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Our Cross to Bear

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“Well, I guess that’s just my cross to bear.” I wonder how many of you grew up hearing that phrase? I did. Not from my parents so much, but from both of my grandmothers, both of whom were devout Christians. They were shaped by a faith that suggested that any suffering one experienced was one’s cross to bear. That suffering – be it physical or emotional – had a personal, redemptive, quality to it. When one suffered, one was closer to Jesus. It was how both of them made meaning of their respective suffering.

So I want to respect that theology. But I really want to explore a completely different way of understanding Jesus’s hard words in today’s gospel, “whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus is slowly but surely making his way to Jerusalem, to what he knows will ultimately be his death. The crowd, by comparison, has been captivated by this charismatic man from Galilee who has been teaching and healing. He has stood up to people in powerful positions, he has re-shaped traditional understandings of their most sacred laws and customs. They see the outward and visible signs of his ministry and they’re so compelling. But they don’t yet understand that Jesus is more than a prophet or a gifted teacher and healer. They don’t yet understand that he is God’s beloved Son whose ministry on earth reveals something foundational about God’s kingdom – of God’s deepest desire for health and wholeness in all of creation. So in today’s gospel reading, we see that Jesus is not looking for hero – worship from those who follow him. And he certainly is not looking for people whose primary hope is that he will make life all “skittles and beer” for them. He wants his followers to see the Kingdom that he sees. He wants them to dare to do, in their limited way, what he himself is doing in his divine way.

And what he himself is doing, is heading to the cross that awaits him in Jerusalem. On this terrifying instrument of state-sponsored terror, he will take away the sting of death forever. He will bridge the chasm between fallen humanity and God, between the meaningless of death and the eternal reign of God that he is ushering in...so that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from God.

And so his followers – that is to say, we as well – are also to bear a cross. Now believe me, this is not a summons to literal crucifixion or martyrdom of any kind. But it is a summons to stand in the midst of the brokenness as we find it and bear Christ’s witness to it. It is a summons to stand in the midst of the brokenness as we find it and bear that burden in some way. Because when we do, we are doing as Christ himself did. As one of my favorite writers puts it, to carry the cross could mean to carry the ministry of Jesus forward by seeing kinship among those whom our corner of the world overlooks. It could mean favoring and regarding the marginalized, even when that action might lead to our own loss of privilege¹. To carry the cross may mean listening to those in our world whose cries for compassion and justice are routinely shushed. In other words, to bear the cross is not something we do to earn our own personal salvation – cause salvation is a done deal -- but rather to partner with Christ himself in revealing God’s kingdom in the here and now.

And it’s no small thing. Ask anyone who has ever taken an unpopular stand because their faith compelled them to do so. It’s easy to get side-tracked by the hyperbole of Jesus’s speech, but his message is unmistakable. Following Jesus, as Jesus invites us to do, does not make us wealthy or powerful or in the post-Christian world of ours, particularly popular for that matter. Quite the reverse. To carry the cross is to invite the contempt of those who find fulfillment in material

¹ Karoline Lewis, “Carrying the Cross,” August 28, 2016.

possessions and power. To carry the cross, is to invite disapproval by those whose approval we crave.

Discipleship is costly. We know that. And we also know something about sacrifice. I think of the parents in this church who sacrifice huge amounts of time and money on behalf of really fine activities for their kids – scouting, traveling sports teams, music lesson, and the like – in order to give their children a chance to build a base of skills and interests which will carry them into their futures. I think of the people in this church who sacrifice long hours and the better part of their energy at their jobs in order to provide for their families and for their families' future. I think of the people in this church who are now retired, but whose sacrificial hard work set their children on the road to bright futures. We sacrifice things of value -- time and energy and money -- because we believe in the value, in the importance of the outcomes, both present and future.

So today's gospel gets all up in our business. It asks us to look at the long arc of our lives and challenges us to place discipleship in the same sacrificial category that we place our careers and our families and their activities. And to look at the long arc of our lives not because we're worried about our eternal destiny – because God knows God has taken care of that already in the resurrection of his Son – but because the caliber and character of our Christian lives matter.² They matter supremely. And they matter not just in the future, but in the here and now. And because the abundant life and way of discipleship that Jesus both promises and announces also takes sacrifice -- not to earn God's grace but to live into the discipleship life that grace makes possible.

² David Lose, "The Cost of Discipleship," Sept. 2, 2013.