

This story sets up for some of the reflection to follow on this gospel passage. It comes from the book TATTOOS OF THE HEART, by Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle, who many of you know founded HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES in Los Angeles to work with kids involved with gangs. He writes:

“At some point midway through my chemotherapy, I arrive at my office after a treatment. A tiny, 15-year-old gang member plunks himself down in the chair facing my desk. He looks positively stricken.

“I hear you have leukemia,” his voice cracks.

I nod solemnly.

There is an awkward silence, which he finally fills.

“My cat had leukemia.”

This just sits in the air.

“Yeah,” he says. “She died.”

“Oh,” I say, “really sorry to hear that.....Awfully glad ya stopped by, though.....you really, uh....picked me up, right there.”

But my favorite moment of all, though, came when P-Nut, a young African American, called me from jail. Collect. He had just read the news of my illness in the paper.

“Hey,” he says, screaming over the jailhouse din. “What’s with this leukemia anyway?”

“Well, it’s cancer....in the blood. The doctor says my white count is too high.”

P-Nut is immediately dismissive.

“Those doctors,” I can hear him shaking his head. “They don’t be knowin’ nuthin’.”

“Whadda ya mean?”

“I mean, HEEEEELLLLLLOOOO!!!” ‘Course your white count’s high.....YOU WHITE!!!”

I’m accepting more collect calls from jail now and calling them ‘second opinions.’ (p. 189-190, slightly adapted)

Good news and bad news today. Good news? Only 2 points! Bad news? Nap time will be as long as usual. Go back to sleep.....

First, some background. This is the midpoint of Mark’s gospel. It is also a watershed and major turning point in his account. We need to note that the word Christ appeared in this gospel at the first verse : “Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...” but has not been mentioned again until now – 8 chapters later. Throughout the subsequent 7 chapters of Jesus’ ministry, questions about His true identity and authority have been at the forefront. There has been secrecy, an incipient promise that eventually we shall know who Jesus really is, and we’ve seen that the demonic powers have identified Jesus as God’s Son, but what does that mean? At this point, if we were reading the gospel for the first time, we wouldn’t know that

death awaits Jesus, although there has been some foreshadowing in His baptism (1:9-11), the opposition He encounters (3:6), and John's execution (6:14-29).

Jesus takes His followers to Caesarea Philippi – a Roman, therefore, GENTILE setting, and puts to them a basic question: “What’s the buzz? What are the people saying about me?” Why all of a sudden this concern with His reputation and why did He lead them here to this pagan region?

The responses they give are inconclusive. But Jesus announces, for the first in what will become a number of pronouncements, His impending suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection. Jesus also tells His disciples what He expects of them and what fate awaits them if they follow Him.

Peter's response that Jesus is the Messiah is astonishing because, thus far in Mark's gospel, Jesus hasn't done anything that looks very Messiah, Christ-like. Israel wasn't expecting a Messiah to look like Jesus. Not much about Him has looked God-like, divine. Perhaps Peter's acclamation is anticipatory, based upon what he has seen of Jesus, looking forward to future good work. Perhaps this is Peter's way of saying, “So far, so good, Jesus – your healings are impressive – I think one day, with a lot of hard work – you might actually come to look like the Messiah we have been expecting.”

But this suffering, death stuff? Jesus needs to get rid of that sort of talk. The people are not going to buy into it. It seems like the central concern of this passage is to provide the opportunity for Christ to correct misperceptions of God's Messiah. “Messiah,” when applied to Jesus, not only includes His eventual death and resurrection; Jesus will ultimately be defined and known by His death and resurrection. Through this encounter, our expectations for Christ are being rearranged.

But expectations about the fate of His followers are rearranged as well. He addresses “the crowd with His disciples,” and invites “any” who want to follow Him to listen up and dare to walk with Him. Everything is tied to “Follow me.” Notice it's not “worship me,” “adore me,” but “follow me.” We keep trying to substitute church stuff for discipleship. But it doesn't work that way. This is a way of life, not a way of worship. We can do the worship thing in an hour – (give or take depending on how long the homiletic torture is); discipleship takes all of our life.

In Mark's Gospel, affirmations about the identity of Christ are connected with claims about discipleship. Following Jesus means to participate in His ministry as He defines that ministry. To believe that Jesus is the Messiah is to follow Him down the path He walks. Thus, crucifixion and resurrection are part and parcel of the disciple's life. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2021, p. 33-34)

Second, the heart of this cross bearing – it's self-denial – is not a popular notion in our ‘it's all about me' culture. The problem is that we have been led to feel that the self is sacrosanct: just as in an earlier time it was thought never fitting to deny God, so now it seems never right to deny oneself. That's part of the deception of evil. My life is all about me. But if we are disciples of Christ, our life is all about God – and others.

This notion of self-denial is closely linked with self-surrender. Which means that dying like Jesus is not limited to the close of our earthly life – or with a terminal illness or long-term pain. Dying in a theological sense begins when living begins – we share in Jesus' dying through the whole of our lives. Whatever makes for pain – pain of flesh or of spirit – should be a part and parcel of our Christian dying. Diverticula or disappointments, dying hopes or the death of a loved one, the insecurities of youth and the tremors that come with aging – whatever it is that pricks my pride, assails my lustiness, intimates my mortality, takes the joy from my very bones – in all these brief moments of what Rahner called “dying installments,” we confront

the critical question – how are we to cope with them? Do we protest? Whine? Despair? Complain? Get angry? Cling all the more frantically to what has not yet been snatched from us? Or accept each breakdown, not simply with resignation, with passivity, but with gratitude – as a grace from God? A grace in dying that can pulse through Christ's body in the world, can channel God's life and grace to others. We have all met people who have suffered greatly in this life yet were a joy to be with. And we have also, sadly, dealt with people who are bitter, entitled, selfish, and angry at what life has dealt them. Look at our responses to COVID. Do we whine about wearing masks again – or surrender our preferences for the sake of the greater good, the common good? It's a choice we all have to make. But if we are disciples of Christ – FOLLOWERS not just worshippers – then we have no doubt about which choice is the right one.

I find it fascinating to listen to the conversations over vaccinations in our culture. Those who refuse to get vaccinated seem to only speak about themselves. Remember, we ARE our brothers and sisters keepers. And I'm not speaking here about those who are UNABLE to be vaccinated because of pre-existing conditions. I'm talking about people who refuse to go and receive a free shot for the sake of others. Why? They protest "It's my right." Forget the rest of humanity. It's all about me! Contrast that with this true story.

It was the year 1665. In a small town called Eyam, a tailor named George Viccars received a shipment of cloth from London. When he unpacked the box, the cloth was damp, so he hung it up before the fireplace to dry. A week later George was dead. A few days after that one of his landlady's young sons died, and then the man who lived in the house next door. It wasn't long before 20 people per week were dying in the town. The disease was bubonic plague.

As the plague raged on and others died in the little village, the rector of Eyam's Church of St. Lawrence called the people together for a meeting. He proposed they draw an imaginary line surrounding Eyam that the villagers would not cross as long as the plague was present. In effect, he was suggesting that they voluntarily quarantine themselves rather than trying to escape to places where there was no plague. The smart thing for any one person to do was to get out of town as quickly as possible, in case they had not been infected. But the people knew how quickly the plague would spread if they went to other towns. So the people of Eyam made an amazing sacrifice. They stayed put, thereby almost guaranteeing that each of them would die, but the plague might not infect neighboring villages. By the time the plague was over in November a year later, 260 of the 300 people of the little town had died – the highest percentage of the population anywhere in England.

Does such nobility exist anymore? We are people who look after our own interests, first and foremost. "Enlightened self-interest" is the way we rationalize it. To lay down our lives for the greater good is a foreign concept. And yet that is what Christ did for us. It's what Christ was all about. Christ is still looking for followers, not worshippers only. Christ is still looking for people who understand what sacrifice and self-giving are all about. It is to them that He will say one day, "Welcome, good and faithful servant." It is to those who are poured out in service to others that He will open the gates to His kingdom. Amen. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Nov-Dec 2010, p. 21-22)