

Whenever the military conducts a large scale operation, they usually give it a code name that describes the mission's objective or the mode in which the mission is to be carried out. I'm sure all of you are familiar with Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001. Both were designed to free the people of Iraq and Afghanistan from terrorists who ruled their countries. In 1991 we had Operation Desert Storm and it was given that name because the U.S. military was intent on whipping up a storm as it raced across the Iraqi dessert to force the Iraqi military out of Kuwait. In the 1950s there was an interesting military operation known as Operation Moolah. I don't know if any of you ever heard of it, but it was aimed at enticing North Korean pilots to defect during the Korean War. It was called Operation Moolah, because the first pilot to defect with his Soviet-built fighter plane would be offered \$100,000 – a lot of moolah or money in those days.

In our Gospel lesson for today Jesus defines the divine mission for both himself and for all of us, as Christians. Had He given the mission an operational code name, I think He could have called it Operation Cross Life, because through the cross He was going to give us life. But that's not a name that Peter, in this text, would have supported, because for Peter and many others in those days, the word "Cross" and "Life" were polar opposites. The cross represented death. Life never came from a cross. So as Jesus talked about this mission where He would die on a cross in order to save the world, Peter objected saying in verse 22, "No Lord. This shall never happen to you." I think Peter felt the divine mission should be called something like Operation Golden Rule. Just do unto others as you have them do to you and everything will be fine. But life with God, eternal life, is not found in trying to follow the Golden Rule, it is found only in the cross; and those who do not accept this are allies of Satan and will lose their life for eternity. Now that may sound harsh, but I am not exaggerating.

In our Gospel lesson last Sunday we heard how Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was and Peter gave this great answer saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus must have been so proud. His close friend got it right and for his rock solid confession, Jesus gave Simon, as he was known at the time, a new name – "Peter," which means "rock." But then in today's Gospel lesson Jesus looks at Peter and calls him, "Satan," and says, "Get behind me, get out of my sight." What happened? Peter had a clear understanding of Jesus' identity, but he was way off when it came to Jesus' mission.

When Jesus explained at the start of our Gospel text that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" notice how it says that "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him," as though Jesus was like a little kid who must have been confused. "Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God is going to suffer at the hands of our religious leaders and be killed? That cannot be God's plan," Peter must have thought. Yet when Peter expressed as much to Jesus, Jesus replies rather harshly by saying, "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

So Peter was now Satan? Wasn't Jesus overreacting a bit? Hadn't Peter meant well by insisting that Jesus did not have to suffer and die? He may have meant well, but Peter had inadvertently tempted Jesus in the same way as Satan did when Jesus was in the wilderness after His baptism. At that time Satan had told Jesus that if He wanted to receive glory and honor from all the nations of the world, He didn't have to die on a cross, all he had to do was simply bow down to Satan instead. Satan was offering Jesus a crown without the cross, but Jesus knew that there would be no crown for us if He did not endure the cross.

Do you find it odd that Jesus equated "the things of man" or the "things of people" with the thoughts of Satan? It sure sounds odd, but whenever someone thinks that they just need to follow the Golden Rule and "do unto others as you would have them do to you" in order to get into heaven, this actually brings great delight to Satan. You see, Satan's goal is not to make this world a horrible place where murderers and thieves roam the streets uncontested. He is quite content to have a world full of law-abiding citizens who trim the bushes for their neighbor and give money to the poor as long as these people think that by doing these good things they will earn their way into heaven, so they don't need the cross of Jesus.

But telling Jesus that He didn't need to suffer and die would be like people in Houston telling their insurance company that it doesn't need to pay for the damage to their homes and cars from the hurricane. Well if the insurance company isn't going to pay, then who is? Someone has to pay if those homes and cars are going to be fixed or replaced. Likewise if Jesus hadn't died on the cross to pay for our sins, we would still be responsible

for our sins. Aren't you glad that Jesus put Peter in his place? Aren't you glad that Jesus understood His mission to save us involved the cross and not the Golden Rule?

The cross, though, doesn't just define Jesus' mission; it also defines our mission as well. Jesus said in verse 24, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Jesus' cross was made out of wood, but what does your cross look like? Many Christians often list things like loneliness, unemployment, family problems, or physical ailments as the crosses they have to bear, but while these are challenges that God allows into our lives, they are not the cross Jesus speaks of here in this verse. Jesus says that a Christian denies himself and follows Him. What does that look like? When we give to people in need, such as to those who are hurting in Houston, we deny ourselves and carry the cross. When you stop your friends at school from laughing at a student or from saying bad things about a student who always gets picked on, you deny yourself and carry the cross. When your spouse wants to eat Chinese, but you would prefer Italian, you deny yourself when you defer to your spouse's choice, not because you have to but because you are delighted that God has given you such an easy way to show love to your spouse.

Now this may not sound difficult, but it is difficult and that's why Jesus compares it to carrying a cross and not following a simple rule. Denying ourselves is hard, because by nature we are all self-centered. Take babies, for example. They do not learn how to speak so they can complement Mom or Dad on what a good job they are doing as parents. They learn how to talk so they can communicate more clearly their needs and get what they want whether its food, or wanting to be held, or wanting to go to bed. But this self-centeredness does not end when a baby gets older. If anything it probably gets worse. As we grow older we simply get better at hiding our self-centeredness and our desire for comfort by thinking, "If I only had a new phone, a larger TV, or more money, then I would be happy." But it never works out that way, does it? As soon as we get something new, we start wanting other things.

Deny your desire to accumulate more and ignore your longing to get your way, and instead lose yourself in Jesus. Losing yourself is not that hard, we actually do it in many different ways. Every time we board a plane, a bus, or get into a car where someone else is driving or at the controls, we entrust ourselves to another person. Likewise, if you want to save your life, then entrust it to Jesus, whose every word, every thought, and every deed was never for His comfort and convenience but was always for the benefit of others – and still is. That's why we can deny ourselves and say "no" to our wants and desires. Jesus knows what we need and He will provide it. Spend your time and energy serving Him as you put others first.

Peter must have been stunned when Jesus called him Satan, but had he really listened to Jesus he would have known that while the cross defined Jesus' mission, it wasn't the end as Jesus said that after He was killed He would rise again 3 days later. And it's not the end for us either. Those who follow Jesus and put others first will one day find that the cross has given way to the crown of everlasting life and happiness when Jesus raises us from the dead to be free forever from our sins and their consequences. But before the crown comes the cross. The cross of this life is where we put others first and follow Jesus. Bear it, everyday, it's well worth it.