

In the reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning, we find ourselves at a turning point in our Lord's ministry and in the lives of his disciples. We need to put this part of the gospel narrative in context. Just immediately before today's passage, Jesus asked his disciples arguably the most profound, most important and most significant question ever asked: "Who do you say that I am?" Only Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Jesus told Peter that flesh and blood, in other words, logic and reason, did not get him to that answer. Peter made a statement of faith and faith comes from God. Peter's response was a response from the depths of his soul, a soul enlightened by the Holy Spirit. In other words, Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah was a gift from God. Faith itself is a gift of God. In faith, Peter knew the Messiah and that is the only way that we can know Jesus Christ.

The question for us, as believers who have come to Jesus in faith, is what do we do about it? Do our lives reflect the faith we claim, and if not, what must we do to rectify it? More specifically, what must we do to be true and faithful disciples? We cannot answer this without being fully aware of the consequences of faith and those consequences can be severe and challenging. That is the point of the gospel narrative this morning. In today's passage, Jesus began to teach his disciples that there is a cost to discipleship, a severe cost. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." The reality of discipleship is that we pay a price, sometimes quite steep and harsh, because discipleship, from time to time, takes us across society's grain, and when you are at cross purposes with society the going can be quite rough. But there is a reward for faithful discipleship, and that reward, experienced now and in eternity, is a lasting place in the Kingdom of God.

Let's look at the cost of discipleship so that we can understand what is expected of us. Jesus said that if we want to be his followers, we have to be prepared to deny ourselves. What did he mean? Are we to discard our possessions, our homes, our material wealth, our secular dreams and aspirations? Francis of Assisi did. For Francis, that denial was necessary so that he could put Jesus before all else. But such a denial of material wealth is not necessarily a requirement for discipleship. What is required is that we make Christian discipleship our greatest goal, our highest value. Jesus must be first in our lives. If he is not, then we are not true disciples. To deny ourselves is to make sure that nothing gets between us and the Lord, and we have to be willing to put aside anything that does. Discernment of what must be set aside, of what we must deny ourselves, can only come through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Having denied ourselves, we have to take up our cross. This does not mean that necessarily that we must die for Jesus. Many have, but even more have not died for their faith and never will. What does taking up the cross mean? The first thing to note is that Jesus didn't say we had to be willing to take up our cross. He said that we must take up our cross; we must bear cross. Willingness is not enough; action is, and to be a disciple is to take up the cross. It was God the Father's desire that Jesus die on the Cross that we might be saved. God has a desire for each of us that does not necessarily have anything to do with physical death. Carrying our cross, means simply to do the will of God regardless of the cost, and to do so even if the cost is death. Sometimes our cross is light and easy, at other times it is severe. Ours is not to question whether the task God asks of us is worth the cost to us. The disciple

soldiers on regardless of the price she or he pays to be Christ to neighbor. And we are called, in discipleship to be as Christ to our neighbor, realizing that the only way that Jesus works in this world, today, is the hearts, the minds, the arms and the hands of those that are his disciples.

Finally, we must follow Jesus, wherever he takes us, doing what the Holy Spirit leads us to do in the name of the Lord. That is much easier said than done, and we are likely to misread the map more than once. Again, discernment of our Lord's will for us, and the direction that he would have us go in doing his work in this world can only come through prayer and the Holy Spirit's guidance, but a willingness to be open to the Spirit and the courage to follow the Lord is essential to discipleship. If we lack this willingness and courage, we can never be disciples of the Master.

The call to discipleship is the call to all of us. As baptized members of the Body of Christ, the Christian Church, we are called to discipleship. The gospel today asks that we be aware that the call to discipleship comes with a price. There is a cost to discipleship and that cost is the irrevocable dedication of our lives to Jesus Christ. *Amen.*