

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I have a friend who for years has audited classes at the University of Pennsylvania. When you audit a class, you pay to go sit in the classroom, listen to the lecture, but you are not required to fulfill any requirements. You don't have to study. You don't have to take any tests. You get the information but you don't have the burden of actually passing the class.

Forgive me, but it seems that's the attitude of many who come to church. They audit the sermon. Listen to the music. Never really participate. They are content to simply audit the class. They don't want to be expected to do any homework. They don't want to pass any tests that God sends their way to check their understanding. These church-goers will pay the money to take the class but they don't want to have to meet any requirements.

As long as my friend audits her classes at Penn, she will have no credit on her transcript. There will be no graduation ceremony and nobody will ever hand her a degree. As long as you audit your Christian life, there will be no passing grades, there will be no divine recognition, and there will be no experience of your call to discipleship.

This message is addressed to any who might be auditing the class that I'll call, "Christian Faith". Today's Gospel text follows immediately after Peter's great profession of faith, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus responds, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it..."

Jesus then starts to explain to his disciples what it means to be the Christ, that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly...and be killed and on the third day be raised."

Peter must really have been full of himself after the earlier dialogue because Matthew tells us he "took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, 'God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.'" Now, in fairness to Peter, we have to say he really loved the Lord. He couldn't imagine that he would suffer and die.

As well-meaning as he was, Peter stirred up one of the most angry outbursts we hear in all the Gospels from Jesus, "Get behind me, Satan! (He calls Peter a devil!) You are an obstacle to me (the very one to whom Jesus, just moments before, entrusted his church). You are thinking not as God does, but as humans do."

Then Jesus spoke words to his disciples that need to be heard by everyone who thinks following Jesus is a course that can be audited, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?"

Now Jesus is not suggesting that putting up with our aches and pains or a misbehaving child or a surly boss is the cross he has in mind. Nor is he referring to wearing a piece of fine jewelry fashioned into a cross. As one commentator stated, “Really the cross does not belong on the Christian; the Christian belongs on the cross.”

No, Jesus is saying that you are willing to live the Christ-life regardless of the costs. Those costs might include financial sacrifice, rejection by family or friends, or loss of a job rather than compromise your Christian beliefs or morals. It means that you’ve made a commitment to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and you are determined to keep that commitment, so help you God.

However, we are becoming a generation that finds making a commitment difficult. Many are reluctant to make serious commitments—whether to their marriage, their family, their employer or their employees, and yes, their church too.

A historian once explained the loyalty of the Japanese people to their Emperor during World War II, “We did not worship our Emperor, we loved him completely. By way of example, he told of the Japanese commander who called for volunteers to cut the barbed wire entanglements which were posing an obstacle to advancement of the Japanese army. The commander said, “You will never come back, nor can you carry a gun. You will take your place and cut one or two wires and then fall dead. Another will take your place and cut one or two wires more. But you will know that upon your dead body the armies of your Emperor will march to victory.” Literally thousands volunteered for these sure death parties. The historian added, “If you Christians loved your God as we Japanese loved our Emperor, you would have long ago taken the world for Him.” Who can deny the truth of that statement? With that kind of commitment, any objective is attainable.

Unfortunately, we are seeing that same level of commitment among these terrorists we now know as Isis in Syria and Iraq. They are gaining disciples from all over the world and they are being funded with hundreds of millions of dollars to carry out evil and death on any and all who oppose them.

Where is that kind of radical discipleship in the Christian world? We know that it is committed people who make a difference in our world—for good or ill. You don’t have to be the most brilliant or the most talented persons to serve Christ. You don’t have to be in a high profile position. You simply have to love Christ enough to step forward to serve.

Why, you might ask, should you make that life-changing commitment in the first place? It is because God has made that kind of commitment to us. We love because He first loved us. He took up the Cross, suffered the insufferable, died a cruel, ungodly death, and came back asking us to do as He has done for us.

Christian faith is really not for those who only want to audit the course. The Father wants to do great things through us and He can do great things through us only if we are willing to commit our all to Him.

Listen to what Paul tells us today. You can't audit this. You have to commit to it: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Please, for the love of God, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, hear the call to discipleship that we are proclaiming throughout our parish. Allow yourselves to be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Commit yourselves to serve the Lord in the Church he built on the Rock of Peter to stand against the forces of evil. This is the New Evangelization to which Pope (now Saint) John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis I have called us. It has to begin with the Re-Evangelization of us—the Catholic Faithful.

What it comes down to is do we love our God more than those Japanese soldiers in World War II loved their Emperor? Can't we give ourselves in discipleship to Jesus Christ with greater fervor than the terrorists of Isis give themselves to their despicable evil?

The Prophet, Jeremiah, wore himself out calling God's People out of their complacency and self-satisfaction. He warned them that they were doomed if they did not re-commit themselves to the God of their salvation. He was mocked, beaten, imprisoned, and eventually, killed for daring to suggest that their very survival depended on turning back to God with their whole heart. And, of course, Jeremiah's prophecy came to be, the people of God became the slaves of Babylon, which, need I remind you, is present-day Iraq.

Thousands of years have passed since the time of Jeremiah. But, the issue remains the same. Will our complacency and self-sufficiency deprive us of truly committing ourselves to the God of our salvation, thereby assuring our doom? You say, "It will never happen. We are the strongest people on earth?" Of course, at the time of Jeremiah, so too was Israel!