

Self-Denial

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Four year old Rick was thrilled when the family got a piano. He immediately went up on the piano bench and began pounding on the keys. After a while he climbed down in frustration.

“It’s no use!” he cried. *“‘Jesus Loves Me’ just isn’t there!”*

Like four year old Rick—any resemblance to real people is totally intentional—too often we expect to be able to access the harmony of spiritual life with none of the sacrifice and discipline of practice. We think it is adequate to attend worship, serve on a committee, and support an event or two. We do these things and say, “I am a good church member.”

And you know what? We’re right. We are good church members. Here’s the problem: Jesus is not looking for good church members! He is looking for disciples. To the extent that our membership in the church equips us to follow Jesus, it is faithful to the One whom we call “Savior” and “Lord.” To the end that it does not, it makes us irrelevant at best and “white-washed tombs”—a phrase Jesus used as a metaphor for spiritually dead—at worst.

To those who would follow, the call in today’s Gospel is clear: *“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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”*

If we are surprised and frustrated when we cannot hear the melody of “Jesus Loves Me,” might it be because we have done little to acquire the disciplines that strengthen us in cross-bearing discipleship?

Let us be clear about three things:

First, in the story Peter resists Jesus. Many of us are sympathetic to Peter. Like Peter, we know exactly who Jesus is: the Christ, the Messiah. The verses preceding today's reading tell us that very thing. Like Peter, we don't like Jesus telling us what cross-bearing means. And what does it mean? Simply this: **bearing the cross is taking up that burden which no one has a right to expect us to take up.** Yet Jesus did that again and again in his ministry, didn't he? Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Give to those who ask. The cross, as Peter and we both know, is an offense.

Like Peter, we wonder "If Jesus is the Son of God, then what is he doing here at the cross, an instrument of abject humiliation and excruciating death?" What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this? The cross reminds us that "no good deed goes unpunished," that virtue is not always rewarded. In the words of Bishop James Harnish:

"The track we follow during Lent takes us to an ugly place of bloody, brutal execution; a stinking dung heap of naked humiliation, abject failure and unmitigated defeat."

Dying to Live: A Lenten Study for Adults, p. 22

So the cross brings us up short. We identify with Peter. We need to be honest about that if we will follow.

Second, the God who asks us to bear a cross and deny ourselves is not asking us to do anything God has not already done. This is not a god who sits above the fray, watching it all unfold with bemused interest or perhaps even heart-broken sadness. No! God enters this suffering with us! Mike Slaughter, author of this year's Lenten study, puts it like this:

"Jesus gives flesh and reality to a God who cares, loves us deeply, and longs to win us at all costs, even to the point of death on a cross. Perhaps it was expressed best by the author and

Christian humanist Dorothy Sayers: 'For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine...he has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.'"

Renegade Gospel: the Rebel Jesus, (2014) pg. 69,
quoting Sayers, **Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World, (1969), pg. 14**

Third, we are mistaken if we believe that following Jesus means only a radical reversal of everything we are and do. That's too easy. It either leads to self-righteousness—“*Lord, look at all I've given up for you*”—or it leads to something less than discipleship: “*Well, I can't do that so I'll go back to just being a church member.*” In fact, self-denial means placing God first, in whatever parts of our lives we most need to do that. Figuring that out returns us to Rick at the keyboard. It is a discipline that uses discernment—think “prayer,” think “covenant or support group,” think “pastoral consultation or therapy”—and decision and action.

And we have the advantage—which Peter and the others did not—of knowing how the story turns out. God wins! The late William Sloane Coffin—social activist, Yale University chaplain, pastor of Riverside Church in New York—proclaimed this truth:

“Christ is risen pro nobis, for us, to put love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more iron up our spines. Christ is risen to convert us, not from life to something more than life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself.” “Sermons from Riverside,” April 3, 1983, quoted in **Dying to Live**

Let us embrace the full life. Let us take up our cross and follow Christ. Amen.