

## 2020 08 30 – Who Do You Say that I Am? – Part Three

### Matthew 16:21-28

Today's sermon is the third part of our four-week series: "Who Do you Say that I Am?" During this series we are exploring who Jesus was to his disciples 2000 years ago and who he is for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are looking at four different scripture passages from the gospel of Matthew to see what they tell us about Jesus' identity and what it means to be his followers in today's world. In week one, we talked about Jesus as both teacher and life-long learner. In week two we explored the title "Messiah" or "Christ." And today we are going to discuss what it means to follow in the footsteps of someone who is willing to die for their cause, to follow in the footsteps of a martyr.

There have been many people in the history of this world who have died for a cause that they believed in (religious, political or otherwise). I invite you now to type into the Zoom chat or to name aloud, any person that comes to mind, any person who has died because of what they said or believed (*leave time for answers such as Martin Luther King Jr, Oscar Romero, Bobby Kennedy, Dag Hammarskjold, Gandhi, Sir Thomas More, Thomas Beckett, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John the Baptist*).

Jesus— like many of the people that you just named—had an understanding of the world that was different from, and even opposed to, the worldview of those in power in the First Century. Jesus preached a gospel of peace and justice, a gospel of freedom for the oppressed. He knew that what he was saying was

going to anger both the Jewish leaders and the Roman governors. Today's scripture begins with Jesus explaining to his disciples that he will suffer at the hands of those in power and be killed. In fact he is very specific about where this will occur (Jerusalem), who will do it (elders, chief priests and religious scholars), and how long it will be before he rises again (3 days).

There are many biblical scholars who question whether Jesus actually said these words. In fact, the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar are of the opinion, and I quote, "that Jesus did not have any special foreknowledge of his death beyond what an astute revolutionary prophet might have been able to surmise." (The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?, page 208) Like so many prophets before and since, Jesus had reason to believe that he would die at the hands of the authorities. But scholars doubt that he knew the exact time or place. They believe those words were added, after the fact, by the authors of our Christian gospels.

But even if Jesus didn't know the details of his death, he and his disciples were certainly aware of the precarious position that they were in. Imagine the fear and uncertainty that the disciples were experiencing! Of course Peter wanted to deny the possibility of Jesus' death! He knew that he and all the other followers of Jesus were also at risk.

So what does it mean to be a follower of someone who is willing to die for their cause? Well I believe Jesus answers that question in his next statement to his disciples. He says, "If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very selves, take up the instrument of your own death, and begin to follow in my

footsteps.” Many of you who are familiar with this passage will know that in other translations “the instrument of your own death,” is clearly identified as “our cross.” We are being asked to “deny ourselves,” and to “take up our cross.” But what does that mean?

Well, I can tell you right off the bat that Jesus doesn't expect us all to become martyrs and to die on a cross. Yes, martyrdom has been the destiny of some of his followers. But that is not what he is saying to us. And he is not asking us to give up our comforts and pleasures. He's not telling us to stop eating the foods that we love or doing activities that bring us joy. When Jesus, asks us to deny ourselves, he is speaking instead about letting go of those parts of ourselves, our personalities, our egos, that keep us from connecting more deeply with God, the Essence of Love.

Richard Rohr, a well-known Franciscan priest and spiritual director describes it this way:

A healthy psyche lives within at least three levels of meaning. We might imagine three domes, or containers. The first and smallest dome is called My Story, the second larger dome is Our Story, and the third and largest dome is The Story [,or God's Story].

In the first dome is my private life: those issues that make me special, inferior or superior, right or wrong, depending on how “I” see it. “I” and my feelings and opinions are the reference points for everything. Jesus

teaches that we must let go of exactly this, and yet this is the very tiny and false self that contemporary people take as normative, and even sufficient.

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Richard Rohr is telling us that we need to deny or let go of that false self that believes that the world spins around my views, my feelings and my needs. It's the kind of world view that leads us to believe that our society doesn't need a social safety-net because "I'm able to work hard and take care of my family so everyone else should be able to do that too." It's the kind of narcissistic, fear-based world view that leads us to hoard toilet paper, build walls and carry weapons where ever we go.

Richard Rohr also talks about a second dome, he says:

The next realm of meaning is about Us. Our Story is the dome of our group, our community, our country, our church—perhaps our nationality or ethnic group. These groups are the necessary training grounds for belonging, attaching, trusting, and loving. Unfortunately, some folks just spend their lives defending the boundaries and "glory" of their group. Group egocentricity is even more dangerous than personal egocentricity. It looks like greatness when it is often no more than disguised egotism. Loyalties at this level have driven most of human history—and most wars—up to now.

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So Richard Rohr is telling us that "denying ourselves" goes beyond just our own personalities. We also have to be able to see beyond the tribes or groups to

which we belong. This includes our families, our churches, and even our political parties. Yes, these are valuable groups in our lives and we need the sense of belonging that they give us. But it is important to recognize that God's reign of peace and justice is bigger than any one group. If you remember our scripture reading from two weeks ago, even Jesus had to learn this lesson the hard way. Even, Jesus had to be taught by an outsider, by "the other" that his mission in the world went beyond the tribes of Israel.

Richard Rohr goes on to say:

The third and largest dome of meaning is THE Story, the realm of universal meaning and the patterns that are always true in every culture. This level assures and insures the other two. It holds them together in sacred meaning. In fact, we could say that the greater the opposites we can hold together, the greater soul we usually have.

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I believe that this is what being a follower of Jesus is all about. It is about building a connection with God, with the divine, with the Essence of Love. It is about building a connection that allows us to let go of those smaller parts of ourselves that our personalities or ego think they need to survive. When our connection with God is strong enough then it frees us from the tyranny of the ego's "I Am" and the idolatry of the group "We Are." When our connection with God is strong enough then it allows us to live in THE Story, God's story of Love.

So what cross, what instrument of death, do we need to carry in order to live THE Story. What cross, what instrument of death, do we need in order to follow in

Jesus' steps? Well, we know that Jesus needed an encounter with the other. Every time we truly listen to someone whose life experience is different than our own, we broaden our worldview. I know many clergy who say that going to seminary and being exposed to a new understanding of our scriptures was a life-altering experience for them. Bible studies and book studies are another way that we can break free of our own self-centred egos. Times of suffering can also lead us closer to an awareness of our own vulnerability and our interconnectedness with the rest of creation. And of course all forms of prayer and meditation will lead us closer to THE Story, to God's Story.

When we deny ourselves, when we carry our cross, when we deepen our connection with the Divine, then we are following in the footsteps of Jesus, we are building God's reign on earth, we are beginning to live THE Story.