

3.4.2020 Lenten mid-week homily  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Matthew 16:24-27

Pastor Timothy McKenzie  
(Thomas à Kempis)

“The Way of the Cross”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The theme of this year’s Lenten Mid-Week Services is “Staying Close to Jesus.” In addition to scripture, each week will also focus on a Christian writer from the history of the church who also “stayed close to Jesus.” There will be an insert in the bulletin each week with a brief reading by this person, and a recommended book for further reading, if it looks like something you might be interested in. This week we will hear a passage from a book by Thomas à Kempis titled, “The Imitation of Christ.” Thomas à Kempis was a late medieval theologian, who was a member of a religious order that specialized in copying the Bible and in biblical research. His book *The Imitation of Christ* draws deeply from scripture and is centered upon following Christ and his cross. It is a book about God’s love, mercy and grace.

During Lent, we are invited onto the way of the cross. Daily Jesus invites us onto this way. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus says, “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 clearly invites us to follow him in a particular way on a particular path. He says if we desire to follow him, there is a particular way of following. It begins with “denying” oneself. In our instant gratification society, the words “Deny yourself” aren’t perhaps the most attractive sounding words. However, to help us a bit, the words “deny yourself” can be translated a couple of other ways, such as “abandon yourself” or “discard yourself” – as in abandoning, discarding or leaving behind an old self that is no longer needed.

When Jesus says “deny yourself,” what is at stake is losing that self – that we all have – that gets in the way of following Jesus. All of us have what has been called a “false self” that self that we create and present to the world, but may not be who we truly are. Anyone who has written a resume knows that the resume only partially describes them. Jesus’ call to follow gets behind our resumes. The grace is that Jesus already knows who we are. Jesus calls us to follow him so that we might more fully discover who we are and who he is.

Jesus says, deny, discard, abandon, that false self, and follow me. The grace in following Jesus is

that we discover who we really are. When we follow Jesus, we are following the Servant who serves others. When we follow Jesus, we will live for and serve others alongside Jesus, and in doing so, we will also discover our true self – our true identity.

After saying, “deny yourself,” Jesus also says “take up your cross and follow me.” The cross is actually a gift that each of us have already been given by God. The cross is something that God has given you to carry in this life that helps you sacrifice for and live for others. The cross is that gift that you have that helps you live for, and serve, others. Because the cross is a gift, the cross will also carry you - if you let it. The cross is God’s power alive in you.

Finally, Jesus also says “and follow me.” On the way of the cross we do not walk alone. The grace is that Jesus walks with us. We are blessed to follow Jesus and his example of the cross of servanthood and suffering with and for others.

Lent is a time of prayer, fasting and giving. Prayer, fasting and giving are the three ways that we practice the way of the cross. Prayer, fasting and giving are three ways that we deny ourselves so that we can better listen for God’s voice, and better live for others.

Paul addresses this in today’s first reading, using the imagery of athletes who train and exercise self-control in all things. In a sense Paul is talking about spiritual exercise. Paul is talking about habits of prayer, fasting and giving - the Lenten discipline. Lent is a time of spiritual training; Paul describes this as punishing his body in order to control it. Prayer, fasting and giving are ways that can help us deny ourselves, in order to better live for God and others. We may not all be athletes, but Paul is saying that we can practice a kind of spiritual discipline and training during Lent that will bring us closer to God and to our neighbor.

In following Jesus, we deny ourselves, we lose ourselves so that we might find our true selves in Christ. In today’s reading Jesus says, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” The purpose of Lent is to bring us closer to Christ Jesus so that we might discover what it means to truly be alive. It is as simple as that. In a world that demands so much of our time in following the concerns of the world, in following the media, in following the voices that seek our attention and our hearts – Jesus comes to us saying, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In a sense Jesus is asking us a question: “Who do we most desire to follow in our daily lives?” Who is the most reliable guide that we can follow each and every day?

The way of Jesus and his cross means abandoning that self that gets in the way of following Jesus. The way of Jesus and his cross means carrying the cross - and its gifts – that God has given us so that we can live for others. The way of Jesus means carrying our cross daily because it is only through this gift of the cross that we will find our new self, and the new life that Jesus is creating in us.

As Thomas à Kempis wrote, “There is no other way to life and to real inner peace except the way of the cross and daily self-denial.” New life and the inner peace are already waiting for us. The issue is us. Will we take time to walk with Jesus these forty days and beyond? “There is no other way to life and to real inner peace except the way of the cross and daily self-denial.”

This Lent - pray, fast, and give. Walk the way of the cross. Do not be afraid, because Jesus walks with you. Amen

**Thomas à Kempis (c.1380-1471)**

From *The Imitation of Christ*

Book One: 11

Jesus has many who love His Kingdom of Heaven, but few who will carry His Cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feasts, but few His fasting. Many want to rejoice with Him, but few will stay by Him. Many want to follow Jesus to the breaking of the bread, but few will drink the cup of His suffering. Many admire His miracles, but few follow Him to the ignominy of the Cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them. Many praise and bless Him as long as they are receiving comfort from Him. But if Jesus withdraws Himself from them, they fall into complaining and great dejection.

Those who love Jesus for His own sake and not for the sake of selfish comfort will praise Him in every trial and anguish of heart, no less than in great joy. And they would praise Him and give Him thanks, even if He never offered them any comfort.

How powerful is the pure love of Jesus, which is free from self-love and self-interest. Those who are seeking comfort like mercenaries betray themselves as being lovers of themselves, rather than of Christ. They are always thinking about personal gain and satisfaction. Where is the person who is

willing to serve God without any rewards? There is no other way to life and to real inner peace except the way of the Cross and daily self-denial.

From *The Imitation of Christ*

Book Three: 56

Christ: Follow me, for I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. Without the Way, there is no progress, without the Truth, there is no knowledge; without the Life, there is no living. I am the Way you must follow; the Truth you must believe, the Life for which you must hope. I am the indestructible Way, the impeccable Truth, the immortal Life. I am the most noble Way, the ultimate Truth, the true Life, blessed and uncreated. If you stay in My Way, you shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free and you shall lay hold on eternal Life.

If you wish to enter into Life, keep my commandments. If you wish to know the Truth, believe Me. If you wish to be perfect sell everything. If you wish to be my disciple, deny yourself. If you wish to possess the blessed Life, despise this present life. If you wish to be exalted in heaven, be humble in this world. If you wish to reign with Me, carry the Cross with Me; for none except the servants of the Cross discover the Way to blessedness and true light.

Note: In this brief passage the following passages of scripture are referenced: Matthew 9:9, John 14:6, John 8:32, John 8:12, 1Timothy 6:12, Matthew 19:17, Matthew, 19:21, Matthew 16:24.

Book Recommendation:

Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. (Robert Jeffery trans.) Penguin Books, 2013.

Thomas à Kempis (c.1380-1471) was a German-Dutch member a late medieval religious order named *Devotio Moderna*. *The Imitation of Christ* is one of the most influential and widely published books of the Christian tradition, and has been translated into many languages. It is a celebration of God's love, mercy and grace. It draws deeply from scripture and is centered upon following Christ and the way of the cross.