

“Take My Life”  
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Open Door MCC

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From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

Long, long ago, Alfie's dad and I had a conversation about the not-so-complex inner workings of the six-year-old mind. Children learning to be nice to other children in order that they will have friends. If you kick and grab and scream and poke all the other kids, eventually you'll find that none of them will play with you. Kids are resilient and forgiving and all that, but even they have their limits.

We talked about the ideal progression from not being awful to the other kids in order to have friends to eventually, hopefully, being nice to people because you value being nice more than whatever else is going on in your head. And, frankly, we're all still kids in this learning curve, trying to figure out why to be nice, whether to be nice, what's in it for us.

Not to oversimplify or anything, but that's basically what Jesus and Peter are talking about today.

We have a tendency to value stuff that gets us something. On some basic level, for lots of us, being nice or getting along means that we don't have to risk conflict, we won't risk being alone. Just about everyone values money, except George Orwell's Gordon Comstock, and that got him exactly nowhere. It buys too many things, it gives access, or seems to give access, to too many things. Money is freedom from so many things, like hunger and jail. We tend to value power because it gives us access to things we want, like, um, money, and more power, and attention, and sycophancy, and not being alone.

It's almost always a form of sacrifice to substantively value behaving with kindness, compassion, mercy, inclusiveness, fairness, respect, justice. It's almost always a form of sacrifice here, now, for us, because the value of doing those things is more esoteric, abstract, philosophical, situational, easily slid back and forth on a scale of ethics that is equally debatable. When that genuinely important, valuable, good stuff gets pitted against more concrete stuff, more personal, direct stuff like money, power, good food, inexpensive food, cheap disposable technology, staying alive, not being alone, most of us are hard pressed to hold onto those other, ethereal values.

That's Satan.

The clearest place I've ever seen this illustrated is in *The Dark Knight*. The Joker keeps saying that his goal is to introduce chaos and disorder and he does this by pitting some of the abstract ideal values against some of the concrete stuff to show what usually wins. His plan, more or less, is to expose selfishness and baseness and survival.

He says that if a television informant isn't dead in an hour, he'll blow up a hospital. He says that the District Attorney and his fiancée are wired to bombs in different directions in Gotham, and The Batman must choose which one he is going to save. He tells two ferry boats, one full of regular citizens (we're supposed to assume they are not criminals), one conveniently full of criminals, both loaded with gasoline bombs, that if one boat doesn't blow up the other before midnight, he'll blow them both up.

In each case he is making people choose: Lots of people have loved ones in the hospital – do they value the life of a random, attention-seeking stranger on t.v. or their mother/brother/daughter/grandmother's life in a Gotham hospital? The Batman had to make a choice between the woman he loves and a civil servant he only respects. Those boatloads of people might have had the hardest choice to make: Did they value others' lives more than their own? Ironically, they're the only ones who "passed" the test. Um, spoiler alert. Nine years later. And maybe that's not even ironic. Who knows anymore, after Alanis Morissette ruined everything?

The Joker forced people into violent situations where people had to choose between their lives, their concrete, direct, personal, selfish values, their own well-being and benefit and those good and admirable and completely theoretical values and other people's well-being. Justice. Pbbbbffft. Who cares about justice when you're about to be blown up? So that's Satan. That's one of the more obvious versions of Satan. Obvious Satan is like taking someone up to a tall building and saying, "Look at this city and all of the land around it. You can have it all if you renounce your allegiance to God and worship me." Dead giveaway. Obvious Satan is pointing to the forbidden fruit and saying, "Actually, technically, you won't die. God just doesn't want you to know what it means to be naked." (That's also exhibitionist Satan.) Putting gasoline bombs on a couple of boats and saying you'll kill everyone unless they kill each other is obvious Satan. Again, I dislike this term, but if I ever was to use it now might be the time to call something a no-brainer. Making people choose between what they crave and what they believe in. Making people choose between their own lives and others' lives. Satan, check, check, check.

