

Long ago and far away and once upon a time, in Hollywood , California, to be exact, there was man who was in lots of movies. On and off-screen, he seemed like a gruff old fellow, who loved the bottle and the women, and had no use for children. He’d say, “Go away, kid, you bother me.” His name was W.C. Fields. What you might not know is that W.C. Fields had been an agnostic all his life—not necessarily completely disbelieving in God, but none too sure, and pretty devoted to his own very excessive pleasures.

However, when he was on his deathbed, he “was discovered reading a Bible.” Why? His explanation was “I’m looking for a loophole.” (The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes.)

He shouldn’t have bothered. There are not any loopholes in the Bible. Loopholes are what human beings hope for, in order to escape what is right and difficult, and sometimes even harsh.

Today’s Scripture from the book of Mark is definitely loophole-free. In fact, it is one very challenging passage.

What had happened was that it had come time, in Jesus’ ministry, for him to start preparing himself and his disciples for the end. Here are verse 31 and 32, from the Message version of the Bible:

“He then began explaining things to them: “It is necessary that the Son of Man (that is Jesus himself) proceed to an ordeal of suffering, be tried and found guilty by the elders, high priests, and religious scholars, be killed, and after three days rise up alive.” He said this simply and clearly so they couldn’t miss it.”

Peter was simply horrified. That had to be wrong! To quote my Bible footnotes: “The idea that the Messiah was to suffer was in complete contrast to Jewish expectation.” The Jewish people of the time were expecting a warrior, a conqueror, someone to save them through might and military power; he was not supposed to get killed himself! No way!

And I'd like to add some of my personal opinion here, too. I think that Peter was personally affected. He loved Jesus, as friend, master, and teacher. He did not want him to die, especially die young, and in a shameful way.

Also, Peter might have had that malady so many of us have--- excessive nice-ness. . . nice to the point of foolish. The kind that would say, "I'm sure Adolf Hitler meant well." There is excessive nice-ness that will opt face the reality of the hard facts of life. We call it "wearing rose-colored glasses" that prevent us from seeing and dealing with death, and evil, and real problems. It's the kind of attitude that would sweep all unpleasant topics under the rug and hope they will stay there, and hope that if we ignore unpleasant facts, they will go away. But that has never worked.

We just may have that in common with Peter. Since we don't like the unpleasant things, we can find ourselves ignoring them, or being really foolish and making comments like: "If those people would just pray . . . or work. . . or be like me, they wouldn't have all these problems." But that is no way for a Christian to face down the evils or racial injustice, or child abuse, or poverty. Things are more complicated than that.

But back to the story. Jesus was very perturbed at Peter's reaction. You knew Jesus was upset, because he called Peter "Satan." It's pretty bad when Jesus calls anyone a devil!

However, it wasn't just a matter of Jesus losing his temper at Peter and saying the first thing which came to mind.

Here's what one book had to say:

"Why did Jesus so sternly rebuke Peter? Because he was putting into words the very temptations which were assailing Jesus.

Jesus did not want to die. He knew that he had powers which he could use for conquest. At this moment he was re-fighting the battle of temptations in the wilderness. This was the devil

tempting him again. . .to take his way instead of God's way."  
(William Barclay)

Peter, although well-meaning, was trying to keep Jesus from doing what God had for him, what God had sent him to do.

"It is a strange thing, and sometimes a terrible thing, that the tempter sometimes speaks to us in the voice of a well-meaning friend." (William Barclay)

Maybe it's like when we try to talk someone we love out of joining the military, or starting something new and difficult and risky. We mean well. We love them. We want the best for them. But we may be wrong, as Peter was in this case.

So, Jesus turned to the crowd and explained that following him was a challenge. Being a Christian was not meant to be a cushy job, not a cinch, not the easy way out.

"Pick up your cross and follow me."

There are two ways to take this. One is to keep in mind Jesus' real-life cross—a heavy, wooden instrument of torture and death which he was made to carry himself, on the way to his crucifixion. Only when he physically collapsed did someone else take over that task.

