

I think I just read to you one of the most disorienting passages in the New Testament. It’s disorienting for at least three reasons: First, Jesus rebukes Peter, so-called *first bishop* of Rome with the words, “Get behind me, Satan!” Secondly, Jesus tells us that if we’re going to follow him, it’s going to involve picking up a cross and losing ourselves. And thirdly, there is the warning that if we’re ashamed of Jesus he’ll be ashamed of us. The fact that we’re not running for our lives at this point is because the church has domesticated this text over the centuries beyond all recognition...

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian, who suggested that most *religion* is a way of approaching God in order to relieve problems like fear, ignorance, or despair. He used the term *deus ex machina* to describe the god that most people want, a kind of “vending machine” god to whom you appeal during a hard time. The *deus ex machina* is always there to meet your needs and fulfill your wishes. You put in a prayer and out comes comfort and hope to carry you through... Bonhoeffer suggested a more authentic Christian discipleship would evolve into a “*religionless* Christianity.” In other words, a follower of Jesus will recognize that the Living God’s love is *for us*, but that the Living God’s love also requires something *from us*. Bonhoeffer asks, “In what way are we ‘religionless-secular’ Christians, in what way are we the *ἐκκλησία*, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, but rather as belonging wholly to [and for?] the world?”¹

In fact, Jesus is anything but the vending machine god who delivers spiritual treats to assuage our cravings... Rather, Jesus stuns all of his listeners with the angry assertion that this idea about god is *the very enemy of God*. Satan is just the Hebrew word for “adversary.” Jesus calls Peter *Satan* because Peter’s views are opposed to God’s ways.

Jesus explains “quite openly” that the *real* Messiah must suffer, die, and rise again. He calls not only his disciples but the whole crowd of people around them to listen up and tells them: "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 gospel, will save it" (8:34-35).

The lesson of the cross is a lesson that we, like Peter, do not want to learn. Three times in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus predicts his suffering and death (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) and every time, the disciples demonstrate that they either do not understand, or perhaps more to the point, understand all too well and don’t like what Jesus tells them. Three times, Mark repeats this prediction. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, so if he repeats something 3 times, it must be something not only of importance but also something so odd, so against our grain, it bears repeating.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Collier Books, 1972), 280-281.

One of the strongest instincts we have is self-preservation. We all have what is called the *reptilian brainstem* and we are hard-wired for self-preservation. It's called our *fight or flight instinct*. When faced with a threat, our amygdala and hypothalamus will send the message to our autonomic nervous system and in milliseconds we determine whether we best fight or run away in order to protect ourselves. Perhaps that's why Jesus' teaching here is so offensive to Peter and to us. It would have made better sense if Jesus said, "*I am walking the way of self-denial to the cross.*" Then we could note another way in which Jesus was very different from us. But unfortunately, Jesus says, "If you want to follow me, deny *yourself*, and take up *your cross* and follow."

I confess I'm not so sure what this means anymore. Deny yourself is so absolute. There's not a lot of room for acknowledging this teaching and then simply moving on in life as you know it. You can't hear this command by Jesus and remain unchanged. What denying *yourself* looks like for you I don't know, but clearly for Jesus it began with fasting and praying. It involves learning to say no to that "me, me, me" voice and learn to say yes to God's still small voice... And that is not easy and probably will involve pain. If that's not obvious, Jesus' command *pick up your cross* should remove all doubt. Picking up your cross only led to one place in the first century Roman world: Death. And a painful death, at that.

It's hard to let go of life as we know it. We invest so much in seeing ourselves and getting others to see us in a certain way.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek tells the parable about a young man who met with a psychologist once a week for years because he was convinced that he was a seed. Eventually, after many years, he became convinced that he was really a human being. Thanking the therapist, he returned home happy. However, two weeks later the therapist hears a loud banging on his door. When he opens it, he sees the man back again, sweating and breathing heavily. "You have to help me," says the man, "my next-door neighbors recently bought chickens, and I am terrified that they are going to eat me!"

"But surely you know that you are a human being and not a seed," replies the therapist... "I know that," he says, "*but do the chickens know?*"²

Even when we experience a profound shift in our identity, we live in a constructed world where if we change, everything else – how we relate, how we spend our time and resources - has to change also in order for the transformation to be complete. Easier said than done... We are under enormous pressure to continue on with the *status quo*.

It was the same for Jesus. Remember he was rejected and killed by the religious leaders because he so radically redefined the nature of the Messiah and what the good news of the kingdom of God really is. The death of Jesus will be "the result of careful deliberations from respected religious leaders who will justify their actions by the highest standards of law and morality, even believing they are rendering service to God."³ We are

² Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe Is Human; To Doubt Divine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011), 44-45.

³ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 254.

confronted here with the contrast of Jesus' way and the failure of the best of human religious systems...

