



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminsternpls.org](http://www.westminsternpls.org)

## *Belonging in the Silence: Letting Go*

Timothy Hart-Andersen

Sunday, April 3, 2022

*Psalm 91; Mark 8:27-36*

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus says, “Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

Traditional Lenten discipline called for believers to deny themselves something for the season. I remember my childhood Catholic friends walking home from school during Lent talking about what they were giving up. They made a daily discipline of letting us know about it.

Those ten-year old ascetics were on to something: the spiritual practice of letting go. As a Protestant kid I suspected there was more to it than giving up chewing gum, but we have to start somewhere.

We’ve been working our way through Lent, moving slowly toward the events of Holy Week. We will gather next Sunday to re-create as best we can the Palm-Parade that enters Jerusalem as the week opens. Assuming good weather, we will start our worship outside with palms and sing our way into the sanctuary.

Long before he gets to Palm Sunday, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. They try several responses – John the Baptizer, Elijah, or various other prophets. Jesus lets their answers hang in the air.

Then he asks another, more penetrating, question, “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter is the only one who dares answer: “You are the Messiah.”

That confession of faith is often viewed as the hinge upon which the gospel turns. That moment of recognition. There’s the time before, and the time after. Here, at the halfway point in Mark’s gospel, Peter identifies Jesus as the long awaited one, the Christ, the Messiah – probably saying out loud what others were also thinking.

Peter blurts out the identity of Jesus as if that were the end of the story.

You have the power, Jesus. You’re on top of the world now. You’re the culmination of history. You’re the one God chose to fulfill the promise. We have arrived.

Jesus is unimpressed. Peter has missed the point.

He orders them not to say anything to anyone about what they've heard. He doesn't want people to think an easy victory is all there is. There's more coming, and it's the important part. The Messiah will be rejected. The Messiah will suffer. The Messiah will die – and only then will triumph come.

Peter can't stand what Jesus is saying and rebukes him – and, in so doing, demonstrates exactly what Jesus is concerned about: an unthinking leap by his followers to power, to the big win, to prideful conquest over forces perceived to be arrayed against the people of God. Peter wants triumph. It's why he resists the arrest of Jesus in the garden. It's why he denies knowing Jesus as the crucifixion looms. Messiahs aren't supposed to suffer.

Many who follow Jesus – then and now – like Peter, don't make it past the triumphant declaration...don't make it to the cross – and the cross is the pivot point, the cross is the hinge upon which the gospel turns.

This past week Pope Francis apologized to the First Nations of Canada for the terrible sin committed by the Catholic Church in the schools into which the Church and government forced indigenous children. The pope begged forgiveness of First Nation elders who had come to the Vatican to tell him what the Church had done to their children and to their culture – from the 19th century into the 1970s.

In his apology – which he will deliver on Canadian soil this coming summer – the Pope said that the Church’s brutal colonial domination of native people was a counter witness to the gospel. The Church was finally owning its complicity and letting go of the storyline it had long sustained about its work among First Nations in Canada. It took more than 100 years for Rome to come to this conclusion, to understand and admit that the Church had developed a narrative that dehumanized people created in the image of God. It was time to let go.

The Church had acted like Peter. It had gone to the place of triumph, lording it over others because of the privilege perceived to be theirs by virtue of their power. The Church was so sure of itself, so convinced it was right and those outside its circles were wrong.

“Get behind me Satan,” Jesus says to Peter.

Hubris and hypocrisy enrage Jesus – especially when shown by those who claim to be his followers. The apology Pope Francis offered didn’t refer to Satan, but it might as well have. He named the “evil” in which the Church had engaged in its attempt to spread Christianity.

“The content of the faith,” Francis said, “Cannot be transmitted in a way contrary to the faith itself.”

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/read-the-full-text-of-the-pope-s-apology-for-canada-s-residential-schools-1.5844874>

In making his apology and owning the sin of the Church, the Pope was “taking up his cross” and following Jesus. He was practicing – appropriately in this season of penitence – the Christian discipline of letting go of what is not true, releasing the lie that had taken up residence in the Church’s account of its work among First Nations in Canada. For more than a century, the Church had lived within a narrative of its own making, rejecting the presence of God in the very people it had come to serve, trying to make them over in its own image.

