



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Take Up Your Cross
Matthew 16:21-28

Most of the members of this church who are my age or older can be heard saying, “Technology has left me behind.” I see those commercials of a couple vacationing somewhere on a beach, and the wife says, “Did you remember to close the garage door?” The husband pulls out his phone, still sunning on the beach, pushes the right combination of buttons and we see the image of his garage door closing at the command of a phone a thousand miles away.

On our recent trip to West Texas we spent the night with my son in Austin. He asked me if I had the WeMo app. I said, “What is a WeMo app?” “Well dad, in order to control the lights and the fan in the bedroom you need to download the WeMo app.” So I handed him my phone and he downloaded the WeMo app, and sure enough, from my phone I turned the lights and the fan on and off. I had no idea.

I’m too young to remember the really old phones where you clicked for the operator and asked her to put you through to Aunt Mable. I started off in life with the modern rotary dial phones. And I remember the days when the caller only had to dial four numbers to make a local call, and now I have to push ten numbers. How cool it was to get my first car phone! I understand our younger members will not remember that large black vinyl bag that contained a large phone that you plugged into what we used to call a cigarette lighter. In today’s cars the hole is still there to charge batteries, but the lighter is gone.

For years I used a flip phone, but last fall I graduated to an Apple 6 or 7 something or other. It is a phone, but I can play games on it. I can read books on the device. I can check the Ranger score. I’ve tried Facebook, but still get frustrated, and I pretty much ignore Twitter and Instagram. All I know about Twitter is I often get tweets and I don’t know what to do with them, and that our president does a lot of tweeting, but I am pretty much bound to the reporting of the television news to know what the president tweets. I have learned to text, but have not figured out how to text more than one person at a time. I use my phone as a watch, a calculator, and of all things, a camera.

I cannot close my garage door or turn lights on and off with my phone. My guess is that my Apple 6 or 7 something or other can be used for about 100 times more things than I can imagine.

Basically, I know what my Apple 6 or 7 something or other is, but I don't know all it can or is supposed to do.

That was Peter's problem with Jesus. He knew who Jesus was but he was ignorant of what Jesus was to do. As Dale Brunner instructs, He knew the who of Jesus, the Christ, but he did not know how Jesus was the Christ, or how Jesus would be who he was.

I know that needs some explanation. Jesus took his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It was the northern border where Israel sat next to the rest of the world. The region was so far from the influence of Jerusalem that it was basically gentile. There were temples to the Syrian god Baal, temples to the Greek God Pan and a center for the Roman godhead of Caesar.

Jesus used this as the setting for what the church would call the Great Confession. This is the place of contrast between Jesus and paganism. And Jesus asked his disciples, **"Who do the people say the Son of Man is?"** Their answers reflect a reincarnation. **"You are John the Baptist raised from the dead. Some say you are Elijah or Jeremiah, or one of the great prophets."**

"Well, who do you say that I am?" And Peter, looking at his Apple 6 something or other, and not knowing exactly what it does, said, **"You are the Christ."** You are the ultimate one, the anointed of God, the one we have looked for. You are the point, the final word, the meaning of life."

"You are the Christ, the Son of the God who is alive." Maybe there was a temple of Baal in the background, or a temple of Pan, or the temple of some other dead deities on the horizon, and in that setting Peter confessed, **"You are the Son of the God who is alive."**

Jesus commended Peter, calling him Rocky. **"Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but you have understood God."**

The problem was that Peter had the right word, but the wrong definition. He knew the answer to who, but he was clueless as to how. For Peter, Jesus was the triumphant deliverer. Jesus was the King of Prosperity. Jesus is the one who makes my car start when it has a dead battery. Jesus makes the markets soar when I am invested and makes them plummet after I turn my stocks into cash, so I can

buy more stocks cheap. Jesus is the one who protects me. Jesus is the one who blesses my life when I am good. Jesus is the one to deliver us from Rome.

Today's text is Matthew 16:21-28, I will begin reading the first three verses from a translation given by Dale Brunner, **"From then on Jesus Christ began to show his disciples that it was absolutely necessary for him to go away to Jerusalem, suffer deeply at the hands of the lay leaders, senior pastors and Bible teachers, be executed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. 'Mercy is your, Lord! This will never ever happen to you!' But Jesus turned on his heel and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a big problem for me, because you are not gripped by the concerns of God, you are gripped by the concerns of human beings.'"**

The disciples had figured out that Jesus was the Christ. Through the fulfillment of prophecy, through miracles, and through Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God they knew who Jesus was. **"Who do you say I am?" "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."**

"Good, you got it. Now that we are clear as to who I am, you are ready to start learning what it means for me to be the Christ." **So from that time Jesus Christ began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer deeply and be executed.** That teaching so floored the disciples that I am sure they did not hear the part about rising from the dead on the third day. I don't think they remembered this part of Jesus' teaching until after the resurrection.

To hear Jesus say he would suffer and be executed was more than they could handle. The very idea of the Suffering Christ was an oxymoron. The Christ was to conquer suffering, not endure it. Jesus is a winner, not the loser.

