

Deny Yourself, Take up Your Cross and Follow Christ

*²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” ²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, “**Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.**” ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

At your confirmation you were asked these questions: “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Is so, answer: I do. Do you believe that the teaching of Evangelical Lutheran Church, as you have learned to know it from Luther’s Small Catechism, is faithful and true to the Word of God? If so, answer: I do. Do you intend to continue steadfast in the true Christian faith, be diligent in the use of God’s Word and sacraments, and lead a godly life even to death? If so, answer: I do, and I ask God to help me. Will you support with your prayers, time, talents and offerings the work our Lord has given to this congregation? If so, answer: I will, and I ask God to help me.” Those are pretty serious promises. Have you thought about them lately? The basis for these questions comes from Jesus’ words to his disciples in our lesson this morning. You promised to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Christ. We’ll explain later in the sermon what each of those requirements mean, but for now, we need to explore Matthew 16 and see why Jesus spoke these words to his disciples.

Do you remember the Gospel from last week? Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” The disciples replied, “Some say Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets or John the Baptist.” “But what about you,” he asked, “Who do you say I am?” Peter, as usual, stood up and spoke for the disciples and gave a beautiful confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Now we come to our text for this morning. Jesus continues the conversation and begins to explain to his disciples, in very detailed terms, his role as the Christ, the Son of God. That **he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.** (vs21)

You can almost see Peter rolling his eyes, shaking his head, grabbing Jesus by the arm and in a disgusted tone say, “**Never Lord! This will not ever happen to you!**” It would be like me saying to you this morning, “Tomorrow I am heading to Louisville to catch a plane to Iran where I will be arrested, tortured for a good long time and then executed.” You would probably say, “Pastor Horn, why would you deliberately go to a country that hates Americans and despises Christianity and allow that to happen to yourself? That’s crazy talk!” Peter thought he knew what was best for Jesus. Surely his Lord and Savior would not allow this to happen to him! The Son of God, degraded like that?

Little did Peter know he was also speaking for Satan. These were the very things the tempter had whispered in Jesus’ ear when the Lord was in the desert for 40 days and nights. “Jesus, don’t carry out your plan to save the world from sin. Don’t bother with the Father’s will. Do what you want to do. You really don’t want to fulfill the Old Testament promises, do you? You know what they have prophesied about your torture and crucifixion? It’s not pretty. It’s very gruesome. Do you really want to go through all that pain and suffering?” Satan didn’t want Jesus to do what he told his disciples he was going to do. That meant Satan would lose. That’s why Satan tempted Peter to say what he did. That’s why Jesus called Peter Satan. This is also why Jesus called Peter a stumbling block; literally in the Greek language, a trap set for animals.

When a critter touched the bait on a stick in the middle of the trap, the movement of the stick initiated the spring and the trap quickly killed them or slammed shut on them.

But our Lord was focused on his goal. He would not touch the bait. Instead he turns around and rebukes Peter, **“You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.”** According to his human nature, Jesus understood full well that the suffering and pain and death would be difficult to bear. But according to his divine nature, he knew this is what must happen to save the world from eternal death, and he was most certainly ready to carry out that plan.

Jesus takes this moment to teach his disciples a Scriptural truth. You can see him gently turning Peter around, bringing him back to the circle of disciples and saying, “Listen up, fellas. If you really want to continue with this disciple gig, here’s the deal. As a disciple, this is what I expect of you: deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. And if you focus so much on the things of this world, gain the power, riches and prestige of this world, in the end you’ll give up your soul for an eternity of suffering. Put the things of heaven first and you will be saved.”

Jesus says to you and me, “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” But there’s a little slice inside each of us that says, “Now hold on Jesus. I didn’t sign up for all this.” It’s like enlisting in the Army National Guard and being deployed to Iraq a year later and saying, “I didn’t sign up for this!” You knew full well what could and would probably happen.

