

THE MESSAGE for Aug 28, 2011**Matthew 16:21-28*****Peter... Losing Your Life to Find It*****The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Bill and Carl were brothers. Bill was 18, Carl, 15. Carl wanted to learn how to ski so Bill agreed to teach him. They hopped into the old VW bug one day and headed up to Camelback Mountain in the Poconos.

Carl had never skied before, so his plan was to conquer the Bunny Hill first. His older brother had a different plan. He said the best thing to do was to ride the chairlift up to the top of the mountain and see the scenery before the mountain got too crowded. Then Carl could ride the chairlift back down and ski the Bunny Hill.

It wasn't until they reached the top and enjoyed the view that Carl learned you can't ride the chairlift back down. There's only one way down the mountain, and Bill knew it all along. He smiled, saying the best way to learn how to ski was to just follow him down the mountain.

Carl followed but he didn't exactly ski. He mostly fell down the mountain, which, Bill said was the first and most important lesson in skiing – learning how to fall. Carl did more falling than following.

Have you ever followed someone, and found yourself in a place or a circumstance you didn't expect? That was Peter's experience with Jesus. Jesus often leads us to places or circumstances we don't expect and it might feel like we are in the middle of a hurricane. We often do more falling than following. I know I do.

Peter and his brother, Andrew, are fishermen by trade, dedicated and hardworking guys. One day, as they're cleaning their nets, Jesus walks up to them and says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." They drop their nets and they follow. I find this so odd until I found out what was going on here. When a rabbi says to someone, "Follow me," it's an invitation to become a student. It's a great honor because only the brightest and best are invited to follow.

By age 12 most of the Jewish boys would have had the first five books of the Bible memorized. A rabbi would interview potential candidates and during the interview the rabbi might ask him to recite one of the first five books of the Bible in its entirety. Or he might ask you, *How many times does the name Lord appear in the 11th chapter of the book of Leviticus?* (The answer is three by the way, I had to look it up.) A rabbi would limit his group to around 12 followers. You needed to have a 4.0 GPS (I mean GPA – see I wouldn't make the cut.) And a 2400 on the SATs just to be considered.

Most people were not chosen but instead went back home to learn the family trade or business. If you were chosen, the rabbi would say, “follow me.” That’s what Jesus says; making him a rabbi. Peter was doing their family trade, fishing, which means he didn’t make the cut. He wasn’t chosen until Jesus comes along.

A rabbi was picky about who they chose because the excellence of the student reflected the excellence of the teacher. The teacher was known for his students. If a rabbi would let anyone in, it was clear he was not a sought after teacher. On the other hand if his students were an elite group then that rabbi was respected and admired by all.

This is the mindset that Peter brings when Jesus says to him, “follow me.” But that mindset will change. Jesus makes an open invitation saying “anyone” which means “everyone” can follow him. It doesn’t take long for Peter to realize that Jesus is a different kind of rabbi. He not only teaches about God and God’s ways he performs miracles too. He is the real deal. And he is no ordinary rabbi.

One day Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The truth is people are saying lots of things about Jesus. There was something different about him and it sparks all kinds of conversation. He lived by a different set of expectations and values. Jesus then asks his disciples, “And who do *you* say that I am?” Peter answers with insight from God, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus basically says that’s right and here is what you can expect. I’m heading to Jerusalem to die on a cross and rise again three days later.

Peter expects his Messiah to be a political king and military leader who will humble Israel’s enemies and restore Israel to the kind of power and glory they enjoyed during King David’s reign. Many people had such expectations from their Messiah. Peter is also looking for a piece of the action, maybe get a position on the king’s cabinet, and sit at the right hand of the throne. Jesus says that’s not the way it’s going to be.

Peter has a problem with Jesus’ plan and feels the need to correct Jesus and set him straight regarding his role as Messiah. But Jesus rebukes Peter, telling him that he is living by God’s agenda and not some human agenda. Then Jesus spells out exactly what it means to follow him. Listen to our reading for today.

(Read Matthew 16:21-28)

If we were looking for a church slogan to accurately capture what it means to be a follower of Jesus, it could be this: *Come and die.*

That would surely get people’s attention, wouldn’t it? Although it probably wouldn’t attract many people. Who wants to talk about death? We don’t like that word. We avoid it. When someone dies we say things like, *they passed over, they’re gone, they kicked the bucket, they bought the farm, they’re asleep with Christ, they passed away.* We tend to avoid saying, *they died.* Death is so final, so complete, so not here.

Bonheoffer put it this way. “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”
Can I have a *whoa*.....

Church history tells us that many who followed Jesus ended up on that road.
According to tradition:

- Matthew was killed by the sword in Ethiopia.
- Mark died in Alexandria, Egypt after being dragged by horses through the streets until he was dead.
- Luke was hanged in Greece.
- Peter was crucified upside down by Nero.
- Thomas was stabbed with a spear during a missionary trip.
- Jude the brother of Jesus was killed with arrows when he refused to deny his faith in Christ.
- James was beheaded in Jerusalem. Many have died for Christ.

