

# When the Going Gets Tough

September 3, 2023

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“Years ago, when I was pastoring another church,” is really the preaching equivalent of “Long ago, in a place far, far away.” It’s a signal to you that the details of a story have been obfuscated enough to make sure listeners don’t get bogged down trying to figure out the particulars and whether the preacher is talking about them.

So, years ago, when I was pastoring another church, I was the pastoral liaison to the Personnel Committee. Our group was tasked with creating a process for performance reviews. We looked at what the committee members’ experiences were in their jobs, researched some best practices, and laid out a plan in which we would solicit written input from the staff member being reviewed, a key lay person or two who dealt with them most closely, and their supervisor.

Then it came time to determine the process for the Pastors’ performance reviews, and someone on the team suggested that the entire church council be invited to fill out these written reviews. I have to admit, this idea struck terror in my being. It’s one thing to receive a critical comment or two, but to have that potential from thirteen people was paralyzing. I’ll never forget, though, that before I could formulate a reason to block this terrifying plan, the chair of the committee said she thought it was a grand idea.

She said: “Bridget is such a strong leader, I’m sure she’d welcome any feedback that could help her be even stronger.”

\*sigh\*

As luck would have it, that chairperson ended up moving shortly thereafter and we never did end up implementing that review process. But in the intervening years, I have finally gotten to a place where I understand that receiving correction in love is actually a blessing. That I hear critique as fodder for the kingdom path, rather than personal failure.

This comes to mind this week as we read Matthew 16:21-28, in which Jesus tells the disciples that he must go through great suffering, be killed, and be raised. Peter rebukes Jesus, saying this must never happen, and Jesus responds, “Get behind me, Satan!” It’s interesting to note here that this is mere verses after Jesus has declared Peter “the Rock,” and that Jesus’ admonition of Peter here echoes what Jesus says to Satan amidst the temptations at the start of his ministry.

Peter is so afraid of the hard parts of following Jesus, is so fearful of the reality of Jesus’ ministry, that he wants to avoid it, bury it. If we deny it, maybe it will go away. But, like in my fear of having thirteen people give me my performance review, denying and avoiding the hard things in life doesn’t make them go away. Most often, it makes them fester, perhaps even becoming malignant.

This is true in church systems. If we don't address the problems, they become three-headed monsters. This is true in marriages and other relationships. If we don't address the problems, we either grow apart or develop unhealthy strategies for dealing with things. It's true in our finances, our health, our yard work. Deal with it head on, or that wasp nest that was fist size will become basketball size overnight.

This brings to mind a scene in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel "The Brothers Karamazov." An important part of that novel is the section "The Grand Inquisitor," a parable told by Ivan, one of the brothers. It takes place at the height of the Inquisition and Jesus has returned to Earth. He is arrested by the leaders of the Inquisition as he is performing miracles and is sentenced to be burnt to death the next day.

The Grand Inquisitor himself visits Jesus in his cell as he awaits execution. He explains to Jesus why the Church voted "yes" to imperial power.

"The Church no longer needs you" the Grand Inquisitor says. "You were wrong to refuse the power to feed the poor, perform a miraculous leap from the Temple, and grab rulership over the world. We picked up where you left off and improved on what you started. In fact we corrected your mistake. Yes, it was necessary to use the devil's principles to do so but we do it in the name of God. What you don't understand," says the Inquisitor, "is that humanity cannot handle the free will you gave them. We gave them what they really need, security from want."

Richard Ward, a retired UCC minister and preaching professor says of today's Gospel passage:

"Cross-bearing is for 'losers' in societies like ours. The 'winners' are those who know how to master the game of life and have the goods to prove it."

This begs the question, "What does it mean to bear the cross?" Again, Richard Ward is helpful:

"What it certainly does not mean is to remain in an abusive situation, valorizing it as one's 'cross to bear.' It does not mean hiding out from life's joys and blessings and responsibilities, enclosing oneself in self-righteousness, and calling that 'self-sacrifice.' It does not mean becoming one of life's doormats and playing some victim card."

Scott Hoezee, the Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at the Calvin Institute puts it this way:

"Jesus indicates that just viewing life the way he viewed it will itself lead to a degree of suffering. If the cross, and faithfulness to the Jesus who died on that cross, is going to shape our everyday lives, then conflict with the prevailing culture should be expected. There may be certain promotions we shouldn't get

or take as Christians, certain business opportunities we should decline, certain things we won't go along with, say, or do.”

I would add that amidst the current culture wars, amidst book banning and attacks on the very existence of gay, lesbian, and transgender people, taking up one's cross also looks like standing up for justice and compassion and inclusion, even when it hurts.

### **Conclusion**

Earlier this summer, I preached about the joy of being able to attend a lecture Dr. Paul Wadell did for the St. Norbert Masters of Theological Studies program. It was the first time in close to 25 years that I revisited Paul's work on Christian friendship.

One of the themes that Paul shared at the time was Allred of Rievaulx' notion of counterfeit friendships, and in particular what Rievaulx called 'carnal' friendships. To Rievaulx, carnal friendships aren't physical friendships as today's use of that word would suggest, but rather friendships that accentuate and even magnify the other's weaknesses. The ultimate effect of a carnal friendship is to make the other less diminished.

I think of relationships I've had in the past in which conversations regularly devolved into gossip or in which I've regularly felt anxious. This notion of a carnal friendship comes to mind when I read the interaction between Peter and Jesus. Peter's response to Jesus' revelation of his ultimate purpose and sacrifice could – if Jesus weren't...Jesus – have the potential to draw him off course, diminish him and his purpose. It can be hard for those of us who aren't Jesus to know when a friendship is drawing us off course and when someone's attempts to try to protect us are Godly.

To help in discerning that, I'll draw our attention back to our passage from the Letter to the Romans which Christie read today. Here, Paul offers us a list of virtues. I started off my reflection today, talking about how fearful I was at the prospect of a review process that had the potential to bear a breadth of critique. But at the core of that fearful attitude was ego and pride.

Over the years, I've traded my expectation of perfection and therefore worldly glory for virtue and striving for Godly ways. In doing that, it's been amazing how the fear slips away. Living the virtues from our passage from Romans is a good start: genuine love for others, tenacious goodness and perseverance even as evil encroaches, patience in suffering, blessing even those who persecute, cultivating empathy and rejecting opportunities for retribution and so much more. The list bubbles over with divine energy.

And facing life in this way brings us back to Jesus' prescription that we must all bear the cross. We must all engage in the counter-cultural, sacrificial ways of being that set aside personal gain for mutual flourishing, from paying higher taxes to protecting the earth.

Ward points out that:

“All cross bearers are God’s allies; they often set aside their own agendas for personal advancement in favor of meeting human need. They hold, by their witness, keys to a kingdom, though not one of human design. Embedded in this ironic view of authentic human existence is a promise. Those who have imprisoned themselves in service to one’s self have their own reward. Those who have carried crosses of compassionate service to others have not only gained a meaningful life, but have also caught a glimpse of God’s eternal realm.”

And so, my prayer this week is that all of us will steep ourselves more profoundly in the virtues we hear of in our passage from Romans. In doing so, unlike the Grand Inquisitor in “The Brothers Karamazov,” we will not try to overcome evil with evil, but rather will overcome evil with good.

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**Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28**  
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