WPC
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Take Up Your Cross
Psalm 105:1-6; Matthew 16:21-28

Last week, we looked at the passage where Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do <u>you</u> say that I am?" and Peter steps forward and says: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16). The passage then concludes with a mysterious message: Jesus sternly orders the disciples not to let the secret out that he is the Messiah. Why?

According to Tom Long, "The reason is that there are two ways to distort and misunderstand Jesus: One is to get the word about him all wrong; the other is to get it half right. At this point, the disciples have it right, but only half right. They know that Jesus is truly the Messiah, but they do not yet understand the companion truth: that as the Messiah, Jesus must suffer and die. If they were to become evangelists at this moment, they would proclaim a half truth – a cost-free gospel, Jesus without the cross. The disciples do not yet understand this. Until the story is complete, then, they are to remain silent; later they will be commanded to tell the whole truth to

the whole world (Matt. 28:19-20), but on this side of the cross, they have only half a truth."[1]

But now Peter and the other disciples are told this other half of the gospel truth: The Messiah will suffer and die on the cross. In today's text, Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem and toward his inevitable death. The cross looms over the rest of the story.

This passage from Matthew contains one of Jesus' hardest sayings. "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Frankly, it's one of those passages most of us could live without. We prefer passages like "God so loved the world" or "Come to me all you that are weary and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." "Those are comfortable passages, safe passages, passages that provide some cushion in a sharp and often frightening world" (Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven, 52).

But "deny yourself and take up your cross"? Who needs this, when it's hard enough just to get up in the morning and face the challenges of an ordinary day? People down through the ages have tried to come up with some creative ways to get around this saying. Some people believe that

[1] Long, 187

Jesus was talking only to his 12 disciples, for instance, and not to the whole church. Others insist that Jesus is the only one called to die on a cross, and that because he did the rest of us don't have to. (That one's a real stretch, given what the verse actually says.)

Then again, on what we might call the other end of the spectrum, "we all know people who have taken this hard saying and made it their life's motto. They put themselves down all the time and shun comfort as if it were poisonous to their souls" (Taylor, 53). Some of you have heard me tell the story of a missionary who many years ago was coming home for furlough. This missionary was known for being a very dedicated and very <u>serious</u> servant of God. The person who picked him up decided to stop at a restaurant and treat him to a new dish that the missionary had never before tried: ice cream. The missionary took one bite of ice cream and a smile filled his face. But after taking two more bites, he suddenly put down his spoon and refused to eat any more. When asked what was the matter, he replied, "Anything that tastes this good must be of the devil!"

People like this "deny themselves the smallest pleasures of life and constantly treat themselves like prisoners on death row, as if simple human happiness were some kind of disloyalty to God. Surely that can't be what

this passage is about: surely Jesus doesn't mean that the only way we can follow him is to take every shortcut to our own graves, but if he doesn't mean that what does he mean? Do we really have to die for love of him? Isn't there some way to love him and live?" (Taylor, 53)

The whole conversation came about because Peter was asking the same questions. When Jesus says he must suffer and die, Peter reacts.

Unable to stand the thought that Jesus would suffer and be killed, Peter scolds Jesus for having such ideas: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Peter said this to Jesus privately, taking him aside to talk some sense into his head. Jesus, however, saw it not as an attempt to "take him aside," but as an effort to "pull him off course" with human folly, or worse, as yet another temptation from Satan. (Tom Long, Matthew, 190)

Tom Long points out that "Peter, who only moments before was the solid rock upon which the church would be built, suddenly crumbles into a lesser kind of stone – a stumbling block" (Tom Long, Matthew, 190). Six verses after Jesus says, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," Jesus stubs his toe on that same rock. (Taylor)

So Jesus rebukes Peter – "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!" (Of course, Jesus here is using hyperbole in describing Peter, to strongly drive home his point). Satan, who from the beginning of time has tempted humanity with alternatives to the will of God – what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "easier alternatives, safer alternatives, flashier alternatives – all of them temptations for us to do and be something other than what God has called us to do and be" (Taylor, 54). In this case, Jesus is tempted to play things safe, to skip going to Jerusalem, to avoid the cross and find another way to save the world.

We must assume that it's a real temptation for Jesus, or else why would he silence Peter so harshly?

Taylor raises an important question at this point that troubles her about this passage: "Does Jesus mean that all of us who pray to be delivered from suffering and death are on the side of humans, and that the side of God is reserved only for those who are ready and willing to die? Does he mean that all of us who want to be on God's side had better go out and get ourselves killed as soon as possible? That troubles me! I want to believe that God gives me my life, not that God is eager to take it away. I want to

believe that God wills my survival, not that God is looking forward to my funeral. Doesn't God want me to be happy? Doesn't God care about my comfort and safety?" (Taylor, 55)

The resounding answer to those last two questions is, shockingly, "No!" That is, God is not primarily concerned with my comfort and safety. It's not that God doesn't care at all about those things, but God's number one goal is not making sure I'm happy. What God most cares about is the quality and depth of my life. The paradox is that when we seek abundant life in God more than our own comfort or happiness, we'll be most satisfied with our lives.

The secret of Jesus' hard words to us in this passage is that "our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy, cautious way of living that is not really living at all." (Taylor, 55) It's like riding a bike – you'll never be able to ride a bike if you go so cautiously that you never build up any speed. It's counterintuitive, especially when you're first learning, but you need to go fast in order to have control.

The deep secret of Jesus' hard saying is that the way to have abundant life is not to horde it but to give it away. Jesus has so much life that the more of himself he gave, the more he had.

Peter missed that part of what Jesus said. Did you catch it? "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." *And on the third day be raised.* How many of us, like Peter, missed that part?

We tend to get stuck on the parts where Jesus talks about suffering and death. We get to that point, and we join with Peter in saying, 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you,' before we finish the sentence and get to the offer of eternal life we have through Jesus.

What prevents us from finishing the sentence, from getting to Jesus' words of abundant life? Our fear of suffering and death is what prevents us. What's ironic is that if we let our fear keep us from sticking our necks out, from taking risks, we'll miss out on that abundant life. If we're too cautious, we'll never learn how to ride our bikes. We can't save our own lives, no matter how hard we try – remember Jesus' words: 'For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'

Taylor says, “Living the life of faith is not about being a daredevil. But it is about living a life that matters – a life for Christ’s sake – and about refusing to put our own comfort and safety ahead of living a life like that, a life that pours itself out for others as a matter of course, a life that spends itself without counting the cost, knowing that there is always more life where our own life comes from, and that even when our own lives run out God will have more life in store for us, because our God is a God who never runs out of life.” (Taylor, 55-56)

“If any would come after me,” Jesus says, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Those will never be easy words to hear, nor were they meant to be. Most of us are not killed for obeying God, but we shouldn’t forget that some are. But ultimately, those words are not an invitation to follow Jesus into death but an invitation to follow him into abundant life. Nobody said life would be a bed of roses, but ultimately we don’t have to get tripped up on suffering and death, because we know that on the third day, he was raised. The victory is ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.