

A Muslim goes to Heaven and meets Saint Peter at the Gate. He says, "This has to be a mistake. I demand to see the prophet Mohamed right now!" Peter says, "Calm down. Would you like a coffee or a cappuccino?" The Muslim says, "No, thanks. I don't think I'm supposed to be here." Peter responds, "Alright, I'll let you sort this out with the manager. You can enter until then." The Muslim enters Heaven which is beautiful. He sees Jesus across the room and goes to talk to him. He says, "Hello, sir, are you the manager here?" Jesus responds "Yes." The Muslim says "St. Peter sent me to talk to you, but I need to speak to prophet Mohamed." Jesus says, "Sure, we can talk, but would you like a cappuccino?" The Muslim says, "No, I just don't think this is the right Heaven for me." Jesus says, "You know what, I'll let you address God about this." God appears before the Muslim and asks, "What's wrong, sir?" He replies, "I don't think I ended up where I should, and I'd like to talk to the prophet Mohamed." God asks him, "Would you like a coffee or a cappuccino?" The Muslim answers, "Fine, I'll have your cappuccino if we can talk!" God looks across the room and says, "Yo, Mohamed, be a good guy and bring us two cappuccinos!"

On a day when Peter is called Satan by his main man Jesus H. Christ, we need a good Peter/heaven joke. The reason this one fits is because we are talking about the idea of the cross and crucifixion in our gospel today. Many Christians have an idea that the central belief in Christianity is that if we follow Jesus Christ we go to heaven and if you don't you go to hell. It is in the Bible in certain places and it is part of Christian traditional teaching. And it is also in the Bible that following Jesus Christ means something for this life here and now and eternal life is something other than fluffy clouds and giggling panda bears forever. Each week, we go where the readings take us...

Peter doesn't understand what the cross means and is told that he is Satan, only thinking of earthly things. And Jesus goes on to explain that to truly be the Son of Man, one must suffer and die. He explains this to the crowd which is Mark's way of saying he is explaining this to us. In no Gospel does Jesus say, "It is my responsibility to die for you, while you applaud my heroism." Instead: "The Son of Man is ordained by God to suffer, die. And so are his followers. Are you coming?" Here, in this gospel, in this episode, the meaning of the cross is clear; the meaning of following Jesus is clear and there is no mention of heaven at all. To decry this explanation as Peter does, brings about the one place in all scripture where Jesus addresses an adversary as Satan—and it's the first of the Twelve whom he summoned – Peter.

Cicero has said of crucifixion: "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him, an abomination. To slay him is virtually an act of murder. To crucify him is—what? No fitting word can possibly describe a deed so horrible." The idea that Jesus was crucified is not simply that he died but was shamed and abandoned. Yet, these days crosses are jewelry. If a soldier or a police officer puts on a uniform, she knows it could mean life or death. But what do we think if we wear a cross or have a Christian bumper sticker. Jesus says get behind me Satan but did the trickster just slip around back while no one was looking? Does the cross still have meaning? What does it mean to you? What does it mean to us? What does it mean to the world?

The power of the cross is the emptying of oneself for the sake of humanity, which is to be divine. Isn't this similar to the concept of enlightenment: that to achieve enlightenment is to relieve

oneself of all desire and be filled only with divine light. And the opposite state is to suffer because of desire. Is it not our desire which interferes with our ability to empty our selves fully. I want I want I want; I need I need I need. But Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: *Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles strive after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.*

The goal of all spirituality is to empty oneself so that we might be filled with the divine. Another way to think of it is to consider ourselves like an onion layering over the center until it gets farther and farther from the surface. The layers are our fears of not having enough money, enough love, enough stability, being a failure, and so on, which become the things we worship, the things we focus our attention and energy on instead of God. So that over time we become stinky and sour and make people cry unless we are intentional about redirecting our focus to the divine which peels these layers away making us less stinky and sour and making fewer people cry. And instead we become light; we allow our true nature to shine through; we become vessels for the divine.

What does this look like in real life? It could look like Sister Constance and the Martyrs of Memphis whom we remembered this week on the Church calendar. During the Yellow Fever epidemic in Tennessee in 1878, this nun along with others such as Episcopal priests from New York, stayed in Memphis while 30,000 fled to avoid the disease. She and her companions died saving lives and lived selflessly as an act of faith. As did Dr. King who died by an assassins bullet fighting for the rights of all oppressed and poor Americans and people around the world, particularly his African American brothers and sisters in this land. Day and night, organizing and preaching so that others can have a life our nation promised in its idealistic documents and even arguing against unjust wars like in Vietnam.

And there are so many others we will never know who give of themselves for the sake of others, not necessarily to the point of death. But certainly carrying their cross. What is meant by this is the shameful, painful, inhuman way of the cross. If we do not occasionally feel ashamed because we are sticking to the way of the cross, if we are not occasionally wishing we had more money because we have chosen to walk the way of the cross, if we don't occasionally say no to things we desire because we are following the way of the cross, we have to ask if we are following the way of the cross. Like the suffering servant we read about in Isaiah today who has people spit on him and insult him but who sets his face like flint toward the holiness of God knowing that he is not put to shame because God is on his side.

Jurgen Moltmann says in, The Crucified God: "In a civilization that glorifies success and happiness and is blind to the sufferings of others, people's eyes can be opened to the truth if they remember that at the center of the Christian faith stands an unsuccessful, tormented Christ, dying in forsakenness." People who walk the way of the cross open the eyes of the blind to see the love of God surrounding and living within them. People who walk the way of the cross change the world by dying for it by giving up our desire for it. This is who we are as Christians. We are the light that shines through the darkness, the ones who truly live because we are willing to die.