

Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 16:21-28

Whenever I take a step back and really look at what Jesus has asked of me, has asked of all of us as his followers, I wonder how anyone has ever said "yes" to Jesus' call to follow him. Did you hear what his call entails in Matthew's Gospel? *"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 will find it."* Jesus calls us to follow him, not to gain prosperity or security or comfort- Jesus calls us to follow him in order to lose our lives. In order to live a life that leads to the foot of the cross. The cross reveals a life lived willing to die for those who didn't deserve it. So I ask you, who in their right mind chooses this way of life?

Yet research tells us that there are 2.18 billion people who have made this decision, 2.18 billion Christians in the world today- that is one third of the entire global population. There are more Christians than any other religion. Even a century ago that wasn't the case, but in the last 100 years Christianity has spread to every continent and nation and Christians are everywhere: there a literally billions of us. The United States is even more so – a full 65% of adults in our nation claim to be Christians. So Christians are in the vast majority in our nation and in the world. But I have to tell you that while that should sound like good news, I actually feel discouraged by these statistics, because, I can't help but think, and maybe you can't either, that surely if one third of our planet and nearly two thirds of our nation are following Jesus- shouldn't we be living in a nation and a world more filled with love, grace, peace, and unity? Shouldn't we be the most self-sacrificing, peaceful, loving ever?

How can we find ourselves in such a hateful and violent place when we have been called to follow Jesus on such a self-denying path? How can events like what happened in Kenosha, Wisconsin this past week keep occurring in our country? Why must the mother of Jacob Blake cry for her son and beg us to pray for the healing of our nation if two thirds of us are giving our

lives for Jesus? St. Paul echoes Jesus in his epistle to the Church in Rome that we read today when he writes, *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Live in harmony with one another;...Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

Maybe we need to ask ourselves the hard question: Is that what we are doing? Do we bless the very people who hurt us, who persecute us, who do evil towards us? Do we take up our cross and follow Jesus? I think of the many critiques the world has for the Church and for Christians in general- like when Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." A while ago on a show called "Totally Biased," they were debating the question, "Does God exist?" with 2 comedians, atheist Jamie Kilstein and Christian- John Fugelsang. Jamie said that one of the reasons he rejects God and the Christian faith is because he sees Christians behind so many of the world's evils. John Fugelsang responded, "I've come to view Jesus in much the same way I view Elvis- I love the guy, but a lot of the fan club really freaks me out." Later he said, "Remember when that guy shot President Reagan to impress Jodi Foster? I don't blame Jodi Foster for what her crazy fans do. And I'm not going to blame Jesus for what his crazy fans do."

Now I think he makes a good point and I can relate to what he's saying, but I think we're in trouble if we have to constantly distinguish between Jesus and his followers.

But we have to start, as always, with ourselves. We have to renew our own decision to imitate Jesus and respond to the invitation to take up our cross and follow him...knowing the great cost and sacrifice involved. We have to look at how we react when we are wronged. Our human reaction is revenge and the ever escalating response of violence to violence. This instinct is the way of the world-and it is why we live in such a violent and hateful context. But we who follow Jesus can witness to something different. And I confess, I find it extraordinarily difficult. But I believe there is hope. There's hope we when look at what it will look like to take up our cross on a practical level? In fact,

Paul's letter to the Romans can help us with it because we can boil his advice down to 4 steps:

Step #1. Paul says, bless the person who has wronged you, do not curse them. We bless when we speak graciously to and about them and by praying for them. We definitely need God's help with this- but I don't know any better way to change my own heart towards someone that has hurt me than to pray for them. It is a miraculous cure for anger, hatred, hurt and bitterness. If someone has wronged you and you are struggling with them- start praying for them right away. In fact, pray for them today. And then pray for them every day- it is a wonderful transformation that can happen.

Step #2. Do not repay their evil for evil, Paul writes, but "take thought for what is noble in the sight of all." The word "noble" in the Greek is "kalos" and it is an adjective meaning honorable, honest, admirable, and excellent. What he is saying is that instead of repaying evil for evil, we are to elevate our minds to do what is honorable. It may require thought to determine the honorable action once someone has done us wrong- but again, God will help us.

Step #3. Do not avenge yourself, instead, leave it in God's hands. One of the great comforts to us followers of Jesus is that we do not need to avenge ourselves; we can leave people and all wrongdoing in God's hands. Instead of retaliating we get to give the entire situation over to God...and know that God's justice is perfect when ours is not.

Step #4. And this is the hardest of the steps outlined in Romans 16. But Paul writes, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Perhaps you feel like me on this one...I feel like maybe I can keep from saying the wrong thing and maybe I can even pray for someone who has wronged me and put them in God's hands ...but to take it to the next level and actually do good towards them sounds nearly impossible. And this, my friends, is the real test, this is the laying down of our lives, this is the taking up of our cross, and it puts our

self-serving tendencies straight into the crucible. But think for a moment what an impact such a thing can have on us, and, what an impact that can have on others. The author Stuart Holden tells a story that exemplifies this when asked the question, "How were you brought to Christ?" He described his time in the military and says, "*There was a private in the same company as myself who had been converted in Malta, and I gave him a terrible time. I remember one night in particular when it was very rainy and he came in wet and weary from sentry duty. Yet, as usual, he still got down on his knees before going to bed. My boots were covered in mud and I threw them both at him and hit him twice on the head. He kept kneeling and praying. The next morning when I woke up I found my boots beautifully cleaned and polished at my bedside. This was his reply to me and it broke my heart. That day I was brought to repentance.*"

This is the call. And again, I will say, it is very difficult. The four steps to sacrificial and Christ like-love, in a nutshell are: 1. Bless and pray for those who wrong us. 2. Do not repay with evil. 3. Leave vengeance in God's hands. 4. Do good by them in word and deed. Shine the muddy boots they throw at your head...and then we will witness real change.

If we are to be followers of Jesus, if we are to be Christians not in name only, but with our lives, then we are on that path of loving sacrifice that will go against all our typical inclinations. Thankfully we have a Savior who has not only lead the way to the cross, but can strengthen us in our weakness. When we reach our limits...that is the time to go to God in prayer, to ask for grace, and be a force for radical love.

Now: imagine if all 2.18 billion Christians in the world did that? Maybe that's hard to imagine. But we can start right here, with us, now, with our little family of God at St. James...and with our own lives....because there's no better way to find "life" than to give our life to God. Amen.