

From Our Conference Minister

Deny Yourself ... and Follow Jesus! (Mark 8:31-38)



February 14, 2018, Ash Wednesday (and Valentine's Day), brought much pain to our nation. A school shooting in Parkland Florida claimed the lives of 14 students and 3 teachers. This was the 18th school shooting tragedy in 2018. Teenage survivors of the school shooting have sprung into action by organizing and speaking out to create change. They have not allowed the grief and trauma to consume or immobilize them. To quote former President Richard Nixon I admire, "the moral courage and high idealism" of these high school students.

The tragedy in Parkland Florida was a heartbreaking way to begin this solemn time of Lent and I can only imagine the intense pain and suffering of the families in that community. Over the next few days we will travel with Jesus on a road paved with suffering and uncertainty on the way to the cross.

Suffering is an unpopular topic for many reasons. Jesus tried to explain his anticipated suffering and rejection by religious leaders to Peter but, in response, Peter took Jesus aside and scolded him. Peter believed through a great military struggle, not suffering, the Messiah would overthrow the Romans and save the Jewish people. However, the suffering and humble Messiah that Jesus was prepared to be was not what Peter or the crowd were expecting; it was contrary to their beliefs.

Jesus was intent on teaching and demonstrating the unusual and paradoxical ways of God. He rebuked Peter saying, "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*" (v.33). In other words, "Peter you are missing what God is at work doing because you are stuck thinking like everybody else, believing only in what you can see now, not realizing that God is at work beyond what you can see."

Jesus laid it out as plainly as he could: "*If any want to become my follower, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me*" (v.34). Self-denial is not easy. We all have things we want. We all have goals, but Jesus is clear that when we choose to follow him, we must first deny ourselves. That means removing ourselves from the center of our concern and giving up comfort and privilege in favor of service to others. In so doing, we might face tough life-changing decisions that need to be made in the shadow of the cross, instead of the desires of our heart.

One of the paradoxes of our faith is that in giving of ourselves to others we get great fulfillment out of life. Jesus reminds us, "*...those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it*" (v. 35) Denial of self is placing ourselves in God's hands and trusting where God leads us.

As we continue to journey together through Lent, may we deny ourselves and follow Jesus: by giving up our lives to acts of love, compassion, justice and peace. Amen.

Lenten Blessings,

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p.s. If you're looking for a small group study topic, here is a [Can We Talk About Guns: Conversation Guide](#) (Christian Century).