

Pots, Crosses and Letting Go

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Today's lectionary text has the same impact of a juicy plot twist – it leaves your jaw hitting the floor. You know the plot twists I'm talking about – the ones that have you exclaiming “Oh. My. God.” I still remember being in shock in the movie theater, learning that Darth Vader was Luke Skywalker's father in *The Empire Strikes Back* – “It's impossible!” Or a more contemporary reference might be learning the identity of the “Half Blood Prince” in the Harry Potter books. And who remembers how *Of Mice and Men* ends?

Like Jesus' disciples, we, too, find the sentences in today's text to be shocking. You can see Peter and the others yelling at Jesus that this wasn't supposed to be the plan. Jesus was supposed to be the mighty messiah who would restore Israel to its past glory. What's all this talk about dying on a cross? Fortunately for us, we have the hindsight of knowing what Christ sacrificed on the cross, but we are still very troubled by Jesus' commands that we must lose our lives in order to save them; that we must take up our own crosses. Um, that wasn't part of the deal either, was it?

This troubling text flies in the very face of how most of contemporary Christianity is lived. In today's society of quick-fixes, 30 second attention spans, and rampant individualism, we have come to see Christianity as being a minor aspect of our lifestyle. We attend church on Sunday mornings. We pray to God to help us find our car keys. We try to be nice and avoid swearing. But if we are truthful, we don't want drastic change in our lives. Sure we want poor people to have better lives, but not at the cost of our own standard of living. Ultimately, many profess faith in Jesus Christ because we want a life insurance policy for souls. This is a text that confronts us with the idea that following Jesus is not something we dabble in. Jesus is calling us to a radical level of commitment to his Gospel. His words challenge our unwillingness to truly embrace the gospel; it should be life-changing.

If you are like me, perhaps this text depresses you. It's like looking into a mirror and seeing the reality of just how substantial my imperfections as a Christian truly are. I have failed miserably in my call to follow Jesus. I'm afraid of conflict, and I am constantly running from discomfort and suffering. I don't love my neighbors – I find them frustrating. I don't pick up my laundry off the floor, let alone pick up a cross. I'm being a bit facetious, but I feel many times that I'm just keeping my own head above water, so how can I ever just up and let go of

everything and follow Jesus completely? Let me leave this question for a little while and return to it later, as it's an important one we all struggle with.

During my senior year of college, I got obsessed with pottery. I took a class and I loved it so much that I created a pottery club, which enabled me to gain access to our pottery studio at any hour. I would gather a few friends and throw pottery until 3am. Then, I would lie in bed thinking about centering the clay and what I might try to create. Playing with clay is really wonderful...to feel its unique texture in your hands, to mold it and stretch it to its limit. But, the process of creating a pot is also incredibly frustrating, especially for beginners. Centering the clay so that you can make a balanced pot takes a while to get the hang of. Then, you begin to pull up the walls of the pot; any slight miscalculation can throw off the clay's balance. As you pull the walls to their limit, if you push them just a bit too far, the walls collapse and it's back to the drawing board.

If you do manage to throw a pot successfully, you then return in a day or two to trim the pot as the clay hardens. As you trim the pot of its excess clay and reshape problem areas, there is always the risk of the pot breaking. Next, your pot is then ready for its first firing – the bisque firing. It might crack. Finally, you add

a glaze to the pot, and yep, you guessed it, it still might not make it. The glaze can crack, it won't melt properly, strange chemical reactions can happen, etc.

I can remember screaming with frustration many times in the old gym that was converted to a pottery studio. There were just so many times when my dream of making a beautiful pot was shattered in an instant. I had put so much time and energy into this piece, and then it was all for nothing. But, as time passed, I began to realize that letting go was a part of the process. In fact, I was getting good practice in the art of letting go. Indeed, there was a powerful lesson in all of this process of creation and failure, not unlike Mr. Miyagi teaching Danielsan the art of karate through the school of life in *The Karate Kid*. Remember – “wax on, wax off?” I came to realize that this process of creating pottery helped me to understand the Buddhist concept of not getting attached to things – that attachment and desire causes suffering. How true! But, I have also come to understand that this lesson of “letting go” is also profoundly Christian.

I believe today's text is trying to teach us about the process of letting go. I think Jesus is asking us to let go of our desires and distractions that keep us away from God. Much of our lives are spent focused on the wrong stuff...on accumulating more wealth...on thinking of only our own needs...on a new car or a

new promotion...on holding on to anger over hurts that happened long ago...or, holding onto guilt and shame long after we've been forgiven. These preoccupations consume us, absorbing all of our time and energy. We put them before God, making them idols. We trust that these desires will bring us happiness, wholeness and peace, but by holding onto them so tightly, we can't allow anything else to enter into our lives, particularly the hope of the Gospel or the presence of God in our lives.

I spent a lot of time over the past several days pondering what it means to "take up one's cross." People speak of unpleasant things as being "my cross to bear." And certainly the cross is a symbol of painful sacrifice. But, the most prominent meaning of the cross, which so many of us wear and which fill all of our churches, is of salvation – that we have been freed from our sins, despair, and even death. So, I am drawn to the idea, then, that "taking up your cross" has to do with doing those things that help set people free, including ourselves.

So, I now return to the question I asked earlier about how we might follow Jesus more completely. Well, first, I no longer think of today's text as being depressing, rather I think it is an urgent call for us to reprioritize what is important in our lives, as we only have so much time on this planet. To regain our focus, we

must become well-versed in the practice of letting go. As we let go of our desires, we are no longer enslaved to them. I'm not saying we should give up on our dreams, but refocusing our energies on to a faithful God who has promised to love us forever is a way of putting everything into perspective. Perhaps some of our dreams will fall by the way side, or maybe we won't marry our perfect match, and we might be stuck driving a Ford Taurus, but that matters not when we realize that we have even been freed from the bondage of death! Secondly, then, by letting go of our obsessions, we make room for a variety of new practices which are fulfilling and help to free others. I'm thinking of the many scriptures that encourage us to practice love and forgiveness, humility and sharing, concern for the sick and vulnerable, and proclaim the hope of the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is a matter of practice. Letting go is one of the hardest challenges we can face and more times than not, we'll fall off the wagon and return to our self-centeredness. But that's no reason to give up. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, often wondered if he was compassionate enough, if he was truly leading a Christian life. But one day he met a Catholic nun who said to him, "You don't have to suffer for the sins of the world, darling. It's all ready been done." In other words, if we are not preoccupied with justifying ourselves, then we can focus on other things...like freeing people. This text declares that nothing will ever be

the same after we experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Through Christ's life, death and resurrection, we are set free to help Jesus bear the cross for all!