

A man from the U.S. was on his first trip to Australia. It was a long trip and when he arrived he summoned a taxi to take him to his hotel. After getting into the taxi he was shocked when the taxi driver asked him in a very strong Australian accent (which I don't have), "*Hey, Mate, did you come here to die?*"

Totally taken aback by this unexpected and disturbing question: "*Did you come here to die?*" the man wondered for a time what kind of ride he was in for. Then he leaned forward and said to the cabbie: "*Excuse me, but that was a rather vulgar thing to ask someone whom you have never met before! Are all Australians so cheeky?*"

And the cabbie responded: "*Cheeky? Mate, I just was trying to figure out when you got here; if you came here to die or if you came here yester die.*"

Not cheeky. Just not clear.

If nothing else Jesus spoke clearly and openly. It didn't matter who he was speaking to – Pharisees, Gentiles, enemies, closest friends. And, Jesus spoke openly to his disciples, who couldn't always handle it.

In today's gospel Jesus speaks openly about what is to come, and they were unable to accept his words. Suffering? Rejection? Be Killed? No way!

"*This simply cannot be,*" they reasoned. "*There must be a mistake. Maybe we heard him incorrectly.*" Their concept of a messiah didn't include suffering and rejection and getting murdered. It included many things, and they had added a few concepts based upon things that Jesus had taught them ... but not this.

In disbelief, Peter, speaking for the rest of the disciples, pulled Jesus aside and began to reprimand him. Ever since he had called them, they had witnessed miracle upon miracle. They had seen Jesus give sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. They had witnessed the exorcism of demons, the forgiveness of sins, the calming of the sea, and the raising of the dead. They had observed the wisdom of this man. They had listened to his teaching. They had observed his compassion, even when he was exhausted. They had seen Jesus cure lepers and had heard him offer an alternative to the holiness code that was so strongly espoused by the Pharisees.

Sure this man was the one of whom the prophets spoke. Suffering? Rejection? Be Killed? No way!

Perhaps some doubt crept into their thinking at this point: "*Have we left our homes and families and jobs to follow someone who isn't what we thought?*"

The degree of Peter's protest demonstrates how his mission and his fate represented a new way of thinking. This wasn't your mama's and papa's Messiah! A new direction in the way of Jesus was being forged. This wasn't just whip up an army and overthrow the hated Romans, the way they had thought. A new view of discipleship was being required. He was talking about non-violence as a way of life, and peace through justice, and the kingdom of God breaking into the now. And, he was talking about suffering ... and rejection ... and being killed!

We all understand how ambiguous messages can be misunderstood. But when someone speaks openly and directly as Jesus did here, there is little room for misunderstanding. The problem is that, despite their relationship with Jesus, despite their traveling about with him as he went from one town to another preaching his message of non-violence, and peace through justice, and the kingdom of God breaking into the now, the disciples really did not understand what Jesus was really about. Somehow they had missed the point

Of course, the disciples had a preconception of what a messiah should be. The scriptures they had heard from their childhood had told them of one who would be God's chosen one, one in whom God delighted. This one would bring forth justice and blot out their sins. This one would open the eyes of the blind and redeem the lost. Had they not witnessed all this in Jesus? Of course they had. The disciples could repeat the prophecies of Isaiah and the others by heart.

*Is not this the fast that I choose;
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and being the homeless poor into your
house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

“Yes,” the disciples would say to one another. “*We have seen these things taking place.*” But did they miss the prophecies of Isaiah and the others who spoke of one who would be despised and rejected; one who would be oppressed and afflicted; one who would be wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; a man of suffering and one who was acquainted with grief? Did they miss that the messiah would enter Jerusalem, humble and riding on a donkey’?

The disciples’ concept of Jesus’ identity and mission was much like the crowd that followed Jesus, those who hung around for the free meal, and the healing show, and the fine debates. And, despite the clarity with which Jesus spoke, despite his denial that the healing and the meals and the debates were what it was all about, the disciples just didn’t get it.

What do you think the atmosphere in that room was like as Jesus began to expound on what the future would hold. I imagine Peter’s face must have paled, his composure evaporated. Peter must have felt like a pebble instead of a rock. Peter’s response caused a response in Jesus that must have cut deeply into the disciples: “*Get behind me, you Satan, you living entity of evil. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*”.

From there Jesus lays it on the line quite openly about what it takes to be one of his disciples. “*Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*”

It’s a simple three point plan. Deny yourselves. Take up your cross. Follow me.

