Invitation to the Table

Richard Rohr says, "We love any religion that asks us to change other people. We avoid any religion that keeps telling *us* to change." Does he speak for you?

He develops his point: We operate with the assumption that giving people new ideas changes them. It doesn't. Believing ideas is, in fact, a way of *not* having to change in any significant way, especially if you can argue about them. Ideas become defenses.

We burned people at the stake for not having the right words, but never to my knowledge for failing to love or forgive or care for the poor. Religion has had a love affair with being right—having the right words and the right ideas, whereas Jesus loved people, who are always imperfect.[1]

We come to this table in gratitude for that. Let us come prayerfully seeking, not to become better insulated from deep personal change, but for courage to expose ourselves increasingly to the cries of those Christ wants to reach.

Our Communion Hymn is #413, "Take Our Bread."

[1] *Adapted from* **How Men Change: A Thin Time**

Pastoral Prayer

Powerful God, our refuge and our strength, this week, on 9/11, our nation remembered the bravery and the sacrifice of those who saved lives as firefighters, rescue crews, or people aboard United 93. Our world changed that day, 23 years ago. We've seen how easily buildings can fall and how quickly lives can end, and we're reminded that you are our only true security.

As we endure the memory of this attack and the changes it made in our lives, grant us your compassion to help each other and the vision and courage to confront the abuse of power and dismantling the systems that allow for and encourage that abuse. Give us your hope as we face an uncertain future. Give us your peace.

Guide the choices of our national and world leaders. Give them wisdom and discernment not only as they work to resolve the lasting effects of the 9/11 attacks but also as they try to alleviate terror of every kind—from genocide to hunger, from drought to bombings.

And in this election year, grant us discernment to make choices that lead to peace and justice for all your people.

Among our own, we lift our prayers for healing for Kelly and Dennis and Carole and Bud—and their families. You know the needs that are too personal and private to share.

Touch us, melt us, mold us, and use us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way

MARK 8: 34-38 (NRSVUE) ***He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*** ***35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*** ***36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?*** ***37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."***

The Word of God for the people of God!

The movie title, "A Few Good Men," is taken from a Marine Corps recruiting TV commercial in the 1970s. In the movie, Marine private William Santiago dies after being severely beaten in a hazing incident. Two Marines, Lance Corporal Harold Dawson and private Landon Downey, are charged with his murder.

Two JAG officers, LtJG Danniel Kaffee, played by Tom Cruise and LCDR Joanne Galloway, played by Demi Moore, are assigned to the defense. Galloway suspects the base commander, Colonel Nathan Jessep, Jack Nicholson's best performance IMO), issued a "Code Red" order that inadvertently led to Santiago's death.

You may recall the iconic courtroom scene when Kaffee has Jessep on the witness stand and is pushing. "I want the truth!" he bellows. And Jessep bellows back: "You can't handle the truth!"

Truth is, as it turns out,: Jessep did order the "code red." He rationalized it as an intense level of "training" for Marines whose performance is "substandard." Truth is: it's a brutal form of hazing intended to motivate by intimidation and fear. The rationalization is that substandard performance comes from laziness and malingering—an attitude that can be turned around with enough punishment.

Pressured by Kaffee, Jessep admits he issued the "code red," and is arrested on the witness stand. Dawson and Downey are cleared of murder charges but found guilty of "conduct unbecoming" and are dishonorably discharged. Dawson doesn't understand what they did wrong—"We were following orders," he cries; but Downey says, "But we failed to defend those too weak to fight for themselves."

Sometimes I'm asked why I went to Marine OCS, but served as an enlisted man. Partly because a serious injury kept me from graduating. But I could have repeated the program, and since I already had done everything, I knew I could do it.

But while I was recuperating from the injury I was assigned to temporary duty, and I saw that same callous kind of disregard for human vulnerability.

Officially, "code red" is outlawed by the UCMJ. But officially, the speed limit on I-40 is 75. I never saw anything like "code red;" but there was this kind of total disdain for human vulnerability; the unpardonable sin was to be weak. I could not, in good conscience, be a part of that kind of leadership. So, I took my pfc

stripe and finished as an enlisted man.

Ironically, that same kind of harsh discipline is indispensable in combat. But you simply can't beat weakness out of a person. You can provide guidance and encouragement and resources to strengthen a person. And while cowardice is a liability in combat, it is not a character defect; some people are simply paralyzed by fear. But few human cultures ever have been built on empathy and compassion.

