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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Second Sunday in Lent

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:22-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

In the gospel today, Peter heard Jesus say what I believe was the hardest thing he had ever heard. No, it wasn't that Jesus would undergo great suffering, be killed and three days rise again. No, it wasn't even that Jesus referred to Peter as Satan when Peter rebuked him. But when Peter heard that to follow Jesus, he would have to deny himself, take up his cross, and lose his life in order to save it, Peter was upended. I mean, really, we all are, by hearing that to follow Jesus, to be his disciple, it is hard, it is selfless, and it means loss.

Like Dave in the children's message, maybe most of us don't understand what it really means to take up our cross to follow Jesus. Now, I have to be up front with you today that when I sat down to write this sermon, I had about 27 disparate thoughts about what these things mean, and I just couldn't make them all come together.

When I was explaining this to my spouse Mike late at night while I was sitting next to our fireplace trying to make all these disparate thoughts gel into a cohesive sermon, he said, "Maybe you should just preach 'Fireside musings from a Weary Pastor'." So, with a shout out to Mike for the idea, here are my disparate, fireside, late-night musings about denying ourselves, taking up the cross, and losing our lives in order to follow Jesus.

Musing number 1:

Sometimes the words of our hymns and songs of praise make the Christian life seem so simple, so blissful, even some of the ones we'll sing today: the hope of endless glory fills my heart with joy and love; there is room for fresh creations in that upper home of bliss; in the cross of Christ I glory.

But following Jesus, truly following him, is not about bliss. It means picking up the cross that he picked up to face injustice, oppression, and evil. It means doing the hard work of bringing God's vision of equity and justice and grace to a world that doesn't want to hear it or accept it. It means finding the courage God planted within us to lead others toward God's vision of a different reality. And it does mean denying ourselves: denying our comfort, denying our desire to remain apathetic, denying the passive, easy life.

In Thursday's God Pause devotion, David Scherer wrote, "Ain't I a woman?" These famous words, spoken by Sojourner Truth to the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, were packed with so much courage and truth. Where did this courage come from? It was eight years earlier, in 1843, when she heard the call of God on her life and exclaimed to her friends, "The Spirit calls me, and I must go." She packed up her possessions in a pillowcase and hit the road, preaching about the abolition of slavery. She was willing to lose her life for the sake of God's liberation because she knew that none would be free until and unless all were free.

No one wants to be a Christian because they want their lives to be harder. But as Christians, we are faithful to Jesus, and therefore we do the hard work that Jesus did.

Musing number 2:

I recently heard a quote from writer and activist Parker Palmer that the spiritual journey is an inward and downward journey into our inner life, and the only way out is in and through. Well, Lent is a downward journey into the reality of discipleship, and the only way out to Easter is to go in and through the disciplines of Lent: prayer, fasting, repentance, and giving. Losing our lives to follow Jesus means that the only way to truly experience discipleship is to go in and through those daily disciplines. We lose our life – we lose the things we would do if we didn't follow Jesus – in order to find our lives as Jesus' disciples. The only way out of Lent, and the only way toward to discipleship, is to go in and through it.

Musing number 3:

Like Jan was trying to explain to Dave in the children's message, taking up our cross means taking up the same things Christ did. We're called to carry what the cross **symbolizes** – forgiveness, life, mercy, grace and love – into a world that is so short of it. We are called away from worrying only about ourselves to focusing on the greater good. It's going from our heart being curved in on itself, as Martin Luther described sin, to our hearts being burst open to where Jesus' love and life is needed.

I think this is why Jesus rebuked Peter and said "get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things" because when Peter rebuked Jesus he was thinking only about himself: no Jesus, you can't be rejected and killed, because that means you'll be leaving me." Peter was myopic, like many of us are at times.

But Christianity is not about getting my needs met by Jesus. It's about trusting that in the process of carrying what the cross symbolizes into a needy world, Jesus will meet us there.

And lastly, Musing number 4:

Last week I watched the PBS special on the Black Church called "This is my story this is my song" – if you haven't seen the two episodes, they are excellent and I highly encourage you to watch them on pbs.org. Those shows helped me to realize more than I ever had that slaves whose freedom had been stolen from them found their lives by losing them for the sake of the gospel.

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes in the first episode, "As the machinery of slavery churned on with no end in sight, enslaved black people found their first glimpse of heaven on earth in the praise house" where they could experience worship, fellowship, and community that they would never be allowed to experience in the fields.

Enslaved black people found themselves in Jesus and in the church. I wonder if those of us who have always been free would be able to say the same.

I hope this week you continue to muse, whether you're sitting at a fireplace or not, about what it means to deny yourself, to take up your cross, and to lose your life in order to find it and save it. Because in doing so, you will realize even more what it means to follow Jesus, and you will become a more faithful follower of Jesus. Amen.