

Sermon 31st of August, 2014 – Sixteenth Sunday of ordinary time
By Caleb Yoder, in the Quito Mennonite Church
Topic: Take up your cross and follow me
Texts: Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21, **Matthew 16:21-28**

These words are difficult for us. They are harsh to our ears, because in today's world, we hope for completely happy lives where we can satisfy our desires, encounter pleasures, find love, without having to do the arduous work of loving. But not just that. We find it difficult to know what it means to carry the cross in our reality distant from that of Jesus.

Last Thursday in Calderon, some neighbors visited our gathering. My neighbor asked, if Jesus had victory, why is there still sin in the world? I really liked that he asked the question, although it is certainly not easy to answer. It is obvious that we live in a world where there are great needs. Great violence, great social and economic inequality, great family problems. In all of this the teaching of Jesus is pertinent.

But before trying to understand what it is that God wants to teach us in our reality, we are going to enter a little into the reality of Jesus and his disciples. We are going to try to place ourselves in their shoes.

Jesus begins to tell his disciples the bad news about what he is going to suffer right at the peak of his popularity. The people have come running to hear Jesus' powerful teaching and allow him to touch their lives and heal them. A little bit ago, Jesus and his disciples shared 7 loaves and some fish with a multitude of 4000 men, which might come to 8 or 10 thousand including women and children. Somehow that little bit of food stretches to feed everyone as a sign of the abundant life that Jesus offers and as a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God where all people share so that no one has any need.

At this height of popularity, according to the gospel of John, the people wanted to force Jesus to become their king. What an opportunity! I don't know why Jesus won't accept. Wouldn't we like to have Jesus as the president of the republic? We have seen the different improvements that President Correa has brought about, imagine with Jesus as president! Correa has been there a little bit too much time; let's elect Jesus.

With all this popularity, the disciples receive a shock when Jesus anticipates the suffering of the road he has ahead of him. They must have gotten so scared by the word

“dead” that they didn’t even here the word “resurrected.”

“It’s necessary,” says Jesus. It is necessary take up the road to Jerusalem. The path of Jesus has always been to do good, to announce the coming of the kingdom, to struggle against the systems of evil that have enslaved the people of God with a non-violent prophetic power. But Jesus is not naïve. He knows that this path implies for his life, but nevertheless sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus does not go to commit suicide. The gospels are clear that the authorities that kill him are to blame. But while there is no other path, while the love Jesus has for his enemies does not allow him to kill them, and while the firmness of his prophetic, healing, and messianic call leaves him in the lion’s mouth, Jesus values the path that has chosen him more than his own life. He leaves his life in the hands of God.

The disciples are surely thinking, “But Jesus, when we decided to follow you, you didn’t give us a contract of discipleship that explained all this.” Peter takes him aside and rebukes him. This shall never happen to you! Have compassion on yourself!

Perhaps the problem is that Peter anticipates a conventional victory. Perhaps Peter still believes that Jesus will be a military Messiah, who will not lose the battle. But the victory that Jesus anticipates is won on the cross. In loving even enemies instead of killing them.

Jesus responds with very strong words. He calls Peter “Satan.” But he does not say it to insult. It is because the words of Peter name his temptation. Jesus feels tempted to not follow the path that has chosen him. It is just as the devil had tempted Jesus in the desert to become a conventional king with all the military, economic and religious power. Now, Jesus knows that he has a difficult road ahead of him and the temptation is to look for an easier road.

What Jesus says to Peter is, “Get behind me.” It is the same phrase that Jesus employs in what he says next: “if any want to come behind me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” So Jesus does not ask Peter to go away. Jesus invites him to take the same path that he must take instead of impeding him.

Not only that. Jesus continues with a teaching against self-preservation. Those who try to save their life will lose it.

In the early church, we know that many followed Jesus on the difficult road. We also

know that many of the disciples and first Christians were marginalized people who perhaps did not have much to lose: slaves, women, and peasants. In the church they discovered that they were equal and had value, and instead of accepting the roads that the Roman Empire gave them, they could join the way of Jesus.

