

Text: Matthew 16: 21-28  
Title: Branding God  
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These are days of great political theater. Democrats and Republicans are jousting and jostling to grab our attention with images that they hope will foster fervor, inspire commitment, stir confidence, and finally secure your vote. Oh, I know each party says that the other offers images instead of ideas, hype instead of substance, and rhetoric instead of experience ~ but politics is a trafficking in symbols.

So, for example, Barrack Obama gave his acceptance speech against a backdrop that was somehow both colonial White House and Roman coliseum. And, framed in a warm light, with an American flag just over his shoulder, on the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech, in the middle of a politician's laundry list of promises, Obama raised up images of simple roots, family sacrifice, service to country, and solidarity with the struggling...

And the camera caught images of eyes misty with tears, faces lifted up and shining with hope, and there was a mighty colorful collage of black and white and Asian and Hispanic and young and old, and the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air.....

And, you get the point. The Republicans will fire up their image machine this week.

We traffic in symbols as short hand for shared understanding. Every label, every branding, every sign is meant to suggest identity and communicate some essential quality, characteristic, or defining value.

A few days after 9-11, Nancy Gibbs wrote in a Time Magazine essay,

*If you want to humble an empire, it makes sense to maim its cathedrals. They are symbols of faith and when they crumble and burn it tells us we're not so powerful and we can't be safe. The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center... were the sanctuaries of money and power that our enemies may think define us.*

She goes on to write that money and power are not our god's, but her point is well taken ~ even terrorists were trafficking in symbols. Again, the currency of image, symbol, or brand is meant to communicate some essential quality, characteristic, or defining value.

So, when Jesus tells his disciples that,

*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*

He too, was trafficking in the power of symbols.

The disciples of Jesus were primarily common Jews who knew the cross to be the brutal symbol of execution at the hands of an oppressive regime. It was an apparatus of humiliation and death. The Roman historian Tacitus writes of an area outside of a gate in Rome that was set aside for the crucifixion of slaves. Roman citizens could be put to death, but the torture and disgrace of crucifixion was reserved for slaves, pirates, and despised criminals.

So, for example after the slave rebellion of Spartacus was crushed, it is believed that 6000 of the slave prisoners were crucified along a stretch of a main road leading into Rome. The cross was a familiar and powerful symbol.

Now, a whole cross may have weighed well over 300 pounds, but the crossbeam would weigh only 75 to 125 pounds. Therefore, the condemned would have the beam strapped or nailed to their shoulders and then be forced to carry it to the place of execution. There it would be hoisted up and affixed to a pole that was already planted in the ground. Then the legs of the crucified would often be broken and the bodies were usually left hanging to be ravaged by the elements.

So, when Jesus tells his followers that discipleship involves taking up a cross it is no wonder that Peter pulls Jesus aside to tell him

to tone it down,  
or stay with the good news,  
or stick to the talking points about the kingdom,  
or manage his message better for better marketing.

In fact, Peter's response can be translated:

*God forbid Lord; this will never happen to you.*

It was unthinkable, unbearable, impossible. The one that Peter had just pronounced the "the Christ, the Son of the Living God" could never be rejected and killed ~ and especially crucified. Inconceivable!

But, Jesus whirls on Peter and says that the one who would be the rock on which he would build his church was also the stone on which he could stumble.

Dear friends, I don't mean this in a trite or flippant way but when God chose a brand as a way to express his will in this world he chose the cross. He didn't chose flowers or palm trees or a catchy swoosh; he chose a brutal symbol of state sanctioned death ~ and then he calls us to follow.

Now ~ in some ways in the economy of God there is an inevitability to the cross. The justice of God can't ignore sin. The mercy of God can't ignore the sinner. So, God's judgement and God's love meet in the cross. In the words of the Belgic Confession:

*We believe that God – who is perfectly merciful and also very just – sent his Son to assume the nature in which the disobedience had been committed, in order to bear in it the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death.*

There is an certain inevitability to the cross.

But, what is particullary powerful to me is that over and over again scripture portrays God not as aloof, or diddling with divine details in the distance while humanity suffers ~ but over and over again God hears, indentifies with, and responds to the brokenness of people.

And, in the cross God enters into and shares the darkest suffering of humanity.

He doesn't skirt,

or dismiss,

or dabble,

or ignore,

or plead ignorance,

or feign impotence ~ but God bears the brand of sin and death.

And that, dear friends, is outlandish, a scandal, a stumbling stone, a mystery so profound that we too would pull Jesus aside and whisper in his ear:

*God forbid Lord; this will never happen to you.*

Or, we would fall on our knees and whisper:

*Thank you... thank you... thank you...thank you...*

Now, I think what is equally stupefying is the admonition to take up a cross and follow.

How would we share the branding of God? How would we take up cross and follow?

Certainly it must mean more than bearing the cross of a working with someone who annoys us, or living with some ailment, or suffering through the collapse of your favorite baseball team in the post season. And, certainly it must be different than our suffering have some redeeming saving value...

Tom Long gets at cross bearing this way:

*Cross bearers forfeit the game of power before the first inning; they are never selected as "Most Likely to Succeed." Cross bearers are dropouts in the school of self-promotion. They do not pick up their crosses as means of personal fulfillment, career advancement, or self-expression; rather they deny themselves and pick up their crosses, like their Lord, because of the needs of other people.*

And in that light I know many of you to be cross bearers:

Parents are cross bearers for children,

children are cross bearers for aging parents,

healthy marriages have a measure of cross bearing,

friends can carry the crosses of friends,

teachers can carry crosses in their classrooms,

nurses can carry crosses...

Whenever we stretch beyond where we thought we could,  
whenever we give more than we thought we had,  
whenever we let go of self for the sake of the other,  
whenever we enter into and share in the suffering of others,  
there is some life, some fullness, some beauty...

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor:

*To be where God is - to follow Jesus - means going beyond the limits of our own comfort and safety. It means receiving our lives as gifts instead of guarding them as possessions. It means sharing the life we have been given instead of bottling it for own consumption. It means giving up the notion that we build dams to contain the bright streams of our lives and instead letting them go, letting them swell our banks and spill our wealth until they carry us down to where they run, full and growing fuller, into the wide and glittering sea.*

Beautiful, but...

But, could it also be that cross bearing, that losing our lives, means more than a call to living more unselfishly because it ends up being a more satisfying way to live.

Could it be that this text is finally about the death of self?

Could it be the deep recognition that finally we nothing to offer,  
not ever our notions of self, whatever they are:

self loathing,  
self important,  
selfish,  
self promoting,  
self serving,  
self giving,  
self determining.

*What can you give in exchange for your soul?*

All we bring is our (dead) selves.

The rest is the work of God.

In the words of Paul:

*For God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*  
*Colossians 2: 13-15*

The branding of God.

Amen.