

Sermon for Pentecost XIII Year A 2020
Pick It Up or Leave It

There are circumstances in life that present themselves within the category of *not what I bargained for*.

A close cousin to this category is one entitled *whose idea was this?*

Certainly, in any relationship—

marriage, parenting, friendship, work, church . . .

in the midst of all the good things these relationships bring to us—

we hit a kind of speed bump,

a crisis when we find ourselves thinking—*I didn't sign up for this!*

Navigating love and life is tricky business.

And that's putting it mildly.

The same could be said for the gospel reading for this morning.

Part of me doesn't feel up to hearing about suffering and loss,

denying ourselves and taking up our crosses,

about losing our lives in order to save them.

During these days that feel apocalyptic already,

I wish we could all focus on a more soothing scripture—like:

Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden

He leads me beside still waters

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you . . .

But no.

This is exactly the pivot you and I can't make in response to the words of Jesus to us this morning.

It's the pivot Peter made and regretted.

Somehow . . . though with every fiber of our being we may be saying

some version of: *this is not what I bargained for,*

whose idea is this anyway?

and I didn't sign up for this!

we find ourselves during painful even frightening days hearing

one of Jesus' hard lessons.

If you remember from last week's gospel story,

Jesus has just praised and blessed Peter
for confessing him as the Messiah.

Now Jesus begins to show his disciples that the Messiah must undergo
great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes,
be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Standing on this side of resurrection history,
we can't easily imagine the effect these words
must have had on those first disciples.

After all, we're used to worshiping in front of a crucifix—

We cross ourselves

or wear tiny replicas of Jesus crucifixion around our necks.

But what would happen, I wonder, if we shook ourselves out of our
familiarity for a few minutes, and heard Jesus' words as his first
disciples heard them two thousand years ago?

The disciples' great hope, cultivated over the three years they followed
Jesus, was that he would lead them in a military revolution and
overthrow their Roman oppressors.

They had seen his miracles,

witnessed firsthand his charismatic ability to draw adoring crowds.

They had heard him proclaim the arrival of a new kingdom.

He was their longed-for future.

Their cherished dream.

Their chance at liberation.

So, what could be more disorienting, more ludicrous,
than the news that their would-be champion
was determined to walk straight into a death trap?

To give himself over not only to severe physical pain,
but to humiliation and disgrace?

To surrender without a fight to a common criminal's execution?

We know the rest of the story.

Peter, clueless but zealous, scolds Jesus for this defeatist and ignominious prophecy.

But Jesus, in what might be the sharpest and most surprising rebuke in all of scripture, puts Peter in his place—

Get behind me Satan!

For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

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.

If you are like me, you can relate very well

to Peter's unease about this hard, hard teaching.

Even now, centuries removed from the context in which Jesus lived and taught, it's not easy or palatable to swallow these words.

What is Jesus saying to his followers?

What is he saying to us?

That he wants us to pursue suffering and death?

That a holy life is not about living but about dying?

(If we are truly taking in the implications of his words, aren't we saying to ourselves—

this is not what I bargained for

this is not what I signed up for

really, Jesus, this is your idea of discipleship?)

Perhaps when we hear this passage,

we are tempted to minimize what it asks of us.

We say, sure . . . I'll deny myself a few pleasures for a few months, or weeks, or days . . . hours?

I'll pray more, read my bible more, give or volunteer my time more

I'll attend online church every Sunday until the pandemic ends,

even though I'm sick of Zoom and computer screens

Well, those are all good and worthy things.
But not, I think what Jesus meant when he invited the crowds to lose their lives for the sake of the gospel.
Not what he rebuked in the strongest possible terms when Peter tried to avoid Jesus' cross with a cozy shortcut.

But then, there is the other temptation which is to maximize in the opposite direction.

To become, as the expression goes,

“so heavenly minded we are no earthly good.”

This is the kind of self-denial that strips life of all pleasure, all delight, all celebration, and all joy.

The single-mindedness that reduces the world to a grim mission field, a landscape to conquer with an earnest but ultimately loveless zeal.

It is the dangerous kind of self-denial that sees ideology before it sees humanity.

The kind of “sacrifice” that encourages people to stay in abusive relationships, and perpetuate their own victimhood.

The kind of devotion that mistakes austerity for faithfulness.

I don't believe that this is what Jesus meant, either.

After all, Jesus did not live an austere life on earth—

I don't see austerity in Jesus' true enjoyment of children whom he took in his arms and blessed,

or the Jesus who turned water into wine,

or the Jesus who advocated for the widow,

the orphan, the prisoner, and the outcast . . .

or the Jesus who dined with all sorts of people.

So, what then?

What does it mean to deny myself?

Living, as we do, in a culture that doesn't torture and kill Christians for their faith, how should we deny ourselves so that the gospel might thrive, here and now?

