forgiveness?

When we make such decisions and take such actions we notice something deep within us that just feels right, and good. That is because we have behaved in the way that represents our true nature as people created in the image and likeness of Almighty God. God is love, and forgiveness, and self-sacrificing, and when we are being ourselves, so are we. Amen