

Here in Iowa, presidential politics and candidates are never completely off the radar screen. Already potential presidential candidates have come on their own initiative or have been invited to social/political functions by the two major parties. These appearances provide the candidate to showcase themselves and allow the party faithful and general public to “size them up”.

In today’s well-known Gospel scene Jesus is “sized up” by the disciples and delivers his message of policy and leadership style.

“Who do the crowds say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. The disciples answer that popular opinion sees Jesus standing in the model of Israel’s great prophets, like Elijah or Jesus’ late contemporary cousin, John the Baptist. Peter, on the other hand, makes the bold confession that Jesus is the “the Christ of God.” This is a loaded religious/political assertion. Peter is voicing popular opinion that the Messiah would be both a military and religious leader in the mold of King David who would rout the Roman occupiers and reform a corrupt religious leadership and restore both kingdom and temple. Of course this would entail using force and violence because “that just how the world works.” How shocked Peter and the other disciples are when Jesus rejects such an interpretation of what being “the Christ of God” entails and instead speaks about his messiahship in terms of one in which he is subjected to suffering, rejection, execution as a criminal on a cross, and ultimately vindicated by being raised from the dead by God. Imagine someone considered a strong presidential contender saying to their supporters: “The poor, the marginalized, and the powerless will be front and center in my administration with business and military interests taking a back seat. I’m putting my career and life on the line for this. Will you join me? But know you, too, will suffer the loss of friends, family, business associates, and arose the enmity and hatred of individuals and groups in the community, and you, too, may end up dying for my cause. Any takers? Raise your hands.

To follow Jesus is to deny oneself and take up the cross daily. It was a challenge in the first century. It is still a challenge in the twenty-first century.

To identify with Jesus means that we accept *all* that happens to Jesus as being part of who we are and how we are to be. It is much easier (and socially safer and more acceptable) to construct a self-identity in terms of power, glory and majesty and to follow anyone who promises them. It is an unheard of challenge to construct a self-identity in terms of denying oneself, taking up suffering and rejection that accompany faithfulness to the saving mission, and giving up one's life for the good of another and then to follow the One who promises these. But this self-identity is what Jesus constructs for himself and for anyone who would be his follower. Here is the point: to save our life, we must lose it.

In Pope Francis we have a role model of this type of following of Jesus. In these few months since his election as pope his remarks have, no doubt, not only sent the heads of government and business turning, but also a few heads with miters in the Vatican! In his first days as pope the Holy Father stated his goal as Bishop of Rome: a poor church for the poor of the world. Like Jesus, and St. Francis of Assisi the namesake the Holy Father has chosen to identify himself and his service as Bishop of Rome, the Holy Father himself and we are challenged to set the persons and plight of the poor: physically, emotionally, and spiritually front and center of our church, parish, and individual lives of discipleship. In his homily inaugurating his ministry Pope Francis declared: "when exercising power, [one] must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the Cross. ...[One] must open [their] arms to protect all of God's people and embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity, especially the poorest, the weakest, the least important, those whom Matthew lists in the final judgment on love: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt.25:31-46*).

St. Paul reminds us that through baptism we have been clothed as the children of God in Christ. This identity is renewed in each of us in the Eucharist again today. How do people size us up? Who do people say that each of us is?