They ran the wrong way. Less than 2 weeks from now, on Friday, September 11, our nation will mark the 25th anniversary of 9/11. Those of you old enough to remember that day, or if you're younger but have seen the images, saw people who *ran the wrong way*, for all the right reasons. While thousands fled the burning towers, firefighters, police officers, and other first responders ran into the flames and crumbling steel, and for many, ultimately death.

Jesus ran the wrong the way, too, for a divinely right reason. Christians mark the occasion on a different Friday each year. While human nature avoids pain and punishment, Jesus – fully human and fully God – resolutely approached unthinkable pain and suffering. In fact, for Jesus, it was necessary. His crown and ultimately ours required a cross. Let's discover what that meant for Jesus and for us, as today our Savior speaks about the blessed necessity of the cross. We turn again to these words in Matthew chapter 16.

Matthew 16:21

Have you ever been sadly surprised when a movie that seems headed for a happy conclusion takes a morbid twist? The hero becomes terminally ill; the perfect couple breaks up; Old Yeller gets rabies and dies; Jack Dawson's sacrificial act of love for Rose goes unrewarded, when he is found dead in the icy waters of the North Atlantic in the movie Titanic (poor Leonardo Decaprio). You might think, *this isn't how the movie's supposed to end!* It seems Peter and the other disciples had similar thoughts when Jesus described what would happen to him in Jerusalem. So…

Matthew 16:22

Literally, Peter says, *Mercy on you, Lord!* He calls on God's mercy to shield Jesus from the inglorious end he just predicted. And why not? After all, Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," as Peter so boldly confessed not long before. How could the one who walked on water, who fed 5000 with a shopping basket's worth of food, who healed the sick and preached with divine authority – how could his life end so tragically at the hands of his enemies? Peter did not yet grasp the blessed necessity of the cross.

It was sincere love for his Lord that led Peter to speak to Jesus this way. But love for someone doesn't mean we always see things as they are or must be. Peter was misguided and actually served as an instrument of Satan to tempt Jesus to turn aside from the cross, leaving mankind in the clutches of our sin. But Jesus would not – could not – be swayed, even when Satan's temptation came through the noble intentions of a good friend. Jesus embraced the blessed necessity of the cross. He treated Peter's statement as the devilish trick it was.

Matthew 16:23

"Human concerns" refer to temporal and often self-serving matters. They avoid the unpleasant and painful. "Human concerns" carry the idea that anything we want in life should be attainable – whether with the swipe of a plastic card or the tap of a smart phone. Saying *no* to self is absent from "human concerns." But Jesus didn't live for "human concerns." His heart held "the concerns of God," – matters penned by his Father's holy will. As Jesus said on another occasion, "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). The Father's will – carried out in perfect harmony with the will and work of his eternal Son – is driven by love for sinners; love neither deserved nor earned; a love so great it required a cross for God's Son. Condemnation for sin – the world's sin, our sin – was the blessed necessity Christ must meet at Calvary. The writer to the Hebrews put it this way: "For the joy set before him (Jesus) endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Hebrews 12:2).

Today, that symbol of torture adorns our bodies as jewelry and tattoos. The cross represents and promotes the faith that centers on what he did there. And yet, even we who adore Christ and honor his self-sacrifice often have in mind only "human concerns" and not "the concerns of God." Think about it – if the devil could capture Peter's thinking when Jesus was right there with him, certainly he can infiltrate our thinking as well – especially when we don't daily arm ourselves with the "sword of the Spirit" – the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). Therein lies the blessed necessity of the cross. Our need made it necessary for Jesus. So, to Jerusalem he went. Satan's Peter-trap would not trip him up. Death and all his friends were waiting for Jesus on that wooden beam.

Maybe you've seen pictures of it; maybe some of you have been there. Perhaps you know someone whose name is on it. I'm talking about the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. Striking for its simplicity, it contains the names of **58,318** Americans who died in the Vietnam War, etched on a black granite wall. Since its opening in 1982, the monument has stirred deep emotions. Some walk its length slowly, reverently. Some run their hand across a loved one's name. But for Robert Bedker, Willard Craig, and Darrall Lausch, a visit to the Vietnam Memorial is especially poignant. Their names are etched into the wall. An error was made and each was incorrectly listed as having been killed in action. So there they are, recorded on this stark symbol of death, while they themselves are alive.[1]

The cross – stark in its simplicity; just two wooden beams. The cross – viewed with reverent admiration by so many. But take a closer look. Your name is on it. So is mine. Every agonizing stab of guilt; every sin – whether committed in careless haste or premeditated evil – it's all etched in the letters of your name and mine on the cross. Yet even as we see its morbid reality, we are alive – set free from sin and guilt; delivered from death and despair. Life eternal awaits our final breath, all because Jesus ran the wrong way, to embrace the blessed necessity of the cross.

And now, so do we, because the cross is necessary for us, as well – for all who would attach themselves to Jesus in faith. Our cross consists not of wood and nails, but the beams and ropes of self-denial. Simply put, the cross means turning away from all that centers on self. It is living for Christ and those he has placed in our life. And this cross of self-denial is not an option. It is a blessed necessity born in the love of our Savior.

Matthew 16:24

Don't let these words fall from our Savior's lips without letting them enter your heart. However we define it, the cross hurts. Its essence is self-denial. And our sinful nature will offer not one ounce of effort to deny itself. The sinful nature seeks a gospel of glory without the cross – a theology of prosperity. But Jesus could not be more clear. Just as the cross was necessary for him, so a cross is necessary for those who would bear his name. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Where do you find that cross in your walk of discipleship? Is it the ridicule of friends or family members who reject your biblical faith and worldview? Is it the setting aside of self-interest for the sake of serving others? Do the sharp edges of your cross sever friendships for the sake of Christ? Maybe the cross you bear is too big to fit through the doors of advancement in your job or career, because it would require shedding the principles of your faith. Current and former collegiates, do you bear the scars of a cross in which peers and academics belittle you as a Christian? Young adults, teens, and children, do you carry the cross of being left out because you won't go along with others in their sin? "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves…" What does following Jesus require you to deny? What evil desire must you and I refuse? Are there friendships that must be shuttered? Opportunities that must be let go? Are there hateful or hurtful words we must absorb without unleashing vengeful instincts that come so naturally?

Such is the blessed necessity of the cross. And I say **blessed** because that's how Jesus describes it. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:10-12a). Don't those last words put it into perspective? As we heard Paul say earlier, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Yes, glory awaits. But it requires a cross. Jesus ran the wrong way – not *away from*, but *to* the cross, the pain, the suffering, the hell. And because he ran the *wrong* way, you and I are forever *right* with God. And as we live in the shade of his cross, the Spirit enables us to bear up under the blessed necessity of our own cross, shaping and sharpening our trust in Christ along the way; and reminding us that one day, these crosses will be replaced with a crown of heavenly glory.

Amen.

[1] https://time.com/archive/6710844/memorials-the-walls-mistaken-men/