

**Sunday, September 3, 2023**  
**Psalm 26:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28**  
**"Follow the Leader"**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

How many of you are excited that summer is almost over, fall is almost here, school is beginning or has begun, and all those activities, meetings, work, and volunteer opportunities are pushing upon us again?! Yea! Except for maybe school starting for parents of young children, probably most of us aren't too excited about another busy fall. And maybe, just maybe we aren't too excited about fall because you had a nice summer? Yes? Restful, relaxing, exciting, time with family, friends, traveling? What was the best trip you took? Best book you read? Best place you visited? Tell me later during fellowship hour.

As you have heard from me all summer, my summer was filled with time in my garden, so many blue ribbons at the fair! And with my family, another sister is visiting! As we move into this fall, I want us to focus as a congregation on taking an inward look and an outward look. An inward look – what does it mean right now, as we enter the fall of 2023, to live and love as a disciple of Christ? And an outward look – what does it mean, right now, as we enter the fall of 2023, to serve as a Disciple of Christ in our world?

So I begin with a question or two or three: Right now, what gives you the greatest joy in your life? What creates for you the deepest sense of purpose? When do you feel most alive, most true to the person you believe God created you to be? Ponder your answers, I'll get back to this in a few minutes.

Up until this moment in the Gospel of Matthew, being a disciple of Christ had been well, rather exciting. They knew Jesus was an amazing person, a Messiah who could perform miracles, preach wonderful sermons, tell great and confusing stories, help to heal and serve people, and teach them all about God. Jesus had just asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter states clearly, "you are the messiah." But then, then, Jesus began to talk about his life coming to an end, his death. How he would be rejected, suffer humiliation, be accused of false things, and be crucified.

And Peter reacts quite strongly. Peter probably flung his arm around Jesus and held him back and states, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" Confronted with the necessity of suffering, most of us would react exactly like Peter. But for Peter, the prediction of Jesus' death seemed like a confession of defeat for the disciples, the end to months and months of hard work, and a contradiction of the Messiah everyone had wanted. One of power and glory and conquest.

Here though, he voices his political wishes, his human wishes; yes, he wanted a divine leader, but he also wanted a Mighty King. One who would change the world, not die on a cross. But what first surprised me about this passage is that Jesus takes Peter's arm off his shoulder and points at Peter saying, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Satan? Peter? One of his disciples, one of his followers. Satan?!

But we must remember what the word "Satan" meant at that time. Satan was defined as the adversary, the one who opposes truth. Peter was opposing the truth, the will of God. It was as if Peter was saying, "don't die Lord, even if God tells you, you must, let's go away where it is safe." If you think about it, he was acting like the Satan who brought Jesus into the wilderness,

where Jesus was tempted to take the way of personal power, the way of human miracles, the way of individual leadership of the world, and not the way of God. Peter was tempting Jesus to take the easy way out, to think more like a human being, than God's own Son, even after just proclaiming Jesus to be God's true Son.

And isn't this the way we all like to walk through this life. To live a life of pleasure, happiness, to take the easy way out, even when it comes to our faith. We all take our Christianity "like cream in [our] coffee – just a little something added to life to make it interesting." But Jesus tells us, if you want to be my disciple, my follower, "you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." This sounds completely backwards to us.

We must deny ourselves? We must take up our crosses? Who wants that? But let's take a moment to look at these two questions. Deny ourselves? Oh sure, we might deny our real age, we might deny we have lost hair or changed its color, we might even deny that we've gained a little weight over the summer – a little too much ice cream perhaps, but we certainly don't deny ourselves of those things that make our lives as easy and as comfortable as possible. But to deny oneself doesn't mean we have to sacrifice all, to give up all of our possessions, to give up our normal way of life, to die in order to be a disciple of Christ. To deny in the Greek means to disown, to renounce claim to, to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness. Denial means refocusing our priorities, taking in the larger picture, the greater good.

Denial may be easier for us to understand if we compare it to say, parenthood. I watched my sisters sacrifice a lot over the years raising their children, mostly as a single parent. Whether working two or sometimes three jobs to make sure their children could go to good schools – moving to be closer to other family for support – saving every penny possible, even becoming a vegetarian, all to give their children a better life. And it worked, they all have healthy successful amazing adult children. We all make sacrifices each day. Denial of oneself for others, suffering in the present day for the greater good of tomorrow is what we are talking about here.