How shall we save our life by losing it for the sake of Jesus in 21st century America?

Of course, I'm asking these questions in the context of a global pandemic that shows no signs of letting up.
I'm asking these questions in the context of gross economic inequality, in a surge of white supremacy and racial injustice, rising violence and misuse of authority.
These questions are being raised in the midst of out-of-control fires due to rising temperatures and droughts, and the aftermath of yet another category 4 hurricane.

Where do we locate ourselves in the midst these crosses?
What am I, what are you, willing to lose in these times?
What do I, what do you, stand to gain?

The uncomfortable truth is that we too often live with crippling fear of suffering and death that wastes a huge amount of our mental, spiritual and physical energy each day trying to stave off both. To be fair, our modern culture encourages us to do this.
What would Jesus say, I wonder, to the multi-million-dollar industries that invite us to deny our mortality through cosmetics, fashion, leisure, sex, entertainment, real estate, sports cars, weight loss, and beauty?
What would Jesus say to a culture that glorifies violence but cheapens death?
What would he say to a global corporate economy that takes everything it can from the planet with no regard toward stewarding it with thoughtfulness toward the next generation?
What would Jesus say to the notion of personal liberty that encourages me to revel in my "rights" instead of shouldering my civic responsibilities?
What would he say to our frightened hearts, that prioritizes self-protection over the common good?

I wonder if Jesus is calling us today
to stop clutching at this life so desperately and greedily.
To step out of the vicious cycles of denial, acquisition,
terror, and violence that seek to cheat death,
but, in fact, rob us of the abundant life Jesus came to give us?

What if we lay down our fears so that others might live?
What if we set aside our own interests—and, dare I say it, our own
liberties—so that we can prioritize what Jesus called the “great
commandments”— to love God and love others as he first loved us?

More and more,
I believe that when Jesus calls us to take up “our cross”—
he is asking us to stand in the center of the world’s pain.
Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering
and then sidle away, but to dwell there.
To identify ourselves with those who are aching,
weeping, screaming, and dying.
To insist that our comfort isn’t worth gaining
unless the least and the lost can share in it, too.

So, one more what if . . .

What if taking up the cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every
suffering soul and body that surrounds us,
pouring our energies and our lives and our resources
into alleviating their pain—not heading the cost.

It would mean accepting—
over and against all the lies and denials of our culture—
that we will die, we are mortal and fragile.

It means following up that courageous acceptance with the most
important question I can ask:

Given my inevitable death,

how shall I spend this brief, singular, precious God-breathed life?

Shall I hoard it in fear, or give it away in hope?
Shall I protect myself with numbness and apathy, or anger?
Or experience the abundant life Jesus offers
to those who ache, weep, and bleed alongside the world's suffering?

Shall I just exclaim, *this isn't what I bargained for,*
this isn't what I signed up for
and like Peter, push suffering away at all costs—
and in so doing, push Jesus away, too?
Or will you and I accompany the one we call Savior
down the only road that actually leads to eternal life?

For all of us who have grown up in the Church,
the actual scandal and strangeness of Jesus' death
has perhaps long faded away.
But here's the bottom line . . .
Jesus died.
And not only that,
Jesus died the humiliating death of the unjustly accused.
The death of a public execution.

Jesus took the violence, the contempt, the apathy,
and the arrogance of this world, and absorbed them all into his body.
He chose to be the victim, the scapegoat, the sacrifice.
He refused to waver in his message of universal love, grace, and
liberation, knowing full well that the message would cost him his life.
He declared solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned,
abused, oppressed, accused, imprisoned, beaten, mocked and murdered.
He burst open like a seed
so that new life would grow and replenish the earth.
He took an instrument of torture and turned it into a bridge of hospitality
and communion for all people, everywhere.
He loved, and loved, and loved . . . never returning evil for evil,
all the way to the end.

Jesus rebukes Peter so harshly in this week's gospel precisely because the temptation Peter holds out is so alluring, so deceptive, and so insidious:
As if Peter had said to Jesus:
You don't have to do the hard thing.
You don't have to take this faith business so seriously.
You don't have to give up your own rights, privileges, and comforts.
You don't have to die.

No, we don't.
There is some truth to these assertions.
Because, as we all know,
there is a spectator version of Christianity
and there are many who have decided to live it.

But, as Jesus would say "if we have ears to hear,"
let's not pretend for one moment
that is the version of Christian discipleship that Jesus calls us to.
Let's not fool ourselves into assuming
that faith-on-the-sidelines
will keep us safe from suffering and death
and grant us only joy and blessing.
It will not.
Those who save their lives will lose them.
Those who lose their lives will save them.
That's the truth Jesus vindicated when he died
and rose from death and the grave.
We can take it or leave it.
We can pick up our cross or not.

