

This morning we contemplate not only the wonderful power of the cross of Christ, but also the power inherent in taking up our own crosses too. So we bring into the front of our minds the picture of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, calling his friends to take up our own crosses and to walk with him. In Jesus's time a cross didn't have any religious meaning. A cross was an instrument of torture and death, something the Roman government used to keep people in line.

To intimidate people, the officials would sometimes put the crosses alongside the roads that led to Jerusalem, each one with a body hanging from it. Jesus had been successful, and everywhere he went, at least in the Galilee, people wanted more. But resistance to him was also growing. Rumors about his being a rabble-rouser were intensifying, some said he was claiming an authority that belonged to God alone. For his own part, Jesus knew that he had to proceed to Jerusalem, to get away from what was safe and relatively secure, and to face even more resistance.

So Mark puts it plainly, "Jesus began to teach the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." It's understandable that they didn't want to hear that, so Peter pulls Jesus aside and says, "God forbid it, Lord. Why are you saying this? Have you taken leave of your senses? Things are good right now. We don't need to head into town, there's trouble there. You're

the Messiah, God's anointed, and suffering and death aren't part of the equation." It's almost as if Peter is saying, "If we can focus on a good strategic plan with clear objectives, and keep building on our success, we'll be fine." Peter was frightened, just as we are sometimes when loved ones talk about their deaths. I think Peter loved Jesus, and didn't want him to die, and of course, if Jesus was vulnerable to torture and death, then so were the rest of his band of followers. That's when Jesus turns and blasts him, saying, "Get behind me Satan!"--unmistakably harsh. Then he said what neither they nor we want to hear: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel will save it." Peter was merely the first to try to define Jesus, and by inference, what it means to follow Jesus, to take his name upon one's self--Christian. And for Jesus's part, he says it with a strength that tells us we've just hit something that's not negotiable.

What's clear today is that following Jesus isn't going to be the answer to all of our problems, and in fact, it might be the beginning of some problems we've never wanted. He's interested in something more than helping us feel happy and comfortable. He's saying that there are worse things than death--things like living in fear, never facing the places where our lives are caught, never quite getting around to giving ourselves to any cause bigger than our own. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "take up **my** cross," as if we're expected to imitate

him. He says, “take up **your** cross,” the one that’s already in your life waiting for you to pick up.

Some of you know the work of the novelist Gail Godwin. Her first work, I think, was *Father Melancholy’s Daughter*, written in first person by the adolescent daughter of an Episcopal priest. In the book the narrator’s dad preaches a sermon about the cross and says,

*Each of us has a place of particular pain. And we know that, when we’re in it, all we can do is say “this is not what I wanted, why can’t someone remove this cross from me?” But then we have to take it a step farther and say, but it’s mine, this particular agony, it’s where circumstances met with myself and made this cross. Accepting our cross doesn’t simply mean taking responsibility for what we are, that’s arrogance, God made us what we are, it means taking responsibility for what we are doing with what we are.*

So what is yours...your cross? You don’t have to go looking, nor do I. We just have to open our eyes. Once we see the pain and struggle and human need that surrounds us, we can pick it up and follow.

When I was 12 years old my parents sat me down to deliver some hard, but ultimately good, news. I was a very obese kid, and something needed to be done. They didn’t quote Jesus saying, “take up your cross” but they did point me in the direction of addressing a part of me that was eroding my life, and they paid for two summers of a very expensive camp for overweight kids that probably saved my life. A cross became the way to life, and importantly, brought me to New England for the first time.

Being a disciple, staying in Jesus’s company, means looking at our lives and figuring out what we’re afraid of, what we know is unjust, what we’re angry about, what we yearn for, what has just fallen across your path that you never planned on--that’s when we’ll see our cross. We musn’t walk around it for the cross isn’t so much an instrument of death, lined up against the Jerusalem Road, but a symbol of a way to live.

Think of what might happen if we picked up our crosses together...well, we could transform not only ourselves, but also the whole world.

#### NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The section in this sermon referring to the Roman practice of using crosses, and how they were not a religious symbol, is taken from James Carroll’s book, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*.
- The penultimate paragraph is taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Barbara K. Lundblad, a retired professor of preaching, at the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts (in 2012).