

Prayer of Illumination: Eternal God, whose word silences the shouts of the mighty: Quiet within us every voice but your own. Speak to us through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we may receive grace to show Christ's love in lives given to your service. Amen.

I am ready for SEC football. It means summer is over, Fall is around the corner and the end of the year will be here before we know it. Dare I tell you that Christmas is 100 days away? I hope you had time this summer to get away from the job, the house, your responsibilities. I hope you had some down time. Did anyone take a ride on a ROLLER COASTER this summer?

“The ROLLER COASTER was designed – to let people forget about everything in life and simply enjoy “letting go” for a few moments. When I was younger and had less wisdom, my wife and I went to an amusement park in Southern California. We rode five or six different ROLLER-COASTERS that day. I don't recall their names except the last one. The last one we rode was called THE CORKSCREW.

What were we thinking? I remember that ride turned me upside down a couple of times and possibly inside out and before I knew what direction we were heading – WHAM - it was over. When we got off I looked at my wife and all her hair was thrown over her head. I couldn't tell if she was looking at me or if she had her back to me. As we gathered ourselves -checking for misplaced body parts – she

said, “I don’t believe we ever need to ride these again.” And you know, I haven’t climbed into a ROLLER COASTER since then – except when I decided to follow Jesus.

How does one answer that very personal question from Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” Who wants to deny themselves, take up their cross to follow Jesus? We trust that our faith will keep us on a good path; trust that we won’t get hurt, get sick; trust that we can get to the end in one piece. Isn’t that what we think before we climb aboard a Roller Coaster? We are looking for signs that God is in control.

For many of us, our faith over the years steadily climbs upward, like that steep opening climb of a roller coaster; we’re excited at first, anticipating the joys of a loving and forgiving God – then we’re thrown forward and straight down, faster and faster in that vertical drop that turns our stomachs, takes our breath away and we wonder; does God care what’s happening right now? didn’t God hear my prayers? and why is it all coming so fast at me? Suddenly an unexpected twist to the left, sharp curve to the right, vertical drop here and we begin to lose our grip – our foundation is shaken, trusting that as we ride the Roller Coaster, we will be held tightly in by the car’s restraints.

There’s AHA’s and OH MY’s as we lift our arms to celebrate a part of the ride that’s thrilling – like finding our own spirituality; lifetime friendships, meaningful worship services. But there are also those dips, drops and unexpected

curves and upside-down maneuvers, like broken relationships, anger, and resentments. It can be one incredible but difficult journey. We are either glad the ride is over or we say, “Woo hoo! Let’s go again”

There are times when I want to get off the Roller Coaster and can’t. There are times when I don’t want to take up my cross, but it’s always there. Our failures appear in the text and we don’t want to get on that ride. We don’t want to deny ourselves and lose our life. We don’t want to admit we’re ashamed of Jesus and his words. So, who do we say that Jesus is?

The text tells us what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus – but we can’t follow until we know who Jesus is. Jesus asks his disciples – who do the people say that I am? Jesus has just fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. He had cured a blind man. But the disciples’ answer is one that’s been heard before. You’re “John the Baptist, Elijah,” and still others, “one of the prophets.”

Here’s where Jesus gets up close and personal – He asks them again, “But who do **YOU** say that I am?” Who do **YOU** say that I am? Peter confesses his belief, “You are the Messiah.” The Christ – the Anointed One. Jesus then warns the disciples “Not to tell anyone.” Jesus is not sure the disciples truly understand who he is and what he must go through.

In our scripture Jesus insists that he must “undergo great **suffering, and be rejected, killed** and after three days be **raised.**” The disciples are up high one minute hearing that Jesus is the Messiah – then laid low the next minute, as they must have been shocked and saddened when Jesus confesses - the type of Messiah he must be. **This is who Jesus is** - the suffering servant of God. This is **Faith Turned Upside Down!** The Messiah was supposed to be an exalted conqueror – not a humiliated and suffering one. Jesus who emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

How do the disciples react? How do we react? To deny one’s self is to deny anything which would keep us from a complete commitment to Jesus. According to Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian, even God denied Godself when Jesus died on the cross. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Self-denial is love. God is love. God exists for us and with us. We love because God loved us first. We **can** take up our cross to seek God’s call in our lives. Who do you say that Jesus is?

Serving God is a full-time commitment. Jesus was the example to follow, as suffering servant his obedience to God did not stop short of the cross. If you’re trying to save your life, by avoiding the cross, you will lose your life. This is our

predicament; our human condition. And if we want to save our life, we must lose it for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Perhaps the most prophetic words I heard during my Seminary years were, “Life happens between Sundays.” Life happens – the joys and the sufferings – wholeness and brokenness - love and rejection – amid our jobs, our families, our lives outside the walls of church. We must deal with our eager expectations and daily deliberations, disappointments - ups and downs – and the upside downs.

During our daily living, how do we hang on to our faith? It is a Roller Coaster ride. Either we white-knuckle it and hold on tight or we raise our hands in praise and thanksgiving. We are called to be Disciples – to be an example of love and encouragement - for the building up of others and the Church – to be followers of Christ who is our example. It’s important for us to keep our lives focused on God, while living in a *roller coaster* world.

Let’s keep our commitment to follow Jesus. Let’s stop turning the potter’s wheel faster and faster – mold me, make me, and shape me now! Lord, fix this one part of me. Lord. When things get going too fast, we often escape into the silent – hidden – and dangerous behaviors that tears lives and souls apart. When a loved one is in pain and suffering, we want to know where is God when that happens.

To DENY ourselves is to let go of the “EGO”; to be humble; to let go of the desire for more of everything. To TAKE up our cross daily is to understand our

own woundedness, the places of anxiety and vulnerabilities that could give in to temptation, those places we would rather not think about. When we **don't** take up our cross, we have become too proud of our accomplishments.

Instead, let us join in fellowship with the humiliated Jesus – Let's get on board the Alpha and Omega ROLLER-COASTER, the one with Jesus at the beginning and at the end; the LOOP-THE-LOOP-OF-FAITH. Those who would follow Jesus are willing to give up the values taught by the world - to live by the upside-down values of God's world. **So that we are not ashamed of his word!**

We can lose our life for Jesus' sake! We will not taste death before we see the kingdom of God. Who do you say that I am? You are Jesus - the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, our Savior.

John Calvin says – Christ is the pattern to follow – Therefore put on Christ – Deny yourself – for we are not our own – In life and in death –we belong to God.

In our culture today, the world would rather watch Christians and see how we act out our discipleship than join the church. That reminds me of the original Loop-the-Loop coaster ride which opened in 1901 at Coney Island. It was a much larger coaster than its predecessor and had a double elliptical loop. Ironically, **more people watched than paid to ride it** – Those who will lose their life for my sake will save it. The world is watching us answer – Who do you say that I am?
Amen.