

“Who do you say that I am?” Asking what the rumor mill is churning out about him, the disciples report on the water cooler buzz. Jesus’ teaching, healing and preaching up to this point has resembled the great prophets of Israel. So, some perceived him as the return of the recently executed emissary John. Others believed him to be the second coming of Elijah, a prominent figure from history that first century Jews were expecting at the end times. And others still, identified him as one of the other divinely appointed messengers. “Ok, but who do *you* say I am?”

We know this story, don’t we? The familiar way that it starts to peel back the layers of what we call Christology, or the study of Christ. The manner in which it demonstrates misunderstanding, even by the inner circle, through Peter’s legendary confession of both faith, “You are the Messiah,” and fear, “[he] took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him.” How it jolts us when Jesus dubs Peter, one of the very first disciples he beckoned to follow, Satan. And of course, the alarmingly sharp demands of discipleship that it articulates.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” As many Christians do, I had some time ago, selected to abstain from indulging in sweets for a few Lenten seasons. It’s what I had committed to giving up as part of my fasting for the 40-day spiritual journey. Is this what Christ meant when he said to deny yourself? Taught by family and society at large that tears are a sign of weakness, a distraught older man refuses to let them fall at his beloved’s funeral, even though his body strains to physically emit his grief. Struggling with issues of self-esteem, a teenager deserts his cultural identity to fit in with the rest of the church youth group. Told that breaking the vow of holy matrimony by divorce is a serious sin, a battered woman disregards her own life and remains in the lethal marriage. Were these the

types of renunciation that Christ was referring to? As the Incarnated God of unconventional love, I have a hard time believing that is the case. As commentator Lamar Williamson Jr argues, “The call is not to deny oneself something...nor is [it] to reject oneself...Self-hatred is not the way of Jesus, but a denial of the grasping self to liberate the greater one.” In other words, the way of the cross means the suffering and death of our corrosive ego. Our tendencies to pigeon-hole God, others and ourselves. And our inclinations, like Peter, to self-appoint ourselves Lord and Master over God, others and ourselves.

Set, it seems, on a Messiah that would, at some point, be the royal figure who would deliver them from their Roman oppressors, restoring Israel’s independence and glory, Peter’s heart is broken by his Rabbi’s news. Wounded, he assumes a position of superiority and authority over the Messiah. Quickly surmising the dangerous situation developing, Jesus undertakes drastic measures, harshly reminding Peter, “You believe divine rule means power without pain and glory without humiliation. But you are wrong. Furthermore, disciples belong behind me. They are not to guide, protect, or possess me: they are to *follow* me.” You can almost feel Peter’s heart splitting even more. However, at times the only way God can get into some hearts is by breaking them.

We too have hearts that need to be broken open. Hearts water-logged by self-absorption. Hearts saturated in toxic personal assessments of self-worth. Hearts crusted over with self-righteousness. Hearts encased by ripened distrust. Yet, in the gracious wisdom of the Creator, we are *free* to decide whether to hold our hearts back or, with the Spirit’s help, offer them as they are to the Crucified Redeemer. The Redeemer whose own heart and body was broken upon the cross.

Heartbroken by the devastation of natural disasters across the globe and willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, renown chef, Jose Andres, has journeyed to multiple places: Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, New York when Hurricane Sandy struck in 2012, and Houston last year in Harvey's wake. Denying himself the comforts of his financially secure life, and leaving the control of his restaurants in the hands of others, he took up his cross, and with others he gathered, followed the footsteps of his Savior to Puerto Rico five days after Hurricane Maria ripped through the island. Faced with some pretty major hurdles—navigating through blocked roads, collapsed bridges, no traffic lights, downed phone and power lines and no fuel—they persevered to feed the hungry. Though it has been hot, sweaty, exhausting work, it has also been life-changing. As of July 26<sup>th</sup> of this year, they have served over 3.5 million meals with 20,000 volunteers working across 25 kitchens. Understanding her husband's call to lose his life for the sake of the gospel, Patricia supports the fact that Jose's Orvis fishing vest and well-traveled backpacks are always at the ready.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus' question compels all of us, as individuals and as a community, to ask, “Who will *I* be? Who will *we* be?” Discipleship is not a one-time, instantaneous accomplishment that occurs at baptism, but it is about, as Alyce McKenzie notes, “embarking on a lifelong journey of allowing his identity to shape our own...Discipleship is a process of...continually articulating our faith, but also our difficulty with, our objections to, Jesus' identity and mission, so that he can continually counter them.”

Jesus does not force us. “If any *want* to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Daily in the waters of baptism, the rejected, suffering and crucified Messiah extends this insistent invitation to you and me, even the times when, like Peter, we confess both faith and fear. Thanks be to God. Amen.