

Impact

Bring faith to life. Find life in faith.

September marks a transition time for most of us. Vacations are over. Those with children return to the routines of school, sports, and activities. We anticipate autumn and get outside as often as we can before winter arrives. The liturgical year is in transition, too. We concluded the Easter season in the late spring, and spent the Sundays of summer hearing of Jesus' miracles and interactions with his early followers. We reflected on Christ's identity as the living bread of life and recognized the abundance of God's grace and goodness in our lives. Now, in the autumn weeks of Ordinary Time, we encounter some of the most essential and challenging of Jesus' teachings, and hear to the call to take Jesus' way of life to heart: "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 and that of the gospel will save it." (MK 8:27-35)



Deny yourself

What does it mean to deny oneself? Are we called to forsake who we are in order to follow the Lord? When we read the context of this teaching, this is not the sort of denial Jesus has in mind. Quite the opposite, in fact. Jesus had predicted his passion, death, and resurrection. Peter, who had just proclaimed faith in Jesus as the Messiah, rebuked Jesus, which prompted the teaching. Jesus had spoken the truth of who he is and what his mission would entail. When he tells us to deny ourselves, he is asking us to put aside anything that will prevent us from living our true mission as a child of God and follower of Jesus.



Take up your cross

In anticipating his passion and crucifixion, Jesus demonstrated his acceptance of the cross as the consequence of living his mission. Jesus tells us to take up our crosses – the trials, suffering, and challenges that we face in daily life, particularly the demands we face as a consequence of living as his disciples in the world. When we are tempted to take the easy way out, give in to selfish and self-centered tendencies, and turn away from those who need love, care, and compassion, we may rely on God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to live our mission as Christ's people.



Follow Jesus

We are always works in progress where it comes to following Jesus. As we know from the gospels, the apostles did not always get it right. This month's Sunday readings give us examples of how they sometimes failed to understand Jesus' mission and teaching, missing the mark through their attitudes and actions. Jesus did not walk away from them, and remains with us, always present as we live and grow as his disciples. We are called to journey with the Lord, opening our minds, hearts, and lives to him. As disciples, we are to carry out his mission, giving of ourselves and our resources and sharing his love in the world.

Jenny's life changed dramatically after a women's retreat at her parish a few years ago. At first, the differences were subtle: she seemed more willing to listen rather than to immediately judge the actions or motivations of others; her family noticed that she prayed before meals and that she seemed to want to go to Mass each week, and they appreciated her growing patience; co-workers recognized that she respected them and their customers. The changes in her actions drew a few surprised reactions, but mostly, appreciation, and wonder. What had caused these shifts in her behavior? It wasn't like she was a difficult or mean person before, but now she seemed to be at peace.

One day a friend asked her what had brought about "the new Jenny." Jenny paused for a moment and then replied, "This may sound strange, but I realized that the point of my life is not all about me. Going on the retreat helped me to see God's presence, but also to recognize that I have a purpose in my life, too. Now, I am growing in love of God, and that love leads me to act differently, to be aware that others will see God's love through me or not, as a result of how I live. I am learning to live differently as a result, and am grateful you recognize the changes in me." Jenny has discovered that her faith calls her to act in particular ways, and others are being touched by her new sense of purpose and meaning.



In reflecting on all that Jesus taught, Saint James realized that we must be "be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves." James knew that we have a tendency to remain complacent and inactive, telling ourselves in our heads that we are people of faith, but not allowing Jesus' call to love and service to have an impact on our lives. Yet Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." Every day provides an opportunity to serve another, often simply and quietly with little

notice by the people around us. Saint James tells us that if we do not take these opportunities and act on them, we delude ourselves into thinking we are Christians, yet we fail to do as Jesus commands.

For some of us, being the "last of all and the servant of all" comes naturally easily; for others, such living is a real challenge. Our journey as disciples who embrace this call begins here, now, each and every day of our lives.

How is your life shaped by such humble service? In what ways do Jesus' command and James' wisdom provide direction, encouragement, and challenge for you at this time in your life? How might you, like Jenny, see God's presence and find renewed purpose in your life? What steps on the journey of discipleship are you called to take today? Your journey starts here.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. MK 8:35

Impact this month

Reflect on your life. How do you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

How may you be called to stretch yourself in order to grow as a disciple who is the "last of all and the servant of all"?

What recent experiences come to mind in which you had opportunities to "do" the word, in which faith directed your actions?