

The word of the day is *contradistinction*. It is a distinction drawn on the basis of contrast. It's a distinction that is made by contrasting the different qualities of two things. *Contradistinction*. Theologically speaking, *contradistinction* is a way to look at our life and the life of the saints, of Jesus himself, and of our ethics based on Scripture. Digging a little deeper, *contradistinction* is used with Biblical language and its understanding both in the day and place it was written and in our day and time. The Gospel writer, Mark, had choices with writing his Gospel in Greek. Like in English, they had a number of verbs to choose from, and the distinction in contrast from one verb to another gave a *contradistinction* to the earlier readers of his Gospel. Likewise, there is a *contradistinction* between the Jewish way and life of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and that of the gentile believers. And, once the gentiles became believers in Christ Jesus, their lives gave a sharp contrast to the distinction of what it is to follow Jesus and to bear one's cross.

Are you still with me on this one? I think it'll make a little more sense, just hang on.

This past week, the Interfaith Ministerial Association – the collection of religious leaders on LBK and St. Armands – met to plan our interfaith Thanksgiving service. At the end of most of our meetings, we get to chat with one another and, from time to time, discuss theology. We had time at the end of our meeting, so I asked Rabbi Stephen Sniderman this question: I heard in a talk once that there is a Jewish folk practice in the spring time every year to “pretend as if you are happily married.” At the end of the season, many couples found themselves to be happier in their marriage. Is this correct or just an interesting story?

The rabbi replied: first, let me tell you in the Jewish faith and life, there is no connection between marriage and happiness. For a long time, marriages were arranged and not done so on the basis of perceived happiness. It's not that one cannot, or should not, be happy in marriage, it's just not the goal. So, to start, I'd have to say that story does not match. But, I think the speaker was getting at a folk tradition that has some validity. The only way I can explain this is with a story: a mother and a father and their two children are in the car headed to a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. The children are sad because their grandmother – their mother's mother – died. The mom looks at her husband and then at her kids and says, “We are going to a happy celebration. Even though we do not feel happy, we must try to act our best. I want you to smile three times – once when we get there, once when we say happy birthday, and once when we say our goodbyes and thank the host for the party.” And, wouldn't you know it, the more that we try to smile, the more smiling becomes easier. That might be the Jewish folk tradition the speaker was talking about.

The rabbi's story reminded me of what St. Paul wrote: *when others are happy, be happy with them; and when they are sad, be sad with them*. This is a hallmark of hospitality for the people of the Jewish faith and of Christianity. *Contradistinction* comes in when we feel sad but are celebrating with others, that we too should celebrate, even if we don't feel it. Likewise, when others are sad, and we are over-the-top excited, we need to remember to be sad with them. After all, we know happiness because we have been sad; and we know sad because we have felt joy. It's a *contradistinction*.

Here is what all of that has to do with today's Gospel lesson. Jesus was asking/is asking/will ask his disciples what others are saying about him. He then asked what they believe about him. It was a contradistinction – what are others saying; what are you saying?

Right now, there are people out in the world that think they know everything there is to know about Jesus and have some negative feelings toward him, his church and his followers (us). Just like in Jesus's day. Jesus, however, is asking us to make a distinction between what we hear on the proverbial street (or in the news, or in politics, or read in papers, on social media and the like) and what we believe in our hearts. Is there a distinction there? If so, Jesus asks, which voice are you going to listen to?

Peter speaks up and says, "You sir are the messiah." Jesus then tells him to say nothing about that. He then explained that in six months, he will be arrested, tried, and crucified. He will then rise again. Peter took Jesus (literally, took him by the hand and led him away from the others) and rebuked him.

Okay, this is where things get interesting with Mark's Greek Gospel. There are things in it that we are not accurately reflected in our English version. Peter rebukes Jesus. Jesus then rebukes Peter's rebuke. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, when a pupil rebukes his teacher in private, the teacher rebukes back. If the student can't "hear" what the teacher is saying – and thus is unwilling to learn – the teacher must turn his back on the student to show that he is not, or perhaps cannot, listen and learn.

Jesus turns his back on Peter – according to Mark – he then says something. Jesus then calls his (other) disciples and says: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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.*

You notice I skipped over what Jesus said. Mark recorded it this way: *Get behind me Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*

Over the summer, I've been reading a new book – Wuest's New Testament Word Studies. I purchased the book because professor Wuest is a leading Greek scholar who believes word order, particularly in Mark's Gospel, is important. It provides a contradistinction between what is said first and what is said last, and in Wuest's words: there is a contradistinction between what word is used compared to what other word could have been used. The word order in this story indicates Jesus was most likely not calling Peter "Satan". He was calling the satan Satan (the word means one-who-makes-others-stumble). As Wuest suggested, it mirrors the temptation sequence in the first part of Mark's first chapter when Jesus was tempted three times by the evil one. The temptation was, in summary, a way to avoid the cross, to worship the evil one, and then be in charge of everything. Jesus instead went to the cross and then became in charge of everything. The tempter was giving him a short cut which included, of course, worship to it. Here in the eighth chapter, Jesus gives his voice to the tempter by saying, "Get behind me." He also sets for the ability for us to say the same thing when the tempter attempts to do the same with us. We simply say, "In the name of Jesus, get behind me." Which is yet, another contradistinction.

Back to Mark's Greek Gospel text, the phrase, "pick up your cross and follow me", is not so easy to put into English. Wuest suggests this is how it would be written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in English:

*Having called the crowd together with his disciples, to himself, Jesus said to them: If, as is the case, anyone is desiring to come after me as a follower of mine, let him at once begin to lose sight of himself let him at once begin to lose sight of his own interests and let him at once begin to take up his cross and let him start taking the same road in company with me and let him continue to do so moment by moment day by day.*

Contradistinction: it takes a lot more words in English to make the same phrase in Greek.

"To lose sight of himself; of his own interests" and come after as a fellow-journeyer with me. "To deny" is the English phrase which Wuest suggests is "to lose sight of himself". There are two Greek words to "deny" one is "bios" the other is "psyche". Bios – it's where we get the term biology. It is living physical matter. Psyche is, well, where we get the word psyche. In the Church, centuries following the phrase, many fellow-journeyers would deny the bios in themselves. They would strike themselves to inflict pain, starve themselves, etc, as a way to deny and to carry one's cross. The problem is, the contradistinction is, the word "psyche" was used. Thus, as Wuest suggested, one is to "lose sight" of oneself and one's own interests. It's not a physical thing, it's a psychological thing. Psyche, in first century Greek, is also a way to describe the essence of someone, or, perhaps, of their soul. It's not to lose their existence but to lose their expectations, desires, their ego and self-inflicted outcomes – to lose sight of one's self and interests – and to place one's psyche as a travel companion with Jesus himself.

Just like the Jewish mother that says in contradistinction: we are sad, but we are headed to a celebration. Smile three times...

In contradistinction, lose sight of one's self and journey with Jesus.

Religious extremists and outspoken atheists seem to have the loudest voices on what faith is, or in contradistinction, is not. Do you believe them? Are you listening to them? Or, are you, as Jesus invites us, to journey with him. To let go of our own expectation and results-driven life and instead, to journey with him. Are we going to listen to all the other voices, or, are we going to do our best to forgive as we are forgiven and to love as we are loved.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.