

Children

Good morning, boys and girls. Jesus told his disciples that they must "take up their cross and follow him." This seems like a strange thing to say, but the disciples understood what Jesus meant. He meant that they had to be willing to do the right thing although it was hard. Jesus knew he was going to go to the cross. He didn't want to – in fact, he even prayed that he wouldn't have to do it, but he also prayed for God's will to win out. Jesus did what was right although it was hard. This is what he wants us to do also. That is what he means by taking up our cross. . . . What are some things that you have to do that are hard but it is the right thing to do?

(Possibilities: mind parents because it is the right thing to do . . . give up a day of playing to help a neighbor, etc.)

This is how you can "take up your cross" and follow Jesus, by doing what is right even when something else is easier.

(If you have crosses for the children, pass them out.) Say: Take this cross to remind you that Jesus wants you to do the right thing even though it is often hard.

I

Last winter AT&T unveiled an amusing commercial in their "Just Ok is Not Ok" series. Many of you will remember it. The commercial features a sleazy tax preparer named Phil who is talking with a young woman who has come for help with her taxes. Phil says to the young woman, "Leave it to me. I'll get your taxes in an O.K. place."

The young woman says, "What?"

Then with the back of his hand beside his mouth, he adds, "Just as soon as my 'audit' is over, this gets my undivided attention."

The young woman looks around his office at some pictures of Phil in exotic locations and says somewhat suspiciously, "You take a lot of trips to the Caymans, Phil."

Phil says, "Pretty great, right?" Then he adds, "Oh, Phil's legally dead. Fell off a boat. Going by Dennis now . . . Dennis Celery. Long story." Then he deftly pushes a piece of paper into a paper shredder. "Oh, you're not going to want to see this," he explains.

The commercial ends with the young woman standing to leave while she says, "I don't think this is going to work."

I thought of that commercial because I learned recently that faking one's death isn't simply a familiar television plot. There really are private investigators whose whole specialty is searching for people who have faked their death. In fact, the practice of faking your own death to collect a life insurance policy, or simply to start over, has its own name, "pseudocide." You're familiar with the term "pseudonym," which means a fake name. A false death is a pseudocide.

Frank Ahearn is author of the book, *How to Disappear*. He has tracked down numerous people over the years who have faked their own deaths. He says people tend to do a lot of stupid things that get them caught. For example, they visit their mother. Or, they choose a new name that is extremely similar to their old name. Or, they Google themselves a lot.

A private investigator from New York named Steven Rambam (I love that name—Rambam—what a name for a P.I.) Steven Rambam says, "People do a remarkably limited amount of planning when it comes to faking their own deaths. Faking your own death is a full-time job, and I can guarantee you that if you slip up with even the slightest sign of life, we will find you." (1)

We may think it's bizarre that anyone would try to fake their own death. But I wonder if Jesus were to come into our church today, he might accuse us of doing that very thing.

Remember in Ephesians 2 St. Paul wrote that we are to be dead to sin and alive to Christ. Think about that for a moment. Dead to sin—alive to Christ. This is to say that Jesus is calling us to begin a new life—not by faking our death, but by giving ourselves to a whole new way of living—a life of discipleship.

Jesus and his disciples are at Caesarea Philippi. Their ministry to this point has been a stunning success. Crowds are pressing in on them everywhere they go. People eagerly reach out to touch this attractive young teacher from Nazareth. The disciples themselves are caught up in the excitement of it all. Then, at Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks them a serious question, “Who do you say I am?” It is one of the most dramatic moments in all the scriptures.

It is Simon Peter who answers enthusiastically, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”

Then Jesus changes the subject. He begins to tell them that the crowds will soon turn against him, he will be crucified, on the third day he will be raised from the dead. The disciples don’t know what to make of all this. Simon Peter takes Jesus aside: “Never, Lord!” he says. “This shall never happen to you!”

Jesus’ response to Simon Peter is as harsh as any words in the New Testament. One translator quotes him like this: “Get behind me Satan! You are not on the side of God but of man.”

Then Jesus speaks some of the best known and most challenging words of his ministry, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

What does that mean for our lives? I believe Jesus is telling us how to begin a new life—not by faking our death—but by becoming one of his disciples. The keys to that new life are found in these words that we have heard so many times before. Jesus says to his disciples and to us: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” What is it that Christ is asking us to do?

