

“Members Only!”  
Pentecost XV, Proper 19

“Members Only!” We know what this sign means. There is no question that one has a membership fee, paid dues, and probably signed a contract to gain access. “Members Only” are for those so committed. When I inquired the cost of membership at a community pool near my home and was told \$1000.00 for its use for four months not including a maintenance fee I knew I would remain outside the “Members Only” sign. Instead I joined the Janesville YMCA and was there a membership commitment? Yes!: a fee and monthly dues.

Every membership has a price. So why is it we do not apply the same cost to church membership? Club or civic organizations have a cost. Church membership appears to be optional. One cannot go anywhere as a part of some community organization without becoming a member. That also includes the church. Is membership necessary? Does the Bible require membership in a church? Let’s see what it says!

Mark 8: 34 requires a membership contract: He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Now I understand “denial” to have two basic meanings: a common and an uncommon meaning. The first means a person(s) who refuse to admit what others see – denial. An example of the common: When someone addicted to his/her own Ego says “I am my own boss, I can be my own god, and I don’t need anyone to tell me what’s right or wrong, I am the center of my world and I am here to get what I can as I pass through and when I’m done I’ll die and rot and become fertilizer for some tree.” That is the kind of “denial” addressed by the first definition. “A person(s) who refuse to admit what others see – denial.

The second basic definition is uncommon: “I believe in self-sacrifice for it’s own sake, to bring good to as many of God’s creatures as I can meet.” This also is “denial” though uncommon and spiritually grounded.

The “uncommon denial” is what Jesus requires of his disciples. It teaches us to lose what we have in order to gain what we don’t have. Nothing Jesus teaches indicates that we can have it all in this life and have the treasures of the next life. If you can find it in

scripture please tell me and I will get my real estate license and help you keep wealth going in your families for generations!

The school of discipleship also known as “church” directs disciples of the Lord Jesus to lose what they have (that’s “the lose it” part). Take the lot one is given in life and has made in life and we are asked to consider it a loss. A loss is a debt of some kind. A loss at the end of the tax year hopefully means a lower taxable income. In the world of the church losses are expected. In the world of Jesus Lord and Savior his people are to be aware that losses are expected and they are necessary. Losses in life make us sad and the world mourns them.

Yet, the loss our Savior speaks of fellow Christian is your MEMBERSHIP FEE. As a disciple of Christ your membership are your losses. That loss can be money, houses, relationships, and anything to which we are attached. That may make us sad but it is meant for good! A loss in God’s world is always meant for good and will result in gain for members of his school of discipleship. What is truly sad is that the schools of this world teach us to minimize our losses, to self protect and to pile high so we can leave it all for those behind us. What seems to be living on the “plus side” will never add to our life.

We can be proud that Jesus, Lord and Savior, has done exactly the opposite. As our corporate Head, our Lord and Savior surrendered up his life to gain the world. How simple yet profound a teaching. Losing means gaining. And for our membership fee, our losses, we are given a cross as a reminder of the gift of life Jesus gave. The cross my fellow believers in Christ is none other that our losses. Take up your “losses” he says! Take up your “losses” and hold them high! For in them we gain our lives. To gain the world any other way is to forfeit life.

The requirements for church membership are fourfold:

1) The sacraments: Baptism and Confirmation 2) Worship 3) Service and 4) Self Giving.

The sacraments are visible signs to the world that we have taken our cross and our losses and thrown in our lot with Jesus Christ! Now we belong not to this world, not to some human family, but to God in Christ. The other requirements follow Christ in his steps – can we do any less? To gain the whole world and forfeit your life – is it worth it?

To those who think they have done their part and have finished “the race” we call faith, and now are retired on active duty (known as the R.O.A.D. program) let me remind you, God has no grandchildren - only you and I. He spoke through the Prophet Anna in her eighties and led the widow to give two mites – all that she had. He led a young man nameless in John’s gospel, who followed Jesus to his death. He taught a young woman named Martha the meaning of service to God, he took people from all professions and labors, gender and race, to take their losses and crosses and turn them to life! Amen.