

“Shoot Me First.” That’s what a courageous 13-year-old Amish girl said to the crazed man who broke into her school on Monday, October 2, 2006. “Shoot Me First.” He did shoot her, killing her along with five of her schoolmates, aged seven to thirteen. Then he killed himself. The shooter, Charles Carl Roberts, a 32-year-old milkman entered the humble one-room schoolhouse with the intent of killing as many students as possible. But one student, Marian Fisher, the oldest of the five Amish girls shot dead that day, tried to buy time for her schoolmates to escape. There were ten of them in all, all girls, five of whom survived. They may owe their lives to Marian who stepped forward and asked her killer to “Shoot me first.” What’s more, Fisher’s younger sister, Barbie, who survived the shooting, allegedly asked the gunman to, “Shoot me second.” **It is a story of incredible courage. Maybe our Amish friends have some things to teach us about how to raise young people.**

Jesus and his disciples were at Caesarea Philippi. Their ministry to this point had been a stunning success. Crowds pressed in on them everywhere they went. People eagerly reached out to touch this attractive young teacher from Nazareth. The disciples themselves were caught up in the excitement of it all. Jesus asked them, ***“Who do you say I am?”*** and Simon Peter answered enthusiastically, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”*** It was one of the most dramatic moments in the disciples’ pilgrimage with Jesus.

Then Jesus changed the subject. He began to tell them that the crowds would soon turn against him, he would be crucified, on the third day he would be raised. The disciples didn’t know what to make of all this. **Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.** ***“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”***

Jesus turned and said to Peter . . . Well, you know what he said, **“Get behind me, Satan!”** You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Have you ever called one of your best friends “Satan”? Maybe, in jest, but probably you didn’t mean it. Jesus wasn’t being funny. This was a rebuke of the first order. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Then Jesus said to his disciples something QUITE STARK. . . . ***“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”***

What did he mean? Does it have anything to do with a teen-aged girl offering her life to save her friends? “Shoot me first.” ***“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me . . .”*** It’s a disturbing statement. Think about it as we deal with Jesus’ rebuke of Simon Peter.

Many of you will remember that old joke about the little country church in North Carolina that was having a service when a guy in a blue devil’s costume suddenly intruded. It seems he was a student at Duke University, home of the Duke Blue Devils. He was on his way to a pep rally, but by mistake he stumbled fully dressed in his devil’s costume into this prayer meeting, setting off a near panic. The simple folk began exiting through doors and windows. One rather stout lady became wedged in a pew and began to scream in terror. The young Duke student in the blue devils costume, embarrassed over the trouble he was causing, rushed toward her to help her. As she saw him advancing, she raised her hand and said, ***“Stop! Devil. Don’t you come any farther. I want you to know that I have been a member of this church for 25 years--but I’ve been on your side all the time!”***

I want to ask you today, whose side are you on? Could Jesus say to any of us, ***“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”*** You see, Satan doesn’t just use bad people to do his work. In fact, he most often uses good people who are only nominally committed. **That’s when SATAN is most effective.**

So today we hear Jesus ask Peter indirectly, “Whose Side Are You On?” And at the same time, Christ is asking you and me, through these STRONG WORDS, **Which side are you on?** There’s no straddling the middle. Either you’re for Christ or against him. **Let me give you a brief test. You can grade yourself.** **Here’s the first question on the test:**

Is your faith sacrificial? That is, IS YOUR FAITH COSTING YOU SOMETHING?? There are many people today who are under the misconception that you can be a follower of Jesus WITHOUT BEARING a CROSS.

We have become a rather apathetic people when it comes to our faith, haven't we? Many of us are much more interested in following the stock market than following Jesus. Or following our favorite football team. Or following the crowd. **We want salvation without sacrifice, and so our Christianity is pale and pathetic.**

There was a humorous story in *Reader's Digest* sometime back. Lt. Commander J. P. Wilkins wrote to tell about an experience he had in the Navy. Wilkins was a Navy pilot. His plane was needing repair. His maintenance crew had worked feverishly to repair it in time for an important flight. After they declared the plane ready to fly, the crew stood by while Wilkins conducted a pre-flight inspection. As he reached behind an equipment box, though, Wilkins skewered his finger on the exposed end of a safety wire. The cut bled profusely. Sticking his head out of the plane to ask for a first-aid kit, he noticed two crew members studying a small red pool beneath the aircraft. **"That's my blood!" he called out.** Both faces immediately brightened. "What a relief!" one said. "We thought it was hydraulic fluid!" **Far be it from them to worry that he was bleeding.**

In one of history's more notable speeches, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain challenged his countrymen to give **"blood, sweat and tears"** to oppose Nazi Germany. **In his own way, he was challenging them to take up a cross, the cross of sacrifice.** No real progress is made in this world unless somebody makes a commitment to something bigger than himself or herself. That is true of every important endeavor in life, including the life of faith. We cannot live out our faith in a world that is fast moving away from God **unless we are willing to sacrifice, unless we are willing to put God first.** Following Jesus is a joyful business, but it is also a serious business. **Our goal is to bring the world to Christ. We can't do that with people who are half-hearted.**