"The words from the gospel lesson about 'taking up the cross and following' [were] spoken to the crowd that understood the cross as an instrument of torture and death for notorious criminals and those who stepped out of line with Rome or dared to speak truth to [the powers that be]." (United Methodist Church Worship Page)

In our own times, in this country, we take the expression "cross to bear," in a different way:

"Many in our culture speak of 'their cross' primarily as troubles in their lives or families—troubles that bring pain and sorrow, but not usually death and public shame. We may be tempted to

view the current economic crisis as such a cross, bringing pain and sorrow. . .” (United Methodist Church Worship Page)

I think both ways make good sense. No matter what, there are difficulties in our lives, big and small. Our Christian response is to face them as Christians, face them bravely and honestly as Jesus would have us do.

And whether the cross we bear is just like Jesus’ cross, or a more personal kind of sorrow, God can redeem this cross. God can redeem this hard experience, and bring some good out of it.

These words of Jesus do have some modern interpretations and explanations, and I’d like to share them with you, because, for one thing, it’s way too easy to brush them off with—that was then, this is now. . .or Jesus was stretching things to make a point. . .or that’s just too mysterious and hard to understand.

“ ‘Whoever wishes to follow after me, deny yourself; take up your crossbeam, and follow me.’ Denying self does not mean ‘engage in [extreme self-depriving practices and live like a monk.]’ Nor does it mean “give up chocolate for Lent [although that is fine if that is what you are doing.] The word is not ‘discipline’ oneself. Self-discipline . . . is important as well. But that is not the point here. . . . To deny oneself, take up your crossbeam, and follow Jesus . . .means to renounce claim upon one’s own life, facing the possibility That following Jesus can mean shameful execution . . .and embracing that, and giving Jesus sole claim for the direction for one’s life.” (United Methodist Church Resource Page)

So the message is:

“Get in. Get all the way in. Be convinced of the truth of God’s reign, and of Jesus, God’s prophet and Son. Follow him wherever he leads, period. No backing down. No backing out. No hedging bets. This is about life and death, about life overcoming death.

Back out or back down from following Jesus and declaring God's reign in word and deed, and you are on the side of death. But get in, all the way in, and stay in, and though you may die, you are part of the movement of Life himself." (United Methodist Church Worship Page)

No loopholes. Here are the verses from the Message:

"Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

All of this comes under what is often called "The Hard Sayings of Jesus." This is challenging, definitely challenging.

Yet, it's really good, too. It's great that Jesus is honest with us, asking for our complete devotion and loyalty.

If you don't think so, here's an example, in contrast, to prove the point. Does anyone remember the movie "Private Benjamin?" Goldie Hawn was the star; she enlisted in the army at the urging of a less-than-truthful recruit, who told her that boot camp would be like "a spa," kind of help get her in shape, get over the grief of being a widow.

Anyone here ever go to boot camp? Was it like a spa? No.

That recruiter offered false claims of softness and ease. Jesus, on the other hand, offers challenge and possibly danger. Jesus is honest with us, demanding, but honest.

Jesus also demands our hearts and mind and attitudes. Again some more modern words:

"If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I'm leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused

friends, know that you'll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father, with an army of angels." (The Message)

"The passage states a simple truth. When the King comes into his Kingdom he will be loyal to those who have been loyal to him.

No [one] can expect to dodge all the trouble of some great undertaking and then reap all the benefit of it. No [one] can expect to refuse service in some campaign and then share in the decorations when it is brought to a successful conclusion. Jesus is saying, "In a difficult and hostile world Christianity is up against it these days. If [someone] is ashamed under such conditions to show that he [or she] is a Christian, if he [or she] is afraid to show what side he [or she] is on, he [or she] cannot expect to gain a place of honour when the Kingdom comes."  
(William Barclay)

This may be another time and place where we are up against it—and I can say that myself, even though I preach for a living. Because right now, we are living in a pretty anti-Christian society. So afraid of offending people of other religions, or afraid of grumpy lawsuit-happy atheists, we are encouraged to keep our Christian faith quiet, as a private matter, when we should be bursting with joy and faith and commitment.

Still, as Mr. W.C.Fields probably found, there are not any loopholes. We need courage and commitment in our Christian faith.

And with these, we'll find something better than loopholes, much, much better. We'll find God's transforming love and grace and mercy, which will transform us into better people, and help us in every possible way, in life and after life.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)