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Isaiah 50:4-9a

50:4 The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

50:5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

50:6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

50:7 The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

50:8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

50:9a It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Jesus is in foreign territory among the Gentiles. He enters the capital city of Caesarea Philippi, the Washington, DC of the day, the seat of power. It is a town filled with temples to the gods. It is here in this place of power that he teaches of the power of suffering love.

Mark 8:27-38

8:27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

8:28 And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

8:29 He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

8:30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

8:34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

8:35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Proclamation of the Word

What is your testimony?

This was the question our son Avery was asked by his good friend JD. JD and Avery have served together in college in Student Government. They were Boy's State friends before ending up together at Presbyterian College. A couple of Sundays ago, JD invited Avery to his dorm room to attend worship at Bedside Baptist church. JD tunes into the local TV Baptist church on Sundays. And a little group gathered. And then the question many Presbyterian Christians fear came (dum, dum, dum)

What is your testimony?

Avery learned that they were speaking different languages. In High School JD had a harrowing car wreck one night. Surprised and thankful that he survived, he committed his life to Christ, or got saved, and has been a strong person of faith ever since.

Avery on the other hand, has always felt like he belonged- belonged to Christ, his people, the church, and cannot point to one single time, but many times when he accepted this call, this identity. Sure he has had questions and doubts. His nature is to be a critical thinker. We joke that when Avery was young, riding in the back seat, he even doubted us. On multiple occasions he would ask from the car seat, "Mom, Dad, do y'all know where you are going?"

He said it so often, it became the joke.

Avery told JD that he is still working on what he thinks about Jesus and the Father, but he understands the Holy Spirit best. He experiences the Holy Spirit the most through people who love and serve God and by extension, love and serve others. He feels God most present and alive through community. And he feels called to make a better life for others in his roles on campus and hopefully, through the practice of law someday. But he still has questions and wishes he could grow in his faith more by talking with folks like you, mature Christians, whom he has witnessed living that faith.

This is his testimony- questions and all.

Avery and I talked about faith as belonging, believing, and behaving- and not necessarily in that order, but some combination of the three: Belonging, believing, behaving.

In some ways what he described was a strong sense of belonging to God and behaving in such a way as to serve and to work to improve the life of his college community. He's still working on believing and knows he has more to learn (don't we all?). I told him the believing part is less about what you think and more about what you give your life to, your heart to.

Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me," not "figure it all out first and write a belief statement."

I have always prayed his faith would unfold and grow with him as I do for our daughter, Hallie. Like the cross stitch on his nursery wall, now stored away, that reads, "That he may grow in faith, in wisdom, and in stature."

It's cool to talk to your twenty year old son about these things.

Both JD and Avery are followers of Jesus.

JD wants folks to commit their lives to Christ, to know Jesus as their personal Savior, to know that peace and purpose.

Avery wants to live the faith by serving his community and helping others.

That is where God is most real to him.

They have different views and experiences, but are following the same Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ.

What is your testimony? That is a very personal and pointed question, isn't it?

How would you answer that?

Now turn to your neighbor and tell them (kidding).

Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter, the stand out student and spokesman, said, "You are the Messiah, the Christ."

Except that they have different ideas about what that means. So Jesus schools the class and dresses down Peter. I am even embarrassed for Peter.

Jesus has been wowing the crowds by feeding thousands. He healed a blind man and cast out demons making people well, giving them new life. In this passage, he is the actor, in charge, the leader. And he takes the time to use this teachable moment. But this is the hinge of the gospel. Jesus has been self-determined, active in ministry, but it is all about to change. Listen again to Mark, Chapter 8, reading from the Message:

"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? (Mark 8:33-34, *The Message*)

Jesus accepts that he must allow things to play out for the people to see, to understand who God really is. Here Jesus pivots and this is not the Jesus, the Messiah, they want or expect. James Howell puts it this way,

Jesus was amazing in his first weeks of ministry. But the real glory came when he let himself be betrayed, beaten, tried unjustly, when he “never said a-mumblin’ word,” when he refused to come down from the cross or strike his enemies dead but instead forgave them. Even his resurrection was passive: he didn’t bolt from the tomb and knock the guards aside; God raised him.¹

Everything within the disciples cringed when Jesus said he must suffer and die. But Peter protests, refusing to listen to Jesus. Jesus puts Peter in his place. Behind him. The only way you can follow Jesus is from behind.

Everything within us cringes, too, when Jesus acquiesces to such suffering. We are self-determined, willful, active people. It's part of the cultural DNA. We are all about pursuing the good life, getting ahead, making progress. And here Jesus wants us to get behind him and follow the way of suffering. And on the cross of all things.

Now Jesus did not say "you should suffer," only that you will suffer because you follow me, that we will lose our lives for the sake of the gospel. Jesus is not saying we should all accept any kind of suffering. Depressed folks can seek help. Hungry people need food. Hurricane victims need assistance. Jesus choose the way of the cross. He surrenders and submits for the sake of revealing God's true powerful love and loving power.

The cross was, for Jesus, not just a divinely assigned destiny, it was a choice. Jesus, fully human as any one of us, had to choose, moment by moment, day after day, right up to the very night before his crucifixion, to accept the terrible calling he had. He knew it was what humanity needed to see what unconditional love of God looked like. It was never assumed, never automatic, never easy. He was daily tempted to be another kind of Messiah, powerful, admired, victorious. And now here, from his very own disciples, he hears those tempting words.

Like us, Jesus is tempted. We hear messages that we should have it all. Excess and consumption or "getting" are the values promoted. No wonder Jesus sounds so strange and unbelievable. He was supposed to take charge, kick out the Romans, and establish a Jewish theocracy in the line of David. Isn't that what they were promised?

Instead, Jesus promotes a call to deny self, to follow him, in order to find life- a real life, a meaningful life, one that is poured out for others in joyful service. Jesus chooses the cross. The cross is not the Governor's mansion or a corporate skyscraper or the finest car- a cross- would be like going to the electric chair. It was the death penalty. God changed a symbol of death into a reminder of the way of new life.

I know too many people who need to find their true selves- who are shadows of their true selves, trying to be someone they are not, or pouring their lives into all the wrong things that do not give life,

peace, purpose, and joy. Or filling some emptiness, numbing some pain with drugs, alcohol, work, porn.

They are living a lie. Jesus brings truth. Behind these warnings stands a wonderful promise. He says, "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?"

Ultimately, following Jesus is not a losing proposition, it's the key to eternal life.

And this is not just true in a someday future, but right now.

The joy of following Jesus on the path of the cross eclipses any joy that we can try to dig out of life through the pursuit of wealth, power, or pleasure.

Self-giving love is the only path to true and lasting happiness.

Shortly before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was jailed for speaking out against Hitler because of his faith in Jesus Christ and the injustices he saw, famously wrote, "Who am I? This or the other?" – taking note of his cheerful disposition he presented to his jailers, while knowing and feeling inside he was impotent and weak. The only way he could resolve the dissonance, and the struggle to be in horrific circumstances, came like this:

"Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."ⁱⁱ

In knowing and following Jesus, we learn who and whose we really are.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, may it be so.

ⁱ James Howell at jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com

ⁱⁱ IBID