

It maybe goes without saying, and maybe I've even said it here a time or two in the last year, but I really do identify with and have affinity for the apostle Peter. Sure, it's the name, at least on the surface it is, but it goes much deeper than that, too. What I like about Peter is the way that his discipleship—like nearly everything we know about his life—is done out loud. He thinks out loud, processes information out loud, in many ways LIVES out loud. And often times, his living out loud involves saying something, making a statement, actually making a declaration or a pronouncement without fully thinking it through. He is the apostle most likely to Sin Boldly, long before Martin Luther coined that phrase. He has the tendency to follow a strategy of Ready-Fire-Aim when it comes to his proclamations. He's the New Testament's Joe Biden in that regard. The little tag line "He didn't know what he was saying" may only actually be said of him a few different times in the gospels, but it is sort of implied quite often after Peter speaks up. "He didn't know what to say, he didn't know what he was saying, or in some translations, the words are put into his mouth: "What was I saying?"

Now what I like about Peter is not necessarily *how* he puts his foot into his mouth in a particular gospel story, but rather THAT he does it. He takes risks, saying what he does. He's direct, straight-forward, low context—no nuance, no subtle coding, no Minnesota nice for him. If he gets caught up in the moment—and he tends to get caught up rather often—he lets his emotions speak. He witnesses. He testifies. He lets you know where he stands, right away, unambiguously, even if that might end up shifting or changing a bit over time. He lives out loud.

Take for example, his encounter with Jesus on the mountaintop, our gospel reading a couple of weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday. Jesus takes Peter, along with James and John up on that mountain, where he is first, revealed in the Glory of Almighty God, and then, seen having a chat with Moses and Elijah, two heroes of the Hebrew faith, both of whom were thought to have cheated death one way or another. Peter is so overwhelmed by this experience, he wants it to last forever.

“Let’s build three tents, three booths, three chapels, right here. Let’s make this feeling last forever. Let’s preserve this, bottle it, institutionalize it.” And no sooner does he say so, the others are gone and Jesus is back to looking like his regular earthly self.

Then, in the beginning or today’s gospel reading—which wasn’t normally in the reading assigned for today, but I added it in—Jesus asks the disciples what people are saying about him. Who do they think he is? They think he’s Moses, Elijah, one of the prophets, but who do YOU say that I am, Jesus asks his followers, and Peter declares “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the son of the living God.” Other versions of the gospels have Jesus responding to this declaration by giving Simon the name Peter for the first time, as well as saying, based on the meaning of that name, that on the rock of that declaration, that confession, Christ will build his church. Well Done, Peter, we think, well put, way to testify to the truth. But then, in the very next minute, in the very next paragraph of the Story, when Jesus says he’s going to have to suffer and die, Peter takes it to the other extreme: NO way, Jesus. You can’t suffer and die. We won’t let you do that. We’ve got your back, we’ll stick up for you. What was he thinking? What was he saying?

And Jesus says, Peter you don’t know what you’re saying, you’re not following my work, you still don’t get my mission. In fact, this is not just you speaking nonsense, this is the devil planting ideas in your head. And so Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan!” Or as one translator puts it, “out of my way! Satan—get lost! You have no idea how God works.” From hi to low, from totally nailing it to having no clue. That’s Peter for you, hot and cold, stating the obvious and totally oblivious, following in faith and letting his own self, his own ego get in the way, you are the rock on which I will build my church, you are a stumbling block, get out of my way before you do real damage. From “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of God” to “you have no idea how God works.”

Ah yes, welcome to the church. From the very beginning it seems, the church, the body of Christ has been made up of flawed human beings—folks who, in their

exuberance as much as in any other emotion, have a tendency to overstate, overemote and over-share, to blow hot and cold, hit the nail right on the head at one time, only to completely miss the mark the next. The Church is full of folks—like us, right?—who want to domesticate our spiritual experiences, to ritualize, routinize, institutionalize them. We feel compelled to testify to the truth we feel and know about who God is for us, and right after, we think we need to steer God a different way, to talk God out of a particular path, to protect God—as if we could.

I think this is where I see the connection between Jesus' words to get behind him when we don't seem to get how God works and his invitation to deny ourselves in order to follow him. If there is anything we can learn in a new way this Lenten season, it is that this whole thing—loving God, following Jesus, living by the Holy Spirit—none of this is about us. It's not about us, not ourselves alone.

Karoline Lewis writing for the website *Working Preacher* this week, says that Lenten call to pick up the cross and follow Jesus—the call we heard again in our gospel reading today—is a denial of self in the best way, to specifically deny the self that refuses to be in community. It is a denial of the self that thinks it can survive on its own. The self that rejects the deepest need of humanity, that is, belonging.

Jesus' charge, she says, is not a demand to deny our identity, but rather an invitation to imagine that ourselves, each of ourselves, needs the other. We can't truly be ourselves all on our own—we need others, and we need to continually expand our relationship circles to include others—not just so that those around us become supporting cast in our own self-perceived power and importance, but rather to have our identity as People of God, as followers of Christ challenged and deepened by the witness of those around us.

As we journey deeper into Lent, let's give up the impulses that demand reliance on ourselves alone and begin to seek the help of others. That's the model that *Daily Work* uses to equip and empower people who seek the help of others in finding meaningful work, life-giving employment, heading at least in the general direction of

true vocation. Part of denying ourselves is recognizing we **can** put the other first, emptying ourselves for the sake of the one seeking, struggling, striving for something more.

Let's take a shot at denying ourselves by putting to rest the belief that our ministry together is a static and unchanging entity, based only and always on our own individual experiences, preferences, or expectations; let's deny the belief that our ministry is required to forever act as if **we** have all the answers—or that our tradition, our style, our habits bring us all we ever need or that our ministry shouldn't expand to include the other simply because *we* don't speak that particular language, or *we* don't know or don't like that specific song, or that **we** aren't used to that certain way of being church together.

And while we're at it, throughout this Lenten Season, let's give up the temptation to try desperately to convince ourselves—our selves—of our own worth without remembering and hearing again the call of God we initially heard whenever, however we first heard it. Let's be bold, speaking out, bearing witness, giving testimony like Peter—and let's realize, too, when we need to maybe keep our mouth shut, reflect, think a little more before we speak.

Because at the end of the day, the denial of self that Jesus calls for is none other than finally embracing the truth that we can't live our lives all alone in this world. The cross Jesus calls us to take up is the one we bear on our brow and have been doing since we rose from the waters of baptism, whether that was last week or two ago or six, seven or eight decades ago. And the way in which we are called to follow Jesus is Jesus himself, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Deny yourself. Take up you cross. Follow. Thanks be to God. Amen.