

Over the course of our lives, one of the things that can be easy to do is to lose sight of what Jesus tells us, namely that we are to love God above all else, and that following Him requires a great deal of effort. When Jesus speaks of loving Him even above our children and parents, He is speaking to His divinity, and stressing that the choice to follow Him is an important one that has to be the most important thing that we chose. And from this follows taking up our crosses, suffering for others, and being a person of mercy as we offer people comfort and chose to make a difference in this world for the better.

As a young man in high school and college, Bob Wieland had a goal: becoming a professional baseball pitcher. He worked out with weights, played several others ports to stay in top shape, and practiced long and hard. After he pitched a game with 19 strikeouts, the Phillies were nearly ready to sign him to a major league contract.

His dream seemed within reach until he received another offer he couldn't refuse - a draft notice requiring him to serve in the army. During army training, he was given the choice of becoming a medic or a cook. He chose

to become a medic and was sent to Vietnam in 1969 at the height of the war.

He was in Vietnam only a few months when his unit, on patrol in the jungle, walked into a minefield. One of his best buddies was hit. As Bob rushed to help him, he stepped on a booby-trapped 82-millimeter mortar round - something that had enough explosive power to put a tank out of commission.

Doctors and nurses thought he was dead when he was brought into the hospital. The blast took both of his legs, and he had lost nearly all of his blood. A doctor later told him he wouldn't have survived if he had gotten to the hospital 15 seconds later.

During the next few days, the doctors still weren't sure he would live. On top of severe injuries, he had malaria. He was running a temperature of 105 to 106 degrees. He was given so much medicine for the pain and high fever that several days passed before he realized his legs were gone.

When he'd arrived in Vietnam, Bob was 6 feet tall, weighed 205 pounds, and looked like a professional weight lifter. Shortly after being wounded, he was two feet, ten and one-half inches tall and weighed 87 pounds.

Although he grieved over the loss of his baseball career, Bob spent little time on self-pity. He had trusted Christ and re-committed his faith as a college sophomore, and now his faith brought him peace most people could not understand. He was deeply grateful to be alive, and he believed God had a special purpose for his life.

After long stays in different hospitals, he moved to California. He went back to college, got a degree in physical education, taught P.E., and met Jackie who became his wife.

He also grew spiritually. He started speaking at high schools about striving for success. He also began weight lifting, pushing himself until he could lift more and more weight for longer times.

In time he competed in the bantamweight class in the United States Powerlifting Championships. At 122 pounds, he lifted 303 pounds - a new

world record. But the judges refused to give him the title. They pointed to a rule book that said "Contestants must be wearing shoes" that disqualified him. Later, he was banned from competition forever.

Again though he refused to get angry or pity himself. While he was wondering what God had in mind for him, Bob met an athletic trainer who asked him to try doing a lap around a track, walking on his hands and stumps. Although his hands were bruised and blistered when he finished, he made it around. After that, the trainer started working with him. Day after day he walked laps around the track, wearing small running shoes on his hands.

One day Bob told his trainer he wanted to walk across the United States on his hands and stumps to share his testimony and to raise money for the hungry. Believing nothing is impossible with God's help, he thought he could make the trip in a year. He trained hard for 19 months. He worked out until he could do a pushup holding all of his weight on 2 fingers.

Then he set out. A friend came along to keep him company and drive a vehicle behind him. Along the way, Bob stopped to chat with people who

came out to meet him, and he witnessed to many. Sometimes people they met invited them to stay in their homes; other times they spent the night in hotels or their vehicle. Bob also gave press conferences and speeches in different towns.

There were dangers and hardships. he walked in extreme heat in the desert and in temperatures as low as -26 below in the winter. Drivers often couldn't see him at the side of the road because he was so low. Dogs were also a threat because he couldn't move quickly.

But eventually he reached his goal, the final destination which is the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. It took him 3 years, 8 months and 6 days since he left California. His walk raised more than \$100,000 to feed the hungry, but in addition to that, many of the people Bob witnessed to on the way came to the Christian faith.

Looking back on that day in Vietnam, he will say of that day "My legs went one direction, my life another."

What Bob knew was God loved him, and God did not say one day “I need someone to lose their legs, Bob will do.” Rather evil happens in the world; but Bob knew that as Jesus confronted it, so could Bob, by choosing to trust in God and to make a difference for the better.

The mother and father image in the Gospel along with the son and daughter is meant to shock us. Of course we love our families; Jesus loved Mary and Joseph deeply. But God comes first. It’s what led many saints for like Aquinas and Francis of Assisi to not give in when their parents didn’t approve of their vocations. So the starting point for us as Christians is do I really believe Jesus is not just my friend or a teacher, but my redeemer? Sometimes if we are honest we may find we love ourselves, our careers, or winning the approval of others and being liked by people more than God. So, we need to ask ourselves: Do you put your trust in Him? Do you make time to listen to Him, discerning what His will is for you and what He is calling you to do? Do you trust in God to help your conscience be formed, so that even if family or friends or the world tells you something, you can truly know right from wrong? Will you follow God even when it’s hard to do and you have to say “yes” to something or “no” to something even if will be costly or make you look like someone who isn’t “with the times” or cause

you to be ostracized? Bob knew his final destination is the kingdom of Heaven, and when we do, we'll follow Him.

How this is done though is of course not easy. "Whoever does not take up His cross and follow after me is not worthy of me" says our Lord. We don't as Christians seek out suffering for the sake of suffering. But our suffering can do so much to help us. Think of the hardships of Bob doing that training; he could have given up after his first attempt going around a track using his hands seeing the cuts. He could have given up when the weightlifting was hard. But he didn't. The suffering he went through helped him to find new talents and gifts. And so it is with us. Nothing comes easy, whether you are trying to get healthy and lose weight or kick a bad habit. But this is also true spiritually true. There is suffering in saying "no" to things that we know aren't spiritually good for us. There is also suffering in changing our lives for the better; think of a parent for instance who before children would go out a lot and then all of a sudden "grows up" and is now focused on their family and children. When we are trying to grow spiritually and as people, it's easy to give up when the going gets tough. But when we keep at it, what we'll find is the pain led to such incredible gain. As one preacher put it, the cross is not given to us to destroy us, and it's not given

to us to test us. Rather it is given to us so that the power of God can be manifested in our weaknesses. God's love has incredible power to transform, so may it transform us.

And lastly, Jesus speaks of hospitality; of giving a cup of cold water to someone. In the Biblical world that might be the difference between life and death. But being a Christian means true hospitality; not just having a dinner party. Each of us has the power to change others for the better; be it a parent helping their child find their confidence and self-esteem; an adult child caring for an aging parent; or people serving others like a number of our parishioners are doing right now on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic. In our world, there is so much need. And on our part, we just have to open up our eyes to see it. It requires a big investment much like Bob made, but think of the power each of us has when we see need - be it at home or in the greater community, and decide to do something about it.

As we turn to the Eucharist, we are again reminded of how much God loves us. In a few moments we will say "Amen" as we receive our Lord. Let's take that word seriously, never forgetting truly following Jesus isn't just saying

“yes” to an hour a week, but a radical way of committing our lives as we are fed by Him, and with Him, feed one another.