

“A Tough Act to Follow”

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Most of us came to be followers of Christ without much thought on our part. Our parents got us baptized, sent us off to Sunday School and maybe confirmation class, and—voila!—we were Christians. Others may have come to the faith later in life and maybe through a back door. But no matter how we got here, I doubt if any of us, like James and John in today’s Gospel reading, had the faintest clue, though, what becoming a follower of Christ would require of us. I know I grew up thinking that if I just followed the Ten Commandments as best I could, I would be a-okay with Christ. What more was required than that?

In the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus trying over and over again to teach his disciples the reality of just how much more is required in following him. In chapter nine, the disciples, instead of taking in what Jesus was warning them about his upcoming suffering, were occupied with self-centered arguments about their greatness. Jesus sits them down and explains that greatness in God’s kingdom only comes through humility and service to others. Obviously that teaching did not sink in, because one chapter later, as Christ is again trying to warn them of the upcoming reality he will face in Jerusalem, James and John are more focused on whether they will become the top honchos in the coming kingdom.

Jesus’s answer is sharp and penetrating. Jesus explained to them that the way to greatness in God’s kingdom was not in seeking power but the exact opposite—by relinquishing it through self-sacrifice even unto death. Were they prepared to drink the cup of suffering and sacrifice themselves? This is a complete reversal of worldly values—greatness achieved by humility and self-sacrifice. This is the great paradox of the kingdom of God. It’s certainly not the way things seem to work in our world.

We may view the disciples in these chapters as pretty dense spiritually and quite shallow, but honestly, are we any better? Do *we* really “get it”? I think, like the disciples, we would much rather focus our attention on our personal goals, on achieving recognition, popularity, and getting “stuff” rather than focusing our minds on the hard realities that we will surely face in life or the sacrifices asked of us. The disciples really thought that they were all going to Jerusalem to be with Jesus as he overthrew the Roman Empire and established his new kingdom—and they

wanted to assure their place in it at the top. They completely tuned out what he was trying to tell them about the required sacrifices lying ahead for all of them

I was just a fledgling Christian in my twenties when I attended a talk that really shook me up. I don't even remember who the speaker was, but I will never forget something he said to us. He said, "If you don't find yourself constantly and consistently being inconvenienced by having to take time to do something for someone else, you'd better take a long, hard look at your life as a follower of Christ." Yikes! I knew I did some volunteer work here and there and tried to be helpful when I could, but was I constantly and consistently going out of my way for others? Did I truly always consider my needs secondary? Wow, I guess trying to follow the Ten Commandments and trying to follow Christ aren't the same thing.

But this is just what Christ was trying to drum into the heads of his disciples. Sure, following the law of Moses is a good thing, but *no*, that alone will not cut it in true discipleship of Christ. It is the same problem Jesus had with the Pharisees and priests.

Rev. Jason Micheli alluded to this last week in his sermon on the ninth chapter of Mark. That is because the same scenario takes place in both chapters nine and ten. In both chapters, Jesus chastises his followers for their selfish concerns and sets a higher bar than the law of Moses. Always Christ places compassionate living over correct beliefs and laws.

I often wondered why it is that it is always the Ten Commandments that we see adorning our courts and legislatures and never any words of Christ? Why does the law of Moses take precedence over the teachings of Christ in our society? Maybe because Christ sets too high a standard and places too many demands on human character? Makes us a bit uncomfortable?

When you think about it, the Sermon on the Mount is a bit of a left-wing inheritance and would make many a lawyer or legislator squirm in their seats. To those who support nationalism and military might, Christ says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." To those ignoring economic inequalities, Christ says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." To those coveting power, he tells them that "the first shall be last." This is radical stuff—it certainly was in Jesus's time. Matthew recorded that "when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished by his teachings." And it's still radical enough for us to sit up and take notice.

The Sermon on the Mount is a commentary on character. What are the greatest values, and what are the requirements for authentic discipleship? What kind of individual is actually a candidate for the kingdom of God? Jesus is not shy in providing the answer. That person is a

portrait of a humble, unselfish, and integrated personality who is acutely conscious of the wounds of the world and who is stirred to heal for the sake of others.