Today, many times as Christians we give the impression that Jesus suffered and died so that we wouldn't have to suffer, or as some churches say, to be "prospered by the word." I believe this is only a half-truth. If the suffering that is meant is feeling far from God, having our immense value and dignity as people snatched away by what others have done to us, if it is finding ourselves without the ability to love, nor know that we are loved, then yes, Jesus came so that we might no longer suffer this way. But if you read the New Testament carefully, you will realize that far from promising a life without suffering, the first Christians understood that in some way they shared the suffering of Jesus. Here we are talking about another sort of suffering. It is a voluntary suffering, something that we choose to accept. It is not suffering just to suffer. After understanding our great value and the love that God has for us, and after finding ourselves in a Christian faith family where we practice the values of the kingdom of God with one another, we take up Jesus mission as his followers. All may go well in this path of discipleship, and yet when we confront the systems of evil, they may pay us with evil. But we are not alone, because we are always alongside sisters and brothers that accompany us in this mission.

The strongest words of Jesus are: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." What does it mean to deny ourselves? Does it mean that we can't enjoy anything in life, that our answer is always no? It so happens that the other times the word "deny" appears in the New Testament, the word speaks of not denying Jesus. Simon Peter, who became a leader in the church, denied Jesus three times the night of his arrest. Peter was afraid of being identified as a follower of Jesus. In the moment of testing, he preferred to say, "I have nothing to do with him." So when Jesus teaches us to deny ourselves, I don't think it means that we have to have a totally serious life with no joy or fun. On the contrary, we love life, but more than anything we love the source of life. Sometimes identifying ourselves with Jesus means to deny ourselves in order to not deny him. We give priority to Jesus, and likewise to marginalized folks with whom Jesus spent his time.

Of course, the life that Jesus offers is one with greater meaning than any other, but it is not an easy life. Jesus' idea was not to seek out suffering and death. That is not the idea for us either. The idea is to traverse a path that demonstrates what the Kingdom of God is like. How God is opposed to our current system of injustice and oppression and how God is on the side of the persons most rejected by society. In taking this path, Jesus angers the authorities and they kill him for fear that too many people will start to follow Jesus.

So we imagine our following will have a price as well, even though it may not be death. What is the price for us? For me it is not easy to answer the question, because I don't seem to have the same difficulties that Jesus and his first disciples faced. I also wouldn't want anything so difficult.

If I don't suffer injustice, it is easier to let things continue as they have been than to confront the injustice. In the news it has come out what happened in the US city of Ferguson, where the police killed another innocent black young man. This reminds me of the racial injustice that continues in my country and the responsibility I have to denounce it. But if I do so, there are people who won't want to listen because it makes them uncomfortable.

I believe that in each context, and in the life of each person, the price can be different.

Maybe you have experienced the pressure to lie at your job, and if you tell the truth, it could harm the company or the other employees. Maybe there is corruption where you work and you feel pressured to keep quiet because speaking could cost you your job.

Maybe it was difficult for your family when you began attending a protestant church. Or maybe you felt a definitive call to serve God that meant giving up the opportunity to earn good money. Your family and friends thought you were nuts.

Or many all is well in your life, but you have become aware of a brother or sister that is having a rough time. Although you could be happily occupied with your own affairs, you practice what Paul teaches in Romans 12 and cry with the person who is crying. You are willing to listen, to support, and to share their pain so that they might not be alone. But this inevitably means losing some of your peace of mind.

These are examples, and they might not seem as impressive as the example of Jesus. But they are examples of prioritizing the values that Jesus preached more than our

personal advancement or comfort. And when we hand over our lives to the hands of God we find our life.

I have a blind spot in my left eye as a result of an infection. Now it is smaller, but it is still hard to see if I cover the right eye. When I went to the doctor, they would ask me to read something with my right eye covered. It was almost impossible. But I realized that the problem was that as soon as I looked at the letters, I always covered them with the blind spot, which was roughly in the center of my sight. If I don't look directly at the letters I can more or less see them in the periphery of my sight.

I say this to illustrate what Jesus says about our lives. When we are focused on our own well-being we neither see it nor receive it. But when we have our sight focused on something else: on the well-being of all according to the values Jesus proclaimed, then we will find our well-being included as well. We know that God raised up Jesus and in the same way can bring the breath of life even after death. No test can have the last word in our lives.

So we can understand what Jesus says: whoever loses their life in following Jesus will find it. My prayer is that we all may find inspiration in these words of Jesus for our own walk.