

(with special thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor)

Our gospel from the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew contains one of Jesus' hardest sayings, "If anyone would come after me," he says to his disciples, "let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me". It's one of those passages we skim over without much thought, or one that catches in our throat giving us pause and some real consternation. We prefer other more comfortably quoted passages such as "Come to me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28) or "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). These are comfortable passages of scripture, safe references, scripture inviting us into surety and safety living in a frightening world.

But, "deny yourself and take up your cross"? Who needs that, when it is hard enough to keep the bills paid and food on the table, when it is hard enough just to get up in the morning and face the challenges of an ordinary day? Some of us like to believe that when Jesus spoke these words, he was addressing his disciples—those twelve apostles—that the rest of us are excused from the rigors of his meaning—denying ourselves, lugging crosses and things like that. Others insist that Jesus is the only one called to die on a cross, and that because he did, the rest of us do not have to.

Then again, we know people who have taken this hard saying and made it their life's motto. They put themselves down all the time and shun comfort as if it were poisonous to their souls. They deny themselves the smallest pleasures of life as if simple human happiness were some kind of disloyalty to God. Surely that cannot be what this passage is about; surely Jesus does not mean that the only way we can follow him is to cut fun and joy out of our lives that we live with seriousness and deep intensity? But if he does not mean that, what does he mean? Do we really have to die for love of him? Isn't there some way to love Jesus and still live?

Our confusion arises because Peter was asking the same question. Previously, Jesus has asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter has given the right answer. "You are the Christ," Peter said, "the Son of the living God," and Jesus rewarded Peter by calling him the rock, the rock on which Jesus would build his church.

But Peter's glory does not last long, because as Jesus explains what will be required of him—that he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and be killed, and be raised from the dead—Peter explodes: "God forbid, Lord!" he says, "This shall never happen to you." It is simply too much for Peter to imagine his teacher coming to such an end, especially if it could be avoided. Why take a risk you do not have to take?

Right or wrong, Peter is the one who says what the rest of us are thinking. Over and over again Peter is the disciples' spokesman, the one who says the things they dare not say, the one who asks the questions they dare not ask. *God forbid, Lord!* He says when Jesus predicts his own death, and Jesus explodes.

*Get behind me, Satan!* Jesus says to Peter. *You are a stumbling block to me; for you are not on the side of divine things but of human things.* What a shock that must have been for the other disciples, to hear Peter, the first disciple, called Satan; to hear Peter, the foundation rock of the church, called a stumbling block in Jesus' path. What did he do wrong? What was his sin? All he did was protest the forecast that Jesus would suffer and die. All he did was say out loud that there had to be another way.

But as far as Jesus was concerned, it was Satan talking. Satan the ancient tempter, who from the beginning of time offers humankind an alternative to the will of God—easier alternatives, safer alternatives, flashier alternatives—all of them temptations for us to do and be something other than what God has called us to do and be.

There is something deeply troubling here—does Jesus mean that all of us who pray to be delivered from suffering and death are on the side of humankind, and that the side of God is reserved only for those ready and willing to die? Does he mean that all of us who want to be on God's side should seek a way to sacrifice ourselves, to literally give up our lives? I want to believe that God *gives* me my life, not that God is eager to take it away. I want to believe that God wills my survival, not that God is looking forward to my funeral. Doesn't God want me to be happy? Doesn't God care about my safety and comfort?

The resounding answer, according to this morning's passage, is NO and YES! God does not care about what **we believe** to be comfort and safety. God does not care about what **we believe** happiness is. God is suggesting that there is a whole dimension and purpose to our lives that we do not see. What God most cares about, with all God's holy being, is the *quality* of

my life. Not just my life, mind you, not just life on the surface of things, but the fullest dimension and meaning of my life—the depth of my life, the scope of my life, what we sometimes call the heft and zeal of life.

The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of the fullest living of our lives. If we fear death, we shall inevitably fear life. And fearing life, we become a stingy, cautious people who withholding and holding back, do not live at all. The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way abundant life is realized is not to save it, but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved in a safety deposit box or bank account.

Life cannot be shut up and saved any more than fresh spring water can be put into a mason jar and kept in a kitchen cupboard. It remains water, and if you ever open it up you can probably still drink it, but it will have lost its essence, its life, which is to be poured out, to be moving, living water, rushing downstream to share its wealth without ever having to look back.

Peter wanted to keep Jesus from doing that. He did not want Jesus' life to be spilled, to be wasted. He wanted to save it, to preserve it, to find a safer, more comfortable way for Jesus to be Lord. What he forgot was that Jesus' supply of life was never-ending, that what poured out of him poured out of an underground source so fine, so strong, that the more of himself he gave, the more he had—a veritable geyser of living water sent to quench a dry, dry world.

Peter missed that part of what Jesus said, and so do we. Listen again to what Matthew says: *Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And on the third day be raised.* Peter missed that part and so often we do as well. We get stuck on the suffering and death part. We get that far and say, *God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you* without finishing the sentence, without noticing that after the suffering and death, there is life again, abundant life, life for Jesus and for all of us that can never be cut off.

We cannot grasp the full message and meaning of Jesus if suffering and death deter us, throw us off the path, if our fear keeps us from sticking our necks out, from taking risks that make life worth living. We can try to save our own lives. We can try to stockpile it, being very, very careful about what we say yes to; being very, very cautious about whom we let into our lives, making strangers walk through safe-guards around our lives; being very, very wary about going outside ourselves, venturing forth under heavy guard ready to retreat at the first sign of trouble.

We can live that way, but do not expect to enjoy it very much, or to accomplish much. *For whoever will save his life will lose it, Jesus says to the disciples, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

I am not suggesting that living a life of faith is about being a daredevil. This is not a call of signing up for skydiving lessons or doing dangerous things for the thrill of it. What I mean is for us to think and pray about our lives in such a way that they really matter—living for Christ's sake—and refusing to put our own comfort and safety ahead of living such a life—a life that pours itself out for others as a matter of course, a life that spends itself without counting the cost, knowing that there is always more where our lives come from, and that even when our lives run out, God will have more in store for us because God is one who never runs out of life.

If anyone would come after me, Jesus says, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those will never be easy words to hear, but they are not in the final analysis, an invitation to follow Jesus unto death but an invitation to follow him into life. We can only follow him if we do not allow ourselves to be overcome with fear, of being preoccupied by the world in such a way that we forget who we are and whose we are and why we are here in the first place.

It has been said that a faithful Christian is a human being fully alive, unafraid of things that go bump in the night, unafraid of not having enough, unafraid of not having things of this world. Jesus' enemies counted on his fear of death to quiet him down, to keep him out of the way. He may have been afraid, but he did not let his fear stop him. He saw through them and did not stop till he found his place in the Kingdom prepared from the very beginning of time.

To be where God is—to follow Jesus—means going beyond the limits of our own comfort and safety. It means living our lives as gifts rather than guarding them as possessions. It means giving our lives—letting our lives flow, letting them run, spilling our laughter, joy and wonder till at last we are gathered up into the fullest, wonderful Kingdom of God.