

When *The Passion of the Christ* first came out in theaters, an op-ed piece appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* by David Kuo that said: “The biggest problem I have with *The Passion of the Christ* isn’t the violence. It is with the protagonist. The guy on the screen is nothing like that tunic-wearing, lamb-carrying, two-dimensional, felt-faced Jesus from Sunday school. That Jesus was easy. He could be molded and crafted like Play-Doh into anything I—or anyone else—wanted from him” (*Gimme That New-Time Religion—a Play-Doh Jesus*, by David Kuo; *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2004).

Isn’t that what many of us do with Jesus? Yet following the real Jesus—not a personal, moldable version—requires a lifestyle of self-denial and cross carrying. It can’t be done at a distance. And it does not guarantee convenience or comfort. In fact, if we’re following in the Jesus way, chances are we’re going to be very uncomfortable, because the Jesus who shouldered his cross isn’t moldable or pliable—maybe not even very huggable. Instead, he’s determined. He knows who he is and why he’s doing what he’s doing. If we are going to follow Jesus, we have to be right in the thick of things, not at arm’s length, but close to the fire where everyone can see exactly who we are.

Wendy Murray Zoba wrote about an experience she had with her sons in the wake of the 1999 Columbine school-shooting tragedy. Her seventeen-year-old son had just come home from a youth group gathering and said, “When I die, I want you to play the Supertones’ ‘Heaven’ at my memorial service.” Wendy says that her heart skipped a few beats before she agreed. She described her thoughts this way: “My son and I brought different assumptions to that moment. My assumption was: Parents are not supposed to bury their children. His assumption was: To serve the Lord means you think about your memorial service. This was definitely a post-Columbine conversation. (*Christianity Today*, December 6, 1999, Vol. 43, No. 14; page 70)

Wendy’s two sons had been reading the book *Jesus Freaks* by the Christian rock group dcTalk in collaboration with The Voice of the Martyrs. *Jesus*

*Freaks* is a book written for teenagers that highlights martyrdoms of people all over the world, from Stephen, the first martyr to Cassie Bernall, one of the students who died in the Columbine shooting. The testimony of a young Russian named Ivan, who in 1970 served in the Soviet military at the age of eighteen, particularly struck Wendy's son, Jon. In an attempt to make him renounce his Christianity, Ivan was forced to stand in subzero temperatures wearing his summer uniform for twelve nights. Yet, this was Ivan's response: "A lark threatened with death for singing would still continue to sing. She cannot renounce her nature. Neither can we Christians."

It is probably safe to say that the majority of us who are hearing this story today do not feel in danger of being tortured for our beliefs. But if there is no physical danger, then why is it so hard for us to follow Jesus? Why do we follow him at such a distance like Peter did on the night Jesus was arrested? Why do we lurk anonymously in the shadows, away from the light of the fire?

I believe the answer is deceptively simple. It is risky business to follow Jesus. However, if we aren't in danger of being killed for our belief, that safety provides us with a false sense of security, a feeling that following in the Jesus way is really not that difficult. In addition to our sense of security, we have recreated the Jesus we have chosen to follow, abandoning the determined Messiah who proclaimed himself to be "*the way, the truth, and the life*" (John 14:6). Instead, we have co-opted him for our own purposes—my way, my truth, my life. We mold this pliable Jesus in order to validate our personal achievements and our personal views on political and social issues. Some of us would say "our" Jesus supports only faith-based charities and is against bloated government welfare programs. Others of us would say "our" Jesus is against war in every instance and favors gun control. "Our" Jesus might stand politically on the left or on the right; it all depends on who is doing the following. The sad truth is that many of us are not doing much following at all. We are merely bringing Jesus along on our own self-defined journeys.

Our false sense of security and our creation of a "Jesus in our own image" hinder us from recognizing the radical nature of the Jesus way. Jesus' words to

*“deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me”* become a faint echo heard only on Sundays and drowned out by the clamor of our lives the other six days of the week. The concept that Jesus may have received the Roman lashes for a reason that has absolutely nothing to do with success or appearance, is drowned out by the voices and images of our culture. The idea that he actually meant what he said about caring for the poor—that he was serious when he said that loving him requires that we love others—becomes a foreign thought. We easily forget Jesus’ words about *“gaining the whole world, and yet losing or forfeiting our very selves”* (Luke 9:25) and his teaching that *“it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 19:23). We follow, but at a distance, never getting close enough to the fire to feel its heat, never leaving the shadows.