The more common outlook is "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." There is a cultural bias against vulnerability, be it poverty, weakness, the differently abled, sexuality other than heterosexual or any other expression of vulnerability.

Today's text may seem to suggest that Jesus felt that way: ***"If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."***

I was disappointed when one of the resources I use to prepare sermons said, "Some of us are good leaders, some are good followers, some will follow as long as following isn't too demanding, and some just get in the way." The implication is that if you're not a good leader or a good follower, you're somehow an inferior Christian.

"Lead, follow, or get out of the way." I don't think that's what Jesus meant.

Remember, Mark's was the first gospel. Some of his readers would have been alive when Jesus was crucified, the oldest may even have known about it. The youngest would be in their late thirties. They were Gentiles. As Christianity spread, the greatest challenge was to overcome what was, to a Greco-Roman audience the oxymoronic idea of a dead savior; or, even more oxymoronic, a crucified savior. For the Romans, crucifixion was the empire's ultimate humiliation for losers.

And yet, here is Mark, addressing a Gentile church about a crucified savior *and adding* that disciples must also take up a cross. By Mark's time Christians had endured Nero's persecutions, Jewish zealots had rebelled against Rome, the Roman army had crushed the rebellion and destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. The Romans crucified many of the revolutionists, so Mark's readers didn't have to wonder what Jesus meant, because it was a reality of their own lives.[2]

But the cross was not Jesus' goal, nor was it what disciples set out to accomplish. The cross is any risk one takes when one sets out to follow Jesus.

In Jesus, the Word became flesh, so that, in *his* life and teachings, we see what it looks like for *us* to express God in *our* lives (and I'm grateful to Mark Sandlin, a Presbyterian colleague, for this language.) For me, "expressing God" is a whole new understanding of faith—a whole new way of *defining* faith: not by what we believe, but by how we express what we believe—by the way we live and experience life—by how we treat others—particularly the vulnerable and suffering. And

[2] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 146). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

if we do it like Jesus did—if we truly follow him—God will be expressed as love, not as executioner.

As Sandlin points out, the key to expressing the love of God is confronting the abuse of power and dismantling the systems that allow for and encourage that abuse. Just be aware: doing so cost Jesus his life and expressed how far love will go for justice. It also expressed how far the Powers that Be will go to stop it.

Let me repeat my understanding of what Jesus meant when he said, "take up your cross." The cross is any risk one takes when one sets out to follow Jesus.

And there are no good followers or bad followers or mediocre followers. You're either following or you're not. You're either taking up a cross or you're not.

But see, here's the thing: while the cross is a risk you take in following Jesus, the cross Jesus asks you to take up is related directly to who you are and what you are able to offer. There is no established standard for cross-bearing.

Remember the post-resurrection story in the last chapter of John? Peter had denied Jesus three times. After the crucifixion, he went back to his old job of fishing. After a particularly unproductive night, he and his partners were coming in, when a man on the shore said, "Throw your nets on that side of the boat."

Peter rolled his eyes, but did what the man said, and the catch was so large the nets were breaking, and the boat was sinking, and Peter recognized the Lord.

Jesus had prepared breakfast; and after they ate, he asked Peter, "Do you love me most of all?" (John uses the word, agapao). Peter ducked his head and said, "I like you." (and the word is phileo) Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" (agapao) Peter said, "I like you." Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." Finally, Jesus asked, "Do you like me?" That upset Peter. He said, "Lord, you already know that's all I've got." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Peter could not be Sgt. Rock, Marine Corps hero. But Jesus accepted what Peter was able to give. Turns out, Peter had more to give than he thought he did.

Taking up a cross is not about separating heroes from cowards. There are no cowards. Through no fault of their own, some people simply are paralyzed by fear. Not everyone can be pushed into the hero mold; but everyone has something of value with which to feed Jesus' sheep. And there's always a risk. The risk of failure; the risk of being rejected or ridiculed or misunderstood. In some settings, one's very life may be at risk. But no one is asked to give more than they have.

"Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way" may be an indispensable attitude for a Marine Corp unit in combat; but, in taking up one's cross, no effort is too small in the hands of the one who took five loaves and two fish and fed 5,000.