

On January 1, 1863, the President of the United States signed a controversial executive order. Our country was in a precarious place socially, economically, and politically. We were in the midst of a Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln had been president for two years. The executive order was known as the “Emancipation Proclamation” and officially, it ended the practice of slavery in the United States. Effectively, it would take many years before the practice of slavery ended, but the proclamation was a bold move on the part of the president. For the first time in the country’s existence, the claim that one human being could own another was delegitimized. But this did not mean that all human beings gained equality or that laws were instantly just. For the next 100 years people fought against injustice and inequality, but in the south especially there was very little progress.

By the 1960s, black people especially in the south experienced deep discrimination, injustice, abuse and economic disparity. The law made it nearly impossible for black people to vote, allowed for them to be paid substandard wages, and let cities segregate schools, restaurants, busses and even churches. Even in our own Methodist denomination, which created a “central” conference for all black churches, discrimination ran rampant.

Once again the nation was in a precarious place economically, socially, and politically. During this time the anti-war movement and the women’s rights movement and other forces of social change ramped up, including the civil rights movement. Like never before, ordinary people fought against a broken system and demanded that the United States live up to its motto of being a land of freedom, justice and opportunity for all people.

A few of those ordinary people have since become household names: Martin Luther King Jr, for example, a Baptist preacher who used his voice and position in the community to speak out against hatred and discrimination. He said faith demanded action, and that life’s most persistent question is, what are you doing for others?

But not everyone who gave their lives for others during the 60s and since, fighting for justice and liberty for all, became famous. The power of the Civil Rights movement and the power of all social action campaigns is the willingness of ordinary people to stand up for truth and justice, to fight for the last and the least, and to lay their lives down for other people, especially when the benefits for which they are fighting have little impact on their own lives.

Like white students from the north who travelled south to stand in solidarity with black students and help register blacks to vote.

Like German people during WWII who risked everything to fight against the Nazi system by hiding Jews, or helping to sneak them out of the country.

Like my friend who has dedicated her life to going into remote places of the world to teach people the Bible in their native languages. Currently this means living in Papua New Guinea

without the comforts you and I take for granted every day, so that others might experience Christ in ways that are meaningful to them and come to know that they are loved.

All of these people demonstrated their understanding that faith demands action and that social change does not come without a struggle.

Today we again find ourselves in similarly precarious place in our nation's history, economically, socially, and politically. Not surprisingly because of the way the Holy Spirit works, our scripture reading today is appropriately about the cost of discipleship. Listen to Jesus talk to his disciple about things to come in this passage from Matthew, chapter 16, verses 21 through 26. I'm reading from the Message translation.

Then Jesus made it clear to his disciples that it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive. Peter took him in hand, protesting, "Impossible, Master! That can never be!"

But Jesus didn't swerve. "Peter, get out of my way. Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works."

Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

This Lenten season, we have talked about giving up control, expectations, and superiority. As we continue examining the things we need to give up in order to be closer to God and more focused on the work of building God's kingdom, today we consider giving up the most important and costly thing we have.... our lives. What if we gave up our lives for God? Are we willing? Are we able?

To gain you have to lose.

When the young lawyer asked him how to get to heaven in Matthew 19:21, Jesus told him: "If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you own! Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and be my follower."

Sounds easy, but we all know it isn't. It's hard to give up pursuit of a great, comfortable life for ourselves in order to do God's difficult kingdom-building work. It's hard to put our dreams on hold in order to serve others. It's hard to give up something we want so that others can have the things they need. It's hard to put our own safety at risk to fight for the rights of others, like the Germans in WWII or the civil rights workers in the 60s.

But Jesus makes it clear that while there is great reward in store for those of us who cling to his message of hope and follow him, there are also great costs. And we cannot be all-in for the

gospel without accepting the cost of discipleship along with the promise of reward and the hope of redemption.

When life is overwhelming like it is right now, it would be so easy to retreat into the safety and comfort of our own lives and cling to our faith for strength, assurance, and hope. Because those are things that God has promised us through Jesus Christ. And they are good things, important things.

But we have been given a greater responsibility than to simply keep faith bundled up for ourselves. Today so many people are suffering. So many people are feeling hopeless and abandoned. Refugees, immigrants, women, children, and people of color are much more likely to experience poverty, injustice and inequality because they are disenfranchised and lack power and the resources needed to fight broken systems.

And here we sit, with the secrets to life and death in the palms of our hands, safely wrapped up in our mostly comfortable lives, hoping for change and waiting for things to get better, on their own, without our work or input.

But we can learn something from Jesus' words about carrying our cross, and we can learn something from those who have sacrificed themselves throughout history to bring good news to others, who have laid down their own lives to make the lives of others better. We can learn that the responsibility for building God's kingdom, for ushering in justice for all, lies with us.

Today, Jesus is asking all of his disciples, us included, to lay down our lives for him. To understand what that means, we can look to Matthew 25 where Jesus said very plainly that whatever we do to care for the least of these we do directly to Jesus, and likewise whatever we withhold from the least of these we withhold directly from Jesus.

Discipleship is more than just professing a belief in Jesus Christ or a willingness to love God. Discipleship is loving others the way that God loves them, tangibly, by serving them, standing with them in times of crisis, and sharing with them whatever we have, no matter how small our own share might be.

I challenge you to spend some quiet time with God this week, and consider not just the amazing rewards God has promised those who follow him, but also the cost of discipleship. And then be assured that with the expectations to lay down our lives, comes the courage and strength to do it. As we continue on our Lenten journey, we ask the Spirit to reveal to us ways that we can take up our cross and follow Jesus by serving the least, the last, and the lost, because that's what Jesus did, and that's what Jesus expects of us.

Amen.