

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Jeremiah 20:7-9; Romans 12:1-2; and Matthew 16:21-27

The cross is the identifying symbol of Christianity because the self-sacrifice of Jesus is its core belief. Beliefs are not ideas; they are action plans, so Jesus tells us, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Jesus is the pattern for every human being. In all three readings this week, God challenges us to take a hard look at the progress we have made in following Christ and how much more we must lean into this action plan of crucified living.

In my life, I have made some significant sacrifices. When I married John, whose first wife abandoned him with three small children, one with Down Syndrome, I gave up having children of my own body. Both John and the children needed so much love to heal. When my mother developed dementia, I became her primary care-giver for five years until her death. She disappeared a little more each day; at the same time, most of my birth family disowned me. Each night I cried over the losses.

I can also see in my life all the ways I fail to sacrifice. I live comfortably in the first-world with many privileges. I do not live with the poor, getting to know them and helping them. I am not visiting jails or finding homes for refugees. I make donations weekly, but am I doing anything to end injustice itself? I compost and recycle but do not do anything substantial to fix global warming. Why? Truth be told, it would be too uncomfortable. Reinforcing this, when I come close to real sacrifice, people say to me what Peter said to Jesus, "God forbid! No such thing shall ever happen to you!"

The thing is, what we struggle to protect in ourselves is not who we are. Fr. Thomas Keating explained that humans spend so much energy satisfying three instinctual needs – for security, affection and control – and think that this will bring happiness.¹ However, true happiness comes from God's unconditional love and a life lived out of that love. What Jesus did and what he asks of us is to cast aside our somewhat crazed focus on these instinctual needs and become our true selves: "Whoever wishes to save [what Keating called their "false"] soul will lose their [true] soul, but whoever loses their [false] soul for my sake will find [their true soul]." (The original uses *soul*, not *life* or *self* as in the lectionary.)

We are not being asked to diminish ourselves. God is not humiliating us nor making us disappear. Note the value Jesus places on our souls: the whole world is not equal to one soul. He repeats for emphasis: "What can one give in exchange for one's life?" We are asked to give our souls away and, wondrously, in doing so, we actually gain a fuller life. Think about the times you have made sacrifices wholeheartedly and the amazing love that came about. I experienced this when my children and husband were healed and when my mother came to a place of peace in the process of dying.

Self-sacrifice takes a lot of discipline, much as athletes must work tirelessly to strengthen their bodies. Jeremiah had the awful vocation of telling people that the devastation of Israel was at hand and, because the Israelites had been so sinful, nothing was going to stop the tide of their destruction. Jeremiah had to name the reality around him every day his whole adult life. He could not be silent. We find him despairing at his task. When he signed on, he thought he would get to deliver both bad news and good news (1:10), giving him security and affection, two of Keating's instinctual needs. Now he has realized that he only gets to deliver bad news and so everyone hates him. When I think about speaking as boldly as Jeremiah did, I think, à la Peter, "God forbid! No such thing shall ever happen to me!"

Romans encourages us to "offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice... [B]e transformed by the renewal of your mind." Keating said, "The spiritual journey... is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound. These make room inside us for the Holy Spirit to come in and heal" (12). We must pray in each moment to focus on who we really are, beings who pour themselves out in love.

- ❖ When were you not willing to love in a self-sacrificing way? What held you back?
- ❖ When were you willing to love in a self-sacrificing way? What propelled you?

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¹ "The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation," Snowmass CO: St. Benedict's Monastery, 1999, 4.