

Crushed and Renewed

“Whoever comes to me and doesn’t hate father and mother, wife and children, even life itself, cannot be my disciple....whoever doesn’t carry the cross cannot be my disciple, ..., and none of you can be my disciple if you don’t give up all of your possessions.”

These are hard words today that Jesus insists upon.

Hate those nearest and dearest to you and, for another poke in the eye, get rid of everything you possess -- for only then can you be my disciple, my student, my friend.

We’ve come a long way since these words were first spoken – a long way very often heading in the wrong direction.

Over these many centuries, we’ve tended to chip away at the hard edges of Christianity, desperately trying to turn our faith in to something that gives no offense, something that is polite, something that is, “safe.”

Safe for you, safe for me, safe for our family and friends: safe for our way of life.

And so it is no surprise that today, if you happen to turn to the AM dial on your radio as you head into church, you can hear Focus on the Family, a group that loudly touts its Christian credentials, routinely giving you a thousand and one lessons NOT about how family can often be the well spring of intolerance and prejudice and an “us vs. them” mentality; but rather you will hear endless explanations on how to make your family the center of your world, and how to circle the wagons against outsiders.

These shows are very popular because nothing speaks of safety louder than a warm family.

The irony of course is that Jesus is no champion of traditional family values, as today’s gospel lesson demonstrates.

And there is this: while Jesus is many things, he isn’t safe.

“Is he safe?” asks young Lucy of Mr. Beaver in the Narnia series, her voice shaking in fear as she is told the lion Aslan, the Christ figure in this book, is on his way.

The reply is one she isn’t expecting, as Mr. Beaver snorts: “Safe?! ‘course he isn’t safe – but he’s good I tell you, he’s good!”

Just so, today’s hard gospel lesson takes us face to face with Jesus who is by no means safe, but who is very, very good.

So how are we 21st century Christians to hear this hard teaching of Jesus, and perhaps more importantly, how are we to bear it in our day to day lives?

Of course, we can ignore today's lesson, and just wait until our Sunday readings roll around to the softer stuff: welcoming the children, finding lost sheep, the Prodigal Son returning home.

Or we can sweeten it up by saying that Jesus doesn't really mean what he says, he just means that we ought to put God first; so with a nod to God, we can get on with pursuing life's ambitions, and playing by the world's rules, without a second thought.

We can do it that way, or, we can sit with these words in the reality of our lives, as individuals, as a community, as a nation, as a world, and ask for the grace to cultivate the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the deeper reality Jesus is drawing us into with these seemingly harsh words.

You heard the reading from Jeremiah, and it's paired with today's gospel lesson for a reason.

The destruction and transformation taking place at the potter's wheel opens doors into the mystery Jesus so aggressively pulls us into this morning because Jeremiah's parable seems to say that the path to redemption often winds through the valley of despair.

Who here has been spared serious illness – cancer, or a sudden stroke, or a heart attack, or some other health catastrophe – whether it's you or a loved one?

Who here has been spared the death of a parent or a spouse or a child?

Who here has been spared a job loss, or a demotion, a busted partnership, or the crisis of divorce or the crisis of unforgiving children?

My guess is that most of us have been touched, directly or indirectly, by one or more of these crises, these losses, these events that strip away who we think we are: often leaving us feeling naked and vulnerable.

And now I ask you to reflect, when you were, or if you now are, in the midst of such turmoil, what does it feel like?

Does the ground seem to shift under your feet?

Do you go numb?

Does the air feel like jello?

Does the world seem a much less friendly place than it was just before the floor gave way?

For Jeremiah, this stripping feels like potter's clay being squeezed and smashed – causing the end of what was, without even a glimpse of what might be coming.

Many of you know exactly these feelings, for you too have been crushed and left with what seems, for a time, to be a life without hope.

I have been there too.

The temptation is to react to these crises by doubling down on control, doubling down on old patterns of behavior.

One fellow puts it like this: “The worldly trappings of the individual must be removed by force, not because God is an angry God, but because most of us, when the ugly truth be told, would prefer to go to the grave with our vices intact, damnation be damned.” C.E.Morgan, *Christian Century*, p.33, 8/21/13.

But there is another way; it is the way Jesus calls us to if we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear.

These life altering experiences have a way of prying our fingers loose from the things we used to count on for security and control and a sense that we are the Captains of our own destiny, Masters of our own fate.

Because what Jesus knows, and what he is desperately trying to help us to see – to help us to hear – is that we can begin to enter the Mystery that we call God only when we loosen our grip, when we hold lightly rather than tightly, onto those things, those people, who define our lives.

The military strategy during the Iraq war involved going into towns and villages, kicking out the insurgents, securing the town and then holding it.

“Take, secure, and hold” is what they called it.

And when you think about it, we don't need to look far to see that very same strategy at work in our own efforts to get through this life.

“Take, secure and hold:” whether it's a spouse, a job, money in the bank, a social position or real estate; “Take, secure and hold” is deeply embedded in a great many of us.

Jesus has a strategy too; and not surprisingly, it is quite different from ours.

You might call the Jesus strategy: “Leave it alone; Give it away; Let it go.”

Because, like clay in a potter's hand, life often breaks us down, crushing and turning what we thought we had -- into nothing....and yet, if we trust in the Way of Jesus, we may find, much to our surprise, a sense of being taken up and shaped anew, into someone wiser, into someone who is slowly finding the grace to leave it alone, to give it away, to let it go.

And in those moments, we might experience a glimpse of the divine, a vision of who we are meant to become, a glimmer of our true destiny.

It's a radical thing; which is why God becomes a human being through his birth and life among us, why he dies a criminal's death on the cross, to show us that it is only in the radical stripping away of our preconceptions, in the radical stripping away of **our way** of doing things, in the radical **rejection** of our comfort zones, only this prepares the ground for seeds able to blossom into eyes that can see and ears that can hear the hidden Mystery that we call God.

I leave you with this quote:

"We are human, so we suffer, we weep, we struggle to go on.

But our pain can be the very path to grace, for it is when we suffer the most, when our sense of self is stripped away, when we have lost what we most dearly cherish, or when physical pain and disease destroy the illusion of our immortality that we can no longer avoid the plain truth of who and what we are.

In a polite world, where language is policed and we dream of a sanitized society free of violence, let's tell the uncomfortable truth; the passage to knowledge and wisdom is most often paved by suffering.

We rarely change until we are forced to, until our pride and vanity are stripped from us.

And it is only when the egoistic outer husk is shattered and removed, when we are reduced to pure seed, it is then that we can finally grow."

Id., p.34, 8/21/13.

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