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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
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Text: Matthew 16: 21-28

Deny?

In this morning's Gospel Jesus says "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" Deny? Did he say "deny?" It seems Jesus had no crystal ball to look into the year 2017. Who in their right minds really want to deny themselves of anything in this day and age? This is one of those passages most of could do without. There is no comfort or joy in hearing "deny yourself and take up your cross." On one hand, there are so many opportunities to be had and doors that just might open at the right time. On the other hand, sometimes it is hard enough putting one foot in front of the other and facing challenges that come with each passing day. Deny ourselves?

In the movie *John Q*, a family is thrust into a life and death struggle. John, played by Denzel Washington, and his wife are hard working parents trying to make ends meet and give their only son, Mikey, a better life. Mikey is a very smart and energetic boy who suddenly collapses during a baseball game. He is diagnosed with a heart defect and the only thing that will save him is a heart transplant. His father quickly does everything he knows to do in order that his son might live. He goes to his employer only to find out that his insurance coverage is inadequate. He makes phone calls to his insurance company to no avail. He appeals to the board of the hospital and finds that the board is a stickler for playing by the rules. While the hospital is known for the many heart surgeries it performs each year, there is no offer to do Mikey's pro bono and to make matters worse, John is told that he must come up with \$75,000 before Mikey's name can even be placed on the transplant list. As John appeals to every system available it becomes clear that surgery for his son is not an option because the family is neither rich nor poor enough. So he seeks help from the media and his co-workers and church begin to take up special collections and John begins to sell what little possessions they have including his wedding ring. Still, it is not enough. "You are always talking about doing this and fixing that. Do something, John!" his wife bellows over the phone as Mikey grows critically weaker. And John does. In desperation John returns to the hospital and brandishes a gun taking the emergency room hostage. Among the hostages are hospital workers, patients seeking treatment, and Mikey's doctors. As each moment passes Mikey's condition becomes even more dire so John decides to make the ultimate sacrifice. And a father offers his life, his

own heart, so that his son will live. John was ready to die because he loved his son that much.

This story may seem far-fetched but there are times when real life does indeed mimic Hollywood. There are people who have denied themselves of many things including pleasures, possessions, stability, and their own well-being, taking risks for the sake of other human beings. We know this to be true as we remember parents clothing and feeding their children before they clothed and fed themselves. We know this to be true when we read the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Moses (whose story continues today), the first disciples, early saints and martyrs. We know this to be true when we examine the lives of people like Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; when we read accounts of fathers who died trying to save their son or daughter from drowning; when we hear of teachers donating a kidney to one of their students. Of a complete stranger pulling a young child out of a burning car. Of first responders and volunteers risking their own lives, and sometimes losing their lives, as they rescued people from rivers swollen by the effects of Hurricane Harvey.

And so we ask: Is this what God asks of us? Does Jesus really mean that the only way to follow him is to deny ourselves to the point of totally giving our very lives?

In last week's gospel we heard Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" It was Simon Peter who exclaimed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah!" Jesus rewarded him by calling him, Peter, the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

But in today's passage seems that Jesus could have taken back those keys because somehow Peter seemed to have missed the point of what being the Messiah is all about. He missed the point about what Jesus' journey to Jerusalem meant. The truth for Jesus was that he was going willingly up to Jerusalem to be rejected and suffer, to be humiliated and imprisoned, and to die. But that on the third day he would be raised from the dead. But Peter didn't seem to hear that part, the part about being raised again, as he sought to save Jesus from all that misery. After all, this was not how things were supposed to go. This was not what he expected for the "Son of the living God." "God forbid it!" Peter burst out. 'This could never happen to you! You're the Messiah! You are supposed to be saving us!'

Jesus' reproach was anything but subtle: "Get behind me, Satan!" he said to Peter. And in a split second Peter had gone from being a substantial "rock" to strewn pebbles. Jesus knew that to be the messiah wasn't about self-glory and living a cushy life and he didn't need the temptation to play it "safe". For Jesus had not come to sit upon a throne but to draw all people to himself. He had not come among humanity to conquer others but to conquer sin and death. He chose to give up his own life on the cross out of love for us so that all may have eternal life.

"If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

So what does Jesus' words mean for us today?

It means following the way of Jesus and that doesn't mean going a short distance but that we are in for the long haul. It means there will be times in choosing to follow him that we risk going without those perks and a cushy life and the need to play it safe. It means we will risk relationships, job opportunities, material comforts, and other things we think that we cannot do without.

To be a disciple means picking up our cross and giving ourselves away wholly and freely as Jesus did. To be a disciple means living lives that are given totally to God and to others. To be a disciple means allowing our love to be genuine as Paul says in his Letter to the Romans.

To follow Jesus means going beyond the limits of our own comforts as individuals and as a church. It means sharing our lives and our possessions instead of hoarding them unto ourselves. To follow Jesus means that when society tells us to be careful of those who may be different than ourselves that we see those individuals as children of God and we treat them as such. To follow Jesus means getting off our thrones, our high horses so to speak, and joining forces with our hearts, hands, feet, and voices with and for our sisters and brothers so that changes for the better will happen where change is sorely needed; so that fairness and equality can be found in every institution and in every system so that the day comes when no one goes without adequate healthcare or education; so that no one goes hungry or naked or thirsty or is left behind. To follow Jesus is to bring comfort and help at all times and not just in times of crisis. To follow Jesus means sharing the Good News. Silence is not the answer. Doing nothing solves nothing. To follow Jesus means hard work. It is hard work. But as I always say, we do not do the work alone just as we do not carry the cross alone.

“If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Will we? Amen.