*“He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” – Mark 8:34*

I have a confession to make, I can sometimes be a little selfish. Ok maybe that’s not much of a confession – we can all be a little selfish at times. Especially, when I was kid I would often look out for myself. It comes with the territory I guess, I have two sisters and as the youngest I needed to protect my interests. As I’ve grown up I think some of that selfishness has eroded away – being married and having kids has broadened my world so that my interests are not the only ones that shape how I see the world and how I act. It’s easy being selfish, however, because our world from the very beginning teaches us that that is what life is all about: what we want, what we desire, what we can achieve is the most important thing in life. Our society revolves around the individual, around what is best for ourselves, it tells us that we need to be the best we can be and the sordid truth behind all the motivational self-improvement is that we benefit ourselves at the expense of others. The whole world-wide economic system for example is based on the exploitation of the poor, whether they be in our own country or the exploitation of resources and people throughout Africa, Asia and South America. That’s not to say that philanthropy and care for others doesn’t happen, but that at the core of all things selfishness reigns.

 Unfortunately, the church is not immune to this sort of selfishness. While we are called to be different from the world, we can all too often fall into the trap of taking on the characteristics which are opposite to the gospel we proclaim. Throughout history the Church has been expressly self-interested, interested merely in either it’s own power and wealth or in self-protection and the desires of it’s members. Whether it was in the accumulation of wealth and land at the expense of the poor during the Middle Ages or the church of today which can forget the needs of the world for the sake of how we have always done things and self-preservation – this sort of selfishness and self-interest is at risk of damaging the Church’s witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Self-preservation is natural when life is on the line, whether it is a person who is at risk of dying or whether it is an organization at risk of fading into history. And yet in our Gospel reading today Jesus advocates for the exact opposite. The story we heard today begins with Jesus telling his disciples and the gathered crowd that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders and chief priests and suffer death, before rising again on the third day. In response to this prediction of his suffering and death, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. And this isn’t some kind of kindly chastisement or friendly correction – the closest translation to the original Greek is ‘shut him up’.

Peter is so offended by Jesus’ words that he tries to shut him up. In a way Peter is saying to Jesus “Don’t talk that way, Master Jesus!  If you’re the Messiah, then you’ve got to save your own life first of all so that you can save and then improve the lot of our lives, too!” And it makes sense on the surface, the disciples and Israelites of Jesus’ day were expecting a Messiah to save them from their oppression under the Romans, they were seeking vindication and a restoration of the glory days of Israel’s past. The disciples had pinned their hopes on Jesus as God’s promised Messiah. And so Peter was merely voicing what all the disciples would have been thinking. Self-preservation – after all the world is convinced that only life can beget life, that death is the end of all things.

Jesus’ response is as harsh as Peter’s initial rebuke, Jesus uses the same language, he tells him to ‘shut up’ and then tells Peter to ‘get behind me Satan!’, quite the rebuke considering that mere moments before Peter had made a stunning declaration of Jesus’ Messiahship. Jesus rebukes Peter because he has misunderstood the very declaration he made, Jesus has to go another way, he has to die, and we along with Peter would be wise if we let him drag us down with him!

You see because following his rebuke of Peter, we hear one of the most famous things that Jesus ever said, in many ways it is the hallmark of his ministry and the call he places on his disciples. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For 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.” (*Mark 8:34-35).*

At the heart of it Jesus rebukes the type of self-preservation and self-interest that is at the heart of Peter’s thinking, he rebukes the type of self-preservation and self-interest which the world declares is the only means to life. But Jesus “says if you are willing to let go, to release your fierce grip on your own ego–and on the life you hope will boost and bolster that ego–if you can just die along with Jesus, then you can get behind Jesus as a disciple.  Then you can be behind Jesus as a follower who is back there with a clear view of what Jesus does so that you can then imitate him.  One way or the other everyone ends up behind Jesus.  The question is whether you’ll be back there so you can go where Jesus goes or whether you’ll be back there to be left behind.  If you are back there to follow, then even though you first die, you will end up with abundant resurrection life.  If you end up back there because you decided to make the goodies of this life your be-all and end-all, then you also will die, but that will be the end of you, too.” (Scott Hoezee)

