

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Sacrificial Love

Peter said, "You are the Christ." Then Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him.

So why the secret? If Jesus was the Messiah as Peter proclaimed in today's gospel from *Mark*, why be quiet about it? If Jesus healed people like He did throughout the *Gospel of Mark*, why keep it a secret? The reason is simple: you cannot understand Jesus' Work or His Messianic mission, unless you understand and embrace the cross.

That's where Peter went so wrong. It might seem reasonable at first. Jesus, Peter's friend, said that he was going to Jerusalem where he would be killed. Peter, as a good friend had said, "Then don't go. Don't do this." Peter did not yet understand the cross. He did not yet understand the depth of the sacrificial love of the Savior of the World. He was thinking in the way of the world.

The way of the world would demand that Jesus limit his sacrifice. It would value present joy over eternal happiness. The way of the world would basically be concerned with number one. It is the way that we have to fight against throughout our lives.

From the earliest days of our childhood, we have the attitude that our own needs are more important than any one else's needs. This is perfectly acceptable for a little child, especially an infant or toddler. The little one cannot exist without help and needs to call out for it, whether it is the baby crying for food in the middle of the night or the little one needing Mommy, Daddy or an older sibling to protect him or her. But the egocentricity of the child has got to end or the result will be a self-centered adult that has little to no room for God or God's people in his or her life. That is the way of the world, the way that Jesus rejected. Look around at society. Look at the people who only care for themselves, even leaving their children to shift for themselves while they pursue their own perceived happiness. The way of selfishness is the way of the world.

The way of selfishness is often our first reaction to being asked to step away from ourselves and into caring for others. Most of us initially tend to react like the son who told his father that he would not go work in the field, but then realized that he was wrong and went and did as his father asked. Over and over, I'll witness people, Teens through adults, say, "No, I am not going to do that. I am secure in my own little world." But then when they are needed, they are there. It is one of the reasons why I love you folks so much because you are always demonstrating your generosity even when it is difficult.

A husband gets a call from his wife that she is sick. Can he pick up the kids, get the dry cleaning and do the shopping? His initial reaction, which hopefully he keeps to himself is, "Oh gee, I don't want to, I was hoping to work out after work." But he stifles

that and says, "Sure dear. Do you need me to get you anything from the drug store." It's little, but it is sacrificial love.

It is normal for us to initially object to being called out of ourselves. We have to fight the temptation to take care of number one, to remain in our own self-centeredness. We have to take steps to deny ourselves for the sake of the Kingdom of God. That's what Jesus is speaking of when he says, "Whoever wishes to come after me, must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."

The sacrificial love of Christians, the accepting of the cross is not for ourselves. It is for others. This is where the second reading from *James* comes in. All that we do by way of sacrifice we do for others. The way of the Christian is the way of giving oneself for others. So *James* says, "Don't think that you are being such a great guy when you say to the person who is cold and hungry, 'Have a great day now, keep warm and eat well,' and do nothing for that person." People of faith are people who reach out from their egocentricity and care for others. But this takes sacrifice. This is what Jesus does. And by following Him, by doing what He does, He makes us an everlasting gift to the Father. He makes us like Him. And the Father sees the image of the Son in us and loves us with an unconditional love.

Like Jesus we are called to deny ourselves and take up the cross for the sake of others. That means that our actions have divine significance for others, significance that we might not even realize. For example, we don't wreck ourselves up by taking drugs or getting drunk. Why? Not just out of self-respect, although that is important, but because there are others now and down the road who need all our brain cells to be able to function. Young people refrain from sex outside of marriage not because this is a Church no-no, but so they can give themselves totally to that person they commit to for life. The married remain faithful as one of many ways of declaring their love for their spouse.

Christianity is not about "little ole self centered me in love with myself." Nor is Christianity about you. Christianity is all about Jesus Christ. To follow Him means that we are called to be like Him.

Following Jesus is still a secret. People love calling themselves Christians, but refuse to adopt a Christian attitude of life. But following Jesus is not a secret from those who love like He loved, denying themselves for the sake of others, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Today we pray for the courage to be Christian.