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9/16/2012 First Presbyterian Church of Allegan "A Christians Job Description"

Isaiah 50:4-9

The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
⁵ The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.
⁶ I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.⁷ Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.
⁸ He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!⁹ It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ."^[b]³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life^[c] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

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What does it mean to be a Christian? This week, was the Allegan County Fair. (160 years of agriculture and entertainment!) There were lots of booths from many organizations at the fair, each of them trying to get your attention. The fair had everything from a company advertising their boat shrink wrapping services to Sylvia's Place who gives hope to people suffering from domestic abuse. But there was one particular booth that caught my eye that I wanted to go to see. It was a booth that advertised a two question quiz that answered the question, "*Are you going to heaven?*"

So on Wednesday, I ran into Father Tom Toeller-Novak at the fair, (he is the priest at Good Shepherd Episcopal around the corner), and he and I decided to go together to that booth and to take their two question test. We were curious to find out if according to them if we were going to heaven. --Now the fact that Father Tom was wearing his white clerical collar and his black clerical shirt was a dead giveaway that the two of us were not their usual customers. --But we walked up to talk to the man and the woman in the booth anyway. Tom introduced himself, (since his collar had done a lot of introducing already) and then he and I took a look at their test.

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The first question on their test is, "Do you believe that you will go to heaven when you die?" The answers to check off included, "Yes", "No", "I hope so" and "I'm not sure". The second question asks why do you believe your answer to the first question?" The answers that you can check off are: "I've tried to Keep the 10 Commandments." "I go to church", "I believe in God." "I'm basically a good person." "I've done the best I could", "I've never hurt anyone." And a blank line for "Other". After Tom and I answered their two questions and passed their test; I introduced myself as the Pastor of *First Presbyterian Church of Allegan* and the four of us got into a very good conversation about evangelism and then we even had a prayer of encouragement for each other together right there at the fair booth. It was a good visit.

---Now you need to know that this booth's goal really isn't to administer this test and to get people to read this accompanying black and white tract from 1981. The goal of the Christians in that booth is to somehow get a conversational opening to talk to people about their spiritual lives and to encourage them to follow Jesus Christ. --And in order to accomplish that, they use some tracts and other literature as conversational tools. --But the literature itself is some really fascinating stuff. In this two questions tract, after it asks you these two questions, and

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then after guiding the reader through praying the sinners prayer, in the back of the tract, the brand new believer is encouraged to do five things to grow as a Christian: They are told to 1) pray every day, to 2) read the Bible every day, to 3) find a Bible believing church, 4) to find some Christian friends and get baptized, and 5) then to tell other people about their new relationship with God.

---When you read this tract, becoming a Christian seems pretty simple, straightforward and very easy to do. In fact, this is one of the things that tracts and some of the literature get great criticism for. In their zeal to make converts, evangelists and tract writers have been criticized for settling for someone mumbling the sinners prayer, (even if they have no idea what it means) or have any intention of living their lives for Jesus Christ. The critique is that after a person follows those instructions in the tract, the evangelists can count them as a “convert” and simply add another hash mark to their tally; without even knowing if the person really understands what they are saying or committing themselves to.

Now, the sinners prayer, while a very good tool, has in some ways become almost like a magic spell for making Christians. It is almost as if some people have gotten the idea that if you say these words just once and mean them with all of your heart that you will be insta-magically saved and

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will be a Christian forever. --That somehow saying these magic words would invite Jesus into your heart and that from then on you would be a Christian. This was the impression that I got anyway, back when I was younger.

When I was a little girl, growing up in a North American Baptist Church and in a Fundamentalist Christian School, we were taught that praying the sinners prayer was the **only way** to be saved and to go to heaven. You needed to admit that you were a sinner and you needed to invite Jesus to come into your heart in order to be saved. Since I was very young, and a typical concrete thinker at that developmental stage, I imagined that inviting Jesus into your heart was a physical thing. After praying the sinners prayer, I imagined that an invisible Jesus, something that I imagined to be like a little plastic but invisible action figure, would magically soak its way through my skin and bones and would sit comfortably right there in the muscles of my heart, breathing my blood like a fish or something. --And there, from his position fixed firmly in my heart, Jesus would help me to make the right decisions in my life. --Accepting "Jesus into your heart" was just something that everybody I knew had done. It was like this accepting Jesus into your heart was a vaccination against evil or something. But I knew lots of people who had prayed that

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prayer and “had accepted Jesus into their heart” who were not at all serious about their Christianity and had no intention of living their lives for Christ. The prayer that they had prayed had simply given them a sense of security for their eternal lives, and with that fire insurance prayer all taken care of, they simply went on living for themselves.

