

## Proper 17A

A patient at a dentist's office tried to lighten her fear by listing her middle name as "Wimp." A little later the receptionist stepped into the waiting room and said, "The doctor will now see the wimp." Four people got up.

--As quoted in Tim Riter, *Deep Down* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995).

The early church of Christ was made up of Christians who were no wimps.

The year ... 177 A.D.

The place ... the arena at Lyons.

The celebration ... fiesta time.

The sport ... killing criminals, runaway slaves and Christians.

A letter from the local church to a sister church in Turkey describes what happened:

The governor had the blessed ones form a procession for the enjoyment of the crowd ... Maturus, then Sanctus, Blandina and Attalus were led to face the lions in the amphitheater .... The virgin Blandina, after the whips, after the lions, after the iron chair, was at last thrown into

a basket and presented to a bull. For a time, the animal tossed her, but she had now lost any sense of what was happening, thanks to her hope, her steadfast faith and her close communion with Christ (as quoted by Christopher Kelly in Times Literary Supplement, 22 December 1995, 22).

Do today's churches offer a faith strong enough that it can command a sacrifice? Do you have enough faith to offer up a genuine sacrifice for Christ's sake? Can you imagine the feel of the splinters as you take up your cross and follow him?

The cartoon of the pig and the chicken looking at a breakfast plate of bacon and eggs always comes to mind as the pig tells the chicken, "For you, it's a contribution. For me, it's the supreme sacrifice."

Can a church in today's self-centered, self-help culture ask its people to sacrifice something for the sake of the gospel? Jesus' challenge to all would-be disciples requires more than a "feel-good" or self-hug spirituality. True discipleship asks, "Are you willing to sacrifice something for the kingdom?" Sometimes one wonders: Does

today's spirituality possess the spiritual resources necessary to inspire even one little sacrifice for God?

What made it possible for first-century Christians to choose a martyr's death? What has kept generations of Christians from losing faith and falling apart when confronted by the violence and hatred of this world? How can we realize even the day-to-day sacrifices of our faith that demand we do things we don't want to do; go where we don't want to go; love people we don't want to love?

At the 100th anniversary of the arrival of missionaries in Zaire, Christians gathered to celebrate from that part of Zaire once called the Belgian Congo. The festivities lasted all day with music, preaching, food and conversations. Many reminisced about the early days and praised God for the progress of the gospel and the church.

Near the end of the long program, a very old man stood to give a speech. He said that he soon would die and that he needed to tell something that no one else knew. If he didn't tell, his secret would go with him to his grave. He

explained that when the first white missionaries came, his people didn't know whether to believe their message or not. So they devised a plan to slowly and secretly poison the missionaries and watch them die. One by one, children and adults became ill, died and were buried. It was when his people saw how these missionaries died that they decided to believe their message.

Think of it -- those missionaries never knew what was happening. They didn't know they were being poisoned and they didn't know why they were dying. They didn't know they were martyrs. They stayed and died because they trusted Jesus. And it was the way they died that taught others how to live.

--Leith Anderson, *Winning the Values War: Thirteen Distinct Values That Mark a Follower of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 198.

When we become Christians, Jesus calls us away from our old identities, our old selves. When we become Christians, we undergo a character change. By our practicing self-denial, Jesus calls us to become members of a new family, part of a new reality--the body of Christ.

This Christ-body community lives according to a new set of shared values which develops a Christian character in each one of us. Living out these values builds up our character more strongly every day. It is only through the strength of this Christian character that any one of us can hope to successfully heft a cross for Jesus.

**Are you standing in the way of God's kingdom? Or is God's kingdom the way you are moving?**

This week I encountered several of our Trinity family members who are very sick. One of them is facing life with great courage and desire to follow Jesus to the very end. What joins us in prayer to these people?

As I have encountered a fraction of our small groups this past week I believe these groups become for us the way God's kingdom is moving. Our people, in one form or another have been profoundly affected as Christians in the life of one of these small groups. These small churches within the Church are the life blood of a parish's spirituality. Without these groups ministry would cease to exist. These small groups when they come together have done

great and wonderful things for people like me and my wife Robyn.

You have fed children, clothed the poor, helped students with scholarships and more.

And this is the more...this parish needs more small groups. We need small groups for our youth to meet in homes. We need small groups for couples with children, for young married couples and old ones, and small groups for single adults some of whom are single parents.

Groups form naturally...they cannot be assigned but we can create a welcoming environment that reaches out to new life waiting to be accepted and be a prayerful support for one another in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth, in sorrow and in celebration, in new life and when death calls us.

Lives are transformed by the witness to a lively Faith lived out in small communities of faith. Then we can gather together on Sunday and celebrate that life as one body, though we are many.

## **Are you standing in the way of God's kingdom? Or is God's kingdom the way you are moving?**

I ask you to covenant with me to form at least two new small groups by the end of this year meeting in homes. If you want to start one and you say, "Father, I would love to but I can't do it every week," then you find others who will help you sponsor such a group. Perhaps you can meet every two weeks then find others who find that time suitable as well.

God's kingdom is moving forward and we all must sacrifice to remain faithful to fellowship, to prayer and the apostle's teaching. God's kingdom began in such small groups and it will continue to grow likewise. I visited such a group of young adults this week in the home of one of our members. The group is seven months old. I am convinced other small faith groups need to start.

I was told that people at Trinity have a heart and a mind to serve Christ. I have experienced that fact. You have been waiting for leadership to point the way. I am the shepherd. God has appointed me to feed the sheep. There is green

pasture that awaits us. There are leaders and fellow shepherds here who are ready to start and lead such small groups. You know who you are. Find a place, find a time and go. I'll recommend a format if you need one. I'll give you names of people whom you know perhaps better than I to call and join them.

Take up your cross, deny yourself and follow me.  
Thus saith the Lord. Amen.