

“Reorientation”

Reading: *Jeremiah 15:15-21; Matthew 16:13-28*

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Maybe you heard the story in the news the other day about a plane that was diverted and delayed because one passenger managed to disable the seat of the passenger in front of him so that the seat couldn't recline, and apparently the passenger in front ended up throwing a cup of water at the passenger behind. The plane had to land partway through the trip and those passengers were removed, and everyone ended up late to their destination. It's one of those stories that is really pretty absurd, and yet at the same time I can easily imagine how the people involved took it completely seriously in the moment. We put up with a thousand little discourtesies throughout our lives, but by golly, I will *not* let you put your seat back on my tray table. This is my line in the sand, and you will go no further.

Hopefully you've never diverted an entire plane, but most of us probably have those little things in life that get our ire up. How dare you cut me off in traffic? How dare you cut in front of me in line? How dare you say such a thing about my political party? We all have those things that we take umbrage at, things that offend us for one reason or another, that we take as a personal insult. We don't all have the same things that set us off. I for one find littering incredibly offensive; I just cannot understand what sort of thought processes would lead someone to deliberately leave trash out for someone else to have to pick up. I think it's incredibly disrespectful, but you may have something completely different that drives you up the wall.

We get personally offended by certain things. Maybe we could even say it's a matter of honor: it offends my sense of honor that you would leave a beer can on my front lawn, and my honor wants satisfaction; I want to see you pay for your transgression, but you're already gone and so I can only grumble about it. Many other cultures throughout history have had clearly defined rules about this sort of thing: if one person offends another person's honor, there were certain ways to go about getting satisfaction. Looking back, we can see all sorts of faults with how those rules worked and didn't work — we would certainly not approve of two people getting into a duel today, of course — but it's also true that at least people knew what the rules were and how to behave. These days, it's basically up to the individual. I define my own sense of honor, and I get offended at whatever offends me. We live in a culture of unpredictable, individualistic umbrage.

It wasn't always that way. In our gospel passage today we see a different sort of umbrage playing itself out. Jesus and Peter lived in a very different culture than ours, and based on Peter's actions Jesus challenges some of that culture's deep values, and though our culture works differently today, Jesus' challenge to Peter also challenges us.

There are two episodes in the passage we read, and they're put side by side in most of the gospels. We don't know if they happened one right after the other or whether the gospel writers are taking two separate events and putting them together for us, but either way they give us a clear contrast. First comes the episode where Jesus checks with His followers about what people are saying about Him. Maybe He's really just curious, or maybe He's testing His followers to see if they've been paying attention. Peter says that people are saying all sorts of things about Jesus. They clearly think He's someone important, but they can't agree on who. And then Jesus asks His disciples directly: who

do they say that He is? It's one thing for the crowds to miss who Jesus claims to be, but what about the ones who have been following Him most closely? And Peter affirms that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the one chosen and anointed by God to bring God's kingdom to earth. And Jesus in turn affirms Peter: "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it." Peter is given a great honor.

And then we come to the next episode, and again, Peter is the disciple who does the talking. This time, though, he is not affirmed, he is smacked down. Jesus begins teaching that He will suffer and die at the hands of others, and Peter rebukes Him. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter in just about the strongest language He could use: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter is filling the role of the tempter and the accuser, in other words, luring Jesus away from His mission and failing the kingdom of God.

Peter takes a lot of heat for his responses to Jesus in this passage. At first glance he seems to be flip-flopping in His allegiance to Jesus: one minute Peter is the rock Jesus will build His church on, the next minute he's Satan. But in reality, Peter is being pretty consistent; it's just that our culture is so far removed from his that his actions don't really make sense to us. In that culture, what you valued most was not your money or your possessions or even really your family. What mattered most was your honor, your worth as a person viewed by the society around you. What mattered was that you maintained your honor in whatever position you found yourself. To them, your honor depended on where you were born, who you were related to, how you conducted yourself, and what your occupation was (which wasn't something you decided for yourself, of course; that was usually decided for you). Gaining and maintaining that honor was all-important. It wasn't a sense of self-worth, because in those days people weren't as individualistic as we are now: honor was something other people gave you.

