

No Turning Back: A Sermon on Matthew 16:20-28
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My favorite movie of all time is the Wizard of Oz. As a kid, I used to watch it with my grandparents and marvel at the change from sepia to technicolor. And, as a kid with a lot of anxiety and fear, I always caught my breath at that moment when Dorothy and her companions see that sign “Haunted Woods. Witch’s castle, 1 mile” and of course, the accompanying sign “I’d turn back if I were you.” I remember thinking that the Cowardly Lion has a great point, as he nods his head in agreement with the posting and turns around. The Tin Man and Scarecrow stop him, of course, and, despite their fears and trepidations, the group continues onward.

“I’d turn back if I were you.” The sign serves as a chance for those unwise travelers to abandon their quest. And I think that’s a little bit of what Jesus is doing in this passage from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 16.

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day. 22 Then Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him: “God forbid, Lord! This won’t happen to you.” 23 But he turned to Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.” 24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. 25 All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. 26 Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? 27 For the Human One[a] is about to come with the majesty of his Father with his angels. And then he will repay each one for what that person has done. 28 I assure you that some standing here won’t die before they see the Human One[b] coming in his kingdom.”

Here we have it. Jesus is telling the disciples, who have already chosen to follow him, exactly what they are in for. He’s being explicit, sharing his expectation that he will suffer greatly at the hands of religious and political leaders. He’s letting the disciples know that the road ahead will not be easy, that this is their chance to turn back. “If anyone would follow me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross.” Jesus is basically saying, “are you really sure you want to do this?” This is Jesus saying “well, you can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Rev. Amy Butler calls this passage “the worst marketing slogan ever.”

And then we get Peter. Bless his heart, I love him dearly, Peter. But he doesn't get it. Again. Peter hears his teacher, his leader, prophesy all the suffering that would come to pass and he says, "Surely not!" Now, remember in the previous chapter, he was just applauded, lauded, told he would be rewarded. He was feeling pretty good about himself and the place he'd have in the kingdom...then Jesus goes off and starts talking about death and suffering at the hands of religious and political leaders, even death by crucifixion...this was NOT what Peter signed up for. Late Black liberation theologian James Cone writes in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*: "People reject the cross because it contradicts historical values and expectations—just as Peter challenged Jesus for saying, "The Son of Man must suffer": "Far be it from You; this shall not happen to You." But Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16:21; Mk 8:31, 33). "In the course of a few moments," Peter went from being "the mouthpiece of God" to a "tool" of Satan, because he could not connect vicarious suffering with God's revelation. Suffering and death were not supposed to happen to the Messiah. He was expected to triumph over evil and not be defeated by it. How could God's revelation be found connected with the "the worst of deaths," the "vilest death," "a criminal's death on the tree of shame"?[15] Like the lynching tree in America, the cross in the time of Jesus was the most "barbaric form of execution of the utmost cruelty," the absolute opposite of human value systems. It turned reason upside down."

No wonder Peter had a hard time reconciling what Jesus was talking about, Jesus was speaking in paradoxes about the type of violence that turns worlds upside down. Peter had just been in a celebratory mindset at the side of the Messiah, and maybe even was planning for victory in his head. And instead, Jesus reprimands him, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jin S. Kim writes in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary, "Peter is trying to rescue Jesus from suffering that characterizes the messy, earthly, political world. But Jesus is "the shepherd of the real, messy, flesh-and-blood church..."

Oh yes, the messy church. The flesh-and-blood church. The terribly, and beautifully, human church. Do we know this church? I think we do, and in this USAmerican culture that, like Peter, thinks in a narrative of winners and losers, we are called to live in Jesus' paradox of the first being last and the last being first. USAmerican culture is intoxicated with the narrative of winners and losers.

Ironically, for USAmericans today, this narrative displays itself in the display of a cross. I own cross necklaces, and have worn them faithfully for years. Crosses were on display at the Republican Convention this past week, juxtaposed next to contemporary heresies mixing patriotism and flag worship with Biblical teachings. But the cross, let's not forget, was an instrument of torture, like the electric chair or lethal injection, it was a tool utilized by the state to humiliate and shame the crucified, as well as an instrument of terror that told all who saw it to beware. Crosses were one of the ways the Roman Empire distinguished winners from losers. I wonder if the American empire uses them that way...

