

Esse quam videri
 Reading from the Old Testament: Amos 5:14
 Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 13:21-28

I belong to that fraternity whose motto is: *Why take two trips if you can manage it with one?* Unfortunately, we do not have a secret handshake because our hands are full. Perhaps you, too, are a member. Our initiation rite is a large SUV and a trip to Harris Teeter. It's a big shopping trip, such that the clerk calls for bagging backup, and other eye-rolling shoppers shy away from your lane as if it's a Covid-hot spot.

So, with a shopping cart stuffed tighter than Santa's sleigh, you wheel it to the temporary cart sanitation station at the entrance. Now, the challenge begins. Pick up every ever-loving bag in the basket, balancing it with a watermelon under one arm and a twelve-pack of Cokes in the other, and carry the whole load in one trip, waddling all the way to the SUV, looking like a float in the Orange Bowl parade.

Why not roll the cart to the SUV and unload it there, you ask? Bless 'em, Lord, for they know not what they ask. Can't you see? If you roll the cart out, you have to roll it back. It's a shopping cart, not a boomerang! Remember our motto: *Why take two trips if you can manage*

it with one? This isn't just an errand, silly, it's a feat, an achievement. Am I right? Though I can't see you, I'd imagine any number of you are nudging your spouse or family member, right about now. "He's right! Wasted steps, wasted steps."

Okay, occasionally there is an accident. *Wumph!* The classic sound of bags landing on Formica.

Me: "I managed to get everything on the list except the apple cider."

Donna: "Were they out?"

Me: "Alas, one of the bags broke under the strain out in the garage.

Don't worry, I'll clean it up."

Donna: "I guess you will."

So close! I almost had it. And so, I march on, living in the illusion that I can carry it all. *Could you use a little help? Nah, I've got it ... or not.*

It's strange, though. The members of my fraternity often hold down good jobs, performed with competence. We can dress ourselves, eat without a bib (most of the time), manage our finances, even make it through a Zoom meeting without a hitch. Yet, in our zeal to unload a

car in one trip, we still find ourselves surprised and confused when we arrive at a doorknob, as if we had no idea it would be there, much less that it would require one of our already overloaded hands to turn it.

Has anyone out there ever pulled a muscle while heavy laden with bags or luggage and trying to contort your body in a way that would allow you to open the door without setting anything down? Why, just this morning when I arrived at the church, I got out of my car, loaded myself up with a backpack, some books, and my cup of hot tea; walked over to the mailbox, managing to pull my key out of my pocket without losing my backpack, opened the box, retrieved the mail, balancing it with my books, not spilling my tea, and walked to the office door.

Once there, I was faced with the task of again retrieving my keychain which held the key fob to trigger the lock, then twisting my torso in an attempt to open the door with my pinkie, get inside and turn off the security alarm before a fire truck shows up. On more than one occasion, the mail has been strewn across the floor and I've yelped at the burn of hot tea on my hand.

Sometimes, you have to put something down before you can pick something up. Sometimes, you have to let something go before you can take something on. Sometimes, you have to die to something, so that you can live for something. --- Wait! What? --- Yes, sometimes you have to die **to** something so that you may live **for** something.

We've come to a turning point in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus has been tempted. Jesus has recruited disciples. Jesus has taught, healed, traveled, challenged the religious establishment, walked on water, fed a crowd larger than the town of my childhood, and commissioned the first preacher for his church. That already makes for one of those long-extended obituaries that run periodically in the Observer. Jesus has been a busy boy, and yet, it seems like he's just getting started.

However, four words in the 21st verse mark an important transition. "From that time on..." Up to now, we're traveling along, just being in awe of Jesus being Jesus. As he gets in the boat after walking on the stormy sea, we read, "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly, you are the Son of God.'" But now, with the words "From that time on," there is a shift in focus from what Jesus is doing to where Jesus is going. There is a sharper focal point. Matthew reports, "From

that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

As we talked about last week, this is where Peter quickly shrinks from "rock" to "stumbling block." Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Wrong answer, Peter! And you were doing so well, correctly identifying Jesus' role as Messiah and being commissioned to lead the nascent church. Jesus' immediate response surprises the reader, and surely Peter, with it's clarity, blunt instruction, and some would say, an uncharacteristically harsh rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

It's not a coincidence that Jesus here uses the same word (ὀπίσω) that he uses when he called Peter there at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where he said, "Follow me." Follow, get behind - not lead, not guide, not direct, and most certainly, not control. Follow. It is not the place of the disciple to mold or shape Jesus into their image of who Jesus should be, nor to drag Jesus where they think Jesus needs to go.

