

In life, there are worse things than death. Living in fear of death can be worse. Living with the death of a loved one or the impending death of a loved one can be worse. Peter's beloved teacher, Jesus, has just announced his forthcoming suffering and death. In the passage immediately before our reading, Peter correctly professed Jesus as the Christ. Surely, Peter must have thought, surely Jesus the Anointed One, the Messiah, is the ultimate goodness, truth and beauty. And that *must* mean that God will protect Jesus from all suffering and death. Is it any wonder that Peter protested? I find it to be a deeply human response. I wonder if Jesus didn't also find Peter's response to be profoundly and even sweetly human.

You see, there is a disadvantage to the printed word. We don't get to hear the tone—the emotional content that shifts how a phrase carries meaning. When I was in theater school, drama professors urged budding actors to look for the words that lived beneath the words on the page. Only then would we understand how to act—how to speak the character's lines in way that carried the intent of the playwright. A good playwright allows the characters' actions to carry clues for the actor to follow like a trail of breadcrumbs leading to unspoken emotional content. A great playwright makes the emotional content drive the action no matter what the written words say. And Mark's Gospel is great playwriting.

Mark's Jesus is a gifted teacher. That's why I have trouble making sense of Jesus harshly scolding Peter like many seem to think he did. That is certainly what the modern English word "rebuke" would lead us to believe. But the Greek word that Mark uses refers to an act of warning to prevent something from going wrong. To re-direct. Listen to Jesus saying to Peter, "Get behind me," as a corrective. Hear "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" not as a shaming critique, but as a warning to transcend the human response and to get behind Jesus.

That reframing makes for a workable and beautiful transition for what Jesus then says to all the disciples: "If any (and I want it to mean "if any of you all") If any want to become my followers, (to get behind me with Peter, that is) let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." If we are not paying attention, we can confuse *our* cross with someone else's, even Christ's. The cross that Jesus had to bear can and will shepherd us toward a magnificent and liberating new way to live, but that was *his*

cross. No one else's. Having borne that cross, Jesus invites us to get behind him, take up *our* cross and follow.

Especially during the 40 days of Lent, we can confuse our own cross with the cross that so vividly captures the suffering and death of Jesus. Six weeks devoted to the mystery of the cross and thinking about its influence on Christian lives can lead us to become distracted by the human attitudes and actions that led to the crucifixion. Resetting our minds on the Divine begins by getting behind Jesus; getting back into right relationship with God and then—and *only then*—taking up our own crosses.

Our life in Christ and our ministry in Christ's name belong together as the two beams of the crosses that we are invited to take up. Think of the vertical beam as a reminder of our personal relationship and encounter with God because God loves each of us uniquely. Imagine the horizontal beam to be a reminder to live our lives as a revelation of God's love for all of God's children because God loves all of us infinitely. Because God loves each of us distinctively, your cross will be different than mine. Because God loves all people with unlimited love, the light of Christ that radiates from us is for others. But it all begins with an intimate relationship with God. "When our ministry does not emerge from a personal encounter," Henri Nouwen once wrote, "it quickly becomes a tiring routine and a boring job. On the other hand, when our spiritual life no longer leads to an active ministry, it quickly degenerates into introspection and self-scrutiny, and thus loses its dynamism."¹

Living into the invitation to take up our cross and follow Christ is to meet the Risen Christ. In making this invitation, Jesus has not promised safety; he has promised life. Jesus invitation has not promised freedom from pain; he has promised liberation from fear. "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." When we make ourselves vulnerable to the needs of those around us, when we give ourselves in love to another, when we set our own interests aside, we are often surprised to find ourselves uplifted, coming alive in a new way, experiencing a foretaste of God's heaven made manifest in the here and now.

These words may sound hollow or naïve to some. People in outright poverty or struggling with their finances may rightly wonder how they are supposed to deny themselves or their families any more than their life circumstances already deny them. People in abusive relationships may put themselves at still greater risk if they hear these

¹ Nouwen, Henri J. M. *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007.

words saying that their suffering is appropriate or somehow transformative. People being mistreated because of their race, gender, age, orientation or religion have challenges enough without the added burden of people framing injustice as the cross they must bear. People devoted to self-sufficiency, self-determination and upward mobility may find the challenge to deny themselves and take up their cross to be the worst possible avenue to peace, security and happiness.

But Jesus never promotes doormat theologies. Nowhere does Jesus advocate for ignoring our genuine human needs or to see ourselves as undeserving of love, dignity and respect. Jesus offers no justification for enduring abusive relationships or tolerating injustice. Nor do we have to go get ourselves killed in order to get behind Jesus and follow him. Giving of ourselves in love is vastly different than having others take from us. There is something tremendously liberating, something life-affirming, in *choosing* to act on behalf of others instead of surrendering ourselves to fear. To follow Jesus Christ means consenting with determination to let the Holy Spirit saturate our minds and hearts.

“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.” Once again, Mark’s choice of words is enlightening. The Greek word that Mark put in Jesus’ mouth was “*psuche*.” Not “*bios*,” a reference to physical, biological life; the opposite of death. Some people do give up their physical life or put their bodies at dangerous risk for others. Many of those people we call martyrs and some saints. For the rest of us, God seems to have a broader category of self-emptying in mind. “*Psuche*” means something more like “*soul-life*,” more holistically referring to one’s being; one’s mind, emotion and will; one’s distinct personhood.

And so Mark’s Jesus appears to be saying that anyone who wants to *liberate* their unique personhood will give it up to God so that God can form and transform that unique person as a specific manifestation of the living Christ. The more of ourselves that we give to God, the deeper we move into the heart of God’s unconditional love. The more that we experience God’s unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, the more we are liberated from our fears and the more we can see the Spirit working in our lives and in the struggles we see all around us.

Our spiritual life is based on these deepening, personal encounters with God—the vertical beam of each of our unique crosses. We nurture those experiences by gathering together in worship, by praying together and in solitude, by studying and learning, by connecting to each other to build and nurture community. Our ministry to others—the horizontal vertical beam of our crosses—involves adopting a stance of

gratitude that opens us to *be* the Good News of God in Christ for others. Through our presence, our actions and our words, together, we let people know that their lives matter to God and to us.

Following behind Christ, we enter into the mysterious truth that the God who loves all creation without exception also loves each individual with an exceptional love. Following behind Christ, each with our own cross, we return to right relationship with God and with each other. Belonging to God, overcoming our fears with each other and living into joy. The deeper we follow Christ into the house of God, the more we become aware that God's house has no dividing walls but only the door opened wide for all by Jesus Christ. This increasing awareness inspires and invigorates our actions on behalf of wholeness, justice and peace.

“All Christian action,” writes Henri Nouwen, “is a manifestation of the human solidarity revealed to us in the house of God. It is not an anxious human effort to create a better world. It is a confident expression that in Christ, death, evil and destruction have been overcome. It is not a fearful attempt to restore a broken order. It is a joyful assertion that in Christ all order has already been restored. It is not a nervous effort to bring divided people together, but a celebration of an already established unity.”²

Come to this table then, trusting the Risen Christ. Listen with the ear of your heart for the voice that says, “Wake up. Do not fear. Get behind me and follow me.”

² Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.