So let’s follow Jesus on this one and consider what he’s saying here. The cross in Jesus’ day was a symbol of death, an instrument of torture, the worst possible way to die. There are other symbols Jesus could have considered. Why not

- a dove – a symbol of peace
- a shepherd’s staff – a symbol of protection
- a rainbow – a symbol of hope and promise

Why a cross? If you want to attract people and get them to follow you then this is probably the worst possible symbol to use. It’s a hangman’s noose or an electric chair. How many people have those symbols on a necklace or charm bracelet?

We’ve turned the symbol of the cross into a beautiful ornament, a fancy piece of jewelry. Look how clean and sterilized our brass cross is here in our worship space. I mean no disrespect but those hearing these words from Jesus to take up your cross would have been so offended, so turned off, so repelled they would have thought Jesus was totally and absolutely mad. What was Jesus thinking?

The cross is a symbol of humiliation and suffering and death. Nobody in their right mind would aspire to be put on a cross. Nobody would willingly go there to be put on display, naked on the side of the road, stripped of any dignity, bleeding and suffering where passer-bys would spit on you, mock you, degrade you. The Romans knew how to beat you to the edge of death and then make you carry the 125 pound top beam of your cross to your place of execution.

Point is: when Jesus says take up your cross and follow him this is not a cake walk. You can’t carry a cross without suffering. There is no comfortable way to carry a cross.

I often speak with people who say “Oh this is my cross I have to bear.” They are usually talking about a challenging situation or responsibility that has been placed upon them against their will. That’s not what Jesus is talking about. The cross Jesus is talking

about is not forced upon us but is taken up. We choose to carry our cross. We choose to live a particular lifestyle that will cost us our lives. Can I have another *whoa.....*

The Bible is clear on this, following Jesus will cost you something. Following Jesus will cost you your life. You no longer live for you – you live for Jesus. That’s what he is saying. Jesus invites us to die to ourselves. “Let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.”

I’ve been around my share of dead people. I’ve been in the room when doctors have announced the time of death. I’ve walked into the delivery room just after a baby was stillborn. I’ve been with family members when a loved one takes their last breath. I stood next to many open caskets as people say their good byes just before the casket is closed for the final time.

I don’t mean any disrespect here, but I’ve noticed something about dead people. They don’t seem to care very much what other people think of them or what they say about them. Dead people aren’t concerned about how nice their clothes are. They aren’t caught up in how much money they have in the bank. They aren’t concerned about getting a promotion, or their house or their stuff. My point is – death is the ultimate surrender of yourself to all that you have. When you’re dead you are no longer concerned with your life.

Jesus invites us to choose that kind of approach to life. He calls us to die to ourselves, daily and to live for him, daily. It’s a daily decision and for me that’s the most challenging part of following Jesus.

Here’s the question I found myself pondering this week – *Am I really carrying my cross if there is no suffering or sacrifice?* Truth is, I don’t like pain it hurts me. I avoid it. Who in their right mind willingly does something if we know it’s going to involve suffering or sacrifice?

When was the last time that following Jesus cost you something? When was the last time it cost you a relationship? When was the last time it cost you a meal so that a hungry person could be fed? When was the last time you talked about Jesus with someone knowing they might reject you? What has following Jesus cost you lately?

No matter how we put it taking up a cross and dying to oneself sounds like torture. You would think that such a decision would make us miserable. Is that what it means to follow Jesus? I don’t think so. If we are miserable, we probably aren’t following Jesus.

The cross reminds me that I am dying every day to be a follower of Jesus.

Jesus says, if you want to be my follower deny yourself, take up our cross, and follow me. What does that mean? What does that look like?

- Does it mean selling everything and becoming a missionary in a far off country– for some it might.
- Does it mean moving halfway across the country for a new job because you feel God calling you to do so – for some it might.
- Does it mean talking about Jesus with your neighbor because you know it might help their situation even though you know it will change your relationship – for some it might.
- Does it mean not going to Disney and instead going on a mission trip to a third world country – for some it might.
- For some it might be even less dramatic...

Sally was fixing dinner for her and her husband, Bill. Bill was watching her but she didn't know it. She went to the refrigerator and pulled out two bottles of soda. The one was almost empty and Bill knew it had gone flat. She poured it into a glass and then opened the other bottle and poured it into another glass. Bill watched to see which glass she was going give him. When they sat down at the table she had taken the glass of soda that was – flat.

That's what it looks like when we deny ourselves to follow Jesus. It's putting others and their best interests before ours.

Do you remember those WWJD brackets? What Would Jesus Do - that question still applies. But now the question is - what would Jesus have me do? That's the question.

Following Jesus will take us to places and circumstances we don't expect. But as we learn from Peter losing our lives for Jesus' sake we truly find a life worth living. May that be true for us because we are followers of Jesus. Amen.