

Years ago when I was a manager I was trained to deliver positive feedback before giving negative feedback under the premise that this would make the recipient more open to receiving the critical feedback, since people shut down if they hear the negative feedback first and then never hear the positive feedback.

Peter's rebuke to Jesus after *"Jesus 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,* would seem to prove the case in point.

Peter heard suffering, rejection, and death and completely missed *"after three days rise again."*

We can appreciate that the impact of these first words was frightening. Jesus had collected disciples and followers and he was having an impact. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God probably conjured up images of a unified Israel, the glory days of David, and the return of a kingdom restored in its relationship with God. At the very least, his followers might have conjured up images of getting out from under the yoke of the oppressive Roman occupation. Suffering was to be endured for such an outcome. The prospect of rejection by all the religious authorities was probably more troublesome – how could the glories of Israel be restored if Jesus and his followers were at odds with the religious establishment? And then there was the total downer of death. What then would be the point?

We may wonder how Peter missed the impact of *"after three days rise again"*? At the very least he could have stopped and asked for a rewind or a "say what"? The totally radical nature of what those words implied was too big to comprehend. Here was Jesus saying that after he had died he would rise again.

Well how would you react? From the distance of 2,000 years in which we have worshipped a god whom we believe has risen it's hard to comprehend the shock with which these words would have been received. Either Peter didn't register Jesus' words at all or he heard them and did not believe them – which also might explain why Peter focused on the negative outcomes of suffering, rejection, and death, rather than the prospect of resurrection. Since the idea of the after-life was not universally accepted in Judaism, and since it would be hard to imagine what that would mean for a mortal being who had died, it is not hard to appreciate why Peter would have not heard the implications of rising again.

Nevertheless it is the resurrection that makes the difference; it is the resurrection that distinguishes Jesus from all the other prophets and leaders that arose during the time of the Roman occupation and who were crucified for their efforts. But it's a hard concept to grasp, especially when Jesus makes it even more difficult by saying *"If anyone want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* Jesus may or may not have been making a prediction about the kind of death he was to die but the sight of crucified bodies would have been a familiar one in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and so the image would have been terrifying.

Furthermore it is the willingness to take up the cross, the willingness to go to the cross that makes the cross a symbol of transformation. There is no way around suffering but through it. Anyone who has ever tried to ignore grief will know what I mean. This is not to say that as

Christians we want to embrace suffering for the sake of suffering. The idea that suffering is good for us is a blasphemy that is blind to how God looked at creation and pronounced it good. We were not created to suffer ...but suffering is a part of life and it is what we make of it for the sake of our life in Christ that can transform it and it is our hope in the resurrection that provides the model for what this can mean.

The willingness to suffer for our faith comes out of faith and that faith is demonstrated by obedience to God. Remembering that the word obedience comes from the Latin to hear we can understand that faith requires careful listening and a willingness to move into action to respond to what we hear God calling us to do. It was Jesus' perfect obedience that enabled him to perform his miracles: to heal, to cast out demons, to walk on water and quell the storm, to feed the hungry, and to remain steadfast in the face of suffering, rejection, and death.

But God talks to us all if we are willing to listen and that is grace. In our reading from Genesis we have the example of Abraham a human being, and a flawed one at that, who responded faithfully enough that God accounted him righteous. We owe a great deal to Abraham, because according to Paul's argument in his letter to the Romans, since Abraham was able to be faithful without the benefit of following any laws he paved the way for gentiles to do the same. Remember that Abraham lived before Moses and the laws that were given on Mt. Sinai. God chose Abraham to be the father of many nations. God moved him around the ancient Middle East like a player on a chess board and every time God asked Abraham to move, Abraham and his wife Sarah complied. This morning we hear that Abraham is 99 and still without the heir he so desired. Yet God promises a very human kind of resurrection, God promises that even though Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 90 they would still have a child. At first Abraham laughs and tries to bargain with God on behalf of his illegitimate son Ishmael. But God has promised and so Abraham continues to walk in faith until the impossible finally happens and he and Sarah have the longed awaited child.

But the point of this story is not the baby at the end of the story, plenty of couples have prayed and the longed for baby never came. The point is that Abraham listened to God, Abraham and Sarah followed God's call in fulfillment of God's plan. Together they carried their cross of moving from one place to another, learning to listen and remaining faithful. The child was not a reward the child was God's plan.

So that was then this is now. Seeing the cross and the invitation to transformation is still hard to accept, especially when we are in the middle of suffering and rejection. But transformation is possible, and in fact that is what we are seeing in this Lent. On Ash Wednesday we experienced another tragic mass murder at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. 17 deaths, 14 injured, and many more than that traumatized by loss and violence. Those who survived have picked up their crosses. Whether or not you agree with what they are doing they are transforming their suffering through action. These youth have taken to mass media, they have and confronted politicians with their concerns and demands. They have moved into action and it is action that can transform suffering from a passive experience into one that brings the hope of resurrection. And yes they are experiencing rejection, they have been dismissed as actors, as tools of the Democrats, and one young man even had to take down his Facebook page because he is receiving death threats! Taking up

one's cross comes with consequences as Jesus knew all too well. But to try to avoid suffering, to reject the cross is to reject the possibility of resurrection.

Therefore as we continue on our journey through Lent we are invited to reflect deeply on the cross we have each been given to bear, to reflect on how it impacts our life of faith, and to reflect on how we can use that for transforming ourselves through Christ, for the sake of Christ and his promise of resurrection.

Amen

Words 7% of an impact, Voice Qualities - 38% of an impact, Physiology - 55% of an impact