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# A Reflection For Today

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### **Discipleship and Commitment**

(Texts: Luke 9:22-27)

Jesus has just told his followers what lies ahead for him in Jerusalem. *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised...* And then infers that the same holds true for any who want to follow him, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*<sup>1</sup> These are grave words for those who have committed their lives to one whom they say is the “Messiah of God.”<sup>2</sup> Think well before committing to such a Lord!

Jesus was subversive, he did not go along with the status quo. He prayed for God’s word to enter his heart, and he lived God’s will throughout his life. But this did not make Jesus’ life easy. In fact it took incredible strength of will for him to speak out against the politics, societal norms, and religious traditions that he saw displayed around him. It was dangerous and heart-rending work, and we know the story. We know the suffering and humiliation inflicted on him, and on those who continue to speak out against the worldly powers of the day. How on earth did he have the courage and strength to do it?



When we read the Gospels, we see that after each encounter with a crowd of people, or a very difficult encounter with the religious leaders of his day, Jesus sought the sole comfort of the one who guided his every move and word, his Father God. Jesus prayed regularly and often and sought God’s divine wisdom, and what he heard from God was different from what the politicians and religious leaders were saying. Jesus heard God say that it was PEOPLE who are most important, and the “least of these”<sup>3</sup> are the most important of all!

In Matthew’s Gospel we hear Jesus say: “Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom...for I was hungry and you gave me food...thirsty and you gave me something to drink...a stranger and you welcomed me...naked and you gave me clothing...sick and you took care of me...in prison and you visited me...Truly I tell you just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”<sup>4</sup>

Our country is divided on political issues that *keep* us divided and serve the purpose of *the politicians* - they divert us from our primary spiritual aim - that those who have been blessed *beyond measure* take care of *the least of these*. What good are laws designed to preserve the life of an unborn child when there are people dying of hunger, malnutrition, and drug addiction? What good is it to lobby for monuments to be built when there are homeless people living on the streets. What good is it to build walls to keep people out when we should be building bridges of hope and trust between nations. What good is the right to bear arms when our *children* are killing and injuring the children of God?

Jesus made a distinction between following human-made laws and obeying God's law. Jesus embraced God's law, summed up in three commandments: Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, love your neighbor, and love yourself. The common element in all of these commandments is LOVE. If the common element of all your political and religious striving does not result in LOVE for your neighbor, then it is not of God.

Jesus strength, courage, compassion and empathy came from his communion with God through prayer. Eugene Peterson, respected theologian and author, says we have a "self problem...a self-annihilating and society-destroying egotism..."<sup>5</sup>

Those big words basically mean that when our own livelihood and lifestyle are threatened by the great needs of the community, it is very difficult for us to be objective. We rationalize our abundance and often blame the victim for their lack without taking into consideration societal or familial factors that may have contributed to their need. Prayer is the answer. Peterson asserts that, "The only way to get out of the cramped world of the ego and into the large world of God without denying or suppressing or mutilating the ego is through prayer. The only way to *escape* from self-annihilating and society-destroying egotism and into self-enhancing community is through prayer. Only in prayer can we escape the distortions and constrictions of the self and enter the truth and expansiveness of God. We find there, to our surprise, both self and society, whole and blessed. It is the old business of losing your life to save it; and the life that is saved is not only your own, but everyone else's as well."<sup>6</sup>

"Prayer is political action. Prayer is social energy. Prayer is public good...The single most important action contributing to whatever health and strength there is in our land is prayer."<sup>7</sup> Prayer has to do with everything: war and government, poverty and sentimentality, politics and economics, work and marriage.

Surrendering to God in prayer, giving up the need to preserve our own way of life and seeking God's guidance for how to invest in the health and welfare of the least of these, is the only way the Church of Christ will grow into the fullness of God that the Christ intended.

Yes, those words of Jesus: *deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow me* conjure up chilling and terrifying images of our own suffering and loss. But Jesus comforts us with his words, "do not fear, only believe."<sup>8</sup> And our own reasoning should tell us that if God so loves and takes care of the tiny sparrow,<sup>9</sup> when we follow his commands, will God not also take care of us?

<sup>1</sup> NRSV, Luke 9:22, 23.

<sup>2</sup> NRSV, Luke 9:20

<sup>3</sup> NRSV, Matthew 25:40

<sup>4</sup> NRSV, Matthew 25:31-40, selected

<sup>5</sup> From Eugene Peterson, *Earth and Altar*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All God's People*, Job & Shawchuck, p. 139

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 140

<sup>8</sup> NRSV, Mark 5:36

<sup>9</sup> NRSV, Matthew 10:29, 31