Grace and peace to you all from God the Father and Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Today I thought we’d walk through each verse in today’s gospel reading because each verse is so deep and so rich and so profound. God help us to get through it all in the next 10-15 minutes. If there is one theme that would tie together all these verses it would be “We think we know what we want, but God knows what we need.” So let that theme run in the background of what we’ll hear about today.

Verse 31 – The big disappointment: Have any of you been just absolutely disappointed at someone or something? I know I have. Being from Wisconsin I got to experience a few disappointing things this year: My dear Packers, after going 15-1, get knocked out of the playoffs right away; my dear Brewers got knocked out of the playoffs after having one of the best years in the franchise’s history. My dear, Badgers made it to the Rose Bowl by the skin of their teeth this year, only to, of course, lose. So this year was a pretty disappointing year for Wisconsin sports fans. And that kind of gets at what I’m talking about. Disappointment. However, when we see Peter getting disappointed with Jesus, it’s not like he’s disappointed at Jesus like I was disappointed with the Packers, or the Badgers, or the Brewers this year – the way he was disappointed was far deeper than that. Perhaps the best way I could describe it is like this: You’ve known someone your whole life; you grew up with them, went to school with them, hung out with them almost every day, you walked in their wedding, you went to their parents funeral, you knew this person almost as good as you knew yourself and then all of a sudden, out of the clear blue, they tell you that they’re going to leave their spouse, they’re going to leave everything they know and love behind because, well, just because they have to. This is kind of
how profound and how deep Peter’s disappointment was; he knew Jesus better than anyone. One of the first people Jesus healed was Peter’s mother in law. Peter spent day after day, week after week with Jesus only to have Jesus drop this bombshell on Peter and the other disciples by teaching them this: “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again” (v. 31).

For us as Christians who know the story, who know the end of the story, how Jesus was crucified, how he rose from the dead, this might not seem like a huge deal to us. But to Peter and to many Jews, for them to hear that the Messiah must suffer, that the Christ must be killed, would be a huge disappointment. For them the Messiah would be the person God had chosen to set Israel free from their oppressors. For them the Messiah, if he was a Messiah that was worth his salt, the Messiah/Christ was to sweep into the land, leading thousands upon thousands of people into war and battle for the purpose of cleaning the countryside from any and all foreign rulers and powers. So for Jesus to tell Peter that the way to redemption and life is suffering and death and not military power, well that absolutely destroyed Peter’s hope. And you see this nowadays too; what the world wants is a God who will work through crushing whoever it is we think the enemy might be, but what the world needs is a God who will suffer with and for those who are without power and hope.

Verse 32: In this verse you’ll notice that Jesus spoke these things “quite openly.” The reason for this is because before, Jesus taught in parables, parables being sayings that would make a deep impression on those who would understand them, but confuse those who didn’t understand or
didn’t want to understand. After this, you’ll notice that Peter turns to Jesus and begins to rebuke him.

Verse 33: In this verse you’ll notice that Jesus doesn’t put up with Peter’s rebuke and instead rebukes Peter instead. And not only does Jesus rebuke Peter and put him in his place, but Jesus also calls Peter “Satan,” and tells him to get behind him. From this verse we learn that even if we have the best intentions for something or someone, sometimes the best intentions end up doing the worst kind of damage. An example of this that comes to mind is the TV show “Intervention.” On this show families have an expert come in and intervene and talk to someone who’s wrestling with an addiction; whether its drugs, or alcohol, or anorexia, or whatever else it is someone is addicted to. One thing I noticed in all of those episodes is that there is always someone in the family who is known as an “enabler.” This person does whatever they can to make the addict happy; giving them money, buying them things, paying their rent, etc. Unfortunately, this person, the enabler, ends up doing more harm than good. They have the best intentions in mind for their loved one, but end up helping out the addict destroy themselves. Enablers give addicts what they want, but they don’t give addicts what they need. So what is needed is tough love. And in this passage we have Jesus show Peter some tough love by putting Peter in his place, and by reminding Peter to focus on God’s will, not on what Peter thinks should happen.

Verse 34: In this verse Jesus talks about what discipleship is all about. Discipleship, following Jesus, entails three things: (1) Denying yourself, disowning who you think you are and coming to the realization of what you really are; (2) Taking up your cross; and (3) following Jesus. I’ve mentioned before how following Jesus isn’t a cake walk, and we see here why. We see in this
passage that following Jesus isn’t about self-preservation, it’s about self-sacrifice. And this is a tough pill for us to swallow because what do we teach our children? “You can be whatever you want to be.” We all know this isn’t true. In fact, that teaching is very dangerous. Some might hear those words and think, “Well, this means that I can do whatever I want to do when I grow up.” When we teach our youth that, we’re teaching them that life is all about them. Forget about anyone else and everything else. What matters the most is that you make yourself happy. What matters most is that you do whatever it is that makes you happy. What matters most is you. It’s no wonder why less and less people are going to church nowadays. If discipleship means denying ourselves, and if the most common thing we hear growing up is to do whatever we want to make us happy, then it’s no wonder few people really want to follow Jesus because that means I can’t do whatever I want to do anymore. If we really want to follow Jesus that means that we need to recognize that life is not all about me, because if we think life is already about “me,” then we’re already dying. If we want to follow Jesus we need to, as Jesus says, deny ourselves, disown ourselves, be truthful with ourselves to God, and say to God, “In the eyes of other people I think I’m something, but in your eyes, O Lord, I am absolutely nothing.”

Jesus also calls us to take up our cross. Many people like to think whatever they want about this saying. People will think that losing weight is my “cross,” or quitting smoking is a “cross,” or that having cancer is a cross to bear. However, while close, those things aren’t crosses to bear because when Jesus calls us to take up our cross he means for us to take on something willingly that will put us in relationship with someone else. And why is this so? Because Jesus himself willingly took up his cross to suffer and die for the sake of many, for you and me. So for us to take up a cross is to take on someone else’s burden, willingly and lovingly. Of course, you
won’t be able to do this unless you first deny yourself. An example of this that comes to mind is the cross my wife had to bear while I was in seminary. Those 4 ½ years weren’t exactly the easiest time for her. I was working 2nd shift while going to school during the day. She worked 1st shift and was, in many ways, a single mother; something those of you who know, who might be, or who used to be a single mother know that isn’t the easiest thing to do. I saw Heather and Ella on Friday afternoons, Saturdays, and Monday mornings – but that was pretty much all the time we spent together. Now, upon hearing my call to ministry, my wife could have said straight away – “Maybe you should talk to God and ask him about that again. I’m not so sure we’re ready for that, so maybe you should pray on that some more.” But she didn’t. She willingly took on that burden for me, being a “single parent,” for all those years so that I might become a pastor; something I will always be indebted to her for.

Actually, I think we’ll stop the sermon right here since we’re probably at our time. But just remember that to follow Christ is to deny/disown your self, it is to take up a cross and it is to follow our Lord. This call to discipleship is not an easy road to travel, but we do have this promise from God that in the very act of losing ourselves for Christ’s sake is at the same time the very act of regaining ourselves. The death of all that is old and useless in us to God is the starting point where God can create something out of nothing; creating a new redeemed you out of the nothing that you were before. Amen.