

5-12--24 Small Things Done with Great Love

I could summarize my message from two months ago as, “We need to get off our butts and do the follow.” I want to continue in that vein. Before I read the scripture passage I want to talk about what happens when we follow. A lot of it has to do with hearing and cooperating. There is an elderly woman struggling to cross the street.

Scenario 1: God is shouting in my ear, “Help her.” I am pre-occupied and don’t even notice the lady. I am deaf.

Scenario 2: God is shouting in my ear, “Help her.” I notice the lady but figure she will be fine plus I am in a hurry. I am deaf.

Scenario 3: God is shouting in my ear, “Help her.” In my mind I get the thought that I should help the lady cross the street. I do and think what a good boy am I.

What really happened is God’s voice broke through and I just seconded the motion. I can take credit for cooperating but the impetus is always from the Divine.

Prayer: We are deaf. Open our ears so that we may hear your voice and do your bidding.

The gospel is Mark 8:31-38.

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Michael Marsh is an Episcopal pastor and, on his site, “Interrupting the Silence” he posts his sermons. They are excellent. Rather than paraphrase and pull portions I am going to read a section verbatim.

Fr. Mike: I wonder what’s got Peter so upset. Some say Peter doesn’t get it, that he rebukes Jesus because he doesn’t understand there is a cost to following Jesus. I wonder if it’s just the opposite.

I wonder if Peter absolutely understands the cost and challenge of following Jesus and that it’s so frightening and contrary to what he thought it was that he rebukes Jesus.

Peter has just been told that the one he has watched heal and relieve the suffering of others, the one he heard accept and welcome outsiders, the one who raised the dead to life will himself “undergo great suffering ... be rejected ... and be killed.”

Something about that clicked for Peter. The light came on and Peter realized that following Jesus meant walking that same path. It didn't sound at all like Jesus that day by the lake when Jesus said, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

You know how when you get an advertisement in the mail the details, warnings, and consequences of the deal are at the very bottom of the page in little bitty print? Today's gospel is the little bitty print at the bottom of the page. I think Peter just read the fine print on what it means to follow Jesus.

- *“Those who want to save their life will lose it.”*
- *“Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”*

We've heard those before. Probably none of that is news to us. But it may be new to the way we are living and what we've come to believe about being a follower of Jesus.

I suppose, like me, you're here today because you consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus. So what does that mean for you today? What are you doing that makes you a follower of Jesus?

Does following Jesus mean getting baptized and going to church on Sundays? Is it about being good, believing the right things about Jesus, and getting into heaven? Is it about joining a prayer group, studying the Bible, attending Sunday School, going on retreat, participating in parish activities?

Does it mean offering your time and money to the church? Is it about being nice to others and posting prayer hands and inspirational sayings on social media? Maybe following Jesus looks like being a priest, reader, acolyte, chalice bearer, or choir member on Sundays. Or maybe it's about praying for and helping others.

There's nothing wrong with any of those things. I've done most of those things and more. I suspect you have too. Some of them are still important to and a part of my life. Maybe yours too. I think they can have value and meaning. They can sincerely and authentically express our faith.

I'm not suggesting we shouldn't do those things but I wonder if that's really what Jesus is talking about when he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Self-denial and taking up our cross are the reversal at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. It's part of the fine print that we sometimes skip over or do not want to read. It contradicts the belief many of us have that Jesus died on the cross so we don't have to.

But what if Jesus is reversing that belief and taking us in a different direction? What if Jesus didn't die on the cross to save us from our cross? What if Jesus died on the cross in order to show us how to die on ours?

What does following Jesus mean in your marriage, family, friendships? What does it mean at work and in relationship to others? What does self-denial look like and ask of you in those settings?

Think about the upcoming elections, local and national. What are they asking of you as a follower of Jesus? If Jesus is your first allegiance what will you bring to the election process?

In every situation we can go along to get along. We can keep doing what we've always done. But I wonder if that's really working for us. Are we bringing about change that gives life and offers healing or are we just getting better and more efficient at doing what doesn't work? As Bishop Read said at Council, "Nothing changes if nothing changes."

