

Defining moment: Matthew 16:21-28

Maybe Peter scares Jesus.

by [Deanna Langle](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."
(Matthew 16:21-23)

Just moments before, Peter had responded to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" with his great confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus had blessed Peter, called him the "rock" on which the church would be built, and given him the keys of the kingdom. What an affirmation! Just when Peter should have felt the closest to Jesus, however, just when he may have felt the gap between Jesus and him narrow, Jesus rebuked Peter: "Get behind me, Satan!"

Peter often reminds us of our humanity: that's his gift to us. Perhaps it was also a gift to Jesus. Jesus must have been tempted by what Peter said to him. Jesus certainly would have preferred not to have to talk about suffering and death. We honor the humanity of Jesus to say that he was tempted by Peter's words. Perhaps Peter is naming something like fear within Jesus and bringing it to light. It scares Jesus, and he responds forcefully. "Get behind me, Satan!" There is a sting to Peter's words, a challenge that Jesus reacts to. Why wouldn't Jesus be fearful?

Perhaps Jesus and his disciples are at Caesarea Philippi because Jesus is trying to find the courage to continue. Peter's rebuke point to an easier option for Jesus, but Jesus realizes that the way Peter suggests isn't an option. When Jesus articulates this, he knows the way he must follow.

This realization, or “call,” along with the power of the Holy Spirit, keeps us from turning our backs on what we value. Following God is difficult. We’re always overwhelmed by discipleship, and so turn away or are tempted to turn away. Jesus’ call to take up our cross and follow is a vision to keep us on the path. When we hear of those who have died in the “war on terror,” or from hunger and preventable diseases like AIDS, we often don’t believe our voices and actions can make a difference. But if we stop pursuing justice, peace, healing and wholeness for our lives and for our world, we become supporters of that which we oppose.

We can give up and be silent, or we can keep on making noise. The moments when we’re tempted to give up are when we confront the gap between humans and God and between who Jesus is and who we want Jesus to be.

Discipleship is not about you or me; it’s about God, which is what Jesus means by the language of denying ourselves. We are not to forget who we are, but rather to figure out who we are through Jesus and as people carrying the name Christian. Disciples are witnesses, speaking what they see even when they don’t feel that anybody is listening or wants to listen. Disciples name evil for what it is; they move beyond thinking that everyone has to understand their authority and what they’re saying, and they persevere with the message.

Jesus invites you and me to be disciples, to take him up on the offer of selfless power. It’s a risky invitation to accept because it means living in the tension of hearing ourselves make the great confession “Jesus, you’re the Messiah!” one minute and hearing Jesus rebuke us with the words, “Get behind me, Satan!” the next. Taking the way of the cross is a real, agonizing process, a task so overwhelming that eventually there is no choice anymore. The only decision is to follow.

Two years ago I invited Dorothy Marie Hennessey and Gwen Hennessey, Franciscan (and biological) sisters from Dubuque, Iowa, to Luther College to share their stories of being advocates of peace and justice. Both have been arrested and served six-month jail sentences for acts of civil disobedience in protesting the School of the Americas (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation)—a military school in Fort Benning, Georgia, that has trained Latin Americans in tactics of war, terrorism and torture.

I asked the sisters, one who was 89, and the other who was 69, “Why do you do this?” They responded with stories of their brother who was a missionary priest in Guatemala and whose parishioners were brutally tortured and killed by people who had, no doubt, been trained by the School of the Americas. These sisters have seen and heard too much, and being silent about what they know isn’t an option. Both said that too many people don’t know or don’t want to know what’s really happening in our world, so they as witnesses can’t be silent. There is only one way for them to follow.

The way of the cross is the way of faith—of claiming life and truth in the face of everything that tells us not to. Once we have seen and heard too much, once Jesus has come too close, then the only thing we can do is to witness to the truth, follow and keep on the path. And this path of the cross is never lived outside of God’s love. That’s the promise in which we live, and the promise that keeps us on the path.