MATTHEW 16:21–26. (EHV)

> From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "May you receive mercy, Lord! This will never happen to you." But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. In fact whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?"

One movement that has gained some popularity in American Christianity is called the "Word of Faith" movement. This might sound attractive to us at first, because Christianity is, after all, all about faith. But the Word of Faith movement isn't emphasizing that we are saved only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ as our substitute and Savior. Its emphasis is on accessing the power of faith through speech. Simply by speaking to God whatever you desire in true faith, you can supposedly bring healing and prosperity into your life and eliminate poverty and pain. Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "Name it and claim it." That is a phrase strongly associated with the Word of Faith movement.

This is a very attractive movement to those who suffer from chronic pain, sadness, or disappointment, or who can never seem to get ahead in life. Just say the right words with the right conviction and the right emotion, and all your problems will miraculously go away.

But Jesus teaches us this morning, indeed, he promises us, that the Christian life involves pain. Yes, he also teaches that there is joy, but that joy is not found primarily in physical healing and earthly prosperity. It is found in him. Let's take a closer look at the pain and the joy of following Jesus.

1. The Pain of Following Jesus

"From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things." Doesn't it seem strange to you that Jesus would decide that it was time to start emphasizing his suffering right after Peter and his disciples nailed it about who he was? These verses follow right on the heels of last week's Gospel, when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. They got it! Why stir the waters right away?

Jesus stirs the waters right away because even when God breaks through our darkness and reveals to us who the Son of God is, he still has to contend with lingering darkness in our hearts about what it should look like if a person is the Son of God, and what it should look like if someone is his follower. Jesus had just told Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!" But what does it mean for Peter's life that he is blessed? What does it mean for ours?

It means pain. "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.'" First, Jesus doesn't leave any of his followers out. "If *anyone* wants to follow me." Then he tells anyone that wants to follow him that their life needs to consist of denying themselves and taking up their cross.

By nature we are not deniers of self. By nature we are all about self; we are turned in upon ourselves. The plans and decisions we make, we make because they benefit ourselves, first and foremost. As toddlers, we take stuff out of the hands of others, and if we get away with it, it starts a trend, because taking stuff from others means we have more stuff. As children, we learn whether to ask mom or dad for a given thing, based on who will say yes, not based on who will give the better reasons for their answer or on what is actually best for our family. As teenagers, we tend not to date people primarily because of their beneficial influence or because they have traits that would make our parents happy. We date them simply because they make us feel good. As adults, if we're offered a job with higher pay and better benefits, our natural inclination is to try and convince our family that taking the job is also better for them, without first objectively weighing if it actually is. As we grow older, we get resentful and depressed when decisions start getting taken out of our hands, because really, our entire lives are one big effort to exert our self over others, to exert our will over the will of others.

Even when we do good, we do so with selfish motives. We give a glowing review of a hotel or restaurant on the internet, because finding good places for us to lodge or eat again in the future depends on people giving accurate and honest reviews. We give our employees a raise, because we want them to continue to think and speak well of us and because we want them to continue to work hard and make us the most money they can. We say "Please" and "Thank you," because people are happier to give us what we want that way. This isn't being overly cynical; this is simply human reality.

In fact, we're so turned in upon ourselves that it used to be that when people were called selfish or self-centered, they still had enough shame to take that as a rebuke and to do a better job of hiding and disguising it. But more and more, selfishness and self-centeredness are praised. People call it "being true to yourself," "enjoying life," and "having good self-esteem."

And now Jesus says that following him means denying ourselves and giving all of that up? That the focus of our life can no longer be on satisfying ourselves but on denying ourselves? That instead of being devoted to ourselves, we must be devoted to him? That instead of being turned in upon ourselves, we must be turned outward toward him and toward others? That instead of trying to gain whatever we can to enhance our lives at all costs, we should be ready to give up everything and even to lose our life for his sake?

And he doesn't even try to conceal the fact that this kind of life will be painful! He calls it taking up our cross, and we know what taking up a cross was like for him. He denied himself in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying, "Not my will, but yours be done," and look where it got him. Hours later, he's carrying the instrument of his gruesome execution to the top of a hill outside Jerusalem. And now he's telling us to take up our cross and follow after him?

