

Title: Boundaries: “need” vs “want”

Matt 16:21-28 (see also Mark 8:27)

During this Lenten season, many of us have given up a sinful desire. Some of the hardest decisions I have had to make are ones in which I must distinguish between a need or a want. I sometimes find myself trying to justify it by calling it a “need” rather than admitting it is just a “want.” Sometimes, one of the hardest times to say “no” is to something I really, really, want. It can be almost painful to be deprived of something I really, really, want. You know the struggle. But it is important to distinguish between the feeling of pain and the more permanent effect - damage. Now, in an ideal world, they are the same, pain and damage are interchangeable. In an ideal world, “pain” would be the “warning signal” that damage is being done. However, in this sinful mixed up world, they are not the same. Sometimes good, sometimes growth, comes with pain, comes with a bad feeling, but the net result is ultimately good. Conversely, there are ways in which damage comes about without pain, or at worst, comes with pain much later when it is too late. It is important to distinguish between pain and damage.

In today’s Gospel, there is a confusion between pain and damage. There are those who wish to travel the path of no pain, but in doing so, will set themselves on the path of eternal damage. The story starts in Matt 8. Jesus has told his disciples that there must be pain. He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things. He has told them that he must be killed, at the hands of the chief priests and Pharisees. But he has also told them there will be gain. The pain is necessary for the gain. For you see, on the third day after he is killed, he would be raised to life. Not only that but because he was raised to life, we too would have the promise of being raised also, we too would have the promise of eternal life.

In fact, without the suffering,... without the pain,... these eternal things would never happen. The reason for this? Long ago, when sin entered the human race it separated us from God. Scripture says the wages of sin is death, so we were destined for death. However, God loved us and did not want to leave us there. When Jesus suffered on the cross he suffered death in OUR place. He endured the pain of death so that the eternal damage of sin would be removed from us. Because he endured the pain... there would also be gain... eternal gain, gain for us. Jesus had committed to do this work.

But there were those who want to refuse it. They want to refuse it because they wanted to travel the road of “no pain.” They want to refuse it because they didn’t see the gain, in the road of pain. Now, you would have expected this response from the Pharisees, but the rejection comes from an unexpected source. When Jesus tells the disciples about his mission to save mankind through his death on the cross, it is Peter who misunderstands. “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Now, I can almost understand Peter. He is excited about Christ. He wants to show Jesus how much he loves Him. He hears that his Lord is supposed to suffer? “No way.” “Over my dead body.” “I’ll throw myself in front of the crowd and die before I’ll let anything happen to my Lord.” I can really understand why Peter said this. In my heart I believe that Peter said this because of a sincere

heart. He saw himself as sort of a body guard for Jesus. His job was to protect his Lord at all costs. To sacrifice himself in order to protect the one he loved. Sacrificial love. We do that kind of thing for our children all the time. I know of many parents who came from poor families. Who, when they were children, many times had to do without. Now that they are older, they make sure that their children will not suffer like they did. They will make sure that their children will have the opportunities which they didn't have. Even if it means having to give up something for themselves today. This is a wonderful thing. Sacrificial love. I believe that Peter, in rebuking Jesus, was attempting, from a sincere heart, to show sacrificial love to Jesus.