Me: Fr. Zosima is a saintly old monk who forms the spiritual center of gravity in Dostoevsky's last novel, "The Brothers Karamazov". Fr. Zosima points out that it is very easy to think that we love one another when we are doing precisely that: *thinking* about loving. A vain widow approaches Fr. Zosima gushing,

"I love mankind so much that—would you believe it?—I sometimes dream of giving up all, all I have . . . and going to become a sister of mercy. I close my eyes and, I think and dream, and in such moments I feel an invincible strength in myself. No wounds, no festering sores could frighten me. I would bind them and cleanse them with my own hands, I would nurse the suffering, I am ready to kiss those sores."

Fr. Zossima responds and in my mind I picture him barely able to contain his disdain for the woman, *"I am sorry I can say nothing more to console you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all. Men will even give their lives if only the ordeal does not last long but is soon over, with all looking on and applauding as though on stage. But active love is labor and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps, a complete science."*

Love is not a feeling. Love is a conscious decision followed by concrete action.

Pick up our crosses. We can get hung up on having to do something really big like sell all and go to the missions but God will be pleased if we start by picking up slivers. Just picking up a sliver can be a harsh and dreadful thing if it involves self-denial or swallowing our pride. St. Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.”

St. Thérèse of Lisieux was a master of doing little things with great love.

St. Thérèse 1873 – 1897, was a French Catholic Discalced Carmelite nun who is widely venerated in modern times. She is popularly known in English as the **Little Flower of Jesus**, or simply the **Little Flower**.

Thérèse felt an early call to religious life and, after overcoming various obstacles entered the convent in 1888 at the early age of 15. Thérèse died at the age of 24 from tuberculosis.

St. Therese often talked about her “Little Way,” which consisted in performing “little virtues,” not seeking grandiose sacrifices to God, but little acts of holiness.

Therese said, “I prefer the monotony of obscure sacrifice to all ecstasies. To pick up a pin for love can convert a soul.”

St. Therese writes about dealing with a particularly annoying nun.

Formerly one of our nuns managed to irritate me whatever she did or said. The devil was mixed up in it, for it was certainly he who made me see so many disagreeable traits in her. Aside: We think of the devil as tempting us to do bad things. Who would have thought about the devil tempting us to see bad in others? Very interesting. I would say Satan is on a roll in the USA.

“As I did not want to give way to my natural dislike for her, I told myself that charity should not only be a matter of feeling but should show itself in deeds. So I set myself to do for this sister just what I should have done for someone I loved most dearly.

“Every time I met her, I prayed for her and offered God all her virtues and her merits. I was sure this would greatly delight Jesus, for every artist likes to have his works praised and the divine Artist of souls is pleased when we do not halt outside the exterior of the sanctuary where He has chosen to dwell but go inside and admire its beauty.” Aside, “Is it any wonder that Therese is so beloved?”

“I did not remain content with praying a lot for this nun who caused me so much disturbance. I tried to do as many things for her as I could, and whenever I was tempted to speak unpleasantly to her, I made myself give her a pleasant smile and tried to change the subject.”

“When I was violently tempted by the devil and if I could slip away without her seeing my inner struggle, I would flee like a soldier deserting the battlefield. And after all this she asked me one day with a beaming face: “Sister Therese, will you please tell me what attracts you so much to me? You give me such a charming smile whenever we meet.” Ah! it was Jesus hidden in the depth of her soul who attracted me, Jesus who makes the bitterest things sweet!”

Therese remarks in a letter to her sister, Céline, that “you know well that Our Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our actions, nor even at their difficulty, but at the love with which we do them.”

You aren't going to give all you have to the poor but the next time you are in the 9 items only checkout line and the person in front of you has 14 items, having trouble remembering their debit card pin, and is taking forever, you can give them a smile and ask if they need help carrying their bags.

You aren't going to pause your plans to go to the missions in India but you can pause to let a car on your right merge into the nonstop line of traffic.

You aren't going to treat lepers but you can treat your annoying neighbor with kindness.

You aren't going to get our political parties to listen to each other respectfully but you can thoughtfully listen to the (Republican/Democrat) whose opinions you loath, making no comment other than, “Tell me more.” Or “That is interesting.”

Query: What little thing have you done recently with great love?

Query: Have you recently experienced a small thing done with great love unto you?