 Each of us, as individuals and as a church, are confronted by Jesus’ calling, by Jesus’ challenge to carry our cross, to deny ourselves. And Jesus’ promise to us and to his church is that when we do release our grip on ourselves, on self-preservation and self-interest that we will experience the abundant and eternal life that he opens up to the world by his crucifixion and resurrection. This eternal and abundant life is a promise for the end of all things, but it is also a promise of the life we will experience here and now. Jesus promises that as we deny ourselves, we will gain a very real taste of the eternal and abundant life now in this lifetime, in this world.

 As we come to the beginning of this ministry year, with our annual Vestry Meeting upon us, it is an opportunity for us to take stock of our calling as a Church; it is time for us to examine whether our ministry is rooted in self-interest and self-preservation or whether we are readily denying ourselves, carrying our cross and following our Lord and Saviour into death for the sake of the World. One is a path to death and decay, the other is a path to abundant life – even if it comes through the pathway of the Cross.

Archbishop William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, once famously said that the “*The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members.*” And this I believe is a simple way of explaining what it means for the church to deny itself and follow Jesus – that the very purpose of the church is to bring a message of hope and salvation, to bring the Gospel to a lost and broken world. All of our worship, all of our outreach, all of our community engagement, all of our pastoral care and education is ultimately to be for the benefit of those who aren’t part of our church congregation. And Jesus’ promise to us is that when we follow him in this way we will experience God’s abundant life here at Grace Church, that we will experience flourishing and vibrancy and the kind of life that we can only begin to imagine for our church here in South Scarborough.

We at Grace Church are ever at the fork in the road where we can choose to follow Jesus as disciples denying ourselves and our own preferences and ways we do things or we can choose not to. As a church we have decisions to make about how we spend out treasure, our time and our talents – our recent Joyful Giving campaign is an opportunity to make a choice. Any call for stewardship and increased givings of time, talent and treasures can be seen in two lights: it can be seen as an act of self-preservation, as a means to continue the status-quo and an inward act to protect the church from extinction. But it can also be seen as a joyful response to Jesus’ call to follow him, as a means by which we as a Church can be a blessing to this neighbourhood, where we can serve our neighbours, where we can bring relief to the poor, the hungry, the homeless.

As you consider how you respond to our Joyful Giving campaign I want you to consider the abundant life that we as a church can experience, I want you to consider what we can do with additional gifts of time, talent and treasure. Our goal is not self-preservation, our goal is not a maintenance of the status-quo but rather an opportunity for our life to flourish, an opportunity for others to experience the joy of the Gospel that each of us have experienced at the hands of Jesus, in the midst of his church over the years.

We have been blest with many things: passionate people, a building on right on a main thoroughfare, generous givers, and on top of that we have received support of the diocese for many years in the form of our MAF Grant, but this money is a means for us to live out our calling to serve our neighbourhood, to hire staff and increase the impact we have in sharing the Good News of Jesus with the people of South Scarborough. It opens for us additional opportunities, but it does not release us from our own responsibility; it does not remove the choice that is before: whether we are to deny ourselves and follow Jesus for the sake of the World or whether we choose not to.

We are all individually called to follow Jesus, and Jesus bids his church to do the same. I pray that all of our ministry, all of our actions: from our worship Sunday mornings, to our social events like our Spring Tea, from our musical concerts to our outreach endeavours – that all of it would reflect the life, the love and the grace we have experienced in Jesus; that it would all reflect a dying to ourselves and our own desires for self-preservation and protection, and that if it doesn’t that we would let it go for the sake the World and the sake of the Gospel.

May we all take up our cross and follow Jesus, even into his death, because it is there where we will experience eternal and abundant life, and it is there that the world is being transformed.

Pray with me.