Now for some people, praying the sinners prayer and following these five steps may be enough to start them on the road to build up their lifelong faith; but these five steps are not at all what Jesus instructs the disciples to do here in our scripture in Mark 8. In fact, those five steps in that tract are a whole lot easier than what is called for here! If being a follower of Jesus just meant praying, reading the scriptures, being baptized and going to church and telling others, you would have thought that Jesus would probably just have listed those things at this point. But instead, what Jesus talks about in Mark 8 is a whole lot bigger than that.

Here in Mark 8, Jesus lays it all out in extremely clear language what it really means to be a Christian. It means you completely give up selfishly living your life for yourself, and that every day you give your life over to following Jesus Christ! --Jesus isn’t asking you to just pray a sinners prayer and then asking you for just for a half hour of bible study and prayer

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every day, going to church on Sundays, getting baptized one Sunday morning and writing “Christian” on your religion identifier on your face book page. --All of these can be done and still leave plenty of room for being an abuser, for living your life for status or money, or for simply just ignoring the leading of the Holy Spirit. Being a Christian isn’t about simply praying the sinners prayer and following a little checklist. It is MUCH more demanding and much more costly than that. Jesus says right here in Mark 8 that following Jesus means giving up your life, literally “losing your life” for the sake of Jesus Christ. Taking up the cross was not simply talking about putting up with some mild inconveniences, “taking up your cross” was a euphemism for putting literally your very life on the line for Christ.

In today’s world, the image of a cross is so common place that we don’t view it as unusual anymore. You see the image of Cross on the tops of churches and on the tops of steeples. Some people put it on their business logos, and others (including me) wear cross jewelry where the cross is made of silver or gold and it is often decorated with pretty filigree or gemstones. When we see the image of a cross today, it hardly registers as unusual, and the first century meaning f the cross is so far from our experience that we almost never think of it anymore.

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You see, in the first century, the cross was an instrument of torture and death. It was the favorite death sentence of the Roman government and it was typically used for slaves or for people that the Roman government stripped of their status and then gave the death of a slave. While most artwork depicts crucifixion victims with a loin cloth, in fact victims were stripped naked in order to further embarrass and humiliate them. Historians have documented that the Roman soldiers used various methods of crucifixion in order to amuse themselves. Sometimes they would tie victims, and other times, they would nail them. Frequently the victims were whipped beforehand and their legs broken while on the cross to increase their pain and quicken the death when the soldiers got bored. Sometimes the soldiers would not use a cross piece but nail the person's hands above the head, or fasten the victim upside down or in an X or Y shape. A foot rest on the vertical support would increase the time that the victim lived and thus increase the length of the painful torture before death.

--The length of time that the torture of crucifixion lasted before the person died could be from several hours to several days. It was a very slow, excruciatingly painful, completely humiliating death, in which the ability to continue to breathe and to keep conscious despite the intense suffering were indicators of how long you would live.

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The closest modern equivalent that we have today to a first century cross, with all of its terrible implications of torture and death would probably be a water board. In waterboarding, a victim is immobilized on their back on a wooden board with their feet inclined. Their faces are then covered with a thin piece of cloth. Water is then poured onto their face over their nose and mouth, causing them to gag, choke and creating the sensation of drowning. --CIA officers who have subjected themselves to this torture technique last an average of 14 seconds before capitulating. With waterboarding, the human brain and the body are convinced that they are being executed, and the victim will typically confess to anything in order to stop it.

While the waterboard torture doesn't actually kill a person, being crucified WAS a suffocating torture that resulted in actual public death. The phrase "take up your cross", in the first century was used to describe the victim being forced to carry the cross beam to the execution site, would be equivalent to the phrase today, "dead man walking" that is said of felons as they make their way down the corridor to the electric chair.

So what does all of this mean for us today? The job description of a Christian is not as easy and as simple as some of the tracts would have a person to believe. To follow Jesus, to act out of the motivation of love in

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every aspect of our lives is a completely different way of life than a selfish

one in which a person can only give lip service and Sunday service to

Jesus. The life a Christian is a life where you balance love of others with

love of yourself. It is a life where your love for God is your motivation and

your purpose for your existence. It is a life that is lived for the benefit of

your spirit, so that in EVERYTHING that you do, you show that being a

Christian is not a life of ease and looking out for your own profits and

yourself; it is a life of caring for others in community as your brothers and

sisters in all that you do. May we lose our lives for the sake of such love.

Amen.