

### Healthy Risks

In last week's Gospel lesson, Peter is the hero: Jesus declares him the rock on which the church will be built. In this week's lesson, in the very next interaction between the two, Jesus calls Peter Satan. Last week's lesson where Peter declares Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God is the pinnacle of Mathew's Gospel. This week's brings us back down to earth quick: "If any of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Last week's lesson also ended on a rather curious note. After Peter's notable confession, Jesus does a peculiar thing: he orders the disciples to tell no one. Now, you would think he would want them to share this news with everyone, right? So why tell them to keep quiet, could it be because the only thing worse than getting the story all wrong is only getting it only half right? At this point, the disciples don't know the whole story. Jesus is trying to let show them that in today's passage: "From that time on," Matthew tells us, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

This is shocking news for the disciples. One of the hardest things for them to come to grips with is Jesus not fulfilling *their* expectations of what the Messiah is supposed to be and do. From everything that they know the Messiah is supposed to bring God's victory and overcome all those opposed to God's way. So it makes little sense to them that Jesus would have to undergo suffering and be killed.

That is the problem with expectations that are too rigid. They can rob us of our capacity to see new and surprising possibilities. In today's lesson Peter can't see past his own expectations of the Messiah to the difficult, yet amazing news that Jesus is proclaiming to them. From Peter's perspective, nothing can be more self-defeating or foolish than to lay down one's life. But Jesus is trying to get him to see the new thing God is doing before them. As one commentator I read puts it, "It is the mystery of the Gospel that what appears to crush everything one hopes to be as a human being—bearing the cross of service and suffering—is in fact the only way for a human being to be fully alive."

You see, the truth of the matter is that this passage contains hard news not only because it breaks the disciples' expectations of the Messiah, but because it brushes against our own expectations of the way life should be. The good life, we think, is the one in which we prosper, we win, we are kept safe and free. It certainly does not include suffering, losing, risk and being bound, does it? According to Jesus' words in this passage it just might. Because you see, there is a bigger reality than our own personal happiness. There is more to the life than any one individual life. Jesus knows this and that is the hard lesson he is trying to impart. There is the happiness and well being of others to consider. We might say, "That's fine. But let them worry about that. I will worry about my own well being and others can worry about theirs." But that is not the way God intends for us to live according to Jesus.

There is a deep truth that we often forget and that is that the well being of one cannot be separated from the well being of another. If one is suffering, there is a very real sense in which we all suffer. Jesus knows this and so knows that as the Messiah he will have to dedicate himself to the well being of all. And in order to

accomplish that he will have to let go of his own life. He has to be willing to risk it all. He must be willing to suffer as long as others are suffering. What's more, he needs the disciples and us to understand that if we are going to continue to follow him in his way, we must be willing to do the same. This does not mean that we should seek out suffering in order to somehow prove our worthiness to God. But, it may mean that we should not avoid hardship when it may be used to benefit others. In other words, as disciples of Christ we live to a standard other than our own best interest. We seek to demonstrate as best we are able, with the opportunities presented to us, God's love for all people.

There is quote which I think communicates a bit of the goodness as well as harshness of what Jesus is getting at. George Bernard Shaw writes, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." Now that is not exactly how Jesus puts it of course, but I am not so sure that at the core, Shaw does not tap into Jesus' meaning when he says "If any of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

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This past week we celebrated the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech." Dr. King is a poignant example of a man who was willing to be used up for a mighty purpose, a man who understood deeply the truth of our interconnectedness as human beings. What we sometimes forget is that well before his assassination, Dr. King willingly suffered greatly for his cause, not only because of people who disagreed with his position, people who clung to their

racism that he suffered, but also because of people who simply did not want to rock the boat: local governments, churches and fellow clergy. In 1963 he wrote a letter from his a cell in Birmingham, Alabama, where he was being held as a disturber of the peace, to fellow clergy who were criticizing his role in the civil rights struggles. It includes these thoughts on the church: "There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are." He went on to say, "If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity...and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club."

The hard truth we encounter in Jesus' words in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death turns into a fear of life. It turns into a fear of disturbing the status quo. It turns into a fear of the new and unexpected. It robs us of the deep meaning and purpose God intends for us. The hard truth we find here is, as one preacher puts it, that "the greatest risk of all...is not to risk anything, is not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart

away, and in that process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.”

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Just so no one leaves confused today, I want to make sure something is clear: the title of the sermon is not health risks, but healthy risks. This is not a sermon about preserving our own well-being. Nor is it a sermon about taking needless, foolish risks. The risk Jesus talked about is the risk of spending our lives on a mighty purpose is preferred over preserving our lives for their own sakes.

That is the challenge of the Gospel. And the promise is that when we find the faith in us that allows us to take these healthy risks, when we are willing to risk to care deeply and profoundly about what God cares about, when we are willing to be used up for God’s mighty purpose, then we will know and experience life as it is meant to be, as God intends for it to be. What’s more, when we as individuals and we as a community are willing to take these healthy risks, we will become the church God intends us to be, that authentic Christian community that, in the words of Dr. King, is not merely a thermometer that records the ideas and principles of popular opinion; but a thermostat that transforms the mores of society, a force that does not merely reflect our culture back on itself, but one that shows forth the life God intends for all, even if only a glimpse now and again.

Let us pray: O God, show us clearly the heart of your kingdom. Strengthen us to teach and guide, by our example, all persons, that we may be bearers of your good news. Give us courage to march in the face of distress and contrary winds. Teach us how to dispense with unnecessary things. Give us faith to lose our lives in you, even if the way leads to the cross. Let us go forward without fear of death in order to fulfill our mission simply, surely, and steadily. In Jesus’ name. Amen.