

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**September 3, 2023**  
**Rev. John F. Koerner**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**  
**Matthew 16:21-28**

*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24 N.R.S.V.)*

## **Peter - There Must Be an Easier Way**

My name is Peter. I have been called lots of things. I’ve been referred to as Simon the son of Jonah, the Big Fisherman, the Rock, the Gatekeeper of Heaven. I’ve also been called some less flattering names. I was called “Pete the Wet” for a while after I tried to walk on water like Jesus. I have also been known as “Old Foot-in-the-Mouth.” I guess I really earned that last one. But, hey, you don’t know if you don’t ask. Right?

I have never been called shy or timid. I have never been much of a philosopher or a naval gazer. I am a man of action. If we had worn baseball caps back then, mine would have said, “Git-er-done.”

Still I wasn’t one to do things the hard way if there was an easier way available. And I certainly was NOT a man who enjoyed pain and suffering. That was why it was so hard for me the day that Jesus told us that he had to suffer and die.

You have to understand that I loved Jesus. He was wonderful. He was a great teacher and friend and leader. There was just something about him that called to me. I left the family business to follow him and that was a very hard thing to do. My father, Jonah, was a fisherman and his father before him was a fisherman. As far back as anyone could remember, our family had always made their living on the Sea of Galilee. My Dad didn’t understand how I could leave like that. My Mom didn’t understand. My brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts didn’t understand. But there was just something about Jesus that drew me like a magnet.

I listened to him for hours when he preached and taught. He was incredible. My heart always warmed when he was teaching us about God. I watched him heal the sick and raise the dead. He did things no mere mortal man could ever do. I watched him touch people’s very souls. He sought out the broken people in society. Spiritual healing was his thing.

So the very idea that my Jesus had to suffer and die. Well that was not going to happen on my watch. I told him that there had to be an easier way. You are the smartest man I know, I said.

You can figure out a better way. And I'll help you any way I can.

That's when Jesus called me Satan. He said that I was focused on the wrong things. That I needed to focus on divine things. That hurt, I have to tell you. That really hurt.

But I get it that Jesus had to nip that one in the bud. And he did! He told us all that anyone who wanted to follow him also needed to be willing to suffer. He said, we needed to take up our cross and follow him.

That was a hard saying. But it was one of the things that I loved about Jesus. He wasn't afraid to be blunt. He didn't dance around the bush, as they say, you knew where you stood with him.

So here's the thing, I always thought about faith as if it were a trip to the marketplace. You go through the market and you pick and choose. You don't like something - you just keep on walking.

Jesus showed us that faith is different. With faith you don't get to pick and choose. Instead you get the whole package. You get political fun things and the shiny things and you get the hard things too. You get love and peace and joy, but you also have to surrender control.

That last one was the sticky point for me. I don't mind hard work. I am willing to sacrifice and even suffer - as long as that is my choice. What I don't like doing is giving up control - not even to God. It's that letting go and letting God thing that was my greatest challenge.

I know I'm not alone in that. I could tell you about a woman I met who told me, "I don't do church. But I'm good." I had to wonder, by whose definition are you, "good?" Is God leading you away from the church for some greater purpose? Or is this a case of "church is too hard, it is just too much of a hassle to deal with those sinners in the church?" I wondered if this woman was thinking like I used to that faith was a marketplace to pick and to choose?

Giving up control, especially when it entails risks and hassles is one of the hardest things we as Christians are asked to do. I'm sure I would never have made it, but Jesus sent help. He sent the Holy Spirit to fill us and guide us and challenge us and empower us. The Holy Spirit also reminds us that without God we miss out on that which is most important in life.

Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" (Matthew 16:25-26)

I could tell you about another man, a man of your times, who was the mayor of his town. He was a rising politician and most people thought he was destined for high office. But he felt called by God to give up his promising political career to stay home with his autistic son. He gave up the world's glitter for the love of his son. It was death to his career, but yet his decision teems with life and love.

I could tell you of another woman who was a Catholic nun and a school teacher. She was doing something she enjoyed doing and she enjoyed a high degree of safety and security. She felt a call from God to give that all up and go work on the streets of India with the poorest of the poor. It's dangerous on the streets, you know. If she answered that call she would be risking her life daily. She didn't even know if she would have a roof over her head or enough food to eat. But with the help of the Holy Spirit she went. You might know her by the name of Mother Teresa.

I could tell you of another young man who was abused and rejected by his family. He became an alcoholic and a drug addict. He engaged in dangerous behavior that was destroying his life and the life of those around him. And then Jesus came to him and offered him a way out of his self imposed prison. Little by little he began to change his behavior and the way he lived. He changed in ways that the people around him could not understand. But we understand, it was the work of the Holy Spirit. He was dying to his old self, so that he his new self could be born. He was letting go and letting God.

None of this is easy or simple. I, Peter, thought there must be an easier way. I tried to talk Jesus out of going to his cross. I tried to escape my own cross. But in time I came to realize that if I turned away from the cross, I was also turning away for the life that is really life.

Let me leave you with these words. Jesus accepts you and loves you just as you are. But he loves you too much to leave you in you imprisoned in sin. He calls you today to take up your cross and follow him. No, it is not easy. But believe me, it is glorious! You were meant for better things.

Amen.