

Scripture: Romans 12: 9-21

Marks of the True Christian

⁹ Let love be genuine;

hate what is evil,

hold fast to what is good;

¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.

¹¹ Do not lag in zeal,

be ardent in spirit,

serve the Lord.

¹² Rejoice in hope,

be patient in suffering,

persevere in prayer.

¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints;

extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you;

bless and do not curse them.

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice,

weep with those who weep.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another;

do not be haughty,

but associate with the lowly;

do not claim to be wiser than you are.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil,

but take thought for what is noble in the sight
of all.

¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all.

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves,

but leave room for the wrath of God;

for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will
repay, says the Lord."

²⁰ No, "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."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil,

but overcome evil with good.

What a wonderful scripture passage – indeed one of my favourites from the whole Bible – It offers such sage and good advice and I end up feeling good about myself after I read it. Indeed, it does exemplify much of our Anabaptist ideals. Ideals like – living peaceably with all people, (well, only as much as it is up to you, but if the other person is giving you a hard time, all bets are off)? And never avenge yourselves – leave that to God – and I hope God will act...

Then there's acting kindly and providing "goodness" to your enemies so that you can justifiably heap burning coals on their heads.

Ah, the joys of reading out of context. We can make it mean anything we want.

As anabaptists, we hold that reading and making sense of scripture from within the community will give us a clearer understanding to the meaning of the text and clearer understanding of God's will.

I feel like we've already learned so much about Jesus and about God's love for us - how can we even learn anything more? And yet, here we are today, gathered as a group of disciples – ready to hear and experience the strength and hope that we know Jesus gives.

We know that Jesus doesn't pull any punches – he just tells it like it is using all sorts of literary tools to get his story across to the people. Jesus' words give us a choice – to take them lightly, or to follow and listen. Jesus' words strike nerves – they can make us feel uncomfortable. This is good.

Today Jesus sets before the disciples – and to us, a choice – Do you or do you not want to follow me. Because if you do, here is what to expect.

In today's passage from Matthew 16:21-28, we read:

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

²⁷ "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

As Jesus looked over his friends and disciples, you would have thought he'd choose words to encourage them to remain his disciples. You would have thought he would have made it sound easy and say, "It is easy being a disciple... Show up to work on time. Be nice to the neighbour next door. Go to synagogue. It is easy to be my disciple, all you must do is teach Sabbath School and sing in the choir."

But instead, what verse sticks out at us in this passage? "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Ick. What do you do with that?

And then we read, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

And

"²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.."

3 hard statements! Do we really have to deny ourselves? Do we really have to carry crosses? Do we actually have to LOSE our life? What does Jesus mean?

Well, let's look at the Greek word for deny used in this case. *Appernaomai*. In this case, it means to refuse or reject. It is the same word that Jesus uses when describing what Peter will do after the rooster crows.

However, in this case, denial is not said in fear nor is it an emotional response. But it is about loyalty and preference – an hyperbole to get us listening and thinking.

Jesus is expanding on what he said in the previous statement. "you are setting your mind – not on divine things – but human things."

The contrast between our love for Jesus and our love for our life and the way we live – our places and people and objects of comfort - is exaggerated in order to drive the point home. Jesus is NOT saying

that only those who live intentionally without comfort, food, warmth and family and friends will find your life. No, instead, it's a little bit like this allegory.

Those of you with dogs, which do you think your dogs will go after – the piece of pizza that dropped on the floor or the toy that's lying beside the pizza? We could say that they love pizza and hate the toy when in fact they are really quite fond of the toy but when the pizza is around, there is no contest. The word *appernaomai* – to deny oneself - is used as an extreme contrast and it is used to wake us up and make us think.

So, if we were to take this all down to the bear bones – what is Jesus saying? I think that he's saying, "Being my disciple is going to be hard." and "don't let anything stand between me and you – including your possessions, and everything that you think gives you life."

Jesus says many parables, perhaps the one that best explain what Jesus means by "denying oneself" can be found in the parable of the Great Feast – as found in the Gospel of Luke. Since we've already done a sermon AND the song about the banquet this past year, I won't get too much into it – however, I think that we can glean a little about what Jesus means about denying oneself through looking at some of the excuses for why the invitees couldn't come.

They got married
They bought cattle – and wanted to try them out
They bought a plot of land

The master sets up this banquet and all these famous people and friends are invited. But one of them just got married and couldn't come, another bought some cattle and couldn't come – still another bought a plot of land and, thus couldn't come.

We could say;

- * I was just at the last banquet – I'm tired of your food
- * I just got a new John Deere combine and want to give it a test drive.
- * I never listen to my voice-messages – did you call?
- * I'm an introvert. Banquets aren't really my thing.

Well, something like that. The sad truth is that none of these making the excuses will ever taste the dinner. Everything that makes responding inconvenient, every well-reasoned excuse, and every possession adds to the risk of missing the party.

It's not easy being a disciple! Don't say you will be one – with all fixings - and then not mean it! Put aside these things and come to the banquet!

I want to use a tool like Jesus – and tell you some stories – some of these may have hyperboles and metaphors – some tales I will tell you today are more historically accurate – and others less. Regardless, all have truth. Through these accounts maybe we can get a clearer picture of what it means to deny oneself and be a disciple to Jesus.

Edward Markquart talks about the pleasures and benefits of belonging to a particular Christian congregation. He says,

"We hear such phrases in our congregation as "We have a great schedule, and you can even come for

the “early bird special” when the church is open for business at the 7:30 AM worship.

At the next service, we have a great church choir, and the quality of music rivals the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. At the next worship service, we have a great contemporary worship service with a band that excels all others. We have a great senior’s program with so many activities that a senior has an activity planned once or twice a week. We have a great youth program, and your child will be influenced by Christian values and Christian friends.”

