

Our passage today comes on the heels of Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus has asked his disciples, "What is the word on the street about me?" And Peter declares without hesitation, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus commends Peter, saying "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." All is well with Peter and the disciples until Jesus starts talking about his future. Jesus shared that he must undergo great suffering at the hands of the religious powers in Jerusalem, and that he would be killed and on the third day be raised. I imagine Peter stopped listening at the word "killed" or at least he didn't understand the implication of being raised, for he blurted out, "This must never happen to you!" Jesus immediately rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me Satan!" or As Eugene Peterson translated, "Peter, get out of the way... You have no idea how God works." From compliment to condemnation Peter's pendulum has swung. Jesus though, with laser precision, now addresses his disciples and tells them what it will take to follow him. This is the context of the words we will hear from the Gospel of Matthew today. Listen now for God's word to you this day:

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? <sup>27</sup> "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, there

are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

The Word of the Living God. Thanks, be to God.

On Wednesday I began my devotional blog writing, “Why would anyone want to follow Jesus when he describes discipleship this way, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me?’”

And if that was not enough to thin the crowds following Jesus, he continued saying to his disciples, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Have you ever lost something you were desperately trying to hold onto? In my first career as a chemical engineer, I experienced corporate reengineering which always lead to downsizing. In the mid to late 1990’s it was a common occurrence. I was on multiple teams that restructured organizations, only to have them restructured again in a few years. It was a brutal time in the company, because when the dust settled you found out whether or not you still had a position. You were called into a conference room and if there was someone from Human Resources present, you knew you would no longer be employed. You were immediately escorted out of the building, given only moments to collect a few personal items. It was brutal.

What I found most interesting though about this tumultuous period is that Jesus’ words rang true in this setting, “For those who want to save their life will lose it.” Those who tried to frantically hold fast to their positions, to their

importance as contributors to the corporation by fighting fiercely against eliminating their positions, they were the first to go. Those who willingly set aside their self-interest and said that things could be done differently or even contributed to eliminating their own job, were spared dismissal and offered new positions. I remember distinctly one phone call when the dust settled after one reorganization, because my immediate boss was terminated, whereas, I was promoted. He called to congratulate me and then proceeded to tell me that he had worked so hard to save his position, that he lost it. As a Christian, these words of Jesus struck him deeply.

Doesn't this ring true for other experiences in our lives as well. We try so hard to hold onto what was that an opportunity of what could be is missed. A parent desperately holding onto the innocence of childhood for her child, loses her adolescence struggling to break free. Or when we try so hard to save our image or prevent others from seeing the under belly of our lives, we lose the opportunity to develop real relationships and find ourselves isolated and alone.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it," said Jesus. "And those who lose their lives for my sake, will find it." Yet, what does it mean to lose our lives? Eugene Peterson gives us some insight as to what this means as followers of Christ, for he writes, "You are not in the driver's seat."

When we lose our lives for Christ's sake, we are not in the driver's seat. We are passengers, not the ones forging the way forward, as someone shared at Sunrise on Thursday morning. Yet, does being a passenger bring you comfort or angst? What kind of passenger are you?

I have a confession to make and my husband will confirm this, I don't make a very good passenger on a car ride! I like taking the wheel. I like charting my own course. You could say I like to be in control, especially when it comes to driving.

Yet, Jesus doesn't say to his disciples, "Take the wheel." He doesn't say take the lead. Jesus says, "Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

Biblical Commentator Susan Johnson writes, "This passage is perhaps the most unequivocal statement of Christian discipleship anywhere in the New Testament, for Jesus makes it clear that following him will cost us something." Following Jesus will cost us the driver's seat, not of our cars, but of our lives and of this church!

"Together Peter and Jesus articulate our challenge," for if we are to follow Christ then we have "to lay aside our personal claim to what is precious to us in this life." We have to let Jesus take the wheel, [even] if it means that we ride into the midst of the reality of pain and loss in this world. We do this not for our sake, but "for the sake of Christ's love for the world," writes Johnson.

To follow Jesus means we want what Jesus wants, even if it means that we will suffer pain and loss.

Yet, as I asked in my Wednesday devotional do we really want what Jesus wants or do our own wants take center stage?

