

It is the age old dilemma. A few hundred years before the modern theologian George Carlin talked about his church's constant push for pain and his own perpetual pull for pleasure, a gentlemen named Martin Luther coined two terms for the same issues. What Carlin called the pull for pleasure, Luther referred to, in perhaps a slightly more reverent manner, the "theology of glory". And what Carlin called the push for pain, Luther called the "theology of the cross."

Whether we would like to admit it or not, the theology of glory is not just what the late George Carlin wanted, but what we all hope for in our God. We want the God who freed the slaves in Egypt, the God who restored the people to their rightful home in Jerusalem. We want the Jesus we find so often in the Gospels, the one in John who says that he has come that we may have life, and have it abundantly. This is the Jesus we have heard about time and again in the Gospel of Mark for the last few months. Up to this point in our Gospel, Mark has told us story after story about Jesus healing the sick and the oppressed, feeding thousands of people with next to nothing, and continually giving new life to people who had been excluded from society. Right up to today's Gospel, we have experienced a Jesus who lives into George Carlin's desire that we be pulled toward pleasure.

But today, all of us are blind sided. Out of nowhere, we suddenly get Luther's second theology, the theology of the cross. Jesus tells us about the power that comes in suffering and in death. He talks about a God who does not come in shock and awe power, but rather one that contradicts everything that we all imagine God to be. We

hear of a God who is made manifest to us through pain. A God that George Carlin suggested his New York City Roman Catholic church of the 1950's talked about exclusively.

Like Carlin, like us, Peter is naturally taken aback by such a notion. All we have experienced thus far in the Gospels is a Messiah that has brought life and healing to everyone. And now Jesus tells Peter that the path they are on is going to lead to agony and pain? What kind of a coup d'etat is that?

Today's Gospel begins the great ambiguity of our faith. Yes, God does want all of us to live lives of abundance and glory. God wants us all to pull for pleasure. But today, we learn that God's strength is not displayed in awesome power, but rather through weakness, pain and suffering. We learn that the compassion of God is not just for the strong, but especially for the weak. And as disciples of Christ and images of God, we too are called to be willing to suffer the pain that results when we operate out of a position of weakness instead of strength. We too are called to give up our lives and sacrifice for others.

When we really think about it though, it is not really so much of a paradox at all. The theology of glory and the theology of the cross cannot exist without one another. The only way Jesus could bring a theology of glory to everyone was to attack the systems in first century society that downgraded so many. People in the power structure never take kindly to someone trying to change the system that gave them their wealth and power. Hence, if any of us choose to be disciples of Jesus, we too must work to change the social systems that create suffering in our own world. And when we do that,

you can bet that the power brokers are not going to happy with us.

What that means is that both George Carlin theology and Roman Catholic theology of the 1950's only told half the story. Yes, God is always pulling for pleasure for us. But if we are going to follow Jesus, there is no possible way that we will also not face pain and suffering.

The danger of today's Gospel for all of us in post-modern society is not so much accepting what Peter could not. We now know that the Messiah is not a power over God but rather a foot washing One who overturns the power structure of the day and has to face the wrath of those whose apple cart Jesus upsets. Our problem today is understanding what Jesus means in Mark's Gospel when he tells those gathered that they must "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him." I am particularly reminded of a number of women who have come to me over the past years from other denominations. In each of these cases, the women were in abusive relationships and had been physically attacked by their husbands. Each had been "counseled" by their male pastors or church leader to read today's Gospel for the answer to how they were to proceed. "If you want to do the right thing," these men told them, "then you need to deny yourself, and take up your cross." These beatings are your cross to bear."

Such is the monumental danger in appropriating a Biblical text for our time without putting it in historical and cultural context. It is also the danger that comes when uneducated individuals are allowed to serve in the role of pastor or counselor. In reality of course, Jesus would have never told a woman that it was her job to take abuse from her husband or anyone else. He in fact, on many occasions, attacks the cultural mores

of the day that allowed women to be mistreated. This is, in fact, why Jesus is against divorce. The problem with divorce in the first century was that a woman who was subjected to it was literally cut off from her entire support system, from her kinship group. This meant she had no place to live and no way to make a living. A divorced woman in the first century had virtually no choice but to become a prostitute if she was going to survive. Divorce took away a woman's life and her dignity and that is why Jesus is against it and why he cannot possibly be suggesting today that a woman purposely allow herself to be abused.

A little cultural context makes this clear. In antiquity, suffering was viewed very differently than it is today. We have two basic views of suffering in our culture. First, we see it as abnormal and something that we are supposed to make go away as fast as possible. At the same time, some of us have been taught that it is a Christian virtue to live with such suffering. "Offer it up to God", is what I was told as a child.

But in antiquity, suffering was seen as a normal aspect of life. Hunger and disease were so common that you were taught to endure it because you had to. There was no drug to take or therapist to go to, to feel better. Unlike us though, accepting suffering was not seen as a virtue. It was just part of the human condition.

