

The Christian Totem

“Jesus”. Sure we have heard about him one way or another. Maybe you are a Christian and have been taught about him before, or maybe you aren’t and have heard his stories in pieces. But in either case, how would you describe who Jesus is? Maybe you might think of some bible stories or maybe you just think of him as a cloaked Jedi who has lost his light saber. I know I have a hard time describing who he is and much less relating to him, but some years back I had heard a story. Although not the end all, be all story about this important Christian totem, I have found it has been one piece in figuring out what Jesus is all about.

There was a college professor teaching a class about religion. He was a pleasant, short man with graying hair and round-rimmed glasses that always seemed to slip down his nose. He had just started the Christianity chapter with his class, however he perplexed on how to best teach the next topic. He thought and pondered well into the night. A couple hours slipped by as it became darker, but finally he came up with an idea. “I know what to do!” the professor thought and he slept.

The next day before class, he waited outside the classroom. He recited his students names, still of course, trying to learn them. Here came Sean, Peter, Garry. Then came Kathy, Emily and Bobby. And then he saw Daniel round the red, brick-walled corner. Daniel stood at least a head taller than the others walking past him and towered over Phil. He had a thick trunk of a neck protruding from a muscular, rippling core. His backpack seemed three sizes too small as the straps choked into his well-defined chest. His giant arms swung at his side, with his forearms slightly bent, a more natural position for the massive network of muscles that seemed ready to burst at a moments notice. Daniel was one of the school’s best football players and he was perfect for the purpose the professor had in mind. He flagged him down.

“Daniel, do you suppose you could help me with class today?”

“Um... sure? What for?”

“Well, I need someone that can do about 200 push-ups. Do you think you could do that?” the professor asked hopefully.

Daniel was taken aback. He had never been asked to exercise in the classroom before, but he wasn’t about to turn down a challenge.

“That’s more than I’ve ever done before, but if I took my time, I might be able to.”

The professor thanked him for being willing to help out and they both stepped into the classroom. Most everyone was seated already in the rows of desks, anxiously waiting for class to begin so it could finish. The professor quickly counted them, noting the number 21. The professor walked behind his desk at the front of the classroom and busied himself. Daniel stood off to the side, awkwardly shifting his weight, not sure what he was supposed to do. The professor then straightened up and turned around walking back to the front of the room. He carried three big pails of Bluebell ice cream — vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry. The student’s eyes widened greedily. This was not how any previous lecture had started before. The professor set out a stack of cheap, plastic bowls and a carton of spoons.

“Now, I brought a treat along today, and everyone is going to have some. But... there is one small catch.”

Various students rolled their eyes. Of course there was a catch. There always was.

“For each bowl of ice cream I hand out, Daniel here will do 10 push-ups.”

The room was silent. Each of the students looked at Daniel as they mulled over the proposal in their mind.

“10 push-ups is nothing for Dan!” Bobby remarked, leaping out of his chair and striding to the ice cream.

Daniel grinned a wide smile back at him. The professor motioned for him to start and Daniel dropped to the floor quickly letting his brawny arms catch him before his upper body met the floor. He rapidly elevated and lowered himself 10 times. Each push-up was perfect with his body straight as a plank and his face snapped at the floor barely grazing the tip of his nose just as a hawk dives to snatch a fish out of water and soars away. He jumped up as his feet bounded up to

his hands and his upper body gracefully unfolded to a standing position. The professor gave Bobby three scoops of ice cream and Bobby walked away smiling as he dipped his spoon into the soft, delicious snack.

The other students quickly jumped out of their seats when they saw Bobby's treat and they hurried to form a rough shape looking similar to a line before the ice cream. Daniel energetically broke out another four sets of push-ups and was only slightly panting as he stood in the front of the classroom still grinning an energetic smile.

The students were happily relishing the delicacy not wasting any time to devour their ice cream. The students in line shuffled impatiently and talked loudly among themselves about last weekend or the latest gossip as they waited. None seemed to notice or consider Daniel. More students came and went and he was now panting heavily. His massive chest was rising and falling like the sea as he tried to catch his breath.

Another couple students came and went, 9... 10... Now Daniel did not jump up from the floor after each set but rather was kneeling on one knee, with his right arm laying across his leg supporting his hunched over body.

