

“Come and Die, the Master Calleth” – Kent Dunnington

Mt. 16:21-28

From time to time I swing by Ben and Michelle’s house to take Caden out for an adventure. One time I really went all out. We went to Buchheit’s where we got popcorn to eat, fed some of it to the chickens or whatever they were, tried on a bunch of different hats, tromped around in hunting gear, moved lawn furniture into a clear greenhouse and acted like we were kings in a castle, sat on a big tractor and made loud engine noises, bought some treats for my dog, bought and ate a bunch of candy, and threw our change into the fountain when we left. Then we swung by McDonald’s before I took him back to his house. I was exhausted but feeling proud about what a good man I am, and as I pulled into the driveway and stopped the car, I said: “Well, what do you think, bud?” He looked at me and said: “We should do something fun together.” “I thought we were doing something fun together,” I said passive-aggressively, feeling my blood pressure rise. “Oh. Okay,” he said, and got out of the car. I wanted to drop kick him across the lawn.

I can hear the disciples, and Peter especially, saying something similar upon hearing Jesus, this far along in their journey together. Jesus says, “If you want to be my disciples...” and their blood pressure begins to rise. “If? If?!!!! I thought we were being your disciples! What do you think we’ve been doing all this time?!” But just as Caden evidently had a different understanding of fun than me, Jesus makes it clear in this passage that he has a different understanding of “disciple” than Peter and the others were working with. And, of course, a different understanding of Messiah, too.

This text is a hinge in the gospel of Matthew. The book gradually builds to a crescendo in the preceding passage, which Christina preached on last week. There, in response to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon comes through in the clutch: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus exclaims, “Blessed are you, Simon!” “You’ve finally got it,” he seems to say. “You’re my man, and I’m going to call you Peter, Petra, which means rock, because from you I will build my kingdom, and it will be so powerful that not even hell itself will be able to defeat it.” What a moment! They have heard what they have been waiting to hear. Jesus is Messiah. And Messiah is the one who will lead the oppressed children of Israel to military victory over their oppressors, the Romans. Finally, the revolution is underway! Put your boots on, Roman Empire, your time is up.

And then, before they could even compose their fight song, the wheels just come totally...off...the bus. Have you ever seen a faster fall from grace than what Peter went through? In verse 19 he is given the keys to heaven; in verse 23 he is the incarnation of Satan. In four verses, Peter goes from being the rock to being the stumbling stone.

This is why the Confession of Sin has historically been part of the church's liturgy, and why I think we should incorporate it into our Sunday morning services. Peter is declared the rock on whom Jesus has built the church and immediately becomes the first to betray him. As individuals and as the church we repeat this pattern over and over again. In the Confession of Sin, we acknowledge that this is who we are. In the Confession of Sin we are reminded that our faithfulness is dependent upon a continual awareness that, like Peter, we presume to follow a God who would give us status and success rather than humiliation and death.

But are we really all that much like Peter? After all, we live on this side of resurrection; we know how the story turns out. We would not rebuke or betray Jesus with our lives.

This weekend, I worshiped with a room full of the incoming freshman class at Greenville College. As the service was closing I scanned the faces of hundreds of students, and I was overcome, as I often strangely am in such settings, with the fact that many, perhaps most, of these students will not be disciples of Jesus in ten, twenty, fifty years. Why? Think of your own closest friends from high school and college, friends who believed in God and heard the gospel preached. How many of them are still devoted earnestly to the way of Jesus? Very few of mine are. Why? Or just think about your own life. I can only speak for myself here, but I know my faith to be fragile. I have rebelled against God numerous times in my life already, and I cannot be sure I will not do it again. Why?

Because it is hard to be a disciple of Jesus. I just don't know any other way to put it. It is exceedingly difficult to become a Christian. It is a hard road to take. For many, it is too burdensome.

You may disagree with me here. You may believe that people do not willfully reject God, but rather that they simply do not understand what is being asked of them or what is being offered to them. The scriptures testify otherwise, for they suggest that even many who saw signs and wonders refused to believe. I am convinced that many people who hear the gospel preached hear a definite call to total self-abandonment to God, and they are disturbed and repelled. I'm convinced of it because I know it to be true of me.

The philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard says that when a person is confronted with the claims of Christ, the immediate tension is not a tension of the head—if it were, then signs and wonders, demonstrations, could resolve it. No, when we are confronted by Christ the tension is in our hearts. The conflict is not between belief and doubt but between faith and offense. "Blessed is the one who is not offended at me," Jesus says. Our response to Christ reveals the state of our hearts; we will either take offense at Jesus or we will faithfully follow. As Paul says in Corinthians, Christ comes to disclose the secrets of the heart.

And often, in our hearts, we rebuke him like Peter. We say, "God forbid it, Lord!" This cannot be what God is like. God could not call me to give away my financial security. God could not call me to break off this romance. God could not ask that I give up being popular. God could

not expect that I make peace with my body image. God cannot expect me to ask forgiveness of my parents. God cannot expect me to forgive my parents. God could not call me to such a thankless profession. God would not allow me to remain single for a lifetime. God could not ask that I open my home to this stranger. God has no business messing with our perfect family. God could not expect us to give birth to this mentally handicapped child. God could not demand that I say no to my lust day after day after day.

If I did those things—I would not even be myself. To do those things would be the death of me! And God would not demand that I die! He wants me to live!

And Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus is calling you. And I am convinced that you are in exactly the same position today that Peter was two thousand years ago. Like Peter, there is something within you which senses that this Jesus has the words of eternal life. There is something within you which tells you that this is the way, that this man Jesus is the embodiment of truth and goodness and love, that he is Messiah. And yet you also sense that the call of Jesus is the call to hand over the reins of your life. That is our predicament. It is the crisis that comes upon us in the call of Christ. It would be death to follow; it would be a lie to run away. And your response will disclose what is in your heart.

I asked Matt Zahniser if I could tell this story because it is a continual source of encouragement for me, and he said that I could. When Matt was younger, he went through a time of intense spiritual trial. He was teaching at a secular school, and he was experiencing some extreme disappointments and frustrations about his vocation. He had been asking God to help him, but he received only empty silence in return. He also had a colleague at that who was persistently trying to get him to abandon his faith and to see that atheism just made more sense. One night, on his knees in his living room, he poured out his heart to God. He asked: “Why do I keep with you, God? I never hear from you. I don’t get guidance from you. Why do I keep on?” And then, Matt said, it was like a voice said to him, “It’s because you love me.” And, Matt said, that was true. I did love him.

Lord, give us hearts that love you, we pray. Give us strength to follow you. Somehow, give us grace to die. Amen.