

Follow Me

‡ Deny yourself (vv.21-24)

‡ Carry your cross (vv.24-26)

In the name of Jesus, our patient Lord and Savior, dear fellow disciples:

Isn't it strange that one thing missing from much of Christianity today is the cross? Crosses have been removed from many churches or left hanging as little more than a traditional symbol.

One of my professors told a story from his years before joining the WELS. A guest preacher was wondering why he didn't get invited back. Finally he called the congregation president. "I'm just curious if it was something I said." The president responded, "Actually, yes! You told us there is no such thing as hell. If you're wrong, you're lying, and we don't want you. If you're right, then we don't need you."

See the problem for the cross? While most theologians keep claiming, "No hell! No cross!" our Lord Jesus keeps calling, **Follow Me – Deny yourself. Carry your cross.** God grant us His grace.

‡ Deny yourself (vv.21-24)

Obviously, this was not Peter's favorite sermon. He told Jesus not to preach this way. What nerve! What a plunge for Peter since last week when we heard Jesus commending his beautiful confession, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" Jesus even said He would build His victorious Church on this bedrock confession that He is the Christ. Now only a few verses later Peter is rebuking Jesus, "**Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!**" Jesus turns to Peter, "**Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.**" Whoa!

Wasn't Peter just trying to be a good friend? If you cared about Jesus, wouldn't you naturally object to this? "**[I] must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and [I] must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**" For Jesus to suffer and be killed is all backwards for Peter. Why did it have to be that way? Why by their own religious leaders? Peter had confessed his faith in Jesus as the Christ of God. Wasn't he sincere?

Sometimes our deepest sincerity makes us most sinful. Let me say that again: Sometimes our deepest sincerity makes us most sinful. Peter absolutely thought Jesus was the promised Messiah; he just wanted a different Messiah, one who would conquer and rule. After all, that's what the Bible said!

Part of it anyway. Peter missed passages like this: "**He...was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away.**" (Isaiah 53:7f NIV) Today's it's call the theology of glory: "Christian, live right and success is guaranteed – especially at the bank or on the battlefield!" American Christians are just as adamant as Peter against suffering. They want to strike these words of Jesus. Sadly, so do we!

For example, a rich young ruler came to Jesus wondering how to earn eternal life. He claimed he had kept all of God's commandments. So Jesus answered him the same: "**If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**" (Matthew 19:21 NIV) As Daniel Deutschlander wrote in his book on the theology of the cross: "The young man went away when Jesus made it clear that the cross, that *self* denial, was the cost of discipleship....Too easily we dismiss Jesus' words to the rich young ruler with the observation that Jesus spoke those words to one who worshiped his wealth – as though none among us would ever do such a

thing!...We can end up covering over the cross of *self* denial with a gospel that has become a pillow and a couch for the rich young ruler in each of us.”¹

How difficult it is to tell our children, “No.” We run ragged for activities, but neglect their Christian education. Are the struggles of our Lutheran schools a reflection of this in WELS? Are we playing Peter by refusing to deny ourselves and put Christ first – not only in our offerings of money, but in the time it takes to prioritize the eternal souls of our kids? Is there a little voice of Peter crying against memory work, while sports, dance, or any other practice always gets more? Are choirs struggling for singers and accompanists as non musicians forget to pray? Why do hours of a movie fly by, while a few minutes with your Bible drag? **Deny yourself** is a sermon we need to hear as Jesus calls: **Follow Me....**

✝ Carry your cross (vv.24-26)

It won't be easy, but consider the alternative. Jesus warns one and all: ***“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”*** (NIV84)

Recently, a national Christian leader stated that if a man's wife is too sick to really be his wife, he can divorce her. In a radio response one Roman Catholic official said marriages can be annulled if one of the parties did not really enter into it with a full commitment. Meanwhile, Lutherans and Protestants cruise down the no-fault divorce highway where the only sign reads: “God wants me happy.”

Where is the cross? Is Peter still driving? Will we force the wheel away from God's own Son? Will we criticize God like Jeremiah in our Old Testament Lesson? People demand to know: “Why shouldn't couples live together if they're in love?” “Why would a loving God deny my happiness?” “Why can't I have what the rich have?” “Why not everything I want?” Remember the LORD's answer to Jeremiah? ***“If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman.”*** (15:19 NIV) **Carry your cross, Jeremiah! Follow me.**

Jesus warns that if you grab everything you want, you will lose everything you have. Professor Deutschlander again: “Cross-bearing *self* denial is to take Christ and His word seriously in both the law and the gospel....It is the struggle to deny *self* and instead to follow Jesus. It is the struggle to follow him willingly, even joyfully, in defiance of the adulterous and sinful generation that still remains in one's own heart as well as in the world. It is a *self* denial that begins with a struggle in the will, continues with struggle in the mind, in reason, and is plagued with obstacles from beginning to end in the emotions....Cross bearing is *self* denial for the sake of Jesus and his Word.”²

Twenty-four years ago, this was our second sermon text when we started worship a mile up the road at Snail Lake Elementary School. Under the snail in tennis shoes, our Lord began teaching us with Peter that without Christ's cross there is no forgiveness. Without the cross there is no crown.

During this quarter century on 9/11, billowing smoke pursued victims who barely escaped the Twin Towers only to be trapped again. For the first time in 100 years all the bridges and tunnels to Manhattan Island were closed. A Coast Guard captain noticed thousands fleeing to water's edge, some trying to swim. He radioed for anyone with a boat. More came than at Dunkirk in WWII. 9/11 became the largest boatlift in history, nearly 500,000 people in nine hours. One ferryboat captain told how his wife questioned him, “Won't you be a sitting duck on the water if they're bombing New York?” The fire flashed in his eyes, “At least I'll die helping! If even one person is rescued, it will be worth it!” Nothing would stop Jesus from rescuing us either – not His lead disciple, not His own dreadful suffering and death. Risen in glory now, He calls, **Follow Me**. Whatever the cross, it's worth it on the way to everlasting glory. **Deny yourself. Carry your cross.** God grant us His grace! Amen.

¹ Deutschlander, Daniel M. *THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 2008), pp. 73f.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 30f. Order this excellent Christian resource at NPH: 1-800-662-6022.

For the study behind this sermon or for copies email m.cordes@comast.net.

You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at www.wels.us/newlife.

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