When Jesus calls the disciple to follow, it's not an option on the menu of discipleship. Rather, it's the heart of discipleship. Follow Jesus as if you are a contestant in Simon says, or in this case, Jesus says.

Follow. Thought, word, deed, steps, direction, compass, map.

Follow. Otherwise, along with Peter, we "are setting [our minds] not on divine things but on human things."

Which brings us to a summons, oft repeated, and more often misunderstood: Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." We have all found ourselves referring to the nagging injury, the problematic colleague, the rebellious teen, the humidity of another Southern summer, the mandatory overtime at work, or the dismal diagnosis as "the cross we have to bear."

True, those are burdens, all. But that is not the focus of Jesus' summons here. Through Christ, you see, the cross is transformed from an instrument of torturous execution into a sign of selfless love. Jesus is calling the disciple, you, me to take up the quest, the purpose, the calling, the pursuit of self-giving love.

To what do you aspire? What does a life that is whole look like to you? Amidst the appealing architecture, bucolic gardens, and inviting recipes of the iconic magazine, *Southern Living*, there is that perfectly posed photo that shows up without fail. Sometimes it is set on the steps leading to the entrance, or on the *Frontgate* furniture on the porch, or the *Henredon* couch in the living room; and there we find the flawlessly groomed family, who've never exchanged a cross word, endured a fifth grader's saxophone practice, or cleaned up after an incontinent dog. They're so pretty sitting there, all smiles, looking like a summit meeting of *Vineyard Vines*, *Ralph Lauren*, and *Lilly Pulitzer*, their retriever or lab snoozing silently and still on her *Orvis* pillow in front of them ... which should be your first clue that this isn't real. I don't see any chew marks on the furniture and the dog isn't snoring, slobbering, or jumping on the photographer.

But that doesn't seem to come to mind as we're admiring the American Dream. We look, and we say, *That's it! That's what I want!* And we'll move mountains and swim the English Channel to get it. Refinance the house, take on extra clients, work longer hours, turbo-fit the credit card.

Is it real? Is it truly the good life? Or is it the American mirage, arranging the perfect photo shoot to disguise the mess underneath. *Esse quam videri*, the motto of North Carolina and the University of North Carolina - *To Be, Rather Than to Seem*. How often are we pursuing the opposite, appearance having precedence over meaning, purpose, love. Think about it.

The photo is enviable. They look good. But is it real? There are no cobwebs on that porch, no forced smiles, no fluctuating moods, no financial stress, carpet stains, wrinkles, sweat, drunken arguments, chemotherapy treatments, dining room tables converted into school rooms; no barking dogs, screen-addicted evenings, layoffs, messy sticky kitchens, sleepless nights, overdue notices. Is it real?

If they wanted real, there would be a photo of me splayed on the bloody kitchen floor with a sliced forehead and my dog looking cross-eyed at me with my wife's favorite shoe still in her mouth. That would be real. Real would be the migraine you get the night before the quarterly report is due or the night after your mother climbs out the window at the memory care unit. Real would be turning the sofa cushions over to hide the frayed fabric, or the smile you force when

inside your heart is breaking. The editor's photo doesn't catch any of that. It looks exquisite, flawless, everything you could want. But is it? As Frederick Buechner once suggested, we live in denial of the fact that so many people cry themselves to sleep at night under the blanket of success.

The house, the pastel pastiche of the family photo, the dog, whether lazy, crazy, or just goofy, they may well be good things, but when they are relied upon for ultimate meaning, they will always fall short.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Sometimes, like the fool lugging fifty bags of groceries in one trip, you have to let go of something to grab hold of something; you have to set something down to take something up. That doesn't mean you have to toss your *Southern Living* or your *Wall Street Journal*, but it does mean you have to stop treating them as Scripture. You don't have to sell your house, but you do have to transfer the ultimate meaning you ascribe to it to the way of Jesus. If it becomes a stumbling

block in relationship, in your capacity to care for others, being sensitive to their needs and not just your wants, it may be time for letting something go. What do you have to give up in order to take up the task of love?

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

What is Jesus asking of us? I think Walter Brueggemann is at least in the proximity of the answer in a prayer, though published some twelve years ago, remains almost spookily relevant to a time such as this. He prayed, in a way I hope we can individually and corporately lean into: "Give us some distance from the noise, some reserve about the loud success of the day, that we may remember that our life consists not in things we consume, but in neighbors we embrace. Be our good neighbor that we may practice your neighborly generosity all through our needy neighborhood." Amen.

“The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.”