

Radical Acceptance

- [Mark 8:31-38](#)

I admit it. I'm mortal. Just like all of us. And that of course is the reminder of Ash Wednesday, that we are entirely dependent on God for every breath we take. And just in case we missed it on Ash Wednesday with this year's self-service ashes, the loss of our beloved sister Karin this week brought it home powerfully. We are mortal. We are not gods. We are humans.

And so it's not surprising that we see things from a human perspective. Just like Peter in today's gospel reading, we don't want change, we don't want pain, we want things to be comfortable. It must have been horrifying for the disciples to hear Jesus talking openly about his upcoming suffering and death, and the resurrection bit was probably just incomprehensible. I imagine that in his own humanity, Jesus was not looking forward to it because he tells Peter not to get in his way, not to be stumbling block... had Jesus been totally self-confident about the future I suspect he would not have seen Peter's words as an impediment.

We don't want to suffer and we don't want our friends to suffer. Yet suffering is part of the human condition. At this moment, millions of people all around the world are suffering. Some of that suffering could be avoided and alleviated, some of it cannot be.

Buddha started his journey to enlightenment when he realized that outside the palace walls, suffering existed everywhere; and he developed the great teaching which, put simply, is that our lives are full of suffering, and the reason for that is our attachment to having what we want. So the Buddhist path starts with letting go of attachment – letting go of having it my way.

Jesus says something a little different. He says “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” Rather than detach, embrace.

But there is still the element of denying oneself. This is of course part of the essence of Lent. What we wonder, shall I give up for Lent? What

small symbolic discipline shall I engage? My friends, giving up chocolate is not what Jesus is talking about. He is talking about an entirely different stance on life; he is talking about moving away from the little ego, and from ego-attachment to having it our way.

On Tuesday mornings in Lent some of us are reading *The Nonviolent Life* by John Dear. Dear points out how violent we are to ourselves; we don't like ourselves, we punish ourselves, our self-talk is full of anger and recrimination; when we make a mistake we call ourselves stupid, and worse. But this is not how God sees us – God sees us as beloved daughters and sons. God sees us as blameless. Denying ourselves in the way Jesus means is not about increasing our self-condemnation but about having compassion on ourselves.

Denying ourselves is giving up our ego-attachment to being right, to being clever, to being in charge and instead realizing that each one of us is a funny mixture of totally brilliant and also very fallible.

Paradoxically, denying ourselves is accepting who we are as we are, mortal and dependent on God. Because our little egos want to make us more important than others; our little egos want to keep going and stay in control of our lives; our little egos make it difficult for us to accept help because that is admitting weakness, that is giving up power.

My friends, we are mortal, we suffer, we are weak, we need help.

This is the path of humility, of self-denial – not that we become victims blaming the world around us for all our ills – but that we see with clear eyes that we are part of the interdependent universe and that today we may give and tomorrow receive.

Jesus tells us to take up our cross. There are many different ways to understand that. But today I want to reflect upon it as radical acceptance. Acceptance of things just as they are.

Many of us spend a lot of internal energy fighting the way things are; others become passive and angrily resigned to the things we don't like about our lives. Radical acceptance is looking at the way things are with

clear eyes. Radical acceptance is looking at things the way they are with God's gentle eyes of love.

In the gospel reading, Jesus was talking about things the way they were. We heard that he, "began to teach his disciples 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. He said all this quite openly."

Jesus was not blaming nor avoiding, but simply saying what was going to happen. I think taking up our cross is doing the same thing. It is accepting who we are without blaming ourselves or the world around us yet acknowledging with gentle eyes that we are mortal; we are dust and to dust we shall return.

This is a very similar goal to that of the Buddhist; not self-punishment but simply letting go of attachment so that we can be free to respond to the world as it truly is without all our projections and without all the stories we tell ourselves about it. It is a similar goal but a different path.

As Christians, we follow Jesus and his way of doing things as best we can. Rather than detaching, he embraced. He lived life to the full. There is a wonderful poem by Rainer Maria Rilke called "Go to the Limits of your Longing" in which God says,

go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Paradoxically I think this is about self-denial in the way that Jesus practiced it - letting everything happen, beauty and terror.

As we surrender our desire to be in charge, our desire to be God; as we accept that we are indeed mortals – mortals, as Merton put it, walking around shining like the sun, but nonetheless mortals; as we accept that stuff happens, both beauty and terror then we can put ourselves into God's hands. We can remember that we are totally dependent upon God for everything.

And with that dependence comes freedom. Jesus did not go quaking to Jerusalem. He did not try to control the outcome of what would happen. He knew that it was in God's hands and he surrendered to the Great Plan with open eyes. He denied himself and took up his cross.

Before I close, I want to be very clear that surrendering our lives to God and allowing both beauty and terror does not mean becoming doormats. There is a shadow to almost everything, and we humans can distort every spiritual teaching. Embracing the cross of our mortality, accepting things as they are does not mean we don't try to change them.

If your hand is burning you take it out of the fire. Radical acceptance means that you then take the steps you need to take to get the help you need. Radical acceptance means that instead of getting caught up in how stupid you were to put your hand in the fire or how stupid your mate was to build a fire where she knew you might put your hand, or how crazy it is that urgent care is not open 24 hours or why you have a flat tire just now – instead of all that mental blaming and cursing, you accept with serenity the things you cannot change and get on and change the things you can.

Radical acceptance allows us to see with God's eyes – the eyes of love and the eyes of realism. Radical acceptance allows us to see what must be done and work towards the reign of God without discouragement.

And let us not forget that the same Jesus who said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," also said "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt 11:28,29)