I think there are times in our lives as Christians when we are just like Peter. In a moment of weakness in faith, we take Jesus aside and rebuke him. “Jesus, you expect me to deny myself? That means I need to set aside who I am. Does that mean I have to take my favorite sins, those secret sins of mine, and put them in the past and not revisit them again? But that’s so hard! And I don’t really want to give them up. You want me to deny myself? That means I have to acknowledge that everything I have comes from you. But I worked hard to earn my money and the things I have in my home. And you expect me to take a portion of that and give it back to you, and to do so generously? You expect me to give up my time, my sleeping in time, my free weekend, my time at home to relax and spend some of it studying your Word? We want me to take time to teach my kids and grandkids this stuff? And discuss it with my spouse and friends? Jesus, you expect me to take up my cross? My cross: that is, the suffering for being a Christian. So when my friends want to do something sinful that goes against your commandments and I don’t join in and they make fun of me, I’m supposed to just take it? You want me to be faithful to your Word and teachings and carry my cross even to the point of death? You expect me to follow you, that is, to trust and do what you command in your holy Word? I don’t know, Lord. I don’t know if I want to be a disciple today.”

To which the Father replies, “Yes you will be. And I do expect all of these things from you, from all of you, all the time. It’s obvious by your reluctance and apathy and failure to trust me that you have not. And I’m very serious about those sins; dead serious. So serious, in fact, I had to send someone down from heaven to save you from those sins.” The Son of God did deny himself, didn’t he? What was Jesus before he took on human flesh? He was true God from before the creation of the world. John 1 tells us that Jesus was present at the creation of the world. Jesus is the Angel of the LORD who did so much for his Old Testament people. He had all power, authority and since he was spirit was able to be anywhere at any time. But he set all that aside for awhile and took on human flesh. He denied himself the privileges and powers of his divine nature and subjected himself to the misery of humankind; hunger, thirst, fatigue, the traps set by Satan. But the Son of God was different from you and me. He heard Satan’s temptations, but he never gave in. We see that especially in the Garden of Gethsemane. No doubt Peter’s words rang again in Jesus’ head. He could have walked away from what was going to happen. But Jesus knew what he had to do. Earnestly he pleaded to his Father for strength, “Not my will, but yours be done.” Jesus sets us an example of complete denial. But more than that, what Jesus did with his life completely covers over our lackluster performance as his

disciples. The Father now looks at you and no longer sees your reluctance and failures but he sees Jesus' life of perfect obedience, covering over you.

The all-powerful Son of God also took up his cross, literally. But he also took up your cross and my cross and crucified us with him on Calvary. Through your baptism Jesus' death became your death. There on the cross your sinful nature was put to death. Those sinful attitudes that say, "I don't want to be a disciple today," were put to death. Since you have been crucified with Christ, you also have been raised with Christ through your baptism. You have been raised to new life in heaven, and a new life to live here on earth.

Your new life says, "Deny myself? Yes I will. I will put down temptation. I will bury my pet sins, repent of them, and ask the Lord for strength. I will deny myself and recognize that everything I am and have comes from my heavenly Father. I will prioritize my life accordingly. I will put my time, service, money and possessions first and foremost as an offering to my Savior out of thanks for what he has done for me. I will set aside time for God's Word and worship. I will not think about this life so much as the life to come. Take up my cross? Yes, I will gladly endure hardship and ridicule for the sake of my Savior. Even when people make fun of me for believing that infant baptism saves, for believing that Jesus' body and blood are truly present with the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, for believing that faith is a gift from God and not a decision I have to make, I will gladly endure that persecution. Follow Jesus? Even to the cross? Even to death. If that's where I must go for his sake then I will gladly follow him, even to the grave. For if I follow him to the grave, then I will walk out, just like he did and ascend to heaven, just like him.

Jesus says to you and me, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me." Yes, I will deny myself, take up my cross, and I will follow Jesus, for all he has done for me." May God grant it for his sake. Amen.