

There's usually a moment in the birth process, when the laboring woman expresses doubt about her ability to complete the childbearing task. It's a turning point in labor and it's so common, physicians officially call it "transition."

I went through "transition," and I too expressed doubt about my ability to finish birthing our child. What I said, was "I'm afraid *it's about to get a lot harder* and I don't know if I can do it."

Everyone in the room got quiet at the moment. And while I was hoping someone would pipe up and cheerfully say, "No, Katie! It'll be so easy from here!" no one did. Instead, my doula responded, "You know what? Yeah. It might get a lot harder. But you can do it."

Today's gospel lesson gives us Peter's "transition" moment: the moment when he realizes that following Jesus is about to get a lot harder.

"From that time on Jesus began to *show* his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and on the third day be raised."

Reality sets in: Suffering. Being killed. Being raised? Peter thinks, I can't do this! Is there any other way? Is Jesus who he says he is?

It's about to get a lot harder.

Not like it hasn't been a difficult path already. By now, Jesus has shown the disciples how he welcomes children, associates with outcasts, offers forgiveness to sinners, and gets his hands dirty laying them on people.

The disciples have seen the countless sick in square that Jesus touched and the hungry gathered on the hillside that he fed. Twice. They've been mobbed by people with demons, people with disabilities, people with leprosy, and people from foreign lands.

To use Luther's words, the disciples have come to "[c]omprehend the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering." And now, Jesus is asking them to follow him beyond this human suffering and through execution and death.

If it wasn't difficult enough already, yeah, it's about to get a lot harder.

Can Peter do it?

I believe Jesus knows he can. "Get behind me, Satan!" he says in the face of Peter's doubts. Jesus' shocking reply forces Peter to think again about the course of action that he--Peter--would prefer for Christ. He's making himself a stumbling block not only to Christ but also to himself. Christ wants the disciples to know what's coming, to have a vision not only of the difficult life they're going to lead beyond him. Christ also wants them to know that they can do it.

They can do it with three actions: deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.

It's not a simple course of action. And it, Jesus says in the next breath, amounts to losing your life. Because yes, denying yourself-taking up your cross-and following means you will die, in the sense that when you lead this life of discipleship with Christ, you'll find yourself doing all kinds of things "You'd never be caught dead" doing before.

Denying yourself means coming sit and read and pray aloud next to people you've never seen before. Taking up your cross means encountering suffering--your own and other people's--you'd wish to avoid; a little bit of you dies when you give your money away or forgive someone who doesn't deserve it. When you hold the hands with someone who's dying or when you say a prayer for your enemy.

Because it's in the places that make us uncomfortable, the times of suffering, the people we see as broken, and the deaths, little and big, that *show* us God. God hides in suffering. God shows up with the outcasts. God works with and through death to bring us to resurrection and new life.

This Denying Yourself-Taking up your Cross-and Following Me...This is what we mean when we use the big term "Theology of the Cross."

And it is not only for the strong in faith. It is also, if not especially, for all the Peters: those of us who are still "works-in-progress," those of us whose moments of transition cause us to doubt. For Christ, after all, speaks these words to *Peter*-- the disciple who tries to follow but often stumbles; the one who tries to deny himself but refuses to lose face in the courtyard on Good Friday. Only very slowly--and after denying Christ and being forgiven--does Peter figure out how to live this discipleship.

God certainly calls us, like Peter, to follow closer, to deeper discipleship. But, like Peter, we learn, one forgiven denial after another, how God's grace calls us to do these powerful things: to meet death, do the uncomfortable, face the doubt and complete our own "transition" times.

For Jesus has known all along that yes, it's going to be hard. And he also knows that we can do it. And going through, we discover that, by God's grace, through faith, Christ brings us to the other side where there is new life.

AMEN.

Rev. Kathryn L. Pocalyko
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Sermon series observing the 500th
Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
Topic: Theology of Cross
Romans 12:9-21
Excerpt from Heidelberg Disputation
Matthew 16:21-28

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary texts from Thirteenth Sunday
after Pentecost