

Proper 17 A Sept. 3, 2017

Different

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I owe a lot to nuns. The women who have taken vows to live a religious life in convents and communities. It's surprising to me how many people are unaware there are nuns in the Episcopal Church, because I grew up with the nuns who were part of the Sisterhood of the Holy Nativity, a community of Episcopal nuns based in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. My mother was an associate to the order, much like many of you are associates to the Community of the Holy Spirit in New York or the Transfiguration in Cincinnati. When I was a teenager, the Sisters of the Holy Nativity started an associate program for teenagers, and I was the first teen in my diocese to complete the 6-month trial period following the prescribed rule of life, which consisted of attending church, praying daily, reading scripture, and receiving spiritual direction, and was received as an associate. One of the things the sisters offered the associate teenagers was an annual retreat at their convent. It was always a good time, one where I met other teenagers who followed the same rule of life. It was also a time when the nuns chose to open our hearts and minds to a different way to look at and understand life as a follower of Christ.

To this day I remember one particularly powerful lesson they taught. We were sitting on their porch on a perfect summer afternoon, and the nun leading the retreat, Sister Barbara Jean, first asked us to each say what we wanted to do with our lives. The answers were diverse: one person wanted to be a lawyer, another a professional baseball player, I think I was in my wildlife biologist phase and that was my answer. After listening with intention, Sister Barbara Jean then asked the priest who was part of the retreat to tell us his call story. Then she told hers, then Sister Mary Helen, the other retreat leader told hers. And it was our turn to listen. And hear how people chose to turn from one way of life to another, all because they felt God call them to something different than what was expected from their families, society, or friends.

Then the challenge came. Sister Barbara Jean asked us to spend the rest of the day in quiet prayer contemplating all the important choices we would be making in the next few years: where we would go to college, maybe who we would marry, what our chosen profession would be, those kinds of things. Then she reminded us our lives aren't really what we choose to do for a living, we are more than a career or a job, we are God's child, and she challenged us to give every decision we will make to God and let God influence our choices. To go to college where we felt God was calling

us, to choose the work God wants us to do. This is a different way to live, she told us, one that she believed Christians are called to live. Ultimately, she said, the choice was ours, we were free to choose God or not, she wasn't going to make the choice for us, or even tell us that is what we should do, just reminded us it is something worth deep prayer and serious thought.

I still remember that afternoon in silent prayer. And I remember the moment I came to the conclusion that if I believed all the words I say every Sunday morning in the church services I attended then it really wasn't that hard of a choice. Since I am not a wildlife biologist, you can probably guess what I chose. I am still in contact with many of those other teenagers who attended that retreat, and many of them took different paths too.

That exercise of thinking about life as a follower of Jesus, I believe, was Sister Barbara Jean and Sister Mary Helen's way of trying to help us understand what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. For some, this might be a difficult Gospel to hear, with Jesus calling Peter "Satan" and then all that talk about losing your life and taking up your cross. A lot of folks have problems with the cross, and they aren't alone. It appears Peter did too, and who could blame him. In Jesus' day a cross was not a pretty piece of jewelry or symbol of a type of religion, it was how the powerful authority of Rome tortured, humiliated, and executed criminals. It was a symbol of shame and suffering. Have you ever thought about how those two things still seem to go together: shame and suffering?

So it's no wonder that Peter, perhaps out of his deep love and admiration for Jesus, would want to prevent someone he cared about from such pain and suffering. It's also easy when hearing what Jesus said about teaching his disciples that he would endure suffering and death and then rise again they would focus on the suffering and death parts, and miss the last bit. It seems to be part of human nature to focus on the negative, or skip over things we can't understand, like the resurrection. So perhaps we can see why the author of Matthew's Gospel shows us Peter missing the part about the resurrection and focusing on what he can do to prevent something terrible from happening to someone he loved. Wouldn't most of us want to do the same?

But Jesus wasn't just predicting the future in today's Gospel, he was teaching who the Messiah is, who he is, and what he came to do. Jesus didn't come to bring humanity more of what humanity already has. If you read through the Gospels, you won't find one account of Jesus multiplying anyone's money. Jesus didn't give anyone a house, or a donkey. He didn't put his disciples in positions of power and then ask for political favors. He didn't hurt or destroy people. Jesus came to offer something different: freedom from all that.

Freedom in the form of forgiveness and healing. Freedom in the form of befriending the poor and women and those considered outside the acceptable members of society. Freedom that was embodied in his resurrection, a mystery we can't explain, a mystery deeply connected to Jesus' crucifixion and shows us a new kind of life on the other side of suffering, pain and death. Resurrection opens up possibilities for a different way of living, one that lives not for money or fame or popularity or power or position or ambition or accumulation of stuff or other forms of self-importance, but for Christ. That's what all that language around losing life and gaining life means. Jesus wasn't asking his disciples to physically die. He was teaching that following him means letting our understanding of what it means to live and live a successful life has to die so that we can see there is something wildly and beautifully and abundantly different when we live a resurrection life.

When Jesus said his followers must take up their cross, he wasn't saying we must tie ourselves to some miserable, abusive situation and just take it. Taking up our cross is about realizing there is a cost to living the resurrection life, a life different from expectations. Because not everyone will understand the choice to live differently, to live into the freedom Jesus brings.

I'm not talking about a life of recklessness either. I'm talking about what Sisters Barbara Jean and Mary Helen were trying to convey to a dozen or so teenagers on a summer afternoon: to live the life God has given you by living into what God is calling you to.

That's also a way to understand what happened to Moses in our reading from Exodus, the first reading we heard this morning. At the time the event we heard about took place, Moses had a pretty good life going for him. He'd escaped from Egypt, where he'd grown up in Pharaoh's palace, but had killed an Egyptian man when he saw that man whipping a Hebrew slave. Moses ran away, and was taken in by Jethro, the Midianite, he married one of Jethro's daughters, worked for him, had a couple of kids, and had a safe, secure, comfortable life. That burning bush changed everything for Moses; as the moment he saw it, we heard he turned away from his life as a shepherd working for his father-in-law and turned toward God. We heard God say Moses was how God was going to answer the prayers of God's people and deliver them from a life of oppression into a life where they would be free to live as God wanted them to live. God called Moses to a different life, and as we read further into the book Exodus, we will see that for Moses, there will be no turning back from his calling.

In both readings we heard today, we can perhaps see the freedom being offered isn't the freedom to do whatever we want when we want, it is the freedom to do as God calls us to do; to live into forgiveness, healing, generosity, nonviolence, and the love of God. The good news is this calling isn't just for Moses, or the disciples, or nuns, or priests, it is for all of us. The challenge might be much like the one offered to me on a summer afternoon, to pray deeply and consider seriously how God is calling to us, as individuals and as a parish, to live as followers of Christ in this moment in time. What journeys are we being called to embark on? And do we see the love of God in Christ in those callings? Perhaps as we listen to and recite the words of the creed, confession, prayers of the people and prayers in the Eucharist we might listen with openness, and pay attention when a word or phrase jumps out at us, for that may very well be, if not a burning bush, then the Holy Spirit, who calls us to live the resurrection life of hope beyond suffering and death.