

THE LEAP OF FAITH

Matthew 16:21-27

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This passage from Matthew contains one of Jesus' hardest sayings. "If you want to come after me, if you want to follow me, you must say no to other things - including some of the things you really want to do - and take up your cross and follow me." As one of my preaching mentors says, "It's one of those passages most of us could do without." We prefer passages like, "Come to me, all you who are tired and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Or "The Lord is my shepherd; he makes me lie down in green pastures; he restores my soul." We want to hear those kinds of passages - comfortable words, words that provide some cushion in a sharp and often frightening world.

"Deny yourself? Take up your cross?" Do we really need that? Do we need life to be any harder right now? We're already living through a pandemic, and climate change, and what some people call "the age of anxiety." Stories of war and violence are front page, top-of-the-hour news, every day. Isn't life hard enough already?

Jesus doesn't just say this in the middle of the day, randomly. He's prompted by Peter. Here's what happens. Jesus is telling his disciples that they should prepare for the fact that he will be put to death. He's made too many people angry and afraid along the way. His enemies are threatened by him. He sees the signs; he knows it's coming. And he wants his disciples to understand. So he begins to tell his disciples what is about to be required of him, how he is about to walk right into the trap set for him in Jerusalem, where he will suffer, and be killed, and then be raised from the dead. Peter evidently doesn't

hear the last part, about Jesus being raised from the dead...after all, who could take in something so outlandish? But he hears the first part and he's having none of it. "God forbid, Lord! This won't happen to you," Peter says. It is simply too much for him, to imagine his wise, young teacher coming to such a quick and terrible end, especially an end that can be avoided. Why walk into a trap when you can turn around and walk away? Why take a risk you do not have to take?

Throughout the gospels, we see Peter saying what the rest of us are thinking. Over and over again he is the disciples' spokesman, the one who says the things they do not dare to say, the one who asks the questions they do not dare to ask. "God forbid, Lord!" he says when Jesus predicts his own death, and Jesus explodes.

"Get behind me, Satan!" he says to Peter. "You are a problem for me, a stumbling block - you're keeping me from God and God's ways." What a shock that must have been for the other disciples, to hear Peter, the first disciple, called Satan; to hear Peter, the foundation rock of the church, called a hindrance, a stumbling block in Jesus' path. What did Peter do wrong? What was his big sin? All he did was protest the forecast that Jesus would suffer and die. All he did was say out loud that there had to be another way.

Here's the problem with Peter's words. Here's why they made Jesus so upset. As far as Jesus was concerned, it was Satan talking. Satan, the ancient symbol for temptation, who from the beginning of time has offered us alternatives to the will of God - easier alternatives, safer alternatives, flashier alternatives - all of them temptations for us to do and be something other than what God has called us to do and be. In the case at hand, the temptation for Jesus is to play things safe, to skip the trip to Jerusalem and find another way to save the world - to direct the effort from secret headquarters, to elude his

enemies, staying just out of their reach and leading his holy revolution without placing himself at risk.

Jesus got angry at Peter because what Peter said was a real temptation for Jesus. Imagine that Jesus thinks about it for a moment. "Maybe Peter's right...maybe I could just tone down my language for a while...maybe I could try to keep the authorities off my scent. All those things I do that make them suspicious of me - healing people on the Sabbath, spending time with women, touching the people who are considered unclean...maybe I could take a break." Jesus entertains these thoughts and then realizes, "No." "No, that's not who I am, that's not my calling, that's not my purpose. My purpose is to demonstrate love in every way possible. If someone needs healing, I'll heal them, every day including the sabbath. I'll touch them whether they have leprosy or not. I'll continue paying attention to children and engaging in conversations with women. I want all people to know that God loves them, especially the poor and the forgotten."

Jesus comes to his senses, remembers who he is, and then looks at Peter and says, "No, Peter. You don't understand God's ways. I'm living the life God has in mind for me, the life for which I was created. It's not an easy way of life, but it's the only way I'm going to live. And if you all want to follow me, you'll take up your own crosses. You'll risk something. You'll give up things, a lot of things. You'll make sacrifices. But it will all be worth it, because my way of life brings joy and meaning and purpose, my way of life leads you closer to the heart of God, my way of life is abundant and eternal."

On this day that we celebrate the birthday of the church, we hear these words of Jesus, challenging each of us to take a leap of faith.

I have been so inspired by the risk-taking leaps of faith I've witnessed by people in this church.

A sister who donated a kidney to her brother, even though she knew that it would risk her own health if she ever became sick. That kidney prolonged her brother's life.

Families who have adopted children, families who have taken in foster children, families whose doors always seem to be open to the children of the neighborhood.

I have seen people give up hours of their own precious time, on their days off, to work around the church - weeding and gardening, painting, putting in electric fixtures and running wire for internet, teaching Sunday School and confirmation, volunteering at the Thrift Shop. There's always something else you can do with your time, but they give theirs away in leaps of faith, again and again.

Stephen Ministers who go above and beyond responding to the needs of their care receivers.

Generous donors who gave up a new car or a vacation when the church had a financial need.

How about the young adults who are spending their summer participating in Bike and Build? No vacations, no beach days, not even a summer job or internship. In fact, they are **spending** their money to ride their bike across the whole country, raising awareness for the problem of affordable housing...most of the time sleeping on hard cement floors. It's inspiring!

Adults who say yes to the call to chaperone the mission trip - some of them giving up a week of vacation time, some of them leaving their own families behind. It's never easy to get away - there's always so much to do to get ready, at work and at home, and

these adults will come home exhausted! But they do it because they've listened to a call. They have heard the question, "What can I do to bring more love and hope into this world?" And they have answered in leaps of faith.

These 64 students leaving for Maine in a few days have each given up something, too. And I know for some of them it may feel like a risk, especially if it's their first trip. I've heard some of their doubts and questions... "Will I like it? Will the work be too hard? Will I get along with the people in my assigned group?" Some of you are probably missing grad parties or opportunities to work and make a little money. We applaud you. And we pray that this experience is the first of many in your life that show you that life isn't always about doing the easy thing, but about listening to your heart. We pray that this trip helps you to listen to the ways God is speaking to you. If you follow that voice, you'll find life to be an amazing rewarding adventure.

I want to end with a quote from Robert Kennedy: "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all of these acts will be written the history of this generation. Each time we stand up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lots of others or strikes out against injustice, we send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Thanks be to God who calls us to choose love again every morning, and who empowers and equips us to serve.

Acknowledgments:

This sermon was inspired by and quotes from a sermon written by Barbara Brown Taylor, "Risking Life," in her collection, [The Seeds of Heaven](#).