In the last few months in America, we have seen a surge of blatant racism. We saw its rage and violence in Charlottesville. Rev. Robert W. Lee IV made news headlines after speaking out against racism at the recent MTV Video Music Awards on August 28<sup>th</sup>. He happens to be a descendent of Confederate

General Robert E. Lee. Here is what he said that night, “We have made my ancestor an idol of white supremacy, racism, and hate. As a pastor, it is my moral duty to speak out against racism, America’s original sin. Today, I call on all of us with privilege and power to answer God’s call to confront racism and white supremacy head-on. We can find inspiration in the Black Lives Matter movement, the women who marched in the Women’s March in January, and, especially, Heather Heyer, who died fighting for her beliefs in Charlottesville.” Rev. Lee, followed Christ’s lead by speaking up about those who choose not to love their neighbors, for Christ taught his disciples, saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And when pressed with the question, “Who’s my neighbor?” Jesus tells us the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the least expected person in the story was the one who loved his neighbor as himself. Rev. Lee followed Jesus’ lead, yet it, shockingly, cost him his pastoral position. Some in his church didn’t like the press the church received after his speech, so Rev. Lee reluctantly resigned.

I have to ask us again; do we really want what Jesus wants?

Jesus said to his disciples, “Deny yourself.” Yet, what does Jesus mean? Are we to deny the truth of our being? Are we to deny all of our wants and desires? Are to believe that we are worth nothing? No, for denying ourselves doesn’t mean we deny our value and worth as a child of God. It simply, yet profoundly, means to reorient our understanding of our true

worth. Our worth is not defined by what the world says - by how much we own or what position we hold or even what others think of us. Our worth, as followers of Christ, is found in the giving of ourselves on behalf of others, as Christ did.

Peterson reminds us through his translation of this passage that “Self-sacrifice is the way, God’s way, to finding yourself, your true self.”

But Jesus doesn’t stop at just asking us to deny ourselves, for he continues saying, “Take up your cross.” This language is extreme given the reality of the cross we know as the Roman instrument of suffering and shame. It was the cruelest and most public way to be put to death by the empire. Taking up our cross means we are to actively put to death all that impedes our willingness to want what Jesus wants.

Put to death your need to be liked, to be praised, to be recognized for your efforts. Put to death your need for safety, for security, and for comfort. Put to death anything that gets in the way of wanting what Jesus wants.

“Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.” I return to the analogy of driving. As followers, Christ is in the driver’s seat, not you or me, or even us. To be a passenger, is to completely trust the driver. To be in the passenger seat with Christ as our driver is what I call courageous living, because we follow, not ever really knowing what the future will hold for us. This is courageous living, because for the sake of Christ’s love for the world we are willing risk being a passenger, rather than a driver of our own lives.

Yet, how do we do this? How do we reorient our lives to want what Jesus wants?

Listen to the psalmist again who says, “I’ve thrown in my lot with you, God, and I’m not budging... I never lose sight of your love.” We are to orient our lives with love, not hate; with love, not violence; with love, not envy; with love, not comfort. Love is to be our focal point; love and compassion for the other is to be our way of life, as we engage the world around us.

William Sloane Coffin remarked to his students at Yale Divinity School, that self-interest is not wrong. The question though, he suggested is, what kind of self are you interested in being? What kind of self are we interested in being? What kind of church are we interested in being? Are we interested in only being wrapped up in ourselves? Or are we interested in being a self, and a church, that for the sake of Christ’s love for the world willingly risks walking into places of pain and suffering?

In these last few weeks and months, we have watched or heard stories about people willingly risking engagement with a world not yet as God envisions, from Charlottesville to Barcelona, from the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and to the present reality of Irma, from the massive earthquake in Mexico to the thousands of refugees crammed into Libyan makeshift shelters. The suffering and pain around the globe is real.

Yet, will we follow Christ? Will we go where Christ’s love and compassion for the world calls us to go? Will we walk the way of the cross?

I don’t know how God will call you to respond to the community and world around us, but I do know we are called to respond. We cannot be silent. We cannot be ostriches and stick our heads in the sand. We cannot pretend that there is not pain and suffering in the world around us.

As Presbyterian Pastor Frederick Buechner reminds us, “The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.

I don’t know what you need most to do. I don’t know what issues cause you to lose sleep. I don’t know if it is the 800,000 dreamers that might find themselves deported to a country they never knew. I don’t know if it is the thousands of refugees fleeing violence in Africa, but are denied safety as countries close their borders. I don’t know if you feel called to speak out for unity in the midst of our diversity. But, I do know we need to listen to our life. Listen to your heart, what breaks it and fills it with compassion?

Buechner writes, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Yet, Buechner insists the call of God is not merely self-interest. So, whatever this deep gladness is that we experience in the giving of ourselves to others, it's not selfish ambition.

Courageous living calls us to let Christ be in the driver’s seat. Courageous living calls us to the way of love and compassion for the other, even if it costs us our lives.

Do we really want what Jesus wants? I pray so! Let us live courageously for Christ as individuals and as a church! Amen.