

22A 2020 SML  
MT 16:21-27

All of us either have, or know someone who has favorite sayings. My grandfather used to say, time and again, “And this too shall pass . . .” Usually in times of adversity, in times of tragedy, “And this too shall pass . . .” That with God’s grace, this, whatever this was at the time, would pass.

My mother used to say things time and again. “People will never cease to amaze you” was a favorite of hers. And one of hers that was a favorite of mine, was, “Dan, they nailed Christ to the cross. What makes you think you are going to do any better?”

My father had a number of favorite sayings, none of which I could repeat from the pulpit!

Our Blessed Lord was known for His favorite sayings. He had seven “famous last words” which He uttered from the cross, and He had many favorite sayings during his years of ministry, and they were favorites because they were radical. Scripture scholars agree that if there’s something in the Gospel that Jesus says and it’s radical, you can bet the Sunday collection He said it.

No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

If your hand, if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.

If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

There is a radical saying in today's gospel that goes something like this. "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up His cross and follow me." That's pretty radical. And to do that, to come after Jesus, to deny yourself, to take up your cross and to follow Him, at the very least, you will need to know him, not just know about Him, but to know Him.

My experience is that the Church is made up more and more of people trying to be good but they do not know God. To clarify, it is extremely important to be good. We will be judged by what we do. We will be judged by how well we kept the commandments. Jesus said, "He who loves me will keep my commandments." Today's gospel says, "He will repay all according to his conduct." Matthew 25 says that we will be judged on whether or not we performed the corporal works of mercy: whether or not we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked. But even an atheist can be good, but an atheist's motivation to be good and my motivation to be

good are different. I am good for no other reason than to give greater glory to God, and I give greater glory to God because I know Him.

Many in the Church do not know God. They are sacramentalized. They are baptized, they are confirmed, but they haven't delved deeply into knowing God. They haven't read the Gospel in a way to respond to the Gospel.

There's a way to test whether or not you know God. It's part of David's Psalm 23:4. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me." And what is the valley of the shadow of death, but taking up your cross in today's gospel.

David said, "Even though I walk through the valley of darkness." That's a real place, that's a real cross and I've walked that valley, and carried that cross more than once. Depression, the death of my nephew, the death of one of my closest friends to Lou Gehrig's Disease. That's a real place and none of those times did I ever think God was saying, "Dan, this really isn't that bad," or did I think God would magically cure my depression, or resuscitate my nephew or cure my friend, although Lord knows I prayed that way. Others are in the valley of the shadow of death in their falling apart marriage,

in addictions they're trying to break, with being out of work for as long as they've been out of work. No, it's bad. It's the valley of the shadow of death and it's bad.

Knowing God says even though I walk this valley, I fear no evil. Why? For you are with me. When trial comes, whether it's death, or unemployment or reaching for a bottle or logging onto the internet for all the wrong reasons, I know that You are with me. And all our goodness, which by all means is important, won't help you one iota when you walk into the valley of the shadow of death. And it's when, not if, as so many of us by this time in our lives realize.

If you would come after me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. That does not feel good. Deny yourself means take yourself out of the equation. St. Paul had it right. How did he describe himself over and again? I, Paul, a slave for Jesus Christ. That's denial. Not what I want, what you want, Lord. Jesus' prayer in the garden. Not my will, but yours be done. That's denial.

Deny yourself. Take yourself out of the equation.

Take up your cross. We covered that.

The only thing that can help me is to know that I am not alone. That God is with me, that Jesus is with me. It's the

whole image of the good shepherd. The thief is there to steal, to kill and to destroy. I am the good shepherd and I came to lay down my life for my sheep. Hirelings leave at the first sign of the wolf. The good shepherd stays and defends. The good shepherd is with you as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, so you have nothing, nothing to fear. That when bad things come your way, you have nothing to fear. Nothing, because I am right there with you. My sheep hear me. They know my voice. They know me. They know me. Do we know Jesus? That's the question. That's the challenge. Do we just hear the words or do we know the reality of the Lord.

How do we know the Lord? Doesn't come by just reading books. Comes with building a friendship with the Lord the same way you build a relationship, a friendship with someone else. You talk to Him. You listen to Him. What many of us do to attempt a relationship with Jesus Christ would never work with anyone else. If our relationship with the Lord never goes beyond asking for things, well . . .

I have a friend I've known since we were in the seminary. I only hear from him now when he needs me to cover a Mass for him. Do we only call on the Lord when we need him to cover a Mass for us?

Jesus wants us to ask. Jesus says, “Knock, seek, ask.” Because, He’s knocking. He’s knocking while you in the valley of death. In the valley of death, He’s knocking in our:

- ✓ Fear
- ✓ Frustration
- ✓ Emptiness
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Despair
- ✓ Pessimism
- ✓ or in the faint suspicion that there just might be something to all this talk about Eternal Life, His Beauty and His Hope.

He’s knocking in our:

- ✓ Satiety after sin
- ✓ Self disgust
- ✓ Discontent with life
- ✓ Disappointment
- ✓ Suffering.

But if that’s all there is, what’s that? In the scripture passage of Jesus with the Roman centurion, the centurion asks Jesus to heal his son. And Jesus said, “Unless you people see signs and wonders you will not believe.” In other words, if this man’s son were never sick, he would never have

come to see me. Jesus would rather give the gift of friendship with Him, knowing Him, and asking what is it Lord that you want from me? There's a question to ask if you want to know Jesus, and we never ask that question.

You want to know Jesus? Spend time with him. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Quietest hour of my day. If you need a little help to know Jesus, (not so much know about Jesus, but to know Jesus), keep your eyes and ears open regarding our small group ministry called Christ Life that will start this fall.

God will never leave you. I will not leave you orphans. That's a promise from God. So why would you not deny yourself (take yourself out of the equation), take up your cross (because crosses will come our way sooner or later; there will never not be conflict) and follow Him? The alternative to this last part begs yet another question from Peter. Lord if we don't follow you, where we going to go? You have the words of everlasting life!