Let’s begin here: The first step to a new life, according our Master, is to deny one’s self. The word Jesus uses for “deny one’s self” can also mean “to forget one’s self.” That’s hard, isn’t it—to forget one’s self?

Have you ever heard anyone described as self-involved? Self-involved people are wrapped up in themselves or their own thoughts. They hardly give a thought to what other people are experiencing. Know anyone like that? The truth is that all of us to one extent or another are self-involved. Forgetting one’s self is difficult.

But what if we could forget ourselves entirely? What if our thoughts weren’t focused on ourselves and our need to achieve, to belong, to be happy or significant? What if we could change our mind’s focus from ourselves and our needs to God and His plan for the world? What if we could surrender everything we have and everything we are to God and His will for our life? Would that not mean that we were becoming a new person?

Cody Garbrandt is a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Cody says he was raised in a family of fighters. Cody gave an interview recently that was quite fascinating. It was about surrendering. Here is what he had to say, “Surrender is a foreign word to many fighters. It was a foreign word to me in my life.”

Cody says that in the early years of his career, he focused all his energy on being the toughest fighter in the ring. Outside the ring, he spent his time partying including using recreational drugs. But he realized something was missing from his life, and no achievement or drug could fill that hole.

One night, Cody got tired of living in constant conflict due to his inner emptiness. He was so desperate he tried to hang himself. Fortunately, his brother found him and literally saved his life.

After that near tragedy Cody and his brother began going to church together. And in his time at church, Cody discovered that the true purpose of his life was not found in fighting or in partying. Cody discovered that the true purpose of his life was found in surrendering his life to God. He discovered that his achievements in the ring had no real meaning; his partying didn’t bring him any lasting joy or pleasure. He had to lay down all the things he thought defined him or gave him worth in order to find his real purpose in a relationship with God.

This former MMA fighter has now found a new life in Christ. As he explains it, “I’m . . . thankful that I’m able to surrender to [the Lord] and I’m not fighting anymore.” (2)

Denying one's self or forgetting one's self is a difficult thing to do. We like to be in control. But surrendering one's self to God is the first step in an authentic new life. Does God rule your life or are you, like Phil, simply faking it?

But there is a second step to a new life and it is even more challenging. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross . . ."

We've heard that command all our lives, but what does it mean "take up your cross"?

One thing it will mean for many of us is that we will have to give up our addiction to a life of comfort. There is nothing comfortable about a cross.

Thank heavens we do not have to take this command of our Lord literally. We're told that the average cross in ancient times may have weighed in the neighborhood of 300 pounds. That's a load. The crossbeam, the part that condemned men were required to carry, weighed about 100 pounds. (3) It makes me tired just thinking about it.

What does it mean to take up Christ's cross? I suspect it has something to do with our addiction to comfort. Have you noticed? Some people never want to leave their comfort zone. They never want to do anything that requires sacrifice. They never want to do anything that will cause them the least bit of stress. Forget about asking them to lead a third grade Sunday school class. Forget about asking them to do something simple like inviting a neighbor to church. "Oh, pastor, I couldn't do that. They might be offended." Yes, and on the other hand, they may have their entire life completely turned around.

You simply cannot serve Christ and always remain in your comfort zone. There are people within a short drive from this church who are facing some tremendous challenges—loneliness, addiction, depression. Some of them are like Cody Garbrandt—so desperate they're on the verge of taking their own life. Do we care?

Some cynic has said, "When the going gets tough, everyone leaves." That happened to Jesus. As the way got harder, the numbers of those who followed dwindled--until finally he died alone on Calvary. Yet, if he had been unwilling to lay down his life, the world would never have known the love of the Father.

And, on the other hand, if those early disciples had not picked up Jesus' cross and followed after him, we still would not know about that love . . .

Over the ages since those early disciples gave their lives to broadcast the news of God's love, a host of other people have given up everything to ensure that the Gospel message has endured.

But here is the truth of the situation: if you and I do not pick up the cross in our time--make those hard choices and assume those difficult responsibilities that are required to ensure that the church of Jesus Christ accomplishes its mission—our children's children will not know the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

It is sad but true—many of us don't want to do anything that requires us to sacrifice some of our time and resources. We sing "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me." But some of us are just faking it.