We are shocked to hear in Jesus' words, **"It is absolutely necessary,"** meaning it was the will of God that Jesus suffer. And to suffer deeply is to say that Jesus the Christ will bear everything. As Isaiah wrote years before, **"He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole."**

I don't know if you can picture the scene, but can you see Peter's jaw drop. Then understanding his new position as the Rock, he put his arm around Jesus and walked him to a private place and whispered, "God forbid Lord, torture and execution, this can never happen." Peter's reprimand was well meaning. It had the feel of one friend telling another they are being too hard on themselves. He was trying to assure Jesus of God's mercy, and the impossibility of his suffering.

How difficult it must have been to tell the disciples they were only half right. Yes, I am the Christ, but you still have no idea of how I am to be the Christ. And the truth of the matter is that like Peter, sometimes our actions and words demonstrate that we too do not understand how Jesus will be the Christ. It is for this reason that Dale Brunner wrote, “We will not only err when we follow our worst thoughts, we will err when we follow our best thoughts.” That is when our best thoughts are wrong; we can cause more problems than when we are guided by our sinful thoughts.

One does not have to be a serious student of history to understand how well-meaning people, believing with all their hearts they were following Jesus, have turned the gospel into fear, violence, heartbreak and chaos.

Hearing Peter’s counsel, Jesus immediately turned and said, **“Get behind me Satan. You are a big problem to me, because you are not gripped by the concerns of God, you are gripped by the concerns of human beings.”**

Our Lord’s words were sharp. Nobody likes to be called Satan, especially when they are trying to do good. The words were sharp because to Jesus the temptation was real.

Recall the time shortly before Jesus began his ministry. He was in the wilderness, fasting and seeking God’s guidance. Satan came to him saying, **“Turn these stones into bread;” “Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple and prove yourself;” “Bow down to me and I will give you the world.”**

Now move forward to the Garden of Gethsemane. There was Jesus on his knees, pleading for his cup of suffering to pass, maybe hearing Peter’s words again, “Jesus you are the Christ, heaven forbid that you suffer.”

“Get behind me, Satan, you are a stumbling block to me.” When Jesus made Peter the Rock, he obviously did not make him the inerrant Rock. Sometimes Peter had it right, and sometimes he didn’t, and this sometimes right and sometimes wrong reflects the entire history of the church and it is a reflection of my life. It is as though Jesus is saying, “Peter, I am grateful for you at times—when you see more quickly than others who I am; but at other times you are my biggest problem, for you have the curse of putting into words the urgings I hear from the Satan himself—the urging to avoid suffering.”

Dear church, I confess that I am Peter, and I wonder if you are honest you will agree that a little of Satan dwells in all of us. We, like Peter at times, are effective in moving the gospel forward and at times we are the biggest problem. I

wonder how close Jesus' indictment against Peter is also my indictment. You decide for yourself. Jesus said, **“You are a stumbling block for you are not concerned about what concerns God, but you are concerned about what concerns human beings.”**

It is commendable when we are quick to recognize that Jesus is the Christ. This is what we do as a church; we proclaim to the world that Jesus is the Christ. This truth is our rock, our foundation. Jesus is the Son of the God who is living, and in our busy and complicated world, a world filled with new ideas and growing diversity, this message is all the more difficult for the world to understand, but it is what we proclaim.

But there is a flip side to the Gospel, and if we are not guided by both sides of the coin we are, well, using Jesus' words, we are Satan.

The flip side is that Christ did not come into the world to be triumphant but to suffer, and when we forget that Jesus came to suffer, the gospel becomes what some call the prosperity gospel, where Jesus does not bid us to come and follow even at the cost of our lives, but Jesus bids us to come so he can bless us with our own little fortunes.

We pay complete attention to Jesus and forget about the ones Jesus calls us to serve. We don't take up our cross and follow by caring for the poor, sick, and marginalized, but we take up our checkbook and praise God for our new car, or vacation home, or luxury cruise.

Fred Craddock wrote about a pastor preaching in Birmingham at what we might call a Festival of Faith.

He was invited to a small group Bible study, and he went, but it really was not a Bible Study; it was more of a prayer group.

The leader of the group sat at the dining room table with his little computer where he had a tally of all the prayers God had answered for members of the group.

My friend was told that the group had only been meeting five months and already they had over twelve hundred prayer requests on their list, and most had been answered.

Their practice was this: Following a Bible reading, they went around the room and the members of the group talked about what they had gotten through prayer the previous week.

Their conversation went like this:

“God gave me that new dress we have been praying for, and now I have something to wear at the office dinner party.”

“Shirley, that’s wonderful. And God provided my family some new luggage for the cruise we are going to take next week.”

“Hallelujah, O how God works! Remember last month I prayed that Keith would notice me? Well, he called yesterday and we have a date for Saturday night.”

“Amen, God is good all the time. You know that we have wanted to go to Hawaii. Well, God provided us with an unexpected bonus at work.”

There were several other nice things that were achieved for members of the group through their prayers.

When my friend could not take it any longer he said, “I’m a little bothered that these are your prayers in a world anguishing and languishing under oppression and falsehood and poverty and disease. New dresses, and rings, and trips and dates, and . . .” One of those present said, “Well, Jesus said, ‘Whatever you ask I’ll give it to you.’ It’s in the book.”

Today’s text ends with these words, “Then Jesus said to his disciples, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.”** Amen.