He continues, “Sometimes we present the Gospel – the Good News of God’s love in such a way as to persuade people to join our congregation – to make us look bigger and better and thus making us feel good.

All the while, we so often forget to talk about the fine print - as to what this commitment will cost...and I’m not talking about the offering plate.”

Let me tell you of another similar account.

Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Partners in Americus, Georgia, and writer of the Cotton Patch Gospels, was getting a red-carpet tour of another minister’s church. With pride the minister pointed to the rich, imported pews and luxurious decorations. As they stepped outside, darkness was falling, and a spotlight shone on a huge cross atop the steeple. “That cross alone cost us ten thousand dollars,” the minister said with a satisfied smile.

“You got cheated,” said Jordan. “Times were when Christians could get them for free.”

Christian discipleship is more than being part of the large crowd of good church members. It means being ready when God pulls us alone out of the crowd and confronts us with that moment of decision when we ask, “am I ready to do what Jesus says? Am I ready to give a hundred percent?”

Andrew M. Greeley is a Catholic priest and a mystery writer. He also writes for the Chicago Sun Times. In one of his homilies, he tells of a young athlete - a football player. Already in elementary school football talented young men are weeded out – scouted you might say - and sent to the appropriate high-schools.

“Once upon a time” he begins... “There was an eighth grader who was a great, great quarterback. Everyone said he'd be varsity in his sophomore year, he was so good. They even said that when he graduated from high school he might go to Notre Dame where they specialize in ruining potentially great quarterbacks.

Well, the kid was really good, but he was also really lazy. Or maybe we should say he thought there were more important things to do with the summer than weight training and practice the first week in August. And maybe he was right. He wanted to play football, you see, but he figured he was good enough that he could take the summer off and still play. So he didn't show up the first week in August or any week in August.

When school started, he finally wandered down to the football field and threw a few perfect passes. The team was enthused. But the coach saw him and chased him off the field. "You didn't come to summer practice", the coach said, "we don't want you now". Maybe the coach was wrong; maybe there shouldn't be August practice. BUT if you don't want to

work at something, no matter how good you are, you may be out of luck. We could say, “you snooze you lose.”

Being a disciple is committing 100 %. It is not committing to God when you feel like it – or when it suits, or on holidays or only on Sunday. It’s all the time.

Joseph of Arimathea is described in John’s gospel as a disciple of Jesus, yet he was a wealthy man who did not give up his possessions. We know that he owned a very nice cemetery plot. We also know that when Jesus was crucified and the body had to be taken down from the cross and buried before sundown and the onset of the Sabbath, Joseph didn’t hesitate for a moment.

He volunteered the cemetery plot for the burial; otherwise, Jesus’ body would have been thrown in the common grave for criminals.

Joseph didn’t stop to think about his tax write-off for donating the plot or where to put the person for whom the cemetery plot was originally intended; he didn’t have time for that. Joseph didn’t think about what his friends would say, about his position in the religious hierarchy, or even all the rules about cleanliness that he was breaking by burying Jesus. For him, honouring Jesus took precedence over all those other considerations, the choice was clear, so he acted.

Joseph of Aramathia gave what he had when the time was right – with no thoughts. He, quite literally, gave his possession to God.

For some of us, the cost of discipleship is high – some give up their possessions – like Joseph of Aramathia – or open their homes to welcome those that are lost. For some of us the cost of discipleship means ridicule at school or in the workplace. For some of us, the cost of discipleship means literally putting our life on the line for the Gospel.

Peter Jakob was born 14 January 1897 in Ohrloff, Molotschna in the Ukraine. He was drafted in 1916. He was released from the service in 1917 and returned home.

He was mobilized into the White Army in December 1918, where he first looked after business arrangements, then served as medical orderly in a field hospital. In October 1920 he returned home suffering from typhus. On 25 April 1921 Peter married Elisabeth and they had four children, Elisabeth, Helena, Peter and Maria.

Towards the end of May 1921 Peter went to court for his father, who could not pay the high fines which had been levied against him. Peter was, in the place of his father, condemned to death. Upon payment of a substantial bribe, he was released after he had worked at the Bethania Mental Hospital for six weeks.

From 1921 to 1925 Peter was conductor of the church choir. He was elected as minister by the Mennonite Church, and delivered his first sermon in July 1924, and on 15 February 1925 he was ordained. He was 28.

Seeing that circumstances were not favourable in Russia, Peter tried to obtain exit visas on a number of occasions, but each time was refused – although his youngest brother, Gerhard, was able to leave. One time Peter was even imprisoned for 14 days.

Menno Mennonite Church
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Living in Denial
Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Emily Toews

He continued, to preach and from time to time Peter was threatened by the regional Soviets. Despite these threats he continued. Since there were few ministers in the village, he had much work to do, being on the road a lot. He even travelled as far as the Crimea to comfort the dying.

Towards autumn in 1932 Peter was tortured for two weeks in Halbstadt, then in August he was sentenced to three years of hard labour. He served the sentence in the hospital in the prison camp at Kem, in the far north, near the White Sea.

He was released in January 1937, in reasonable health. He was united with his family and eventually found work, although he had to periodically report to the secret police.

In December 1937, at night, he was again arrested for preaching and was sent into exile. It is reported that Peter died in exile, on 14 July 1943. His family was deported to Siberia in 1943.

Peter's youngest brother, mentioned earlier, immigrated to Ontario – where he married Helena Unrau and together, they raised 3 boys, Gerhard, Werner and Ernst. Ernst married Alice Krueger, they had three daughters – Helen, Ruth and Emily Toews.

What does it mean to be a disciple?

Think about it hard – are you ready to give your life over to be a disciple? The choice is yours.