The story is told of a worker in an inner-city mission who had given many years to a most discouraging ministry. A friend came to him one day and said, "Why don't you leave this job before you are broken by its inhuman burden? Why don't you run away from it all?"

The man replied, "There are times when I would very much like to leave it all. But there is a strange man on a cross with love in his eyes who won't let me."

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross . . . Then he adds three more words: "and follow me." What does it mean to follow Jesus? You know what it means. Following Jesus means living a life of loving service just as he did.

Let me tell you about a young man named Mike Cohen who was diagnosed with leukemia when he was 18 years old, but intense chemo and radiation treatment eliminated the leukemia, and Mike returned to the active lifestyle of a healthy young man. He became an avid hiker and biker, taking cross-country trips on his bicycle to honor the cancer doctors who had saved his life.

What he didn't realize was that the aggressive treatments for his leukemia had damaged his heart muscle. By the age of 33, Mike's heart was failing. In February 2018 he lay in a hospital in San Diego with a life-threatening blood clot strangling his already weakened heart.

There was another young man named James Mazzuchelli. James was a Navy flight surgeon known for his dedication to his country, his courage and his selflessness. In February 2018 James was killed in a helicopter training mission at Camp Pendleton in San Diego. And so, that night, James's strong heart was transplanted into Mike Cohen, saving his life.

James's mother, Christine Cheers, was overwhelmed with grief after her son's death. The tiny sliver of hope that kept her going was the knowledge that James was still helping people, that he was still living inside each of the donor recipients. She wrote letters to each of the four recipients of her son's organs.

She only heard back from two of the recipients. Mike Cohen sounded sincerely grateful, and he and Christine stayed in touch. They exchanged letters and kept in touch over social media. And one year after Mike's heart transplant, he planned a cross-country bicycle trip from San Diego to Jacksonville, Florida to visit the grave site of the man whose heart gave him new life. Christine Cheers and her husband followed Mike's cross-country bike trip on social media.

On November 20, 2019 Mike and his friends arrived at the cemetery where James Mazzuchelli was buried. He and Christine hugged each other and wept. And then Mike knelt at James' grave and thanked him for the gift of life. A friend traveling with Mike brought out a stethoscope so Christine could hear her son's heart beating in Mike's chest. As Mike Cohen said, "As cliché as it sounds, I wanted them to know that James's heart was in a safe place. That I was going to do everything I could to protect it." (4)

When you take up Jesus' cross, you are taking up his heart. His heart, his priorities, his values, his love now live in you. And your journey through life becomes a journey to honor his sacrifice and protect his heart. You are taking up the very purpose and driving ambition of Jesus' life: to share God's love with the world. That's your cross. And Jesus' challenge to you is simple: whatever you have to sacrifice, whatever you have to lay down in order to pick up his cross, then do it. Then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you will truly discover a new life. Why fake it any longer? Why not surrender your life to God today?

1. "Inside the world of investigators who know you've faked your death" by Isabelle Kohn, MELBeta, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/inside-the-world-of-investigators-who-know-youve-faked-your-death>, August 26, 2019.

2. "MMA Fighter Cody Garbrandt on Finding Peace in Surrender," *I Am Second*, August 22, 2018, <http://blog.iamsecond.com/mma-fighter-cody-garbrandt-on-finding-peace-in-surrender>.

3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion>.

4. "Their Son's Heart Saved His Life. So He Rode 1,426 Miles to Meet Them." By A.C. Shilton, Bicycling.com, January 24, 2020. <https://www.bicycling.com/rides/a30458648/heart-transplant-recipient-rides-1426-miles-to-meet-donors-family/>.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., [Dynamic Preaching Third Quarter Sermons](#), by King Duncan

II

Have you ever had a setback, a defeat, a screw-up? Have you ever snatched failure from the jaws of success? Playwright Oscar Wilde once commented after a disastrous opening night that his play was a great success but the audience was a failure. That's one way of handling defeat, I guess.

Winston Churchill had that same ability to spin a setback a setback into something else. He was once asked, "What most prepared you to lead England through World War II?"

His reply? "It was the time I repeated a class in grade school." His questioner then asked: "You mean you flunked a grade?" Winston Churchill straightened himself up to his full height and replied: "I never flunked in my life. I was given a second opportunity to get it right!" (1) That's the way to handle a defeat look at it as a second chance to get it right.

