

If Jesus was trying to win followers and build a movement, he really could have used a marketing team. Because this whole “lose your life,” slogan was not going to attract legions of new fans. Ancient people would have understood “take up your cross” to mean something like “mark yourself for a horrible death.” Not the sort of thing that brings people in. But I suppose one of the reasons the Gospel is still fresh and provocative today is that it was not focus-group tested.

If anyone thought Jesus was being ironic, or anything less than serious, Mark includes the story of that awful confrontation between Peter and Jesus that always makes me feel a little queasy. Peter, his heart being in the right place and his foot being firmly planted in his mouth, tells Jesus he’s got it wrong with all this suffering, rejection, and death rhetoric. Whatever Peter and others were expecting from a Messiah, this wasn’t it. Hearing Jesus say, “Get behind me, Satan” is painful enough, but I’m troubled even more by what comes next: “you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Isn’t that setting the bar just a little high? Criticizing Peter for thinking like a human being? How could Jesus, who knew Peter better than anyone, expect him to think like God? That is an impossibly high standard, yet I ask you not to dismiss it out of hand.

Up to this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has been focused on reaching out to the most marginalized people in his society: the poor, the hungry, those with physical or mental illness, those possessed by demons. He has also been attracting unwanted attention and calling specific people to be his disciples, but hasn’t laid out their mission or really asked them to do anything but physically follow, and observe.

Now we reach a turning point, where Jesus reveals a mission that is qualitatively and decisively different from the expectations of both the secular world and the professional religious elites. The secular world, in those days and in ours, upholds the accumulation of power and wealth as not just a goal, but a virtue. The religious elite did not have a unified, systematically defined description of the Messiah, but many expected either a kingly figure like David who would restore the good old days of Israel’s political independence and dominance, or a priestly figure who would reform the existing hierarchy from within. Yet the poor and the ordinary folks are catching on to the true mission and identity of Jesus.

They are beginning to understand Jesus in the great Jewish tradition of prophets, outsider leaders who bring a disruptive message from God and back that message up with provocative actions. Perhaps an old-school prophet like Elijah, perhaps someone more modern like John the Baptist, perhaps someone with an entirely new style. They’re not wrong, although in a way, those who expected a king or a priest weren’t entirely mistaken either. But at this point in the story, no one can see the fullness of who Jesus is because no one has yet seen Christ crucified.

Only in his death and resurrection can we see who Jesus truly is. Those saving

acts are absolutely essential in understanding his mission and the implications of discipleship. They show us that for God, discipleship means offering all that we have and all that we are to God, and accepting God's direction over every aspect of our lives. God is worthy of this profound trust because God is a God of love, and a God of life. The God who gave us life did not do so in order to snatch it back or to fill it with suffering, but gives us gifts that we might live a more full life than we could design for ourselves. The God who gave us life holds us up when our earthly life runs out, and through the resurrection of Jesus, gives us new and everlasting life.

For most people, death is the most unappealing thing they can think of. The September 11 attacks are a loss so traumatic that our country still hasn't completely healed from them, and we are still losing people to a pandemic that has already taken hundreds of times more lives than those attacks. From just under 3,000 to over 600,000, and counting. Hundreds of times. We can't really process that. And closer to home, our parish suffered the loss of Wilson Wright, and as lovely as his service was — I was watching — it's normal if we still feel the loss, still miss him. In my own life, a community that was a formative part of my adolescence and early adulthood, the Kanuga community, lost a beloved leader and mentor in Fran McKendree. His service was beautiful too, but seeing old friends reunited for what could be the last time reminded me of how the loss of an individual can also mean the loss of a community, if we're not careful.

But the loss of life that Jesus talks about is an even more challenging thing than what we call "death." While a very few Christians are called to martyrdom, Jesus invites all to follow him, and truly following Jesus means dying to the world. The loss of life he speaks of is not physical death, nor so-called acts of self-denial that may focus us more on ourselves, but the much more difficult work of giving up control of our own lives and doing what God would have us do.

Even if we do trust God enough to accept Jesus's challenge, how can we know what, exactly, God wants us to do? Even if we don't want to live for material wealth, personal pleasure, and social approval, how can we know specifically what God wants us to do? How can we be sure that we aren't projecting our own desires like Peter was doing and calling our own preferences "God's will?" How can we set our mind on divine things? Can we think like God? Not exactly, but we can align our hearts and minds with God through prayer. Rote prayer can be helpful, but I'm talking about brutally honest, authentic, open prayer that holds back none of ourselves, that accepts God's presence even in the parts of ourselves that we try most desperately to hide.

Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit to accomplish precisely this, to enable us to commune more intimately with God than our unaided minds would think possible. So take the risk, invest the time, to accept Jesus's challenge. Pray with the utter candor and devotion that Jesus modeled. Try to become so focused on your prayer that you lose yourself in sacred devotion. Trust that God is not just listening, but caring — as

Fran used to sing, “shielding joy and sharing pain.” Embrace the experience of sharing your whole self with God, that God might restore, renew, and transform you. Look to the example of Jesus, who is so radically alive that he is a completely unexpected savior, but the glory of his resurrection outshines the whole material world.

You’ll see that the life God offers all humanity in Christ is stronger than physical life or anything that threatens it, certainly stronger than our weakness, and therefore worth giving up anything for, even the whole world. No slogan could summarize what God offers us in Christ; to fully understand what God is doing, we must walk in the way God sets out. And for most of us, all we give up is our grief, frustration, and fear; God empowers us to live in the joy and hope of the resurrection until we are reunited with our loved ones and see even God face to face. Embracing life in Christ doesn’t mean losing something, so much as it means gaining everything.