

*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.”*

This statement by Jesus has always been at the heart of what is required of people who want to follow him. So today, let's spend some time with this sentence and see how it might apply to our lives as 21st century Christians.

First of all, ***“if any want to be my followers....”*** In the gospel according to Mark, Jesus has people following after him all the time. The crowds come from everywhere to hear him preach, to be fed by him, to be healed by him, to have demons banished – people are attracted by the good news.

Now, Jesus has a way of seeing that is more than just casual observation. Jesus can see into the *souls* of people. This “inner seeing” on Jesus' part is quite evident in John's gospel. How Jesus sees is *also* part of Mark's gospel. This kind of seeing into people's souls is a part of what happens when Jesus calls the disciples to follow after him and to help him carry out his ministry.

In the very first chapter of Mark, Jesus is passing along the Sea of Galilee and he sees Simon and Andrew and calls to them: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” The same is true for James and John. Jesus sees them – and calls them.

In Chapter 2, Jesus sees Levi, the tax collector, sitting at the tax booth and he says to him, “Follow me.” And Levi got up and followed him. The wonder and joy of today's passage is that we find out that Jesus not only calls the *disciples*, but he calls all of *us*.

Mark tells us that Jesus calls the *crowd* to him *with* his disciples, because just as Jesus has seen Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John and Levi, Jesus also sees the *crowd*, sees *their* inner longings, *their* hunger, *their* need for healing, *their* secret and not-so-secret miseries.

And even now, Jesus sees all of *us* all the time. He sees *our* longings, *our* hungers, *our* need for healing, the miseries that all of *us* have that we keep hidden from the world.

Jesus sees us doing the things we do in our day-to-day lives – whatever our day-to-day lives hold, and all the time, he's saying to all of us who are in the crowd “If any want to be my followers....”

The first condition of being a follower of Jesus is to *want* to be a follower. Not just to want to follow while the sun is out and the way is easy, but to *still* want to follow even when all you can see is Jesus way out ahead in front of you carrying his own cross and nothing but darkness beyond that, and you're stumbling along dragging your cross along and you can't keep up. Following Jesus is a longing that nothing else can satisfy – not human love, not success in this life, not fame, not money.

We often settle for the joys these things bring, and tell ourselves, “this is all there is, so I'll take it and be satisfied.” But, be honest, you know better. Ultimately, this longing to be a follower is only fulfilled by *following*, which Abraham knew as he heard God say yet again that he would be a father of nations even though by now God had been promising and promising and nothing had happened and the clock was ticking and Abraham and Sarah were old, too old to have children, and so even though Abraham and Sara laughed and doubted God's plan, they followed anyway.

In the end, their longing for God was greater than their need for security, stability, and certainty. And so they simply followed, just as the disciples did centuries later when Jesus called them to follow him.

Of course, like us, they all failed miserably much of the time, but still, they kept trying.

So Jesus sees us, in fact Jesus is always *looking* for us, and Jesus is always calling us. “If any want to be my followers....” Jesus longs for us to long to follow him.

So if we figure it out – that yes, we do want to be followers, not just the hangers on in the crowd, then we have to pay attention to the next part of this sentence. “**Let them deny themselves and take up their cross.**” Here's where the complications set in and discernment on our part becomes necessary.

First of all, there's this business of denying ourselves. Our culture is all about *indulging* ourselves. Many ads and commercials that we see are all about indulging ourselves “because we deserve it.” The very idea of denying ourselves of anything we want is downright counter-cultural.

And then there's the denial that can go badly wrong. This week I read a story about a man named Jonathan Hollingsworth. Jonathan and his mother wrote a book called ***Runaway Radical: When Doing Good Goes Wrong***. I haven't actually read the book itself, but the point seems to be that, in Jonathan's case, denial of himself in order to do God's work in the world led to his being clinically depressed and unable to do anything.

He crashed and burned because he picked up every cross he saw and tried to carry them *all*. He tried to BE Jesus and forgot that he was *following* Jesus.

And this is a danger for all of *us* – pride and self-reliance and the ego can actually keep us *from* God, rather than bring us closer *to* God. In the end, this kind of ego-driven cross-bearing doesn't solve anything for anybody. We need to be in prayer to discern exactly what crosses are ours to bear.

The Greek is clear here. ***“The cross of him,”*** that is, our individual crosses. God is not asking us to be the Savior of the world, but simply to take up the cross that is ours to bear.

A whole lot of prayer is simply around the issues that come with picking up crosses and bearing them. And this is where our relationships with one another as fellow Christians can come in handy. To have someone to share these prayerful dilemmas in our lives with us can be really helpful, because we all know that there are more crosses in the world, right in our path, than we can pick up and carry alone.

St. Ignatius came up with what is known as the ***Spiritual Exercises*** in the 16th century, and these exercises are widely used today. Ignatius says that right discernment ultimately brings peace, which I have found over the years to be true. When we make prayerful decisions that align with God's will for our lives, then God fills us with peace, the peace that passes understanding.

The last part of the call Jesus gave to the crowd was ***“Follow me.”*** During this season of Lent, I invite you to spend some time in prayer about how Jesus is calling you to follow him along the Way.

After all, it is he who ultimately carries every cross we are called to carry. It is he who knows us best, and sees into the hearts of each one of us. So ask Christ to come into your heart and give you the vision to see what it is that blinds you to Christ's light and presence in our lives, and to let go of those things that keep us from seeing that light and presence.

May Christ give us the wisdom to know what crosses are ours to bear, and the courage to pick them up and carry them, knowing that, as he promised, “your yoke is easy and your burden is light.”