Simon Peter knew about second chances. You will remember from last week that Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?" It was Simon Peter who answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus heaped on Simon Peter words of profound praise for his answer: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."

Today's lesson follows that rapturous scene. Matthew tells us that 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, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. At this, says Matthew, Simon Peter took Christ aside and began to rebuke him. Can you imagine anyone rebuking the Messiah, the Son of the Living God? Simon Peter has proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Now he is rebuking him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Well, you know what happens next. Jesus turns and says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

What a turnaround! It takes Simon Peter only seven verses to go from being the rock upon which Christ will build his church to being the voice of Satan tempting Christ to avoid the cross. That is one of the reasons I love the Bible. There is no effort to sanitize these stories. There is no attempt to make biblical characters more holy than they were. One moment Peter proclaims Christ as the Messiah and the next moment he is telling Christ how to go about his work. One moment he is in the garden defending Christ with a sword against a Roman legion, and the next he is standing outside the palace where Jesus is being tried and denies with an oath that he ever knew Jesus. One moment he is in hiding as his Master is being crucified, and the next he is proudly proclaiming Christ's message to thousands of listeners on the Day of Pentecost.

Even more important, however, is this truth: we are Simon Peter. Up and down, in and out, defending and denying that's us. We can identify with this fickle disciple. When he looked back on it later, Simon Peter probably regretted trying to correct Jesus. But we all say dumb things from time to time. We all take our feet and shove them toe first into our mouths. Maybe I'm just speaking for myself, but I suspect it is part of the human condition.

In her memoirs, Barbara Bush described one of her most embarrassing moments. Along with her husband, then the Vice President, Mrs. Bush was lunching with Emperor Hirohito at Tokyo's Imperial Palace. Sitting next to the Emperor, Mrs. Bush found conversation an uphill task. To all her efforts at verbal engagement, the Emperor would smile and simply answer "Yes" or "No," with an occasional "Thank you" tossed in.

Looking around at her elegant surroundings, Mrs. Bush complimented Hirohito on his official residence.

"Thank you," he said. "Is it new?" pressed Mrs. Bush.

"Yes." Hirohito replied. "Was the old palace just so old that it was falling down?" asked Mrs. Bush. In his most charming, yet regal, manner, Hirohito replied, "No, I'm afraid that you bombed it." (2) Oops! Mrs. Bush doesn't regard that as one of her finest hours. But we've all done it at the least appropriate moment, we've blurted out something dumb.

It's like a tour group of college students in Italy. They were standing just inside St. Peter's Basilica, the second largest church in the world. The tour guide explained, "This church is so large that no man on earth could hit a baseball from one end to the other not Lou Gehrig, not Babe Ruth, not even Mark McGuire." The group stared in silence at the beautiful marble sculptures, intricate paintings, and glorious mosaics all around the enormous building. Then a certain college girl interrupted the silence with an astonished question: "You mean, they actually let them hit baseballs in here?" (3) Okay, we might think she's a few fries short of a Happy Meal, but all of us have blurted out remarks just as clueless.

Simon Peter rebuked Jesus. The truth is that Peter cared about his Master. He didn't want him to suffer and die. But something else vexed Peter. How could the Messiah be put to death? That didn't make sense. Peter was impetuous and a little impertinent in his rebuke of Jesus, but he was being quite honest. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" As usual Peter was probably saying what the other disciples were thinking.

If we were honest about it, there is a lot about our faith that bothers all of us. If that is not so, why are we not turning this community upside down with our zeal for the Gospel? Why are we so anemic in our witness for Christ?

Soren Kirkegaard once told a parable about a town where all the citizens loved and admired the fire chief and his crew. One day the alarm went off at the fire house and so the chief and his crew hurried to get into their wagon to race toward the burning building. But part of the way there the road was blocked. Hundreds of citizens were standing in the street holding squirt guns! Occasionally the people would turn in the direction of the fire and shoot off their tiny guns. The fire chief yelled at them, "What are you doing? Why do you have water pistols? What are you trying to accomplish?"

