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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021
Mark 8:31-38

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

Every week we come together to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. I was looking for good news this week as my siblings buried my Mom and Dad side by side at the VA cemetery in Los Angeles. I couldn't be there which broke my heart but I was there in spirit and they were with me as I prayed with this week's gospel. Well, this week our passage does not scream Good News at first glance. Peter certainly didn't hear it as good news.

I can imagine Peter saying: “What? You are the Messiah! You are the one who is supposed to lead us to victory, to defeat the oppressive powers of the Roman Empire. You are the one who heals and performs miracles. What do you mean you are going to suffer and die? Never mind that little bit about rising again, this just doesn't make sense. Jesus, you are talking nonsense!”

If we are honest, this call to deny ourselves and take up our cross has felt like nonsense to many of us at times, too. I think that's because, like Peter, we have misunderstood Jesus. We have heard “deny yourself” as deny your goodness, deny your gifts and talents. We have heard “take up your cross” as suffer silently. God is testing you. We have misunderstood Jesus' words to mean we should suffer through abusive situations, to stay put and ‘bear our cross’ because the suffering somehow honors God.

But I don't think that is what Jesus meant. I don't think that is good news. I think to deny yourself means to take yourself out of the center and broaden your vision to include the needs and the hurts and the dreams of others. It doesn't mean denying who you are, or adopting some kind of contrived humility. It means just the opposite – knowing who you are, God's beloved, and living out of that rather than out of our need for security and power and control.

Denying ourselves doesn't mean we are powerless or out of control. It means we know where our true power lies and that leaves us free to choose love over hatred, healing over hurting. Knowing who we are as followers of Jesus leaves us free to choose mercy over vengeance, compassion over indifference. Following Jesus means clinging to the hope that another world is possible.

That does leave us open to suffering. We will be disappointed. We will be misunderstood. We may be mocked for our belief in love in a world that believes in strength and power over others. When we choose to follow Jesus and to deny ourselves we are choosing to enter fully into life. When we do our best to follow the two great commandments of Jesus to love God and love our neighbor, we can no longer ignore the suffering around us. We take up our cross when we bear one another's burdens and when we stand up for the dignity of every human being.

No wonder Peter didn't want to hear this. It's a tall order. And it sounds so noble and so holy and saintly. How can we possibly live this way? We don't always and we can't do it perfectly. But we are called to *follow* Jesus, not to *be* Jesus.

I think my Dad understood that. He died on January 2nd at 100 years old, so he had plenty of time to strive for the life of discipleship. He was not perfect. No one would call him a saint but

he did have a preferred title: The Salad Man. Every Monday night for years, until he was 99 years old and the pandemic hit, my dad served the salad at a community meal for people in need. He had his own apron with his name embroidered on it and he wouldn't miss his Monday night service for anything. After he had to give up driving, my sister would make sure he got there each week.

My dad could have stayed within himself. He could have focused on his aging, aching body and stayed home on the couch. He could have given in to the grief of losing my mom eight years ago. But he denied himself and went out to serve every Monday night. He loved talking to the people in line as he served them their salad. He looked each person in the eye and treated them with utter dignity. Doing this work opened him up to the suffering of people who would otherwise go unnoticed in his neighborhood. My dad wasn't a saint. But he was a disciple. He clung to the hope that another world is possible.

The world that Jesus proclaims, the reign of God, isn't something we just wish for or wait for or dream of. Jesus says that to follow him will mean we have to pick up our cross. To love God and to love our neighbor will mean confronting the forces of evil along with Jesus. It will mean confronting the ways we oppress one another or denigrate one another or ignore one another's needs. New life is on the horizon but there will be pain on the way.

My dad taught me this at an early age. I was just a kid when the Watts Riots happened in Los Angeles, just shy of my 8th birthday. The riots went on for days and have been called the largest urban rebellion of the Civil Rights era. The uprising started with a traffic stop. But it wasn't about this one incident. It was about a cycle of poverty and hopelessness that the residents of South-Central LA saw no way out of.

After things calmed down, my dad put us in the car and drove us around the burned-out neighborhoods. He wanted us to see the destruction and the pain behind it. He wanted us to understand what happens when people live in extreme poverty generation after generation. He deplored the violence, but he wanted us to see that the riot was a result of the Watts community's longstanding experience of high unemployment rates, substandard housing, and inadequate schools. My Dad was not a man of great means. He was a blue-collar worker with a mess of kids to raise. He could have ignored the pain of the larger community. He could have stayed in his white suburb and not exposed us to the harsh realities of longstanding discrimination and poverty. But he chose to deny his privilege and he moved beyond himself. He took up his cross and faced the suffering of his brothers and sisters. He chose to believe that another world is possible.

There is great hope in Jesus' words this morning, even if Peter had a hard time hearing it. Even if we have a hard time hearing it. Jesus tells us he will die. In our baptism, we die with him. We are called to die to self-interest and self-protection at all cost. We are called to die to status and privilege. Jesus tells us, and I think this is the bit that deep down my dad understood, that it is only in facing our suffering and facing the suffering of our world, in dying to indifference that we will rise with him to new life.

This is the life that I believe my dad, the salad man, is living now and the life which we are all promised in Christ. It is breaking in now and it is our promise for eternity. Will we choose to believe that another world is possible?