

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
Is 50:5-9a
Ps 116:1-9
Jas 2:14-18
Mk 8:27-35

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Poor Peter! Put yourself in his shoes sandals. One minute you're flying high; the next minute everything blows up in your face. In a burst of enthusiasm, no doubt inspired by the Holy Spirit, he blurts out that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited savior of the Jewish people. "You are the Christ," he says, and Christos in Greek (the language St. Mark wrote in) literally means "the anointed one," and in Hebrew, anointed one is what the word Messiah means. So, when Peter, full of excitement and enthusiasm, says to Jesus, "You are the Christ," he knows exactly what he means. Jesus is the conqueror who is going to gather up the Jewish people, shake off the yoke of the Roman Empire, and restore the glory Israel enjoyed under the reign of King David and King Solomon.

Hah! Jesus sets him and his fellow disciples straight. "Yes," he says, "I am the Messiah. But no, I'm not the type of Messiah you're expecting." Jesus says that he is the type of Messiah Isaiah foresaw in our first reading, a suffering Messiah, a Messiah who gets beaten up, a Messiah who can take suffering and death because he is on the side of God, and no one ultimately triumphs over God.

Peter doesn't like this message. He puts on his vice president of marketing hat (or maybe it's his campaign manager hat), and he says, "Hold on, Jesus, you're not going to win many friends or influence a lot of people with a message like that!" But this is Jesus he's talking to, Jesus who announced at the beginning of his ministry that he was turning the world's values upside down, Jesus who said, "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the folks who are mourning. Blessed are the non-violent. Blessed are the ones who get beaten up and bullied for standing up for what is right."

No, Jesus didn't care about packaging. Jesus did not sugar-coat his message. "Come follow me," he says, yes, but following him is costly, following him means taking up your own cross, and living your own Way of the Cross.

How harsh! Deny your self, take up your cross, and come follow Jesus. If you want to save your life, you gotta lose it. If you lose your life for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel, then you save it." Self-denial. Losing your life. Not much of an advertising jingle, is it?

While preparing this homily, I had lunch one day in a food court. I observed a mother with two teenage girls. One of the girls was eating a slice of pizza. The other girl was sharing a lunch with her mother. It looked like shrimp with fried rice out of a Styrofoam box. At one point the mother speared a shrimp with her fork and offered it to the

daughter who had the slice. As the daughter took it, I thought, *In this simple way, this mother is denying herself* – it was her shrimp, after all – *and giving it, out of love and for sheer enjoyment, to her daughter*. I'm not holding this lady up as a model of heroic virtue; what she did was simple and ordinary, but it was an example of self-giving love.

Jesus revealed to us a God of self-giving love. Love spills out of God. The Father poured himself out in creation. The Son poured himself out in incarnation and salvation. The Holy Spirit continuously pours himself out in inspiration and sanctification. Each of the persons of the Blessed Trinity pours himself out to each of the other persons and that love spills out onto us, in creation, salvation, and sanctification. St. James had it right, didn't he? We can't just say, "I'll pray for you; you're in our thoughts and prayers," without doing what we can to help. Piety without action is mere window-dressing. Faith without good works is dead.

Deny yourself – your inclinations to accumulate stuff, to dominate others, to put yourself first. Take up your cross. Share what you have and help others, and don't be looking for the angle. Don't be governed by the tax consequences, or don't collect favors to be redeemed at a later date. Help for the sake of helping. Look at all the times in your life when, like the mother in the food court, your love has spilled over spontaneously. Spontaneous joy. Self-giving love. Those are pretty good tag-lines; you can build a whole ad campaign around them.

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A man decided that he was bored with his cross in life. He was a mature Christian; he knew that everybody has a cross to bear, but he was just so tired of his own cross. So, he prayed, "Jesus, please take away my cross and give me another." That night Jesus appeared to him in a dream. He took him by the hand and led him into a room that was filled with crosses. There were large crosses and small crosses, plain crosses and fancy crosses, crosses made of wood and crosses made of iron. There were even ceramic crosses and jeweled crosses. Crosses of every description. Jesus said, "Look around, and I'll let you pick whatever cross you want." As the man wandered through the room, he kept coming back to this one cross. It was small and lightweight and hung conveniently from a metal chain. Finally he picked up that cross, turned to Jesus, and announced, "This is the cross for me." At that Jesus laughed and said, "That's the one you came in with!"