

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Reflection

Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-27

Life has a way of throwing curves at us. As much as we might be prepared for the uncertainties of life, we still find ourselves overwhelmed, burdened and even shocked when life takes a turn we were not expecting.

I will never forget the devastating curve that struck our family 32 years ago when we received a call that Janet's sister died suddenly of an overdose. We had been with her just a few weeks before and never imagined she was experiencing such inner pain. There is a wound in our hearts this world will never heal.

I know so many people whose lives have been marked by tragedy, sadness, loss and pain.

This side of heaven untold number of curves have been thrown and will continue to be thrown our way.

As a nation, we are in the midst of many curves: The global pandemic has affected all of us in some way; racial unrest, another police shooting, natural disasters like Hurricane Laura, rioting and looting in many cities, and politicians (Democrats and Republicans) embroiled in anger and conflict.

At a time when we need to come together more than ever, it seems so much is dividing us, so much is tearing us apart. How do we respond to such curves?

I believe God's Word gives us important insight and guidance, but also reveals curves of its own.

In our gospel reading, Matthew 16:21-27, the disciples are thrown a huge curve. For the first time, Jesus announces that he will suffer and die and rise again. I can only imagine what was going on in the minds and hearts of the disciples:

-You called us to follow you and said we would become fishers of men. You said nothing about suffering and death.

-I left my career and family for this?

-Or maybe they remembered Jeremiah's words, "You duped me and I let myself be duped."

Regardless, we do know what Peter thought. He took Jesus aside and said, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." Yet, Peter was thrown a second curve – Jesus said to him in response, "get behind me, Satan." Simon, who was just named Peter, meaning "Rock" now becomes a stumbling block, a hinderance to God's work in the world. Peter's thoughts are not God's thoughts, but man's.

Peter got the title of Jesus right, Jesus is Lord. But he got the way of Jesus wrong. As Lord, Jesus' way was a way of sacrifice, surrender and self-donative love. Jesus' way was the way of the cross. That was and is one big curve!

Moreover, Jesus made it clear that it was not only his way, it was also to be the way of his followers. It is meant to be our way. Jesus went on to say,

"Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

I think, if we are honest with ourselves, this is still a huge curve for each of us. We are on board with following Jesus, but to deny self and take up our cross is too personal, too demanding, too hard. And besides, what is "our or my cross?" Sadly, we can spend much of our lives trying to figure out what our cross is and never pick it up.

I believe Paul offers us a vital insight in our Romans passage on how we are to deny our self and take up our cross. Paul writes, "By the mercies of God, present your body as a living sacrifice." We are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. It is in our living that we offer sacrifices pleasing to God.

What if, like Jesus, our lives are so closely linked to the cross that **our lives are our cross?** This side of Calvary, we cannot separate Jesus and the cross. Is this a clue for us? If our cross and our lives are one and the same, then to deny self and pick up our cross is to pick up our very lives and follow Jesus.

This makes sense to me. Instead of trying to figure out what our cross is, We are called, by God's grace, to get up each morning and offer our lives in self-donative love to Jesus and to others. **Our lives are our cross.**

Eugene Peterson's translation of our second reading, Romans 12:1-2, found in The Message seems supports this thought. Using everyday language, he translates and paraphrases from the original Greek. Take to heart these words:

“So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

I invite you to read these words over and over again.

As Christians, God's beloved children, we are called to be signs to the world. We are called to respond to the curves of life with faith, hope and love. We are called to respond with our very lives.

The cross of Christ is both vertical and horizontal. To deny our self and take up the cross of our lives is to love God and live wholeheartedly for God (Vertical) and to love others and live wholeheartedly for others (Horizontal), no matter what their race, color, economic state, political affiliation, sex or any other factor which the world uses to divide.

Let's throw the world our own curve, the curve of God's love embodied in the crosses of our lives – A love that never ends and never gives up!

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve