

Matthew 16:21-28 September 3, 2017

I once came across the following quote, attributed to William Douglas, who was a Supreme Court Justice "As nightfall does not come at once, neither does oppression. In both instances there is a twilight when everything remains seemingly unchanged. And it is in such twilight that we all must be most aware of the change in the air-however slight-less we become unwitting victims of the darkness" Douglas was talking about a moment of transition-a space in time when everything hangs in the balance. At such a moment the future breaks in. This time is the neutral zone, because it can be a time when people are caught between on way of perceiving reality and another.

Matthew tells us that an important transition took place immediately following the encounter when Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Right after Jesus said that a Peter-like faith would be the rock upon which the church would be built, Jesus told them not to tell others.

Next, Matthew's gospel has the words "From that time on" in verse 21. We've just turned to a new chapter. The last time Matthew used those words was at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, immediately following the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

So what is this transition? We see right away that there is a challenge. First is the challenge from Jesus, then the most understandable challenge from Peter. Finally we're left with the question of what it means to follow Jesus.

First of all, Jesus addresses the religious leaders of his day. I like the translation I came across which said that Jesus addressed the lay

leaders, the senior pastors, and the Bible teachers. This gets us into the picture. Two things happen in these few verses. First of all, Jesus clarifies what kind of Messiah he will be, and then Jesus teaches what it means to be a disciple in light of this revelation. He now is saying it again.

We're still in this picture as disciples, by the way. Wouldn't we have said the same thing? We also have to get behind Jesus. I interpret this as a pretty good place to be. If we're behind Jesus, we're ready to follow him wherever he might lead. By the way, when Peter gets back into that line, he's there to climb the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter's there for the Last Supper. And he's there on the day of Pentecost. Only when we're in line are we there for those times when God is made manifest.

To get behind Jesus at the point means we're there with our faults and frailties already revealed. We aren't in this line because we have faith like a rock, but simply because the graceful command of Jesus places us there. However, to be placed in this line behind Jesus means leaving some things behind us. What did Peter leave behind as he was corrected by Jesus? Peter had to drop that CEO type of messiah. Peter had to leave behind false dreams of glory that he might have had. Peter may have thought he might be the grand marshal bringing Jesus into Jerusalem. But he didn't get to ride in that convertible; he had to get behind Jesus.

Maybe it's a hard call for us to face, too, as we get back in line. Maybe we dream of a Bible that can answer every possible question. Maybe we want a church that overcomes all obstacles and in which there is

never a cross word spoken. Maybe we want our church leaders to be unblemished and wise at all times.

But what does Jesus say? Jesus says that we can't envision what glory is all about unless we first embrace a cross. We can't have a perfect religious leader unless we'll walk with her or him in the line that forms in the rear, where true humility begins. We can't have that perfect church unless we realize it's a fellowship of people who've been picked up and saved by the mercy of God.

We can't have our lives unless we're willing to lose them. Talk about a message that's countercultural. We're not even to be in charge of our own lives. So, who is to be charge of our lives?

Remember that many believed the Messiah would come with pomp, power, and prestige. Only a few of the prophets had dared to suggest that the Messiah might suffer and die. Few dared to think that the Messiah would champion the poor and break bread at their table. No wonder Peter says to Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you" These words had been spoken before. Jesus had heard them in the wilderness, but then they had been the words of Satan. It isn't too surprising that Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me Satan".

The message in Matthew is that we find our lives by following Christ. We find our lives in the same way that Jesus found life, through taking up the cross.

So, if we're disciples like Peter, we often don't get it right. At best we're apprentices. But if we're in that line, we can keep our eyes on Jesus. And if we follow, Jesus will lead us from a cross to glory. I personally

like to think that when I come to communion, I'm getting back in line. Walking forward to receive communion is a powerful metaphor, because it isn't for me to decide who is in the line. I can't bring anything more than empty hands. Isn't this what Jesus said would mark as disciples?