

- *[T]ake up your cross and follow me.* As Christians we are called by Jesus Himself to be His followers or students. Church people call it Discipleship.
 - But, if you grew up in church, or have been around it for any amount of time well, you can begin to question that that means - faith can seem a trip without any direction no mile markers, no end in sight.
 - Coming to church maybe it feels like there are all these things you're asked to do. In my experience, even growing up, I was aware of how annoying and confusing it can be.
 - It seemed like we were being nagged all the time.
 - We need volunteers to lector, to serve
 - We need people to set up for the Christmas pageant
 - We want can goods for the food drive
 - There were stern reminders about going to Confession, fasting before Mass, and Holy Days of Obligation.
 - And of course the biggest ask of all was always for whatever fundraiser the parish happened to be currently hosting. And there was always at least one fundraiser running.
 - At yet, at another level, an intellectual level, a spiritual level, at the level of people's minds and heart we really weren't being asked for anything.
 - Not anything that mattered or added value to our lives.
 - A trip without any direction, No mile markers, no end in sight.

- Discipleship is about following Jesus Christ.
 - It's a journey. And every journey is made up of steps.
 - And that's what this series is all about: The simple steps of discipleship. Because, it turns out, successful discipleship all comes down to simple steps.
 - They're not *easy* but they are entirely *simple*.
 - Over the past few years we have talked about specific STEPS, each of which are, in fact, life style choices, choices that we think are essential to growing and strengthening our faith.
 - We've talked about faith as a relationship with Jesus, a relationship in which He can guide us, support us, comfort us but also a relationship in which he can change us and transform us.

- These STEPS are about building that relationship, both practically and spiritually.
 - So over the next few weeks we're going look at them.
 - Now before I lay them out, let me clarify that these are NOT obligations to mark off a check list.
 - Do you know that the word *obligation* does not appear even once in the New Testament?

- Jesus never talked about obligations. *But* he talked about steps all the time.
 - His favorite invitation to potential disciples, simply: *Follow me.*
 - When it comes to faith there is a constant temptation to look at spiritual practices as obligations, requirements to be fulfilled or hoops we have to jump through.
 - The steps we are talking about are not obligations.
 - As soon as you look at these steps as obligations you have to do to be a good Christian or a “practicing Catholic” you weaken their potential effectiveness.
 - The steps lose their ability to change and transform you. The point is not to get you to do more stuff. None of us need more stuff to do.
 - The steps we’re talking about are aimed toward simplifying not complicating your life.
 - Neither is the point of this series to take every single step all at once. They are called STEPS because they are meant to be taken one at a time as God calls you to take them.
 - We just want to make you aware of these steps and encourage you to take the next step that is the right next STEP for you.

- STEPS is an acronym: *You knew that was coming!*

S is service in a ministry and or missions.

- One of the descriptions used most often in the Scriptures for those who were closest to God is *servant of the Lord*.
- Jesus himself said *the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve*.
- To grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ it is vitally important that we learn to serve, generously and freely. Christ-like servants serve for the benefit of others.
- In our hearts, I think, that's the kind of person we really want to be, we want to be someone who makes a difference in the lives of others.
- It's what St. James is talking about in our second reading, the service to others that demonstrates to me and to others the faith I have in God.

T is about tithing and giving.

- Perhaps nothing grows one's faith and trust in God as much as giving. Money brings security and freedom. And giving it away is always a risk.
- Jesus said that our money and possession represent the greatest competitor God has for our hearts.
- It is the greatest obstacle to putting our faith and trust in God. That's why Jesus talked about it all the time.
- Our money and possessions also give us a huge opportunity to put our faith into action, to accomplish great good.
- God is generous. God is a giver and we can use our money to become more like him.

E is engage which is about small groups, our connect groups for example.

- Faith is personal, not private.
- It needs to be lived out in a community of people. We all need friends in faith who strengthen and support us in our relationship with Christ.
- We need people around us who can encourage us. Last week I spoke about connect groups and we've got sign-ups again this week, an opportunity, not an obligation, to get and to give support in faith.

P Is the practice of prayer and the sacraments.

- To grow as a follower of Christ we need to talk to him. We need to learn to hear his voice, to recognize it.
- That happens in a daily quiet time where we're talking to God and allowing God to talk to us.
- To that daily quiet time we add our weekly worship at church in which we celebrate the Eucharist.
- This time is going to be far richer and rewarding, its going to be the nourishment and encouragement its meant to be if is matched with daily quiet time.
- In turn, the Eucharist can be the source and summit of a life of prayer.

- S is, lastly, for sharing our faith.
- As a Church we steward the most incredible and important message there is: *God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son.*
 - God wants to include us in the life of his kingdom.
 - And we don't buy it and we can't earn it, we can't work our way to it, we'll never deserve it. There is only one thing we can do with it...share it.
 - In fact, our faith actually grows as we share this message with others.
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- In today's gospel reading Jesus makes a remarkable challenge that is also an amazing promise He says: *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 and that of the gospel will save it.* (Mt. 8.35)
 - Discipleship is simply following the Lord, step by step, again, simple but not easy. But it's not impossible, either.
 - It's not about perfection but about proximity to the Lord, not about sainthood but about striving, even haltingly towards sanctity,
 - Its following the Lord step by step...A little bit more today than yesterday...A little bit more tomorrow than today
 - And in the process our life is simply more successful. The steps are steps to life change.