

“That Isn’t What I Thought You Meant”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God and from Jesus the Son and from the Holy Spirit.

I think he just knew...I think that Jesus just knew that if he were to live the way that God would have him live...In fact, if he were to be the very embodiment//the incarnation of God’s love (which we confess he is)...If Jesus were to live out his own Sermon on the Mount being for and focusing on and lifting up those who are poor in spirit and those who mourn and who are weak and who hunger and thirst for righteousness...If he were to live out his own mandates “if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them your cloak as well” and “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” and “do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth” and “do not worry” and “do unto others”...If he were to speak out against the primacy of the self and act counter to the me-ism which drives so many, if he were to deny his own rights and privileges and challenge the system which kept the powerful powerful while ignoring or silencing or oppressing so many others...then the outcome...his loss of life...his death...a cross would be inevitable.

“If any want to become my followers,” he says. The language here is singular...That is to say that it is directed to the individual – which is not all common in scripture. Most often, when Jesus is speaking, it is to a collection of people – the plural “you.”...Not here – here it is distinctly individual...If any one of you wants to...It’s a third person singular verb. If any one of you wants to become my follower that one must deny his or her or “pronoun” own self. That one must stand against the things I stand against and with those things I stand with. That one must be for the other...the least and lost and overlooked and oppressed. So, choose intentionally – because to choose to follow this one, means to choose to suffer and die...It means to choose to follow the way of the cross.

It took all of my energy, when a well-meaning person said, after my mother died of cancer... “Well, cancer was just her cross to bear.” It took all of my energy not to lash out and say, “NO! My mama did not choose to have cancer.”

Cross-bearing is a choice...cancer is not.

Cross-bearing is a choice...abuse or poverty or mental illness is not. COVID 19 is not.

Cross-bearing is a choice...oppression and racial injustice are not.

Jesus is clear...He says “IF...If you want to follow.” He makes it our choice. He loves us enough not to manipulate or control us...He gives us agency. We can choose to follow him; which means that we can choose not to. We can choose not to deny ourselves and

our rights. We can choose not to reject our own privilege. We can choose not to live in a way that will land us with a cross to bear.

“But, regardless...either way,” Jesus says, “I’m going to land there...I’m going to suffer and I am going to die.”

“No matter what you choose,” he may as well say, “I will suffer.”

“And...no matter what you choose, I will love you. Because loving...even you, is what I do.”

Which is definitely good news...at least for me...Because even at my best, I simply fail from time to time... Frankly, I fail a lot when it comes to choosing the way of the cross. I am just not that good. I fail a lot when it comes to denying myself and rejecting my privilege – because, quite honestly, I am either blind to it...or benefitting from it more than I like to admit. Then I get down on myself. I get overcome by my own tired-ness and weariness and sense of failure. I fall prey to my own insecurity or anxiety.

I want so desperately to check off the litany that Paul puts forth for what the life of a Jesus-follower looks like: genuine love; and holding fast to what is good; ¹⁰loving one another with mutual affection; outdoing one another in showing honor; and ¹¹not lagging in zeal and be ardent in spirit. And on and on. Being ¹²patient in suffering, and persevering in prayer; and extending hospitality to strangers; and ¹⁴blessing those who persecute me; and ¹⁵rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. Right? I mean, I want so desperately, ¹⁸so far as it depends on me, to live peaceably with all.

But sometimes...often I just find myself stuck...unable to choose to do any of those things; unable to take one more step alongside or even toward Jesus, much less to take up a cross.

I just get tired and feel weary of it all and like I am a complete failure and then I become certain that, despite all of my best efforts and intentions I am going to be overcome by my own suffering and the suffering that is all around me. And I just can’t move.

And then...then when it all come crumbling down, and I am left with no alternative, but to stay still and listen...and listen...and if I am listening, then, by definition I am not alone...right? When I am left with no alternative, but to stay still and listen then all of this becomes good news. Listen again. Jesus says, “I am going to suffer.” Jesus says, “Where there is suffering...That’s where I’m going to be.” “Where there is suffering...That’s where I am going to be.”

I understand Peter’s thinking... “God forbid it! When I said that you were the Messiah, and when you said, ‘Yes! That is right!’ this isn’t what I thought you meant. I thought you meant that we would bypass all the suffering...Be delivered from it...Not sit in it.”

“Yeah...I see that’s what you thought I meant...It isn’t. I meant that I won’t leave you during it. I meant that I will go through it with you. Where you just can’t...I can.”

Maybe for today, the best we can do is confess. Confess our weariness and anxiety and insecurities. Confess our pain and fear and grief and failure. Confess our ignorance and embarrassment and frustration. Maybe for today, the best we can do is admit that we are suffering and that we feel surrounded by suffering and helpless in the face of it. Maybe for today, the best we can do is admit that "I don't really understand...but I hear your promise, Lord, that you are in the suffering with me...and the suffering and even death will not last forever...because on the third day." Maybe for today, the best we can do is sit in our own confession of suffering and perhaps catch a glimpse of the Christ who finds us there...In the eyes of a friend or a stranger. In shared tears or unexpected laughter. Shouts of joy or cries of frustration.

Maybe for today, the best we can do is give in to the reality...maybe even the promise of Jesus,

"I will undergo great suffering...I am there with you...

holding you, lamenting with you, encouraging you and carrying you through, for as long as it takes...

until you can begin to choose again...

until you can begin to follow again...

until you can find your legs and carry another

who is suffering as you walk together

in my way and in my name."