

**THE SECOND  
SUNDAY IN  
LENT**

**The Rev.  
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Mark 8:31-38 Lent 2B 2012  
Stephanie E. Parker

### Take up your Cross

The Rev. Daniel Berrigan once said, "If you are going to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood." Historically speaking, we all know that Christians who genuinely conform their lives to that of Jesus Christ don't fare too well.<sup>1</sup>

Centuries of Christian martyrs testify to that. And today Jesus is very clear with his disciples that to follow him means that they put themselves at great risk. But he is also very clear that unless those who would follow him take this risk, they have no place with him or his mission.

But, here is a challenge that those of us sitting here in these pews today must confront...the chances are that we will not called to sacrifice our lives for our belief that Jesus is the Christ. So, if this is true, how is it that we might "take up our cross and follow Jesus?"

I think one of our greatest challenges is put away the "wisdom" of current popular culture. Every day we are bombarded with messages that tell us that to feel anything but "good" is to have somehow failed in life.

These messages tell us that we can buy and drink, and prestige our way out of any chance that life might bring us pain. This twisted wisdom tells us that feeling sorrow over failed relationships, experiencing pain over losing a loved one, or to risk ourselves on something, which has no personal payoff, is foolish and unnecessary.

The messages are pervasive, how do we hold on to the truth that this type of wisdom is simply a lie? How are we, sitting in safety and comfort, called to take up our cross?

First we must realize what taking up our cross really means. Sadly, this powerful pronouncement has become a throw away phrase for putting up with things that we aren't really happy about. Jesus is not calling us to bear some small or even great burden without complaint. The cross of Christ is not about the amount of burdens we have in life. The cross of Christ is about great love. This cross is about unflinching obedience to God's call to be reconcilers in the world.

So taking up our cross means to love others as Jesus loves us and to show compassion for others as Jesus shows compassion. We all know that he didn't have to go looking for the cross. Jesus only had to share the love of God with those that established society and religion deemed unworthy and the cross found him.

But, I think, as I said at the beginning, our modern culture rails at risking ourselves in this way. We are more conditioned to think of self-protection. We have been sold the lie that we can avoid pain and suffering in our lives if we just isolate and insulate ourselves enough.

But we all know because experience has taught us, that life cannot be lived without pain. In fact, a life lived fully and with a great love and compassion for others and the plight of our world will be full of pain and suffering.

But, let's face it; if we do not open ourselves to the pain of loss and the possibility of being pierced by compassion, we will never know the full joy of the deep love which God has for all of us.

There are implications here of tremendous importance. Pain is an inevitable part of life; no matter how we try to live it or which way we attempt to go. Therefore, it is futile to try to escape pain altogether. There is no desire embedded any deeper in our make-up than the desire not to suffer: yet this becomes a tragic illusion if we elevate it into a life goal.<sup>2</sup>

There is pain involved in life no matter which way we turn; so the quicker we disabuse ourselves of the fantasy that we can somehow evade suffering, the better.

Because the irony is that if we refuse to put this illusion away, we will only bring greater and greater suffering into our lives and into our world because our very attempts to avoid suffering simply puts us on a collision course with new forms of it.

We see this truth played out graphically this morning when Jesus openly acknowledges to the disciples that his way of declaring God's love for all has gotten him into trouble with the powers that be. He tells them plainly that he is going to suffer many things at the hands of those who oppose him.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Logue

<sup>2</sup> John Claypool

But, Jesus firmly believes that something better will come out of this agony, that it will not all be in vain. Peter, however, promptly takes Jesus aside and contests his assertion.

While we are not told explicitly, I am guessing that Peter argued this point that suffering should be necessary. "There ought to be a way," Peter probably said, "to get the job done without pain. Surely someone like you should not have to undergo such an ordeal!" Jesus' response to these words is almost shockingly vehement. In the original Greek there is something like an element of horror in his reaction.

Jesus senses in Peter's words the deceptive power and temptation of Satan himself. He realizes that there is nothing more dangerous or more self-destructive than to suppose that there is a way to live without pain or sacrifice.

The person who harbors this illusion will finally come to disillusionment at never having found such a way. And worse still, he will involve himself in even greater suffering by his attempts to evade it.<sup>3</sup>

No matter how we live, we can expect to encounter some pain. Making choices that are for the greater good of all as opposed to just ourselves inevitably leads us into some challenging and painful situations.

I am reminded of a NY Times piece a couple of years ago about a Lt. Comdr William Kuebler, a military lawyer appointed to defend a Guantanamo Bay detainee. After he became the defense counsel for this detainee he came to see the military tribunal system as blatantly unjust and he found himself fighting the Pentagon by every means. His fight absolutely ruined his ability to advance his career in the military.

And he is not the usual suspect that one would think would take such a stand. Kuebler describes himself as "a born again Christian who never voted for a Democrat."

But when asked by the reporter why he persisted on this career ruining course he said, "It is a powerful way to be a witness for Christ, by demonstrating your capacity to not judge the way everybody else is judging, and to serve unconditionally."<sup>4</sup>

Talk about a radical choice to follow the way of God's love, justice and compassion over self-preservation. It is striking to consider a lieutenant commander arrayed against admirals and generals. But in the end I think he is in fact not fighting against something, but fighting *for* something.

Maybe he rattled his saber not just on behalf of his client, but on behalf of the military, the country—on behalf of people like you and me as a reminder that self preservation isn't the highest loyalty we should serve.

I do not want to put words in the Cdr's mouth, but I wonder if he is saying with Jesus, "those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it?"

Hard decisions come to all of us—I guess in the end the question is not will we come to painful choices that involve suffering, but simply what kind of pain will it be?

Will it be the form of suffering that goes with loving and making ourselves vulnerable to the plight of others? Or will it be the form of suffering that comes from not loving—that special kind of agony that grows out of the isolation and dis-ease that comes from being "cut-off from that deeper well of God's outpouring love for all.

The tender truth is that if we wall ourselves away from pain or risk, we also wall ourselves away from love...Jesus knows this and so he calls us to risk ourselves for the sake of others. It is only in risking ourselves for the sake of others that our lives actually have any "life" at all.

The attempt to avoid suffering and therefore save one's self by not loving as God loves is the surest way to lose what gives us real life.

At the same time, the willingness to risk, daring to lose one's self in the act of giving to others—therein lays the secret of a life worth living. You see, there *is* no better Way, no better Truth, and no better Life than to take up our cross and follow Jesus...Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John Claypool

<sup>4</sup> NYT 6/19/2008, *An Unlikely Antagonist in the Detainee's Corner*.