

Think About It, or How Not to Be a Scandal
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Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

Poor Peter. In a matter of minutes, he's gone from being the rock on which the Church will be built to being called a devil and a scandal to his face.

I have to wonder: What's he thinking when he pulls Jesus aside and tries to tell him he's wrong? IS he thinking clearly at all?

Personally, I'd guess it's a both/and. His shocked statement, "God forbid it!" is a kneejerk reaction to hearing Jesus say that being the Messiah does not involve the trappings of kingly power. It's the exact opposite of what Jesus' ancestor David was given, and what many expected also would be given to David's successors. Those expectations are based in large part on 2 Samuel 7, which lays out the covenant God makes with David and his family: "Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel... I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth" (2 Sam 7:8b-9, NRSV). What Jesus tells the disciples about his fate is the exact opposite of a royal prince wielding his power over the people. Instead of being like this typical king, complete with a crown, a scepter, and the power to make decisions on everyone else's behalf, Jesus will hold his God-given authority while being at odds with earthly authority. Things will very quickly get to the point where earthly authority will stop at nothing to shut him up permanently. It's an act to which God will respond by taking the audacious step of raising Jesus on the third day. Peter can't quite wrap his head around this. It upends his own expectations of a kingly Messiah who'll trample Israel's political oppressors into the

dust, and shockingly so. He responds by taking Jesus aside, and telling him flat out, "No way! We just cannot let this happen!"

Uh-huh. Sure.

"But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'" (Mt 16:23). In other words: Peter's expectations could not be further from reality. Peter needs to get himself straightened out, NOW, before his crooked thinking causes him, or someone else, to trip over it and do a face-plant in the dirt.

The hardest "ask" that comes with accepting the cross- and death-shaped parts of Jesus as Messiah is to put away any thoughts of power as something to be hoarded and lorded over others. Instead, as St. Paul strongly suggests, real power creates conditions where we are to turn more toward things like holding fast to what is good, hating evil, and loving one another with mutual affection. All of these things are hallmarks of a healthy Christian community. However, they are not quite what Peter seems to have in mind – or even what a lot of Christians have had in mind, for that matter - about where Jesus' real power lies and what that means for those who are called to pick up their crosses and follow him. All too often across the centuries of the Church's history, "when Jesus says 'Cross!' the Church votes 'Crown!'" and to its own detriment.¹

A recent, concrete example of this tendency, and its resulting difficulties, appeared in a study commissioned by The Episcopal Church just last year. The study

¹ Richard Ward, "Commentary on Matthew 16:21-28."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-matthew-1621-28-6> [accessed August 28, 2023].

asked participants of all religious backgrounds about their perceptions of Jesus and the Church. In general, non-Christians saw Jesus in a favorable light; the Church and its members, not so much. Among the most common characteristics they used to describe Christians were words like judgmental, hypocritical, self-righteous, arrogant, unforgiving, and disrespectful.² At times, those adjectives are well deserved. And, it makes it just that much harder to convince the world that we are mostly harmless, and care deeply about making the world around us that much kinder. However, as the Presiding Bishop very often points out, the counter argument to all of these things is living into the commandment to love one another – because if it doesn't have that, in any form, it's not about God. Period.

Changing our ideas about power, how to engage the socially-acceptable drive to "get ahead," or even what the Church ought to be, and in favor of more cross-shaped ones, is risky. It will definitely cost us the time and energy needed in order to make this change in focus a permanent one. As individuals, it might even cost us the respect of our neighbors and expose our kids to ridicule. However, what we get in return for our investment is the freedom to be exactly who God calls us to be, and without having to prove to anyone that we deserve it. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that going the route of counting the social benefits first only serves to cheap the grace God has extended to us through the person of Christ. He writes, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate... Grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and

² "Jesus in America." <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/jesus-in-america/> [accessed August 30, 2023].

it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.... Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son... and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.”³

We don't have a choice but to respond to grace by picking up the cross and following him. Otherwise, we risk falling into the same trap that Peter does when it comes to understanding with our heads and our hearts that Jesus isn't solely a political savior or a nice guy whose ideas have a lot of merit, and that following him means we too must get up off the couch and get our hands dirty. Taking up our cross allows us to accept the challenge to follow his example, as well as to meet head-on the evils which confront us on a daily basis. What that takes in practice is a willingness to simply be our most authentic selves, to show up for someone else without any strings attached, and to do so without bothering to check the price tag. As it was for our ancestors, Peter included, and still is for us, it isn't just our personal freedom and welfare that's at stake. It's that of the whole world. Or, to put it another way: What will it profit us, if we gain the whole world but forfeit our life?

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship, First Touchstone Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 45.