Pigeons. Have you ever seen how those incessant birds in parks and plazas head in one direction for a time, and then turn and go another way, and then another like they're always fall-down drunk? There's a reason for that. As long as pigeons are in motion, they can't see their surroundings clearly. So, they frequently stop, pivot andcock their heads as if to take bearings, and then they're off again. Canadian bird scholar B.J. Frost says that the momentary stillness of their heads allows pigeons to become aware of movement around them, while the motion of their bobbing heads enables them to detect depth and distance.¹

Pigeon-walking and head-bobbing helps these creatures get their bearings. Best we can tell, though, birds have no lofty ambitions. They use their faculties for survival: to find food and to fend off enemies. Humans, on the other hand, are strategic. We have a sense of the future and we desire to be part of something enduring. We find meaning in joining movements we think are going somewhere. But how do we keep our bearings, so we don’t get lost?

A disciple is someone who follows a master. In our text today from Matthew’s Gospel, the disciple Peter has just confessed that his master is the messiah of God, the one God would use to redeem Israel. Jesus praises Peter for his insight, albeit crediting God for giving it to him more than Peter himself for having it. And yet, Peter—whether him personally or the faith he confessed in Jesus being the Son of God—is declared to be the Rock on which the church will be built.

Peter is in that moment perfectly aligned with Jesus. But no sooner is that blessing given than Peter loses his bearings and Jesus needs to get him back in line.

This is true for all of us who follow Jesus as his disciples. We love associating ourselves with Jesus and his mission to save the

world. We want to be on his team. We walk the aisle and sing, *I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.* We are baptized in his name, drowning our self-centeredness and re-centering ourselves in and around him. But we lose our bearings so easily.

Look how this happened with Peter. Jesus starts to tell Peter and the other disciples what it means for him to be the messiah. He must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of religious leaders there, be crucified ... and on the third day rise from the dead. I’m sure by the time Matthew got around to writing this half a century later it was easier to remember that Jesus added that part about rising from the dead. At the time, though, he and the others heard nothing but the part about suffering and dying.

None of us wants that part. We want victory without struggle. We want light without the darkness. We want the world fixed without the sacrifices that go into fixing it.

We’ve just finished two weeks of political conventions that laid out plans for “saving the soul of America.” Not that politicians are ever given to overstatement, don’t you know?! Now, you probably resonate more with one party than the other. Most do. I won’t debate you here about that, no matter how strongly I feel personally. I must warn you, however, about not losing your bearings as a disciple of Jesus in your political partisanship.

It’s easy to confess Jesus as Lord until it calls on you to question every other loyalty. Jesus’ words to Peter and the disciples—that is, to us—amount to this: curb your enthusiasm for personal glory and for stitching your faith to a flag. There are two key bearings you need to get right if you will be in proper alignment as a disciple: behind Christ and under your cross.

Getting behind Christ is our first and ongoing duty. Notice again this encounter between Jesus and Peter. Jesus asks the disciples, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter answers correctly, saying, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* He gets the doctrine right but not the discipleship.

When Jesus starts to talk about suffering and dying, Peter objects. *Mercy, me,* he says. *Lord, have mercy,* no, not ever, is what
he means. And Jesus hears him speaking with the voice of Satan rather than the voice of God. God revealed to Peter the true identity of Jesus, but then Peter tries to take over as his campaign manager. He goes from being an ally to an adversary. The word Satan means adversary. Jesus has heard this tune before and knows it isn’t the song of the Savior.

When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, the essence of all three temptations was the same: You deserve not to suffer. Get behind ME and I will give you the world. Jesus rejected that then and he hears in Peter’s words a repeat of the same temptation. So, he says to Peter, Get behind me, Satan.

The proper place for Satan and true disciples is the same: behind Jesus. Jesus tells us to get behind him, not to get out ahead of him. Disciples follow; they don’t lead. And followers of Jesus do not try to direct him or coopt him to follow their agenda.

For Jesus to be the Christ means he will save the world by going through, not around, suffering. He will take up his cross, be true to God’s loving solidarity with the suffering and neglected and of the world. He will win by losing.

This is where we can find God at any time. God is with us all and for us all in the pain and loss and struggle of life. As Richard Rohr says: There is no nonstop flight to salvation. You can’t skip over the suffering and dying.

Which is why Jesus then turns to the disciples and tells them that is true for them as well. We are to get behind him, and we are to get under our own cross. You see, some people seem to think that since Jesus died for the church, the church doesn’t have to die to itself. We can have all the power and glory associated with his resurrection without following the same path of self-denial he followed. But that isn’t how it works.

Jen Hatmaker is a powerful voice for us in our day. Her appeal has been mostly to Christian women, but her experience encompasses all of us. She’s been going through some hard, personal

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2https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/8058RBA5E52BB3052540EF23F30FEDED/164215EB34D30CF66E6039C17E42EE19
family struggles of late and this week she posted this: *Quite a while ago, I lost my tolerance for Christianese. The platitudes, the trite phrases, the simplistic way of viewing life and loss and complexity. I left that behind and chose a wider, less formulaic faith that made actual sense in the real world.*

*So please trust me when I tell you that Jesus is real in suffering. Not in a "let go and let God" way. Ugh. Because what does "let go" even mean pragmatically in a lived experience of loss and grief? I hate that [stuff]. Everybody stop saying stuff like that.*

*No, I mean in the actual darkest, pitch black night of the soul, there is a comfort in the weird, miraculous proximity of Jesus who loves us. He doesn’t even suggest "letting go and letting God" or give any sense of hustling through suffering.*

*We each of us have a cross to bear in our lifelong calling to follow Jesus. I don’t know what the nature of your cross will be, but the crux of it will be the choice between self-sacrificing love and self-serving power. You will either follow the path of the suffering Savior or of some self-styled Sovereign. One path will soften your heart and the other will harden it.*

The shooting of Jacob Blake seven times in the back by a white police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin already had me reeling again. He was unarmed, but now they are doing what they always do—trying to justify the shooting of a Black man by saying he had a weapon. Which was a knife on the floor of his car! But then when a 17-year-old white boy showed up with an AR-15 and killed two protestors, the police watched him walk away and cross the state line before being apprehended. I am beside myself as a Christian. If you want homework on what Jesus is saying to Peter, you can use this as a test case. Are you more passionate about protecting property or people? Do you care more about law and order or about justice? Are your sympathies directed toward defending the powerful in their use of deadly force or the powerless who are continually hunted down and killed?

In his new book, *Scandalous Witness*, Lee Camp talks about

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3 Facebook post, August 22, 2020.
how Christianity should bear witness to an alternative use of power that brings peace not more power.

He cites the historical marker in Nashville, Tennessee that shows the tragedy of how people who called themselves Christians ended up reversing the biblical vision of beating swords into plowshares. The marker reads: *Site of a farm implement factory operated by Messrs. Sharp and Hamilton, previous to the War Between the States. With the outbreak of hostilities they reversed the Biblical injunction and produced swords of excellent quality for the Confederacy. With the coming of the Federal Army, the making of swords was discontinued.*

Our partisan loyalties can lead not merely to ignoring the call of the gospel but inverting it and perverting it. There is only one way to transform the world for good and for good, and it’s by winning with love. The kind of love that refuses to play the self-justifying power game. The kind of love that gets behind the King of Love and carries its cross rather than nailing others to it.

It’s always hard to keep our bearings behind Christ and under our cross. But there’s no other faithful place to be. Amen.

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