Theologian Fred Craddock states, "we think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – 'here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us, is that he sends us back to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there . . . [because] giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time." (1)

Here's the thing, one pastor writes, "we tend to think that life is something you go out and get, or earn, or buy, or win. But it turns out that life is like love, it can't be won or earned or bought; only given away. And the more you give it away, the more you have. In fact – and as first-time parents [and grandparents] experience profoundly – only when you love others do you most understand what love really is. Likewise, only when you give away your life for the sake of others, do you discover it. Somehow, in thinking about how to fulfill others needs your own deepest needs are met. Call this the mystery of life and the key to the kingdom of God." (2)

There once was a young man who came to a pastor's office and said he wanted to be a Christian but he didn't know what being a Christian was all about. The pastor told the young man to read the Book of Acts as preparation, then come back and they would talk about what he had learned and how to apply it. A week went by and then another week and then another. The preacher began to think that he'd made a serious mistake in his suggestion. Finally, almost a year later, the young man came back. When the surprised pastor asked where he had been, in all seriousness the young man said, "*You told me to read the Book of Acts. Well, every time I*

*started reading it, it told me to get up and do something. So, I did. I got up and I went and did it. I've been too busy to come back and talk about it. I've been living it. And in living it, I met Jesus. And in meeting Jesus my life changed. Thank you, now I know what it means to be a Christian."*

(3)

To follow Jesus, to be a disciple is not just one more hobby or extra-curricular activity. It also involves carrying the cross. Most of us have heard the phrase to "take up one's cross" as being associated with one's burden or suffering. "This is my cross to bear." But there is a difference between a burden and a cross. We all carry burdens, they are the natural shocks that life brings us, we all have those. Jesus, by his healing miracles and his amazing compassion for all people, makes it quite clear that God does hate human suffering, but he also challenges us to think as God does, for we have a choice whether or not to carry the cross of Christ. To carry our cross is to carry the choices and burdens and realities of a life that has made a certain commitment – a commitment to a way of life that is committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God, the ways of God, here and now.

To be known as a disciple of Christ, we too must witness to the realm of God working within and around us, and at times this will be really hard for us to do justice and love mercy – at times we must even create conflict, expose unfairness, call for change, and endure real opposition. Whether it is in our fighting for a good school system which doesn't create a curriculum which solely evolves around state tests results but works for creativity; whether its holding legislators and leaders accountable for reasonable taxes, keeping a close eye on the major companies in this town and how they contribute to the future of this town; whether its creating a new way of being a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century here in this congregation; whatever our challenge, whatever our fight, we will meet some opposition, some discomfort, some sacrifice. But, rest assured, God will be there with us and we must be assured that eventually, truth will be revealed, good will triumph, peace will abound, they'll know we are Christians by our actions, our values, our love.

So I go back to my three original questions: what gives you the greatest joy in your life? What creates for you the deepest sense of purpose? And when do you feel most alive, most true to the person you believe God created you to be? My guess is that it wasn't something you bought, or even earned, but rather was rooted in relationship, in acts of service, and even in acts of what the world calls "sacrifice" when you are caring for another. Self-denial and cross-bearing are not about being less happy, but about discovering the real and abundant life – a kind of life the culture, the society out there, can hardly imagine – that comes in and through sacrificial love and service to another.

I remember a few years ago I had surgery on my leg and the Deacons asked if I needed anything. Rides, a meal? Well in this day and age with Uber Drivers and Door to door delivery of food, I said, no thank you, I don't need anything. Well one day the doorbell rings – which is a crazy thing these days – how many of you jump a little – who's here? Well one of the Deacons was standing there at my door with a basket of food, lasagna, fresh bread, salad, brownies, and I remember saying . . . "Oh, I didn't ask for anything, we are fine." And she said, "I don't ask if someone needs anything, I just bring it. I don't care if you throw all this out. I just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you."

This church, this church, is the place where folks do things just like that, small sacrifices to serve others. Just this past week I heard of a church member who's family dog was dying and

her Deacon went to her home and just sat on her floor holding her dog; just being with her for a little while. I'm sure that Deacon probably had other things to do that day, but that is what we are talking about, giving, serving, loving. This church is a house of joy and denial, love and sacrifice, I see it everywhere, because we are here together discovering what it means to be a disciple of Christ, today, right now, and together risk to be known in here and out there for what we believe, and together discover what really matters in this life and that is – that is that we are loved unconditionally by a God who generously gives us his grace and mercy and love each and every day.

Well, summer is almost over my friends, just a few days and the busy fall will be upon us, so come children of God who feel lost and alone, as we welcome you home here, as we journey together to follow Christ our leader. Come children of God to the joyful feast of the people of God as we celebrate a new season of following Christ our leader. And what did I say last week, let us become a house of love, service, laughter – don't forget laughter – oh and those hugs too. May it be so, Amen.

(1) Craddock, The Rev. Dr. Fred. Leadership, p. 47.

(2) Lose, The Rev. David.

(3) Strayhorn, The Rev. "Cross Road: Taking It Up", p. 4,5.