Regardless of what we have made it, the Jesus way is truly risky business. As Wendy Murray Zoba discovered in talking to her sons, our youth likely understand the extreme nature of following Jesus better than we do. They realize that in a culture inundated by extremes—extreme sports, extreme makeovers, extreme media—Christians need to be as potent as the culture in which we find ourselves, and that can’t be done at a distance. It requires getting close enough to the fire to feel the intensity of its heat. In the words of dcTalk, it’s about not caring whether others label us Jesus freaks, *“cause there ain’t no disguising the truth”* (“Elegy for a Jesus Freak,” *Christianity Today*).

Following Jesus is not about co-opting him for our own purposes. It’s about being open to the radical nature of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. As David Kuo wrote in *The Los Angeles Times*: *“The Passion of the Christ* is so hard because it presents Jesus as we’ve never seen him and reveals a truth: Come face to face with Jesus in any way and prepare to squirm, or maybe even to hate him. He arouses that kind of passion which should make all of us who use his name for any reason be very, very careful.”

Following in the Jesus way is about coming face to face with Jesus, following as he leads, risking rejection from people who disagree. It requires that we reach out in love to people who aren’t always the easiest to love, or to those

whom others have deemed unworthy of our love. It's about opening our hearts to the possibility of pain and hurt when others refuse to love us in return. Following means moving out of the shadows and into the light of the fire, close enough to feel its heat, maybe close enough to get burned. The Jesus way is risky because it's all about relationships—our relationship with God and our relationships with others on God's behalf. Carrying our cross alongside Jesus requires that we make ourselves vulnerable in order that Christ might be seen through us, and that Christ's love might be evidenced in our lives. It requires that we solidly stand against injustice and in solidarity with all who are oppressed in order that others can taste the justice and mercy of God.

In the 1995 movie *Now and Then*, four women who shared a life shaping summer as young girls reunite after twenty years. As they reminisce about that unforgettable summer, Demi Moore's character, Sam, reflects on her attempts to protect herself from pain, saying, "If you don't fall in love, you can't get hurt." Her friend Roberta (Rosie O'Donnell) replies, "Yeah, but it sure is lonely all by yourself." Continuing, Sam considers the idea that rather than shielding herself from hurt, she has insulated herself from fulfillment and joy. She finally declares, "I've been so afraid of the bad things that I've missed out on the good."

Our spiritual lives can be like Sam's experience. If we avoid the risky part of faith, if we follow Jesus at a distance playing it safe, we insulate ourselves from the power that God offers us when we immerse ourselves in the Jesus way. We may avoid the difficulty and challenge, but we will also miss the deep meaning and significance. Yet, when we determine to follow Jesus side by side, shouldering our cross as he shouldered his, the Spirit of Jesus permeates our entire being. His strength becomes our strength, his boldness becomes our boldness, his courage becomes our courage.

In 1986, Boston Red Sox pitcher Roger Clemens played in his first All-Star game. He hadn't hit in years because of the American League's designated hitter rule. So when he came up to bat in the second inning, he was very nervous. Clemens took a few practice swings and got into his stance. New

York Mets pitcher Dwight Gooden, who had won the Cy Young award the previous year, wound up and threw a fastball that zoomed right by Clemens. With an embarrassed smile, Clemens stepped out of the batter's box, turned to catcher Gary Carter, and asked, "Is that what my pitches look like?" Carter replied, "You bet!" Clemens returned to the batter's box, only to be unceremoniously struck out by Gooden. He went on, however, to pitch three perfect innings and to be named the game's Most Valuable Player.

Roger Clemens got a helpful reminder of how overpowering a good fastball is, and he pitched with far greater confidence and boldness from then on. If we never take the risk to move closer to where the action is and if we never risk abandoning the Jesus we have created in our image in favor of the real thing, we will never fully understand the depth of strength, courage, and boldness that is available to us in our walk of faith. We will never understand how overpowering self-denial and cross carrying really are.

Several years ago, I came across a worship resource called "The Handbook for Multi-Sensory Worship." It contains these words: *I choose to follow Christ's path. I won't give up, shut up, let up until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go until he comes, give until I drop, preach until I know, and work until he stops me. And when he comes for his own, he will have no problem recognizing me. I belong to him.*

Now that's following Jesus. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it*" (vv. 23&24). That kind of following requires us to move close to the fire. If we don't—if we keep our distance and remain in the shadows—we will never truly experience the power of Jesus in our lives, and we will never live in the abundant, freeing, confident way that Jesus promises.

In this season of Lent, how close do you suppose we can get to Jesus? Amen.