The content of the faith cannot be transmitted in a way contrary to the faith itself.

When anyone who follows Jesus says they are called to love neighbor on Sunday and then does the opposite on Monday the church’s hypocrisy is laid bare. We cannot call Jesus the Messiah one moment and in the next reject his willingness to join those he calls “the least of these” and invite us to follow. Jesus did not come to align himself with the powerful, the successful, those on top of their game, but with those on the receiving end of the cruelty and injustice of history.

Our nation had its own long overdue moment of coming to terms with history this week. The Senate unanimously

passed an anti-lynching bill and the president signed it into law – 122 years after it was first introduced in Congress. You’d think the need for it would have been obvious in 1900 when the law was first proposed. The nature of lynching has changed over time. It now takes place on the hard pavement of a city street or in the driver’s seat of a car or in a raid on an apartment. No matter how it happens the racialized violence of lynching has the same awful, terrifying result.

Ten years ago, James Cone opened the eyes of many of us to the link between the cross and the lynching tree, in his book of that title. White Christians in America long ago convinced themselves they could deny, ignore, tolerate and, even at times, encourage racism. We never connected the lynching tree to the cross. We had told ourselves it was God’s design for some to be superior over others, and then we set out to build a social structure and an economy and a nation based on that false narrative.

We are beginning to let go of that lie, but it will take time. The Church should be in the lead as we own the sin of our complicity in the past. It will take listening to other voices for that to happen.

“By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight,” Howard Thurman wrote, “The slave undertook the redemption of the religion that the master had profaned in his midst.” (<https://www.pastortheologians.com/book-reviews/2020/09/30/the-cross-and-the-lynching-tree>)

The story of 400 years as told from one point of view only will not be relinquished easily. As the Catholic Church knows, its work with First Nations is only beginning. We also will need to resolve much in the journey ahead. We will need to get to the point of addressing the need for reparations. The theological term for that is atonement for sin. Confessing the sin of the past is not and should not be easy. It should cost us.

There is an uncomfortable reality in Christian faith. We get there, sooner or later. It's coming closer as we move through this season. It's the cross – an astonishing religious symbol. There's nothing triumphant or hopeful or inspiring about it. It's a sign of loss, not of gain. It suggests mortality, not life. It points not to victory but defeat.

That instrument of destruction becomes our walking stick when we “take it up.” We lean on it as we move on the way. It accompanies us in life, always reminding us that as we follow Jesus we live in solidarity with those who suffer. To take up the cross means letting go of faith that embraces power, letting go of faith that always wins,

letting go of faith that never breaks, letting go of faith that cannot see beyond itself.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it,” Jesus says, “And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

Sister Marie Augusta Neal wrote a book 45 years ago titled, *A Socio-Theology of Letting Go*. She was responding to theologies of liberation rising in places where those who were poor or oppressed were finding their voices. What would people of power say to the demands to end unjust systems in our land and elsewhere, she wondered.

“Ours must be a theology of relinquishment,” she said.

Until we are ready to let go of – to relinquish – that which stands in the way of giving ourselves over to the life of faith, we will fall short of God’s hope for human community. Christian faith is fundamentally the act of letting go – of surrendering fully to the love and justice of Jesus Christ.

“The cross is laid on every Christian,” German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in 1937. “It is that dying of the old (self).” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM Press, 1948/2001), 44)

Paradoxically, when we let go, we discover we have nothing to fear.

“You will not fear the terror of the night,” the Hebrew poet says,

“For God will command the Lord’s angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” (Psalm 91:5-6, 11-12)

When Jesus says take up your cross and follow me, he’s saying take up that which is bearing down on you and from which you cannot escape. You carry that cross and I’ll carry mine, and together we’ll break free.

We will relinquish the old narrative and live into the new.

Maybe that’s what my little Catholic friends were trying to do in their own way as they gave things up for Lent. They were learning that, strangely enough, when we let go, we begin to receive life in abundance.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.