

August 28 A 2011

Arne was a member of Siloa Lutheran Church, Ontonagon, Michigan.

He was a quiet man of Scandinavian background.

Arne was a man of faith.

He was active at Siloa.

He attended worship regularly.

He was involved in a Bible Study.

He was active on property projects.

He gave consistently.

The day came when Arne died.

In his will, he gave \$50,000 to Fortune Lake Lutheran Bible Camp.

Can you believe it?

When word got around about Arne's generous gift, the most common response was: It fits.

It fits; that's the kind of guy Arne was.

It fits; that's the kind of faith Arne had.

It fits; his gift was entire consistent with how he lived.

That's what we want for ourselves.

We want a consistency in our lives from birth to death, a consistency based on faith.

We want a strong faith evident in how we live.

We want our words and our actions to be consistent with our faith.

We want a strong faith evident in how we die.

We want our trust in the Lord to give us peace and hope in our dying process.

We even want a strong faith evident in our estate stuff, so that even after we're gone, our family and friends can see what was important to us, what truths we tried to live by, what values we held dear.

Some years ago, there was a smallpox epidemic in eastern Nigeria.

Every person who came to the mission hospital was examined carefully to see if they had smallpox symptoms.

This was to protect everyone else in the hospital.

In spite of this precaution, a woman who had been admitted to give birth was discovered to have this dreaded disease.

She would need to be cared for in isolation.
The doctor asked for a volunteer from among the midwives.
At first, there was only silence.
But then, a woman named Matilda agreed to serve.
She had a good heart, a Christian heart.
Matilda was from a small town.
She was a Lutheran.
The baby was born soon after, unaffected by the disease.
Unfortunately, the mother's health worsened and she died.

Some of the Christians at the hospital thought, since Matilda had put aside her fears to care for the mother and the baby, God would protect her from the smallpox.
But soon the spots appeared and Matilda developed a full-blown case of the disease.
For a week, her life hung in the balance.
Then, to the immense relief of all, she recovered.

We think of stories like Matilda's when we hear these words of Jesus:
"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
Matilda's loving self-sacrifice appears to be a Christ-following act.
The fact that she survived the smallpox does not diminish her service.
This was clearly an act of self-denial.

In the mainstream of American culture, actions based on a theology of self-denial are not popular.
Our culture teaches: "Product X may cost a little more, but you're worth it."
Self-denial, many people think, is mainly for Mother Teresa types.
But the Matildas of the world and the Arnes of the world tell us something different.
We follow Jesus.

Christ calls you to self-denial.
Christ invites you to walk the godly life, just as he walked.
Self-denial as Jesus encouraged is not really a matter of deliberate taking big risks.
Self-denial is not really about avoiding personal pleasures.

Self-denial fundamentally is about the prior commitments of our lives.
When a person declares loyalty to Christ, that person accepts certain principles of ethical behavior.

As we make our myriad of ethical choices, self-denial means making the choices which are most in line with our Christian commitments.

Even when it is personally inconvenient or costly to do so.

It means holding fast to the teachings of Jesus even when we are under fire.

At the age of 12, Jesus was separated from his parents and stayed behind in the temple talking with the elders.

When his parents found him, he said, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

Jesus was saying that he had a prior commitment in his life: his Father's business. In today's Gospel story, we learn that his Father's business includes his sacrifice on the cross.

The disciples disagreed.

But Jesus insisted.

Jesus lived out his prior commitment to his Father's business.

That was true for his life.

That was true for his death.

That was even true for the ramifications after his death.

The cross fits with his commitments.

Prior commitments help us when we are faced with hard choices.

Consider the case of a woman who is having a hard time financially.

At work, she sees a golden opportunity to steal some money and she could get away with it.

She does not do it, because of her prior commitment to the Christ-like values of honesty and integrity.

Or consider a man whose wife has an incurable disease.

She is helpless, and at times the man feels overwhelmed by her dependency on him.

One friend suggests that this man would be justified in walking out of the marriage.

This man does not do it, because of his faithfulness to a prior commitment to love his wife in sickness and in health.

Or consider Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporters marching for civil rights.

They are physically attacked by white racists.

But King and the others do not retaliate; they do not strike back.

Rather, they kneel and pray.

They are being faithful to their prior commitment that violent resistance is as wrong as the violence directed at them.

Denying yourself means, when faced with a choice of ways, your prior commitment to be a follower of Jesus Christ dictates that you serve others and not yourself.

Your model is Jesus.

How did Jesus say it?

“If you want to become my follower, deny yourself and take up your 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 find it.”

So go about your business, people.

Be about caring for and serving others.

It fits who you are as a person.

It fits with who you follow as Lord.

Amen.