

The path to life

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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One of the cool traditions that our church is a part of is what is called “Lenten lunches.” Every Thursday throughout Lent, a different church in our city opens its doors to sisters and brothers from other denominations for a short devotional, followed by a simple lunch of soup and bread. Last week, I was at a table with a few other pastors and the conversation inevitably turned to the demands of ministry: the sometimes seemingly endless meetings, the overwhelming needs of people that we are so often powerless to meet, the importance of boundaries, etc. There was plenty of knowing nodding and mm-hmming. But then there was a pause... and a comment from an Anglican minister: “But isn’t the invitation to Christ on some level an invitation to die?”

Silence.

Yes, an invitation to die. Right.

One should perhaps not expect a perfectly balanced life with vigilantly policed personal boundaries and a carefully measured out expenditure of self in this line of work.

During the devotional prior to the lunch, the speaker had read the following portion of Isaiah 53:

*Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*

*He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.*

*Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

“We held him in low esteem.” As far as leaders of movements go, Jesus wasn’t an obvious choice. He was ugly and plain and undesirable. He offered a way of life that was difficult and confusing. He spoke in bizarre riddles and told weird and provocative stories. He talked about hating our closest relations and about taking up our cross and losing our lives. As Bonhoeffer famously put it, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” It was almost as if Jesus was *making* it hard to follow him. Hmm.

On the way to work on a recent frosty morning, I listened to a sermon that was discussing the church as the bride of Christ. It was a sermon full of flowery language about the mystical and intimate connection between Jesus and his people. At one point, the preacher was talking about intimacy with Jesus and asked something like the following rhetorical question (he was addressing common critiques of love songs to Jesus): “But aren’t there times when you just *long* to express the depth of your love to Jesus as you would to a lover?”

“No,” I said. “There aren’t. I literally can’t recall any such times and I don’t want to try.” I said this audibly as I was whizzing down the highway. I kind of surprised even myself. It scared me a little, truth be told, how automatically that came out.

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

If we are honest, I think most of us would admit that there are times when we are not attracted to Jesus, when we don’t want him and don’t want to want him. There are times when we wish that Jesus would just leave us alone.

So, on the one hand we have this ugly Jesus who calls us to a life of death to self. Not exactly an easy sell. Yet, on the other hand we are convinced that the call to life with Christ is the call to “life to the full.” It is the call to a life of love and peace and joy. We are convinced that in the life of Jesus we are given a glimpse of what a truly human life looks like, and that the invitation to faith is an invitation

Whoever loses their life will find it, Jesus says (Mat 10:39; 16:25). Often this is crudely interpreted as something like, “If you deny yourself enough now and just knuckle down and be a good boy and believe the right things, there will be a nice

shiny prize at the other end for you! Just hang on!!” But surely Jesus is saying something much deeper and truer and more life-giving than *that*. Surely he is offering more than a carrot and a stick. Surely he is saying something about the kind of default life we often settle for and calling us to raise our eyes to something higher and more lasting. Surely he is pointing to the reality we are the sorts of creatures whose perspectives about truth and beauty and goodness need to be persistently reoriented and reshaped according to something beyond our default assumptions and expectations about what life looks like and how it works best.

And, of course, the hope is that in embracing this ugly, unattractive Jesus, this sometimes painful and uncomfortable way of being in the world, we begin to see ourselves, others, and the world in general in a truer, more God-like way. The hope is that what at first seems only to be ugly, costly and difficult will, over time, come to be seen for what it really is. The path to life.

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