

ACCEPTING JESUS THE WAY HE IS

“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed, and on the third day be raised to life.”

In Peter’s job description for the Messiah, such words were nowhere to be found. They were completely contrary to the role Peter had in mind for the One whom God sent into the world to restore Israel and redeem humankind. Peter had certain uncompromising expectations of Jesus the Christ, and those expectations definitely didn’t include being killed.

“Suffering and death?” Peter responded. “What are you talking about? That’s not how things are supposed to end for you, and for us, your followers.”

Talk about a letdown. Discouragement. Disillusionment.

On the Saturday Night Live TV program a few years ago, one of the actors on the show, Rachel Dratch, created a character named “Debbie Downer.” As you might guess from her name, Debbie was a gloomy, pessimistic person that no one wanted to be around; and when someone did happen to encounter her, they wanted to get away from her ASAP. She had this way of sucking the joy and happiness out of any room she entered.

For example, Debbie would be at a party, next to people who were standing around a punch bowl laughing and having a grand time, and she’d casually mention how many germs were probably lurking on the punch bowl ladle, just waiting to get passed on to all the partygoers and cause vomiting and diarrhea. After each negative comment she made, there would be this musical sound, sort of like when a contestant loses at *The Price is Right*. Wah, wah. The thing about Debbie Downer was that, in a very short while, she could transform what was a cheerful, upbeat atmosphere into a dark and somber one.

I think that’s what Jesus did to Peter in this morning’s Gospel reading. At the time, Jesus was on top of his game. He had a powerful, magnetic message about God’s coming kingdom to share; he had many enthusiastic followers who hung on his every word and would have probably done pretty much anything Jesus asked them to do; and he had the power to do a lot of good for a lot of people by healing the sick and exorcising demons.

God had greatly blessed Jesus' ministry, and everything had been coming up roses. But then this positive, upbeat mood took a sharp, downward turn. Jesus was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He had become a Debbie Downer.

Wah, wah.

Well, Peter would have none of it. He wasn't going to allow Jesus to burst his rose-colored bubble. So he took his Lord aside and rebuked him. He scolded Jesus like a child who had just said a naughty word. "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"

Who could blame Peter for reacting the way he did? He and the other disciples had put all of their eggs in one basket, so-to-speak. They had left their homes, their families and their livelihoods to travel around with Jesus and help him proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom. They had fully invested themselves in the belief that Jesus was the Messiah that they—and all of Israel—had been hoping for, yearning for and desperately waiting for, for so many years. And now Jesus was talking about suffering and dying? That wasn't the kind of Messiah they had sacrificed everything for.

So Peter reacted strongly. "No way, Lord! It isn't going to happen!" But Jesus' response to Peter was just as strong, if not stronger. In fact, I think Jesus' reply is as startling and surprising to us as it must have been to Peter.

"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you don't have the concerns of God in mind, but merely human concerns.

That harsh statement of Jesus cuts kind of close to us, wouldn't you agree? Because, to be honest, when it comes to you and I following Jesus, a high percentage of our concerns are human rather than concerns of God. Peter's problem was that he wanted to believe in and follow a Jesus of his own choosing and understanding; a Savior made in his own image, so to speak. And isn't that true for us, as well?

We much prefer a Jesus we're comfortable with: a Jesus who thinks the way we do, agrees with our political and societal views, and conforms nicely with our own beliefs, understandings and ways of living. We want a Jesus who doesn't demand too much from us, doesn't call us to make any significant changes in our lives, and is fine with us going right on doing what we've been doing. We want a Jesus who believes that what we think is right for us is surely right with him. And why wouldn't it be?

I read a story recently about a minister who often preached about peace and justice issues; and on one particular Sunday, not very long after 9/11, he spoke on the subject of loving our enemies and forgiving those who injure us. With the destruction of the World Trade Center Twin Towers still fresh in

the minds of everyone in the sanctuary, it probably won't surprise you to know that his sermon went over like a lead balloon. Most of the people who attended the worship service were outraged about the sermon message, and the preacher was all too aware of it. He could feel the intense anger radiating from the congregants in the pews.

In the receiving line after service most people said nothing and just gave the minister the evil eye. But one man came up to him and said, "Pastor, I'm a veteran and I have put my life on the line for this country. That was a cold-blooded act of war perpetrated against the United States, and it's offensive to me that you would even slightly suggest we try to love and forgive the inhuman monsters who flew those planes into the World Trade center and the Pentagon and killed thousands of people. Not to mention the passengers who died when that jetliner crashed in Pennsylvania."

The minister replied, "But I was preaching what Jesus said and taught."

To which the man replied, "Yeah, well, I always thought that was one teaching Jesus got wrong."

Who among us can honestly say that, at some time or other in our lives, we haven't felt the same way that man did about something Jesus said—and we thought our Lord "got it wrong on that one." Maybe we verbally expressed, or at least thought in the silence of our own minds, the same kind of sentiments that enraged veteran did: that Jesus was in error when he taught about forgiveness and loving our enemies; or he was mistaken or completely unrealistic about some other teaching we find hard to agree with and accept?

I know I've wrestled with such feelings.

What, Lord? Sell all my possessions and give them to the poor and then go follow you? Surely you don't really mean that!

