

Today's Gospel contains some well-known teaching of Jesus, but it is a very difficult lesson. It's about the relationship between discipleship and suffering. Jesus connects the cross to the life of all of his disciples - including us.

Last week we heard Jesus ask his disciples who they think he is. We heard Peter's faith-filled response. I always appreciate biblical humor. Jesus had just renamed Peter because this was the guy Jesus was going to build his entire Church on. He re-named Peter THE ROCK, which is *petra* in Greek. When Peter objects to Jesus suffering, Jesus says he is an "obstacle," which is *skandalon* in Greek - which literally means "a stumbling stone." So in 6 verses, Peter has gone from being the ROCK to being a stumbling stone.

Peter doesn't yet get it that Jesus came into the world to save the world through his suffering on the cross. When Peter opposes the idea of Jesus' suffering, he opposes God's plan to set the world free from sin and death.

Jesus says that his disciples must do two things - they have to deny themselves and they have to take up their cross. What does that mean?

Today when we talk about being believers in Jesus, we put most of the emphasis on accepting the doctrines of Jesus like we pray in the Creed. But in the Gospels, the disciples aren't called believers - although they do believe - they are called disciples. That Greek word literally means "a student." So if you're a student, you follow the master, you imitate him, you live like him, you walk with him, you act like him. So Jesus is saying that if you want to be my disciple, you have to imitate me.

In our time, we use the phrase "take up your cross" as acceptance of the sufferings of our daily life, and that's a good way to look at it. But in a first century Jewish setting, if you told someone to take up their cross, they knew that the cross was a form of execution and nothing more. It was the most brutal, heinous and shameful way to die at the hands of the Roman Empire in the first century. So it would shock any student or follower, and yet that's how Jesus described discipleship. Those are the conditions of discipleship: imitating Jesus and accepting suffering.

I don't know about you, but if I am about to encounter suffering - even that crown prep I had at the dentist this week - I automatically try to avoid it. But Jesus says that if we as disciples willingly suffer for his sake, we end up saving our souls. The crazy thing about discipleship is that the only way to the glory of resurrection is through the cross. It's easy for us to want the glory of the resurrection without the shame and the suffering of Good Friday, but there is no other way to heaven. It's through suffering that we end up saving our souls.

What Jeremiah laments in the first reading is what Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel. To follow Him is to deny ourselves - our priorities, our preferences, our comforts. Jesus tells us that if we want to be his disciple, it's going to cost us everything on the spiritual level - our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength - because that's what he's calling his disciples to give to him. Jesus tells us that if we want to gain the whole world by chasing after the things of this world, we risk losing supernatural life in the kingdom and the eternal life of our soul.

The place where we can connect our suffering with the suffering of Jesus is here at the Mass, because the Mass is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Jesus, with all of its richness and its many layers of prayers, songs and readings. Those of us who gather with this intention, and with this focus at the altar, are not simply witnessing the event of the cross, but we are sharing in it. As Paul says in the second reading that we have to join ourselves to the sacrifice of Jesus - to offer our whole beings - our joys and our sorrows - as living sacrifices to God. At the offertory, we can put in that basket every little thing in our lives, whether it's happy, sad, fun or painful. But now it will have a new meaning because of its connection to Jesus. And it can be a powerful avenue of grace. That is true participation. And participating in Mass in this way fundamentally changes the way we experience and interpret our own pain and suffering.

All of us can participate in the Mass through our prayers in our responses, and also by uniting our personal sacrifices and sufferings to the great sacrifice that Jesus made. Our suffering can be united with his and it takes on a new meaning that it wouldn't have otherwise. When our pain is aligned to the sacrifice of Jesus, it can be spiritually transfiguring.

When a parent witnesses the agony of a child in the hospital, or a mother endures the rebellion of a teenage daughter, or young man received news of his brother's death, or an elderly person tosses and turns at night with anxiety about their financial situation, or a child experiences the break up of a close friendship. All of these people can see their pain as simply dumb suffering, or the uncaring result of an indifferent universe.

Or we could see suffering as Jesus sees it - as the way that God draws us closer to himself. When our suffering is connected to the cross of Jesus, it can become the way for a change in our soul, the turning of our soul in the direction of God's love for us.

St Thérèse of Lisieux showed us "the little way." She lived the gospel in her own life by making small sacrifices with great love. That was her way of embracing the cross, to willingly choose to sacrifice little things in the daily things of life in order to acquire the habit of taking up the cross and uniting it to the love of Jesus, learning how to love through sacrifice. Amen?

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- Deacon Jack Schaefer