



For My Sake
Ash Wednesday message from
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Welcome to the forty-day season of spiritual preparation for observing our Lord's passion and resurrection.

I invite you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to observe a holy Lent:

- by self-examination and repentance;
- by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and
- by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

The following words of Jesus are among the most recognized and most troubling in the Gospels. I am reading from Luke 9:23-24.

Then Jesus said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life **for my sake** will save it."

Most of us are uncomfortable with the notion of suffering and denial. We work overtime at being strong, independent, self-assured. Yet, these words of Jesus make it clear that suffering and self-denial are part of Christ's ministry and part of the discipleship of those who follow Jesus.

Historically, Lent has been a season of the church year when followers of Christ deny or give up something in their daily lives as a symbolic way to share in Christ's passion. These words of Jesus are the basis for this practice. I can remember as a youth being encouraged to give up candy or other such indulgences during Lent. Perhaps, you had similar experiences, or continue this discipline of self-denial as a part of your Lenten journey. It can be an effective way of reminding us of the path of Christian discipleship.

Throughout his profound book, *Renovate: Building a Life with God*, Jacob Armstrong reminds us that going where God wants us to go is about submitting our lives to God in a way we have not previously experienced. It is about allowing God "to heal you and rebuild you, to renovate your life" (p.15). A discipline of self-denial can help us focus on the central question Jesus is asking each of us: "Will you submit your life to me?"

But, the key to understanding Jesus' teaching on denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily is in the often-overlooked phrase, "for my sake." Some of us too quickly and erroneously believe any act of denial or any suffering we experience is for Jesus' sake. But we do not suffer cancer, or an unhappy marriage, or go bankrupt for Jesus' sake. Nor, do we give up eating candy for 40 days for Jesus' sake.

Jesus has another kind of denial or suffering in mind. Jesus is calling us to live as he did. Jesus is calling us to address the problems and issues people face – disease, poverty, prejudice, hunger, loneliness, hatred, fear, sin – with a generosity, compassion and love that the world will likely consider strange, yet wonderful.

Jacob Armstrong puts it this way: "When renovation (or transformation) is taking place in your life, there comes a time when you become less focused on the thing being restored (you) and increasingly focused on the impact that your renovation can have on others. This is what happens when God remakes us" (p. 96).

- To lose your life for Jesus' sake is to live out of God's abundance, when the world says hoard your resources.
- To lose your life for Jesus' sake is to witness for peace, when the world is mad with war.
- To lose your life for Jesus' sake is to seek justice, when the world says look out for yourself.
- To lose your life for Jesus' sake is to die to one's selfishness, so that others may have abundant life.

To live and witness as Christ did is to take up these crosses for his sake.

I thank God that the Dakotas Conference has so many congregations and so many individual Jesus followers who practice self-denial and living for others – not just during the 40 days of Lent, but every day. Truly, our missional vitality is found in losing our life for Jesus' sake.

As you move ever deeper into your Lenten journey, I invite you to prayerfully seek ways to bring abundant life to others. I invite you to lose your life for Jesus' sake and for the sake of Jesus' redemptive mission. This is the pathway to a life that is whole, complete, joyful and saved.

I pray for you a rich and blessed Lenten journey.