Slowly the students began to realize the strenuous effort Daniel was putting forth and silence slowly crept over the room as they watched Daniel. Some whispered among themselves but no one got out of line.

7... 8... 9... 10.

It was taking Daniel much longer to complete the push-ups now. He strained and grunted as he slowly lifted himself up. When his arms were fully extended, he came crashing back down, unable to catch himself gracefully as before.

Colton was next. He looked at Daniel and said, "I don't want any ice cream."

The professor looked saddened and he responded, "That is okay, but Daniel has to do the push-ups anyways."

Everyone but Daniel looked at the professor as if he had told them to jump off a cliff.

"Sorry, but that is part of the deal. Continue Daniel."

Daniel began his next set of push-ups and as he finished, the professor offered Colton his bowl of ice cream.

“But I don’t *want* any ice cream!” Colton yelled and he took the bowl and strode angrily over to the trash can.

“Please don’t,” Daniel groaned, but it was too late and the ice cream was wasted. Daniel looked hurt as he stared at the gray trash can.

More students hesitatingly came and went. Daniel no longer got up off the floor. He laid on the hard, dirty-white laminate with his hands down by his sides and his right cheek turned into the floor. Sweat glistened across his brow and it slid ever so slowly into his eyes.

Beth came up to the table, and looked at the professor squarely in the eye.

“You can’t force him to do push-ups!”, she accused.

The professor replied coolly, “I’m not forcing him. Daniel has willingly volunteered to do so.”

Beth received her ice cream from the professor and turned to face Daniel.

“Thanks, Dan.”

Richard was second from next. He stepped out of the line mumbling, “I can’t stand this” and he quickly strode out of the classroom, with the door slamming behind him. As everyone was eyeing the door wondering if they could do the same, the professor nodded at Daniel and he began a set for Richard, wasted as the ice cream was going to no one.

“Dan, stop!” someone shouted but he continued.

He battled with gravity, and sweat was now pouring off his face, pooling onto the floor. His shoulder blades erupted like mountains from his back as he could no longer keep a straight figure.

Kathy and Emily were the last ones. They had watched Daniel all class long and now tears escaped their eyes, painting silver path ways as they tumbled down their cheeks. Emily walked up to Daniel. In her hand was her purple nalgene. She carefully unscrewed the lid and set it next to him.

“Here, take this Dan.”

Daniel returned a small smile back, his eyes gleaming as if to say, “Thank you”. He sat up and brought the water bottle up to his mouth with both hands. Water sloshed out of the lid and drained onto his shirt as he struggled to steady the opening against his lips.

4... 5... 6...

He gasped for breath as he laid on the floor.

7...

Trying to regain strength where there was none.

8...

Struggling to push himself up.

9...

Arms wobbling as he inched himself up the final time.

10...

And he collapsed on the floor, motionless.

A couple students came forward and pulled him up into an empty chair. His head was rested to one side and his arms hung loosely by his sides. His shirt was soaked and clung to his skin.

“Thank you Daniel for providing ice cream for everyone. I hope you all paid attention and will be ready for the next exam. Class is dismissed.”

The students filed out of the classroom, some turning their faces away from Daniel to avoid making eye contact quickly shuffling by. But others paused as they walked by to put their hands on his shoulders or to offer a quiet “Thank you.”

After all the students had left, the professor thanked Dan again for helping him and asked, “How did you feel about doing all those push-ups?”

“It nearly killed me, yet I kinda liked it cause I earned ice cream for the class. The hardest part was when I had to do push-ups that were wasted.”

For me this story really hammered home what Jesus is all about. He is someone who

lovingly endures sacrifices for others. Just as Daniel endured each and every one of those push-ups so his classmates could enjoy ice cream, Jesus did even more so by enduring death on the cross to ensure you and I could have the chance to pass through the pearly gates of heaven.

But how does one respond to such a sacrifice? The tragic part to this story is to realize that sometimes sacrifices are wasted. Just as Daniel had to do push-ups for those that didn't want ice cream, so too has Jesus laid down his life for those that will reject the ice cream he has offered. On the other hand, there are others who have taken what has been given to them and give of themselves in return. Just like Emily who offered her water bottle to Daniel. Loving sacrifice.