

Exodus 3:1-15  
Romans 12:9-21  
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c  
Matthew 16:21-28

Proper 17 A  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
September 3, 2023  
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### Seriously

Today's gospel follows right on the heels of last week's reading - do you remember it? Jesus and his friends had all gone to the very pagan district of Caesarea Philippi, and it was there that God began to reveal Jesus' true identity. We tend to think it was Peter who did the revealing - after all, Peter was the one who confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." But we're told God revealed that to Peter, not that Peter figured it out himself. And even though Peter made that bold confession of Jesus' true identity and Jesus blessed him for it, even though Jesus claimed Peter's confession would be the rock to build the church on, we know Peter didn't have the first idea of what being the Messiah meant. That becomes abundantly clear today, when Peter responds to Jesus talking about suffering and dying and rising- the true path of the Messiah.

We can't blame Peter, really. The whole notion of the coming Messiah had been one of a hero who would rescue the Israelites, overturn the occupying Roman government, and bring back the glory days of King David. Even after three years of sharing in Jesus' ministry, of witnessing miracles and healings, of seeing Jesus unravel the arguments of the religious and political authorities, the disciples still didn't understand God's heavenly upside-down kingdom, where the first would be last, where the poor would be rich, where the "hero" would die a miserable death because he wouldn't even save himself.

No wonder they were confused and afraid. When Jesus began to tell the disciples what being the Messiah really meant, when he told them that suffering and dying rather than sitting on the throne of glory would be the work ahead of them, when it seemed he was knowingly walking to his death, Peter just couldn't take it. So, having been handed the keys to the kingdom only last Sunday, Peter stepped into his leadership sandals, boldly called Jesus aside and said "No." "No, this cannot be, no, this is a terrible idea, no, this doesn't need to happen, no, you do not have to die." And Jesus' response? "Get behind me Satan."

I can't help but wonder if the strength of Jesus' reaction had to do with the degree of temptation Peter's advice held for him. Recall that right after his baptism in the River Jordan, at the very beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. There, in the wilderness, his responses seemed calmer and more collected. Had he been prepared for those temptations? Jesus quoted scripture and the will of the Father as his answers to Satan. When finally, the devil had taken him *"...to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; [when] he [had] said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus [had had enough]... 'Away with you, Satan!'"* *Matthew 4:8-10a*. Which is pretty much what Jesus said to Peter.

While Peter was saying “no” to divine things, Jesus was saying “no” to human things. We have to be careful here. In saying Peter had set his mind on human rather than divine things, Jesus wasn’t saying humans or even all human things are bad. What he was saying is that Peter’s vision, the all-too-human vision of who God is, was tragically limited, and far too small. And it isn’t only our vision of God that is woefully inadequate. We place our all-too-human, pathetically limited vision of ultimate human success in our titles, our stuff, our money, our accomplishments or even our good works. The world of agreement calls people “successful” when they appear to be in total control of their destinies, and often the destinies of the people around them. I’ve heard it said that *“The ‘winners’ are those who know how to master the game of life and have the goods to prove it. One of those goods might even be a gold cross that hangs around their neck on display for all to see! [These allegedly successful people] might explain that the cross represents something Jesus did for them... But when Jesus talks about the cross, it’s cross-bearing he speaks of, and cross-bearing is what disciples are called to do in Jesus’ name.”*<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus turned his eyes toward Jerusalem and the cross, when he began to speak of what was to unfold for the Messiah, of course the disciples didn’t want to hear it. All they could see was an end to everything they believed in, everything they’d hoped for, everything they’d given their lives to. All they saw was death. And their fear of death was so strong that they never even heard Jesus say, *“and on the third day, be raised.”* That’s what happens when you set your mind on human, rather than divine things.

When Jesus said *“If any want to become my followers, 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 will find it...”* he wasn’t suggesting the kind of self-denial that involves chocolate or bad habits or even suffering for the sake of suffering. When Jesus said we need to deny ourselves, what he was talking about was putting ourselves and our comfort and our convenience aside, so that we can live lives that provide for God’s greater good. To deny ourselves, to take up our crosses is to make choices that point others toward God, choices that move us toward God. To deny ourselves is to make certain that we are not somehow a stumbling block for others who are desperately in need of God’s love and grace. To call ourselves Christians and at the same time insist that the world arrange itself to our liking is to deny the rest of God’s children their rightful place in God’s kingdom.

To be a cross-bearer isn’t to live a sad and austere life, a life of suffering without joy or delight. To be a cross-bearer is to want with all our hearts what God wants – or at least to want to want that – and to recognize ourselves as God’s own beloveds, partnering with God to heal the suffering of the world. To be a cross-bearer is to live a life that proclaims in word and even more importantly, in action, that the Kingdom of Heaven has come among us and the empire, the world of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-matthew-1621-28-6>

agreement, is no longer in charge.

Will that bring suffering? Sometimes, yes. Because the cross is both a condemnation of the empire that is the worldly culture, AND a symbol of what empire does when you cross it. But the cross is also the way of life and hope and freedom, and so being a cross bearer means living a life that is more concerned with God's greater good than it is concerned with my own good. It really is that simple.

I think what Jesus is saying is that lives aligned with a culture that says "Me first," I'll get what's mine, and hang onto it for dear life regardless of what that means for you or anybody else," those aren't lives worth saving. That lives aligned with a system that rewards the haves and ignores the ones who have not, aren't lives worth saving. That lives focused on making things convenient for me, aren't worth saving. And while we can likely say our lives aren't like that, I don't think we can honestly say, "*I never think of myself first,*" or "*I never participate in systems that deny justice and dignity to some people,*" or "*I never try to set my perfect little world up for my own convenience.*" At least I know I can't honestly say those things.

And this, my dears, is precisely the self-denial, the cross-bearing Jesus is talking about. The way of the cross is the way of the Kingdom, which is not suffering for the sake of suffering, but recognizing that there is so much suffering in the world and we're called to come alongside it. That's what compassion means, you know – com = with, passion = suffering. Oh, we can push the suffering aside, pretend other people's suffering isn't our own, but that isn't what Jesus says. Jesus says, "*Love your neighbors as yourselves*" - as if they were ourselves. Which means their joy is our joy and their suffering is our suffering. When denying ourselves means giving ourselves over to God's greater good, we begin to understand that the life Jesus says we must lose is the life lived to self. And the life we're to gain is a life lived in service to God, lived out in service to others. When we do that, we become a Kingdom-living community of cross-bearers.

The life Jesus wants for us is a life rich in relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves, a life devoted to serving others with love and mercy and grace. Putting others first, serving others rather than ourselves is so antithetical to what the world tells us to do. But true sacrifice is life-giving – that's the way of the cross too. Caring for others, giving ourselves away, sharing what we've been given, joining together as a community to transform the world by sharing God's love, these are the most life-giving things we can do. When we love with abandon, we experience boundless love. When we give with abandon, we receive with more than we could ever imagine. When we lose our lives, we gain everything in God. That's always how God's upside-down kingdom works, isn't it? No matter how we try to get away from it, the message is always the same. Now is not the time to be tired, to fuss about things being inconvenient, to turn away from the suffering in our own lives or in the world. Yes, of course we have to care for ourselves, but my goodness we have some crazy ideas about what that means. What Jesus is telling us, what Jesus is always telling us, is that in giving, we receive, in losing, we gain, in dying, we live. I think we need to take him seriously. Amen.

