

A priest friend of mine got the Greek word *doulos* tattooed on his wrist when he was ordained. I'm sure that, over the years, a few people saw the tattoo and judged my friend as snobbish or elitist for having a Greek word tattooed on his all-American skin. Perhaps someone has actually had the nerve to tell him that to his face. If so, I would love to see the look on their face when he explains that the word means "slave," though it is often translated "servant," and that it summarizes his understanding of ordained ministry, reminding and encouraging him to stay faithful to that essence and purpose of unconditional service in a world full of distraction and temptation. In a way, that small patch of ink keeps my friend accountable, for he knows that if he ever failed to live up to its ideal, the tattoo would take on a pointed irony and he would have no one to blame but himself.

I have no tattoos, but I take a keen interest in the difference between a label and an essence. Halloween is coming up and that gives everyone a golden opportunity to wear a label. If you've never dressed up as a priest on Halloween, I highly recommend it — I'll loan you the garb if you wear the same size shirt as I do. But the rest of the year, wearing a misleading label is much less entertaining.

Sometimes it's merely embarrassing, like claiming you're a huge fan of a renowned author or artist and then being unable to answer specific questions about their work. Other times it's devastating, like the time someone I loved wrote me a letter saying she loved me, when it would have been more accurate to say, "I've been seeing someone else for a while now." That was years ago and I've moved on... obviously... but I won't soon forget the lesson that just because someone labels themselves as something doesn't mean they are that thing.

Jesus, who is, authentically, love, teaches his followers that lesson in a compassionate way. James and John, two of his very closest disciples, came to him seeking a label. Jesus offered them something much greater and more precious: an essence and a purpose. They asked him to do them a favor without saying what it was — always a bad sign — but I can't condemn them. Their desire for places of honor is phrased in relationship to Jesus, and their request is based on the assumption of Jesus's victory, and his sovereignty. Even if they're asking for the wrong thing, they are looking in the right place, and their zeal is commendable. But a place of glory is an awful lot like a title, or a label, or a ribbon. What good is a ribbon if you didn't enter the race? What good is a diploma if you didn't learn anything?

Jesus reminds them that following him requires deep commitment: a willingness to sacrifice everything one has, even our lives. Accepting the label of Christian means putting Jesus first always, just as Jesus himself put his faithfulness to God and his mission ahead of his own desires for a happy human life. Yes, Jesus went willingly to his awful death, but not before asking that the cup of suffering might pass from him, if God's will allowed. For God, greatness and humility are two sides of the same coin.

To their enduring credit, James and John were not put off by Jesus's invitation to

take part in the sacrificial substance of discipleship. They affirmed, "We are able." Three simple words that never fail to inspire me. Those words indicated a choice that redefined who James and John were, as the choice to follow Jesus rather than our own wills always does. James and John may have begun by asking Jesus to do whatever they asked, but they grew, quickly, into agreeing to do whatever Jesus asks. And he lovingly guided them away from the secular and material, the world's fleeting rewards, and toward the greater rewards of the holy and spiritual, the everlasting rewards of God.

Sometimes people push back against the notion that our choices, and not our labels, make us who we are. Such resistance is understandable. Labels are easy to make, apply, and control, and we can easily predict which labels our society will reward. But the freedom to choose who we are at our essence, and the responsibility that comes with that freedom, are so great as to be bewildering, perhaps even scary. And as James and John discovered, we can't always predict the consequences of our choices. Their choice to give themselves completely to Jesus's mission would lead the world to label them as enemies of the empire and its status quo, and demand painful sacrifices from them, but their choice also led them to the essence of love in God's eternal exaltation.

Now, yes, every person's circumstances have a powerful effect on their life. It's important to understand why people do what they do, but it's at least as important to honor those who make life-giving choices in the face of adversity. History and hagiography incessantly remind us that everyone is capable of tremendous courage and generosity. A hero lives in every human heart because we all are made in the image of God. Difficult circumstances do not excuse wickedness but they do magnify compassion into nobility.

Now is the season when every family in our church is asked to respond to our stewardship drive, "Renewing gratitude, celebrating resurrection," with a decision about how generously they will give to Advent next year. Each of us has to decide if the word "Christian" is just a label we wear, or a fair and honest description of who we are at our core. We decide if our relationship with Jesus is something we accommodate, or if everything else in our lives must move to accommodate Jesus, even to the point of sacrifice.

Today I am inspired by the public commitment we are making as a community, the result of dozens of private choices. And many of those choices are amazing indications of the essence of Christian love. In every congregation, some families who have the least give the most, relative to what they have, and the breadth and depth of that commitment is far more inspirational than numbers alone. So we soon will be thanking God for inspiring us to generosity and asking God's blessing on our mission.

Our drive to renew our commitment creates an opportunity for all of us to choose and express who we are, deep down: to stake out for ourselves what we mean when we say we support Advent and the Gospel mission that plays out here every week. This

process creates a level playing field in a world where some have more than others. Regardless of what any of us has to work with, each of us knows to what extent our pledge represents a generous, sacrificial commitment.

In this way, every year we get another chance to define ourselves, to express for ourselves what is most important. Thus we also get the chance to discover, as James and John did, that only commitment to Jesus and his mission brings the peace wherein joy can flourish. This year and every year, may we all follow the example of those who heard Jesus's call to sacrifice and answered, "We are able."