

Lent 2, Year B, 030412
All Saints Episcopal Church

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

On Friday, my day off, I took my car to get the oil changed, and the tires rotated and balanced. When I went to sit in the waiting room, I found an old Reader's Digest in the stack of magazines. That was a big surprise, since there is usually only 'manly' magazines - you know, ones about hunting and fishing, cars, boats, and, oh yes, the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition! So I grabbed the Reader's Digest and began to thumb through it, reading the jokes and the stories submitted by folks from all over the country. A woman sent in this story:

When my sister-in-law Ginny cooks she likes to substitute ingredients for those in the recipe. One time I gave her the recipe for a chicken-and-walnut dish that her husband, my brother, likes, and she served it one night when I was over. In place of walnuts, she used raw peanuts. And for chicken, she substituted beef. In fact, every major ingredient had been replaced. "This is terrible!" my brother said after one bite. Ginny glared across the table at me and said, "Don't blame me! It's your sister's recipe!"

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus tries to explain to his disciples what it means for him to be the Messiah and for them to be his followers. But Peter doesn't like it. He wants to change the recipe, the formula, the instructions. All this suffering and dying business doesn't fit his understanding of what a Messiah is, and it REALLY doesn't fit his understanding of what he wants to do with his life as Jesus' disciple.

Starting this lesson at verse 31 of the 8th chapter is another one of those odd choices the lectionary elves make that confuse us; we begin in the middle of the story. It's like walking into a party just as there's a lull in the conversation and a woman yells at her husband "That's what you think!" and stomps off upstairs and locks herself in the bedroom. You're left looking around at everyone asking, "What? What was that all about?"

In order to understand this text, you really have to know what went before. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

And this is where we come in: THEN Jesus begins explaining what it means for him to be the Christ, the Messiah. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed . . ." Jesus goes on to talk about being raised after three days, but Peter quits listening at the part about being killed.

Peter's brain is yelling NOOOO! NOT Jesus, NOT the Messiah, NOT the Christ. That's not the way the story goes; that's not right; that's not the formula for success, we've got to change that!

So Peter grabs Jesus and takes him aside for a little private conversation. Actually the Bible says Peter rebuked him; that's a strong word. It means he fussed at Jesus for not being Holy enough, for not staying up there on the pedestal where Peter and the rest had put him and wanted him to remain.

And here Jesus is; surrounded by an adoring crowd that has begun to call him the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah. He has probably struggled mightily throughout his adulthood to figure out who he is exactly - a regular human being or a superhuman being. Did he know ahead of time everything that was going to happen to him? Or did he just have vague ideas based on what was written in the Hebrew texts about the Messiah?

But Peter tries to talk him out of it. And Jesus recognizes the voice of Satan when he hears it. This is a moment of genuine temptation, which must be resisted firmly: "GET BEHIND ME SATAN!" You are setting your mind on human things, not divine things!

And after pushing Satan away, Jesus gathers the whole crowd together to teach them, and us, what it means to be disciples of Christ, followers of Jesus.

Now one thing is for sure: no one can accuse Jesus of false advertizing, of luring followers with rock music and video screens and cool, helpful sermonettes on *Three*

Tips for a Happy Marriage or Ten Biblical Investment Strategies.

No, Jesus lays it out clearly and honestly: "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up a cross and follow me." But many of us, when we hear that recipe for being a Christian - that set of instructions for building a Christian life - we get squirmy, uncomfortable.

We want to be like Ginny in the Reader's Digest story, changing the recipe:

"Well, he couldn't have meant for us to deny ourselves, not really. That's just, well, that's just un-American. We're supposed to have the things we want because God loves us and will bless us. He must have meant that we should read the Bible carefully for all those wonderful promises about how we can be happier and richer and a more well-rounded and well-liked person.

"And follow him? I don't know. After all, Jesus ended up dead. I think he meant we should admire him, and worship him, and expect good things from him, especially when we're in trouble; but follow him? I don't know."

So what does it really mean to deny ourselves and take up our cross and to follow Christ? Without changing the recipe?

Well, Jesus doesn't say that his followers should take up his cross, or that we should carry a cross that someone else has forced upon us. Instead, Jesus compels us to find the particular path that will enable us to do the work of giving up everything that separates us from God, from one another, and from our deepest selves. As Peter learned, this includes letting go of our desire to dictate the actions of others in ways we are not meant to do, and letting go of our attachment to outcomes that lie beyond our control. "To have without holding," poet Marge Piercy puts it. In one of the great paradoxes of the spiritual path, it's this kind of denial—this kind of detachment—that makes way for our deepest connections.

As for the next part of Jesus' teaching: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it," are we supposed to literally give up our lives for all this?

According to human values, one's own life comes first. We might be kind and generous and thoughtful toward others, but cultural norms put first priority on our own safety or privilege or physical comfort. In Mark's gospel, the disciples characterize human values. They want power and greatness and assume that Jesus shares these values. Jesus represents God's values, best summed up by the willingness to risk one's own life for the sake of others. But Jesus does not encourage suffering for its own sake. The key to meaning here is "for the sake of the gospel" and Jesus is the prime example. Jesus invites his disciples to follow his example, to be willing to risk our lives for the sake of others.

I can think of many heroes of the faith - the saints of God who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew; their names are well-known. A more recent example of risking life for another, however, is of a man who was the lead news story for a couple days, including guest appearances on morning TV news shows, a number of years ago. You may remember the story. This courageous person whose name is long forgotten saw a man who had fallen on the subway tracks in the path of an oncoming train.

Realizing there was no time to get the doomed man to safety, the soon-to-be hero threw himself on top of the stranger between the tracks while the train traveled over them and came to a stop. Both men survived. I don't know if the courageous man was a Christian or if he belonged to any faith community at all. But his risk for the sake of another was definitely the sort that Jesus speaks about. We remember him because of that.

Most of us will never have to face giving up our own life for the sake of another, but we do have opportunities every day to consider how we might deny our own desires in order to serve others.

May our hearts be led in this Lenten season to join God's heart in bringing life to others, and in doing so, to gain our own lives.