Refer back to Bonhoeffer's *religionless Christianity*... Perhaps part of our Lenten Journey requires first identifying religious assumptions that are the enemy of Jesus! I think Bonhoeffer would agree that Jesus is calling us to deny putting our hope and allegiance in even the best systems or institutions of human ambition. There's no earthly financial, political, medical, or spiritual bail-out that will save us in the end. Our only real hope is that God may give us the grace to repent and make real changes in whatever life we have left, even learning to lay down our lives for others, rejecting the temptation of a *vending machine god*. The way to God's promised new life is counter-intuitive, and the kingdom of God comes because we are turning the values and power-systems of this world upside down...

What strikes me as so fascinating in all of this is the *paradoxical nature of the gospel*. In the last ten years there have been some incredible breakthroughs in computing because of quantum physics. Conventional computers perform their calculations using 1's and 0's, with each binary digit called a 'bit' of information. *This or that*. But in quantum mechanics, multiple possibilities exist at once, and a quantum bit – *qubit*, for short – is not ... a '1' or a '0' but a combination of both.

Just a half hour from here in Yorktown Heights, NY, IBM has powerful quantum computers doing work that is exponentially faster than conventional computers. By stringing together qubits, a quantum computer performs a multitude of calculations simultaneously. In other words, *ambiguity and paradox is at the most foundational levels of our reality*, and the way to resolving some of the most complex problems in science and industry faster, including the recent vaccines that were developed so quickly. Experts say quantum computers can produce answers in days or even seconds, whereas the fastest classical bit computers would take longer than *13.7 billion years!*⁴

As strange as it may be, perhaps we must consider again the paradox of denying ourselves, of picking up our cross and following Jesus? Perhaps Jesus calls us to lose our lives for his sake and the gospel because our own ways in the end are hopelessly unsustainable. Jesus calls us to let go of the "deus ex machina" gods of this world and embrace the "Thy will be done" kingdom of God. And here's the really strange part: You may have to drop some *burdens* you are carrying now because it is not *your* cross to bear. You may have to let go of some suffering because ironically it has nothing to do with following Jesus or glorifying God in your life and the larger community! There will be suffering and death, to be sure, but Jesus' way leads to new life. That's the promise. Paradoxically, picking up your cross may mean letting go of certain ways of thinking, even religious dogma, in order to experience God's new life for you and the world...

⁴ Kenneth Chang, "I.B.M. Researchers Inch Toward Quantum Computer" (*New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2012), B2. For IBM's latest quantum computing, see <https://www.ibm.com/quantum-computing/>

Which brings us to the strange conclusion of this text... that somehow if we are ashamed of Jesus, he will be ashamed of us... Really? That's what the text says. But we know that Peter and the rest of the disciples were ashamed of Jesus and denied even knowing him. But Jesus didn't abandon them... He forgave and patiently helped them to understand God's power of love and forgiveness are stronger than death itself...

Perhaps our only hope is to get behind Jesus? For in the end, we'll all find ourselves being an enemy of God, being ashamed of and being *Satan* to the ways of Jesus' self-giving love. We need to admit that Peter is not the only one who will misunderstand and misconstrue the ways of God. We probably will too! And so, it's hard, but I hear Jesus rebuking *us* in this text. Get behind me, Satan... What might that mean for you and me today? What does it mean to "get behind" Jesus?

Perhaps getting behind Jesus means first allowing him to shield us from ourselves? Let go of our knee-jerk religious guilt, and rest in Jesus even with our questions, our fears, and doubts about what it means to follow him. Let Jesus patiently teach us.

It may mean simply practicing what Jesus taught. For example, maybe being more hospitable to those who are least like you, because God welcomes you... Or letting go of work earlier to be with your family, because performance has nothing to do with your beloved status. It may mean learning to give more generously because Jesus gave you everything. Perhaps it means forgiving and entering into a process of reconciliation with a neighbor, or learning more about systemic racism because Jesus has forgiven you and called you to the ministry of reconciliation? Perhaps it means speaking more openly about issues of justice and mercy for the LGBTQ community, because Jesus endured the ridicule and shame of the cross to take upon himself the justice and mercy of God for us? It can be as simple as maintaining silence when the gossip starts to fly or turning the other cheek to dialogue with an enemy, because Jesus silently endured false claims and commanded us to love our enemies. Perhaps getting behind Jesus means rejecting the dehumanization of pornography or substance abuse, because you are the temple of the living God? Perhaps as we are coming out of this pandemic it means committing to engage again in community because you are a child of God and not meant to be alone?

I don't know exactly what picking up your cross and following Jesus looks like for you, but I suspect it means denying anything that keeps you from embracing your identity as beloved and entering more fully into the way of God's self-giving love. Getting behind Jesus will mean questioning our assumptions about power and success. It will mean practicing new ways of letting go of life as we know it and embracing the new Kingdom life God offers to us by grace through faith. And yes, following Jesus will mean picking up a new cross, a new and costly challenge for our life together as a congregation that leads to a more inclusive, fruitful, joyful resurrection life for us and all people. As impossible as it may seem, I pray we will say yes to the paradoxical path to new life.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.