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WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Reading today's gospel text might lead one to wonder what JESUS had in mind when HE chose Peter to be one of the twelve.

- Frequently, we see Peter missing the spiritual while holding on tightly to the earthly.
  - And though life is often a mixture of the two, JESUS makes it abundantly clear that the spiritual must come before the worldly.

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In the television movie "Once Upon a Time in the West," the character played by Henry Fonda says to another, "How can you trust a man that wears both a belt and suspenders?"

- "Man can't even trust his own pants."

It was a humorous line, but the symbolism of the statement can apply to Peter's situation, and even to ours today.

- We often reach out for the hope of heaven, while being very careful not to lose our grip on the world.
- Like the man with both belt and suspenders, we aren't quite sure if our faith will hold up,
  - so, to be on the safe side, we try to use a combination of faith and practicality to, in a sense, "cover our bases."
  - It's a problem we all face.

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I sometimes find myself asking, "Am I on the side of JESUS or the side of the world?"

- You see, I also like to be a bit on both sides.
- Both the heavenly and the earthly look good to me.
  - I like the ways of the LORD,
    - but I like some of the ways of the world.
- And this leaves me wondering, "Am I on the side of JESUS?"
  - "Am I truly a disciple of the LORD?"
  - "Can I even be sure?"
  - "Is JESUS really the central focus of my life?"

Perhaps you wonder, too.

- Certainly, you believe in GOD.
- Of course, you confess that JESUS is the CHRIST, the SON of the living GOD.
- The seeds of faith were sown at your baptism.
- You want to be a disciple—a follower of CHRIST.
- You regularly pray, "THY Kingdom come, THY will be done."
- You want GOD active in your life, influencing your thoughts, words, and deeds.

But then the doubts come.

- Are you on the side of JESUS or the side of the world?

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Before you rush to answer that question, consider it carefully in light of today's gospel.

- What does it mean to be on the side of CHRIST?

To begin with, being on the side of JESUS isn't something you decide as part of a group.

- Nor is it a commitment you ask someone else to make on your behalf.
- Choosing for JESUS is a personal thing.
- It is a decision you make for yourself, by yourself.

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JESUS told us, *“Whoever wants to be MY disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow ME.”*

- This is exactly what being on the side of JESUS is all about, but such a declaration contains two of the most challenging words a Christian can ever consider: “deny” and “cross.”

First, “deny” seems pretty clear in its meaning.

- It isn't easy to miss the sense of the word.
- To “deny” means to “contradict” or to “disavow.”

*“Whoever wants to be MY disciple must deny themselves.”*

- The Greek term for “deny themselves” literally means “to make themselves strangers to themselves.”

In our world, self-denial usually means abstaining from certain luxuries and delights.

- And there are times when this type of practice can lead to self-praise, applauding our own ability to say “no” to something.

- How often do we pat ourselves on the back for pushing away the extra helping of food or the piece of pie or cake?
- When we do that, we become like Little Jack Horner, who takes only a plum instead of the whole pie and then praises himself with, “What a good boy am I!”

However, the type of denial of which JESUS speaks, this becoming a stranger to oneself, is a much deeper, much more personal commitment.

- JESUS is talking about making ourselves not an end but a means to GOD's kingdom.

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The story is told of how Alexander the Great, perhaps the most powerful general of all time, approached a great-walled city with only a handful of soldiers and demanded the surrender of the city.

- The people of the city, seeing only this small band of soldiers, laughed and said, “Why should we surrender when you have so few fighters?”

In the way of an answer, Alexander had his men line up single file and ordered them to march.

- Nearby was a steep, treacherous cliff, and as the people of the city watched, Alexander directed his men toward the edge.
- Then, one by one, each soldier stepped off the cliff to their death.

At a certain point, Alexander halted the march and ordered the rest of the men to his side.

- They immediately returned without a hint of fear, relief, or panic.

When the city's residents saw the loyalty that Alexander commanded, they realized defeat was inevitable, and they surrendered.

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Indeed, we know that GOD will not ask us to do anything so deliberately self-destructive.

- Nevertheless, imagine what could and would happen if enough of us would learn what it means to deny ourselves, to turn away from the priorities of this world, and choose for the side of JESUS.