There is a powerful scene in the movie *Schindler's List*. In the beginning of the story a Czech business man named Oskar Schindler builds a factory in occupied Poland using Jewish labor because, in those tragic days at the start of World War II, Jewish labor was cheap. As the war progresses, however, and he learns what is happening to the Jews under Adolph Hitler, **Schindler's motivations switch from profit to sympathy. He uses his factory as a refuge for Jews to protect them from the Nazis.** As a result of his efforts, more than 1,100 Jews were saved from death in the gas chambers. You would think that Oskar Schindler would have felt quite pleased with himself, but at the end of the war Schindler stands in the midst of some of the Jews he has saved, breaks down in tears, takes off his gold ring and says, "My God, I could have bought back two more people [with this ring]. These shoes? One more person. My coat? Two more people. These cufflinks? Three more people." There he stands, not gloating but weeping with regret that he had not done more.

I wonder if one day you and I as followers of Christ will ask ourselves, ***"Could I have done more? Have I truly borne the cross of Christ?"*** That is the first question on today's test: **IS YOUR FAITH SACRIFICIAL? IS IT COSTING YOU SOMETHING?**

Here's the second: **Do you spend most of your efforts looking out for #1—YOURSELF??**

Many people do. In fact, that's what our society tells us to do. **Whitney Houston**, in a song that was hugely popular a few years ago, particularly with many school choirs, told us that **to love one's self is "the greatest love of all."**

Of course, Americans have a long history of fascination with self. Some of you read a poem in school by **Walt Whitman** that was written nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, titled **"Song of Myself."** Remember how it begins? "I celebrate myself, and sing myself . . . I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it . . ." Farther on he writes, "I dote on myself; there is that lot of me and all so luscious." Then, toward the end, Whitman writes, **"Nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is . . . Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself."**

No wonder that a recent study of one million senior high school students revealed that, on leadership ability, 70 per cent thought they were above average, only 2 per cent below. In the category "ability to get along with others," none of the students rated themselves below average, 60 per cent rated themselves as being in the top 10 per cent and twenty-five thought they were in the top 1 per cent. And just in case you think it's confined to teenagers, another

survey found that 94 per cent of teachers thought they were better than their average colleague. **“How do I love me? Let me count the ways.”**

Sure, we understand the importance of positive self-esteem, **but whatever happened to J O Y...**

J-O-Y Jesus first; Others second; Yourself third.

We need to have a healthy sense of self respect in order to make a difference in the world. But we were not put on this earth to look after number one. **Most people who spend their lives looking out for number one are miserable.** You can start with the pop music business and see that. We are important, but we are no more important than every other man, woman, young person and child on this planet. Jesus said, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me . . .”** Is your faith sacrificial, or do you spend most of your efforts looking out for number one?

Here is the final question on the test: Do you trust God and God alone for your Salvation?

It would be easy to conclude from today's lesson that this is the whole story of our faith. Deny yourself, live sacrificially, take up a cross. But this is not the whole story. If it were so, Simon Peter would have been doomed, and so would we. Christ does not expect us to live under a heavy weight of guilt like Oskar Schindler, always feeling there is more we could have done. Such a burden would ultimately weigh us down and defeat us. And it was never Christ's intention that we would think of ourselves as hopeless sinners. We are of ultimate worth. Christ gave his life for us. This is where positive self-esteem comes from. It comes from knowing that even though we are not perfect, we are loved. We are loved by the Creator God who sent His son to die for us.

There is a story of a young boy from the slums of London named James, whose only refuge from the squalor of poverty was the Roman Catholic school he attended. Somehow his mother had managed to enroll him in this parochial school that was located in a middle class neighborhood. In spite of the fact that he came from a much poorer family, James managed to fit in fairly well, in part because everyone wore the same uniform. But the uniform could not completely conceal years of malnutrition. James was small for his age and his skin still had the pastiness that comes from a deficient diet. One day a physician came to the school to give medical examinations for all of the students. As James left the examination room, one of the nuns asked him what the doctor had to say about him.

James answered, **“He took one look at me and said, ‘What a miserable specimen you are!’”** The sister could see the hurt in James' eyes, **but after a short pause his eyes brightened again and he said, “But he didn't know that I've had my first Communion, did he, Sister?”**

That's beautiful, isn't it? “He didn't know that I've had my first Communion.” This is what makes us special. We're not all we should be. Some of us may be a little too self-involved. **We confess we do not live as sacrificially as we should. But God loves us. Christ died for us. We trust God and God alone for our salvation.**

SO, WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON? I hope you are on God's side. For it is God who loves us when the world denies us. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

Are you ready to PAY ATTENTION to Christ's call? I hope so... for like the Amish girl at the beginning of this message, your call home may come sooner than you expect. Amen.