

Expressing negativity and skepticism has never been difficult for us human beings has it? Go back 20 to 25 years ago, and kids and adults were actually telling "not" jokes. "Not jokes are funny ... NOT!" "Mom said you can eat as much Halloween candy as you want. ... NOT!" "Your baby boy is so adorable when he cries....Not!"

These days' people don't really tell not jokes anymore, instead they use a similar grammatical construction. "Not" has been replaced by "Said no one ever!" For example: "I love the sound of my alarm clock -- said no one ever!" + "Your socks look great with your sandals -- said no one ever!" + "You don't have to put on that jacket; it's not that cold outside -- said no mom ever!" + "I guess it's time to clean my room -- said no teen ever!"

In today's Gospel lesson from Matthew, we can probably come up with even more of these sarcastic type proclamations. In fact this morning we are going to look at three to be exact and the first one is: "Sure, I would love to live a life of self-denial -- said no one ever!" Yet, this is precisely what Jesus requires of his followers. He declares to his disciples back then, and to his disciples here and now, "If anyone wants to become one of my followers, let them deny themselves..."

Ok, what then does it mean to practice self-denial? We can't "deny ourselves" without understanding the extent of the egocentric culture we live in. It's all about "me" and my needs and wants. It's the principle that practically drives our market driven, capitalistic society. It's the assumption of all publicity and advertising campaigns. It is typically the normative behavior that is found in our relationships at work, school, and in our neighborhoods. More often than not people put their own interests ahead of others.

This is one reason conflicts arise, why we often don't get along, and why there are disagreements, hurt feelings, feuds and broken relationships. It explains in part why people lose their jobs, why they get into a fight over a parking space, and why they seethe in anger when cut off on the interstate. We live in a country called "Me." We have Me rules, Me goals, Me dreams, Me plans, Me money, Me toys and Me gadgets. When people -- and the *behavior* of people -- disrupt our life of "Me," then the me will often get upset. It is not

supposed to be about you. It is not about your needs, your feelings, your dreams and goals. It is about me.

And yet, Jesus turns this all upside down. If we want to be his disciples, we need to change our geography. We need to make an effort to live in the country of "You," where the needs of the other comes first. For instance: "Where we live to make certain that You are cared for, that You are honored, You are respected, and that You are whole and healthy in every way. That is what a follower of Jesus does. They deny their citizenship in Me, and embrace a world in which You is the center. When we deny ourselves and do things the Jesus way, we live in a place of self-sacrificing agape and unconditional love.

"Sure, I would love to live a life of self-denial ... said no one ever!" Well, actually people have learned that they can say it. The apostle Paul acknowledged this necessity: "I die every day," he wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," wrote German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*.

There's a payoff, of course and that payoff is life. "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it," Jesus said. Jesus even uses the word "profit in verse 26: "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" Jesus himself knew that, although he was going to Jerusalem to die -- and that would not be easy -- beyond the cross was a resurrection. When we deny ourselves, although it may be difficult, we often find that a life of self-denial is intensely meaningful. The last line of the Prayer of Saint Francis is rather appropriate for us to take to heart, "For it is in dying to self, that we are born to eternal life."

Another sarcastic comment we might come up with is, "I can't wait to embrace the instrument of my death. Where's my cross? -- said no one ever!" So if following Jesus means we're going to die, we should probably talk about the instrument of his death, and that instrument was a cross. It was the preferred method of execution in the Roman world. Everyone knew that, and back then the cross wasn't a fashion accessory, a piece of jewelry, or something pretty. I remember when I was in Seminary one of my professors compared

wearing a cross necklace to wearing a miniature, diamond-studded electric chair or hangmen's nose.

Sure it's kind of an extreme example, but it can cause us to stop and think about what bearing a cross actually means. And to unpack this, let's try to imagine what it would have meant for Jesus' disciples when they heard Jesus talk about it. They knew that many, if not most of the people the Romans crucified were compelled to carry the very cross on which they would die to their crucifixion.

The disciples, therefore, understood the reference, but at that time, they could not possibly have understood that Jesus' comments were to be taken literally. They scarcely understood that Jesus himself was going to die on a cross! In fact, with all of the parables that Jesus taught, and with all of the symbolism he used in his preaching, they probably thought he was speaking metaphorically. Jesus was not asking them to literally find a cross for them to carry so they could die on it. More than likely they understood Jesus' comments in a figurative way. And if they did, we should too.

Ok, if that is the case then what did they think Jesus meant? Jesus was saying that his followers must embrace things or moments that incite a self-denial response. Keep in Mind, and let's not forget Jesus said, "Deny yourself" and "Bear your cross." In other words, if we feel that in our lives there is no opportunity for self-denial -- Jesus is saying, "Well, you better find one." Find that cross. Because unless you practice a life of denial in which God and others are given precedence over yourself, you can't truly be a disciple.

Do you have a hard time loving and befriending a certain person? Well...maybe you should make an effort to love them and befriend them anyway. Is it difficult to give to charity, to nonprofits, or to the church? Is it hard for you to open your bank account so that your financial resources might bless others? Perhaps you can try to make it a goal to give if you aren't giving or to give more if you already are! Is it hard for you to "bless those who persecute you....Bless them, pray for them, write a note of encouragement and slip in a \$10 gift certificate to Starbucks. That's picking up a cross. That is active discipleship.

Thomas à Kempis a classic Christian author in his book *The Inner Life* wrote, *In the Cross is salvation*; “in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection against our enemies; in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; in the Cross is excellence of virtue; in the Cross is perfection of holiness. There is no salvation of soul, nor hope of eternal life, save in the Cross.”

Bear in mind that the cross is not the illness or chronic physical problem you may have, as difficult as it may be to endure the suffering it causes. Cross-bearing is a voluntary act of discipleship. Cross-bearing always involves the "picking up" part, or the "taking up" part. The cross is something we choose. We can pass the cross and/or we can choose to leave it behind -- and leave Jesus behind as well. Or we can stop, pick up the cross, and follow Jesus.

Finally the last sarcastic proclamation we will explore is, "Sure, I would love to follow Jesus -- said no one EVER!" Actually, *many* people have said this. But often it is spoken before accepting the first two conditions, self-denial and cross-bearing. It's sort of like jumping a queue, or cutting in line. We think that Jesus won't notice. We'll just forget about those first two stipulations and we can follow Jesus without denying ourselves and without taking up our crosses.

But, unfortunately we can't and shouldn't do this. We can't really follow Jesus without the cross. That's like being a Seahawk fan but not being willing to wear a Seahawk T-shirt in public, or being a Packers fan and not being willing to put on one of those funny looking cheese-heads. No, we can't follow Jesus without the cross. Jesus knows it, and eventually as we grow in our faith and in our understanding of who Jesus really is, we begin to understand it as well.

Unfortunately, many people who begin as followers of Jesus evolve into following or adopting a theology or lifestyle that is far removed from what Jesus had in mind, or who Jesus was. Perhaps this drifting away from Jesus occurs because we prefer leadership to followership. And there's nothing inherently wrong with this, except when the decision is about whether Jesus is the leader or we're the leader. When we rebel, or wander from Jesus'

leadership to go our own way, not only have we stopped being a disciple, we have dropped the cross and -- rather than denying ourselves -- we've denied Jesus.

"Being a follower and disciple of Jesus is easy -- said no one ever!" It's not easy. But it is meaningful, in its own way it's rewarding, and it not only beneficial to us, but it is also beneficial to others, and maybe that's the whole point! Amen. Thanks be to God.