

Before E. B. White moved to his farm to become the barnyard chronicler we know from Charlotte's Web, he lived and wrote in New York City. He wrote observations of life there, including one that occurred during the frantic shopping days before Christmas.

In Macy's, he saw a little boy put his hand inquiringly on a Christ child, part of a crèche. 'What's this?' the boy asked his mom, who had him by the hand. 'C'mon, c'mon,' replied the harassed woman, 'you don't want that!' She dragged him grimly away—a Macy's Madonna, her mind dark with shopping goals, following a star of her own devising."

"You don't want that!," she said, meaning Jesus. Well, do we? Do we want Jesus?

As Mark tells the story, probably not.

Jesus had just asked his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets," they said. People weren't sure who Jesus was. "Well, who do you say that I am?," he asked them. Peter blurted out, "You are the Messiah."

But Peter had said the truth without really grasping it. Like a lucky math student, he'd stumbled on the right answer without struggling through the difficult equation. He knew but didn't know.

So Jesus responded with an explanation of what it meant to be the Messiah. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after 3 days rise again." Mark says he was very direct about it; "He said it all quite openly."

The disciples were shocked. Peter spoke for them all: "C'mon, you don't want that!" Suffering, rejection, and, finally, death! Nobody wants that! You don't want that, do you? We sure don't!

What do we want, though? That's a big question. What do we want?

Jesus describes his own time as an "adulterous and sinful generation." Ken Woodward, religion editor of *Newsweek*, describes ours as "an age of mixem, matchem, salad bar spirituality." Take what you want, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots; leave what you don't want, beets, beans, peas. He says that's how people assemble their spiritual lives, and he cites a contemporary pilgrim who declares, "Instead of me fitting a religion I found a religion to fit me." One can only suppose the fit is cozy.

The question Job asked was "Where is God?" Martin Luther wondered, "How can I find a gracious God?" For our time the great theological question is "What do I want?"

"What do I want?" may not seem like a faith question, but theologians say that faith is about our "ultimate concern." The "ultimate concern" for many people today is "What do I want?"

"What do I want?" is what we ask standing before an open refrigerator, wondering what might satisfy some vague hunger inside us. "What do I want?" is what we ask in the supermarket when we've forgotten our list, and everything seems equally appealing. "What do I want?" is what we ask in the shopping mall, hoping something we buy might make us feel whole, happy, or just better.

"What do I want?" When that becomes life's big question, our ultimate concern, faith loses its connection to God, any hope of inspiring, guiding, challenging, or saving us. It becomes just another thing added to our consumerism. Then the church becomes like a shopping mall, with people making choices the way they'd select a TV or I-pod. This model has these features, but my peers say that one's "cool," while that one's less expensive. And we half expect Consumer Reports to do a spiritual shopping edition. Maybe, someday, they will. As if that could really help us!

How different it was for Bethany's founders when they wrote the statement of purpose for our

Constitution. They said, “The purpose of the church is:

to establish a congregation for worship,
to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
to celebrate the sacraments,
to render loving service toward humanity,
to strive for righteousness, justice, and peace,
to advance the Realm of God and home and abroad.”

None of it was about what they wanted! It was about what God deserved - adoration, thanks, and praise in worship. And what God wanted – for us to preach and teach the Gospel, celebrate the sacraments, serve humanity, strive for righteousness, justice, and peace, and work to advance God’s Kingdom. They were focused on God, not themselves.

Notice first line –“to establish a congregation for worship.” They came together to form a group of people for what? For worship! Not to do anything for themselves, but for God, to give God thanks and praise. That’s what worship is – an act focused on God, on giving God thanks and praise!

And how did they “establish a congregation for worship”? By sharing their gifts! Sharing their time, talent, and treasure, as gifts to God, so that together, they could give God thanks and praise.

What do we come together for today? Too often, not for God, but for ourselves, for something we want, to get something for ourselves. Too often, we look at worship as an arena, to pursue that agenda. What we want may vary – comfort, affirmation, schmoozing or networking, expressing opinions, even inflicting insults or getting revenge, even withholding our gifts, rather than sharing them, as a way to do that – but, the underlying concern is “what I want.” We find all kinds of ways to make worship about us and not about God.

But that’s not real worship, “religious activity,” maybe, but not true worship. It can’t be!

You see, Jesus’ words, “deny yourself” have to do with more than just restraining ourselves from going after something we really want. They go deeper than that. They’re about taking our selves out of consideration, and making God our first consideration! What our forbearers understood, and what’s forgotten today, is that focus on God, not ourselves, is what we need, what saves us.

What we should want more than anything we might get for ourselves, is simply truth: the truth about ourselves, about the world, about God. What we need to learn from the wise and faithful people who formed this church is that the truth is a much larger, tougher, and more complicated than my getting “what I want.” Faith should help us know that truth, the truth which Jesus said, “shall set you free.” At the heart of that truth is that “it’s not about me” but about God.

