

Last week after being quizzed by Jesus, Peter got it right confessing Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ and this week not so much. What Jesus says in today's passage isn't what the disciples expect at all. Instead, we learn it's not enough to speak aloud the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. But before we go pointing the finger at Peter and the disciples, we need to take a good look at ourselves as disciples. So, let us listen for God's word for us today but first let us pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 16:21-28 (NRSV).**

Can't we have some relief? Some good news? I wonder if this isn't what Peter is thinking. I know I've been thinking that as lately these days feel rather apocalyptic. Suffering, death, cross carrying, and self-denial don't sound like good news. The first few words of this passage, "from that time on," give us a clue that Jesus began to show that the Messiah would not be welcomed but rejected, not crowned but executed, not empowered by might but weakened by pain and suffering. I imagine that Peter and the disciples were undone at this terribly disappointing and shocking news. Nothing could be more contrary to their hopes and expectations of their long awaited Messiah. Do what? You're supposed to be different, Jesus. I've got to hand it to Peter because I don't know if I could rebuke Jesus to his face. "Peter's insistence that Jesus fit into his watered down comprehension of divinity hits a nerve so raw, Jesus turns and rebukes Peter with words that shock us still, two thousand plus years later" (journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas). "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (v. 23). Get behind me can be heard as "go away;" however, Jesus doesn't ask Peter to go away. Instead, he asks Peter to get behind him- to get in line behind him and follow. In other words, get in the place of a disciple, Peter. This exchange

echoes of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Peter still thinks according to the ways of the world. There is a selfishness that muddies his understanding of how things should be. Security. Power. Influence. Human things. It is hard to resist their shiny, magnetic lure, isn't it? Perhaps that is some of what distracted Peter from hearing Jesus' strong word of hope. I think Peter missed it or even more so didn't comprehend it. "And on the third day be raised" is what Jesus said. We know that Jesus is referencing his resurrection, but Peter and the other disciples don't know that.

The tall praises of Peter's commitment is matched by the depth of his failure to follow. Peter could not fathom a Messiah who would give up his life at the very moment when he should be stepping into power. He could not fathom a Messiah who would choose the way of the Suffering Servant. I imagine most of us can relate to Peter at times in our lives. "Instead of falling in, rank and file, behind Jesus, we too may object to the suffering and death he predicts and refuse to accept 'the way of the cross'" (*Connections*, Raquel St. Clair Lettsome). "Surely there is a better way," we say! In putting our minds on human things, do we, too, miss the Easter promise of resurrection and new life? A future promise of deliverance in which justice blooms, the hungry are fed and the imprisoned are comforted (25: 31-46). Perhaps the story has become too sanitized. "Maybe we are so comfortable with the end of the story, so confident in Jesus' resurrection, that his crucifixion no longer looms large? Maybe Jesus is no longer a threat to established religion, and Jesus' teachings no longer confront but instead endorse the way things are? Maybe the result is that we become caught up in the world's way of thinking to the point that we will not oppose current religious and political leaders for the cause of Christ if it means possible

rejection, suffering, and death, whether these consequences be physical or social? After all, two thousand years have passed, and crosses are easily borne as ornaments disconnected from discipleship” (St. Clair Lettsome). But the disciples aren’t just witnesses of Jesus’ suffering; they’re participants in it. They don’t just get to tell about it; they live through Jesus’ suffering in their own bodies. Yes, it is our default setting as humans to think in the ways of the world. But today’s scripture can reset our habits of mind and action. Somehow, even during the painful, frightening days in which we find ourselves, Jesus’ ‘bad’ news is the Good News” (Thomas).

Two sentences capture the essence of Jesus’ Gospel message: “If any of you want to become my followers,” Jesus says, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (vv. 24-25). What does this mean? The cross is not something to which Jesus alone is assigned. Jesus told his disciples that their future would resemble his. And if they chose to continue to follow Jesus, they would be putting themselves in a position where they, too, would be humiliated and suffer by the powers that be. **Maybe that’s why the words “deny themselves” is here?** When one is willing to sacrifice their time, energy, rights, interests, position, reputation, privileges, comforts, and even their very life for the sake of Christ, they exemplify what it means to deny yourself. I have to confess that my temptation as I read this text is to minimize what it asks of me. How about you? But Jesus demands more of his disciples. For us, to take up our cross is a metaphorical idea. But, even to deny ourselves seems too much to ask. Take up your cross doesn’t mean that we should be patient in illness, or persevere in grief, or persist in