Unlike the disciples, some of the religious leaders of his day understood. There were elders who understood and fumed. There were priests who understood and spit on the ground. There were scribes who understood and shouted, “*Blasphemy!*” Some grasped his call and knew his mission – though in opposition. And the truth of Jesus’ words was so threatening to the religious and political powers of that time that they had decided to kill him. That is just what they did. Fulfilling what the prophets had forecast, they looted his clothes, mocked his name, and crucified him.

It’s a simple three point plan. The disciples were called into the plan. So are we – each and every one of us. Unfortunately, most within the church are just like the first disciples. They just don’t get it!

And, like the religious elders and the priests and the scribes of his day they fume, and spit on the ground and shout “*Blasphemy!*” And like the religious and the political powers of his day they loot his clothes and mock his name and crucify him over and over again by not acting as his disciples.

I know that some of you wonder about my constantly inviting members who are not interested to attend Adult Class. Why do I do this? Because studying God’s word is part of your discipleship, and when you don’t participate you are not fully living out the discipleship into which our Lord called you.

I know that some of you wonder about my constantly pointing out who isn’t in church with us today, and my asking you to let them know that you missed them. Why do I do this? Because being in worship every week is part of your discipleship, and when you are not here you are not fully living out the discipleship into which our Lord called you.

I know that some of you wonder about my constantly requesting that you get more involved with the ministry that is going on at Holy Redeemer. Why do I do this? Because doing ministry is part of your discipleship and when you are not engaged in ministry within your congregation you are not fully living out the discipleship into which our Lord called you.

You see, I don’t know what you think the job of a pastor is in general – I don’t know what you think my job is at Holy Redeemer. I am pretty sure, however, that there is a large difference between what you think my job is and what it really is all about.

Pastor Ed Markquart, is a Lutheran pastor in Seattle, Washington. I have known Ed since 1974, when I was an intern in Tulsa, Oklahoma and he had a church in the Oklahoma District of the Missouri Synod. Ed frequently tells a story about an encounter he had once with a pastor named Richard Wurmbrand. Richard Wurmbrand, who died in 2001, was a Christian minister of Jewish descent in Romania who suffered years of imprisonment and torture under the communists because of his faith.

Some years ago Ed and some members of his church went to the Holy Land together. While they were there they took a cruise on a ship, following the journeys of the Apostle Paul. One of the passengers on that cruise was Richard Wurmbrand.

One night Ed Markquart and his wife were seated with Wurmbrand at dinner. Much to his

surprise, Ed found Richard Wurmbrand to be witty, charming and intelligent as he told delightful story after story about living under the Communist regime.

He was delightful, that is, until at the end of the dinner, when he learned over to Orlie, a layman from Ed's church who was also making the trip, and asked him, *"Is that pastor over there a good pastor?"*

Ed later said it bothered him that Orlie paused before his answer. Finally, Orlie answered, rather quietly, *"Yes."*

Richard Wurmbrand asked another question, *"Why is he a good pastor?"*

Orlie responded without as much hesitation this time, *"Well, he makes good sermons."*

Then, says Ed, Richard Wurmbrand looked right at him and asked Orlie, *"Yes, but does he make good disciples?"*

"In that moment," says Ed Markquart, *"there was a pause, a flash of embarrassment, and a little dagger went into my soul. He didn't say it but he could have said that the purpose of the church is not to make good sermons or good music or good youth programs or good sanctuaries, but the purpose of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, does he make disciples?"*

"In that moment," Ed Markquart continues, *"Richard Wurmbrand was the angel of the Lord to me . . . The purpose of God for all pastors and in all sermons is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. People who love Jesus Christ, who follow Jesus Christ, who call Jesus Christ their Lord. That is what we are all called to do: to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Not make church members. Not make Sunday schools. Not make buildings. These can all become ends in themselves. We are to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is what it is all about."*

Richard Wurmbrand was right. Ed Markquart is right. This is why I have the privilege to stand before you each week. It is not to entertain you. It is not to tell you what nice people you are. It is not to tell you that it doesn't matter when you don't take discipleship seriously.

It is to encourage you to walk in the steps of your Lord; to challenge you to be all that you can; to try to equip you to be better disciples of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is about self-denial. Jesus turned to his disciples and to the crowd around them

and said, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."*

It's a simple three point plan. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me. We are left, as were the disciples, to decide. Jesus asks each one of us, *"Who do you say that I am?"* The answer to what happens next is up to you and me. Amen.