

We look back at this event from some 2000 years ago, and we know the price that Jesus paid to show us God's love. And while Jesus paid that price to insure that we would live with him eternally in heaven, he also wants us to serve him in this life. Martin Luther puts this so beautifully in his explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed. After confessing about Jesus, *"He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death,"* Luther goes on to say, *"All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and live and rules eternally. This is most certainly true."*

In one of my favorite Bible passages, Paul puts this new priority in living this way: *"[Christ] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor 5:15).* And elsewhere he says, *"You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body" (1 Cor 6:19, 20).* In other words, honor God with your life. Put Jesus first, others next; and yourself last, and you will have JOY, great and lasting JOY, the same joy Jesus felt in serving his heavenly Father. That's no different than what Jesus is saying in Mark's Gospel today: *"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world,"* to put himself first, *"yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."*

So, here we are, sitting in a mostly comfortable pew, in our beautiful church building, with countless opportunities before us to bring Jesus' love to those around us—in our congregation, in our communities, in our country, and in our world—in short, to bring others within our area of influence closer to Jesus. What will we do for Jesus today? How will we serve him? In what way will we sacrifice for him? In what way will we deny our self, take up our cross, and follow him? Will it be with our time? With our money? With our voice? With our talents and abilities? The list is endless. We're only limited by what we want to do for Jesus.

May God graciously fill our hearts with a spirit of repentance and faith, with self-denial and sacrifice, with gratitude and thanks, so that we willingly and gladly put our Savior first, others second, and ourselves last—to his glory and for our spiritual and eternal good. Amen.

Mark 8:27-38; John 19:28, 29—*Love Takes Up the Cross*
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What is it about a surprise birthday party that makes it memorable? Isn't it the surprise part of the party? It's not really the day itself. In fact, as we get older, we tend to lose our childhood excitement and look at our birthday as just another day on the calendar, another milestone on our journey through life. And sometimes we're made to feel older than we really are [62nd birthday story].

Think about it. Our day is going as it typically does. Perhaps we've even forgotten that it's our birthday. We're just going through the day, thinking about this or doing that, when, BAM, out come the cake and the noisemakers and our family and friends. Into the monotony and routine of our day comes the grand and glorious announcement that we're loved and cherished, that there are folks who care about us so much that they're willing to hide behind the couch and jump out and express their love for us. They show us something we don't expect.

In today's first Gospel text, the disciples get something they don't expect. They're used to Jesus asking them questions, and today's no different. *"Who do people say I am?"* he asks. It's an innocent question, isn't it? Sort of like a politician who wants to know his approval ratings, Jesus wants to know how his radical gospel message is being received. The disciples respond favorably. *"Jesus,"* they say, *"your popularity is really up there. 75% of those surveyed view you favorably. They put you up there with guys like John the Baptist, Elijah, and the great prophets of old."* But then comes a question the disciples don't expect: *"But what about you? Who do you say I am?"*

"Do you," Jesus is asking, *"do you understand what I've been saying? Is the message I've been sharing with you from day one sinking in?"* Not surprisingly, it's Peter who's the first to pipe up. Perhaps speaking for all the disciples, he says. *"You're the Messiah."* We cheer for Peter, don't we? We slap him on the back and say, *"Good job, Peter! Great answer! I couldn't have said it better myself."*

But then Jesus takes the conversation in an unexpected direction. He starts talking about death—not someone else's, but his own. And since the disciples are his followers and are joined to him "at the hip," so to speak, Jesus may be referring to their deaths, as well.

Today, then, we learn this lesson:

Love Takes Up the Cross

1. It was that way for Jesus.

2. Why should it be any different for us?

1. Mark writes, "[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this."

The Israelite people had been praying for and anticipating the coming of the Messiah for a long time. His arrival was to be a joyous occasion, one that marked the time when Israel would throw off Roman tyranny and finally be a free state, the kind of kingdom that God had destined her to be. Many thought that the Messiah would be a great military leader, one who would muster a vast army to bring about God's final victory. "So, why this talk about death, Jesus? Let's focus on the victory, not your own demise." It's obvious that the disciples don't understand what Jesus is talking about. It's no wonder that he has to tell them not to tell anyone. They just don't get it. This isn't the Messiah that the general populace expects. They're expecting the Messiah to be a figure of glory and grandeur, not of suffering and sacrifice. No, Jesus isn't by any stretch of the imagination the kind of Messiah that they expect him to be.

So, Peter, with the very best of intentions, takes Jesus aside for a little sidebar correction. He's going to set Jesus straight. Scripture doesn't reveal to us the details of Peter's conversation with Jesus, and I personally appreciate the fact that it doesn't. Given Jesus' reaction to Peter's rebuke—even calling him Satan, "the accuser," it's probably a sign of God's grace that we don't know how miserably Peter put his foot in his mouth and embarrassed himself.

Jesus responds with strong words. He wants Peter—in fact, all of the disciples—to understand. He wants them to see how big God's unconditional love for them is, but, as before, they just don't get it. Jesus wants them to love their neighbor, but they can only think of themselves. Jesus teaches them that sometimes doing what God wants can take a lot of hard work, but they only look for the quick fix, the easy way out, the stroll down easy street. To walk according to God's will means nothing less than dying to our own selfish wants and desires. Jesus turns and looks at all his disciples, so they know his words are directed not only to Peter, but to them, as well, and he says, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

As we've been hearing this Lenten season—both on Wednesdays and on the weekends, Jesus was under constant duress to give up his heavenly Father's plan for the salvation of the world. Following his forty days of temptation in the wilderness, where Satan tried with all his might to deter Jesus from his appointment with suffering and the cross, Luke tells us, "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time" (Lk 4:13). This was one of those opportune times. Peter's sidebar conversation with Jesus must have been very inviting. "I don't really want to suffer. I don't really want to die. I don't really want to go to hell. Who does?"

In the Garden of Gethsemane we get a vivid picture of the struggle that was very real for Jesus. On Maundy Thursday evening he's praying for his heavenly Father to find some other way to accomplish our salvation. As true God, Jesus knows what's waiting for him the next day: whipping and ridicule, insult and injury, death and the damnation of hell—all the things we deserve because of our sin. As true man, he's terrified—absolutely terrified—of what awaits him on Calvary, and we see him sweating great drops of blood.

But Jesus had come to seek and to save the lost. Paul writes, "He, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Php 2:6-8). And on the cross he was even willing to suffer what we might call the small things, the unimportant things—suffering from extreme thirst—so that he might fulfill what God had said he would do. "Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips." And Jesus drank. He drank for you and for me. For Jesus it was all about suffering and sacrifice, so that for you and for me it could be all about life and salvation.

Love takes up the cross. It was that way for Jesus. Why should it be any different for us?

2. As Jesus speaks to his disciples, he invites the crowd to listen, too. He wants them—as he wants us today—to hear his words: "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 and for the gospel will save it."