So yes, if I'm truly honest with myself, I have to admit that I would be more comfortable and a lot happier with a Jesus who always agreed with me and saw things the way I see them, rather than a Jesus who requires me to agree with him and see the world through his eyes if I truly want to follow him.

I would be a whole lot more at ease if I could follow a Jesus who never said, as he did this morning, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

But, like it or not, that's the Jesus who calls us. And as much as we might want to echo Peter's words, "Never, Lord!" when we hear certain teachings and commands of his that we find hard to accept, Jesus would probably have a few words to say to us in response, like: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but human

concerns.”

I recently read a story about a man who took the words of Jesus seriously, who accepted Jesus the way he was, was guided by what Jesus said, didn't try to shape Jesus or Jesus' message into his own image, and strove to live faithfully, according to Jesus' challenging teachings.

Damien DeVeuster was a Belgian priest who gave up his life caring for lepers in a leper colony at Molokai, Hawaii, and died in 1889 at the age of forty-nine. Molokai is an island where lepers were sent to rot and die. Literally. Partly because of the way that lepers were depicted in the Bible, they were considered “unclean,” and had to be isolated from “clean” society. And for many years these unfortunate individuals were sent to Molokai, where they were left to die under the most horrible conditions.

As a young priest, Damien felt that when Jesus said to his disciples, “You shall be witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth,” it surely included the island of Molokai. Nobody else, it seems, had figured that out yet, but Damien had. So he went to his bishop and asked permission to move to the island and be with the people there and do what he could to minister to them. The bishop loved Damien and saw great promise in him, so he tried to talk him out of it. It didn't seem right that this young priest with so much potential should throw his life away in that forsaken place. It was what someone later called “Holy Waste”—which I think is equivalent to losing one's life for Christ.

But Damien ultimately persuaded his bishop, and he received permission to travel to the leper colony at Molokai. Father Damien wrote that in the early weeks he was often very sick to his stomach as he moved among the people and saw the horrific conditions they were living under. It was all he could do to force himself to stay; but in the end, his strong conviction that Christ himself had called him to that island kept him there, so he went to work.

The first thing Damien did was to find a source of fresh water up in the mountain. And he was able to build a little system that brought the fresh water down to the village. From this came the colony's first sanitation system. Then he showed the lepers how to build simple little houses to replace the flimsy shacks and huts they had been living in. It was the colony's first housing project. Next, Damien built a health clinic, and although he had almost no medical knowledge, he could at least dress their leper sores and give them some comfort.

If it hasn't yet come into your mind, remember the cup of cold water Jesus told his followers to offer the thirsty, as well as going out to visit the sick, and Jesus' great commandment to love your neighbor—it was all there in Damien's ministry and in his life. He took Jesus' words to heart literally and

acted on them.

Finally, Damien helped the people of the leper colony build a small chapel, and he preached in it every Sunday. Over the years the lepers grew accustomed to see him in the pulpit on Sundays. He would begin by crossing himself, and would always begin his sermon with the same words: ““You lepers know that God the Father loves you.” Then he would go on to preach a message that was always full of hope, full of joy, and full of life.

Several years went by in this way, until one Sunday morning he went into the pulpit, crossed himself and said, “We lepers know that God the Father loves us.” It was the colony’s first indication that Damien had contracted leprosy by living so close to them. But he continued to take up his cross and lose himself in his ministry of love for as long as he was able, until he died, a leper among the lepers he loved and had dedicated his life to serving.

It seems that these words of Jesus were spoken for people such as Damien DeVeuster: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

My friends, the words I’m about to say next scare me, but I’m going to say them anyway and allow us to reflect them during the remainder of this worship service and into the future as we continue our efforts to live our life in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. And those scary words are: we can’t cherry pick the teachings of Jesus and choose which ones are acceptable for us to follow and which ones aren’t. Being a disciple of Christ doesn’t work that way.

Rather, when it comes to Christian discipleship, we have to take Jesus as he is, and accept the things he said just as he said them. This means, among other things, recognizing Jesus as The Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and a Messiah who willingly went to the cross and died on it so that we might live.

It means taking up our crosses as Jesus told us to do—whatever those crosses might be for us—to follow Christ wherever he leads us and accept the consequences of our faithfulness, good and bad, whatever those consequences might be.

Taking Jesus as he is entails losing our lives for him, giving up our own self-seeking will and desire and living for Christ, so that we might find our lives through ministering to and loving others. And it means giving up our idolatrous love of the world and material things so that we might gain our soul.

Accepting Jesus the way he is means not becoming a stumbling block or pawn of Satan by placing our human concerns ahead of God’s concerns.

And accepting Jesus the way he is entails resisting the urge to immediately and impulsively respond, “Never, Lord!” with little or no consideration, when Jesus tells us something we don’t want to hear, such as

how we should love our enemies and forgive those who wrong us and hurt us.

My prayer for us today is that our reaction to the words and teachings of Jesus we find challenging and difficult to accept won't be to simply reject them outright, but will be tempered with great respect, deep reflection and prayer, serious consideration, and a strong enough faith to let our lives be guided by what Jesus says, no matter how difficult and demanding it might be.

May God bless us and guide us to that end. Amen.