

In the name of God, Creator, Incarnate, and Renewing Spirit.

Why can't love be painless?

In today's Gospel, we see an interaction between Jesus and his disciple Peter that seems to demand that question. This interaction happens just after Jesus has asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter has replied, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus has walked and talked with his disciples throughout Galilee; they have eaten together, taken rest and refreshment in people's homes, including Peter's; Jesus has been friend, teacher, and healer; he has fed them in the desert, along with thousands of others, when there didn't seem to be enough food for even a few of them. He has given them such hope; and then Jesus comes along and says this: He must suffer, be rejected by every respected segment of Jewish society, and eventually killed. Mark's Gospel notes that Jesus says this "quite openly"; some translations say, "quite plainly"; in other words, there was no mistaking what Jesus meant, no room for misinterpretation. Jesus will suffer, be rejected, and killed. And Peter responds to these awful words as someone who doesn't want to

lose his friend, teacher and healer. Peter tells Jesus, this isn't how things work; this isn't what your ministry is about. Jesus has given them comfort and compassion; he has fed their spirit as their teacher; he has healed their loved ones. This, surely, is the reality of God's love, Peter is saying; not rejection, suffering and death.

Jesus knows that his radical good news that welcomes the outcast, frees the oppressed, and lifts up the poor will be met with hostility as it threatens those in power. But Jesus is called to embody God's love, and God's love always reaches out beyond humankind's definitions of welcome, of freedom, and of uplift. God's love does not cling to the temporary; God's love reaches to the eternal. God's love reaches beyond healing, comforting and feeding. God's love takes in the totality of human experience, the sweet and the bitter, in order to transform it; God's love embraces suffering and death so they can be overcome and defeated. Peter, understandably, would rather such pain be avoided. He doesn't want to lose his friend or see him suffer. Peter wants God's love to pour out upon him the sweet, not the bitter cup; but the fullness of God's love contains both, just as the human experience does. And Jesus, fully human and fully God, embodies God's love; and so Jesus the Christ must reach out and embrace the

bitterness that comes with loving the whole of humanity. That means Jesus must embrace suffering, rejection, and that most human of conditions, death.

Loving the way that God loves is not painless. In that beautiful hymn written in the letter to the Phillipians, Paul reminds us that God lost God's self in order to become a fully alive human, filled with the power of the divine. Jesus the Christ was willing to lose his life to embody God's love; and Jesus tells us that we must follow him, and love the way God loves losing our selves in order to become fully alive humans filled with the power of the divine. Like Peter, we often want to hold on to whatever good we can manage to experience here and now, rather than freeing it so that it can be transformed into something even more glorious and more lasting. We want to hold on to what good we find in ourselves, what good we find in our daily lives; and Jesus calls us to let go, so that we and our lives can be transformed by God into something beyond even what we can imagine. And that letting go; that denying our desire to hang on to what we have in our grasp so that we can move forward into a life that has more depth, more spirit, and yes, more love; that letting go is painful. It often encompasses suffering; it can even bring upon us rejection; and because

we are mortal, letting go will always confront the reality and reckoning of death. But letting go, losing what we, by our own power, can make of our lives, frees us to be engulfed by God's transforming love. And as positive as that sounds, it still hurts; Jesus, fully human, understands this. Jesus, fully divine, embodies the faith that bearing this pain is part of being the Christ, just as the pain of losing our self is part of our being transformed into Christ-likeness.

After the interaction in today's Gospel, Jesus will take Peter with him up a mountain. There, with James and John, Peter will see what it will really mean for Jesus to lose his life; there, Jesus is transfigured into the divinity which flesh can only temporarily contain. Peter will be flabbergasted; Peter will not understand what he sees any more than he probably understood the rebuke of Jesus, telling him to stop seeing only the temporary and look to the eternal. But Peter will be given a vision of what it means to allow the power of God to transform human life and human suffering into glorious, eternal life.

What Jesus tells Peter in today's Gospel is a hard lesson for him; it is a hard lesson for us. But at some point in our lives we all face the pain of

loss; and if we wish to fully follow Jesus, we must be like him and willingly lose the parts of ourselves that keep us from full union with God: we must willingly lose our ego, our fearfulness, our desire for easy answers so that we can be clothed in the eternal, filled with the power of God, and be fully renewed as God's creation. Those losses are painful. Following Jesus is not easy; it is demanding, it is challenging, it is the cross. But if we allow God's grace to bear the burden of our struggle, that struggle is transformative and liberating and creates us fully alive and filled with the power of God.

All we can do is keep walking in the Way that Jesus showed us.

Sometimes we will be on that glorious mountaintop; sometimes we will want to yell at God for the pain we find ourselves going through. But if we keep focused on God, and not look to lesser things to numb us or distract us from the struggle, we will find ourselves engulfed in life, made new, and healed in God's all-encompassing love.

God's love is not painless; God's love opens its arms wide upon the cross to embrace the whole of the human condition. Thanks be to God.