But what does any of this have to do with Peter. Satan? That seems pretty harsh, Jesus. This guy loves you! He jumps into lakes in his excitement. He tries to walk on them for you. He's followed you around for ages and for miles in dust and heat without any money or staff or second set of clothes. And all he seems to be saying here is, Please don't go die. Please don't go die on purpose. Don't leave me.

But maybe that's what Satan does. Satan will make justice seem like loss, make integrity seem like loss, make kindness seem like loss, make loss seem like devastation. And Satan will pit us against each other, and pit us against ourselves, the way we're forced to choose between being

Christian or queer, forced to choose either queer or trans, forced to be only trans or feminist.

Peter is trying to make Jesus choose between versions of who he is, he wants Jesus to reject one of the things that defines him in favor of another. I don't think Jesus is cavalier about going to his death, or even resigned to it. I don't think he's disconnected from the world and his friends. He adores them. I think he longs to stay alive and to be with the people he loves – isn't that Kazantzakis's premise in *The Last Temptation of Christ*? Isn't that the premise of Matthew's and Mark's and, especially, Luke's last lonely evening in the Garden of Gethsemane: Take this cup from me, will you? And I doubt very much that it was any single decision or any single act, but more likely a series of decisions again and again every day to keep heading toward confrontation with Jerusalem and Rome. To keep heading toward his ultimate understanding of love and justice.

Technically, you know, Jesus could have gone either way every single time. Fully human. Fully divine. This was determined at the first council of the church in Nicea, and affirmed in Constantinople, in Chalcedon, again in Constantinople. Between you and me, there's something going on there to require so much debate and affirmation, but that's another sermon entirely.

I get what Peter's doing here. I get wanting the people we love to stay alive, to stay with us, to never leave. I understand wanting things to be easier, less uncertain, less confrontational. Every day, a hundred times a day, we make decisions about who we're going to be, and sometimes we decide to just let things slide. Sometimes we let the woman-hating joke slide, to show that, hey, we can lighten up! Sometimes we don't have the conversation about Black Lives Matter, because it's too complex or too simple, because there are too many sides or too few sides, because it's too explosive, because every time we stick our neck out, someone might disagree with us and take their friendship or their business or their whatever away from us.

I get it. Every time I talk about Charlottesville or incarceration and the so-called drug war as "The New Jim Crow" or the racial wealth gap or gun control or equal pay for equal work or reproductive choice or pro-immigrant immigration reform or inclusive language and dis/ability there is always a chance and I'm always a little afraid that someone who thinks about it differently will feel attacked or will dislike me or stop coming or stop giving. Which I don't say to make a point about me or make this about me but just to, as usual, cannibalize my own life for sermon illustrations to show that we all go through this. We're all susceptible.

And, frankly, justice and compassion are pretty abstract and fairly esoteric. What is actually tangible is the person in front of us, who may have completely different feelings about what is just and compassionate. What's actually obvious is that the victim we're defending may really be an addict or a hooligan or promiscuous. What's actually real is all the well-placed pressure to conform, because we need to be the "good" gay person, the "good" trans person, the "good" girl for them, the likeable one, the one who *has* a sense of humor, the one who's not angry and shrill.

These are real fears of loss, of friendship or respect or likeability, loss of perceived or real cache, and we can try as hard as we can never to lose anything ever... but, as we know, Saint Audre reminded us that we're all going to die no matter what, and now we know that Jesus says we have to die.

It's a little bit like stewardship, I guess. It turns out that none of it is ours. Who owns the air? Who owns the rivers? Who owns outer space? Who does the earth's semiplastic convective mantle belong to? Exactly. So why in God's name do we think that anything else is a commodity, is ours, has our name on it? "They" say it is and we act like it is and try to hold onto it. My house. My clothes. My car. My neighborhood. My tax money. My money. My desk at Rape Crisis that sometimes an intern needs to use... But nothing really belongs to us, not our stuff and not our life, and Jesus says it over and over again.

