

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

So, in last week's gospel reading, Peter got it exactly right. Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said, "Yes! And it's on your confession, that I will build my church.

And Jesus and the disciples continued on their way. But after Peter's confession, things got real. Jesus started telling them the truth about what it meant that he was the Messiah. That he had to go to Jerusalem, and endure suffering and be killed, and be raised on the third day.

And after Jesus said these things, Peter got it exactly wrong. And Jesus told him as much.

I think Peter meant well. I really do. I mean, none of us wants to hear the people we love tell us they're going to have to walk a difficult road – much less die when they get to the end of it. We don't want that for anyone.

¹But for Jesus, Peter's rebuke represented a temptation to walk away from all that and do his own thing. Similar to the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness after his baptism. It was as if Peter had said, "Come on, you don't have to do the hard thing. You don't have to take this so seriously. You don't have to give up your own rights and comforts. You don't have to die."

And, really, Peter was right. It would have been easy for Jesus to just walk away. So Jesus had to respond as harshly as he did – to remind himself as much as the disciples that, yes, the things coming up were going to be hard. But he had to do them. Because if he didn't, humanity wouldn't be reconciled to God and there would be no resurrection.

In that instant, everything was flipped for the disciples. All of the sudden they were faced with the fact that the stories they'd heard about the Messiah while growing up were fulfilled in Jesus. But it wasn't going to go the way they thought it would.

The Messiah wasn't going to be the military hero they'd hoped for. Victory was going to look completely different than what they'd dreamed of. Jesus was serious about things he said in the Sermon on the Mount.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2733>

He was serious about people turning the other cheek. And loving their enemies and praying for those who persecute them. And not judging others. And doing to others as you would have them do for you.

Life as Jesus' followers wouldn't be easy, and it would cost them. Because following Jesus, truly following Jesus, means taking up your cross and going where Jesus goes.

The disciples had a very real idea of what that meant. They knew what the cross was used for, because they'd seen actual crucifixions.

But following Jesus meant committing to his idea of being the Messiah, taking seriously his teachings and his way of living. Receiving his invitation to love above all else, to care for the people who were left to fend for themselves. To stand up to the power that oppresses and keeps people down.

Following Jesus meant receiving his invitation to give up life the way they thought it was going to be, and following him into those places to receive the life worth living. And they did.

It isn't any easier for us today to receive that invitation. To take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Because, when you think about it, we don't have to do the hard thing, either. We don't have to take this faith thing so seriously. We don't have to give up our own rights and comforts. We don't. That's the temptation we face every day. We don't have to do any of it. And there's a version of Christianity that teaches people this and they decide to live it.

But it isn't the life Jesus invites us to live.

The life Jesus invites us into, taking up our cross and following him, is the way of love that Jesus brought into the world. It's a life lived in that love all the time. It's a life that seeks justice, and to serve others. To meet them wherever they happen to be and to walk with them in whatever they're going through.

It's a life that denies what is familiar and comfortable, in order to see the righteousness of God – the works God has been doing in our world. Not only so that we see them, but so that others see them, too.

Taking up our cross and living the life Jesus invites us into isn't easy, and it rarely goes the way we think it should, but it's the only life worth living.

And it isn't about living in search of doing the "big things" – like going to a protest march, or how we respond to crises like a mass shooting or ICE activity in our neighborhood. Although that can be part of it. Because living the life Jesus invites us into is about how we live day-to-day. The choices and decisions we make about how we interact with others and with the world.

Recognizing that it isn't about getting it right all the time, but rather seeking to faithfully live in line with the way Jesus did.

Taking up our cross and living the life Jesus invites us into isn't a life that asks whether our actions are liberal or conservative, socialist or capitalist, or woke or whatever the opposite of that is. Living the life Jesus invites us into is a life that asks whether our actions love our neighbor and look out for their interests more than our own. That's it.

And in a time like the one we're living in now, those are critical questions. Because we've all said we want to follow Jesus, and to have the world that God wants for us. But if we're being honest, we usually want it on our terms.

We don't want to have to give up the things that make us comfortable. And, again, we don't have to. We don't have to love our enemies or pray for them. We don't have to not judge others.

We don't have to fight for racial justice and equity. We don't have to advocate for inclusion and protection for people who are trans. We don't have to demand fair wages and affordable housing for everyone. We don't have to make sure everyone has enough to live. We don't have to demand better care for our planet and its resources.

When it comes down to it, we don't have to do any of that. That's the temptation we face every day. We can be comfortable and leave those things to other people. But that isn't the life Jesus invites us into.

The life Jesus invites us into, the life of the cross – the way of the cross, is the way of love that Jesus brought into the world. It isn't a life of certainty or security or privilege. And that's scary. And I think the scariest part, the part that stops us, is that the world would have us believe that if we live this way we'll be completely cut off and alone.

But that's a lie.

The life Jesus invites us into, the love Jesus invites us to live, is the one we live as part of a faith community. We don't do any of this by ourselves. Jesus is with us every step of the way, and we live this life together.

We accompany each other, and build each other up, and encourage each other along the way. Reminding one another that we aren't going anywhere Jesus hasn't already been.

On the surface, taking up our cross and following Jesus doesn't sound like much of a life. And it isn't, by the world's standards. But it's the life that stands up to power and oppression. The life that seeks justice and equity for everyone.

It's the life that makes visible the love of the incarnation, God with us, and makes God's realm a reality here and now. It isn't a life of comfort or security according to the world. But for us, as people of faith, it's the only life worth living because it's the one Jesus invites us to live.

Thanks be to God! Amen.