

Proper 17 + August 28, 2011

Occasionally, I receive business cards from people and keep a stack of them in my desk. Important information is inscribed on these cards – people’s names, their place of work, the company for which they work, phone numbers, addresses, emails ... all the necessary information. Some of the cards may not be business cards per se but identity cards revealing something about the person, their hobbies and interests. Some cards feature photographs, other graphic designs, and some have clever logos. Some are colorful and some are plain. Each card represents a real person and with each person there is a story, a history, a relationship.

As I thumbed through the cards the other day looking for a person’s phone number, I ran across what is, by far, the most interesting card I ever received. The card came from Doug a couple of years ago. The card is very simple. White background on soft paper, not the kind of cardstock you get from professionals. You can tell it was done at home, probably from his computer. The little white card, suitable to place in your wallet states his name: Doug Knudsen. And underneath the name is a title: “Servant.” His phone number is listed underneath the word servant. That’s it: Doug Knudsen, Servant, phone number. He gave me his card, oh, a couple of years back after a visit and I didn’t really look at the card until much later, so I didn’t get a chance to talk to him about it. When I first noticed it, I scratched my head and thought “Now, that’s strange. I wonder what to make of this.” I really wanted to ask him about it. Does he hand out these cards randomly? To whom does he give them? And what exactly is he trying to say? Doug is retired. It isn’t really a business card. I assume it has something to do with his identity and what he does and how he spends his time and what he values. What does this all mean? I’m sure there’s a story here. I’ve always wanted to know.

I haven’t had much opportunity to ask him. We don’t see him much. Doug is married to Jean. She is my Dad’s cousin which makes them second cousins. Once in a while our paths cross. They live in Fullerton, down in southern California. We visited them a couple of summers ago and that might have been the first time we got a glimpse of how unusual and amazing this family truly is.

On our visit we got to spend time not just with them but with Erica, one of their three daughters. Erica was born with a debilitating disease that left her speechless, immobile. She required careful and constant care. Around the clock care. She needed to be fed through a feeding tube that Doug and Jean monitored. Not only did they feed her, they cleaned her, moved her, and had to turn her body every so often when she lying down. They devoted their entire time and energy to Erica. We got to know Erica. She was unable to speak or move her limbs but she expressed herself in an amazing smile and frequent laughter. Britt was especially good at getting her to smile and laugh.

Besides our visit in Fullerton, they came by here a time or two and in visiting with them we learned a lot about their endeavors: their involvement in their church where Jean brings

communion to homebound members and where Doug has a ministry called “The Carpenter’s Handyman.” He goes to the home of church members, usually older widows, to do household repair for those who are unable to do it themselves. Once, he spoke to us about befriending a man who had just been released from prison. He was helping this fellow work and shelter. These are the sorts of things they do.

Every time Britt and I have reflected upon our experience of visiting with them we have been amazed. These are busy folks, pouring out their hearts in generosity and love and care. When they speak about what gives them passion it is always about serving their family, their friends, their neighbors and yes, strangers.

We were saddened to learn, over a year ago, that Erica had died. Jean and Doug and Erica’s sisters grieved deeply, as did all whose lives were touched by Erica. She could not fight back the illness that had attacked her body. We reflected on how much, like her parents, she gave to those who knew her. We’ve spoken with Doug and Jean a few times since her death, most recently last weekend when they stopped by for a visit. They stayed at our home on Saturday and came to the Saturday service here at Bethlehem.

It was good to catch up and to hear how they are doing in their journey of grief after the loss of Erica. For the most part they are doing well. They have good days and bad days. I asked them how they were filling their lives these days and as they spoke, I heard a familiar theme. Their latest passion is Corazon, an organization that offers education, assistance and shelter to thousands. They are specifically involved in the ministry of repairing and building homes in Mexico. Servanthood is the theme of their lives. We had a great visit last weekend and, by the way, before they left our home, Doug fixed our front door. I never have asked him about his card. I don’t think I need to ask him. No explanation necessary. They have showed us what it means.

Jesus said “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 lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Over the years I’ve wonder what it really means to lose our lives and truly find them. Sometimes I struggle with Jesus’ summons. What does it look like to give ourselves away and in doing so discover true life? Is it even possible? Maybe I’m a lot like Peter some days. I will claim that Jesus is Messiah without missing a beat but when I hear what is involved in following him, I put up some resistance. Sometimes I am flummoxed still by a God whose power is shown in suffering and death and whose rule is self-giving love.

Then, I find myself being moved by the example of Doug and Jean or any number of people who, in losing their lives have truly found them. No, they are not perfect people but those who have discovered life and, yes, joy in something greater than themselves.

The call to deny ourselves isn't a call to self-loathing. On the contrary, we are beloved by God, whose declaration of love is fulfilled in Jesus. We find great security in the love of God and are set free to enjoy life. I think taking up our cross and following Jesus is about abandoning self-centered living and the notion that the world revolves around you. In fact, isn't there great freedom in such a journey? At times, I believe our greatest anxiety comes when we desperately look for security in things other than God –winning at all costs, pining after great wealth or riches or the pressure to be successful or the smartest or the strongest. We get most anxious and despairing when we try to save our lives. There is no freedom in such pursuits.

Taking up our cross and following Jesus and losing our lives is really about freedom. We are free to do something wild for the sake of God's Kingdom – befriend the lost or lonely or needy neighbor, to strive for peace and justice, to minister to the poor, to be generous in all things. Invariably it is a call to community – the community of faith and the world of the neighbor. And, at least according to St. Paul in our second lesson today, such freedom looks something like this: rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, living in harmony with one another, associating with the lowly, not claiming to be wiser than you are, even feeding your enemy and giving them something to drink.

We may not have cards that say "Servant" on them but we do have a Cross signed on our forehead, first placed there by God in the waters of Baptism. It is our insignia, our logo, our identity and it is God in Christ who faithfully works this miracle of faithful service in us and through us. Jesus' summons to follow him is first of all an invitation to trust him and make our home in God. Amen.