

“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

We all know that there are certain words which should not be spoken in polite company—or in any place, for that matter. We have off-colour words; curse words; offensive words. We are told that we need to be politically correct in our conversations and inclusive in all our speech. While I do not agree with the people so influenced by a “woke” culture, I would agree that there are certain words that have no place in our conversations. God commands us: **“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”** (Exodus 20:7, ESV) In teaching this commandment, Luther reminds us: *We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.* (SC, 2nd Commandment) God goes even further and tells us in the words of the Eighth Commandment: **“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”** (Exodus 20:16, ESV) Again, Luther teaches us that: *We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.* (SC, 8th Commandment)

Now, I remind you of all this because I am going to be brazen enough to share with you some of the most repugnant, evil and dirty words in our world today. If you aren’t sure you want to hear them, cover your ears. Are you ready? Here they are: *self-denial*.

We all know that self-denial really isn’t a dirty word, an evil word or something repugnant. Yet to so many people in our world today the very idea of self-denial is an absolute contradiction to what they believe life should be. Self-denial is an act of letting go of the self. It is the willingness to forgo personal pleasures or undergo personal trials in the pursuit of the increased good of another. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary suggests that the first use of the word is from 1605, but we hear Jesus tell us today to deny ourselves—to say no to ourselves—and to follow Him. Following Jesus involves something else that seems to contradictory to our normal attitude toward life. He tells us that **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”**

Who wants to do that? Who wants to deny themselves? Who wants to have to carry a cross? That is not the way our world sees things. Yet it is in that self-denial and in that cross-bearing that the Holy Spirit works to bring us the greatest gift of all: the gift of life and salvation through the Son of God, who denied Himself and bore the cross for our sake.

Our text today comes right after Peter’s great confession: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** (Matthew 16:16, ESV) Peter’s confession of faith is the foundation on which the Church of God is established. Jesus even declares: **“on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”** (Matthew 16:18, ESV)

Now we are told: *“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus now teaches His disciples what that means. Jesus knew what lay before Him. He has come to fulfill His Father’s will; He will deny Himself and suffer the burden, shame and death of the cross to free us from sin, death and hell itself. Jesus also declares that He will rise again, the victor over our enemies. But that wasn’t what the disciples expected in a messiah. The Messiah was going to free them from their enemies. He was going to restore the earthly glory of Israel as it was in the days of King David. The Christ, the Anointed One was supposed to bring victory, glory, and wealth to His people. We know from other discussions among the disciples that they thought that Jesus would bring this great worldly kingdom, and that they would

all have special places of honour in that kingdom.

Was this why Peter is so adamant and why he takes Jesus aside and says, *“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you”*? Jesus very quickly puts Peter in his place. *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”* Jesus knows how our own plans and purposes can conflict with God’s perfect plans. It was God’s will to send His Son to save the world from sin and death through Christ’s death and resurrection. Peter’s thoughts aren’t on the will of God. They are on his own wants and desires. Jesus will establish an everlasting Kingdom. He will bring His people into a glory, a joy and a peace that we can only long to see in this world. Yes, the disciples will be honoured in that Kingdom. By faith in the dying and rising Christ, we also have a place of honour in that kingdom. “That is my plan for you”, Jesus says, “but you won’t find this by your own plans. You need to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.”

But who wants to do that? We want freedom to ‘do our own thing’. A back to school ad notes that kids have so many rules, like “clean your room”. But the ad then says: “when it comes to back to school, there is only one rule: you do you.” That is the attitude of so many in our world. We want everyone to acknowledge that our ideas, opinions and views of truth—including in matters of faith—are what really matter. We strive for wealth and health and happiness. We want what we want. We have the right to it! We can be what we want to be. It’s our right! We can live any way we want, and no one has the right to tell us we can’t do it.

Jesus says something very different: *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”* Jeremiah complained that God had ‘set him up’, that the ministry to which God called him brought nothing but struggle and loss. He almost seems to ask, “If I’m proclaiming Your truth, shouldn’t I be more successful?” Yet God does promise His servant: *“And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD.”* (Jeremiah 15:20, ESV) You will find that even in your losing you will win, Jeremiah. Paul also turns us away from ourselves in the Epistle today. He tells us that we are to have a sincere love for others—a love not motivated by selfish desire or ambition, but a love that actively, joyfully and willingly seeks the good of others. It’s not about our doing everything for ourselves. It is about self-denial, so that others may benefit. It’s about giving up ourselves for something greater, even if that greater is for others and not ourselves.

We struggle with self-denial. We don’t think it’s fair to have to set aside our own rights and privileges. We want it our way. We claim our rights. We claim our freedom. We claim our truth and ideals. Even though we may not intend to do it, we also start to claim our own way of saving ourselves. God calls us to something better. He calls us to His way. He calls us to service; He calls us to surrender. He calls us from sin and death and the emptiness of worldly self-serving attitudes to the fulness and glory and marvel of life with Him forever. More than that, He calls to give up our own idea of salvation, to deny our self and to throw ourselves fully on the only One who can save us, and that is the crucified and risen Christ.

In our Baptism, our old self was crucified with Christ, so that we may live with Him in the new life He gives us. The old, selfish and sinful heart that wants only what it wants—that heart that thinks only about itself—has died. Yes, that old self clings to us and tries to overwhelm us. But in the power of the Holy Spirit we can deny ourselves. We can take up our cross and follow. We give up what doesn’t matter, for we know God has something better for us. We carry that cross that comes as we live for Christ here. That means servanthood. It means looking to the needs of others. It means trusting and clinging to Christ when the world turns against us. We do this, not because of what it brings to us, but we do it for Christ’s sake—for the One who has done everything for us. What we give up and what we lose for Christ is never lost, for the Lord of heaven and earth turns it all upside down. Who would want to deny themselves and take up a cross? We will, for in Christ, we find we have more than we could ever imagine! Amen.