

Last week, in the Heights, in Little Rock, construction was being done on the sidewalk outside Kroger. It did not strike me as odd. This is a busy corner, with lots of foot traffic. The thought of widening that part of the sidewalk did not seem strange. However I was not prepared for what I saw Tuesday evening when I was driving to the grocery store. There, on that corner, in the newly-widened sidewalk, is a huge bronze statue of a fat bunny rabbit. It is really big, out of proportion with everything around it and it does not make sense: Why a bunny rabbit statue? Why here? What is its significance? Who commissioned it? Mind you that I have not yet ventured forth to read any possible dedicatory plaque accompanying this statue. I am just floored by the existence of a bunny rabbit statue at this prominent intersection.

Our gospel lesson today: the one about picking up one's cross and following Jesus felt this week similar to this bunny rabbit in the middle of the Heights: a teaching so large and strange that it cannot be ignored.

These past few weeks have been tough in our country, don't you think? The terrible events in Charlottesville have opened the necessary conversation about racism and white supremacy. A good and hard thing. We have seen the underbelly of violence, we have to deal with it. Then this flood happens in Texas and Louisiana and we have to wonder, not only about how to care for those folks but also about possible environmental shifts. Then again we see that our country is divided about what is happening in our environment. Let's also mention weapons testing Korea.

And today, seeking solace, we come to church and there is this giant rabbit of a gospel reading

in front of us: what are we supposed to do with that? Is Jesus asking the impossible, telling us to pick up our cross and follow him? Picking up the cross in Jesus' day involved not only the physical strain of carrying the wood to the place of one's own execution for political crimes, but it also meant torture, revilement and persecution along the way. Is Jesus really asking that of us? How can it be true that the same Jesus who is our comfort and hope is also the one making an impossible demand?

I thought that too until I remember that when I read the gospels and it feels as though Jesus is making a demand, it usually is a time that Jesus is actually being descriptive rather than prescriptive. Jesus is showing us how life works, not giving an ultimatum concerning his love. Here he is saying to us: the way to get the kind of life that I am offering to you is not the way of power. It is not the way of you making your own plans. It is not the way of you deciding the

agenda. If you do set the agenda, says Jesus, if you do try to save your life, it will slip through your fingers, but if you let me set the agenda, if you follow me to the place where the way up is first the way down, where you give up your ego and strength, your best ideas and agendas. If instead you follow the path I have been showing you, then you will truly have life.

When we look for the path that Jesus is showing us, we don't have to look any further than the Epistle. What if we loved that way on an individual and on a communal level: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

To live this way is to have to lay down our lives. I don't know about you, but outdoing one another in showing honor would reset the tone for a lot of our social ills of the day. So would loving one another with mutual affection. So would rejoice in hope.

It seems to me that Jesus is asking us to be our very best selves, our selves that let go of our survival fears and step out into a way of behaving that embraces these characteristics. Indeed how would life on earth be different if both our private and our public lives were governed by these directives. What would happen to our world if these were the behaviors adopted in public life, in business life, in the medical field, in the laws that got made and the social programs designed. What would happen if this way of behaving invaded our culture, our world?

What would happen is what we pray in the Lord's prayer: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done; ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. On earth as it is in heaven. Whoever will lose their life will save it, whoever will save their life will lose it.

I heartily believe that we are to embrace the gospel with all of ourselves: with our career selves, our spiritual selves, our creative selves, our family selves, our social selves, our sexual selves, our emotional selves, our economic selves, our political selves. This is the living sacrifice we heard about last week. We present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, we lose our lives...not just for the heck of it, but for the sake of the gospel.

It will cost us. It will cost us our pride. We will have to get ready to get uncomfortable with ideas and challenges that we don't want on our plates. It will cost us our loyalties: we may have

to cooperate with those with whom we disagree. It will cost us our agendas: we may not be able to run so fast and jump so high after our own security and ego fulfillment.

It doesn't matter. Not one bit. What matters is that we will be disciples of our beloved Jesus. Justice and mercy will happen because of us. The kingdom will come because of us. And, by the way, as a result, when we look at our lives we will say: oh, life, there you are. You have found me.