



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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'For My Sake': Ash Wednesday message

Welcome to the 40-day season of spiritual preparation for observing our Lord's passion and resurrection.

I invite you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to observe a holy Lent:

- by self-examination and repentance;
- by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and
- by reading and meditating on God's holy word.

The following words of Jesus are among the most recognized and most troubling in the gospels: "Then Jesus said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life **for my sake** will save it'" (Luke 9:23-24).

Most of us are uncomfortable with the notion of suffering and denial. We work overtime at being strong, independent, self-assured. Yet, these words of Jesus make it clear that suffering and self-denial are part of Christ's ministry and part of the discipleship of those who follow Jesus.

Historically, Lent has been a season of the church year when followers of Christ deny or give up something in their daily lives as a symbolic way to share in Christ's passion. These words of Jesus are the basis for this practice. I can remember as a youth being encouraged to give up candy or other such indulgences during Lent. Perhaps you had similar experiences, or continue this discipline of self-denial as a part of your Lenten journey. It can be an effective way of reminding us of the path of Christian discipleship.

Throughout his delightful devotional book *The Balancing Act*, Bishop Robert Schnase reminds us not to neglect the interior life and to re-learn the unforced rhythms of life that nurture our abilities to notice God, find courage, embrace change, let go, and reach out. A discipline of self-denial can help us focus on those elements that bring balance, grace, and joy to our lives and ministries.

But the key to understanding Jesus' teaching on denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily is in the often overlooked phrase, "for my sake." Some of us too quickly and erroneously believe any act of denial or any suffering we experience is for Jesus' sake. But we do not suffer cancer, or an unhappy marriage, or go bankrupt for Jesus' sake. Nor do we give up eating candy for 40 days for Jesus' sake.



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Jesus has another kind of denial or suffering in mind. Jesus is calling us to live as he did. Jesus is calling us to address the problems and issues people face—disease, poverty, prejudice, hunger, loneliness, hatred, fear, sin—with a generosity, compassion, and love that the world will likely consider strange, yet wonderful.

Bishop Schnase puts it this way: “Many of our prayers ask God to change our hearts. Sometimes we courageously follow God’s calling into circumstances that change our minds. We have prayers to change our spirits... Maybe we also need a prayer that says, ‘Lord, change the way I look at people’” (page 129). And I would add: Perhaps we need to pray for moving from truly seeing our neighbors to acting to save our neighbors.

- To lose your life for Jesus’ sake is to live out of God’s abundance, when the world says hoard your resources.
- To lose your life for Jesus’ sake is to witness for peace, when the world is mad with war.
- To lose your life for Jesus’ sake is to seek justice, when the world says look out for yourself.
- To lose your life for Jesus’ sake is to die to one’s selfishness, so that others may have abundant life.

To live and witness as Christ did is to take up these crosses for his sake.

I thank God that the Minnesota Conference has so many congregations and so many individual Jesus followers who practice self-denial and living for others—not just during the 40 days of Lent, but every day. Truly, our missional vitality is found in losing our life for Jesus’ sake.

As you move ever deeper into your Lenten journey, I invite you to prayerfully seek ways to bring abundant life to others. I invite you to lose your life for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of Jesus’ redemptive mission. This is the pathway to a life that is whole, complete, joyful, and saved.

I pray for you a rich and blessed Lenten journey.

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