

For the past few weeks, as Matthew's Jesus continues walking his followers toward the inevitability of the cross, we have heard stories about awakenings. Three weeks ago, Peter stepped out of a boat expecting a spectacular physics-defying miracle. And when Peter sank, Jesus was immediately there for him.

Peter woke up to the astonishing everyday miracle that our own little bit of faith is enough for Christ to lay hold of us and work through us to help others.

Two weeks ago, God spoke through a Canaanite woman to wake Jesus up to his Divine identity. That awakening dissolved his attachment to his human identity as a Jewish son of David, and opened him to his identity as the Son of God.

Last week, Peter publicly named that Divine identity. "You are the Messiah," Peter said, "the Son of the living God." God spoke into Peter's awareness and Peter spoke God's words out – words that Peter did not fully understand. Jesus understood God's truth as well the implications for him and for his followers.

This week, Peter went from foundation stone to stumbling block. Jesus went from handing Peter the keys to heaven to calling Peter "Satan." Remember, for first century Jews, "satan" was simply a title for a "tester of loyalties," not the embodiment of evil that came from Medieval Christianity.

Even so. What a week for Peter!

Let me tell you a story. Some years ago, I was with a group of people talking with a prominent teacher. One young guy was especially eager to talk to him. Finally, the teacher acknowledged him. The young man was ecstatic. "I have realized enlightenment!" he said. "Well, that's fantastic," the teacher said. "Now. Get over yourself."

Some people misunderstood that response as harsh or dismissive, but it is exactly the right next move. God doesn't grant awakening and grace for the benefit of an individual person. God grants divine awakening and grace for the liberation of all.

"You are setting your mind not on divine things," Jesus says to Peter, "but on human things." Peter once expected all miracles to be extraordinary spectacular and, Peter is now expecting Jesus, the Jewish son of King David,

to be a warrior-Messiah. How else could Jesus conquer the Romans and liberate the Israelites?

Maybe Peter hopes to comfort Jesus when he says: ““God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” If Jesus has truly given Peter the keys to heaven, maybe Peter imagines that he can bring about Divine intervention.

What seems clear is that he does not understand that Jesus must suffer and die, and be raised on the third day. Maybe *only* Jesus can truly grasp that the Messiah must go beyond conquering and comforting.

To be the Messiah, Jesus has to liberate – to wake up – his followers as children of God. Conquering and comforting will only give people more of what they already have. To liberate them, Jesus has to show them that what they already have isn't life-affirming to begin with.

Jesus is not immune to misguided human schemes that promise safety, certainty and pain avoidance. Jesus knows this temptation for himself. No wonder his response to Peter's fear is so much like his response to the challenger who tempted him in the desert.

Peter is not wrong. What is coming for Jesus should not happen to him or to anyone. Jesus aims to expose the injustice of the cross for what it is. By bearing it.

And so, Jesus turns to speak to Peter. But he does not insist that Peter leave as he did with the challenger in the desert. Instead, Jesus tucked Peter into the appropriate place – our place, the place of a follower – *behind* Jesus.

Only as followers, can we watch and learn the lesson of the cross. Jesus must suffer and die, but not because God wants it – not because God wants Jesus to suffer and die – but because Jesus is obedient to God.

There are preachers and theologians who say that God needed Jesus to pay a ransom for us or that only a supreme sacrifice could appease God in the face of our supreme sin.

I simply disagree with them. And I am not alone in rejecting portrayals of God as some sort of ultimate child abuser. I can't square the God of all encompassing love with theologies of God requiring death and humiliation for *anyone*.

The stumbling block of the cross is this: that by staying true to God even through the injustice of his death, Jesus Christ, the self-giving Son of God, provides an indelible image of God who prefers forgiveness and mercy over retribution and violence.

What God wants is to love and be loved. What God wants from Jesus is to stay true to the love of God regardless of the cost.

Jesus had to suffer and die not because God wanted him to be humiliated, tortured and murdered. Jesus had to suffer and die because that was the cost of staying true to the love of God through the gauntlet of human fears, limited human perspectives and fear-based human decisions that led to his murder.

Jesus is aware of the deceptive seductiveness of keeping life exactly as it is, the empty promises of certainty and the hollow but comforting assurances that we can somehow avoid suffering. And none of these inclinations are completely wrong.

Maintaining life is usually better than destroying it. Establishing an open confidence in what we know allows us to function and keep learning. And there are certainly experiences of suffering that are *only* destructive: spousal or child abuse or neglect, racist or homophobic violence – these are forms of destructive suffering that we can work together to stop.

But we can enslave ourselves to self-centered and ultimately futile assurances of status quo, absolute clarity or safety.

Waking up to God's truth allows us to see that, beyond conquering and comforting, Jesus's death and resurrection liberates us; frees us from our addictions to human promises and projects that are not life-giving or life-affirming. Jesus chose to give himself for us as an act of love, not as an arbitrary payment to a cruel and abusive God.

Jesus choose obedience to love with all the pain and the risk that love entails, regardless of the cost. Human experiences of love, even when they break our hearts, resonate with God's love for us. If you have ever fallen deeply in love, if you have loved family or friends, then you know or you will know the grief that comes with giving your heart to another.

To truly love is to say "yes" to inevitable loss *and* to recognize that love is worth the cost.

Giving ourselves to love is the cost of liberation. We are free to set aside our ego defenses for the sake of love. We are free to get over ourselves and carry our crosses of living in right relationship with God and each other in an unrighteous world.

God needs none of us to carry the cross of Christ. Jesus did that once, for all time, for all people. Some of us do face physical death as a

consequence of saying “yes” to God’s love. But most of us are learning to follow Christ’s presence and pattern in ways that simply challenge us.

We walk behind Christ by forgiving each other instead of seeking retribution. Love is worth that cost. We walk behind Christ by being generous with the resources God has given us instead of clinging to whatever we can.

We walk behind Christ by meeting rage and hate with loving boundaries, even when that puts our personal safety at risk. Love is worth the cost. We walk behind Christ by seeking mutual respect, especially when we disagree, instead of engaging in violence that seeks to silence other voices.

If we have confined ourselves inside perspectives of fear and scarcity, these changes can feel like small deaths until God raises them to new life. And so, while we wait for God, we walk behind Christ by loosening our grip on our past, on our certainties, on our fears and old life patterns.

People intent on clinging to their history at all costs stop engaging in life.

Instead, we walk behind Christ, trusting God to guide us into new life. We follow Christ until the shackles of our fear, distrust and self-centeredness drop away. And that’s when we are finally free to get over ourselves and find the life in abundance that God desires for all people.

Following Christ, we are truly liberated to embrace life with all its harmony and all its discord. We become free to love the way that God loves – loving because it is worth the cost.

Loving *anyway*.

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