But we’re seduced by this idea that faith is only about getting what I want. That’s because it’s very attractive. So attractive that it leads us to see church as a means to that end, leading us to distort why we come and what we do there in terms of “what I want.” And Jesus becomes the one who can help me get it. Worship, church school, a ministry or mission, become contexts in which I seek it. Faith as a means to my ends! Sounds pretty good!

Jesus’ words, by contrast, are anything but pretty. Suffering, rejection and death! Who wants that?

Especially when he adds, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." The words seem strange and out of place. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it."

What does that mean? We hardly know how to hear such words any more. "What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Take that verse and walk it around the mall!

C'mon, c'mon, you don't want that!

Nobody wants that! Nobody has ever wanted that. Peter didn't want it, the disciples didn't want it, we don't want it. We want what we want, and our strategies are more direct. We find life by finding it. We save life by saving it. We get more out of life through the things we buy and accumulate.

We'd like faith to be just one more thing we add to the pile of stuff we hope will make life attractive and comfortable. So why would we want such unattractive and uncomfortable words? Why would we need them?

Important questions! If Peter didn't want these hard words, nor the disciples, nor us, what are they doing in our nice Bible? Why would anyone have remembered such unwanted words? If we want what we want, why were these words passed on, written down, and included in the gospels?

Nobody wants them!

So, why have they been remembered, kept, written down, and saved?

Because they're true! They point to a truth that alone can save us – life doesn't come from getting what we want! Life comes from taking the focus off of ourselves, so we become free to give what we can for God and others.

Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me." Take up your cross, take up the weight of your desires, your self-concern, and follow me. Though his way sounds strange, it's also strangely appealing. He speaks so confidently about life: life so abundant that if you give it away you only find more of it; life so precious it can't be bought, only received as a gift.

Relentless voices call us to grasp and grab after life. We listen but find we're never satisfied, always wanting more, always trying to fill a deep emptiness which can't be filled by anything less than God.

We're not so good at expressing this hunger for God. We're better at talking about what we want.

Yet, still, we hunger. We need God.

Our faith affirms that we discover God most fully in the cross of Jesus. This is how God comes into the world: suffering, rejected, dying, losing life so life may be given to all. If we want to know God and the great mystery of life, it's all wrapped up in this strange, scary invitation from Jesus, "let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me." Our hope is in the way of the cross.

One young mother who'd dropped away from faith decided it was time to get her family back to church when her four year old pointed to a crucifix and asked, "What's that man doing, Mom?"

"What's that man doing?" is not an easy question to answer. It is a much more profound question, a much more central question, than "what do I want?" It is a life-sized question, a question to which men and women may give themselves, a question which promises, in the end, life.

Let's ponder that question as we sing our next hymn.

Gracious God, we come to you on this “Recovenanting Sunday” in humble gratitude.

For the wisdom of those who formed this church, focused their faith on you rather than themselves,
...made showing their gratitude and praise in worship their first priority,
...and made living that gratitude and praise through learning and service their life’s purpose,
...we give you thanks.

For the wisdom of those who came after them, who kept the faith, loving you and each other,
...and have passed on to us a legacy of challenging, committed discipleship,
...who have enabled us to reach out more and more in loving service,
we give you thanks.

For those who have borne the burdens of commitment,
...who have kept the classes alive when attendance or commitment dwindled,
...who kept singing and playing when things were difficult or disappointing,
...who kept studying, praying, serving, attending,
...we give you thanks.

For what we ourselves have learned by watching and listening,
...by being in the presence of true saints,
...for what our ears have picked up and our eyes have perceived,
...for words that were said to us that were hard to hear but needed to be said
...because they were from you,
...for all the truth that has gotten inside us and changed us more into the likeness of Jesus,
...we give you thanks.

For your Truth, which always challenges us,
...asking why we would waste our time and energy on vain things,
...encouraging us always to return to the energy of the scriptures,
the passion of the cross, the security of the Creator, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,
...we give you thanks and praise!

Christ, Teacher, Worker of Wonders, the Great Example,
...help us not to see you as just a teacher, just a miracle workers, just an example,
...but to know you through your cross.

You are the Messiah. We will pick up our cross. We follow.

Alpha & Omega, First & Last, who commissioned the prophets, was baptized by John the Baptist,
...help us not to see this great new thing you have done as merely the same old thing,
...help us to through the cross and beyond to the resurrection.

You are the Messiah. We will pick up our cross. We follow.

Messiah, greater than all angels, bearer of all sins, raised up on the cross, so all could see you suffer,
...help us not to see you as some means to getting what we want,
...nor to view you as some reflection of ourselves

...but as the one who calls us to repentance so that you might also call us to life.

You are the Messiah. We will pick up our cross. We will bear each other's burdens. We will follow.

As those who trust in your love enough to make these challenging commitments we pray for...