

“Make Room for God”

Psalm 22:23-31, Mark 8:31-38

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This morning, I invite us all to explore Jesus’ four simple steps to be his disciples: 1. Deny your own self-knowledge. 2. Understand Jesus’ cross. 3. Take up your own cross. 4. Follow Him. In our New Testament reading, Jesus called the crowd with his disciples and said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." What does it mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus?

We have been exploring spiritual key words to get closer to God in this season of Lent. Please look at the right side wall and our Lantern banner. Each Sunday, we will add key words as “signposts” toward our destination. In the banner, our final destination is the cross where Jesus died. Last Sunday, we began with the first word, *Trust*. For this week, we will add another word, “Space”. What I mean “space” here is not our room, but God’s space. We acknowledge God within us and humbly “make room” for God in our lives.

Let’s begin with understanding of “self-denial”. What does it mean “to deny ourselves”? Jesus didn’t say that we are not important. It was a question more about “self-awareness” and “self-examination” in our relationship with God. Jesus asks us a fundamental question - who are we before God? Jesus taught his disciples a basic spiritual principle. That is simple, “Self-help is no help at all. We are not in the driver’s seat, but God is our driver.” Denying ourselves is a spiritual premise that we acknowledge our limit of knowledge, confess our self-pride and self-centeredness life attitude and turn to God for help. Simply speaking, we make room for God within us.

Just imagine if there are many rooms within us. What things are filled in your rooms? An early Christian Father, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was convinced that one thing is sure, the place of God is in our soul. God still speaks to us from our deep inside. We “hear” a God who speaks from within our very “selves”. We realize that our rooms within us are filled with our stuff, even God’s room, too. He advised us to examine ourselves within and check “our rooms” whether they are filled with our own things or not. He pointed out these rooms like: I am selfish! I am proud! I am constantly plagued by my passions! And I have an addiction that is destroying me!

“Denying ourselves” is truly our humble confession and spiritual discipline to clean up our rooms and to make space for God’s dwelling place within us. All our Lenten activities and spiritual practice are the reminders for this purpose. Rediscovering God’s voice and place within us is the first step to practice for “denying ourselves”.

Tilda Norberg shares her spiritual insights in her book, *Ashes Transformed*. “Ask God to make you aware of divine nudges in your life. What has God said to you through recent incidents? What was God saying to you in that unexpected phone call? In that ‘coincidence’? Now pay attention to your hunches, your impulses. Obviously, not every hunch or impulse is a message from God, but does God sometimes choose what we do? Call an old friend? Take a nap? Go for a walk in the park? Read a certain book? Play with your kids? Offer forgiveness to someone who hurt you? Record your impulses in your journal. If your impulse is not patently foolish, will not hurt anyone, and seems consistent with the gospel, try following it. See what happens.” As we continue our Lenten journey, I hope that you will hear God’s special message and calling for your lives.

Secondly, what does it mean to “take up your own cross and follow me”? Let’s revisit the dialogue between Peter and Jesus. When Jesus began to teach the disciples that he would suffer, be rejected and killed on the cross. Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about suffering and death. Peter was disappointed in Jesus. He left everything to follow Jesus. He may have dreamed of some rewards when Jesus would restore the fortunes of Israel and save the people as the Messiah. A suffering messiah is unthinkable! But Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Who do you think is wrong? Is it Peter or Jesus? We are challenged to redefine our understanding of our Messiah. Should religious faith protect us from suffering, bring security, give us victory? But Jesus doesn’t say anything about the secret of success rather he calls us to “lose” our lives. Does this make sense to us? Promised suffering, bearing crosses, losing one’s life –That will not bring church growth! Why follow a wounded, scarred, crucified Christ?

One of our Methodist Bishops in Nashville, Kenneth L. Carder shares some meaningful insights about Jesus’ cross in his article, *Why Follow a Crucified Christ?*¹ “Peter’s objection is as contemporary and personal as our own instinct for self-preservation, our own longing for security and prominence

¹ This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, Aug. 27-Sept. 3, 1997, p.753

and health and life. If we stop before Calvary, we misunderstand Jesus. If the disciples proclaim Jesus the Messiah without the cross, they will proclaim a false messiah, for Jesus' true identity can be known only at the cross. Why follow a crucified Christ? Because only a crucified messiah reveals God as a suffering, vulnerable God. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "Only the suffering God can help." And Alfred North Whitehead calls God the "fellow sufferer who understands." The Bible bears witness to a God who hears the cries of the poor and defends the orphans, widows and immigrants. Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, the power of the cross. The message is profound: The Transcendent One has moved into our vulnerability, our guilt, our alienation, our suffering, our death. God has claimed our weakness as a resource for divine power. God has claimed our wounds as potential means of healing. By following a crucified Christ, we can face our own vulnerability."

In this special time of Lent, I hope that we seriously take Jesus' advice for our spiritual discipline. Four simple steps: 1. Deny your own self-knowledge. 2. Understand Jesus' cross. 3. Take up your own cross. 4. Follow Jesus. Let me suggest four guiding questions. 1. Dare we begin laying down our self-centeredness and make space for God? 2. Jesus proclaimed a compassionate God who would cry when we cry, a God who is willing to suffer and die for us. 3. Jesus calls us to be like Him. 4. Jesus invites us to join him and his ministry. That is what Jesus teaches us about God and his calling for our lives. I hope that we all decide to take up our own crosses and follow him as his disciples. Amen.