

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

As I read the Gospel for this morning

I was reminded of a day a bunch of years ago.

I was on vacation in Union Pier, Michigan with my extended family.

On one particularly wonderful afternoon,

I went down to Lake Michigan for some wave jumping  
with Bev and our teenage nephew Quinn.

We had heard that the surf was up and thought it might be fun  
to frolic in the waves of old Gitche Gumee.

When we got there the surf was impressive, in the five or six foot range!

Bev, being the wiser of the three of us,

decided that it would be a great day to read a book and catch some rays,  
but Quinn and I charged right in.

As we jumped about, we spent time reviewing important safety points  
like how to watch out for the under tow  
and what to do if you got caught in one.

Just a week before, a swimmer had almost drowned  
and had to be rescued by a human chain from the shore,  
so this was not a frivolous activity.

Soon though, we moved on to the more arcane (and much more fun) topics  
of wave taunting (in order to encourage the lake to send bigger waves)  
and the importance of watching out for the three sisters  
(a group of three waves of increasing height peculiar to Michigan).

We were having so much fun cavorting and laughing  
that we finally enticed Beverly away from her book and into the lake.

As you may know,  
getting into Lake Michigan can be character building adventure,

but on this day the lake was positively warm.

And the large waves were regularly rolling in, so it was easy.

We should never have let our guard down.

Beverly was in the lake only a few minutes when we were surprised by a wave.

I was holding hands with Bev

(I know you're thinking, "How romantic!" but it was pure survival!)

and Quinn was a few yards away.

We were only 15 or 20 yards off the beach.

In the trough of the wave the water was about up to our waist,

and when a wave would roll through

we would jump up or lean in to the wave,

depending on whether we needed to keep our heads above water.

Bev and I happened to have our backs to the lake at that moment,

when I suddenly became aware

that the water level was almost down to my knees

and so I turned around...

to see a wall of water well over our heads

and the curl of the wave breaking right on top of us.

Before I could do anything or say anything I was engulfed.

At least I saw it coming.

Bev was hit cleanly in the back and lost her footing completely.

I hung on to her hand like my wife depended on it.

We were all washed in toward the beach

in a rolling ball of arms, legs, sputtering laughter, and foam.

I remember finally getting my feet under me and my head above water

and seeing my arm disappearing into the boiling froth,

hopefully still attached to Bev,

while Quinn rolled out of the retreating wave halfway up the beach.

It was an experience a bit beyond what we normally hoped for

when one goes out wave jumping in the lake, but welcome nonetheless;  
that thrilling moment when the lake surprises you.

In our Gospel this morning we have a surprise of a different kind.

Different, but not that different.

Jesus startles Peter with his rebuke,

“Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.”

Every time I hear it, it affects me like a slap in the face.

For Peter, I’m sure it was a lot more like my experience in the lake;  
something that knocked him clean off his feet.

I suspect that if we were hearing this story for the first time,  
and were paying attention,

Jesus would be startling all of us as well.

Sometimes when you hear a story again that you have heard before,  
it can lose some of the power and impact of the narrative.

Remember, it was only last week (a few verses ago)

that Jesus called Peter the Rock

on which he would build his church

and gave Peter the keys to the kingdom.

But this week its, “Get behind me Satan!

You are a rock that trips me up!”

So what could have happened?

How could it have gone so bad, so fast?

After Jesus tells his disciples to keep quiet about his being the Messiah,  
that was the end of last week,

he begins this week to describe the new reality,

the new expectations for the new kind of Messiah that he will be.

The problem is, that to the disciples,

it doesn’t sound at all like what a messiah should look like.

Remember, the Jews have been waiting, and indeed still are waiting,

for a messiah to restore the political fortunes of the kingdom of David,  
a sure sign for them, of God's returning grace.

Wealth. Power. Influence. Growth.

It would be easy to say that those were just the desires  
of the disciples and the Jews way back when,  
but it wouldn't be the whole truth.

We need to be honest with ourselves  
and admit that we have those same desires now.

Ever since Constantine converted,  
and made Christianity the official religion the Roman Empire,  
and we moved up to the top of the heap,  
we have been struggling to stay there.

And because of this misplaced struggle, we have in so many ways,  
become our own worst enemies.

We are constantly seeking wealth, power, influence, and growth for the church.

We look at mega-churches with envy  
and wonder why we can't be more like that.

We look at the church of the 1950's  
and wish we could get back to the "good ol' days."

The church in various denominations  
fights to push public prayer back into the schools;  
fights to teach biblical truths as part of the regular science curriculum;  
bemoans the dropping of Christian symbols and writings  
from the facades and grounds of public buildings;

and in general whines over the churches fall  
from its unquestioned place of power and influence.

In response to this perceived fall  
the churches are responding,  
but not well.

At least I don't think so.

Much of their response appears to me

to be mere posturing in a grab for that elusive bigger piece of the pie.

A political response to a theological problem.

The temptation of wealth, power, influence and growth

is a constant temptation.

They were for Jesus, throughout his ministry.

They are no less a temptation for us in our ministry today.

They too often appear to us to be the ultimate safety net.

They are not.

They are treacherous idols.

They are a stumbling block.

This is what Jesus reminds us of this morning

as he reminded his disciples so long ago.

“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”

There is a cost to this ministry,

the cost of discipleship,

and the sooner we realize that the better we will be.

Unlike much of the popular spirituality found around these days,

Christianity isn't about self help,

it's about self sacrifice.

That is what taking up your cross is all about;

a radical turn from yourself to the other.

It is not easy.

It goes against everything we think we know

about safety and preserving our life.

It is no wonder that Peter tried to talk Jesus out of it.

Any sane man would.

But Jesus isn't a sane man,

he is the Son of God,

sharing with us the desire his Father has for us,

the desire that we should love the way that he loves us;

the self-sacrifice of God's loving-kindness.

Self-sacrifice is the way of the soul.

It feeds the soul.

In an article I read,

one parent said this about sacrificial love,

"I didn't know how to love or really receive love until we had the baby.

Before the baby, what I thought was love was really a sort of exchange of favors.

It was delightful.

But it wasn't love.

With the baby, we learned about love.

The baby cried, we responded.

It didn't matter whether or not we were tired,

or doing something else,

we responded.

The baby did not do anything for us.

But in these sacrifices of time, energy, money,

and all of the work that goes along with having a baby,

we found out what love means.

A smile from that child fills us with joy.

We can't do enough for that baby.

And we began to see each other in a new way.

We began to sacrifice ourselves for each other.

Sometimes it was a simple, "I'll tend to the baby, you sleep."

Other times it was deeper.

We both began to realize that we had parents who had lavished love on us.

We began to see ourselves as recipients of love,

not because we deserved it, but because we are alive.”

This is the truth that Jesus struggled to share with his disciples that day  
and it is the same truth he struggles to share with us this morning.

It is the truth he lived out

on the road that led to Jerusalem and eventually all the way to the Cross.

Jesus reminds us to sacrifice ourselves

because that is the way of love.

It is through sacrifice that we learn to truly love.

In sacrifice, we learn how much we are loved.

Sacrificial love is the food of the soul.

It feeds the soul, nourishing it and making it strong.

It doesn't matter whether we give sacrificial love or receive sacrificial love,  
the soul is fed.

Our soul

and the soul of our beloved.

Our feeble attempts at love

are lifted out of the economics of power, influence, and even self-help

And into the realms of everlasting light.

And we are never the same again.

This is the story we have to tell;

the gift we have to share;

the Gospel we have to proclaim.

This is what it means to live in the kingdom of God.

Amen.