

I am going to start off today with a story.

I couldn't remember if I have told you this before, so forgive me if I am repeating myself.

I am going to briefly share one of my call experiences, when I knew I had to go into the ministry.

I had just turned 20 years old.

I was finishing my second year of college.

I was at my grandfather's memorial service.

It was May 2007.

My grandfather was a UCC pastor.

The whole service from the introduction to the eulogy to the words of remembrance, to the stories told at the reception, all of the words shared celebrated my grandfather.

People spoke about his ministry, his humor, how he took risks, how he changed lives, how he loved people.

It was at this time that I was prepared to apply to law school.

I had the schools picked out, I was ready to start applying.

But something happened at my grandfather's memorial service.

It caused me to think about what I wanted people to say about me, at my funeral.

People dying has a way of doing this to us, it makes us wonder about how people will remember us after we die.

I realized that I too wanted to be remembered for helping people, for loving people, for challenging unjust systems, for advocating for those without power and resources.

Long story short, my life took a sharp turn that day and instead of applying to law school, I ended up applying to seminary.

The thing is that what people say about us, it does matter, although many of us have heard the opposite.

I have been told before, don't worry about what others think about you, or what they say about you.

And it's true, we have to take everything we hear with a grain of salt.

We have to remember that what others say about us is filtered through their lens of perception, their life experience, their limited understanding of us.

However.

What people say about us does convey something about how we move through the world, how we engage with others.

If we repeatedly receive critical feedback from others, or if we often hear negative things said about us,

it's worth taking those sentiments into consideration.

We have to be humble enough to consider, could they be right?

Could that feedback have some truth to it?

So, if your loved ones were being honest, what would they say about you if they delivered your eulogy?

Or, if that's too morbid and you prefer not to think about your funeral, imagine that loved ones are writing an honest character reference about you.

What would they say?

Are you happy with how they'd describe you?

Do you somehow wish it were different?

Do you wish people knew things about you that you keep to yourself?

Is there a gap between what you think' they'd say, and what you'd want them to say?

What if you wrote a character reference about yourself, is that much different from one that others would write about you?

I don't think that it would be a perfect match for any of us.

I believe that all of us somehow want to be different, want to be better, or want to be better understood.

We want people to know what we struggle with or what keeps us from being the people we want to be.

In today's well-known Gospel story, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

They reply with all kinds of answers.

They tell him that people think he's John the Baptist, that he's Elijah, that he's another prophet.

Then, after Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, they tell him, "You are the messiah."

You might think that it would be ridiculous for us to ask the question, "Who is Jesus?" because we might assume that we all know.

But do we all know who Jesus is?

Do we have consensus?

My guess would be that all Christians have some understanding of who Jesus is, but that we do not all agree.

In fact, we would probably get a wide variety of answers if we took a survey and asked people, "who is Jesus?"

But this question matters because I think our answer says more about us, and our theology, than who Jesus is or was.

For some people, Jesus is a savior who saves them from their sins, so long as they confess and repent.

For some people Jesus is the source of salvation, and belief in him is what ensures our entrance into heaven.

For other people, Jesus is God incarnate on Earth, sinless, perfect, and incomparable.

For other people Jesus was a human rebel who defied authorities.

For others still, Jesus loved everyone, he was kind and nice and harmless.

For others, he was threatening, warning people of God's judgment, and that he would return again in power and in glory.

The four different Gospel texts present different versions of Jesus, not to mention the 13 letters attributed to Paul, which adapt the function and significance of Jesus' life depending upon the population they're addressed to.

For some, being like Jesus is their goal, and it's an attainable one.

He was human, he lived and had emotions and a mortal body and interacted with imperfect people, just like we do.

For many Christians, Jesus is relatable.

For others, he is not relatable, he is unreachable.

He is the begotten son of God, born of a virgin, who was sinless, perfect, who knew he was sent here to die so that God might forgive us for the original sin committed by Adam and Eve.

There are so many different Jesus's in the Bible and they all have scriptural support.

So, that's why I say that who we say Jesus is says more about who we are, our theology, what we are trying to attain, than it says about Jesus.

When he tells his followers to take up their cross and to follow him, the way we interpret that depends upon our understanding of Jesus.

