

“Should we print some brochures?”

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord. Amen

Jesus once said: *“Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.*

Woody Allan once said:

“I'm not afraid of death - I just don't want to be there when it happens”

I sort of know the feeling - I want to be a follower of Jesus - I just don't want to be there when I'm supposed to take up a cross.

“Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.

Any takers? Anyone here interested in a faith that involves giving up self-interest, submitting oneself to the possibility of ridicule and shame, perhaps even suffering and death?

This whole conversation begins with Jesus teaching the disciples that he must endure suffering, be rejected by religious and political authorities, be killed, and, on the third day, rise.

It is no surprise that the disciples' understanding was a bit limited at that point.

It seems that they got the part about the suffering and the rejection and the being killed, but, evidently, never hear the third-day-rise-again part of the teaching.

Suffering..... Rejection..... Death.

Needless to say, that does not fit with their picture of a successful rabbi.

It certainly doesn't square with their preconceived notions about what a messiah should be and do - God's anointed one, the one who would save God's people.

Peter had just finished making that remarkable affirmation, immediately before this reading in Mark's gospel.

Jesus asks his disciples, *"Who do the people think that I am?"*

And they reply, *"Some think you are John the Baptist.*

Others think you are Elijah."

But Jesus pressed the point. *"Who do you say that I am?"*

That's always the question isn't it.

Peter replies *"You are the Messiah".*

And Jesus tells them not to tell anyone else. *“Whaaaat???*
You are the messiah Jesus, you are the saviour – we should be shouting it
from the roof tops!!”

According to Mark, it was after this little bit of dialogue that Jesus begins talking about rejection and suffering and death.

Not much of a surprise, what happens next.

Peter takes him aside and begins to rebuke him.

Now ‘rebuke’ - a strong word.

In Mark’s gospel Jesus rebukes the wind when a storm threatens to sink their boat on the Sea of Galilee.

Rebuke - it’s what Jesus does to evil spirits that would control a person’s life and cut them off from their community of family and friends.

Rebuke - it’s a strong word.

It is interesting to note that whenever anyone else in Mark’s gospel rebukes someone, they get it all wrong.

The disciples rebuke people for bringing children to Jesus.

The crowd rebukes a blind man who is trying to get Jesus’ attention as he passes along on the road.

Peter rebukes Jesus for suggesting that rejection and suffering and death is a part of the messianic agenda.

Peter rebukes Jesus.... Jesus rebukes Peter back.

"Get behind me, Satan!"

In other words, what Peter suggests

- a life without pain, messianic leadership without suffering
- is a real temptation.

Avoid the pain.

Avoid the suffering.

Avoid the humiliation.

Avoid the cross.

It was a temptation for Jesus
it certainly is a temptation for me.

Jesus rejects it.

Then he calls the crowd to come and to listen along with his disciples.

What he is about to say, what he is about to tell them, is not just for a select few. It's not for saints and priests and preachers.

It is for everyone.

And what Jesus says is that the denial of self, taking up the cross, is not just for him—not only a messianic vocation, but the vocation of anyone who would follow the messiah.

It is for anyone who would be a follower of Jesus.

Now, what does it mean, to take up a cross and follow him?

Well, for one thing, taking up a cross is something that we decide to do.

It is something that we do, not something that just happens to us.

It is not just some bad event in life that comes our way.

I was talking to a man who suffered from periodic attacks of gout. Walking was painful and it was difficult around. He referred to this ailment as "the cross I have to bear."

I don't mean to discount or minimize his discomfort, but I suspect that Jesus had something different in mind than a case of gout.

What does taking up our cross mean practically for you and me?

I am not sure.

I think that taking up our cross is probably different for each of us.

I think that it may mean different things in different situations.

For me, it might involve the risk of opposition and criticism and perhaps a modest measure of material sacrifice

- although I am no fan of opposition and criticism and material sacrifice we know that for many Christians around the world and through the ages, taking up the cross had far more serious consequences.

