

COME DIE WITH ME

When Jesus Really Scares Me | Matthew 16:21-25

The Call to a Cross Not a Cocoon or Cushion

Matthew's gospel says that toward the end of his three years of public ministry, **Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Mat 16:21).** Hearing this, **Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (Mat 16:22)**

What Jesus then said in the face of this apparent devotion forces me to redefine faithfulness in terms that I don't think I'd ever get to by myself. The Bible says that **Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Mat 16:23).** Then Jesus said to his disciples, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Mat 16:24-25)**

There are few words Jesus ever spoke that are scarier, I think, than these ones here -- particularly when you contrast them with some of the other invitations Jesus issues. When Jesus says, **"Come dine with me,"** come experience my fulfillment, most of us are pleased to accept. When Christ says, **"Come do life with me,"** experience the difference my companionship makes, many of us are naturally intrigued. When Jesus says, **"Come dance with me,"** come experience my joy, it seems like a good deal to follow him. But when he says what he says here -- when Jesus says: **"Come die with me,"** come take up a cross with me, come experience my death, there is something in almost all of us that cries out with the Apostle Peter, **"Never, Lord!"**

And isn't this only natural? From the cradle on we are taught that the goal of life is to preserve it. From the moment we're first strapped into our child safety seats to the day we are lying in a hospital room with tubes in our bodies, the continual message is: *Preserve, protect, sustain, secure!* It is not simply the maintenance of life but its continual maximization that we are taught in American life today. From early on, we absorb the message that the quality of one's life is directly related to the quantity of life-enhancements we have been able to secure. Our lives come to be defined by the titles and trophies we've amassed, the pleasures and privileges we enjoy, the sheepskins and the shape of our skin, our castles and our credit scores.

Somebody Has to Die

And, then, along comes Jesus. He tells us that we have defined life too superficially, too selfishly, too stupidly. He looks right into our eyes, as he did the Pharisees', and tells us that we're barely touching life as God intended it. He tells us to get off the fence we've been walking between the world's way and the kingdom's way. He challenges us to seek to serve rather than to be served. He tells us to check our box and bags for things we've been carrying so long that we don't see how burdened and blocked we still are by them. He calls us to patrol the pleasures we've allowed to invade our perimeter and conquer our hearts. He tells us to complete the circle of grace and not just demand it for ourselves because we've got a ticket.

No wonder they crucified Him.

Because, if we are truly hearing him, then we rightly recognize that the coming of Jesus requires *somebody's* death. If we are going to follow Jesus through the gate of the kingdom... if we are to be born anew into this life of God... then the way we've been taught to define Life, the way we've naturally come at Life, the Life or self we've become, has to die. It has to be lost. It has to be named and nailed and annihilated. And that will be painful and hard. It will demand something of the profound humility and courageous perseverance we see in Jesus as he carries *his* Cross.

It will mean periods of terrible thirsting for the substances that used to slake our thirst. It will mean times when we'll feel utterly forsaken by God. It will put us in a place of temporary vulnerability before the soldiers and mocking crowds of this world. It will mean cleaving to our spiritual family the way Mary and John were called to by Christ at the Cross. It will require a daily commitment of our Spirit into the Father's hands. It will mean trusting and obeying until God's work in and through us is completed here and we can say: "It is finished."

George MacDonald, the great Scots preacher, once wrote that it is crucial we grasp that *"Christ died to save us, not from suffering, but from ourselves; not from injustice [or] justice, but from being unjust. He died that we might live--but live as he lives, by dying as he died who died to himself that he might live unto God. If we do not die to ourselves, we cannot live to God, and he that does not live to God, is dead."*¹

During Holy Week we are accustomed, I know, to focus on the death that the Palm Sunday crowd eventually called for. But it is equally crucial that we remember the death that Jesus called for. This death Christ calls for is a price entirely worth paying. It is the path to communion with God himself. It is the road to an eternal peace and prosperity. It is the only way to gain an unshakable faith, an unconquerable hope, and a life-changing love more precious than anything the crowds chase after. But this is what Jesus makes clear: This life doesn't come from simply *wearing* a cross; it comes from *bearing* a cross. Somebody, some life, some self *has to die*.

The DaVinci Code Jesus

No wonder some of even Jesus' would-be disciples said "**Never, Lord,**" I don't like this path you're talking about. I understand that. I understand why people still want to crucify Christ instead of die to self. There are times when I think I would rather have Dan Brown's *DaVinci Code* Jesus. Did any of you read that book or watch that film? There are times when I'd like to rewrite the story of Jesus and view him as someone who would never do something so radical as to deny himself the pleasure of sex, who got married to Mary Magdalene and had a child whose real gospel was about touching the divine through physical pleasures and fertility.

