

Take up the Cross. Sermon: Pentecost Pr. 17A
STG/HPB 8.31.08.

Text: Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:21-27

Aim: Stand for Christ and let God change you.

+++++

Well, I just celebrated my birthday - hitting the 55 year mark,
which I understand makes me 'street legal' in the Villages.

A six year old boy was in church with his grandparents.

After church, which seemed like a long time to him, on the way
out in the narthex, he noticed a large plaque next to the

American Flag and he tugged on his grandad's sleeve and asked:
"What's that?"

His grandad said: "That's so we don't forget all the people who
died in the service."

The boy stared at the plaque for a moment.

Then he looked back at his granddad and said:

"Did they die in the 8:00 service or the 10:00 service?"

We all have sat in a doctor's waiting room somewhere, watching the clock and wondering why, if you can make your appointment, why on earth can't they?

You look at a pile of uninteresting, outdated magazines and you pick one up anyway. It has one of those quizzes in it.

You're bored, so you decide to fill in the quiz.

One of the questions is...

Which would you rather do?

- a. pamper yourself
- b. spoil yourself
- c. deny yourself

Obviously you pick c.) Naturally, you find yourself thinking, "Oh, I can't wait for the next opportunity to deny myself."

But like it or not, Jesus told his followers, which of course includes us today:

"If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves, take up the cross and follow Me."

What does that mean?

Well to be sure it doesn't mean going round with a somber face that lets everyone know how long suffering you are.

So how are we to best understand this statement of Jesus that we should deny ourselves take up the cross and follow Him?

It means that we are asked to boldly take a stand for Jesus Christ and the ways He taught, whether it is convenient or not.

Life is full of changes. Some are positive and pleasing changes. But all too many are changes that we do not welcome.

Times change. Perspectives change.

I remember talking with a Navy Pilot in a former parish. He said to me: "When I was a boy I used to go out fishing and I'd look up at the sky and every time I saw an airplane go by, I'd think: 'Wow. I wish I was up there flying that plane'.

Now I spend almost every day flying a plane and every time I fly over the water I look down and think,

'Wow. I wish I was down there fishing.'"

A third of a century ago, Alvin Toffler published his famous book, “Future Shock”, where he wrote of the ever increasing pace of change.

Rushing headlong into the future, we are repeatedly required to adapt in everchanging ways, and at a distressing pace that is like a kind of culture shock. The last couple of decades have shown us just how right on the money Alvin Toffler was.

We deplore some changes that seem so destructive in today’s society.

We grieve over some changes that cause us the loss of wonderful customs and ways of life that are forever gone.

The only thing that we seem to have any control over at all, is ourselves. And that is very illusory.

One of the hard things for many of us to come to grips with is the recognition that we are not as much in control of our lives as we like to think we are.

After all, if we were in control we would have the perfect investments.

We would have the perfect figure.

The perfect golf game.

Our children would be perfect.

Everything would be exactly the way we wanted it to be and we wouldn't want for anything.

No, we're not as much in control of our lives as we'd like to be.

God requires us to change.

But the kind of change that God requires of us,

while it might make us temporarily apprehensive,

gives us comfort and hope in the long run.

For all of us the possibility of our being made whole involves our ability to change.

Our ability to keep moving from being one kind of a person to being a better one is intrinsic to the Christian spiritual path.

To become more honest, more faithful, more kind, more loving, more giving.

The change that Christ elicits in us is so radical that St.Paul described it as: “Our old self is crucified.”

Are we made perfect? No, of course we know we are not. Does our being Christian stop us from all wrong or selfish thinking? We know the answer to that too.

There is an ongoing struggle in each of us,
between pursuing the gratification of our selfish desires,
and walking in the ways of Jesus Christ.

In the Olympic Games, not the recent Games in Beijing, but in the Paris Olympics back in 1924, British athlete Eric Liddell was fully expected to win the gold medal as he had run the fastest time in the world for the 100 metres.

But such was the strength of his Christian convictions that when it was announced that the 100 metre race would take place on a

Sunday, Liddell withdrew, saying that he would not race on the Sabbath.

Probably no other athlete from the 1924 Paris Olympics is still remembered, yet Eric Liddell is remembered for his remarkable choice to stick to his convictions, regardless of what he could gain by overlooking his convictions.

The race schedule had been published several weeks ahead, so Eric Liddell spent the intervening time training for the 400 metres, instead, which would take place on a different day.

The day of the 400 metres race came, and as Liddell went to the starting blocks, a member of the American team put a piece of paper into his hand on which he'd written a quotation from the book of Samuel: "Those who honor me I will honor."

Liddell ran the 400 metres, with that piece of paper in his hand. He not only won the final, but he broke the world record.

Liddell, a Cambridge graduate and Olympic Gold Medalist was offered several high paying positions straight after graduating. Instead he chose to follow his calling and he went off to serve as a missionary to China.

Taking up the cross and following Christ was his way of life.

As committed believers we are in a process.

We are Christians under construction.

But through Christ, God is infusing resurrection life into us.

So if we are responsive to Him we are becoming a new, higher order of being.

We are being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Our old self is dying; our new self is being raised up.

Over and above the shifting sands of the changes in life, God is God; and at the end of the day, God is all we can count on 100%.

In seeking to know God more fully, we need to change.

Yes, He loves us in our present state, but He hopes for a continuous drive on our parts to bring our whole personality more fully in accord with His will.

Jesus gives us a new way of understanding ourselves.

To think of ourselves as someone whose selfish nature has been killed off, and in its place a new beautiful Christlike nature is being encouraged to grow, every day of our lives.

We are continuously faced with choices.

The question that repeatedly puts itself before us is:

Can we rise above the pull of self-serving interests?

What happens when we are forced to make a choice between God and money?

Or, between God and gratifying any conceivable self-serving desire?

Between doing the right thing, or doing the convenient thing?

Will God take second place?

Or, will we take a stand for Christ and His ways ?

The answer is always clearly spelled out in the choices we make.

Ask yourself:

“Am I willing to deny myself,
take up the cross
and follow Him?”