Interestingly, this exactly describes the Buddhist concept of *bodhicitta*. *Bodhi* means enlightened, and *citta* refers to the mind and heart. It is a state of mind in which an individual desires, above all things, to be empathetic toward all beings and to dedicate themselves to overcome the sense of self and work for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. To work for one's own enlightenment alone is insufficient; it must be for the enlightenment of all—again, denial of the self in service to all others. The parallels between the teachings of the Buddha and Christ are often rather striking.

Last year, Cindy Huggins led our book group in a study of the Benedictine way of living. Saint Benedict was a monk living in the sixth century who revitalized the monastic movement throughout the Western world. He created the Benedictine Rule, an idealistic, yet pretty practical collection of insights to guide a way of day-to-day living that is intentional, disciplined, thankful, and humble—a path toward transcending a self-centered life.

In *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*, author John McQuiston II translates this sixth-century wisdom of Saint Benedict for the circumstances of our own time. There is a chapter in the book called “Self-Forgetfulness.” One passage in particular echoed to me the same words that had shook me up in my twenties: “Our ultimate goal is this: to forget ourselves. . . We must always be prepared to cast aside our own agendas whenever we have the opportunity to be of service to another. And when we act for another's interests, we must do so cheerfully, without thought of recognition or reward. Our greatest compensation will occur when compensation is not sought.”¹

Denial of self is so hard for us. It is counter-intuitive to our Darwinian human drive for self-preservation. Of course, it is natural for humans to seek what they require for survival, but once those basic needs are met, what then? It seems like that competitive drive just keeps chugging along, even picking up speed as we try to “get ahead in life.” Our egos love to be in control—they urge us to claw our way to the top, satisfy our desires, and convince us that we deserve it all. And though ambition in itself is certainly not wrong, if the pursuit of status and possessions becomes our life's purpose and more important than the needs of those around us, then we come to destroy our life in God's kingdom.

¹ John McQuiston II. *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1996) 33–34.

The importance of this principle of service and self-denial can be seen by its constant repetition in all four gospels. Jesus's parables and teachings keep driving home the lesson: It's not all about us! We are here for each other, and only those who live in love and service can be part of the kingdom of God which dwells within.

It's a tough act to follow. So how do we begin to incorporate selflessness into our daily life—especially when we live in a society where, as we've seen in the pandemic, the rights of the individual are often more valued than the well-being of others, and where “America First” is a common mantra. We do not see selflessness modeled for us very often. But we *do* have Christ's example—he modeled for us the role of the “suffering servant” even unto death.

I have a close friend who is a devout Buddhist, and I was talking to her about this precept of selflessness at lunch this week. She told me about how vital her “practice” was to her; practice for Buddhists involves daily meditating, chants, and studying teachings. It occurred to me later that that word *practice* may be the key to beginning a road to selflessness. Practice in the sense of repetition and constancy. We all know the importance of practice when we are learning any new skill. The more you practice, the easier it gets, so why not in learning selflessness?

This doesn't require you to drop your life and become a fulltime volunteer or fill every day with good deeds. What it does require is for us to be intentional, to keep our ego in check, and to practice not missing opportunities to serve when they present themselves. Every day look for little ways to put someone else first.

I found that something as ordinary as a trip to Hannaford's afforded me several chances to practice. Pulling into the parking lot on a busy Saturday, instead of driving around trying to find an empty parking space close to the door, I could park in the back to leave those spaces for others. And I could go get that stray shopping cart that would probably hit someone's car. Waiting in line to check out, I noticed a lady having a hard time navigating the self-checkout process. Hey, it didn't kill me to get out of line and give her a hand.

Nothing I did changed the world, but it did change me a bit—changed my mindset from me to them, and it felt good. I believe that the more we practice small acts of selflessness and service on a day-to-day basis, the more it will become ingrained and become a way of living—the way of loving into the kingdom of God that Jesus wants for us all. We have to begin somewhere, and the greatest symphony is created one note at a time.