It should not be lost on us that Jesus uses this image of the cross just about halfway through this gospel, a full 11 chapters before Jesus is killed on the cross. At that point in his ministry, the disciples were probably pretty confused about why he was talking about an instrument of torture. And furthermore, why would he tell them that they must take up their crosses?

“I’d turn back, if I were you.”

Jesus’ second calling to the disciples, the point at which they could have turned back and gone home and abandoned this mission, comes with the call to deny oneself. Fully knowing that political dissidents often wound up on crosses, Jesus calls those who follow his Way to take up their own crosses. He calls them to go up to the city of Jerusalem, the center of power in their region, and confront the powers and principalities.

But self-denial is not what winners do. It’s what losers suffer. And confronting the powers of domination is not what winners do...winners ARE the powers of domination. One doesn’t have to think too hard in the USA today about where to find the rhetoric of winners and losers. And going into the city, the stronghold of political strength, to preach and teach healing and equity and grace? And giving of oneself every day for a cause bigger than themselves? Definitely not what winners do.

A word about self-denial. My late professor, Rev. Dr. Dale P. Andrews, wrote, “The notion of sacrificial suffering as redemptive comes with a history of abusive practices and a risky trajectory of ill-conceived self-abandonment.” It is important to know the difference between these types of self-denial and what Jesus is asking of his disciples, and of us, in the call to follow his Way. Jesus’ self-denial is not asceticism or self-hate or deprivation. It does not necessarily mean rejection of all pleasure or willingly living in poverty. One scholar writes, “Just giving up things will not make one Christian; it will only make one empty. What is difficult for our culture to understand, indeed what it cannot understand on its own terms, is an orientation to one’s life that is not focused on self at all, either as self-esteem or self-abasement, as self-fulfilling or self-emptying.”¹

Let me say that again: USAmerican culture cannot understand “an orientation to one’s life that is not focused on self at all.”

So how do we deny ourselves and take up the cross? Professor Mitchell G. Reddish writes “The disciple who ‘takes up the cross’ is one who is willing to surrender pride, ego, status, comfort,

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary

and even life for the sake of the kingdom of God... They must be willing to surrender their own self-centered ambitions, goals, and lifestyles for the way demonstrated by Jesus." (FOTW)

Friends, what is the cross you are called to take up? What must you deny yourselves in order to follow the Way of Jesus? What does it mean to "do your work"?

"Do your own work": we get caught up in this. A lot of folks hear this phrase and say "YEAH" and then draw a blank when it is time to actually do their own work of dismantling white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, etc. We don't know where to go without someone telling us. But each of us, being different humans, we each have places we hide from each other and from ourselves, we each have done or said or not done things we feel ashamed of, we each have heard the call at some point and turned back along the path...this is where our work starts. It starts with listening when someone calls you out, reflecting on your discomfort, noticing the padding in your bank account, considering what you could offer your community. It is something that each of us must realize for ourselves, something that no one can do for us.

I was in seminary during the 2016 election. November 9 and the days after are kind of a blur of meetings, tears, demonstrations, remembering to breathe, trying to figure out if it was a waste of time to be in school right now. As about half of Vanderbilt Divinity School was white and figuring out how to be clergy leaders in the time of Trump, a queer Black woman student created a "Risk Inventory for White People in Religious Leadership." The directions read, "Rate each item 1-5 with your preparedness/willingness to deal with the loss/risk of each item. (5 = most willing/prepared to risk)."

The inventory wasn't for anyone but ourselves, and no one could do it for us.

I looked through the inventory and thought about what boxes I would check.

Under social capital: denominational support, scholarships, internships, references, ordination standing. Under community respect: gossip, vandalism, hate speech, membership of organization or church membership, job in congregation. Under relationships: friendships, family arguments, family shunning, loss of communication, loss of family network. Under financial resources: \$20 a week, \$50/week, donations to organizations, credit rating, inheritances, property, house ownership. Under rights: limited right to assemble, no fly list, travel ban, etc...and more and more and more.

