

Simon Peter has just made a bold confession about Jesus. Jesus had asked his disciples a question: “Who do YOU say that I am?” And Peter answered: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” A+: he got it right, but Peter had no idea what it would mean for Jesus to be the “the chosen one of God.” Or what it would cost to follow him. “*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.*” Costly, indeed.

Some years ago, the Indiana-Kentucky Synod Assembly was blessed with having Ken Medema as musician for the sessions. He shared a song that really speaks to this challenge of following Jesus:

Finding leads to losing;
Losing lets you find.
Living leads to dying;
Life leaves death behind.
Losing leads to finding,
That’s all that I can say.
No one will find life another way.

Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, where the authorities will arrest him, and nail him to a wooden cross. When Peter “begs to differ,” Jesus, the Christ, issues a strong challenge: “If you truly follow me, your life will be marked by the cross of Christ forever.” Your life will belong to a God who takes on suffering, not inflicting it and not being ashamed of it, but embodying the power of divine love to overcome it and bring new life out of it. God’s power shines through *precisely on that cross*, where Jesus shows us that losing life does indeed lead to finding life. God broke the stranglehold of death through Jesus, who died and was raised to life again. *Life leaves death behind.*

Our crosses tend to be stained glass, or polished brass, or worked into beautiful banners. So we could miss the scandal of this “cross-bearing.” But it surely wasn’t lost on Peter and those around him. Most everybody would have witnessed a crucifixion in those days. The Romans would fasten the condemned person to a wooden cross set up along a busy road so that everyone could see it. It was a shameful and extremely painful way to be executed.

When Peter “rebukes” Jesus, it’s not because he misunderstands Jesus’ words, but because he DOES understand them, and he can’t accept them. To quote that great theologian Mark Twain: “*Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand.*”

Is it any surprise that Peter was horrified? “*No, Jesus! No, never---not you.* Our Messiah doesn’t suffer; our Savior doesn’t get killed. Our mighty God is going to drive out the idol-worshipping Roman Empire, overthrow the evil puppet kings, and get rid of the corrupt temple leaders. Then God will put *us* in charge.” Jesus says *NO* to that.

So, two comments about “cross-bearing.” First, not every burden is a cross. A true cross comes as a result of following Jesus. Second, to “deny yourself” doesn’t mean to believe that you are just like worthless junk. To pick up your cross means letting go of the fierce drive to only “look out for Number One.” It means putting *God’s* first things *first in your life*. It may mean embracing the discipline of showing up even when we’d rather not; or speaking up when someone needs a word of comfort or encouragement or advocacy; or maybe shutting up long enough to listen carefully to God and to each other. Sometimes we want a God who will affirm the rightness of *our* cause, then fill in the gaps we can’t quite manage --or at least conveniently get out of our way and don’t bug us.

Then we hear the words of Jesus rip through our smokescreens: *you’ve got to get your self out of MY way if you plan to follow me*. The sharp *rebuke* -- that word was used to drive out demons— “Get behind me.” And you know, when you think about it, “Get behind me” is the only way anyone *can* “follow someone.”

Jesus is going another round with the Tempter, this time in the person of Peter. The godly ways of Jesus go up against the evil ways of Satan. Evil draws power as it moves in and turns good gifts from God -- talents, energy, relationships, political and religious structures -- toward self-serving and oppressive ends. It’s often subtle and it’s always strong. The temptation to *save our own life* is so strong that not only does *Peter* fall into it, even *Jesus* sweats blood over it in the Garden. “Let this cup pass from me . . . *but* not my will.” Jesus does not call us to follow anywhere he has not already gone. And Jesus promises to be with us all the way, daily challenging us to trust God, to hope amid hopelessness, to receive and embrace a cross-marked resurrection life that death can’t define or defile.

Cross-bearing is love in action; for knowing the unconditional love of Jesus is only thing that can truly free us to serve others and not our own egos; it’s the only thing that can replace fear with courage, replace anxiety with compassion, and transform despair into hope. The love of Jesus can empower us to love ourselves as we ought, and our neighbors as we are able.

Jesus scandalized Peter, and Jesus blows us out of the water too. But this world is broken; God wants us to be unashamed to let our hearts be broken by the things that break God’s heart— things like trusting false gods of “power-over” others or unrestrained greed. To follow Jesus is to know that when *our* lives are ripped open, God’s Spirit promises to be *right there* in the brokenness, to bring new life out of the suffering and dying – for in our baptism, we are marked by the cross of Christ forever.

When the church of Jesus Christ turns it back on the suffering of this world, it loses its vital connection to that crucified and risen Messiah. When it turns its attention inward, absorbed with saving its own institutional life, then it becomes like Peter in today’s lesson. Following Jesus means shifting away from our hyper-focus on self-preservation. Our Lord wants to teach us that vitality in the church comes as the by-product of faithfulness in sharing and living the message of Jesus Christ, crucified, and risen.

Jesus gives us the bottom line about faithfulness: follow *me*. God loves a broken and suffering world *through us*, and within the web of roles and relationships and institutions where we find ourselves. We must do what we do, not to strive to survive, but to be faithful to Jesus who tells us “*Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life, for my sake and the gospel, will save it.*”

Joseph Ton was pastor of a Baptist church in Romania while that country was ruled by Communists. The authorities hated him because of his preaching. They arrested him and threatened to kill him. Ton said to the arresting officer: “Sir, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. Sir, you know that my sermons are all over the country on tapes now. If you kill me, they will be sprinkled with my blood. And whoever listens to them after that will say, ‘*I’d better listen. This man sealed it with his blood.*’ They will speak ten times louder than before. So, go on and kill me. Then I will win the supreme victory.”

The officer sent him home. Ton says: “For years I was a Christian who was cautious because I wanted to survive. I had accepted all the restrictions the authorities put on me because I wanted to live. *Now* I wanted to die, and they wouldn’t oblige. Now I could do whatever I wanted in Romania to spread the gospel. For years I wanted to save my life, and I was losing it. Now that I wanted to lose it, I was winning it.” Losing for the sake of the gospel leads to finding.

Jesus says, “*take up your cross and follow me,*” but we mess that up a lot. It is difficult to trust that letting go of the old helps us find new ways of living faithfully. But don’t be discouraged. Remember that Jesus doesn’t fire his disciples, not even when they desert him. Jesus forgives, and invites them *and us* to follow him into a world that hungers for us to share God’s love. Whether our calling as disciples is to serve as teacher, learner, helper, fellow traveler -- or parent, citizen, neighbor, spouse, child, friend, God promises to lead us, as God led Abraham. God loves us. Trust that promise of God’s blessing and respond to what you encounter along the road. *No one will find life another way.* God, give us eyes to see, ears to listen, hearts to trust, and willing feet to follow.