

The Cost of Discipleship

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September 12, 2021. Where are you called to use your hands to participate in God's creativity and love? How can you find the courage to speak the gospel's radical truth in the face of resistance, and hold your tongue when needed so other prophetic voices can be heard?

Readings: [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#), [James 3:1-12](#), [Mark 8:27-38](#)

*** Transcript ***

After five weeks of Jesus' bread of life discourse, about God giving God's self to us in very profound, real, and sometimes mystical ways, we are now on our second week of Mark showing us Jesus in all his humanity. Last week Jesus tries (unsuccessfully) to hide from the demands of the ministry he is embodying, and in the process he shows us how *not* to respond, and how *to* respond, to someone different from us. Today, as Jesus is trying to explain to his disciples just how hard the road ahead of them all is, Peter tells Jesus (in not-so-polite language) to be quiet. And Jesus in turn tells Peter (in not-so-polite language) to be quiet.

In all fairness, I can sympathize with Peter, who doesn't want to hear about what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem, and what will happen to Jesus' followers later. And I can sympathize with Jesus, who just wants one of his closest companions to get it, so he doesn't have to carry this load alone. Anyone who has had hard truths to share can probably understand how Jesus was feeling, and just how disheartening it would have been to have Peter discount what he was saying to them. After all, Jesus didn't want the cross to become a reality, any more than any of us would, or do. And yet, he knew the truth of it, and Peter trying to shut down that truth was just too much.

All through our scriptures today, we see this reality: trust in God does not make things easy. In fact, sometimes the radical, unapologetic, unlimited love of God, fully embraced, can make us a target for the evil in this world, whose only mission is to close into a box that which will not be contained.

Isaiah tells the Israelites that as people of faith they are called to proclaim the good news of God right into the midst of their enemies. We often read this passage in which Isaiah speaks of giving the back to those who beat it, and the face to those who pluck the beard, as being about Jesus. The hard truth here is that Isaiah is actually speaking to the Israelites living in exile among foreigners, and to all followers of God, to us, who are called to claim God's promise exactly where it is needed the most. To call out radical love and justice for those most vulnerable, even when others are trying their hardest to shut it down.

This is no small thing. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in an attempt to shut down his leadership in the movements for racial and economic justice and peace, not so long ago. Water Protectors standing for the protection of sacred lands, environmental justice, and clean water have faced violent resistance and even death in our own country in the last few years. Many seeking racial justice have found themselves targeted by private citizens, right-wing militia, and even government — and Heather Heyer, who was murdered by a white supremacist during the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017, is not the only one to have lost her life.

This week, the ELCA officially welcomes Bishop Megan Rohrer (they/he), newly installed to the Sierra Pacific Synod, the first openly transgender bishop in the ELCA. Since they have served as an openly

trans pastor, boldly proclaiming radical love and inclusion for all regardless of gender identity, Bishop Rohrer has received messages of hate and even death threats.

This is not easy truth, family of faith. It would be so much easier, wouldn't it, if we could just skip the cross, skip the challenge, skip the suffering, and go straight to resurrection. But Jesus tells Peter, in no uncertain terms, in not-so-polite language, that it doesn't work that way. God has always come to bring the gospel of healing, hope, justice, and love to the broken places, and God has always sent God's people to do the same, because that is who God is. And that is not an easy road. No wonder some of the disciples chose to leave, as we heard in our gospel a few weeks back.

Our readings today carry this even further. James makes it clear that sometimes the evil trying to shut down or limit God's love is nothing more or less than the very tongue in our own mouths. What we say can be very powerful, as Isaiah and James both make clear in today's readings. Words can do harm and tear down, or words can build up those around us. And likewise, silence can do incredible harm, allowing untruth and evil to go unchecked, or silence can create space for truth that others need to share to be heard and honored. Silence is as powerful, or more, than words.

"The Good Place" is a light-hearted comedy about an unlikely community of people who end up in the show's version of heaven after they die, some of whom probably got there by mistake. One of them, Jason, is in the Good Place because he was mistaken for Jianyu Li, a Taiwanese monk. He jumps at the offer to "continue his vow of silence" to keep the secret. And everyone thinks he really is a monk until... you guessed it: he opens his mouth and speaks. Jason's tongue, the second it is unbridled, makes it clear just who he is, for good or for ill.

And in all of our passages today, and in Mark especially, Jesus is sharing words that make it very clear who he is, and what it will mean to follow him. Not the glory of the Messiah lifted up and honored, but the reality that following Jesus, trusting in God, means embodying the truth of God's promises at the very center of the greatest suffering. Just as Isaiah tells the people that God is calling them to be faithful, bold, and do that in the face of their enemies.

As we remember the 20th anniversary of the death and destruction of the September 11th attack on the Trade Center and Pentagon, we know there is evil in this world. We also recall those who faced the evil to bring rescue and healing wherever it was possible. Many of them died for their efforts. And we know that there is a great capacity for good. The news shows us both the evil and the good every day.

And God is still present, bringing the good news of the gospel right where the suffering is greatest, and calling us, God's people, to do the same. This weekend is also "God's Work Our Hands" Sunday in the ELCA, highlighting our call to enter the brokenness of the world and proclaim God's love for all, even when our enemies, or our own tongue, try to shut it down. Jesus followed this path, all the way to death. This is, at its heart, the meaning of the cross.

This is not easy, family of faith. And it is no wonder that some of Jesus's disciples turned around when they understood it, and no wonder Peter tried, in not-so-polite language, to keep Jesus from telling this truth. We can take courage knowing that even Peter and Jesus wrestled with it, and we do this not alone, but together.

As we mark "God's Work Our Hands" Sunday, where will you bring God's message of healing and justice? Where are you called to use your hands to participate in God's creativity and love? How can you find the courage to speak the gospel's radical truth in the face of resistance, and hold your tongue

when needed so other prophetic voices can be heard? All the way back to Isaiah, the call is clear. And all the way to today, God walks the road with us.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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