

The Challenge and Reward of Following Jesus

The Rev. Karen Swanson

Our Gospel lesson is difficult this morning. It challenges us to grapple with who Jesus the Christ is to us, and how we will respond to that. In the Gospel reading, Jesus inquires of his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Perhaps Jesus is wondering what his next step must be to help the people understand his identity and purpose. The disciples respond that some see Jesus as John the Baptist or Elijah, come alive again, and others see him as a new prophet in the great tradition of the Hebrew prophets who spoke to the people about God’s will in their lives.

Jesus pushes the question one step further, testing the understanding of his closest followers. “But you, who do you say that I am?” He asks them. Peter, foremost among the disciples, answers correctly, “You are the Messiah.” When Matthew tells this same story, Peter is praised by Jesus for his perceptiveness, and Jesus re-names him “Rocky” and tells him that he will be the “rock” on whom Jesus will build the church. Mark says nothing about this. Instead he moves on to Jesus’ description of what kind of Messiah he will be: he will suffer, be rejected, be killed, and three days later rise from the dead.

How hard this must have been to hear! The disciples have come to love Jesus: they have been his close companions, and have experienced firsthand his care. They don't want him to suffer, be rejected or die, anymore than we would want this to happen to members of our family, our church family, or our close friends. We would prefer to protect those we love from pain and suffering.

These words also challenge Peter and the other disciples on another level. Do they want to follow a leader who is not a winner with whom they can share in a victory, but an apparent loser, at least as the world defines it? Jesus is a messiah who chooses to love his followers by suffering with them. He is a man of integrity who is faithful to his relationship with God and his principles, and will not abandon them in order to make his mark on the world. Many whom history remembers have won by means of violence done to others. For Jesus, the winning is not found in taking up the weapons of those with whom he fights. He avoids violence and moves through suffering and death to a more profound victory: the victory of peace over violence; of love over hate; of suffering with over "lording over" others.

Do the disciples want to follow a leader like this? Do we? Do we have, can we find, the strength to do so? Where will this path lead us? Is it the place we want to end up? If not this way, which way?

In her sermon this week, The Rev. Janet Hunt talks about her father's death, and her desire to protect her younger sisters from the pain that she herself was feeling as he moved through the last stages of life. Then she describes the insight that came to her. If she could protect her sisters from the pain of their father's death (which she probably couldn't), she would also be taking away from them the gifts of suffering and grief, for example, the discovery of spiritual strength and the awareness of God's forgiveness.

Rumors, a preaching website I sometimes read, tells this story about Mother Teresa, shared by a man named Don Sandin. "A plump businessman, dripping with gold and diamonds, came one day to visit Mother Teresa, fell at her feet, and proclaimed, 'Oh my God, you are the holiest of the Holy! You are the super-holy one! You have given up everything! I cannot even give up on samosa for breakfast! Not one single chapatti for lunch can I give up!' Mother Teresa started to laugh so hard her attendant nuns were concerned. She was in her mid-80's and frail from two recent heart attacks. Eventually, she stopped laughing and, wiping her eyes with one hand, she leaned forward to help her adorer to his feet. 'So you say I have given up everything?' she said quietly.

The businessman nodded enthusiastically. Mother Teresa smiled. 'Oh my dear man,' she said, 'you are so wrong. It isn't I who have

given up everything; it is you. You have given up the supreme sacred joy of life, the source of all lasting happiness, the joy of giving your life away to other beings, to serve the Divine in them with compassion. It is you who is the great renunciate!”

To the businessman’s total bewilderment, Mother Teresa got down on her knees and bowed to him. Flinging up his hands, he ran out of the room.

As our Gospel passage says, “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.***”

I would like to end with one final story told by Alyce M. McKenzie, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology:

A small plane with five passengers on it had an engine malfunction and was going down. The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group: ‘Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news. The bad news is that the plane’s going down, and there’s nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the

wall back there. The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you. But good luck. Thank you for choosing our airline, and we hope you have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be.' He gave the group a thumbs-up sign and was out the door.

A woman leaped up from her seat. 'I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me.' She grabbed a pack, strapped it on her back, and leaped out.

A man stood up. 'I am a partner in a large law practice, and the office would fall to pieces without me.' He grabbed a pack, strapped it on his back, and leaped out.

Another man stood up and said, 'I am arguably the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I won't even tell you what it is. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute. He grabbed a bundle and leaped out.

That left only two people on the plane, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy. 'Son,' said the pastor, 'you take the last parachute. You're young; you have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you and safe landing.'

The teenager grinned at the older man. 'Thanks, pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my knapsack.'

And 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.