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Sadly, putting CHRIST first is not too popular a lifestyle, especially for us who live in a society that stresses popularity, comfort, and luxuries as signs of success.

- Was it difficult for you to come to the worship services of GOD today because of the call for relaxation, vacation, or some extra sleep?

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Charles Allen tells about being a young pastor of a little church up in the mountains.

- There was an older man in the community with whom he spent a lot of time and from whom he learned a great deal.
- The man would tell his young pastor of life as it used to be, of how little the people had, yet how happy they were.
- But one day, the mail carrier left a mail order catalog at someone's home.
  - The people began looking through it, first out of curiosity and then longing.
- Soon, every home had one of these catalogs, and gradually, people turned away from the things that used to mean so much.
  - As they turned the catalog pages, they forgot the beauty of the mountains that GOD had created and the love for each other they shared.
  - Instead, they thought of the many things they did not possess.
  - They drifted away from making sure that their neighbor had enough, to thinking about what they lacked compared to their neighbor.

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Denying self for CHRIST means doing away with concern for self-acclamation and the insistence upon comfort and prestige.

- Self-denial means putting aside selfish desires for the sake of putting oneself into CHRIST's service.
- Denial of self means coming face-to-face with that other term "cross" and the challenge to *"take up one's cross."*

Often, this phrase is misused.

- Some speak of a calamity, problem, or inconvenience as "the cross they must bear."
  - Sorrow and loss may be heavy burdens, but they are not necessarily a cross.
  - Taking up a cross is not simply putting up with bad habits or temperament in a spouse or other family member.

The cross of JESUS was HIS deliberate decision, HIS choice of giving HIS life so that we might live.

- It was HIS personal commitment to others with whom HE had no previous knowledge so they might know GOD.
- The cross of JESUS was ministering to the needs of others out of love and for their understanding, no matter the cost.

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Thus, in CHRIST, we can see what it means to take up the cross of JESUS,

- for it means the deliberate choice to do a service that could be avoided;
- taking on a burden which we are under no obligation or compulsion to carry out;
  - no compulsion except for the call of GOD to love others in CHRIST.
- Taking up the cross means serving others by sharing their burdens;
  - putting their needs ahead of our own for the sake of JESUS;
  - giving our time and our gifts so that others might come to know the love of GOD through us.

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A high school classmate posted this message this week:

- I worked very hard my entire life to get what I have. Most of the people I know have too. I deserve where I am in life. I will not give up what I have earned so that someone who has not can feel "equal." Nor will I assume their debt. I have paid my debt. I insist everyone else be held to the same standard.
  - While my classmate is speaking from a political perspective, I can't help but think, "Thank GOD JESUS didn't come into the world with that attitude."
    - JESUS took on my debt, and I want everyone else to know that blessing as well

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Louis Pasteur had an excellent reputation and outstanding medical practice after the development of the process of pasteurization.

- But the call to serve others caused him to risk all that.
- In fact, he received the scorn and condemnation of the medical community, was almost run out of town, and spent nearly every penny he had, all because of the work that resulted in the cure of rabies.

Self-denial and taking up the cross means doing what JESUS would do and doing it because of what JESUS has done.

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Imagine two buckets, one filled with oil and the other with water.

- The oil represents GOD's will for us, and the water represents our will.
- Both are full, so you cannot pour the oil into the other bucket until you have emptied the water.
- Before you can know GOD's will and purpose for your life, you will have to empty the bucket of your priorities so that you can receive what GOD has to give.

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Denying yourself and taking up the cross means choosing for the side of CHRIST.

- Stephen did and saw the glory of GOD and JESUS standing at GOD's right hand.
- Peter did and received the keys to heaven.
- The centurion did, and his servant was healed.
- The criminal on the cross did and was welcomed into eternity by JESUS HIMSELF.

Bear the cross and receive the blessing.

- Deny yourself and find a SAVIOR who will carry away all your sins.
- Choose the side of CHRIST, and you will find life more wonderful, fulfilling, and blessed than anything you can imagine.

Ask yourself now, this day, "Is it the way of the world or the way of CHRIST?"

- Whose side are you on?