

Today's gospel lesson follows right after the one last week in which Peter named Jesus as messiah and Jesus both affirmed him *and* told him he didn't really know what he was talking about. He continues in today's reading by making the bad news explicit: he will suffer and die at the hands of the powers that be, and what's more, someone who follows him needs to be ready to do the same. They must deny themselves, take up their cross, lose their lives in order to save them. The watered-down cultural interpretation of this, as we know, is that we should be cheerful about the difficulties we encounter, and shoulder our burdens willingly. The toxic interpretation is that victims of injustice should accept their lot without complaint, as God's mysterious will.

But we all know that Jesus is not saying those things. He's saying so much, in these few words, and Christians have had so much time to live out and reflect on these words, that one sermon can't do justice to this reading. It's sort of the gospel in a nutshell: the Kingdom of God is revealed, comes alive, when disciples hold the tension of the shame of crucifixion and the glory of the resurrection. The shame of crucifixion AND the glory of the resurrection, held together, not reconciled but held in tension, reveal the Kingdom of God. And what does that mean when it's at home? It means that we disciples are called to a life of marginalization, to identify with the nobodies like slaves, foreigners, criminals, and those understood to be cursed by God. It means we choose to identify with those who resist the empire's control, who contest its version of reality and who are vulnerable to its reprisals. It means identifying with a sign of the empire's violent and humiliating attempt to dispose of all who threaten or challenge its interest—the cross. **To so identify is not to endorse the symbol but to counter and reframe its violence.** As the end of the gospel shows, it is **to identify with a sign that ironically indicates**

the empire's limits. The empire does its worst in crucifying Jesus. But God raises Jesus from death to thwart the empire's efforts and to reveal the limits of its power." ([Carter, Matthew and the Margins](#), p. 344)

One hallmark of the empire that's sickeningly prominent right now is racism, most horrifically in the repeated police shootings of Black men. Joe Gatto, a city council member in Des Moines, said indignantly a few weeks ago, while rejecting BLM demands for police reform, that he's the least racist person he knows. Joe Gatto has not done his homework. The charge of racism is not a personal attack on the character of white individuals. It's an acknowledgement that in some ways our "empire" is built on keeping people of color at a disadvantage, and white individuals need to educate ourselves about that and get engaged in re-forming our institutions. In this case, accepting the humiliating reality that we've been oblivious to the exclusion of people of color would be one small picking up of the cross, one small denial of self, or self-regard.

That was a lot, right? Just jump right into a **core** passage of the gospel, boil it down briskly, and go straight from there to one of the most painful issues of the day. But I wanted to lay it out there so that we'd have context for the rest of what Jesus says, which is "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Chosen One coming in his kingdom." In other words, those who *are* disciples, who *follow* Jesus on this path of countering and re-framing the violence we live in, will discover **in their lifetimes** the presence of the kingdom. We're not shouldering a cross in this life to get a reward in the next; rather, our alternative practices which reject or subvert violence, themselves create a foretaste of the kingdom. Disciples' alternative way of life manifests in God's realm in part now and

foreshadows the future full establishment of God's realm.

This is what I want to think about today. How is it that living in an alternative way, swimming upstream, going against the grain of society, yields a life that is full of God? Rhoda Janzen, in her memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, recalls the dread that Mennonite missionaries awoke in her. She was quite sure, deep down, that God was calling everybody to be a missionary—that that was the real, most Christian thing to do with your life—and she couldn't imagine anything worse. It would be boring, she would be cut off from everything that gave her pleasure, it would be hard and dangerous and uncomfortable, and for whatever reason, that's what God really wanted good people to do. She could not resolve that problem.

She wasn't all wrong, either. It is absolutely the case that when we commit ourselves to living in the way that we think is faithful, we take on a significant amount of drudgery and tedium and even difficulty. I remember when Tom and I lived in Stockton, Kansas, where I had my first church, and we had Caroline. I so persistently and guiltily wanted a photo album in which to record her precious new life, but I held off because it was extravagant and self-centered to spend money on photos of a baby which, let's face it, looked like most babies. I eventually yielded to the temptation, and boy am I glad, but it was one of many, many struggles I've had in the course of trying to live faithfully.

A more serious instance is the real cost of participating in the ongoing work for justice. Just on the issue of police violence against people of color, there's no end to the work that needs to be done. There are clergy strategy discussions, BLM marches several times a week, city council meetings to attend, letters to write, bail funds to donate to—it does not end. It does not end, because police violence does not end, and because too many people don't care.

So instead of being expected to be a missionary to the heathen Chinese, we can quite realistically assume that we are called to be allies in the fight against racism. And we are . . . but how is that a foretaste of heaven? And how do we sustain it?

Dorothy Day titled her autobiography *The Long Loneliness*, because as a child and young woman, she felt a persistent longing. She saw that her church members were not having a banquet and calling in the lame, the halt and the blind; those who were doing so, like the Salvation Army, did not appeal to her. She says, "I wanted, though I did not know it then, a synthesis. I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. I wanted it for others too. I did not want just the few, the missionary-minded people like the Salvation Army, to be kind to the poor. . . . I wanted everyone to be kind. I wanted every home to be open to the lame, the halt and the blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake. Only then did people really live, really love their brothers. In such love was the abundant life and I did not have the slightest idea how to find it."

Dorothy Day was lonely until she and Peter Maurin established the Catholic Worker houses, where there was a place for anybody in need. She was lonely until she found a way to live, every day, dawn till dusk, in a community whose baseline was that everybody belongs. And her life is also not one that I could sustain—I have too strong a need for solitude and beauty—but it's instructive that she identified welcome and hospitality as necessary to abundant life. Life which incorporates hospitality and the breaking down of barriers is cross-shaped, but it is also joyful because it joins up human relationships with relationship with God. Dorothy Day always said that she looked for the eyes of Jesus in each person's face, which means she knew they were there. Jesus looks out at us from each creature's face.

I've talked long enough, and not begun to do justice to the reading. I cut out as much of this sermon as I left in, and you can thank God for that because it could have been a lot worse. But I'll wrap up with a return to Rhoda Janzen, the ex-Mennonite rebel who likes little black dresses and teaches English at a small liberal arts college. Although she imagined self-denial and responding to God's call meant going overseas to a life of hardship and deprivation, I think she stumbled into the real thing by the grace of God. Denial of the "self," the false self or small self, the ego that fancies itself on its own, comes about when we are curious about others, when we take risks to immerse ourselves in the realities of people different from ourselves—that is, we deny ourselves and pick up our crosses when we ground ourselves in the larger self that is God, immanent. In Rhoda's case, she fell in love with an extremely blue-collar, Pentecostal, recovering alcoholic who thought she was wonderful *and* couldn't wait to share his weird church with her. After a couple of months, she says, she was terrified that a well-meaning believer would button hole her, hand her a tract, and inquire whether she'd enjoy a basket of muffins and a nice chat about her status as an unrepentant sinner. And she found a home there and her world got bigger. What I'm saying is, Jesus becomes visible in the eyes of people not like us. We have to die to our neatly boundaried selves to see that. AND if we keep at it, we find not only the grief and despair of trying to heal a broken world, but also the joy of the kingdom of God, right here, right now, in our midst.

Let us pray: Holy One known so trustingly by Jesus, the invitation to abundant life sounds like an invitation to death. Help us to hold the reality that resurrection comes via the way of the cross, and nudge us along our various ways toward full lives given to the mending of creation.

Amen.