

Message for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (9/12/2021)  
Mark 8:27-38

**Jesus never promised that he would make your life easier.** Whatever Christian faith has come to mean in different times and places, it's never been a guarantor of happiness or personal improvement program or ideological rubber stamp. On the contrary, according to Jesus, discipleship will make your life harder: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Peter seems to miss this point in our Gospel from Mark today. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his first disciples as they make their way together. And perhaps to our surprise, Peter gives the right answer: "You are the Messiah." As it turns out, however, he doesn't understand what that title means. When Jesus predicts that the Son of Man will undergo suffering and death at the hands of other powers, Peter objects. That's not the kind of Messiah he's prepared to follow; that's not the kind of Messiah he wants.

How different are we? When Jesus insists that his disciples carry a cross of our own, do we object? That's not the kind of Christianity we're prepared to accept; that's not the kind of Christianity we want. No, **we want a faith that will rescue us from pain, not join us to the pain of others; we want a promise of comfort, not a summons to sacrifice, even if that sacrifice makes for a better world.**

**It's never been easy to heed Jesus' call to lose the life you've planned in order to find another more abundant one.** Nevertheless, that call echoes again and again through the words of witnesses down through the ages. And tomorrow, the church commemorates one of those witnesses, the fourth-century preacher, John Chrysostom. That's not a surname, by the way, but a nickname John received on account of his famed eloquence. Chrysostom is an anglicized version of the Greek *Chrysostomos*, which means "golden-mouthed."

To his credit, John's illustrious preaching did not serve to obscure the reality of crisis and pain and loss, but rather to proclaim God's promises in the midst of them, and in the case of the excerpt you're about to hear, the promise of our solidarity as people of faith, hope, and love. That promise is reflected in Jesus' own words, although we're liable to miss it if we read today's Gospel through the lens of individualism: *If any want to become my followers (plural), let them deny themselves and take up their cross (plural) and follow me.*

**What difference does it make that we heed the call to discipleship together, and not individually? What difference does it make that the life of faith is a shared, and not a lonely, life?**

Consider these words of St. John Chrysostom: [excerpt from Philip H. Pfatteicher's *Festivals and Commemorations* (1980), 350-1]