

Five Invitations from Jesus: Deny Yourself Sunday, 6/2/19

1 We're wrapping up today our study of the invitations of Jesus. Jesus was a master of giving invitations that were personal and life-changing. But each invitation from Jesus implies a question: "How will you respond?" Jesus has invited us to come and see what he's all about, to rest in his presence and Spirit, to follow him, and to go fishing. Today's invitation is perhaps the hardest one of all, as Jesus invites us to deny ourselves. There's no sugar coating this one. Jesus isn't content to be our co-pilot, he wants the whole enchilada. Jesus is knocking at your heart's door this morning and gently, lovingly, but firmly laying it all out there: If you really want to live, then deny yourself.

2 There are few people in this congregation who can compete with me for the title of "Most Sports Illiterate." Sure, I know that the Twins are a baseball team and the Vikings play football, but don't ask me what a safety or a screenplay is. So it's with some trepidation and humility that I offer to you this morning a football illustration.

Gayle Sayers was a first round NFL draft pick in 1965 who played his entire career as a running back with the Chicago Bears. Some of you sports nuts probably know his career stats: 4,956 total rushing yards and 48 touchdowns, selected for the Pro Bowl four times, three of those Pro Bowls as Most Valuable Player, and the NFL Rookie of The Year in 1965. Gayle Sayers has an impressive record of accomplishments that led to his induction in the NFL Hall of Fame. But for all that, it was his friendship with Brian Piccolo that gave #40 his greatest notoriety, a friendship that crossed a racial divide at a time of deep racial unrest in this country and inspired the movie "Brian's Song." Gayle Sayers also coined the phrase, "I am Third" to describe his devotion first to Christ, second to others, and third to himself.

If that sounds familiar, it may be because we hear it from Jesus all the time. It was there in our Gospel readings this morning, when Jesus insisted on being in the drivers' seat, and again later when he told us to offer a cup of cool water to someone who's thirsty. "I am third" is actually a great summary of the great commandments, where Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. Do this, and you will live." I am third is a pretty good summary of what Jesus had in mind by his invitation to us to deny ourselves and follow him.

3 I know a United Methodist pastor who used to hand out “Gumby Awards” to his congregation. Do you remember Gumby and his side-kick Pokey? Gumby and Pokey were all the rage during the hey-day of clay animation, or “claymation” films, films animated by recording just a few frames of film at a time and making small movements of the clay figures in between frames. Wallace and Grommet is another example of claymation. Anyway, the Gumby Awards came from the observation that Gumby and his clay friends are so flexible. They can bend and stretch in any direction without harm or complaint, and they always come out smiling in the end. So Gumby awards went to members of the congregation who showed great flexibility in facing moments that required it, for the sake of loving Jesus and serving others. I wonder if we should start giving out Gumby awards here at BUMC?

If we’re honest, we have to admit that there are times in our lives and our life together as a church when it’s very difficult to deny ourselves for the sake of loving Jesus and one another. Wherever there’s a group of people gathered together, sharing a space, sharing relationships, and sharing what gives meaning to life, you’ll find crises, differences and conflicts. So in that we’re no different than the rest of the world. What makes us unique, what makes us the church, is not that we don’t experience those conflicts over what we want- it’s how we handle them. Jesus never asked us to be unthinking, subservient robots, but Jesus did insist that if we’re going to follow him- really follow him- then we’re going to have to stretch ourselves, thinking first about the Gospel and example of Jesus, second about how we can serve others, and only then and in that context about what we want.

4 When I was in Israel in the late ‘90s, I visited the “Church of the Nativity” in Bethlehem, supposedly a church built over the location of Christ’s birth. The most interesting part of the building was this entrance, built small and low so that anyone entering has to bend over and assume a physical posture of humility in order to get in. A mosque we saw had shoe racks on the front steps- apparently, anyone entering had to remove their shoes first- a wonderful act of humility that hearkens all the way back to Moses and his encounter with God in the burning bush. I don’t think I want you all to take your shoes off before coming into the sanctuary, but I wonder if there’s something we might do as we’re entering church to remind us of Christ’s call to deny ourselves in order to serve Christ and each other. I’ve always thought the pew kneelers that are common in Catholic churches probably serve

that function. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to kneel on our concrete floor. But think about it- What we do with our bodies in worship might have some bearing on what's happening in our hearts. It's probably why we typically bow our heads and close our eyes in prayer. That's a posture of humility.