He even gave Peter a taste of what this life of discipleship is like. Part of denying oneself is having to listen to Jesus tell you straight up when you're not denying yourself, when you're thinking in a worldly way instead of in a heavenly way. Peter was spot on in his confession of the person of Jesus. But when Jesus told him about the Messiah's work, the work of suffering many things and dying, Peter thought Jesus had it all wrong. He was so convinced of this that he took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him: "God forbid, Lord! This will never happen to you!"

And Jesus wasted no time. He "turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a snare to me because you are not thinking the things of God, but the things of men.'" It didn't

occur to me until about six years ago: When Jesus turned, had he been facing away from Peter, so that he then turned and faced him? I think probably not, since we're told that Peter first took Jesus aside to have this conversation with him. When you take someone aside, you make sure that you're looking at that person and he or she at you. That means that when Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!", he did so facing *away from* him. As if to say, "I can't even look at you right now."

That's a big part of the self-denial required for following Jesus—having him regularly tell you when you're being selfish and self-centered. Isn't there a part of you that would love to come into church fifteen minutes late each Sunday, so that you can skip the confession of sins? "I confess that I am by nature dead in sin. For faithless worrying and selfish pride, for sins of habit and sins of choice, for the evil I have done and the good I have failed to do, I deserve to be cast away from your presence forever." Good grief. Again? Isn't that painful? Isn't there a part of you that dies inside every time you have to confess your sinful condition and behavior?

And then there are all the other ways that Jesus teaches us to deny self and to lose our life for his sake—when he allows hardships and difficulties to come into our lives in the form of family strife, and relationship problems, and physical handicaps and illnesses, and economical hardships, and political unrest, and tragic deaths, and the list could go on. I'm of course talking about these things only to the extent that they've come in spite of our faithful love and service to Christ. I'm not talking about when we bring them on ourselves through our sin. Jesus uses these things to draw us more and more away from ourselves, away from our worldly life, and closer to him, more focused on heaven. But it's painful, isn't it? That's because we still have a sinful nature that goes kicking and screaming all the way.

Let no one tell you otherwise: There is pain in following Jesus.

2. The Joy of Following Jesus

But we follow him anyway, because there is also joy in following Jesus, and the joy far outweighs the pain.

We have joy, first of all, in knowing that we aren't following after someone who's just barking out an order to carry our cross because he's on some power trip. The greatest generals don't just send their troops into battle; they lead them into battle. Jesus tells us we must carry a cross, but he first carried the worst cross, the most painful cross, the cross that has taken the sting and the weight out of our cross. He went to Jerusalem and suffered many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and was killed—crucified on a cross. He did that in denial of himself. He did that in obedience to his heavenly Father's will. He did that for us and for our salvation. He took all of our sin on himself, all of our selfishness and egotism, and bore the full punishment of God's wrath over it for us. When he tells us to take up our cross, he says so knowing full well what it's like, and also knowing that ours will be nothing like his.

And we have joy because we've come to know through this gospel that denying ourselves and losing our life here for Jesus's sake is the best thing for us in the long run. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. After all, what will it benefit a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what can a person give in exchange for his soul?" All those people living for the here and now, living for themselves, living to exert their will over the will of others—what will happen to their lives in the end? They will

lose them eternally. Yes, what if every tyrant in the history books had achieved his ultimate goal and had gained the whole world? They would still be in the history books, because they would have died in the end, and would have forfeited their eternal souls to the flames of hell.

Our soul is the most precious thing we have, and the only way it can be preserved is when it trusts in the person and work of Christ, when it gives itself over to his glory and his will. Yes, bearing the cross is painful, but it's only painful for a short time. At death, we will not lose our life, but find it. At death, we will not forfeit our soul to hell, but have it ushered into heaven. As Paul writes, "Our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us." In Christ, we must daily struggle against self, but at the end of each day we can still go to bed at peace with God, with a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Here is the mystery of bearing the cross, of suffering pain for Jesus's sake: It's actually the only way any of us experiences true, pure joy, both in this life and for eternal life. Let us deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, through this life of pain, in the joy of faith and hope, to the joy of heaven. Amen.