

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. The scripture text is taken from Matthew 16:21-28

The story is told of a stingy farmer who wanted to get his wife a great birthday present. As he was driving down the road, he noticed a sign near the airport road that read: "Experience the Thrill of Flying".

He thought that is it! My wife would love to see our farm from way up there, to get a "bird's eye view". So the farmer went to the airport and found the pilot, and inquired about the price of taking him and his wife on a flight over the farm.

So this stingy farmer began to barter with the pilot. Finally the pilot agreed to a lower price on one condition, that the farmer and his wife could not say a single word during the entire flight.

One spoken word, however small, would increase the price to the pilot's original fee. The farmer's determination to spend as little money as possible, agreed to the condition.

The next morning the three of them took off and were soon high in the clear blue sky. The pilot knew that if he did a couple of roller-coaster dips and turns with the plane, the couple in the back seat would surely say something, and he would receive a higher price.

So the pilot dipped and turned, rolled, climbed and dived, and even did a few loop-de-loops. But not a sound was uttered. Not a scream or a whimper. Nothing but the sound of the wind over the wings and the motor.

As the plane was landing, the pilot, amazed at the determination of his passengers, yelled back at the farmer, "I can't believe you didn't say something up there through my dips, loops and rolls you were quiet the whole time, I guess you win!"

The farmer shouted back, "Well you almost won, you almost won, because I sure felt like hollerin' when my wife fell out of the plane."

You see, the farmer was determined to get what he wanted on his terms. In our gospel narrative for today, Peter, had a similar sense of determination.

Peter did not understand why Jesus had to suffer and die. Peter wanted to argue his point. Peter was determined to create another plan for Jesus.

In fact, in verse 22, the writer of Matthew's Gospel, says: "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."

The disciples had determined for themselves that the messiah would come for Israel alone to overthrow its enemies.

Jesus seemed harsh, but stern. Jesus said: "Get behind me Satan!" This is how Jesus responded to Peter's egotistical determination.

Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block and says: "You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus knew the divine plan, after all, Jesus was God in human flesh. Peter was not God. Jesus told Peter to "Get behind me".

What Jesus was doing, He was telling Peter, and the disciples, about the correct posture of discipleship. "Get behind me". In order to be a follower, you had to be, behind a leader.

This was a call for Peter and the disciples to renew their call to discipleship, to experience it at a deeper level. This is a formula, not merely location.

Jesus said that He was going to Jerusalem, that He is going to the cross, to suffer and die, so if you are a true disciple, a true follower, then you will follow me all the way there.

Jesus continues by making this point clear. Jesus addresses the issue of true discipleship. Discipleship is based on faith in Christ, and a confidence in the future victory of God.

Discipleship is not merely a high human idea or a noble principle of being a church member. Discipleship is not just living a good life or following the advice Jesus gives.

Discipleship has costs. And our faith should tell us that something has happened on a cross over 2,000 years ago, that makes everything different.

What Jesus is saying is that to believe in Him as the Christ, to confess His name, just as Peter did in the passage, is to live a life that is reoriented toward the good news that God has acted decisively and ultimately, in Jesus.

Now in verses 24 through 26, we find a call to discipleship which is based on faith and a sure belief and conviction that God has already won the war against evil and sin.

This life of discipleship is not just a, "I'll do what I can, depending on whether or not I have the time or I feel something is right or good." Or, "I will do things my way."

The call to discipleship is a matter of confession. Discipleship means to declare your faith in Jesus, boldly to the world.

Throughout the Bible, the word used to mean confession in the Greek is "mar-teer-ee-on". Pronounced "Martyrion".

Do you hear another word in there? (Of course you do, you hear the word, Martyr). This same word is also used for confessing or witnessing your true belief in something other than yourself.

Jesus said: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

In the First Century, taking up one's cross was a colloquialism, a slang expression for dying to what you want.

Jesus tells us that as disciples, we should deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. Jesus is referring to giving up your desires, for His desires.

Understand, that if you and I had lived in Jesus' day (in the First Century), if you saw a person carrying a cross, you knew only one thing was a head of that person, "death".

Think of Jesus walking through Jerusalem up the hill to His death. When we take up His cross daily, we are testifying to the world that we are giving up our life, as an act of a testimony to a much bigger truth than we are.

Many around the world, still confess by literal martyrdom. That is not the case here in America. Although for us, the call to give one's life as a testimony to the truth of the gospel is no less real, for us, self-denial, taking up that cross, confessing that you are a Christian, and that you believe in the cross, is an action of participating in sacrificial love.

Discipleship here may simply mean orientating our lives to serving God, by serving others, rather than serving self.

You see, the call to discipleship is also matter of community. What good will it be to gain the whole world, yet lose your soul. Discipleship is not about individualism.

Sure you can gain the whole world for yourself, but what good will it do you? None. Instead deny yourself, and serve others, that is the real call of discipleship.

The meaning of discipleship is learned along the way, a life-long process. Jesus said to Peter: "Get behind me". Follow along and you will learn what it means to be a disciple.

Hopefully, we read our Bibles for more than just good stories or advice. Hopefully, we study our Bibles so as to see, how to shape our own lives, how to be more Godly in this God-less world and to be more Christ-like.

You can be a believer, but not a follower, you can be a follower, but not a disciple. Jesus doesn't want fans from the sidelines, He wants disciples on the frontline in the spiritual battle that is being waged.

William Barclay once wrote, "It is possible, to be a follower of Jesus without being a disciple; to be a camp follower, without being a soldier of the king; to be a hanger-on in some great work, without pulling your weight. Once someone was asking a great scholar about a young man, He said, "So and so, tells me that he was one of your students". The teacher answered, "He may attended my lecture, but he was not one of my students."

Jesus calls us to be true disciples, not distant followers. Discipleship is a learning process. We learn how to serve Jesus and to serve others along the way.

For the disciples, Jesus was addressing this very thing. Jesus was explaining how to find life.

Now let's look at verse 25: Jesus said: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This is the message of the cross. On the cross, Jesus experienced death, but life. On the cross, we can see death, but we should find life.

Understand, that life, comes by death. Life comes through our "martyrion, our confession, our martyrdom, which for all of us, is our self denial.

To die, is to live. Our desire should be replaced by the desires of God. Our desire should be to want less of ourselves, and to want more of God.

We will have to overcome our own determination to have things done the way we want them done. For example, the farmer in opening story, he got what he wanted, but with a result, that he probably had not counted on.

Some of us are like that. In matters of our family, our job, our involvement in the community, and even in the church.

We can be strongly determined to have and to do things our way. We can let our pride and/or our stubbornness get in the way of learning from Jesus' example, of doing what is not in our own interest, but in the interest of God.

Often times, that means getting out of the way, and not being a stumbling block, but letting go, and letting God, by His grace, allowing us to see, what can be, and will be if we let God do the leading.

We must deny our pride, and deny ourselves. Our determination should not be for ourselves, but for God's will to be done, period!

Then, and only then, will we find life, a life of peace, a life of justice, and a life of grace. Amen.

Let us pray:

Lord God, You have called us to follow You through faith in Christ. Help us to put aside self, to put aside our ego, to put aside our own selfish desires and to get behind you, and follow where you will lead us in this life. Be with us in our daily walk of faith and discipleship, as we strive to be more Christ-like, by following your will, not ours. All these things we humbly pray, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.