

"Getting dropped" sounds painful, but, if you're a cyclist, the main damage, such as it is, is to your ego. In cycling, getting dropped has nothing to do with falling off one's bicycle, which has its own lingo such as: (kissing the tarmac, taking an endo, sanding the asphalt, doing a hand plant, etc.). No, getting dropped is when you are riding with other cyclists, but can't maintain the pace the group is pedaling. So, you fall behind. If you can't catch up, the gap widens and eventually, you are so far behind that you're either pedaling solo, or you've been overtaken by a slower group. In some cases, even the slower group is too fast, and you get dropped a second time!

Virtually every cyclist who rides with a group, whether a professional racer or weekend recreational rider, has been dropped at one time or another. Even the strongest riders have off days. Getting dropped is a humbling experience. So common is getting dropped that *Bicycling* magazine recently published interviews with riders across the spectrum -- professionals, amateurs, enthusiasts, recreationalists -- who talked about what they learned from being outdistanced by a group.

One of those interviewed was a lady named Kelly Krause, a 33-year-old publicist from Austin, Texas. She's been cycling regularly for only two years and was 100 pounds heavier when she started than she is now. She said, "[W]hen I first started, I got dropped -- a lot. I don't see it as a failure. I approach every ride as a learning experience. ... When ... I look up the road as the group rides away from me, I don't panic. I simply watch as other riders also pop off the back. Then I work my hardest to ... catch them. Every time, I make it a little farther. It's the tiny victories that keep me going."

Cedrick Grouse, a 31 year old visual effects artist and amateur racer from Orangeville, California, says he uses getting dropped as an opportunity to analyze what he was doing that led to being left behind. He mentally replays the moment

when he started slipping from the pack and figures out where he needs to push a little harder. Applying what he learned, he began to win some races. "Don't fear getting dropped," he says. "Learn from it."

In some Christian circles, the term "left behind" is reserved to describe the location of those not righteous enough to be taken into heaven during the second coming of Christ. We could say, perhaps, that they've been outdistanced by the faithful crowd and "dropped." But our gospel story for today suggests "getting dropped" in a positive sense. The scene is the Last Supper, where Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is soon to come. He talks about what loving him means going forward, and then adds, "I have said these things while I am still with you."

But just a few verses later he adds, "I am going away" In effect, Jesus tells the disciples that he is, in the cycling sense, "dropping" them, and they will be left behind to carry on the gospel proclamation without him. As *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary notes, "The governing theological and pastoral concern of John 14:1-31 is to prepare the community of Jesus' followers for "life in his absence." And, not coincidentally, this passage is for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, the Sunday before Ascension Day, when Jesus left the disciples behind in a very dramatic and memorable way, as he ascended into heaven before their very eyes.

Mind you, he didn't leave them *alone*, for, in this morning's passage, he also talks about the Holy Spirit coming to teach them what they need to know and to remind them of Jesus' words. In fact, as the NIB also points out, "In the context of Jesus' death, the verb 'to leave' takes on the meaning of a bequest." But, for the disciples, the ongoing endeavor of following Jesus would have a whole different feel without him physically present among them.

And isn't that where we who follow Jesus are today? While we've never known Jesus as a physical presence in our lives, we are called to "ride" in the wake of his time on earth, dropped and outdistanced, but still pedaling, left behind for life in his absence to be the witnesses of his reality, the bearers of his Spirit, and the practitioners of his teachings.

So, maybe we can learn something from the cyclists who have looked for the positive in being dropped, and even from lagging behind other Christians. Kelly Krause looks at the other riders who've been dropped, but are still ahead of her, and works her hardest to catch them. Even when she doesn't, she gets a little closer than the last time. And while there are certainly no perfect Christians, there certainly are followers of Jesus whose example of discipleship we can emulate, and from which we can learn.

Eunice Holz, a church member in Madison, Wisconsin, tells of asking her son, who was a university student, why he seldom studied at his apartment. He explained that if he really wanted to study, he went to one of the campus libraries. "When I see all those people reading and concentrating, it convinces me to get at it, too." Holz goes on to say that similarly, seeing the members of her church working on mission projects and tasks good for the church inspires her to do her part. She closes her article by addressing her fellow church members: "When I see any of you putting God and church ahead of personal wants, I'm reminded to look at myself to see if, indeed, God is first in my life. Your lives are my favorite sermons."

Cedrick Grouse uses getting dropped *as an opportunity to analyze what he was doing* that led him to being left behind. His words also apply to us when we notice how far we are from where and whom Jesus calls us to be. There's value and help in mentally replaying our failures to love one another, or to live holy lives. By

such scrutiny, we can see where we started slipping from the pack and figure out where we need to do things differently going forward.

Such analysis might include a recognition of where we started to toy with the temptation that eventually led us to sin -- and to the conclusion that we need to step away from the temptation at that stage and not wait until it is full-blown. Or, as another example, when we have blurted out something unloving, we might rerun the episode in our minds to see why we didn't adhere to our commitment to live as Christ's person and how we can do better next time. Such analysis can also lead us to see those we may need to apologize to.

None of this is to say we should obsess over, or wallow, in how far behind Jesus we are. In a book by French priest Michel Quoist, there is a prayer in which the author includes, not just the words of the person praying, but also what the author envisions as God's answer. In one prayer, the pray-er confesses to having fallen into sin and to now feeling ashamed and soiled. But then the voice of God comes:

Come, son, look up ...

Ask my pardon

And get up quickly

You see, it's not falling that is the worst.

But staying on the ground.

In our narrative this morning, Jesus tells his followers that he will be leaving behind *a heavenly encourager* with them. Granted, Jesus doesn't use that term. Some translations use "Comforter or Advocate." Encouragement is part of the Spirit's work. The Spirit will do the work of encouragement by "teach[ing] you everything, and remind[ing] you of all that I have said to you," Jesus said.

Few metaphors are perfect, and, although the idea of getting dropped while cycling does give us entry into our Gospel lesson for today, it doesn't cover

everything the passage says. One thing it misses is that *we who follow Jesus are not being left behind in every sense*. Jesus tells the disciples, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we" -- that is, the Father and the Son -- "will come to them and make our home with them." At the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus tells the disciples that he is leaving "to prepare a place for [them]," but, he's saying something much more. As commentator Richard Burrige notes, "Not only does Jesus prepare a place for us in God, but he also makes a place for God in us."

Yes, you might say that in our journey of faith Jesus has outdistanced us. He's returned to his Heavenly Father. But he has also, at the same time, made his home in us who struggle to keep up with him. And that struggle, as the cyclists I mentioned earlier remind us, can make us stronger followers of Christ and perhaps even help us narrow the distance somewhat. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.