And so Peter, and everyone else in that culture, is viewing everything through the lens of gaining honor. Here Peter is a disciple of a rising young rabbi; he's following Jesus, he's seeing amazing things happening, everyone is wondering what Jesus is going to do next, and so there's lots of discussion about who exactly Jesus is. In that culture, honor is not something that you have for yourself or decide for yourself, it's something that is given to you and depends on who you're associated with. So if you're the Messiah's disciple, you gain in honor because you're associated with Him. The rest of society will view us as being worth more because we're in the group of the Messiah. And Peter confesses this; he sees the truth about Jesus and affirms it, and he's proud to do so because they will all gain honor as a result.

But then their Messiah starts talking about being killed at the hands of others. Again, your honor depends on who you're associated with, so if your leader is shamefully killed, that means the whole group bears that shame. In fact, depending on how shameful the death of your leader is, you might just become shameless, to the point where you are stripped of all honor in the eyes of society, and you're basically cut off from being a part of society. This is what Peter sees coming, and so, from his point of view, what Jesus is saying is a threat to all of them and to the mission of God's kingdom as he sees it. Surely the Messiah could not bring shame on the kingdom by dying in such a manner. Surely the Messiah would not risk how we followers of Jesus have invested our honor in Him. This is offensive and dangerous, and we must stop such talk.

In some ways, Peter sees what God is doing better than anyone else: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! But then, just like everyone else, Peter sees what God is doing through his own eyes, through the eyes of his culture and upbringing and values: surely the Messiah could not bring shame by dying. And any one of us could be put in Peter's place in this moment, because we also have our own values and priorities, and we also pass judgment on what God is doing based on those values. There are certain things God does that we like and approve of, and there are things that we just can't accept. We may have different values than those of the first-century Mediterranean world, but there are still values that the kingdom of God challenges and we have difficulty letting go of.

"Get behind me, Satan," Jesus says in response. The fact that Jesus is the Messiah was something that was not revealed by humans, but was revealed by God. Rejecting the shame and suffering of the Messiah, on the other hand, reveals that Peter has human concerns in mind, not God's concerns. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," Jesus says. This is a reorientation of your values, Jesus is saying, so that what matters to you is no longer formed by the world, it is formed by God. For Peter and everyone else in that culture, gaining honor was the motivating priority in all their social interactions. What mattered was how other people evaluated your actions and their impact on your honor. Jesus is reorienting them to the fact that what matters are God's priorities, and the reality that what truly matters is the honor that comes from God, not other people.

Peter is finding that what he orients himself to, what drives him, what his culture tells him matters, is being challenged by this Messiah and His kingdom. Our culture is different, and we have a different understanding of honor and value. We're much more individualistic, and sometimes we even make a value of not caring what other people think of us. But we still have those values and priorities that are oriented toward our own understanding and need to be reoriented toward God. If you do not take up your cross, if you do not confront those aspects of the kingdom of God that reorient your priorities, then you have no place in that kingdom. In this kingdom, there is no Lordship without the cross; there is no glory without giving of yourself to save others, there is no salvation without following Jesus on that path that is so difficult to accept as being the path God rewards.

Taking up the cross means that our view of the world and the ways we value ourselves may not actually be in line with God's view of things, and we need to let God transform our minds and our lives. It means that we need to learn that honor and value come from God, and that He is the true Lord, and therefore we can depend upon Him to give us priorities that are true. In Peter's case, that meant reorienting his understanding of honor and shame, and coming to a new recognition that his true honor came from God, not the eyes of other people.

What does it mean for us in our modern context? It still means that our value is in God through Christ Jesus, and that our priorities come to us from His kingdom, not our own. It means that if you are living your life for yourself, you will not see God's kingdom in the end, and you will be left with nothing. It means that you could even have the whole world in your pocket, but the world will not last. It means that being a good person in the eyes of the world does not necessarily make you God's person. It means that the things our world values, things like wealth and fame and power, and even things like patriotism and family, need to be reoriented onto God's kingdom if they are to have value into eternity. It means that even our most deeply-held values, even our most sincere priorities, need to be evaluated in the light of the cross of Christ to see if they line up with kingdom values.

The challenge for us, of course, is to deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow Christ. If you encounter Christ, He will not leave you the same. He will not leave you oriented to yourself, and He will not leave you with small priorities or values in your life. He will reorient you toward His kingdom, and with His kingdom comes salvation.

Benediction: Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Christ will find it. Therefore go, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.



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