

Some years ago, when I was a young graduate student and priest, even more foolish than I am now, I was asked to be the supply priest, in fact, the only priest, for a little parish in Lincoln Heights, a suburb of Cincinnati. Lincoln Heights was a poor community, virtually all African American, that had been purposely gerrymandered so that it would have no political clout and a minimal economic base. The Church was small, covered with clapboards, and with linoleum on the floors. No priest, though, could have asked for a better community, centered on Jesus and willing to do all the heavy lifting of keeping the place going completely by themselves. And it was there that I met Miss Louise. Miss Louise was a force of nature. Long widowed, the church was her life. She ran the Altar Guild, and the choir, and pretty much everything else, including the priest. But, we hit it off nicely and my cooperation was rewarded a few weeks later by an invitation to Sunday afternoon tea.

“Ah,” I thought as I climbed the stairs to her front porch, “I’ve really arrived.” I rang the bell and Miss Louise ushered me inside to her parlor (living rooms not yet having been invented), and invited me to sit down. And, dressed in her Sunday finery, complete with hat and white gloves, she served me tea, no matter that it was a Southern Ohio summer day, with the temperature in the 90's and the humidity in about the same place.

Miss Louise,” I said in my best pastoral voice, “Tell me about yourself.” And so she did. About how she was widowed suddenly as a young woman, with two small children and very slim means. How she struggled to support them, working first as a teacher’s aide, then getting a teaching certificate and eventually, a bachelor’s degree. How one had turned out well, and the other, to her great disappointment, had spent much of his life as an involuntary guest of the State of Ohio. And how, now, she struggled on with failing health on a very limited income.

Still in full pastoral mode, I asked the earnest question: “Miss Louise, a lot of bad things have happened to you and yet you still keep going. How do you manage to do that?” She looked at me for a long moment with a look that I would come to recognize as her “where did the bishop come up with this one” look, and then replied, slowly and carefully as one might to a slightly backward child, “why Father, I just take it too the foot of the cross.” That was only the first of many life

lessons she'd teach me, though at that moment my only wish was that the sofa would open up and swallow me.

In last week's gospel, you may remember, Peter was pushed to ask that question that each one of us must eventually face: "Who do you say that I am?" And his reply of faith resulted in Jesus naming him head of the Apostles.

This week, though, Peter regresses. When Jesus begins to talk about his passion and death, Peter's immediate reply is, "Say it isn't so!" And Jesus turns on him, insisting that anyone who wants to follow Jesus has to take up his cross, that this is the only way.

The cross was a hard pill for Peter to swallow, and so it is for us as well. That's especially true for us, I think, because of our circumstances. Mostly, we're folks with substantial economic resources as well as people who, in an information age, have learned how to access the things we need to in order to make the world work for us. Unlike the inhabitants of Lincoln Heights, it's very easy for you and me to cherish the illusion that we're pretty much in control, that the world is mostly always a benevolent place, a place where bunnies scamper in green fields and where all of us are safe and secure from any kind of harm. And it's easy to develop a kind of personal theology that rejoices in the resurrection without ever facing the grim reality that cross and death come before it, a sort of "best of all possible worlds" Christianity, best capsulized in the bumper sticker, "It's fun being a Christian."

I could give you all sorts of reasons from the Church's tradition as to why that theology isn't proper, but the one to which I return, over and over again, is that it just doesn't work. A theology without the cross is mostly useless when we face the loss of a relationship, or the loss of health, or the loss of a job. It gives us nothing on which to rely, nothing to which to cling at 3.00 AM when we feel alone and afraid. In the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams, "The desire to be in God's image without attaining Christ's image is a desire for immediacy, which wants everything without detour and without self-actualization, a narcissistic desire of the ego to settle in God, immortal and almighty, that doesn't find it necessary "to let its life be crucified" and to experience the night of pain."

Make no mistake, though: it's not out of any kind of great enlightenment that we embrace the cross as a source of life and hope. As Jesus found out, as Miss Louise found out, as all of us find out—if we're really true to ourselves—we embrace the cross because there is no other option open, because it's all coming apart at warp speed, because our backs are to the wall and there is simply no other place to go. We embrace the cross not because we want to, but because we have to.

But in doing that, we discover a marvelous thing, the same marvel that was such an important part of the life and ministry of Jesus. As we let go of our own need to control ourselves and everything around us, as we cling to the cross for all we're worth, we discover, in the words of one of my other favorite theologians, Johnny Cash, that the blood gave life to the branches of the tree and the blood was the price that set the captives free/and the thousands that came through the fire and the flood/clung to the tree and were redeemed by the blood." We discover that it is indeed in clinging to that tree that the gateway to resurrection opens to us, that "the Spirit is that which impels us forward, which creates hope out of our cries of protest in the present."

And so we stand this Sunday morning, you and I, with Peter and Miss Louise, with all of those before us who have taken up their crosses and followed him, and with them we pray: "Mercifully grant that we, who glory in the mystery of our redemption, may have grace to take up our cross and follow him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in Glory everlasting. Amen.