However, a sincere heart, is still a human heart. Because of our sinful nature, even good human feelings can be sinful. In vs 23 ²³ *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."* I used to think. That's pretty harsh there Jesus. I know that Peter can be a bit rash and shortsighted. I know that Peter sometimes doesn't quite understand the long range vision of your death on the cross. But that was a pretty hard slap. Couldn't there have been a better way to say it? But then I started thinking about it. Suppose you were a doctor. Suppose you were a doctor treating a patient with cancer. You knew that without the radiation and chemotherapy that the patient would die. But with the treatment, even though it would entail pain and suffering in the short-run, he would live healthily, many, many years longer. But suppose now, there was a nurse who didn't quite understand the nature of the treatment. Suppose there was a nurse who saw only the pain of the treatment. Suppose she tells the doctor. Oh, I've stopped giving the treatment. By some misplaced compassion, the nurse says, "Never will I allow that kind of suffering." You would expect a very violent reaction from the doctor. Get thee behind me, you nurse! You are a stumbling block to healing. You do not have in mind the things of medical treatment. Sometimes, sincerity and our human loves can go astray. They can go astray when we think that suffering must be avoided at all cost. But because of our ignorance we allow damage to occur. The doctor had a longer range view of the treatment, because he knew that in the long run the suffering of the treatment would be worth it. Sometimes, in order to avoid damage later, we need to endure pain now. Sometimes we need to remember that growth is the result of certain types of suffering. Sometimes the worse thing we can do is to protect ourselves from pain. Sometimes pain is part of growth, to avoid it is to not grow. Sometimes we cannot trust our human feelings about this. Sincerity and our human loves can go astray Even something as noble as sacrificial love, can turn astray. In Matt 16 Peter needed to see that Jesus' suffering was not "bad" but was part of a good plan. Jesus had to share with Peter his long-range view of salvation. But not only that, Jesus had to share with Peter His long range view of "what it means to be his follower." Jesus further needed Peter to see the bigger picture of being a disciple... that for the disciple suffering was not necessarily bad, that for the disciple suffering might actually bring good. Jesus said "If anyone loves me, he will **obey** my teaching "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. To take up his cross means to bear all the suffering they will endure because they are Christians. Okay, we get the idea! We get the big picture. As Christians, we do not avoid suffering at all cost. We are not supposed to say 'no' to all suffering, because the suffering may not be bad. The suffering may just be part of being a Christian, a part of following Jesus.

But now the question that comes to my mind is “Why do we have to suffer at all?” “Why does God make “suffering” a part of following Jesus?” I mean really, God you created everything... Why couldn't you just make fun and happiness the part of following Jesus? Scripture explains this. Because of sin, the world is blind to the ways of God, blind in such a way that it considers the direct opposite of God's ways to be “good.” Scripture goes so far as to say that, because of this blindness, because of its sinful ways, the world and people of this world are enemies of God. So if we are to be followers of God,... we will be going against the ways of the world. We will go against what seems to be common sense of the world. So in reality, it is not God who demands pain, in following Jesus. Having to go against the ways of the world is the source of pain. This crazy world, calls people to take the easy route. to take the painless route, but in the long run, it points to the road to damage. It points to the road to condemnation. It points to the road to spiritual damage.

God calls us, however, to a different road, a road to spiritual growth and spiritual health. Jesus calls us to “follow him.” It may be a road with occasional pain. It may be a road of sacrifice. It may be the road less traveled by the people of this world. It may be called stupidity by those who are blind to the ways of God. But it is the road to spiritual growth and health. Jesus calls us to “follow him”, even if it means carrying a cross, even if it means pain, because in the long run He sees the road which avoids damage, In the long run, it is the road which leads to paradise. It is a road of faith. In faith we walk that road. We walk that road knowing that God loves us. In Faith, we walk that road knowing that Jesus died for all our sins. In Faith we walk that road knowing that our ability to go to Heaven does not depend on our being good, or doing good but is entirely a gift. In Faith we walk that road knowing that at our baptism we entered into a relationship so close with God that we are called “children of God” In Faith we walk that road trusting that no matter what happens here on Earth, Jesus is with us, He is with us during the good times, celebrating with us. He is with us during the bad times, comforting us. In Faith, we walk that road knowing that there is a place of no tears, no suffering, called Heaven, waiting for us.

Brothers and sisters. Do not fear the road of pain you may have to walk. Do not be afraid to run the road of faith, even when you think others might think badly of you. Run the road which Jesus has laid out for us for his is the road which leads away from damage. Run the road which Jesus calls us to for it leads to heaven. Amen