The citizens replied, "We've all gathered here to support your efforts! We all believe in the good work you do in this community, and each of us has come to make a humble contribution." The people in the crowd then once again smiled at each other, looked in the direction of the raging inferno and squirted some more water from their pistols. In disbelief, the fire chief looked at them and said, "Get out of here! Fires like this are not for well-meaning people who want to make limited contributions! Such situations demand firemen who are ready to risk their lives in putting out the flames!" (4)

Rather than fire hoses, we so often stand around squirting our water pistols, don't we? Why? Because we are like Simon Peter before he was confronted by the risen Christ. Sometimes we're up, sometimes we're down. Sometimes we are convinced; other times we are confused. Sometimes we are soldiers in Christ's army; at other times we are missing in action.

After Christ confronts Peter about his impetuous comments, Christ spells out what is facing those who would give their lives to him completely. Jesus says to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it . . ."

This is heavy stuff. Jesus says if we want to follow him, we must take up his cross. In August of 2003, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was broken into twice. In the first event, thieves made away with a metal moneybox. Three weeks later, vandals escaped with something much more puzzling. Being a Catholic church there was a large crucifix in the church. The thieves had unbolted the 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster Jesus from the crucifix, but left behind the wooden cross to which it was attached. The church caretaker, David St. James, confessed his bewilderment at this. "They just decided, 'We're going to leave the cross and take Jesus,'" he said. "We don't know why they took just him. We figure if you want the crucifix, you take the whole crucifix." (5)

We know why, don't we? Many people would like to have Jesus and leave his cross behind. Jesus represents forgiveness and grace. Jesus is a divine Friend who accepts us as we are, hears our prayers and helps us in times of need. Who wouldn't want Jesus? But his cross, on the other hand, represents discipline and self-denial. The cross represents service and sacrifice. The cross represents taking our eyes off of ourselves and putting them on those for whom Christ died. That's an entirely different matter altogether. We want Jesus; we're uncertain about taking up his cross.

Yes, those thieves are not the only ones who want to take Jesus, but not his cross. That is our temptation as well.

Peter backslid in a hurry when he was first confronted with the message of the cross. Often we will, too. But fortunately that is not the end of the story.

Peter had an encounter with the risen Christ, and the man who had been a fickle reed became a solid rock of faith and service. That can also happen to us.

If there is any doubt that Jesus is resisting the lure of the easy way, listen to the words that follow: "If any man would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Many of us today are making the mistake of following the easy way. We see it in our family life. Homes are disintegrating because a father or a mother decides one day that enough is enough and simply walks out. To be sure, being a parent is hard work.

We see it in our work. True, it is nice to see that the work ethic has regained respectability. Many of us can remember when young people dreaded taking their place in the business world. That attitude was reflected in a Doonesbury cartoon a few years back that had Zonker Harris noticing a despondent student coming out of the library. Zonker asked, "What's the problem?" The student replied, "It's nothing anybody can do anything about. It's just that tomorrow I'm graduating and on Monday I'm assuming a position as a junior vice president of the Chase Manhattan Bank of New York." Zonker is immediately shocked and saddened and says, "Hey, man, I'm sorry. I didn't know." Those were the seventies. But all that has changed. Today many people would sell their soul to be a junior vice president of Chase Manhattan and according to recent news reports MANY OF THEM

HAVE. So a national magazine asks on its cover, "Whatever happened to ethics?" We are working harder but we are still seeking the easy way.

We can also see the desire to follow the easy way in the church. One fellow said to another, "Say, I heard that you bought a new car. How did you ever afford it?" The other fellow replied, "I just cancelled my church pledge." The first one said, "Gee, I wish that I could buy a new car for that little."

We are the devotees of the easy way even though everyone in this room knows TWO IMPORTANT TRUTHS. The first is that the path to personal success is that of self denial. Zig Ziglar tells of visiting the Washington Monument. As he and his party approached the monument, he heard a guide announcing loudly that there would be a two hour wait to ride the elevator to the top of the monument. However, with a smile on his face the guide then said, "There is no waiting to go to the top if you are willing to take the stairs." Successful people know that there is no limit to what a healthy, reasonably intelligent person in this society can accomplish if he or she is willing to "climb the stairs." The opportunity is there for anyone willing to pay the price.

