

Who Said It Would Be Easy?

We like to be comfortable. When we come to church on Sundays, we walk into a climate-controlled space where, if everything is working as it should, it's not too hot in the summer and not too cold in the winter. We like to be comfortable where we sit, so in this church members grab a seat pad that someone thoughtfully made years ago and put it where we sit each week. One comment I heard repeatedly when we were going through the merger conversation and trying to decide which building would be best for our ministry was that the pews here are too hard. I watch you wiggle just a bit on Sunday mornings, and I know you are thinking the same thing. And I don't blame you. After a hard week out in the world, whether that week has been going to work every day and juggling kids at the same time or going from one doctor's appointment to another, just for one hour it would be nice to come to church and be both comforted and comfortable.

Maybe that's what Peter was going for too. He had just said that he thought Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God. There was nothing in Jewish tradition as it was understood in his time that said suffering was going to be part of the Messiah's work. Peter may have looked at the world around him, thought it needed to be better and that with Jesus, the Messiah in the world now, it was going to be easy from here on out. He and the other disciples would have work to do, sure, but it would be as part of the inner circle of the messiah. How hard could it be?

But that's not what Jesus said. As soon as his identity as Messiah was known at least to those in the inner circle, Jesus began to reinterpret what it meant to be Messiah. It didn't start with the power and the glory. It started with the suffering and the dying. Probably that's not what Jesus wanted either. The way he said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan" using almost the same words as he used when he was being tempted in the wilderness shows that Peter's way, the easy way that avoids all the pain, was a real temptation to him. But Jesus knew the easy way wasn't an option either for himself or for his followers.

So for Peter and for us, this story from Matthew's gospel becomes a story of a different kind of cross – a crossroad, a moment of choice and decision about which way to go. Peter had hoped that the way to follow Jesus would be straight and easy. If it wasn't going to be, would he still follow?

And what about you? The call to follow Jesus is not an easy one to answer. It goes against the grain of the culture. Frederick Buechner puts it bluntly: If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, "Mind your own business," and Jesus says, "There is no such thing as your own business." The world says, "Follow the wisest course and be a success," and Jesus says, "Follow me and be crucified." The world says, "Drive carefully -- the life you save may be your own" and Jesus says, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The world says, "Law and order," and Jesus says, "Love." The world says, "Get" and Jesus says, "Give." In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.

Yet most of the time, those of us here this morning find ourselves laboring under precisely that delusion. We are comfortable Christians. We are blessed compared to so many in the world. Although our place of privilege in this country is no longer what it once was, we are certainly free to proclaim the gospel and act on our faith as our brothers and sisters in some other countries are not. We are financially secure. Sure, there are things we'd like to do in our church, but we own this beautiful and useful building in a desirable location. We are comparatively rich. We are used to being comfortable in church and in our place in the world.

There are those who are follow Jesus to distant corners of the world to serve those in gravest need or to teach the gospel. Others, closer to home, live at a subsistence level while ministering to the homeless, the immigrant, those just trying to make ends meet. Maybe you will hear that call some day. Maybe you heard it in the past. But as you stand at the crossroad with Peter today, what does it mean to us comfortable Christians to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus?

I suppose that at the very least it means to allow yourself to be uncomfortable. That's part of what it means to deny yourself – to put someone else's need or someone else's comfort in front of your own. That's the kind of counter-cultural thing Buechner was talking about.

I remember a number of years ago, we did a mission trip along with a group of folks from Marple Presbyterian Church from here to the coastal islands off South Carolina. When we planned the trip, I allowed the last day to be a fun day, a day for everyone just to relax at the beach. But when Thursday night came, we had a problem. The work on one of our sites was unfinished. We were painting a house, which sounds simple enough but it had been plagued with problems all week long – a giant hornet's nest that had to be dealt with before one end of the house could be painted, rotten fascia boards that had to be replaced and so on. There was no option to leave it for the next group to finish. The next group wasn't coming for several weeks. So we had to decide – did we leave the job we were doing for someone who really needed it unfinished, or did we give up our day at the beach? The kids had a long and thoughtful discussion that night. In the end, one of the kids said, "What are we here for anyway? We're here to do the work, to help other people. I vote to finish the job. There will be other times to go to the beach." So that's what we did. We put in a long day, all three work crews painting. We were exhausted when we were done. But we finished. The kids were on their way to discipleship. They learned what it was to deny themselves for someone else.

That's just a little step toward what Jesus was talking about, but it's a start. A willingness to experience some discomfort for the sake of others. As we move into this Fall, as we begin to actively invite people, especially those with disabilities into our church, that may be where we start. Small things that have been the same for years might begin to change. We will make some alterations for the sake of others. There might be people here you don't know. People might not behave the way you would like in church. Someone, God forbid,

might even sit in your pew. It might get uncomfortable. Please, remember that this is part of the denying yourself for the sake of others that Jesus calls us to and don't give an itchy or noisy neighbor in the pew the stink-eye. Instead, welcome them and get to know their name. Deny your own comfort for the sake of another.

In light of what we've seen elsewhere this week, it seems like a little thing, in the face of the Texas Navy and other first responders who set off not being concerned for their own comfort to rescue and provide shelter for those affected by Hurricane Harvey, in the face of fire fighters risking their lives to save home and lands in California and Montana, in the face of aid workers and journalists in places like South Sudan, who give their lives to save others. But for us comfortable Christians, a willingness to be uncomfortable ourselves so others may find a place of comfort is a place to start.

There's one other thing to think about. Jesus' suffering ended with resurrection. Jesus promises us that those who lose their lives for his sake will find it. It's not just about the hard stuff or the painful stuff. There's good stuff at the end. In a quote that could have come from Jesus, but did come from Mae West, of all people, "I never said it would be easy. I only said it would be worth it."