5 You may have heard about all the deaths that have taken place on the summit of Mount Everest this year. This photograph summed up so much for me about the situation, and in many respects is a potent metaphor for what Jesus was trying to teach us when he invited us to deny ourselves. What you see in the photo is a long line of stalled climbers, waiting their turn to finish their ascent to the summit, all the while enduring subzero temperatures and limited supplies of oxygen. Here's how one New York Times reporter described it:¹

Ed Dohring, a doctor from Arizona, had dreamed his whole life of reaching the top of Mount Everest. But when he summited a few days ago, he was shocked by what he saw. Climbers were pushing and shoving to take selfies. The flat part of the summit, which he estimated at about the size of two Ping-Pong tables, was packed with 15 or 20 people. To get up there, he had to wait hours in a line, chest to chest, one puffy jacket after the next, on an icy, rocky ridge with a several-thousand foot drop. He even had to step around the body of a woman who had just died. "It was scary," he said by telephone from Kathmandu, Nepal, where he was resting in a hotel room. "It was like a zoo." ... [It was a] scene reminiscent of "Lord of the Flies" — at 29,000 feet. At that altitude, there is no room for error and altruism is put to the test... "A lot of people were panicking, worrying about themselves — and nobody thinks about those who are collapsing."

That scene at the summit of Mount Everest is the antithesis of what Jesus asks of us. Instead of pushing and shoving, and stepping over bodies, Jesus wants us to do the Jesus thing. Getting to the top isn't what life is all about. If you see a fellow climber struggling, stop and share your oxygen. Think about the welfare of the group, especially those you might not even know. Forget about the selfies and look for ways you can lay down your life for Jesus.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/26/world/asia/mount-everest-deaths.html>

6 Denying ourselves is hard, but Jesus acknowledges that what he's asking of is huge, which is why he encourages us to start small. "Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty."² Even that is really no small thing. Think about it. You can only offer a cool cup of water to someone if you've put yourself where they are, which means turning off Netflix and going somewhere. You can't know if it's cool water or something else they need until you've met them and listened to them. Even simple acts of kindness require a basic intentionality in denying ourselves of our priorities and plans in order to serve someone else, someone who most likely isn't able to speak up for themselves.

Notice also Jesus says, "Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help."³ Do you believe it? "Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help." Following Jesus is less about building our resume of righteous deeds done, and more about being in righteous relationship with Jesus and others, whether we're the giver or the receiver.

7 Last week we observed Memorial Day, a day when we remembered all those who gave up their lives in the service of our country. The sacrifices we make in the life of the church are not unimportant. But as we make these small sacrifices, it's good to pause and remember that there are many who have given their very lives for what they believe in.

The thing about following Jesus is this- it's a journey. We never sit down and say, "I followed Jesus." To be following is to be moving. And so we've made some changes this year, including to our summer worship format. I imagine we'll continue to make changes in the years ahead, as long as we believe there's something worth trying to serve newcomers better in the name of Jesus. Some of those changes will be easy, but some may require flexibility and sacrifice of our own preferences for the good of others. I'm not asking you to literally lay down your life for the sake of making new disciples. But I am asking you to think about denying yourself in the choices you make each day, in what you say and do, and what you choose not to say and do. Remember that Gayle Sayers slogan: I am third. Serve God by serving others, by sacrificing your preferences and "in humility, regard others as better than yourselves." There's great joy in being third, in sharing in the same love, spirit, and mind of Christ. May we all find that joy in humble service. Amen.

² Matthew 10:44, The Message

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Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com