This is the type of suffering that Jesus spends his entire ministry attempting to alleviate. He doesn't want people to suffer in this way, and he does everything possible to remove this pain from them. It therefore makes absolutely no sense that Jesus is suggesting today that we all just suck it up and take this kind of suffering. In fact, what Mark does is make a clear distinction between this general human suffering, the stuff

that is being eliminated by Jesus through healings and great giveaways of food, and the persecution that Jesus tells us we are going to suffer in today's Gospel. Persecution, unlike general human suffering, comes at the hands of those whose power we are taking away when we follow the lead of Jesus. THAT is the suffering that Jesus tells us we must endure today.

Thus, being a disciple of Jesus is both glory and cross, pain and pleasure. Following Jesus means an end to much of human suffering and a new life of freedom and dignity for each of us. But it also means that if we are true to the Jesus message, we are going to face the wrath of those whose power we are attacking.

While the phrase "let them deny themselves" conjures up for us images of self-sacrifice and denial of our inner selves, I would suggest that this is not the way anyone in the first century would have heard today's lesson. For us of course, life is centered around the individual, so our first thought is that this must be about relinquishing our individuality. But in the first century, and also in other parts of the world today, society is not centered on the individual but on a multi-generational kinship group. That's why women were in so much trouble when they were removed from that group. But in such a society where people were not expected to have personal opinions, "denying one self" could not mean denying your individuality, but instead renouncing one's kinship group. That's why elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus talks about hating members of one's own family and creating a wholly new kinship group. (Joining him) This is all about breaking down the social organization that took away people's dignity, especially women's dignity.

Of course, doing so meant attacking the very social fabric of society. What Jesus

did was not unlike the cultural wars going on in our country today. Jesus made the rash suggestion that family should mean more than blood relatives. And some of us today have made the rash suggestion that a nuclear family is not necessarily made up of one man and one woman and two children.

Here then, is the lesson that Jesus offers us today. If we follow him, we will receive many blessings and much abundance in our lives. And what following him means is that we need to deny our self (meaning denying our kin), and take up our cross (meaning risk persecution from the powers that be). To hear today's Gospel as Christ encouraging us to take on individual suffering that we could have avoided, or that a woman, for example, should be subservient and endure suffering that could be averted, is to reverse what today's Gospel is really about. Neither does Jesus or Mark ever glorify suffering for the sake of suffering and never ever do they encourage anyone to become a victim. Instead, it is all about accepting God's gifts, but also being ready for the persecution that may follow as a result of lifting up others to lives of full dignity.

There is little doubt that the people of the first century knew exactly what Jesus meant when he said that we are to take up our cross and follow him. In the year 6 CE, they watched as the Romans crucified 2000 political insurrectionists. They knew what Jesus meant was going to happen if they followed in his footsteps and attempted to bring relief to those who were suffering. The same is true for you and me.

Of course, we would all prefer just the first half of Mark's Gospel. We, like George Carlin, are pulling for pleasure. In fact, we have built entire religious denominations around Carlin's call. The most well known today is called the Prosperity

Gospel, the notion that God wants us to be happy and to succeed. And of course, all that is true. That is what God wants for us. But it is only half the story. Because if we want to bring that same prosperity to all of God's children, we will, no doubt, be persecuted for doing so. One is not possible without the other.

As we continue our Lenten journey, my prayer for all of us this morning is that we can embrace this paradox. Whenever we see that beautiful cross right outside, or this one right here, or the one we hang around our necks, let us not embrace Carlin's Gospel of pure pleasure or the church's Gospel of purposeful suffering. Let us instead relish the notion that the power of the cross is that Jesus refuses to use power.

Let us remember that carrying our cross has nothing to do with accepting personal suffering and everything to do with pointing out how and why people are suffering and doing something about it. Let us follow in the footsteps of not just Jesus, but all those who have seen the power of leading through weakness. The Buddha brought respect and love to his people through a campaign of not fighting back. His words are very reminiscent of Jesus' in today's Gospel. The Buddha said, "by giving away our food, we get more strength. By bestowing clothing on others, we gain more beauty, by giving abodes of purity and truth, we acquire great treasures. Ghandhi brought full humanity to Indians and changed the way the British empire saw their role in the world, and he did so without ever striking anyone. He put it this way; "The true child of God has the strength to use the sword, but will not use it, knowing every human is the image of God." Our own Bishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela brought justice to a people by loving their enemies to death. And in America, Martin Luther King, Jr. changed the way an

entire society treated part of its population through the path of non-violence.

This is the way of the cross. It is not an easy path for any of us. It was not an easy path for Jesus, for Nelson Mandela, or for Martin Luther King, Jr. But it was the path that Jesus put them on, and when we have the courage to stick to it, we too, can change the world. By holding fast and accepting our call, we will bring blessing and abundance to all and we WILL bring about God's reign. Amen.