Possibly life altering, even life threatening consequences.

The question is... is presenting this notion of self-sacrifice a good idea?

To often we soft sell – both to ourselves and to others -

the whole cross bearing idea.

The most churches across North America talk about all the things that the church has to offer to people.

You've seen the ads . . . *Dynamic Worship! - Wonderful Music! - Enriching Fellowship! - Opportunities for Growth for Children & Youth!*

You've heard the promises . . .

Deepen your spiritual life. Get closer to God, find peace of mind.

In other words, what we tell people is what we can do for them

— and there is much that the church does do for people.

It's understandable that we want to highlight it—to market it.

But if that is our focus - are we doing Jesus, and our discipleship, a disservice?

There are churches where the preacher promises that following Jesus is the path to success. It is called Prosperity preaching. It's popular with televangelists. "Want to get ahead in the world? Want God to be on your side? Come to Jesus! ... and be sure to put your money on the offering plate..." It might seem harsh to say, but brand of Christianity is religious hucksterism, religious snake oil.

Now we in the United Church don't say that following Jesus will make you rich or famous or happy.

We haven't been guilty of perverting the gospel by saying that it's the path to success. No, we are not that blatant.

But I wonder if sometimes, in our effort to be attractive to people, we have not always made full disclosure about the demands of discipleship.

We don't want to discourage people.

We don't want to offend anyone, particularly the curious.

We don't want to seem like we were fanatics.

So we put out a picture of discipleship that is not too radical,

not too demanding,
and frankly, not too directly connected with the hard sayings of Jesus.

We haven't asked for any unreasonable commitment.

We haven't talked about self-sacrifice or denial or choosing a path that involves the risk of shame or ridicule, much less suffering.

But...Have we made a mistake?

Have we misrepresented Jesus and his message?

By downplaying the cross carrying

– have we failed to tap something that is deep, within the human spirit?

In our helpings of chicken soup for the soul,

have we failed to provide strong, meaty stew for the soul?

Have we failed to recognize the human need not just for security,

but for significance?

Not just for love and acceptance, but for meaning and purpose?

Someone has said that humans can survive any HOW if we have a WHY.

William Willimon was at one time a professor at Duke University, one of the big, rich, prestigious schools in the U.S.

He tells the story how a representative of Teach America visited the Duke campus. Teach America tries to recruit the nation's most talented college graduates to go into some of the nation's worst public schools.

The goal is to transform those schools into something better.

The woman from Teach America stood up in front of a large group of Duke students - a larger group, says Willimon, than he would have expected to show up for that sort of thing - she said to them,

"I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place. Somebody told me that this was a 'BMW campus' and I can believe by just looking at you. Just by looking at you I can tell that all of you are a success. Why would you be on this campus if you were not going on to successful careers on Madison Avenue or Wall Street? And yet, here I stand, hoping to talk you into giving your life away in the toughest job you will ever have. I am looking for people to go into the hollows of West Virginia, into the ghettos of South Los Angeles and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year two of our teachers were killed while on the job. And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you are interested in

that. So, go on to law school or medical school or wherever - or do whatever successful thing you are planning to do. But, if by chance, some of you just happen to be interested, I have got these brochures here for you to tell you about Teach America. That's all. Good night."

And she walked away.

With that, Dr. Willimon said, the whole group stood up and pushed into the aisles and shoved each other aside and ran down front and fought over those brochures.

Maybe we've gotten it all wrong.

Maybe in our desire to be nice and not offend anyone, we have short changed both our society and ourselves. Maybe we should just be upfront about the demands that Jesus makes. I suppose the first step would be to start with myself and then you folks.

*"Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self;
he must take up his cross and follow me.*

What say you? Is there something this week that you can take up to make
the world a better place?

Let us pray: Lord, we like easy and your word about the cross is hard.

We like to be liked, but standing with the poor and the sick and the marginalized can put us at odds with the powers and principalities of this world. Give us courage this week, to take up our cross and to follow you, wherever you may lead us. amen