



Mark 8:27-35
Pentecost 15b
September 13, 2009

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Friends:

It is great to have you joining together in worship of God this morning. Thank you for being part of this community of faith as we begin a new year of worship and growing together.

This is the beginning of the new season for many of us. The orientation of our lives around the school year brings a freshness and energy even as it pinch us and clogs our calendars with many events and obligations. Even if your days aren't changed by start of the school year, I'm guessing that you have your own pinches and clogs at times, too. We're just busy people. The pace of life is one that we seem to have lost much control over - and no one seems to truly understand why.

As the summer ends, I have been reflecting on the season now gone. Some of you recall that last spring while the routine of the school year was still in place, I went on a three-month sabbatical. Stepping away from the routine - and being away from the USA for a majority of the time gave me perspective on our lives here in this culture. I'm still trying to figure out the effect of our busyness. But there's something that I sense isn't good for us, our relationships with each other and with God.

We are people who are led along in life by so many forces and a plethora of influences and activities beyond us that take a subtle toll on our bodies, minds and souls. I'm convinced that we are over prioritized people. The issue isn't a lack of priorities - it's too many of them.

We hear about priorities all the time. Daily news media fills us with information about priorities of our nation: ending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, solving health care reform, diffusing nuclear threats from North Korea, restarting Middle East peace talks; there's the priority of getting people back to work, bolstering the US dollar and jump starting the economic engines of this country.

In our own lives we're always dealing with priorities. We try to make good relationships with our family a priority. This time of year we recommit to education as a priority. Here in the start up ministries of this church we want you to make exercise and proper nutrition a priority as you sign up for the Walk to Bethlehem starting today. In light of the recession we're learning new lessons in paying down mortgages, spending less and saving more. All of the time I'm hoping you make growing in faith and living it daily a priority. From my experience the people who are best prepared to live well through the challenges of life are those who invest in regular worship, basic spiritual practices of daily prayer, devotions, serving and caring Christian friendship.

What are your priorities? Doesn't hearing about this topic get a bit overwhelming? How do we sort our priorities? Which should be at the top of the list?

This morning's Bible reading has Jesus laying out what he expects of his followers - you and me. As a matter of priority Jesus says if you believe he is the Savior you align your life with him. In his words, "deny yourself, take up the cross and follow."

Jesus' call to follow him makes a demand on us that should cause us to reassess our priorities. At face value, these are very direct words. To deny self is not something any of us like to do! I know I'd like to say: "Hey Jesus, I'll follow you - and put you on



the list of priorities in my life, but let's get rid of this denying self part. It just sounds too demanding."

Beyond the face value of these words, is the news that God's makes us the priority of God's grace and love. As Lutherans we understand that God first loves us – it's a gift – called grace that's given to us in baptism. Then, after already being loved and claimed by God – we've got our whole lives to show forth this gift of God's love. It's in that reality that Jesus then makes this request of us. But know this: God never demands or expects anything of us without first giving us the gift – unearned love and the hope of life in Jesus. From this point God wants to help us keep our lives in perspective – so that the big priorities are not crowded out by all the little ones that crowd our lives.



Watch this: www.sermonspice.com "Priorities"

To take up the cross means to actively give ourselves to a continuing relationship with Jesus Christ. An active relationship with Jesus prompts us to rejoice daily because of the reality of God in our lives.

As I said at the start there's something in our culture that isn't good for our relationships with each other and with God and it has to do with our priorities. Back to the Bible reading: "deny yourself, take up the cross and FOLLOW Jesus" is truly a rescue for us!

Jesus comes to help us out. Jesus rescues us from all those priorities that consume us:

- *from thinking that we have to make our own way in this life or
- *that we have to make something of ourselves to be someone.

Jesus comes to help us reclaim the BIG priorities for our lives by making a gracious, well-planned demand on us: "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." When we do this - our priorities get filtered, the BIG ones get new prominence and our lives rest for living faith in daily life.



Golf is a very popular sport in Japan. Millions of Japanese are taking up the game. But there's a problem for all those golfers in that heavily populated country. There aren't many courses and many are far from the cities. So, the average Japanese golfer can better afford and access these driving ranges to work on their stance, their grip and swing. As a result, many of Japan's golfers are "driving range golfers" only. On the driving range, they look like fine golfers. But they never take their game onto an actual course. And if you've even been on the driving range - you know it's really nothing like being on the course where you encounter sand traps, water hazards and trees. On the driving range, golf is a lot easier.

The words of Jesus in this bible reading today challenge us all to take the game off the driving range and onto the course of life. When it comes to your faith and following Jesus are you on the driving range or the course of daily life?

This fall I hope you'll make the step to prioritize your life to put your faith in Jesus Christ out on the course of life. Come here and get recharged and redirected each week. We'll help you to integrate faith into daily living so that you'll be eager to get off the driving range and onto a faithful course of life.

Tony Campolo is a pastor, college professor and national speaker who continually urges

people to take deny self, take up the cross and move off the driving range. Campolo was the person who inspired me to travel to Haiti the first time some years back. He regularly takes students down to Haiti to work in schools and medical clinics. On one particular trip, he took Charlie, a young college student to a rural Haitian town. There disease and malnutrition are devastating children by the hundreds. Charlie was deeply moved. I was too, by the incredibly harsh life Haitians endure. The massive suffering and the unending misery prompted Charlie to tell Campolo "I'm going to come back here and be a missionary doctor."

Some years later Campolo caught up with Charlie and had a chance to learn about how his life was playing out. Charlie did become a doctor and he was an active participant in a church. But he wasn't living in Haiti. Instead Charlie is doing cosmetic surgery, and as Campolo puts it, "It's not the kind that makes any sense but rather the kind that caters to the appetites of a sexist culture."



Campolo said, "I looked at Charlie and said emphatically, I have one thing to say to you ... you may go to church, believe Jesus is the savior, give 10% of your income and lead a moral life. But you're a sell out Charlie. God called you to spend your life on something significant Charlie, and you're wasting it. You're wasting it." Perhaps Campolo would consider Charlie stuck on the driving

range.

"If any want to follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." These are words of rescue for all of us who have too many priorities – or have yet to move off the driving range.

This fall, I hope you'll rest your life, remembering the claim God has made on you -- to love you and keep you forever. Then take these words of rescue from Jesus deny self, take up the cross and follow.



Let's pray:

God, thank you for these words of rescue from Jesus. We admit that we don't follow you consistently or with much commitment. We get busy with so many things -- that we don't even take time to pray to you, to read your Word, to think much about you or worship you. So hearing words that you expect us to deny ourselves and follow - goes against the tendencies we have to follow our own pursuits and priorities. When we do this we feel guilty

So this morning God, give us a fresh start. Give us the desire and the resolve to re-prioritize - because we want to follow more faithfully - and we know it will be better for us, too. Give

us the courage to stand up to others who might divert us and to those inner voices and selfish feelings that tell us we don't really have to make you a priority.

Then thank you God, for the reminder this church announces, that in expecting us to deny ourselves and re-prioritize our lives -- we hear again that you make us thee priority of your love and mercy. May that Good News give us the passion to make following you in our daily lives the priority, too. Amen.