Success in life requires a willingness to resist the lure of the easy way. A sound body requires that we exercise, eat the right foods, conquer bad habits. A sound mind requires that we read, that we observe, that we continually learn. A sound marriage requires that each partner goes into it with the understanding that marriage is not a 50/50 proposition but a 90/10 one in which both parties give the 90. A sound family means that we will take the time to be sensitive to the needs of our children, that we provide not only for their physical needs but their emotional and spiritual needs as well. Such goals require sacrifice, they require perseverance, they require determination. But everyone of us knows that the path to personal success is the path of self-denial. We also know that self denial is essential to the salvation of the world. Here is the missing summons in our day. Our world faces some tremendous challenges. Is there on one who cares enough to act? Some cynic has said, "When the going gets tough, everyone leaves." That happened to Jesus. As the way got harder, the numbers of those who followed dwindled until finally He died alone on Calvary. Yet, if He had been unwilling to lay down His life, the world would never have known the love of the Father. If those early disciples had not picked up Jesus' cross and followed after Him, we still would not know about that love and if you and I do not pick up the cross in our time make those hard choices and assume those difficult responsibilities our children's children will not know the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

1. *Daily Grace Devotional Reflections to Nourish Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, Co: Cook Communications Ministries, 2005), p. 189.
 2. Bob Dole, *Great Political Wit: Laughing (Almost) All the Way to the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 135.
 3. Laughter for a Saturday. Subscribe @ <http://family-safe-mail.com/magiclist/>.
 4. Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), pp. 82-83.
 5. Andrea Elliott, "Thieves Take Figure of Jesus, but Not the Cross," *New York Times* (8-25-03). Cited by Greg Asimakoupoulos in *Leadership*.
 7. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1979), pp. 44-46.
- King Duncan

Ill Desiano

"Oh, is that what you meant?"

We might use a phrase like this when we get a left-handed compliment, or someone sends us an unexpected gift, or when a political leader employs a new phrase whose meaning takes time to figure out. You'll remember the famous phrase, "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse." It's a nice sounding way of threatening someone else. "Oh, is that what you meant?"

I hear Peter trying to say something like this to Jesus. We cannot divorce the passage we have today from the one we had last week, where Jesus told Peter he was the Rock on which his church would be built. That passage ended with the cryptic sentence about Jesus telling his disciples not to tell anyone he was the Christ. In today's passage we know why Jesus said that.

When Jesus tells them what being the "Christ" is all about—how the Son of Man would be rejected, disgraced, and murdered, it takes no time for Peter to say to Jesus, "Oh, that's what you meant?" And he has definite opinions about this. In fact, he begins immediately to try to disabuse Jesus of this harrowing notion of being the Christ. "You cannot mean what you are saying."

Peter was not the only one who wanted a Messiah on his own terms. Haven't we, throughout history, remade the image of Messiah in a variety of ways—from the ascetic who rejected the world, to the emperor who conquered nations and developed political systems, to the philosopher who answered all our questions, to the social radical who overthrows assumptions about how life can be lived?

Indeed, in our own personal lives one of the greatest temptations we face is to make up religion as we want it, filled with excuses for our own weaknesses, or points to argue with people we do not like, or practices that seem to bring us solace but ask nothing more. We have wanted every kind of Jesus except the one who tells us that we have to renounce ourselves particularly by letting go of the security blankets we use to protect us from what God is asking us.

Yes, saving ourselves and those we love is a primary impulse in life. Jesus is warning his disciples of the way we can be deceived by this primary impulse. Because we can continue to put ourselves in the middle of everything by thinking that life is about aggrandizing ourselves, or dominating others, or getting even. Until we realize that God, and God's Kingdom, have to be at the center of our lives we are not seeing clearly. Until we realize our salvation consists of living for others as Jesus did, we are just like Peter; we are trying to write an alternative script rather than accept God's will that we support each other in our suffering.

For the Messiah is the one who carries our burdens, even to the point of death, as a way of showing us that his path is not about getting our own way but giving ourselves as a sign of God's love for everyone. After all, Jesus does not die for one group or one nation; Jesus dies for all. Denying himself, he affirms God's love for everyone—a lesson that has been so hard to hear down through history, even to our present days.

"All men are created equal." Oh, did you really mean that? "Love your neighbor as you love your own self." Oh, did you really intend that? "Deny yourself and give yourselves to others." Really? Indeed, look upon the Messiah, and the cross he carried for us. Then we can see that, for sure, he really meant what he said.