

At the 8 a.m. service, a parishioner asked me, “How’s your metanoia going?” [Meta-noia, beyond-thinking, was my topic last week] I love it when I introduce a new word to you all and then y’all use it. It makes me so happy. So, I ask you, how’s your metanoia going? Are you ready to do some above-and-beyond thinking with today’s Gospel lesson? I hope so because I am fired up to try something out.

Here’s my thinking: I am having difficulty with Jesus using the phrase, “Pick up your cross and follow me” with the people in the first century. The cross was a horrific torture device that ended with death. The primary purpose was to show to everyone that the Roman Empire owned your body and for those who step out of line, there is a torture device that is used to show everyone who is in charge. For years I have been thinking that “pick up your cross” was a catch phrase. It wasn’t until the persecution of Christians – where martyrs would literally be forced to carry their cross – when this phrase took on a literal meaning. The problem is it would require the type of work for a doctorate to get to the root catch-phrase of it. And I just don’t have that much time. Nevertheless, the meta-noia for me is to go above and beyond thinking on this. I think that Jesus came to set us free. For us to live as we were meant: to forgive as we are forgiven, to love one another as we are loved, to help others with their burdens. So I’ve been doing a lot of thinking and reading about this passage. Here is what I found.

First, there are two types of “following” in Greek (and English). Both require a volunteer so I can show you what it means. John – the volunteer – is going to follow me around. As I walk down the aisle and through the rows, John is following behind me. The second “follow” is this: John, will you walk with me. As we walk, John is side by side with me. We can talk and share and plot out our journey together. (Thank you John, you can take your seat) When Jesus said, pick up your cross and follow me – the follow is that of the second example, to journey with, to walk side-by-side; not following at a distance. The first kind of follow is one where I am the leader and I plan things out and all you have to do is stay in line behind me. The second kind, the Jesus kind, is where we walk together and experience things together.

Our faith tradition during St. Paul’s lifetime was not called Christianity, it was called The Way; or People of the Way. The Way is a journey and we are walking with Jesus. When Jesus called Peter and the disciples to “follow” him, he called them to walk with him, side-by-side and experience life together. As such, today’s lesson shows us that those who want to follow Jesus must journey with him, side by side.

As far as picking up the cross, I think it was a catch phrase that had something to do with picking up, or carrying, our faith. Like the faith that Abraham had, the cross that Jesus was referring to can be seen as picking up Abraham’s faith; the one that St. Paul wrote about – “Although he was 100 years old and ‘as good as dead’ and his wife Sarah was well past the age of having children, Abraham still had faith that God’s promise of being the father of many would happen.” That’s

the cross I think Jesus is inviting us to pick up – faith. The type of faith that passes all rational thinking, that is certainly above and beyond ourselves, faith in what we do not see, that’s our cross. It makes us unique. It makes People of the Way, stand out or aside of others that live by what they can see.

The entire phrase that I am working on is this: to [journey] with me is to deny oneself, pick up one’s cross, and [journey] with me. In Greek, to “deny” oneself is to lose oneself in something. Have you ever danced and just lost yourself in it? Have you lost yourself while listening to a symphony or watching a play? Have you ever spent time playing with kids, or grandkids, and lost the sense of time because you lost yourself in the activity? Like metanoia, it is a way of traveling outside of our own interests, or own self, and losing oneself into something else. Jesus is asking us to lose ourselves, to take up our faith, and to walk with him. It’s not easy to do; we can get a glimpse of it, but, it’s also something that we can get caught up in.

If I can add all of these things together, and translate it into our 21st century conceptual language, I would say that Jesus is calling us to walk vulnerably with him. To be vulnerable is to pick up the faith that Abraham had. To journey, to walk, with Jesus is a path of vulnerability. And, this is where the cross comes in – to hang from a cross is the most vulnerable a person can be. Everything else has literally been stripped away.

In our day and time, we are raised not to be vulnerable. In fact, we are supposed to be the opposite. We need to work hard, save, protect ourselves from the whims of the market and interest rates. Wall ourselves off. We need to protect ourselves and our families. And, all of this is true. We do need to do this; but, in faith, we are to take a vulnerable journey with Jesus.

If you are wanting to journey with Jesus, and hearing that it takes vulnerability, let’s look at it this way: let’s take up our prayer life. I am all into prayers of thanksgiving and praise. All the day long, give prayers of praises and thanksgiving to God – thank you for the day, for the beauty of the day, for the air we breathe, we give thanks and praise for our families and our church family. I love this form of prayer. Yet, the journey with Jesus asks us to go above and beyond that prayer life. We need to pray with vulnerability. Here’s one way: when you find yourself sitting in a cold, windowless room, on an examination table with that flimsy paper gown, sitting on butcher paper (why do they call it butcher paper when in a doctor’s office). Sitting there with nothing to read or to do but just be cold and worry about what the diagnosis is going to be – in that place, that is where we learn to pray with vulnerability. *God, I’m sitting here, shivering, bored, and anxious; help me.* Or, when we have a loved one sitting in a doctor’s examination room and there is nothing, nothing at all that we can do to fix the situation: *God, I’m sitting here in panic and frustration and feel as useless as a broken pot.* Invite Jesus to journey with you in that place of vulnerability. This is the journey with Jesus that we can take, in this century, on Longboat Key or wherever you are, life sometimes brings us to places like this and that is where we journey with vulnerability with Jesus.

I was sent a beautiful poem about prayer and vulnerability. The author said to pray in vulnerability while sitting on the plastic bench of a city bus. Pray for the bus driver (who you have no control over). Pray for those who are getting on the bus; pray for those who get off the bus (none of which you have any sort of control over). Pray for those who are on the bus with you, those who are walking on the sidewalk, for those who cannot walk. Pray, and pray with vulnerability of sitting on a bus for others. And, if you do not need to take a bus, get some coins and ride one, and pray; because if you do, you will be praying with vulnerability. You'll be praying in a situation where you cannot direct where you go or who you are sitting with. If that doesn't work for you, right where you are, think about those who depend on the bus and pray for them. Pray for those for whom riding a bus would be a delight but not possible. If we practice praying when we are not in control of our circumstances or surroundings, we will be taking a Lenten journey with Jesus. It will also help us identify and help others who, at various times in their life, are not in charge of their own circumstances. We will be journey with Jesus with the very people that he called friends.

We are all people of The Way. That's who we are. We are called to journey with him and to bring someone along with you; bring those who need help, bring those who don't think they need any help; bring the doubters, the scoffers, the skeptics and the saints, bring the faithful and the faithless, bring them all on this vulnerable journey of prayer and service; bring them with you; lose yourself in the journey, believe in something that you can not see, and join in the journey with Jesus.