

Who we say that Jesus is – what we know in our heart of hearts Jesus the Christ to be – is what drives how we live out being his disciples.

There is a perennial joke among Jo and Jim and their priest friends about what Jesus was asked when he ascended to heaven. He was asked him how he could leave his ministry in the hands of a few disciples when so much was at stake. And further, what if the disciples didn't do it – didn't continue his ministry? What if they didn't spread the Gospel to all nations? And Jesus answered: “There is no Plan B.” Everything – everything – depended upon the disciples. They were – and still are – Plan A. The disciples' understanding of who Jesus was and their ability to disciple others in their day began a long road of Christian conversion. They discipled others, who then taught and converted the next generation and the next and the next – all the way to 2024.

Jesus was traveling with his disciples from the Sea of Galilee to the villages in and around the prominent pagan town of Caesarea Philippi. And Jesus asked his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples reported what people were saying about him. The disciples shared that the people thought that he was “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” In that non-Jewish region, indeed a pagan region, these non-believers didn't really know Jesus. They merely knew OF him? And they would not come to believe unless they came to truly know Jesus. They needed someone to disciple them. They needed Peter and James and John and Andrew, and Bartholomew (Nathanael) and James the Lesser and Judas and Jude (Thaddeus) and Matthew and Philip and Simon and Thomas.

After the twelve shared the popular rumors and reports from friends and foes, there must have been a breathless silence, and Jesus turned to his own and asked: “Who do YOU say that I am?” Who Jesus was to the disciples is what formed them as the ones who could teach what he had taught them – who could continue his ministry in the world.

Peter's answer to Jesus was "You are the Messiah." Peter's words have since been revered as a sincere confession of faith in Jesus's mission as the Messiah. In front of all the other disciples, Peter said – you are the anointed one.

So fast forward more than 2000 years. Who do we say that Jesus is?

Jesus is:

- a prophet
- our friend
- our helper
- our teacher

Jesus was a revolutionary...

- a radical
- a rebel
- a rabble rouser
- a miracle worker
- a healer
- the protector of the poor

Jesus is hope for the world

- the lamb of God
- the son of man
- the son of God

Jesus is Lord

- God incarnate
- the ruler of the universe
- the King of the Jews.

Jesus was and is all these things and more. And we are Christians who have been disciplined by other disciples. Christ is still alive because of what we believe and how we express our beliefs and how we live and how we reveal Christ in the world today. Just like the 1st century disciples, we live in a world that is more and more non-religious. When we engage others about their beliefs and ask who they say Jesus is, we must be prepared to disciple them. It is what we have promised to do at our baptisms – to spread the Gospel – to tell who Jesus is – to remember him – re – member him.

If we were asked "Who do YOU say that Jesus is?" could we say Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one sent to reveal to us our God who empowers us to love one another as we have been loved? If this is who we believe Jesus to be, then, as his disciple,

Jesus can and will speak through us and he will be re-membered – be made alive to the people of our time.

Jesus told the 1st century disciples that he “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.” Peter reacted with a rebuke. The Messiah was not expected to suffer. Peter did not want his friend, his teacher, the one from whom he had learned God’s truest love to die – to leave him. Peter surely didn’t want Jesus to suffer...we don’t either! Many Christians today de-emphasize his suffering. They would have us go directly to Easter without going through the cross. But without going to the cross we would be lost. Peter felt the loss, because he spoke sharply to Jesus, who told him to “get behind me, Satan” – get out of my way – Peter. Get out of God’s way! Peter had become a stumbling block. Jesus called Peter Cephas, which means “the rock,” yet Peter – the rock on whom the church would be built – had become an impediment to Jesus’s message to the disciples.

Jesus HAD to go to Jerusalem, and suffer, and be rejected, and be killed AND be raised from the dead. And the disciples then were told that they – that we – must take up the cross. Peter didn’t want to hear this news. We don’t want to hear this any more than Peter did. But we are called to tell the story.

What would it mean for us to take up our cross daily?

- To take up our cross might mean to take up the burden in another person’s life.
- To take up our cross might mean to carry a burden in our own life – a disease perhaps or handicap – to carry it a bit more lightly.
- To take up our cross daily might mean carrying a brother or sister on our back (remembering that “he ain’t heavy; he is our brother”).
- To take up our cross might mean to be open and flexible to God’s plan.
- To take up our cross might mean to focus on God daily by practicing a spiritual discipline (perhaps something as simple as reading a daily devotion).
- To take up our cross might mean to try to be more loving every day.
- To take up our cross might mean to have grace under pressure (“grace under fire” as Jo used to teach her children).

- To take up our cross might mean to go the extra mile to do our jobs well.
- To take up our cross might mean to work among atheists and agnostics and non-believers who see Christianity as ridiculous.
- To take up our cross might mean to work on our relationships with family or with friends or even with people we do not like.
- To take up our cross daily might mean to go against what our culture and the media say is success.
- To take up our cross might mean to bridle our tongue so that in the silence we and others can hear God speaking.
- To take up our cross might mean to simply get out of the way so that Jesus can enter into our hearts and others' hearts through us.

My dear sisters and brothers, we are an essential part of Plan A. Discipling is hard work, all the while taking on burdens, setting burdens aside, being counter-cultural, reconciling with our family and enemies. We must do this work so that we can be equipped to confess who Jesus really is – so that we can live – can bask – in his love and invite others to join us.

When we take up our cross – armed with who we say Jesus is in our heart of hearts – we WILL re-member Christ. Will we stumble? Yes, we are human, just like Peter. And, yes, there are some crosses so heavy that we cannot carry alone. But when we take up the cross we are never alone. If we can get beyond ourselves and allow God to work with us and through us, we will realize that Jesus and our friends are bearing much of the weight of the cross. And together we can be Plan A; we can be disciples.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.