

Discipleship 101

Matthew 16:21-28

The first week of school is often spent just figuring things out. You have to find your way from class to class, room to room, building to building. You have to figure out when you can eat, when you can study, when you can sleep. One of the most important things that happens is that you get your syllabus for each class. You get told the expectations for the class. You get told the due dates for assignments. You get told when tests, midterms, and finals will be held. That's important because the syllabus sets the expectations. It tells you what you will learn.

When I was in college, I shadowed a local pastor as part of my discernment process to figure out if I wanted to be a pastor. I went with him to Bible studies and meetings, got connected with the choir and food pantry at his church, and spent time listening to the wisdom he'd gained over his years of being a pastor. One piece of advice that stuck with me is what he told me about going to seminary, graduate school for becoming a pastor. He told me I needed to remember that I was there to learn, not to show how much I already knew. I needed to be open to what I would be taught. I had classes at both the beginning of college and the beginning of seminary that did that, a reminder of how much I didn't yet know, and how much I needed to learn.

That's part of coming to college, too. Even if you've taken AP tests or community college classes in high school, you may not know the subject matter the way your professors or TA's here want you to know it. You have to learn how to use the library and all of the electronic resources to find information. You have to learn new programs and lab equipment. You have to be open to learning that you might not know everything already.

In the section immediately preceding today's reading, in what was the Gospel reading last week, Jesus asks the disciples who others say that he is. As they've walked with Jesus from place to place, they've heard things. They've heard the crowds describe Jesus as John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets, and dutifully report that. They've even managed to put enough together to figure out that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. And they think they know what that means. They think that the fact that they've been following Jesus means that they will have a place of honor, a place of respect. They think they will follow him to a place of triumph. They think they know what it means to be a disciple.

Here, the narrative changes. It shifts. Jesus starts clearly teaching them what is to come. He's teaching them what they will have to give up, what they will lose. He's teaching them what he will have to do. And their expectations don't line up with the reality Jesus is teaching them.

Even though they had given up so much already to follow Jesus, left behind their fishing nets and boats, the disciples were not ready to hear what Jesus was telling them. They weren't ready to hear that Jesus wasn't going to be the Christ they thought they needed, one who would lead them to triumph over their foes. They weren't ready to hear that Jesus was going to be the Christ they needed him to be, one who suffered and died in their place.

When the disciples do not understand something, Jesus doesn't just leave them in their ignorance; he teaches them. When Peter misunderstands how Jesus will save the world, Jesus doesn't just say that his simple faith is

enough. Jesus tells Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus does this not out of hatred, but out of love. He wants Peter to realize what he’s saying. He wants Peter to rethink his presuppositions and expectations about what sort of Messiah he is following. He also wants to remind Peter that he is to follow Jesus, not lead Jesus. Peter objected to the thought that the Christ should die and sought to turn Jesus from the way that led to His death. Jesus in His reply to Peter made it terrifyingly plain to him how far and how deeply he had committed himself with his confession to the Christ. He was to cherish no illusion that he might influence or control the Christ. Jesus is the one who leads.

Peter, as spokesman for the disciples, has failed to see Jesus’ basic purpose. Jesus didn’t come to create the Kingdom of God by force, with an army coming down. Jesus came to die. Jesus came to die for sinners. Jesus came to die for sinners like you, and for me, and for Peter.

Peter also doesn’t want Jesus to go to the cross because he knows that means he will go to a cross, as well. And for Peter and the other disciples, taking up a cross wasn’t an abstract concept. It was something they had seen themselves.

In 71 B.C., the Romans put down a slave revolt led by a former gladiator named Spartacus. Starting in the city of Capua, 6,000 of Spartacus’ followers carried their crosses on the road to Rome and were each crucified along the way. Sixty-seven years later a Jewish rebellion broke out in Jerusalem after the death of King Herod the Great. The Romans swiftly put it down and 2,000 ringleaders carried their crosses to their death. As Jesus spoke, His followers could picture themselves as condemned criminals, carrying their crosses behind Him.

As much as we sometimes don’t want to admit it, we want what Peter wanted. We want following Jesus to lead us to triumph, not tragedy. We’ve become too comfortable. We think we live in a country in which being a Christian is an advantage, when we need to remember that we are strangers and aliens and exiles in a foreign land. There’s concern that, as the church gets more and more involved with politics, that the church has gained earthly power at the expense of its witness.

Following Jesus requires us to take up different crosses. Shane Claiborne writes in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*,

“I know there are people out there who say, ‘My life was such a mess. I was drinking, partying, sleeping around; and then I met Jesus, and my whole life came together.’ God bless those people. But for me, I had it together. I used to be cool (I was prom king, for heaven’s sake). Then I met Jesus, and He wrecked my life. ... The adventure has taken me from the streets of Calcutta, where I worked with Mother Teresa, to the war zone of Iraq, where I lived through the bombing of Baghdad. ... When I got home from Iraq, a woman came up to me... and said, ‘How dare you be so careless with your life and put your mother through all that. Jesus should be shaking His finger in your face, saying, ‘How dare you be so reckless.’” I listened, wondering to myself what Jesus she was talking about. The Jesus who died on a cross and invited His disciples to do the same? The Jesus who taught His disciples that if they wanted to find their lives they should lose them? Most of them did, by the way, which surely made some parents angry. Centuries of Christians have been jailed, beaten and executed for preaching that Jesus. How was I to tell this lovely

lady that Jesus was actually the very source of all this beautiful mess?”

When talking about the cost of following Jesus, it's hard to avoid talking about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death. A German Lutheran pastor, he had the chance at the eve of World War 2 to remain safe in the United States, teaching at a seminary in New York City. Instead, though, he returned to Germany, where he would lead the Confessing Church in opposition to the state church which had embraced Nazi ideals. He was arrested for his part in a plot to kill Hitler. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote “[w]hen Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.” A contemporary of Bonhoeffer, Hermann Sasse, said something similar: “To believe in the cross always means also to carry the cross. A yes to the cross of Christ is also a yes to my cross.”

Understanding what discipleship means, what it means to follow after Jesus, is difficult. But the promise of Jesus is not just in an example to follow. It is in what he did that we try and fail to imitate. In his self-sacrifice, in his death in the cross, there is resurrection, new life. And in everything, from the little deaths of growing up to the death of our bodies, there is Jesus waiting for us, raising us up, to be with him. When the call comes for us to take up our crosses and follow him, it turns out that we've already got our crosses with us. The cross marked on your forehead and heart when you were baptized. The cross that is not a burden, but a blessing. A cross that binds us with Jesus, and with each other.

When we teach about Jesus, when we follow Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised that we face opposition. But because of the opposition and persecution Jesus faced, because of the persecution that led to his death on the cross, we can face whatever the world throws our

way. So, too, our Lord has called us to live as his people in faith. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he encouraged them to take up their cross and follow him. Life in this world will not be easy. It will not be filled with the best that this world has to offer. But it will be filled with God's love. His heavenly Father's work will continue, after he rises and ascends into heaven, and we have the privilege of being called into God's mission. We are the children of God, at work in our Father's kingdom, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

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August 30, 2026