In the Hebrew law, God only wanted ten percent of everything and we could keep the rest. I don't know how many people here tithe ten percent of their wealth. Anyone? Even that relatively small amount is a challenge (and it's more of a challenge, of course, when there isn't enough to live on to begin with). And yet Jesus is never satisfied with the perfectly respectable, the good-enough, the always-been-this-way. He says, "They say don't kill, but I say don't even say mean things." Jesus says, "They say don't cheat, but I say don't even think about even looking at a picture of someone contemplating cheating." Jesus says "Ten percent used to be good enough, but I say, sing 'All that we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be we give to you, we give to you'... and mean it. Did you feel indignant about Joel Osteen bogarting his pristine megachurch? What did you offer to Houston without being asked? What did you offer that guy on the median down by Middlebrook Road? Try not to be self-righteous. Give away everything you have to people who can't pay you back. Love your enemies. Worry about kindness more than food. Worry about justice more than money. Worry about equality more than staying alive. Be last. Take up your cross and follow me."

Jesus says that, if you love God and if you follow him, Jesus, your life isn't yours to begin with; it never was. And it's Satan – the word means the adversary, the opponent, the rival – it's Satan that makes us think it is. You won't actually die, God just doesn't want you to know stuff. You don't have to actually die, God just doesn't want you to have nice things. You don't have to risk anything meaningful, just give a little here and there around the edges. Satan isn't just into the obvious stuff, like offering Jesus the whole world, or making two boatloads of people choose between their own lives or others'. Satan's best work, possibly, is getting us to think that our stuff belongs to us, that our life is ours to use for our own advantage, that we only need to be nice to other people when there's something in it for us. That people are poor because they're lazy, in jail because they did something we don't do, sexually assaulted because they made bad choices.

Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, and he's going to confront Rome, and he knows they'll probably kill him for it and how. He doesn't have to do it, nevermind Irenaeus, forget Calvin, two thousand years of theology notwithstanding. He doesn't have to do it. Nobody is making him. He can walk away and go have a life and spend time with his kids. There's not a single, solitary thing he's going to get for himself out of this ministry. He's risking everything he has and is, everything that's real and tangible and touchable and obvious for some esoteric, abstract, concept of love-slash-justice-slash-God.

And that's what he's asking from us. Take up your cross and follow.

And anything less than that, he wants us to know, is nothing less than Satan.

But all or nothing, Jesus? I'm not so good with ultimatums. Thank God for grace, I guess, while I work through my issues with loss, with perfection, with ultimatums.

Corrine and I had a friend in New York who would say, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly." And she didn't mean don't do your best or don't try to get the best result. She meant, don't wait until you have enough time, until you can do it just right, or perfectly, don't wait for the ideal circumstances, just get out there and do it. Do it half-way, half-hearted, half-you know, but get started. Make a start. Do something. Pema Chodron says, Start where you are. Lao Tzu said, A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

Jesus wants us to risk everything for God. We want to hang on to all our stuff. That's the dilemma. And our practice, the battle that we wage with Satan, our faith itself is us trying to work through that quandary.

I think there are a lot of ways to understand Leonard Cohen's lyric, "cold and broken halleluia," but I feel pretty sure that this is one of them: Praise God with your whole life, your whole body, risk everything, love God and all our neighbors when there's nothing in it for us, when it feels hard and lousy and hard and hard. When it doesn't serve us. When doing it doesn't feel like joy. Praise God with our loss, despite our loss. Willingly risk our friends, our wealth, whatever privilege and respectability, willingly let go of our resistance and defenses, willingly let our Jesus go on ahead to Jerusalem to die, and then follow him there.

I'd be lucky to only pull it off ten percent of the time. A ten percent success rate would be a perfectly respectable outcome. Maybe I'll even make that my target for now.

And, hopefully (hopefully!), even if it all goes wrong, I'll stand before the God of song with nothing on my tongue but halleluia.

Peace.