If you believe Jesus offers us eternal salvation, then your understanding of taking up your cross, might be to teach others about the way of Jesus, so that they might be saved.

If you believe Jesus was nice and kind and loving, your understanding of taking up your cross might be to be kind and loving.

If your understanding is one of Jesus as a rebel who defied Cesar and the high priests, who aligned himself with the vulnerable and marginalized, who lived a life in service to others, then your way of taking up the cross might be by having the courage to stick your neck out, to risk your reputation and social status and financial security in order to be more like Jesus.

Some people take up their cross by praying, repenting, prophesying.

Others take up their cross by giving, by loving, by being kind.

Others take up their cross by transgressing boundaries.

However you understand Jesus, and however you take up your cross, your ways should be loving and life giving.

“When he says those who lose their lives for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it, he means that the joy of following him on the path of the cross eclipses any joy that we can try to dig out of our lives through the pursuit of wealth, power of pleasure.

Self-giving love is the only path to true and lasting happiness.”
(Vander Zee, Leonard. “Proper19B,” calvinseminary.edu)

So if the person you want to be is different from the person you are, picking up your cross means changing those things which are causing the misalignment.

In other words, picking up your cross means being more like Jesus as you understand him.

You might think that those changes are hard, daunting, overwhelming, impossible.

You might think that it’s too late in life to change or that you are adequate the way you are.

The last thing is true.

You are adequate the way you are, as one of my favorite theologians Rob Bell says,

“We all fall short and that’s the beautiful part. Broken, flawed, vulnerable people like you and me, are invited to be the hands and feet of a Jesus who loves us exactly as we are and yet, loves us way too much to let us stay that way.”

When we work on changing those aspects of ourselves that we don't want mentioned in our eulogy or in our character reference, we find that God meets us in those hard moments.

God meets us, *“when all we had worked for, hoped for, and striven for fall apart and we realize that we are, quite simply, mortal, and incapable of saving ourselves...”*

Here's the thing: we tend to think that life is something you go out and get, or earn, or buy, or win.

But it turns out that life is like love, it can't be won or earned or bought, only given away.

And the more you give it away, the more you have.

In fact — only when you love others do you most understand what love really is.

Likewise, only when you give away your life for the sake of others do you discover it.”

(Lose, David. “Pentecost 16B: Intriguing, Elusive, Captivating, and Crucial.” www.davidlose.net.)

So however you understand Jesus, however you are picking up your cross, as hard as it may be, know that God abides with you and that in the end, you will be more loving, and your life will be more fulfilling.

In the end, all shall be well.

I'd like to leave you with this beautiful poem, by Steve Garnass-Holmes, which speaks to all the different ways we know Jesus...

*Jesus is God's best selfie,
and humanity's true DNA.*

Jesus is the great overlapping.

*Jesus is God's fragile hope set loose in the world,
God's vulnerability surviving among us,
the living wound of the Beloved.*

*Jesus is the tear in the world where we see through to God,
what we look like when we let the Divine burn in us.*

*Jesus is the living bit of love that every empire trips over,
the peasant who shatters the world,
the victim who ruins our judgments
and leaves us with nothing but mercy.*

*Jesus is my wizard, my teacher, my elder,
my big brother and little sister,
my comrade, my accomplice, my troublemaker, my trickster.
Jesus is my healer, my lover, my peace,
and not mine.*

*Jesus is my possibility. The flavor of God.
Infinite mystery in an old shirt.*

*Jesus is the coach who expects almost too much of me,
and is never disappointed.*

*Jesus pushes me out of uncomfortable places,
and pulls me into them.*

*Jesus invites me into the world's wound
deep enough to find light.*

*Jesus is always dying so I get the hang of it.
And rising.*

*Jesus is always a step ahead of me
except when he's disappeared into me, waiting,
always pouring God out at my feet,
always weeping and joyful and curious.*

*Jesus is always setting me up on blind dates with God,
and then coming along just to watch.*

He's got heaven all over him like pollen on a bee's legs.

Jesus is my glasses, my hearing aid. Also my hard hat.

*Jesus has light spilling out all over, especially through
those holes in his hands.*

*Jesus has a million questions, and most of them are the same
one:*

“Do you know how much I love you?”

Who do you say that Jesus is?

Who do you want people to say that you are?

Amen.