

*27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

*34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

She had asked me to the dance. She was a year older than I, since I had not yet reached my growth spurt, she was quite a bit taller. But here I was all dressed up, feeling kind of scared. "Let's dance," she said.

"OK," I responded.

My dancing skills, taught during lessons in seventh grade were kind of rusty, but I knew that I was to lead, she to follow.

But she didn't. Two of us were leading, no one was following. That's quite a feeling.

Everyone leading - no one following.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples.

Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

The Messiah - the one anointed by God to lead God's people.

The Messiah - the Christ which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah.

The Messiah would come and the whole world would follow.

Follow.

*Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. He said this all quite openly.*

*And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

*But turning and looking at his disciples he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

You are the Messiah.

What a confession Peter had made! The whole world would follow Jesus.

And immediately Peter is telling Jesus what to do.

I am sure that in his mind Peter knew all about what it would be like when the Messiah came. Just as you and I have some ideas what life should be like when God is blessing us.

Health.

Leisure.

Doing what we do because we want to do it.

Happy and agreeable family members.

Feeling good every time we are here in worship.

Peace.

Harmony.

And what comes our way? Sickness, work, work, work, family members who are upset, discouraged, facing challenges. Sometimes here we feel trampled upon, or passed over, leaving here a little on edge. Conflict. Discord.

Jesus said that when the Messiah came there would not be peace, but conflict, not a series of victories for the Messiah, but a defeat in death. Victory would only come from God and after three days - after the great suffering - after the rejection - after the being killed.

"Get behind me," Jesus said to Peter. "Follow."

Then Jesus spelled it out even more clearly: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*

Jesus really means follow. Even in taking up a cross, losing our lives just as he lost his. Follow.

The other night in the confirmation class I asked the students to write down those who suffered for them and how they suffered.

At first there was only one answer: Jesus - his death on the cross.

But as they thought further other answers followed: Their mothers in giving birth. Their parents in giving their time to provide for them, go to work, care for them. Teachers, pastors, friends, sisters, brothers. Soon it was clear to me that all who love us give up time and things and freedom for us. Not all sacrifice their lives as soldiers who fought for our nation's freedom did, but love so very often means sacrifice, suffering.

Even for God. We always thought that God could just make everything great with no suffering at all. A snap of the fingers and we are all in paradise. Send the Messiah, there will be endless joy.

I suppose had all followed it might have been like that, Jesus healing, everyone sharing and loving. But when Jesus was leading no one was following, everyone was leading, friends and foes alike. Everyone knows better than God.

Jesus simply let us have our way with him. Suffered Peter's disobedience and loved him still. Suffered our disobedience, and loves us still.

And he told Peter to follow him in this.

I never win anyone by struggling for power over them. On that dance floor where two were leading, there was never dancing, only a struggle. But Jesus wins the world, leads the world by letting us have our way with him, suffering under our way with him and loving us still.

And he invites: *“If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

I think of parents. When they begin I do not think they have any idea how much giving, sacrificing, loving, raising children will require. The children sometimes will seem like a sponge, able to absorb and absorb and absorb and giving back so little.

But then something marvelous happens, the children take their turn at being parents, and follow, in so many ways follow as they were led. Now they give and sacrifice and love.

Christ led Peter and the others, loved and loved and loved until death. The disciples looked like they would never catch on.

But after Easter, and after Pentecost a remarkable thing happened: They followed him in loving, and loving and loving and others became Jesus' disciples through them. Others denied themselves, took up their crosses and followed.

Now you follow also!