

September 15, 2024
Maximum Exposure to the Love
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In the 1975 classic Monty Python and the Holy Grail, there are, of course, many iconic scenes

The one that comes to mind for me this morning is the scene where a gaggle of monks in black robes are depicted walking across a courtyard chanting and smacking themselves in the head with wooden planks

“Pie Jesu, Domine” *whack*

“dona eis requiem” *whack*

It’s funny because, well because it’s funny to watch people whack themselves with wooden planks and keep walking like nothing has happened

But, it’s also funny because it plays on a religious trope: that to be truly holy, like monks are very holy, means to suffer and if you aren’t actually suffering then you induce suffering by self-flagellation

It’s not just a trope, it’s based in reality as you may know – there are people and traditions that practice forms of self-flagellation as a religious discipline and it wouldn’t surprise me if the reason is because of the text that we read this morning

In dialog with his disciples about who he is, Jesus’ friends say he is being compared to the great leaders of the long past and recent past: Elijah and John the Baptist

When pressed to answer for themselves, Peter, ever the eager student, says boldly “you are the Messiah”

Jesus hushes his friend because to say such a thing so loudly and boldly might garner attention Jesus is not, at this point, eager to garner

But he explains why – Jesus tells his friends that the Son of Man (another name for the chosen one of God) “must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise again.”

In his utter disbelief and revulsion that such a thing would happen to the Messiah, Peter rebukes Jesus and begs him not to say such things

To which we get such an intense response from Jesus: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things”

He goes on to explain to the whole crowd, not just to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

In other words, those who want to be my followers will, like me, also follow a path of great suffering, rejection, and death.

Sounds appealing, no?

Our tradition isn't one for altar calls, but can you imagine that as an invitation: “come claim Jesus as your Savior: it is a path of great suffering, rejection, and death! Come on up!”

But, you can see why some folks over the centuries of Christian belief have interpreted this call to discipleship as a call to suffering: “*deny yourself*” “take you [your] *cross*”

If you are not suffering you must not be a true disciple of Christ

And you can see, can't you, how dangerous this interpretation could be?

How justifications for staying in dangerous circumstances or relationships because it is our own “cross to bear” could be used with this kind of theology?

But, what’s almost worse to me, is how – with this kind of interpretation – discipleship and following Jesus quickly becomes about martyrdom and not just about faithfulness?

Jesus thought that his disciples, the ones who would aspire to take on his ministry of radical love and justice and care and compassion risked the same fate as him: suffering, rejection, and death

Not that suffering, rejection, and death was what they should aspire to in order to be a faithful disciple

There’s a difference, isn’t there

In fact, as Matt Skinner, New Testament scholar, points out in the Gospel of Mark “Jesus has spent over seven chapters alleviating needless suffering or oppression whenever he encounters it; how could he be endorsing these things here?”¹

No, it is not that suffering, rejection, and death are the things to which we should aspire or the things we need to experience in order to be a follower of Jesus – it is love, and justice, and care, and compassion to which we should aspire and it is possible that in doing so we will set ourselves apart from friends, family, society and experience some loss

Emerson B. Powery, influenced by the teachings of Howard Thurman, writes “The one who follows Jesus will choose rather to do the thing that is

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-mark-827-38>

to [them] the maximum exposure to the love and therefore to the approval of God, rather than the things that will save [their] own skin.”²

I love that phrase: “the maximum exposure to the love”

Followers of Jesus aspire to the maximum exposure to the love

Followers of Jesus aspire to show others the maximum exposure to the love

Followers of Jesus aspire to show God’s creation the maximum exposure to the love

Conversations about caring for our planet can kind of go the way of “suffering is a sign of climate justice” much like discipleship, can’t it?

There is an aspect to the dialog about climate care that sounds a bit like the comment I made earlier where “if you’re not suffering you’re not loving the planet”

Do you sometimes feel like there is an argument made in society or at least the way some things are phrased that sounds a bit like that?

It’s even, “if you’re not suffering we have no chance of saving the planet” - even more dire

It feels like climate justice activists are asking us to walk around in black robes and whack ourselves in the head with wooden planks to show our dedication to saving the planet

Or even if it’s not directly what’s being asked it feels like it might be the only solution in a situation that is so catastrophic

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-mark-827-38-6>

But that's not what climate activists are asking of us just as it's not what Jesus is asking of us

Jesus is asking us to live in a way that attempts to procure the maximum exposure to the love, and I can see that to live in a way that is to choose the maximum exposure to the love, that I might give up and lose some of the things that have been comforts or even, seemingly, necessities in my life so as to show love, justice, care, and compassion to the earth

And, there are certainly people who have really tried to live out this maximum exposure of the love for God's creation who have been rejected and ridiculed by our society, like Greta Thunberg ("Mama Greta" as they call her in the novel we're reading for the Book of 2 Months Club)

There are those who would say that martyrdom is the only form of discipleship of Jesus or the only kind of climate care that truly makes a difference

I won't argue that the circumstances aren't dire, but I think what's actually asked of us is to turn our thoughts, our actions, our energy, and our passions towards the maximum exposure of the love and to do that is risky business

So risky in fact that Jesus feared that it may cause suffering, rejection, and death

That sounds pretty scary to me – I'm not sure I'd come to the altar with that kind of invitation

But, if you said: do you want to live in a way that seeks out the maximum exposure to love? Sign me up.

What does this look like?

Well, I don't think it's black robes and whacks to the head with wooden planks.

I think it looks differently for each of us – but I can imagine that trying to live a faithful life of maximum exposure to the love for me and for those around me and for God's creation, I can imagine it involves some sacrifice, some loss, and some risk

And, Jesus, our Messiah, knew this and warned us

As Matt Skinner says: "Knowledge about Jesus' identity is useless if it remains abstract; this Christ calls followers to journey with him"

So, rather than me having all the answers, I'll put to you: what does living into the maximum exposure to the love look like for you in your life now? what could it look like in the future?

Thanks be to God we do not travel this faithful path alone - Jesus goes ahead of us and all Christ's faithful disciples go with us now.

It is this that makes me hopeful that true love, true justice, true care, and true compassion might prevail on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.