

Cary Grant was walking down the street in New York one afternoon. He was spotted by someone who excitedly did the whole stop, stare, double-take, stare, stammer thing. “You’re, you’re, you’re . . . Rock Hudson. No, that’s not right. You’re, you’re, you’re uh, uh, Gary Cooper. No, that’s not it, you’re, you’re Burt Lancaster, no, uh . . .” Seeking to help, Grant helpfully suggested, “Cary Grant?” Man shook his head and muttered, “No, that’s not it. I’ll get it in a minute.”

Today’s Gospel lesson turns on a question of identity – exactly who is Jesus? Well, it’s pretty clear that the author of *Mark* wants us to know that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the Savior, the Christ. And, he wants us to know that Jesus’ identity as the Christ, the Messiah, has implications for Jesus that the disciples did not want to hear. “Suffer?! Die?! No! That can’t be right.” Peter took Jesus aside to tell him, “Now, listen here Jesus, that’s not who you are.

We do that ourselves. Like the movie fan and Cary Grant, like Peter, we presume to know better than Jesus and tell him who we think He is. And Jesus’ response to Peter carries us deeper into the mysteries of identity, of suffering and death, denial and the cross. This question of identity isn’t just about Jesus; it’s also about us. If Jesus is the Christ, what does that mean for us? What does it mean for us to say week after week in the *Apostles’ Creed* that Jesus is the Christ?

Well, for some, this text is an invitation to believe the right things about Jesus. “Who do you say that I am?” is seen by many as the essential question of the faith, as if our eternal salvation will be determined by what we thought about Jesus, that our relationship with God depends upon our thinking and believing the right things.

And the next part of the text, the part about Jesus predicting his own suffering and Peter’s unwillingness to accept it, and Jesus crying out, “Get

behind me Satan,” are reminders of Jesus’ own suffering for us on the cross. Part B is correct; but Part A — not so as much as we might think — it’s back to that “thought” part. You see, in the midst of all this, many still see this text as being exclusively about what Jesus did for us and almost never about what we are called to do with Jesus for the world.

Often times the phrase “deny self” is interpreted as something like: “Quit your meanness and get back to church.” “To take up one’s cross,” is understood as “Put up with whatever less than ideal conditions you find yourself in, it may be bad but it’s not as bad as what Jesus went through to save your sorry self from the place down under (and I don’t mean Australia or the Outback Steakhouse), so quit complaining.” And “following Jesus” apparently consists of being in church a lot and giving enough so that the church can meet its bills.

And then there was this big church rally and the Rev. Dr. Somebody Famous preached on this text and said that the focus of this story needed to be moved from salvation to service. He laid down the challenge to

consider what God was calling the folks at the rally to do with their lives. And, apparently, the answer to “deny self, take up a cross and follow Jesus” was to give ourselves to something called “full time Christian service.” While one might ponder as to how there could be anything else but “full-time” Christian service, (I mean being a part-time Christian just doesn’t seem to make much logical sense; either you are or you aren’t) it was further explained by Dr. Somebody Famous that the preferred full-time Christian service was outside the United States among people who would never hear the Gospel if those assembled there in that hall don’t carry it to them.

And again, is that really what “deny self, take up a cross, follow Jesus” means? Maybe, but that can’t be all there is to it. Perhaps something Fred Craddock wrote on this makes the most sense. (Dr. Craddock taught preaching for many years at Vanderbilt and Emory Universities.) Craddock said that most of us think that this call to denial will come in a startling moment of moral and existential clarity, that we will have a “Damascus Road-like” experience that causes us to shed our old life in order to totally and completely embrace another life for the sake of the Gospel. And the

and completely embrace another life for the sake of the Gospel. And the truth is, Dr. Craddock says, for most of us, most of the time, it doesn't happen that way. Dr. Craddock's analogy is that we think we have a million dollars and we believe we have to spend it all at once on something big.

The reality is that we give away the million dollars a quarter at a time, all day long, every day of our lives. We give it away in little acts of sacrifice and kindness to others and in devotion to God. We listen to the neighbor

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kid's problems, we go to a boring but necessary committee meeting, we spend a night at the homeless shelter, we provide a meal at the battered women's shelter, we give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home, we call the pastor and tell him or her that her or his sermon helped us this week, we treat the teenager at the drive-through with respect whether they deserve it or not; and the list goes on.

Usually, giving our lives to Christ is neither glorious nor spectacular. It's done in little acts of love, twenty-five cents at a time; living the Christian life little by little, day after day, over the long haul. (Fred Craddock – Cherry Log Sermons) It's like the story of the Ragman by Walter Wangerin. As the narrator follows a ragman around the city, the small encounters the ragman has with others transform their lives.

Think of it this way, we go through life shedding little pieces of our old self, tiny bits at a time. And we pick up little splinters and pieces of our cross along the way as we attempt to follow a Christ who is just out of sight over the horizon, until, near the end of our journey, we look back and realize we are no longer who we once were and the change in us is all because we followed him.

Who is this? Who are we who follow this One called the Christ? Who is God calling us to be? And, what is God calling us to do?

Let us pray: Ever-loving, ever-calling God, You have shown us who You are in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus who we call the

Christ. You lead us step by step into Your Kingdom, a place where Your shalom is ever-present, where death and dying are no more, where tears and sorrow are but fading memories. And, You have shown us in Jesus that this Kingdom is here on earth already. Let us be transformed into citizens of Your Kingdom. Put before us opportunities to show others Your love and grace, mercy and hope. Bring us to humbly follow Your Son as the Lord of our lives, the Savior of our souls, the Redeemer of the world. We pray all this in the name of that same Lord, Your beloved Son, Jesus. Amen.