When we peruse the gospels to fill in our portrait of Jesus, there are times when we uncover the kind and compassionate Jesus. He says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Other times we hear the wise and insightful Jesus: “No one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth.” Regrettably, on this holiday weekend, we hear from the stern Jesus; the demanding Jesus; dare we say the crotchety Jesus?

To set the scene, it helps to know the precise location of Jesus and his disciples when Jesus popped the big question, “Who do people say that I am?” Our text says they were at Caesarea Philippi. It helps to know that 15 years before the birth of Jesus, King Herod built a magnificent temple of white marble near the source of the Jordan River and dedicated it to the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. After Herod died, his son, Philip, was named the ruler of this region. Philip dressed up the temple even more to magnify its impressive nature. Upon completion, he changed the name to include Caesar and who else? Himself! He named it Caesarea Philippi.

Roman rulers constantly drummed it into the people that Caesar was anointed by God. So, it was in the shadow of this imposing monument dedicated to the anointed Caesar that Jesus asked, “Who do people say that I am?”

Peter blurted out, “You are the Messiah.” And what does the word “Messiah” mean? The anointed one.

In my mind, I picture Peter pointing to the glistening white edifice and declaring, “Caesar is not the anointed one. You are!” And Jesus praised Peter for answering correctly.

Then, almost immediately, things veered in a surprising direction. Following Peter’s answer, Jesus sketched out the details of what it meant for him to be the anointed one.
He said he must march due south to Jerusalem. The initial reaction of the disciples may have been to cheer. They hoped that Jesus was the one to liberate them from the Roman oppressors and become the long-awaited king who would rule with justice and mercy. But before the sound of their cheers died down, Jesus said that he will neither sweep the floor with the Romans nor dislodge the religious and political leaders who colluded with them. Instead, he would undergo great suffering and be killed.

His words made no sense to any of them, so Peter jerked Jesus aside and said, “No! This is not going to happen to you.”

It seems like a normal human response, but his words sparked Jesus’ anger. Jesus lit into Peter with one of the harshest rebukes in all of Scripture. He shouted, “Get behind me, Satan!” Then, after having just said that Peter was the rock on which the church would be built, Jesus called him not a foundation stone, but a stumbling block. For Peter, it was the best of times and then very quickly it was the worst of times. Peter was convinced he was right about what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. But, in fact, he was dead wrong.

You may know that James Garfield was not trying to become the President, but at his party’s convention, they could not agree on a candidate. They went through ten ballots and there was no clear choice. They went through ten more ballots, still no one emerged the victor. The horse-trading was fierce, but after 30 ballots, they still could not agree on a candidate for President. Finally, after a long and hard-fought struggle, Garfield was chosen as the nominee of his party on the 36th ballot.

After a modest campaign, he was elected, and he took office in March of 1881. Just four months later, he was meeting a train in Washington when a man named Charles Guiteau shot him in the back. Garfield was rushed to the White House where he received medical care from Dr. Willard Bliss.

“Garfield would not survive. But it was not his assassin who killed him; it was his doctor. Bliss was unable to locate the bullet, but he searched for it almost daily. At that time, the process of antisepsis was known in the medical world (a process to sanitize hands and instruments to prevent infection) but Bliss did not believe in it. Frequent searching and probing with unsanitary fingers and instruments introduced infection into the President – infection that within two months took Garfield’s life. To the end, Bliss defended his methods. He was convinced he was right, but he was wrong.”

Peter was convinced he was right. The Messiah was supposed to liberate his people. The Messiah was not supposed to be killed by the oppressors. But Peter was very wrong.

I’ve been there; certain that I was right about something only to find out that I was terribly mistaken. Perhaps you have been there too. Or at least you have known someone who was convinced they were right when they were not. If you are sitting next to that person, this would be an appropriate moment to jab him in the ribs.
I don’t believe God intended for Jesus to be tortured and killed, but Jesus was no fool. He knew the ferocity of his opponents. He knew it was a longshot for people in positions of power to acquiesce to a prophet of peace.

However, there is a good deal more to this passage than a reminder that none of us is perfect and humility is a virtue. Knowing the opposition to his way of living, Jesus spelled out the demands upon those who follow him: “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Our passage describes a liminal moment for Peter and the disciples. They were crossing the boundary between the familiar routine and the uncharted road; the place of safety and the risky future. Jesus made it clear to his disciples that they were at a crisis point and their decision will make or break their lives. The path Jesus was traveling was not for the faint of heart and now was the time to opt out if they were not committed. Jesus was not a self-destructive person who urged his followers to seek suffering. But he knew that living in harmony with the will of God requires making personal sacrifices – sometimes extraordinary ones.

Most of us live such privileged lives that talk of personal sacrifice can easily drift into the trivial - denying ourselves dessert or screen time; or promising to spend more time praying. On the other hand, talk of denial and losing one’s life for the sake of the gospel sounds impossibly demanding. Something that only giants of faith like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, and Martin Luther King Jr. are capable of. It can feel as if our choice is to either minimize the demand or confess the futility of attempting to fulfill it.

What does it mean to deny yourself and follow Jesus? Theologian Debi Thomas notes that some adopt “the kind of self-denial that strips life of all pleasure, all delight, and all celebration. (They) reduce the world to a grim mission field, a landscape to conquer with an earnest but loveless zeal. This is the dangerous kind of self-denial that sees ideology before it sees humanity.”

We need to be clear about what it means to deny ourselves. Jesus would never want us to deny that we are children of God created in God’s image. He would never want us to deny that we are worthy of love. He would never want us to think we should deny ourselves happiness.

As he often does, Jesus is employing hyperbole to drive home the point that if you are constantly promoting yourself, you will miss the joy that comes from giving yourself. One of the mysteries of faith is that it is in serving and sacrificing that we become fully alive.

Two seasoned war correspondents visited a hospital where the wounded were being treated. A nurse was cleaning debris out of a woman’s mangled leg. One of the journalists recoiled from the ghastly site and said to his companion, “I wouldn’t do that for a million bucks.” The nurse overheard and looked up with steady eyes, and said, “Neither would I.” She was driven by something far greater.
When Jesus declared “Those who try to save their life will lose it,” he was pointing to the fact that a life turned in on itself becomes shallow and meaningless. When he said, “Those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it,” he was not talking about believing in him in order to gain eternal salvation. Rather, he was pointing to the deep truth that “de-centering yourself from your own preoccupations” and giving yourself for the good of another is the route – the true route – to deep satisfaction and joy.

When Jesus calls you to pick up your cross and follow him, you may not be led into life-threatening places, but you will be led into demanding places – sitting with someone whose grief is raw from the death of a loved one, forgiving someone who does not deserve it, standing up for people who are treated unjustly, giving away a portion of your money to help people who are desperate.

Jesus is calling you to follow him wherever he leads, and he can take you to life-transforming places that will save your soul.

NOTES