

“Discovering Your Mission”

Apparently after a summer of debauchery and brushes with the law, pop star Justin Bieber is making amends. If you're not familiar with this guy, he is a 20 year old singer and songwriter who Forbes magazine named in 2012, the third most powerful celebrity in the world due in part to his 40 million followers on *Twitter*. Still today, he is a well-know figure in pop culture. But things haven't gone that great for the singer this year. He was arrested for DUI in Miami. He was charged with vandalizing his former neighbor's home. He and his girlfriend broke up for like the fourth or fifth time. And to top it all off, he is currently facing possible extradition to Argentina to face questions over an assault.

So in an effort to get himself back on what he calls “the Christian straight- and narrow,” the singer is in a self-imposed isolation distancing himself from his usual Hollywood pursuits. According to one website, “Justin has exiled himself from friends, alcohol, weed and everything else that doesn't involve the good Lord.”¹ It goes on to say that he will stay wherever it is that he is staying for two weeks.

Two weeks in exile from everything that doesn't involve the good Lord. Hmmm. Now of course I don't know this man so what I say concerning his situation is only based on what I've read. But is this really what following Jesus is all about? Certainly if repentance is involved, that is part of it. But discipleship is not some sort of formula where exile from certain people and certain products for a set period of time equates to being more of a Christian. Now I know I'm picking on this particular man and I admit I don't know the whole situation but it just rubbed me the wrong way. I understand that people's intentions with exercises like this are generally good but this is not good theology. In fact when a celebrity or anyone for that matter endorses such an exercise in

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2839859/Justin-Bieber-friends-alcohol-weed-two-weeks-Jesus-camp-Palm-Springs.html#ixzz3JXkP9qYT>

the name of our crucified and risen Savior, people can be misled. Christ is calling us all not to retreat from the world but to discover our mission in the world. But whatever this is all about for Mr. Bieber, it seems he is searching or trying to discover something.

What about you?

As a Christian, are you still searching for what you think God really wants you to do in this life? I know that many of us struggle knowing there is more to life than what we perceive as the boring day in and day out and think that if God would give us a hint or even a direct quote, we could get on with doing what he wants. Well, guess what? If that describes you, I have good news. You can stop searching because our relationship to God is not determined by what we do to earn His grace but by our faith in the perfect and complete work of Jesus Christ. God saved us not because we deserve it or somehow got his attention or he wants something in return. No, he saved us because he loves us. God loves us. We don't have to search for that love. He proved it by dying for us. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, paid the full and complete price for our sins with his own body and blood. That's love. Now, the question that we should be asking ourselves is how are we are going to take this eternal truth and apply it in our lives and in the lives of others? In other words, it's time to ask, "what is our Christian mission?"

Paul writing to the Ephesian Christians reminds us of the importance of our missions in our epistle reading today: "Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift," he writes. "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:7; 4:11-12). As those baptized into the body of Christ, no matter where we find ourselves in life, we are Christ's disciples, the saints, and our charge is build up his body, which is the church. I'm not talking just about Hope or our particular brand of Lutheranism but the universal Church on earth. Unfortunately, we have this tendency to segment ourselves as Christians don't we? We are Lutheran Christians, but down the street gathered are the Roman Catholic Christians, the Baptist Christians, the Methodist Christians, the Eastern Orthodox Christians. Yes, within those churches there are different understandings of how this whole Christianity thing works but in the

end, we all confess that Christ is King. We all confess that Christ is the way, the truth, and life and if someone is not confessing that, they need our help. Our mission is to discover ways we can build up the body because every person in this world needs the certainty of God's love in Christ!

But we generally don't get up every day with that kind of goal do we? Unfortunately, we so much of the time as Jesus says in our Gospel reading, "Set our minds not on the things of God but on the things of man," (Matt. 16:23). We get mad when things don't work out the way we want. We think we know a better way than God's way. And the uncomfortable truth is because of our selfishness, we can actually get in the way of the mission of the Gospel. Think about that. Setting our minds on the things of man can actually be a barrier to the life saving Gospel of our Lord. But Jesus sets us straight in the next verse. And we can't hear this enough because in verse 24 he is absolutely clear about the path that we are to walk.

Jesus says to his disciples, which includes you and me gathered around him today in his church, that we must "deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow him" (Matt. 16:24).

In discovering our Christian missions, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow Jesus. Have you ever thought what Jesus really means by these words?

"To deny ourselves" is to get out of God's way and let God be God. To deny ourselves is to never assume or think that God's way of dealing with the world will ever "conform to our expectations or definitions of success."² Evil exists and we want God to do his thing and overcome it, don't we? But Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, which means that He calls us to drop our way of thinking and our way of measuring success in favor of his way.

² Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary Matthew 11:2-20:34: CPH, 842*

And then he calls us to “take up our crosses.” This is actually a strange way of speaking. We might not think so because we hear a lot of “cross bearing” talk today — so much so that I think these words have lost their true meaning. Of course we all have trials, afflictions, and situations that are really hard to bear but what Jesus is talking about here is more than our problems. Remember what the cross was in Jesus’ day. It wasn’t just a symbol of pain and suffering. It was a symbol of death.

Now I don’t know about you, but crucifixion is kind of a creepy metaphor for discipleship isn’t it? Most of us would probably be ok with Christ saying something like “life is a journey, follow me” but take up a symbol of death and follow him? This sounds risky and kind of scary doesn’t it?

But I think that’s his point. It can be risky and at times scary to follow Christ especially in a world that seems to have less and less tolerance or interest in what he represents. But his words are not suggestions; they are what he demands from his followers. Jesus Christ expects commitment. He doesn’t want just a little piece of our lives; he wants it all. Because when we are denying ourselves and are taking up our crosses and following him no matter what, even to the point of death, he knows that’s when we are in discovery mode. Total commitment to Christ screams a life of finding new ways to share his love. And I think we all agree that what our world needs is more of our bold Christian mission. Am I right? And the world is right out those doors.

My final thought I want to leave with you this morning is this: theology is not just an intellectual exercise. It’s not as if anything I’ve said today can be neatly organized in our minds and then implemented to the point of producing results. We can’t think our way into following Christ. Christian theology is an exercise of the heart. When we, in faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit, take to heart what happened on the cross; when what God did by saving people out of his grace through the death and resurrection of his son actually reaches beyond our minds as more than something that just happened but penetrates our hearts as something that happened for us, that’s when all of this discipleship stuff really starts to make sense. As crazy as it might sound, the truth is that

an instrument of death, the cross, brings hope. My prayer for us all is with that hope comes a lifetime of mission discovery. People need Jesus and he needs us to help show them who he is. **Amen.**