If I can come to view the Church of Jesus in the DaVinci Code way -- as just a collection of corrupt or misguided people who have nothing to offer or teach me... If I can caricature spiritual disciplines as some sort of sick, twisted masochism instead of the tools for health and freedom they are... If I can take the parts of the biblical Jesus that I like, the ones that reinforce my lifestyle, that leave me feeling spiritual without much cost, and ignore the HARD sayings of Jesus... If I can wear a cross as jewelry, without feeling any need to bear a cross as a disciple... Then I can go on with life as I have it. I can keep the SELF I have.

But, you know what? I don't want that self. I want a better self. How about you? Don't you want the self that Jesus shows you, that Jesus says can be born in you, the kind of self he apparently gave to Arland D. Williams, Jr?

Cross at the Bridge

Does that name mean anything to you? If you've spent much time in the Washington D.C. area, you may know that there is a bridge by that name that crosses the Potomac River. I was not far from there on January 13, 1982 when Air Florida Flight 90 iced-up upon takeoff, and crashed into those icy waters. It was 4:01 in afternoon. I was in my girlfriend's apartment and we were getting ready to cook dinner. I probably could have walked over to the crash site if I'd been motivated, but I wasn't. There was a snowstorm outside. Understandably, perhaps, I wanted to stay inside where it was warm. And so I just watched TV. I watched on the news the struggle to rescue the small number of survivors who treaded water for their life.

Among the survivors of that plane crash was Arland Williams. As the *Washington Post* tells it: "*Five different times, a helicopter dropped a rope to save Williams. Five times, Williams passed the rope to other passengers in worse shape than he was. When the rope was extended to Williams the sixth time, he could not take hold, and succumbed to the frigid waters. His heroism was not rash. Aware that his own strength was fading, [Williams] deliberately handed hope to someone else.*"² Again and again and again and again and again – in the most difficult circumstances, Arland Williams made the choice to die to self and, in so doing, became a glorified life – the kind that never truly dies.

There is a Bridge to Life that stands at a place where Someone else once made some deliberate choices. We've named that bridge the Cross of Christ. We gather tonight at the edge of that bridge to remember that when he might have elected otherwise, Jesus chose to pay the ultimate price for human sin there, so that you and I might be forgiven and live forever with God. As the frigid waters of death swirled around him, Jesus had options. He could have chosen to save his own life many times that Friday; but instead he chose to pass the rope of salvation to you and to me.

No one takes [my life] from me... Jesus said to Peter and the other disciples shortly before walking to the Cross. No one takes it from me, **but I lay it down of my own accord (John 10:18)**. Later on, Jesus said: **The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:23-24)**. In other words, the best way to multiply your influence and fruitfulness is to die to your SELF. So watch me do this, says Jesus to his disciples. No one is forcing me to give up my life. I am choosing it for the sake of the new life that my surrender will unleash.

We gather tonight to remember that when he might have elected otherwise, Jesus chose to take up his Cross, to pay the ultimate price for human sin, that you and I might be forgiven and live forever with God. As the frigid waters of death swirled around him, Jesus had options. He could have chosen to save his own life; but instead he chose to pass the rope of salvation to you and to me.

I remember the day when I was 18 years old – a selfish, shivering kid – and I took hold of the rope that Jesus offered to me. I think with such awe and gratitude of the cold waters God drew me out of and the new life he helped me find.

If you have never taken hold of it before, I beg you, grab hold of the lifeline Jesus offers you today. Let God pull you to safety above the waters of sin and death. Let him wrap you in the blanket of his family. But once you've done that, don't stop there. Don't let the Cross be merely a symbol of the life Jesus had, or that you'll have one day in heaven. Let the Cross be a signpost to the kind of life Christ calls you to in this world. Cross over the bridge and into the life of the Kingdom of God. You know the way into that city, don't you? It's the way marked out by Jesus, by Arland, and by every soul in every home and church and workplace and town who keeps making the difficult choice, the disciple's choice. **If [you] would come after me**, said Jesus, **[you] must deny [your]self and take up [your] cross and follow me (Mat 16:24)**.

What of your old decaying self is Jesus inviting you to lay down and lose tonight? Take your stubborn pride, your simmering anger, your grief or greed, your lust or laziness, your envy or your guilt and leave it here at the foot of the Cross. Let go of these former things so that you can take hold of a new life. I tell you, **Whoever wants to**

save their life will lose it, says Jesus, but whoever loses their life for me will find it (Mat 16:25).

Sometimes this call to the Cross causes us to *tremble*; but, beloved, it's the tremble of new birth into a more glorious self and life.

¹ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (Series 3)

² "A Hero-Passenger Aids Others, Then Dies," *Washington Post* (1-14-82)