

Advanced Directives and the Cost of Discipleship

Matthew 16:21-28

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A now late Catholic deacon friend once shared with me his basic plans for he and his wife as they neared the end of their lives. They had their home. Just down the road was an assisted living facility when they couldn't quite make it at home. Then, there was the hospital and nursing home when assisted living was not enough. After the hospital offered all it could they had the funeral home. After that, their gravesite. And all of these places were within a mile of each other. They didn't have to travel very far at that point. Jack let me know, that woman (his wife) did not find that funny. She complained, "YOU PLAN EVERYTHING."

While we don't necessarily have to plan every detail down to the distance, it can be very helpful to make advanced directives, to pre-plan funerals, and have our affairs and major decisions decided before tragedy strikes in the moment. This is not as new of a concept as one might think. Jesus gives his advanced directives to his disciples in our text for today.

In the foretelling of his death and resurrection, Jesus completely turns the idea of Messiah upside down. With that, the role of discipleship changes too. Jesus rejects the idea of political triumph and replaces it with sacrificial love. Following the way of Jesus means relinquishing one's ego, letting go of control, and ignoring cultural expectations. God's justice and vindication frame the call to courageous faithfulness. Discipleship is physical and demands carrying the cross, surrendering, and following.

No longer is the Messiah the one who reigns with great power and instantaneously fixes all that is wrong with the world. The Messiah now follows the pattern of the prophets, challenging the authorities of the day, confronting systems of domination with ideas of love and mercy. In Jerusalem, the disruptive teacher is inevitably entering conflict, and Jesus' mission is increasingly incompatible with the expectations of political messiahship.

Suddenly, Peter, who was just handed the keys to the kingdom prior to this passage, rebukes Jesus. Peter cannot comprehend that Jesus must suffer and die. Ironically, Peter, who had just proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, now misunderstands Jesus' messiahship. Peter represents the temptation to choose political triumph over the way of the cross. We can probably relate to Peter here, but it is still socially shocking to rebuke a teacher in this context. Peter's boldness underscores how deeply he rejects the idea of Jesus suffering. We prefer a Messiah who can take control rather than one who surrenders to the will of God.

Jesus responds with "get behind me, Satan." Now, the meaning of the word Satan in this context probably refers simply to Peter as an adversary getting in the way of Jesus' mission rather than Jesus calling him the devil himself. Although, either essentially works in translation and calling Peter Satan makes a strong point.

Jesus goes on to list the conditions of discipleship: they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. This is a serious job description and discipleship is costly. Carrying the cross means embracing vulnerability and presence. It means giving up the ego-driven life in exchange for the authentic self, rooted in God. It means true life is in the coming kingdom, not in temporary survival. This is not so easy, because it means choosing our allegiance to Jesus over our self-preservation. Carrying the cross is embodying resistance to empire and following Jesus as he encounters suffering. This is just as tough a decision for us today as it was in the time of this text.

We are called to stand beside the vulnerable and oppressed. We are called to resist empire in favor of human life. We are called to surrender to God's will before fighting for political power. Discipleship is about supporting the meek, the underdog, and downtrodden. It has little to do with personal comfort or climbing the social ladders of our culture. Discipleship is about the freedom to become our truer selves. How would we be different if we were free to be our true selves? What does that look like?

We must first remember that God's judgment is not merely punitive, but much more restorative. God promises to set all things right for Christ's disciples. God will bring justice to all the nations. There will ultimately be accountability across the board. God's decisive action is about to break into history as God's reign is near. This is true for us today. Now, Christ has not physically returned to us and set all things right yet. God is very patient about bringing an end to all challenges and trials. For God uses such experiences for our growth and development, to help make disciples. Jesus also offers the promise that some here in that setting would not taste death before they see God's glory. He was likely referring to both the Transfiguration that comes next in Matthew and also, of course, the hope of the resurrection.

Yet, God's reign has already begun and God has entrusted the church to do its part. After all, just prior to this passage, Peter received the keys to the kingdom. The keys which we now have inherited through our faith. It is our job to join in on God's restorative justice in the world. God calls upon us to make right all we can to the best of our ability.

We can work to make right in our households, in our church, and at our places of employment. We can seek to care for the earth and for one another. Some of us even seek to restore inanimate objects like cars or furniture. That kind of restoration is good too.

Most importantly, we can restore our minds and our hearts to trust fully in God and join in on proclaiming and living the gospel in the whole of our lives. We are bearers of the good news. We bear witness to the good news through word and deed. Trust in the Lord with all of your heart. Rely fully on the Holy Spirit. There is no secret gimmick to growing as a church. Learn to listen more deeply and connect with each other, continue to learn, immerse yourselves in scripture, pray without ceasing, and continue to worship. Growing within is even more important than growing in number, though the latter might follow the former. What is most important to know is that while the cost of discipleship is high, we are not alone in our venture. We have one another, and Jesus is still our shepherd, the head of the church, always. Overall, trust in God whose grace is always sufficient for us. The advanced directive is that we are people of the resurrection. We proclaim the good news in everything we do. And God will always be with us in the journey.