

Today, I want to pick up on the second half of last Sunday's Gospel
Last Sunday we heard about Simon Peter and his great confession of faith.
Peter declared to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

And Jesus said,
 Good answer Peter, I will call you, The Rock, and on this rock, this seed of faith, I will
 build my church.

But that wasn't all that happened.

So today we hear the other half of the story.
 "From that time forward, Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of man must
 suffer many things, must be rejected and killed and on the third day, rise from the
 dead."

And what did Peter do?

He interrupted Jesus.
 "Stop! Jesus. What you're saying, can't be true. What's all this talk about suffering and
 dying."

But Jesus stops Peter and says,
 "Get behind me Satan. You are not on the side of God but of men."

One minute ago, Peter was The Rock.
One minute ago, Peter had the keys of the kingdom.
But now, Jesus said to Peter,

 "Get behind me Satan. Your mind is not thinking God's thoughts. You are thinking
 human thoughts."

Peter had been a rock and then in a flash he was a stumbling block, an offense to the Gospel.
He had been a star disciple and then in the blink of an eye he was Satan.

Jesus continued,
 "Whoever would be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.
 Whoever will save his life will lose it. Whoever will lose his life for my sake (for others
 and for God) will find it. What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world but
 loses his own soul."

Simon Peter had the right answers but he didn't fully understand. He said, "You are the Christ,
the Son of the Living God," but he did not understand about the way of the cross.

Peter had the right theological answer;
but he didn't understand what the cross meant for his life.

You see, Simon Peter only had half of the story right.

Part of being a Christian is to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
But there is another half of the story, and that is to experience the cross.
To experience the cross is to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Christ. It is to lose your life for Christ's sake.

That's what I want to talk to you about this morning.
I want to talk about this experience of the cross.
The question is: What does it mean for us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Christ? What does that mean?

The author C. M. Clowe makes a distinction between burdens, thorns and crosses.
We don't choose our burdens or our thorns. Those are the things that life throws at us.
Those are the things we experience because of the frailty of being human.
There are burdens in life. There are thorns in life.

And then there are crosses. We don't choose our burdens or our thorns.

But we can choose to pick up the cross.
Picking up the cross is quite different than living burdens or living with thorns.
Picking up the cross is something that you choose to do.
To pick up the cross is to choose to pick up the thorns and burdens *of other people's lives*.
When we see other people are in need, we can choose to go and love them and help them with their lives.

To pick up the cross is to choose to serve the needs of others and thereby to serve God.

A pastor by the name of Harold Luccock, wrote the following words about today's Gospel passage.

"Taking up the cross of Christ is a deliberate choice of something that could be evaded.
To take up a burden that we are under no compulsion to take up except for the love of Christ living inside of us.

It makes the choice of taking upon ourselves the burdens of other people's lives. Of putting ourselves, without reservation, at the service of Christ and the world - whatever the cost."

So to pick up the cross of Christ is to pick up the burdens, thorns and pain of other people.

Peter's problem was this: Peter believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of the Living God, but he didn't understand the way of the cross.

Peter heard that the "Son of man must suffer, die and rejected," but he didn't understand what it meant for his own life.

Peter did not understand what Jesus meant when he said,
 "If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself, pick up the cross and follow me.
 For whoever will find his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will find it."

This is an amazing truth that too many people miss

It is not just some platitude or pious talk.
 This is the way life really is.

If you live your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you lose your life for other people and their needs, you will find it.

St. Francis of Assisi wrote: "For it is in giving that we receive, and it is in dying to self, that we are born again to a living hope."

Mother Theresa, telling the story about how she answered the call to serve, wrote this:
 "In 1948, twenty years after I came to India, I actually decided upon this close contact with the poorest of the poor. It was for me, a special vocation to give all to belong to Jesus. I felt God wanted from me something more. He wanted me to be poor with the poor and to love him in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor. I had the blessing of obedience."

The most important thing that can happen to peoples' lives is to surrender themselves to Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Present your whole self as a living sacrifice to God."
 Not just your money. You offer your *whole* self to God: your eyes, your ears, your feelings, your thoughts. You offer everything to God. You surrender your *whole* self to God as a living sacrifice.

Gerhardt Frost, once wrote the following words: "It is in living by loving and dying by giving that we finally find happiness."

All of us struggle with surrendering our selfishness to God.

Let me share with you a couple examples of this kind of surrender.

The first story I want to share with you, I read in a commencement speech by a highly respected Senator.

In his speech he shared the story about a president of a small college who loved his work. This man just adored the academic environment; the students, teachers, the world of ideas. But then his wife began to suffer Alzheimer's, so he put his career on hold to take care of her.

He spent all his time taking care of her. He was her primary care-giver.

But a lot of people said to him, "Why are you doing that? You have a life. She doesn't even know who you are, so if you are not there, so what?"

His answer was astonishing. He said,

"You are right, she has no idea who I am. But I know who she is. She is my companion for all my life, my best friend, the mother of my children the grandmother of my grandchildren, and the person to whom I made a vow in front of God."

This man knew what it means to deny himself, pick up his cross daily, and follow Christ.

I also know a couple who adopted a baby boy, a boy they brought home, and loved and cared for and later learned had been the victim of fetal alcohol syndrome.

All through his teenage years this boy struggled in school, and rebelled, and later became addicted to alcohol himself and spent time in prison.

His parents suffered. Every time they built a bridge to him he seemed to take advantage of them. But did these parent's love for their son, ever die?

No. In the ten years that I served as their pastor, I saw them take up their cross time and time again. And they loved their son, with the love of Christ alive inside of them.

Do you have a similar story?

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt compelled to help someone? And the reason that you felt compelled, is because you felt Jesus moving within you. You could hear him saying "Follow me, set your own desires aside, and help this person in need."

If you did, then you've experienced the way of the cross.

Simon Peter didn't understand it initially, but he gradually learned.

"Whoever will find his life on this earth will lose it and whoever loses his life for others will find it." Amen