suffering or that we must bear the suffering borne to all humanity, whether sickness or betrayal or failed dreams. Take up your cross means take up the way of the Sermon on the Mount...the way of the kingdom of God...a way of loving enemies, forgiving offenses, sharing wealth. Taking up the cross is the price of social nonconformity; it is the end of a path freely chosen after weighing the cost; it is a willingness to accept the suffering which is the consequence of following Jesus in a world which rejects his lordship (*Mere Discipleship*, Lee Camp quoting John Yoder). When the world continues yet in rebellion to the ways of God, it means we shall suffer. “Here is both the challenge and the good news in this text: If we follow Jesus, we will be seriously called to bear certain crosses and lose hold of our lifestyle, if not our life. Yet, in all our weakness and human mindedness, it is Jesus’ own death on the cross that enables us to do what we cannot” (Schmit). In God’s inbreaking kingdom, taking up our cross looks like naming and standing up against death-dealing people, injustices, oppressive systems and institutions, and discrimination involving “isms”. Many times when we hear “cross,” we think of it only as a symbol of suffering and death. You may translate the cross as something that represents that Jesus died for you as an individual and for your sins. That is true; however, the cross is much more fully orbbed than that- focusing on community as well. It isn’t just about you. It’s about all of us. The cross is also an act of defiance, a symbol of the power of the empire and what the empire does to destroy persons who work against a different kind of kingdom here on earth. The principalities and powers of this world may think they run the world, but they do not. God does. It is through the cross that God gains victory over the empire of the rebellious world, defeating the rulers, powers, principalities, or authorities “which perpetuate the enslavement of sin and the oppression of the weak” (Camp).

I was in college when I first heard of, Clarence Jordan, a Bible scholar, writer and farmer, and his radical idea to establish an interracial Christian community called Koinonia in rural, South Georgia in 1942 based upon the Sermon on the Mount. Jordan, a son of a prominent banking family, was an unlikely candidate to establish Koinonia (which is a Greek word meaning “community” or “fellowship”). Koinonia was practiced nonviolence and a strict equality of ownership in all goods (taken from Acts 2). They lived out the teachings of Jesus at Koinonia. I visited there in 1993 on a mission trip because Habitat for Humanity was born out of this community and our own Nikki Day lived at Koinonia but those are stories for another time. Even more radical for Clarence’s day, he knew that since the division between Jew and Gentile had been broken down in the gospel, the same was certainly true of black and white. By the latter half of the 1950s, the rage of segregationists descended upon Koinonia Farm. Koinonia received threatening phone calls, cross-burnings, vandalism, bombings, shootings, beatings as well as an almost complete economic boycott that threatened their very existence. So Clarence approached his brother, Robert, who later became a state senator and justice of Georgia’s Supreme Court, to serve as legal representative of Koinonia. Here is the conversation between Robert (“Bob”) and Clarence (italicized in red): “Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got. *“We might lose everything too, Bob.”* “It’s different for you.” *“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”* I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point. *“Could*

that point by any chance be- the cross?” “That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.” “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer, not a disciple” (Camp).

Jesus calls upon his disciples not simply to understand what is being asked of them but to decide if they will pursue it. The temptation to set our minds on human things is real. “There is a spectator version of Christianity out there, and plenty of people decide to live it. But let’s not pretend for one moment that it’s the version Jesus calls us to live” (Thomas). The Bobs of this world don’t have to take up their crosses alone. We can’t do discipleship alone, but Christ can do much through us. Maybe if Bob had heard this...maybe if he could’ve linked arms with his sisters and brothers in Christ and felt that strength- the strength of Jesus Christ, who has gone before us and bears the weight, he would have acted differently? You may say I cannot protest with Black Lives Matter or I can’t speak up about Greenville’s lack of true affordable housing or I can’t walk up to the person on the street because they smell differently from me or I can’t stand up to the person bullying my friend due to their sexual orientation. But with Christ, we are not powerless to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. “We say, ‘But Lord, I cannot.’ And God says, ‘I’m glad to hear you say that. Through you, I can” (Schmit, Lloyd Ogilvie quote). Let us pray. When following you, Jesus, remains an elusive hope...when we feel utterly paralyzed by all that swirls around and within us, reset our habits of mind and action. When we start to doubt or say it’s too hard, turn us from admirers into disciples reminding us always that through us, you can. Shake

us out of our complacency and remove our paralysis and fear that we may feel your strength and choose to deny ourselves and be your faithful, cross-bearing disciples that this rebellious world so desperately needs. Amen.