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Pentecost 14

Friends, this morning's Gospel is one of the big ones, the guide that Jesus gives to truly follow him: that if any want to become his followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow. That those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Christ's sake will find it.

I once read this passage as one of self-sacrifice; as one of our own need to give up of ourselves for the sake of others. And while I find much of that reading, not all, but much of it to be true, I have found it less a reading of command to give up something of ourselves... and more a reading about encouraging us to not lose sight of who God has made us to be.

In the Gospel today, Jesus tells off Peter for saying that Jesus' future in Jerusalem needs to be prevented. And Peter, to me, seems terrified that Jesus could be killed. I get why Peter says what he says. I understand that feeling of wanting to prevent someone from being hurt, in this case, being killed. And Jesus' response, I used to think it was about rebuking Peter. That Jesus was saying, "Peter! Stop focusing on the human stuff that doesn't matter, focus on the God stuff that does!" But I don't think that's it. It's almost as though Jesus is saying "Get behind me Satan!" to Peter for himself. [For those of you who remember the Fellowship of the Ring and the Lord of the Rings, in that first movie, Frodo has the one ring of power. And he's with Gandalf, and Frodo learns that he has to carry the ring. And he's terrified and implores Gandalf to take the ring, yelling "Take it Gandalf!" to which Gandalf responds in a booming and yet tired voice, "don't tempt me, Frodo!"]. I hear in Jesus' words the temptation to forgo his suffering, to pass the burden of God's call for him in order to save his life.

I think Jesus felt afraid. Because of fear, Peter wanted Jesus to stop preaching, to not go to Jerusalem where he was called, to hide. And Jesus admits Peter's fear is one he feels, a stumbling block to him. In his outburst to Peter are echoes of Jesus' tears in Gethsemane. In his outburst to Peter is echoed his prayer that God take that cup of suffering away from him. So too is echoed the fear in your life. When you fear that the truth of your life, the gifts of God that are yours seem like they have no place in the world. When you fear your voice doesn't matter to those around you or that others don't want to know you. When you fear sharing something you've created or worked one, afraid that what you've made or what you've loved will be discarded, thought insignificant. The fear that you, what you love, and what you bring will be hated.

But this is why our Gospel this morning is one of encouragement. That we be encouraged to be ourselves even when we are afraid and when things seem hard. In our story, Jesus knows that despite the consequences, if a worthier world is to be made, he can't stop being who God called him to be. The message of the gospel, the work of love and justice, Jesus KNEW it would lead nowhere else but death on the cross. He knew that he could stop, could save his life by being silent, by refusing to heal the sick and feed the poor. But for the words from the Song of Solomon to prove true, that love is strong as death, Jesus knew that he would have to bear his cross, and that it would be worth it.

Jesus' example and his words today remind us to be who we are called to be. That we are called to gain that life that we are meant for in which our joys, love, and gifts are celebrated, even though it means we must bear our cross in a world where the son of God can put killed on a cross.

Each of us has our cross to bear as we seek the lives we are meant for; we bear the sufferings of bad financial news, broken relationships, the hurts we endure and the hurts that we do to others. But never let that stop you from being you. Don't ever believe that your voice, your passions, your art, your jokes, your work, never believe that you are insignificant. Even when your cross feels unbearable, even if you

have to stop and set it down for a time, even if you need to ask for help in carrying it, remember to keep walking. And live the life God calls you to. Amen.