

Year A, Proper 7  
Matthew 10:24-39; Romans 6:1b-11  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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### Choose Your Story

This Gospel reading we just heard is one that might well make us wonder, “Where’s the Good News in that?” It starts out with Jesus warning his followers that they can expect to be maligned and misunderstood even more than Jesus himself. But, not to worry, he says: God will care for them – at least as long as they remain faithful. “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven,” Jesus says, “but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32-33). Then, he really gets rolling: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (10:34). Following Christ will bring division, even within the close bonds of family. Whoever loves their family “more than me is not worthy of me,” he declares, “and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (10:37-38). Well that’s nice – there’s nothing like a little Good News to comfort us on a Sunday morning.

When I hear this reading, or others like it, I think of a friend of mine from seminary, a man named Peter Kago. Peter is from Kenya. He was a successful lawyer in Nairobi, part of an influential family there. His family has served in the legal system, and the government, and the Anglican Church of Kenya for several generations. He was being groomed for a top slot in the power structure. But after serving as a lawyer for a number of years, Peter heard God calling him to ministry in the Church; so the assumption became that his top slot had shifted from the government to the Church of Kenya. Peter was sent to seminary in the United States, which has often been a way of grooming future bishops in Africa.

As an African, Peter brought a fresh perspective to our studies, a very different voice from all the rest of us in my class. I remember one day in a study group, we were talking about a passage very much like this one – it may have been this one, in fact. The rest of us – Anglos who had come out of similar backgrounds in similar Episcopal churches – we all reacted to this passage with our typical response to hard sayings of Jesus: Surely, he didn’t really mean *that*, did he? This must be one of those examples of the Gospel writers putting their own spin on the message – after all, what sense does it make for the Prince of Peace to rant about dividing families and not bringing peace but a sword? Or, we thought, maybe this is an example of the hyperbole often used by the Gospel writers, and by Jesus himself, to make a point that doesn’t *literally* mean what it says. We felt better, as we sat there in our study group, looking for something easier than Jesus *really* meant to say in this passage.

But Peter made us stop short. As usual, he was quiet through most of the discussion, listening like a lawyer to the arguments being offered. Finally, he said, “Well, *I* think this passage means what it says. If we are not faithful to Christ, why should he be faithful to us? God *does* tell us to give up our earthly lives so that we can find true life in Christ. We have to choose which side we are on.”

This came from a man who came from a place where it might cost you something to live as a Christian, in opposition to Islam, tribal religions, and other faiths. Peter spoke with an authority we could not explain away.

“Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me,” Jesus says (10:38). That call is so demanding, so overwhelming, that we might wonder how in the world a person *could* live into it. Facing persecution and the prospect of death, rejecting family, losing our life in order to find it – this is hard stuff for us to comprehend because it’s so foreign to our experience. Standing in opposition to a threatening culture was much more familiar to the disciples, and to my friend Peter, than it is for us.

Well, our second reading might help us hear Jesus’ call in a way we can understand a little more easily. Now, this is no easy reading either. This passage from Romans is Paul’s way of expressing the same, challenging reality that Jesus is talking about today – the need to die to our old selves in order to live anew in Christ. But Paul presents it in the context of something we’ve experienced ourselves and seen a hundred other times: baptism. He’s explaining what it *means* to be baptized – just what a radical, transformational thing is happening here at the chancel steps when we gently pour a little warm water on a beautiful baby’s head. “Do you not know,” Paul asks, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:3-4) So *that’s* what’s happening here at the font. It’s drowning – nothing less than death and resurrection, *the* Christian story.

Being a follower of Jesus – being part of the Church – means something much deeper than what we usually imagine. It’s not simply a matter of affiliation, of declaring ourselves to be members of this particular faith “team” as opposed to any of the hundreds of other teams we might join. We American Christians tend to see faith that way, as simply another affiliation we might choose to make, not that much different from being a Shriner or a Democrat or a P.E.O.

But Paul is saying that something much more transformational is going on in our choice to follow Christ. In baptism, Jesus’ story becomes our story – or, more precisely, we put aside our story and take on Jesus’ story instead. In the experience of Jesus, God gives us the pattern for the life that God desires from each of us. “Our old self was crucified with him...,” Paul says. And “if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ... So you must ... consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:6,8,11) His story becomes our story, too; and we enact it every time we bring another person through those waters of baptism. God’s pattern with Jesus is God’s pattern for us. We are cut from the same cloth.

The challenge for us, and the reason these readings are so hard, is that we have to choose that story as our own. There are a thousand stories out there in the culture, vying for our attention and our allegiance. There’s the gospel of acquisition, the story that says the more you get, the happier you’ll be. There’s the gospel of relativism, the story that says it doesn’t matter what you think or what you do because everything means the same thing ... which is really nothing much at all. There’s the gospel of humanism, the story that says we’re perfectly capable of finding complete truth on our own, thank you very much. There’s the gospel of personal power, the story that says I’m doing just fine all by myself, God, and I really don’t need much from you other than for you to leave me alone. That’s the most dangerous one, actually – the story that boils down to “*I am God.*”

Jesus offers us a different narrative to claim as our own. It’s a story that asks a lot of us and sometimes takes us places we’d rather not go. It can bring us into conflict with the world around us. It can threaten the security other stories seem to offer. It can complicate relationships

with family and friends. It demands real faithfulness to God as the story's author. But it's also *the* story – the story of salvation, the story of resurrection, the story of life.

Back to my seminary friend Peter. When we were at a restaurant once, he gave me a line that I think about often in relation to the challenge of the life of faith. Peter had a passion for meat – just roasted meat, with nothing more than a little seasoning on it. Apparently, in Kenya, meat is scarce, and having a lot of meat with a meal is a sign of a true feast. So, when we would all go out, Peter nearly always ordered lots of plain, roasted meat. Well, at a restaurant one day, Peter looked at the menu and saw chicken wings. He ordered them, thinking that what he was getting was, simply, chicken wings. When they arrived coated with hot, sticky Buffalo Wings sauce, Peter looked at his plate and grimaced and said, “Oh, this is not what I wanted. This is ... messy!”

And so is the narrative that God calls us to follow, this story of dying and rising again with Christ. Discipleship may *not* be just what we wanted. It is definitely messy. But, as the story goes, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

For my friend Peter, here's how that story looks today. Peter never did return to Kenya to take the place in the Church he was being groomed for. This once-successful lawyer and likely bishop never left Austin, Texas, once we graduated from seminary. He's now doing street ministry with his wife, Anna, and their girls. I've lost touch with Peter now, so I can't say for sure whether he's happy. But if I asked him, he would probably look at me quizzically and ask me why I would ask such a question of a person called to ministry in Christ's Church.

His story *has* been messy. But Peter has chosen which side he's on. The story he has claimed is God's own story, the story of baptism, the story of Easter – the story of dying and rising again to new life.