

The words in today's gospel reading are pretty harsh. Jesus flat out states that he did not come to bring peace but a sword. That doesn't sound very nonviolent or pacifistic which are traits I always associate with Jesus. Here I believe he is talking about a metaphorical sword—himself. His presence in his disciples' lives will serve as a sword to cut them off from their family or anyone who is not following Christ's path. They are not to treasure anything above the love of God. In fact, he tells his disciples, then and now, that they must pick up the cross and follow him.

We often use the phrase "this is my cross to bear" when talking about things that have impacted our lives negatively. I've heard it used in relation to illnesses "this insert name of disease is my cross to bear." I've heard families use it in relation to difficult relatives "Uncle so and so is our cross to bear." But, what does Jesus mean when he says "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me?" I don't think he is talking about diseases or relatives that we have to endure. I think he is saying that we have to choose daily the path Jesus chose and follow him in all that we do.

What, exactly, is Jesus' path? Well, what did Jesus tell us are the greatest commandments? As Bishop Curry says "to love God, love your neighbor and while you're at it to love yourself." And, while that might sound easy, in reality, those seem to be three of the most difficult things for us to do.

How do we love God? Well, as it says in the Gospel of Mark we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. How do we do this? I think it means we put God before everything else in our life. God is first and foremost in everything we do. God sets the standard for our decisions and

leads the way down every road we travel. This requires us to be in constant conversation with our triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must have a daily prayer life where we are checking in with God and not only talking but listening, too. We have to be silent and allow the movement of the Spirit to come to us, we must be aware of movements within our lives, we must respond to God as we encounter God in the world. Setting aside daily time for prayer and communion with God is vital for our life as Christians. You wouldn't go months or years not speaking or listening to your partner or best friend. The same applies to your relationship with God. You need to tend to that relationship just as a gardener tends to his garden. It's the only way you will see the fruit of the spirit that God offers us when we follow God.

Further, we are to love God with every fiber of our being. It is like the title of the recent Academy Award winning movie. God is to be our everything, everywhere, all at once. It takes practice. It is something we have to work on daily, finding God in all aspects of our lives. One way to do this is to start a gratitude list. Every morning when you wake up, list three things you are thankful for and thank God for those things. Then, at night when you go to bed, do an Ignation Examen where you review your day and take all the positive things in your life—the times when you felt closest to God, living into this path Jesus set for us in your left hand and then take all the things that may have been negative in your right hand, where you might have been straying from God's path. Honor the good and the not so good. Then, bring your hands together in prayer and thank God for the totality of your day and for being with you throughout. Those are just some ways there are for you to practice loving God.

How are we to love our neighbor? We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I must admit that I for a time in my life I would say it was much easier for me to love my neighbor than to love myself. After all, I am acutely aware of all my flaws and reasons not to be loved. However, as I matured, I realized that if I did not love myself first then I could not love anyone else. We all know the “airplane story” where you must put on your mask if the oxygen levels drop before you are to help anyone else. Likewise, you have to love yourself before you can love anyone else.

How do we love ourselves? We love ourselves by living in authenticity and truth—by becoming all that God created us to be, by accepting ourselves for who we are and accepting the transformation that we have received by being heirs of Christ.

Brene Brown, author of *Dare to Lead*, defines authenticity as “the daily practice of **letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are**”. Authenticity is about embracing who God made us to be--our passions, gifts, talents, and even our weaknesses and things we do not like about ourselves.

How do we do this? As Christians, I believe we do this by relying on God working in us. As the psalmist prays to God “Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer, and attend to the voice of my supplications. In the time of my trouble I will call upon you, \* for you will answer me” It is only when we reach out to God and call upon God that our prayers are answered. The psalmist continues “For you are great; you do wondrous things; \*and you alone are God. Turn to me and have mercy upon me; \*give your strength to your servant; and save the child of your handmaid.” It is only when we

realize that God is God and we are not that we can feel God's love and mercy which is so freely given.

It is only in letting go of our will and living into the will of God that we can truly love ourselves and live out God's purpose for our lives. I think it is important to pray as often as possible to God for the knowledge and strength to do God's will on earth, for gratitude and thanksgiving. Doing these things are a step in living an authentic Christian life. Going to church, partaking in communion and being part of a Christian community are also things that help us discern the will of God in our lives.

Once we love ourselves and live in authenticity, we can then truly love our neighbors. What does loving our neighbors in this day and age mean? It means that we welcome asylum seekers and provide them with protection from the deadly and destructive countries from which they flee. It means that we work to end homelessness. It means that we provide health care and mental health care for everyone. It means that we truly stretch ourselves and reach out to those among us in need—whether they live next door or across the world. We care for those who are in desperate economic situations, those living in war zones, those who are victims of famine, victims of oppression, victims of violence, victims of injustice, and the homeless and migrants of the world.

It also means that we share God's love and story with those whom we encounter. It is easy when we live in a country where Christianity is the predominant religion to think that everyone has heard about God and doesn't need to learn about the sacrifice of Christ and the mercy and love God has for us. But, I don't think that is true. I think there are many people

who need to hear about God's unbounded love for them. It may be the one thing they have been needing to hear and it is up to us to share it with them. I am going to give you an assignment this week. I am asking you to do these three things to reach out to others to share the love of God in Christ:

1. Pray for one person, specifically, and let them know you are praying for them. Pick someone you know—a friend or family member or someone on our prayer list in the bulletin. Pray for them and then tell them you are doing it.
2. Write a note to someone. Not by email but in actual handwriting on a card or letter that you put in the snail mail and send to them. I don't know about you but I LOVE getting letters from friends in the mail. There is nothing like finding a letter amidst all the junk mail or bills we receive, tearing it open and enjoying the news that is shared. Give someone that joy this week.
3. Finally, invite someone to this church for next week. Father Joseph is gone this week but wouldn't it be exciting for him to return next week and we have double the attendance? If everyone of us invited someone to St. Michael's, we could make that happen.

I know I've gone from preaching and am into meddling but these are the things we have agreed to at our Baptism and which we are held to live out in our lives—that we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ and we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Then, and only then, are we able to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Jesus told his disciples that he did not come to bring peace as they saw peace. They still expected him to become a king and take over the world. But, Jesus did not come to be an earthly king and bring peace by overthrowing the rulers of that time. Instead, he was telling his disciples that he was on this earth to make a change that would destroy the current ways of doing things. It is up to us to take up Jesus' mantle and shake things up as he wanted us to do. It is up to us to leave this Church and do things that show we are following Jesus. It is up to us to leave here and truly love our neighbors. I will charge you after this service to leave here to love and serve the Lord and you will do so by serving your neighbor, loving yourself and loving God with every fiber of your being. Amen.