

With a little thought, most of us can remember being in some kind of relationship with someone who wants us to be a different person, or a relationship with someone we wish to be a different person. Not necessarily a romantic relationship; family and professional relationships are just as likely to have this dynamic. Maybe more likely, since if there's something about a potential romantic partner that we can't accept, we might find the wisdom and courage to stop looking at them as a potential romantic partner, as difficult as this may be, whereas we're always stuck with our family, and often stuck with our coworkers, too.

The dynamic between Jesus and Peter looks like this, even if it doesn't quite fall into any of those categories. Jesus referred to his disciples as his brothers, but before that, he called them, and they could have said "no." For all we know, there could have been dozens of people Jesus called who did say no. In any case, the ones who said yes and followed Jesus retained their agency — the disciples were free to leave Jesus, not held captive. Jesus doesn't force people to follow him. But Jesus also doesn't become who anyone else wants him to be. Not for his preeminent disciple, and certainly not for anyone else.

But let's be fair to Peter. Up until now, Jesus had not told his disciples the whole truth about his mission. He had not told them that he would be executed in the most agonizing and humiliating way. They'd seen him healing, teaching, and helping people in other ways. He was becoming popular, and the disciples must have enjoyed this. Many preachers say the disciples had been expecting Jesus to meet the popular expectation of a political and military messiah, who would lead a revolt kicking out the Romans and restoring the glory days of the Davidic monarchy. And maybe they did expect that, but for me it's enough to think they enjoyed feeling like some of their teacher's adoration, admiration, and prestige was reflecting on to them.

That's more than enough reason for Peter to reject Jesus when he suddenly told them that things were going to take a turn, "that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." Yes, he went on to say that he would rise again after three days, but they had no way of understanding that part. If they were even still listening after the first part.

And of course, apart from their own roles and reputations, the disciples simply loved Jesus, so they didn't want anything bad to happen to him. And Jesus loved them, and would not send them away. But if they wanted to stay with him, they would have to choose to continue following on a path that suddenly looked a lot less appealing. They would have to keep growing.

So here we are. People want what they want, but only get to choose from among certain options, and usually none of those options are perfect. Even Jesus, who is perfect, isn't who the disciples wanted him to be. He isn't who a lot of modern people want him to be, either. And that's a multifaceted phenomenon.

Part of the problem is that in recent years, the Church hasn't done enough to tell

people who Jesus is. Formation is critical, ongoing work, not merely preparation for baptism and confirmation, but also the natural consequence of those sacraments, just as Jesus continued teaching his disciples deeper truths about himself. Ignorance of spiritual truths is just as sad and dangerous as ignorance of truths about the material world. And then there are those who teach falsehoods about Jesus. Some of those falsehoods are superficially appealing but inevitably lead people away from Jesus, and others are so ugly that they send people running away from Jesus.

Now again, in fairness, Jesus is complicated. The four Gospels emphasize different aspects of his ministry and personality, and within each, we see different sides to him. People who want to portray Jesus in a certain way can often do so simply by pointing to a few passages and ignoring the rest. And there can be good reasons for doing that, especially if you need to correct a misapprehension, but one should always keep in mind the complexity we know, not to mention the profound otherness that lies hidden in the Godhead.

But God has chosen not only to reveal some of who God is to us, but also to cultivate ongoing relationships with us, both individually and collectively. This is expressed so beautifully in both the Old and New Testaments. Abram and Sarai's lives had been comfortable and prosperous, but they found themselves near the end of their lives without having any children. Not only had they desperately wanted children, but their culture had a strong conception that one lives on in one's children, one's line. To them, a life without children was a life that had amounted to nothing.

God not only appeared to them, but gave them hope, a vision, a promise, a covenant. And rather than desiring for God to be someone else, profoundly, they trusted God enough to allow God to make *them* someone else. And that is why Jews, Christians, and Muslims all revere them — not merely as ancestors, but as figures who exemplify the power of being in right relationship with God, despite their flaws. When God changes their names, God changes their role, their purpose, their destiny. Abraham and Sarah didn't know as much about God as their descendants would learn, but they knew enough to understand that what God would do for them would be far greater than anything they could do for themselves. Or even anything they could dream.

Lent is meant to be a time of growth, and growth is a gift from God. Now is an opportune time for all of us to ask not who we want God to be, but who God, in wisdom and love, wants us to be. The same God who loves us just the way we are loves us too much to want us to remain stagnant. Rather, God loves for us to grow into the best possible versions of ourselves, the greatness and grace God knows we can become. As with everyone else who has accepted God's call to relationship, God will continue closely with us on the path God has set out, if only we choose to follow. Now is a time for us to remember how richly God has blessed us, that we might renew the courage of our faith and choose to follow God just as God is, and just as God might turn out to be.