

-When Abby and I were living in the Bay Area, we decided to go see a play that we had heard a lot about called *The Wild Bride* playing at the Berkeley Rep Theater. The play was an imaginative modern day fairy tale loosely set in depression era appalachia. The story follows a father who, standing on the precipice of financial and personal ruin, makes a deal with Satan (who wears a slick black suit and played the banjo) and is tricked into giving away his daughter. The story then twists and turns with following the daughter and her eventual breaking free from the bonds of this deal with Satan. It's an incredible piece of theater which has been on my mind this week as I have been thinking about our gospel story.

-“For what will it profit a person if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matthew 16:25-26)”

-That was perhaps the most fascinating part of *The Wild Bride* for me. It's exploration of this very question: a man so scared for himself that he ultimately ends up giving even his own daughter away in order to save his own skin.

-But here is the hard part: we all have some form of self-preservation. Most, if not all, animals (including human beings) have this. It's what made Charles Darwin so fascinated in how animal species develop and thrive.

-“Looking out for number one” as Abby calls it when I get cranky and make myself a meal without leaving her much of anything. It's something I think all of us can relate to. Self-preservation and making deals to thrive is part of our complex web of human traits. In some extreme circumstances it stands as one of the only things that can keep us alive.

-Here comes the complexity of interpreting this text. When Jesus says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”, what does he mean? Does he mean completely (and maybe even physically) suppressing this drive of self-preservation? Or is this just a symbolic, spiritual description of our faith life and really should have no impact on how we should live in the 21st century?

-Let me offer some of my own thoughts, though let me be clear, I don't have this text fully figured out by a long shot.....

-One special part of this statement, I want to point out, is that this statement of “denying oneself and taking up their cross” is a uniquely Christian description. It's a challenging statement (get to that in a minute), but it's a special statement for Christians. Other religious traditions might say similar things of “detachment” or “resisting evil”, but taking up one's cross is almost exclusively found in our tradition. Like many of Jesus' statements, It's full of oxymorons and symbols. How many people do you know today saying to you: take up your electric chair or take up your lethal injection table and follow me? In a lot of ways it's a statement about resistance and just kinda weird. But resistance to what?

-The first thought I want to offer is a thought on *balance*. If you look at what is one of the most important values of Judaism (even today) and what, I believe, influenced Jesus and his ministry in a huge way, it was *balance*. God, in Genesis 1, didn't just say creation “is good” because of Adam, Eve, and the lovely animals. God said it was good because creation was in *balance*. Infact, I have gotten into a very deep discussion with Laurie Franklin, Rabbinic leader at the Har Shalom synagogue in Missoula, about this and she gets incredibly passionate about how God's command to Adam and Eve to

have “dominion” over creation is not really let’s control and bend nature to our will, but actually is thought of in rabbinic tradition as a special calling for humanity to keep creation *in balance*. That’s God’s task for us.

-I think we can see Jesus’ words in our story today in light of *balance* too. The act of self-preservation is a God-given trait which serves a purpose. But, when this trait gets out of balance with other God-given emotions and becomes the only trait that really matters in one’s life, it creates: greed, consumerism at all costs, corruption, hunger for power, and severe injustice; all of which are very sinful and evil. Jesus, in his time, saw this imbalance lived out in the abuses and authoritarianism of the Roman Empire. This radical and in many ways evil imbalance is what Jesus had no problem taking to task and calling out, and is also what I think he is inviting us into as his followers.

-Thus, to get to: “Take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me.” I think it’s been common for this text to be interpreted as: **take up suffering. Deal with it. Embrace it.** (recipe for abuse)

-But in light of “a world in balance”, I don’t think that is what Jesus is saying here at all. He is not saying embrace suffering but resist suffering. “Take up your cross” is: recognize, name, and resist the reality of evil and imbalance in our time including maybe that own “self-preservation” in ourselves. This is a deep Christian calling to bear witness, not absorb abuse.

-This is why clergy in Charlottesville gathered arm in arm and stood face to face in the middle of protesters (some even with guns) and would not let them cross the line to pick a fight. This is why Christians around the world stand with the native tribes at Standing Rock, stand with women seeking equal rights, stand with all of those seeking equal treatment under the law.

-That’s the challenge, finally, that Jesus demonstrates in his words to Peter. Sometimes our own beings want to ignore evil in our world. We want to make deals that insulate us from evil at the expense of others. Again, our self-preservation, if unchecked can cause us to not have a clear sense of reality: it doesn’t allow us to see who are the “haves” and the “have-nots”.

-I think what Jesus is telling Peter, denying himself means, denying the urge to “only think about ourselves”.

-I have been working with Peter Metcalf, our Church President, to assemble a Building Audit Committee. This committee’s job will be to take stock of how we are using our church facilities currently and make some recommendations to our Church Council and the Congregation at our Annual Meeting on maybe some new ways we can use our building as a ministry. Some of you may be thinking: “what does our church building have to do with denying ourselves and self-preservation?” Well, I think there is quite a lot. I think it’s common for churches sometimes to hide behind their buildings in the name of self-preservation above all. I remember hearing in my home church in Minneapolis: “So-and-so built these cabinets, so we don’t want to have just anyone using this space.” You know our basement of over 2,000 square feet sits empty almost every single week except for some Sunday School kids that play down there? What ministry could we start in that space? What partner could we have possibly to rent or use that basement as something else that would have impact on this community?

-This is the denying ourselves part that I want to enter into this next year with you. This is a new way in which we can resist self-preservation taking over completely in our

community. May God grant us courage to pick up our cross and bring balance to the world. Amen.