Given who I am, given the place I hold in my family, friendships, in society, given my constellation of identities and privileges, I had to think: what is my cross to bear? What are the risks I am ready and willing to take, or at least willing to become ready to take, for the sake of justice? What am I called to do as I strive to follow the Way of Jesus and bring about the kingdom of God?

David Frenchak writes in one commentary, “There is no way anyone committed to social justice can avoid conflict and confrontation with the principalities and powers. It is part of the cross we must bear. The invitation to follow Jesus sets us on a path that leads to cities where the principalities and powers of destruction are lodged. This is the prophetic alternative to the mainstream culture that worships victory.”

Recently the 45th President of the USA said that his Democratic opponent wanted to destroy the American dream...that might sound scary to some of you, might be alarming on the surface...but if the American dream is the suburban dream, I don't want to be part of that. If the American dream is a white supremacist dream, I don't want to be part of that. If the American dream is only for winners lifting the narrative of victory above all else, of superiority and supremacy, I don't want to be part of that dream. Wake me up. The cross I bear, the cross we bear together as one body following the Way of Jesus the Christ, is not one that will have us come out on top, win us popularity, make money in our 401ks, buy us a new house with a white picket fence. If we deny ourselves a worldview that centers our own individual prosperity and instead adopt a worldview in which community flourishing is the goal and mode of being...that is a dream worth following. Sign us up to bear the cross that leads us on to *that* horizon.

In a recent sermon, I spoke about a Militant Nonviolent Civil Disobedience training I attended in July with the Rev. Osagyefo Sekou. I shall remember this forever: he drilled us on what to do during protests that may turn violent, telling us how to cope with being tear gassed and how to act as one body. Over and over he kept asking “How do we do this work?” to which the answer was “out of deep abiding love.”

Deep abiding love. The center of resistance, the center of protest, the center of “showing up” and “doing our work” is deep abiding love, **MUST BE** deep abiding love. There is no turning back from this love. As we sang earlier, God's love is the love that will not let us go, promising that “morn shall tearless be.” Romans 8:38-39 reminds us that “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So even though we, like Peter, may think “No! How can it be?” at the thought of great suffering, and even death, when we hear the prophet's words about taking up our crosses...if the work is done out of deep abiding love, if we choose to keep following, even though the signs saying “America first” and “prosperity this way” point the opposite direction, if we choose not to turn back but to pick up our crosses **DAILY** and live for the good of communion with each other and with the Holy...we will not be alone. God's love will not let us go.

In a beautiful and moving article entitled “Jesus, the Failure,” Michael Manning, an intentional community worker and writer on the Isle of Man, writes, “Community is demanding. It’s no panacea. It’s not a guaranteed success in any sense of the word. Human relationships are riven with petty conflicts, impatience, and wounds that mar our attempts to love one another...There are no certainties to love, no easy roads home. To bear with the pain of people is a long and mostly thankless task, with no sure outcome. But to love like the God who loves us we must take that risk, with a hope that refuses to be completely disappointed no matter how much rejection it faces. The demands of loving deeply wounded individuals in all their desire, confusion, annoyingness, chaos, and violence are huge. In an unredeemed world we will hurt one another in our clumsy attempts to love, but our failures are borne by the scarred one who loves us and longs to see the world set right in justice and peace.”²

And so, beloved church, let us choose to live in the real world, knowing there are no safe spaces but choosing to create brave spaces where we live lives that are intentionally bound together. Let us deny our self-centered ways of being, let us swallow our pride, let us build the world into the shape of communal love, let us take up our crosses and follow Jesus.

1 I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
no turning back, no turning back.

2 Though none go with me, I still will follow;
though none go with me, I still will follow;
though none go with me, I still will follow;
no turning back, no turning back.

3 The world behind me, the cross before me;
the world behind me, the cross before me,
the world behind me, the cross before me;
no turning back, no turning back.

May we never turn back from following the Way of the love that will never let us go.
Amen.

² <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/service/jesus-the-failure>