

Pentecost 14 A – 09/03/2023

When I think of how fast everything fell into place for me to arrive and begin here, it really has been a whirlwind. Yes, I considered my options, but I could have just as easily decided I did not want to start over again and I could have retired or at least stayed in the UP. I tried to weigh out my needs and what or who God was calling me to.

If I had thought any longer, I could have allowed fear and uncertainty to lead me. I could have also said yes and then allowed my fears and anxieties to take over. Since I have made other major moves, I felt if this is where God is calling me to, it would work out.

I can't tell you that there were not times that I thought about stopping the whole process. There are so many details, and one has to stay amiable in order to navigate changes. When I got the flat tire in St. Ignace on my way down to my home inspection, I could have thought that this was a sign to stop the process, but I just decided that I had to breathe and make it work.

Fortunately, I come from a family stock that stays the course. I have also learned that you continue to tell people what you need, or you have little chance of getting it. It is so easy for us to plan out how things are supposed to go and then I think that God laughs.

In last week's Gospel lesson, which we did not use due to Pride Sunday, Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah. When Peter heard Jesus say that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great sufferings at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and then be killed, and on the third day be raised, he did not like it. This was not fitting Peter's expectations of Jesus as the Messiah.

Just as I had fears and anxieties, so did Peter. Peter actually took Jesus aside and emphatically told Jesus no, that this would not happen! Typical human beings, make a proclamation and basically back peddle because what was happening wasn't fitting their plan. I like how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus' response to Peter, Peter, get out of the way. Satan get lost.

You see Peter was not relying on Jesus, but himself and this allowed Satan to work. Satan was capitalizing on Peter's fears and anxieties which was caused by relying on himself to know who the Messiah was and what the Messiah was supposed to be doing. Satan was working to foil God's plan and Jesus was not having it. Peter went from proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah to becoming a stumbling block for others in completing God's plan.

As soon as a plan has some bumps, it is so easy to want to turn back. We want to go back, even if something was not healthy. It feels more comfortable because we know what to expect. We knew what to expect and therefore could manage it better, as that is often the human being's approach.

Life does not always allow us to turn back. Change happens whether we like it or not. Our expectations are not always met, and it can cause us to question the plan or direction.

The older we get, the more of these experiences we have. We can learn from them or allow them to consume us. Peter in our Gospel lesson for today is allowing Jesus' foretelling of his life, that doesn't fit his expectations of Jesus who had proclaimed to be the Messiah, to consume him.

He told Jesus no this just can't happen. This is not what is supposed to happen in Peter's way of thinking. What a switch! Peter was saying at first that he believed Jesus was the Messiah. We could take this to mean that if Jesus came to save the world that Peter was following him in obedience.

Now he turns around and tells Jesus, the Messiah, how the plan was to supposed to happen or at least how it was not supposed to go. Peter probably didn't want to see Jesus suffer, but maybe also, what would that mean for Peter who publicly proclaimed him as Messiah? Satan may have been saying to him, you know you will not look good in other peoples' eyes if this happens.

It is that voice that can throw a follower of Jesus off track. Peter in that moment could not trust that what Jesus was saying was true. Also, it could have been that he didn't want to be associated with a Messiah that was going to suffer and die. I'm sure that this was very confusing to Peter.

Jesus pointed out to Peter that he was focusing on and listening to the wrong voice. That voice was creating a lack of trust which produced fear and anxiety. It caused Peter to feel insecure and Jesus was telling him that he needed to turn this around and focus on Jesus.

Jesus then turned to his disciples and said, again from Eugene Peterson, Anyone who intends to be with me has to let me lead. You are not in the driver's seat, I am. Don't run from suffering, embrace it. Follow me and I will show you how. Self-help is not help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self.

That is quite blunt. Peter was trying to be in the driver's seat and Jesus knew that is not the way it works. It is possible that the other disciples were thinking like Peter but didn't have the guts to tell Jesus. Thus, Jesus wanted to clarify more what it would mean for them to follow him.

Basically, if you are going to follow me, it won't be easy. You will be going against the grain of society. Jesus asks us to pick up the cross and he was and is the model for how to do it. It is not about self-help, but self-sacrifice.

This does not mean that we are doormats, but that we will have to step past our fears and anxieties in order to be Jesus' followers and proclaim his love. You see it is not about what we can gain, but what others gain and that is Jesus' love. The church, the beloved community struggles with this as it clashes with our society.

Richard Ward in his commentary on this Gospel lesson says that the church too often says no to Jesus' way far too often, we need, like the disciples, to be reminded of the differences. Our society says that cross-bearing is for losers. The winners are those who know how to master the game of life and have the goods to prove it. This is not what Jesus is calling us to. Cross bearers are winners and not by anything that we have done.

The winners may have goods and the goods are all gifts from God in Jesus Christ. Jesus won everything for us that means anything and that is forgiveness, salvation and new life which are all signs of God's love for everyone. Thus, everything that we do is a response to God's love. So, when Jesus asks us to carry the cross, he is hoping that our response would be yes out of love for all that we have received. Jesus modeled what it meant to carry the cross out of obedience and love and now he asks his disciples, you and me to continue the cross bearing.

During this next year, I will be working with the transition team and asking hard questions that may make us feel uncomfortable. It will create fear and anxiety. Through all of it we are called to carry the cross not as a burden, but as a response to Jesus' love for each of us.

So, the question then for us will be, as we experience fear and anxiety is, "who is in our driver's seat?". I know in my journey here, there were many times I had to take myself out of the driver's seat or I may not have made it here. It is a constant process that continues until the day that we leave this earth.

I believe it is good to ask questions of Jesus if we don't understand something. We still may not understand it, but I believe our trust grows as we see things work out even if it is not what we expected. I continue to learn that things take time and if they are meant to be it will happen or it may happen another way or not at all.

Cross bearing is really about letting Jesus be in our drivers' seats. Giving our fears and anxieties over to Jesus, follow in obedience out of love and find joy in the ride of life.