

DISCIPLING: PART II

Shame, facing the demon

I recall the story of a man who was forced to witness the execution of his best friend, whom he had followed wholeheartedly in a very risky venture. Before his execution, his friend was publicly exposed, and brought to trial in shame and ridicule, whereas prior to this he had been the object of public respect and admiration. This man was now being put to death for his crimes while his friend looked on with a sense of utter hopelessness, even to the point of denial as a defense against self-destruction. The friend was named Peter and he was watching Jesus die. It was the darkest hour in Peter's life, having previously followed Jesus while believing the world was going to change before his eyes, and that he would have a role in it. Now crushed, he tried to forget his dreams and hopes, walking into the dark night of an uncertain future, the disciple of a disgraced master.

Fast forward to today. In the average life, the average person floats along day by day facing the average ups and downs, ins and outs, fast and slow changes, and occasional surprises, holding on to the clouded fantasy that somehow life will "work out," without ever comprehending what any of it means. Look around you, how many people like that do you know, people who manage but never quite get around to deciphering the meaning of their life? They sort of make up the middle of the pack in the endeavor of life. At one end of the spectrum are those who manage to enjoy success and comfort, growing their lives out of hard work and a lot of good fortune, seemingly always being in the right place at the right time. Now, think a little harder. Ever meet someone who has been entirely crushed by life? I don't mean someone who has had a serious blow or loss and is momentarily disabled by the resultant pain, but someone who has lost everything important to them, including hope? Yet somehow this hopeless soul has managed to physically survive, although survival may have seemed the lesser option at the time. Their stories are sometimes so sad and overwhelming, or full of shame and disgrace that we avoid them due to our own sense of helplessness or disgust. We would rather these people and their stories didn't exist because of the questions and doubts they raise regarding the purpose of life and the role of God in all of it.

Let's go back to Peter for a moment. He truly was left with a sense of hopelessness. He hadn't quite caught the impact of Jesus' words regarding his impending fate. Although he heard, Peter chose to reject or suppress this theme from the teaching of his master, and was caught up in the hype and promotion of the "Messiah" concept popular at his time. He wanted to believe that Jesus was going to defeat the Roman oppressor, set the religious and legal leaders straight on their errors, and bring in an eternal age of peace and true righteousness. But Jesus had another plan for Peter and his other disciples. He had known beforehand that they would not comprehend his teaching; that they would suffer the defeat of witnessing his death, and would be forced to rethink everything he said in the three days until his resurrection. Here's how the narrative goes in John, Chapter 16:

Jesus, in attempting to prepare the Disciples for his impending death, told them that he must go in order to fulfill the plan of his Father. He continued to relate that they would become outcasts because of him, and that though they were hearing him relate these facts, they would not understand them until afterward: ***But these things I have spoken to you, that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. (John 16:4 NASV)*** Even though he told them, the disciples still didn't understand that he was going to die. They questioned each other, ***What is this thing He is telling us, 'a little while, and you will not behold me; and again a little while, and you will see Me;***

and, because I go to the Father? . . . We do not know what He is talking about. (John 16:17-18) Jesus continued, he warned them that they would weep and lament in sorrow while the world rejoiced, but that their sorrow would ultimately become joy. Yet before that they would be scattered to their own homes and that they would leave him, the Son of God, alone to die a death of disgrace.

In Peter's case Jesus even told him that he would suffer the blow of shame to such a degree that he would deny any relationship with Him. Yet when Peter challenged him, saying *God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You;* Jesus turned to him with the harsh rebuttal *Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's. (Matt. 16:22-23)*

As we all know now, this was a part of the large plan, and we take it with bland regard as a part of our Christian history. Some, in comparing themselves to Peter, even conjecture that their faith would have kept them from denying Jesus, thinking of it apathetically as a simple test of faith. So many Christians today see their faith as a walk of "self-actualization," of becoming all they are destined to be for the sake of their own lives. Yet the plan for the disciples of Jesus was to reduce their hopes to dust, to remove the human aspect of self-service and self-glorification. Ultimately it was the brokenness of their lives, failure of their own plans, their shattered dreams, that enabled them to see Jesus after His resurrection and comprehend the true nature of their calling.

And, here's where the demon lies in wait in our lives. We are all being called to become true disciples, to learn what Jesus taught in its entirety, and to reach that point where we lay down our self-interest in service to Jesus. Yet, just as in the case of the Disciples, we tend to take the lower road, the easier path, wanting to preserve to "good" parts of our lives. We quickly forget the issue of forgiveness, and what we came to Jesus for in the first place. The demon says that we're OK, that we can get by on our own initiative, accepting from God what works for us, and rejecting the rest. We want what the Disciples wanted, to pick the right venture and participate in its success, with a little glory for ourselves thrown in. And, this is where it gets hard.

Remember the hopeless soul whose life has been crushed by circumstances beyond his control and by his own behavior? That individual who has not been successful but has failed, that one whom you would rather forget about? When that one comes before the throne of grace there is no longer his or her own planning to get in the way of God's plan. The dreams are gone, the hope is gone, and one naked soul stands before God admitting to utter failure, perhaps not knowing what to ask at all, yet looking for some hope, some rescue. And this is when the Rescuer of our souls, Jesus, can step in and become the Disciple of a crushed life, the Hope beyond the hopelessness.

Too bad for those of us who still hold on to the dreams of success, leisure, reward, and recognition by the world's standards. Too bad for those in the middle of the pack who can't quite figure it out, but are sure that they will find the answer some day, and that some day their ship will come in. The demon is saying "hold on to your dreams, press forward toward your success, you deserve it." Jesus is saying "Give up your dreams, forget about success, you will receive from Me what you can never earn and certainly don't deserve." Your true self and your true destiny await you if you let go of the old stuff. Easy for someone who has lost it all, not so easy for the rest. He forced His Disciples to face the failure of their own dreams and aspirations and to wait in complete despair before He returned to reveal the complete plan. The complete

plan for our lives requires that we give up our plans. In the event you find your life being deconstructed before your eyes, perhaps you should consider that Jesus is preparing you to truly have life. You cannot be a disciple of the Master, Jesus, until you reject the former master of your life, you.

Be Blessed, Bill Zinn