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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
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Let us pray: Savior Christ, you are the Church's only foundation. Be, we pray, our only Master. Nourished by your grace, may we have the strength to deny self, take up your cross, and follow you with faithful and joyful hearts. Move us by your Spirit from conflict to community and from fear to excitement. Amen.

Perhaps you remember the advertising slogan from years past, the one for Coca Cola, "things go better with Coke!" Those of us who are faithful followers of Jesus cling to the belief that life does go better with Christ and, to a great extent, that is true. To know Jesus as Savior and Lord is to know unequivocally and unconditionally that we are loved, gracefully forgiven, part of an eternal purpose, and alive now and forevermore! We think with God on our side we'll slide through life smoothly and with no problems. Well, today's Gospel reading would have us think otherwise. Hear again the hard sayings of Jesus: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother. Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." What a rough and tough call to discipleship we have here!

Jesus was addressing the twelve disciples in this reading, disciples who had, indeed, given up their families in order to follow Jesus. It's highly likely that for many of these twelve, following this radical, anti-establishment Jesus meant being disowned by their families. Even in this day it can happen. I remember a woman, in the first parish I served, whose mother hadn't spoken to her in eighteen years because "this good Catholic girl" married a Lutheran and joined the Lutheran congregation I served!

Perhaps, you've heard the horribly shocking and tragic story of a pregnant woman in Sudan who has been sentenced to death by stoning for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. She gave birth to her daughter on May 27 and, thereafter, was whipped with 100 lashes. She's being allowed to nurse her child for two years before the death sentence by stoning is carried out, only because she is a Christian. We are richly blessed that we live in a society where professing faith in Jesus Christ doesn't mean risking our very lives. And being baptized isn't a death sentence as it has been in some times and places in the history of the church and, yes, even now.

Yet we can't expect that following Jesus faithfully will result in a life free of problems. Faith doesn't guarantee an ideal marriage, model children, an exciting and fulfilling job, or a harmonious church. So why believe, we might ask? What's the point of faith? Because to believe with heart, mind, and soul that there is a God who creates us out of love, and gives his life for us in love, and loves us with a love that not even death can defeat is to have the power, the very strength of God, to cope with the cancer diagnosis, the decline of a parent or grandparent, the death of a friend, or the end of a marriage.

The God we encounter in Jesus Christ, his Son and our Savior, yearns that we respond to his unconditional love and perpetual forgiveness with our total commitment. Jesus speaks of the commitment he expects from us with these words: "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." As if for emphasis, later in this Gospel of Matthew, chapter 16, Jesus again pleads for our total commitment: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Recently I read a book entitled "Loving Jesus" by Mark Powell. In it he shares this wonderful story. He tells of an encounter with a Christian rock fan, a Jesus freak he calls him, living in the joy of the Lord. Powell is envious of this man's commitment to Christ. He reads his Bible every day, prays to Jesus every day, and plays Christian rock music on his boom box every day. When Powell asked him about church, however, the young man said he had been unable

to find a congregation where he felt like he fit in. "The church where I'm a member," he said, "is like something out of a black-and-white TV show, like 'Ozzie and Harriet.' Everybody dresses up in a suit, and they play this music that doesn't sound like anything on the radio, and the preacher talks about things that have nothing to do with my life, and, I don't know, it's just, well, boring!" So, he said, he just didn't go. "Do you love Jesus?" Powell asked. "Of course I do! I love him with all my heart," the young man answered. "Would you die for Jesus?" "Absolutely, I would!", the young man replied. "So, you would die for Jesus, but you won't be bored for him?" Powell continued: "This is what the Lord wants you to do. I think that Jesus wants you to get out of bed every Sunday, even Sundays you'd rather be sleeping in or doing something else, and go to that 'Ozzie and Harriet' church and sit there for one hour being bored for Jesus! Do it for him. Call it bearing the cross of Jesus." And I, Tom White, say, "Amen!" Why do we think our involvement in the church is only about what we get out of it? What about your commitment to this congregation, and what you have to give to it, and must? Are we committed even when we are bored, or when we are turned off because there is quarreling, and dissension, bruised feelings, controversy, and conflict? Are we able to bear the cross of the One we call Savior and Lord enough that we stick with our church even when we might think, "I don't need this," and are tempted to call it quits and flee?

St. John's is at a critical moment in its long and storied history, a vulnerable time, this time of transition as the process moves forward of calling a new priest. This is a time not for conflict and desertion, but for cooperation and harmony! If this congregation is going to be able to move forward into the bright future I firmly believe God has in store for you, it is necessary that everyone, every one of you pull together and work together in spite of any disagreement, conflict, or challenge. Can this be difficult at times? Most certainly! But that's where cross bearing comes in and commitment to this, your congregation, commitment both to its present and to its future! Jesus Christ deserves no less!

Might you want to hear my paraphrase of these words of Jesus, "whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me?" My paraphrase goes

like this: we are called to check our ego, and our pride, and our "my way, or the highway" attitude at the doors of this church when we enter it! Jesus is Lord here, not our ego, not our pride, not our trouble-making, not our personal agendas, not our bickering, not our power-plays! Some of you might think my words too harsh. Please know I say them to you because I care deeply about this congregation and its future! I say them out of love for you, each of you, every one of you!

There is no one more important in your life, my life, or the life of this community than Christ Jesus. That's why we come here each Lord's Day, right? There is to be nothing, absolutely nothing, more important in our lives than our Savior, no, not even our family ties as important and precious as they are to us! Jesus demands that he be Number One! And He has the right to be Number One in your life and mine because he has made us Number One in his heart and life! We aren't worthy of Jesus if we make him second-best!

Jesus again appears to us this morning in the gift of grace that is the Holy Eucharist. He comes to us with unmistakable proof that he will do absolutely anything to convince us of his love and mercy, even sacrificing his very life for us and for our salvation! We are Number One in his book! Can he be any less in ours?!

† In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.