

The body arcs away (Matthew 16:21-28)

In Matthew 16, I see a particular classical ballet step.

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I am both a preacher and a ballet dancer. When I read a scripture text, I often imagine what classical ballet step might best embody a particular story, character, or phrase.

Throughout Matthew 16, I see *renverse*.

Renverse is a French term that means “to turn back or fall back.” The movement begins with one leg lifted straight forward, then carried from the hip in an arc to the side and back of the body, until the knee bends and the pointed foot pulls the body around. The arms work in harmony with the motion of the leg, but the head fights. The head is the last to follow the body, whipping around at the last second. The body is thrown off balance until the head lets go of its frontal focus to follow the turn backward in an effort to restore equilibrium.

The words of Jesus telling of his planned journey to Jerusalem—where trial, death and resurrection await him—throw the disciples off balance. The body of Christ arcs away from the disciples’ intended *telos*, and their minds hold on fiercely to their desired direction.

Peter resists Jesus’ movement fiercely. Peter embodies the sign of Jonah that Jesus mentions earlier in Matthew 16. Jesus even calls Peter the son of Jonah after his confession. Peter’s offense and rebuke is very Jonah-esque. Jonah’s journey, too, was

a *renverse*. Jonah's mind takes him to the sea, although he is called backward to Nineveh. Like Jonah, Peter must turn away from his human understanding of who God is and how God chooses to act in the world. Peter's mind will fight for quite some time, through abandonment and denial of Jesus, but the risen Christ will restore him to the body in the end.

But, for now, the only comfort Jesus offers the disciples is the paradox of losing their selves in the world and finding their selves in him. No earthly glory or powerful legacy of which to boast. We, too, will lose ourselves and have nothing in the world to show for the effort, just our souls.

Modern dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham has said of dancing:

You have to love dancing to stick to it. It gives you nothing back, no manuscripts to store away, no paintings to show on walls and maybe hang in museums, no poems to be printed and sold, nothing but that single fleeting moment when you feel alive. It is not for unsteady souls.

Jesus speaks of how his redemptive journey will save our souls, as unsteady as they may be. Gaining him, and not the world, is how to hold onto what matters most. Jesus loves us, and we trust in his steady soul and promise of new life.

The body of Christ turns, and we are called to follow.