

"Getting Behind Jesus"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Feb. 25, 2024

Please Read:
Genesis 17:1-7
Mark 8:31-38

I just read to you one of the most disturbing passages in the New Testament. It's disturbing 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 taking up a cross and losing ourselves. And thirdly, Jesus warns us that if we're ashamed of him, he'll be ashamed of us. The fact that you're not running for your lives at this point is because the church has domesticated this text beyond all recognition. Perhaps the healthiest response to Jesus' teaching today is fear.

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 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 in hard times. The *deus ex machina* God is 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 the Living God's love is always *for* us, but that the Living God's love also requires something *from* us. Bonhoeffer asks, "In what way are we the *εκκλησια*, those 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 assertion that a feel-good messiah is nothing more than an empty idol, that this idea about god is *the very enemy of God*. Satan is just the Hebrew word for "Enemy" and Jesus calls Peter *Satan* because Peter's ways 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

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

lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35).

One of the strongest instincts we have is self-preservation. Perhaps that's why Jesus' teaching here is so offensive to Peter and to us. We would prefer if Jesus said, "*I am walking the way of self-denial to the cross.*" Then we could note another way in which Jesus is very different from us. But unfortunately Jesus says, "If you want to follow me, deny *yourself, and take up your cross and follow.*"

I must confess that I'm not so sure what this means. Deny yourself is so absolute. In other places Jesus said he has come to bring us life; that he has come to make our joy complete. It's a paradox to be sure... Following the way of Jesus is not easy and probably will involve pain. If that's not obvious, Jesus' command *take up your cross* should remove all doubt. The 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've invested so much in seeing ourselves a certain way and getting others to see us in a certain way. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek tells the parable about a 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 said, "*but do the chickens know that?*"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 in order for the transformation to be complete.

Jesus was rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and killed not because he was fulfilling their expectations of the Messiah, but 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 would 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 them to render service to God."³ We are confronted here with the contrast of Jesus' way and the failure of the best of human religious systems.

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

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

Our town is reeling from the tragic death of Toby Woods. Kristina, his mother, wrote a letter to family and friends to let them know of Toby's untimely death: *He was full of joys and loves and deep passions - for classical music, cello, piano, travel, learning, hiking, cooking, Legos, puzzles, business and urban design. In the midst of these joys he also suffered at times from depression, and in a dark moment he succumbed to it.*

Toby's death is heartbreaking, absolutely crushing. He was a speaker at the New Canaan High School graduation last year. He was a brilliant young man with such a promising future, but he suffered from severe depression at times, and in the end, he was not able to find a way out. And so, we pray for Toby's family and try as best we can to surround them with our love and support. We know that words fall painfully short, and I lean pretty heavily on Paul's words, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words."

I think it's important to say that Jesus does *not* call us to pick up our cross to hurt us, but to give us new life. Any religion that calls for suffering for suffering's sake is bad religion. The suffering to which Jesus calls us is unto new life, and a deeper fuller joy in life. As strange as it may be, perhaps we must consider again the paradox of denying ourselves... Perhaps Jesus calls us to lose the lives we are currently living *for his sake and the gospel* because our 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.

The juxtaposition of reflecting on the meaning of taking up our cross and the news of Russian dissident Alexi Navalny's death is important to note. Three years ago, in his last public speech at his trial, he shocked the audience by admitting that he had converted to Christian faith: "The fact is that I am a believer, which, in general, rather serves as an example of constant ridicule in the Anti-Corruption Foundation, because mostly people are atheists... But now I am a believer, and this helps me a lot in my work, because everything becomes much, much simpler. I think less, there are fewer dilemmas in my life—because there is a book in which, in general, it is more or less clearly written what needs to be done in each situation. It's not always easy, of course, to follow this book, but in general I try. And therefore, as I already said, it is easier for me, probably than many others, to get involved in politics. A person recently wrote to me: "*Navalny, what is everyone writing to you: 'Hold on, don't give up, be patient, grit your teeth? Why do you have to endure it?' I think you said in an interview that you believe in God. And it is said: 'Blessed are those who thirst and hunger for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.'* Well,

that's great for you, then! And I thought—wow, this person understands me so well!”

Navalny understood that the book (*the Bible*) unabashedly asserts that the way to new life often requires suffering. But again, it's not suffering for suffering's sake. It's suffering for love; it's suffering for what is just. It's suffering for what is good, and true and beautiful. Ironically, you may have to let go of some suffering because it has nothing to do with following Jesus or glorifying him in your life and the larger community! There will be suffering and death, to be sure, but it will be on the way to new life. That's the promise. Picking up your cross may mean letting go of certain ways of thinking, even religious doctrine, in order to experience God's love and healing new life for you and the world...

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 he 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 them. He patiently helped them understand that God's power of love and forgiveness are even stronger than death itself...

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

Perhaps getting behind Jesus means first allowing him to shield us from ourselves? I mean that we need to let go of our knee-jerk religious guilt or shame. We need to let go of judgment and self-condemnation. Rest in Jesus even with our questions, our fears and doubts, our frustrations and anger about the senseless tragedies of this life. Let Jesus patiently hold us and teach us the way forward.

Friends, I don't know what getting behind Jesus looks like in your life, but I do know this: It probably means denying an assumption of who God is and the requirements of the idolatries of empire religion. Taking up your cross will mean putting to death the idols of materialism, power, and security. It will mean repentance, thinking again, and pursuing a more loving agenda, a more expansive inclusive life. But you are to take up your cross because you are getting behind Jesus to walk with him on this Lenten journey... all the way to new life.

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