

Yesterday was a milestone for those of us who live in the States: 20 years since the tragic events of 9/11. That day claimed the lives of both victims and volunteers—that is, those who willingly sacrificed their own lives to help defend or rescue others. A casual scroll through social media showed about an equal number of posts urging us to “never forget” as posts lamenting that attitudes and reactions to current events suggest that we have, in fact, already forgotten. Purely by coincidence, today’s gospel speaks a word of comfort and conviction in light of those memorials and the struggles of today.

The setting of today’s gospel, Caesarea Philippi, is one of my favorite spots in the Holy Land. Just about as far north as you can get in Israel before landmines litter the borders with Syria and Lebanon, the ancient ruins of Caesarea Philippi reveal a series of cultures and religions that all found something sacred about that space. Pagans honored it as the place where life began, because the headwaters of the Jordan River seem to appear from nowhere, springing up from the depths of a cave in the steep wall of rock. Greeks and Romans carved niches in the rock to house statues of their gods. With this pantheon as his backdrop, Jesus asks the disciples, *Who do you say that I am?*

With all sorts of divine options to choose from, Peter gets the hint and confesses that Jesus is the Messiah—a human being yet also the anointed one of God. But Peter doesn’t have the whole picture figured out yet: Israel had been waiting for generations for the Messiah, but they were expecting a powerful military and political leader who would free them not from spiritual bondage to sin but from the practical occupation of foreign governments and armies. Jesus hadn’t done anything like that, but we might imagine Peter having faith that Jesus *would be* that kind of leader in the future when he gained enough followers and expanded his influence.

Of course, Jesus’ future is quite different from Peter’s grand plans. He begins to teach the disciples about his suffering, rejection, and death—not at all Peter’s image of Jesus winning back the rule of Israel from the Roman Empire. Peter tries to intervene: *No, Jesus, that’s not the kind of leader we’re looking for. We want a winner—a successful revolution, not suffering, failure, and death!* But Jesus turns on Peter: *No. We are not going to bring about the kingdom of God by using human methods. The human way isn’t working; God’s way is different.*

The next part is not the *most* misunderstood part of scripture, but it’s somewhere in the running. Jesus invites anyone who wants to follow him to deny themselves and take up their cross. We often hear people refer to the struggles of life as the “crosses we have to bear” but that’s not what Jesus is referring to here. He’s not talking about suffering in general—the aches

and pains of old age, troubles at work or dysfunction at home—though life certainly gives us plenty of opportunities for that; instead, Jesus refers to the suffering we endure specifically as a consequence of following him. For Jesus' first disciples, that suffering and those consequences were mostly literal crosses—several of them were crucified or otherwise died by state execution, expressly because they spread the gospel. Other early Christians were likewise persecuted—sometimes as bait for lions in the Colosseum, but more often through boycotts of their businesses, imprisonments, or social ostracizing—until Christianity became legal.

It didn't take long for Christians to forget this teaching of Jesus, that to follow him we will have to make sacrifices, to lose our lives for the sake of the gospel—whether that means losing our literal, physical lives, or losing some of the privileges or preferences that we think we should be able to enjoy as part of our lives. Christianity got big enough and powerful enough and rich enough and mainstream enough that the expectation went from losing our lives, to making sure we don't have to lose anything, to trying to make other people lose if they aren't Christian—or even if they don't belong to one particular brand of Christianity. Instead of emulating Jesus, who submitted to crucifixion in service of God's way, Christians, ever since Peter in this gospel passage, have tried to remake Jesus into a proud and powerful ruler, like any other human hero. We don't want to follow Jesus, who, after all, ended up on the cross; we want Jesus to follow us. But discipleship doesn't work that way.

We might guess that Peter wanted Jesus to be the gloriously successful Messiah of Israel's dreams in part because he wanted to be on the winning team, to enjoy the privileges to which he would certainly be entitled as one of Jesus' closest followers. But Jesus bursts his bubble—and maybe ours as well: privilege isn't Jesus' path; the only thing that following Jesus entitles us to is a cross. If we try to make this life all about us and what we have and what we want, we'll utterly lose our way. Yet Jesus promises that when we walk into the kinds of places we wish we could avoid, we will find life—maybe not the life we are trying so hard to save for ourselves, but life that comes from the one who created, redeemed, loves, and sustains us. Like Peter, we may be disappointed to find that Jesus isn't the savior we want—not accomplished by any human standard, not an infinitely richer, more powerful, more popular ruler than any of history's human leaders, and not about to bless us with the trappings of success as it's defined by this world. We do, however, have the savior we need; and that is whose disciples we are supposed to be. We don't have to follow the way of Jesus; plenty of people don't. But we can't go another way and expect to find him there, either. May Jesus teach us to lose ourselves in the service of others and in the process, may we find ourselves in the presence of God.