

IS THE CROSS YOUR WAY?

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Grace Church in New York
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2018

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

These familiar words about the way of the cross remind me of a story I once heard about a place called the Chapel of the Transfiguration, near Jackson Hole, Wyoming. On our summertime vacation out west we never came near it, so I've not been there, but I'm told the building is just a tiny log structure, even smaller than our chantry. It features a large plate glass window over the altar that frames a spectacular view of the Grand Tetons, so that worshippers and visitors glimpse the glory of God's handiwork. Upon the altar stands a large cross that parishioners fashioned from native wood. From the pictures I've seen, the cross on the altar, with the clear window behind it, is dramatic. It appears to overlay the mountains, as if to suggest that God's sacrificial nature is etched onto the whole created order.

Years ago the priest in charge of the chapel was a man named Walter McNeil. One day he was making his rounds and stopped at the church. Outside he visited with the normal gathering of tourists in the parking lot, then he went inside. He was unprepared for what he saw. Beneath the plate glass window was a family of four, standing at the altar and eating a picnic lunch on top of it. They were loud and messy, and they had apparently thrown the cross to the floor, as it was tilted against the wall. Walter McNeil summoned every ounce of composure within himself and approached the obstreperous family. Wearing his clerical collar, he stood before the man and asked in as measured a manner as possible, "Why did you take the cross from the altar?" The man replied with a dismissive air, "Because it was in the way."

Walter McNeil concludes the story by leaving to our imaginations the scene that followed. Suffice it to say, the picnic lunch was over, and the cross was soon back on the altar. But when all was said and done, Walter McNeil never forgot the man's cavalier attitude and crass comment, "because it was in the way." The cross was in the way.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, we've heard Jesus ask a question of his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" What he was doing by asking the question was determining if any of them really comprehended the immensity of who he was and what he came to do. Peter responded, "You are the Messiah." Not a bad answer – certainly better than "a wise teacher," or "a great prophet," or "an amazing miracle worker," or any other easy definition of Jesus, either then or now. What Peter probably meant was, *Jesus, you are the one whom God promised to send; you are the one who will establish God's kingdom among us.* Again, not a bad answer. But in all the Gospel accounts of this particular conversation, Jesus seems to have suspected that Peter was missing something. He was still not discerning the full mystery of Jesus' nature or mission.

What was lacking in his answer? Clearly, Jesus thought the piece of the puzzle that Peter and the other disciples was missing was the cross. What they didn't calculate into their thinking was the price that God would pay to establish the kingdom of Heaven on earth. They were overlooking how God's self-sacrifice is etched into every facet of creation. We see God's goodness and love in the calling of Israel to be his people, in his Word spoken through the prophets, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, his Son. God's blood, sweat, and tears are all over it. Indeed, Jesus embodied God's patient, long-suffering commitment to reclaim all of creation as

his own. He stretched out his arms upon the cross to forgive the sins of the whole world, and show us the immensity of God's love. Think about it: to forgive entails bearing a loss, paying a price. So the cross is the symbol of God's self-giving, sacrificial nature. The cross is the greatest of all good news for us because it speaks of the lengths to which God will go to redeem us. The cross reminds us that nothing can sever us from the love of God. Nothing. God in Christ did all this for us.

How are we to respond? Make no mistake about this: the dream of God is that we do respond. God gives his divine self always in the hope that a busy, distracted, self-important world will take notice and repent and be healed. God's gracious invitation is nothing short of an offer to share his divine life for all eternity. It begins when we choose to follow Jesus: to learn his ways, to be his apprentice, to be his disciple. Accepting his invitation – or not – is the decision of a lifetime. Here again is how Jesus issued his call to life: *“If you want to become my follower, then deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life you will lose it. But if you lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, you will save it.”*

Excuse me. Did Jesus say “lose my life?” Come to think of it, did we not hear Jesus earlier in the passage say that he was to *undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed?* What kind of invitation is this? Where did Jesus get such ideas? Well, as I mentioned to you last Sunday, he got his ideas about what the Messiah was to be like from Isaiah. Isaiah foretold a figure who would be sent from God who would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. He would be wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities. We've come to call this figure the Suffering Servant, and today's reading from Isaiah (50:4-9a) is another, perhaps less familiar passage about him. But what we hear is more of the same: suffering, insult, and rejection. The disciples then we today want Jesus to lead us to life. We believe his invitation is to love, joy, peace, and reconciliation. But when you listen carefully, it seems to be something else entirely. It seems the invitation comes with fine print. Beneath the promise of life comes a disclaimer.

It reminds me of the pharmaceutical commercials you will see on TV. Have you ever really paid attention to these things? On the screen you see love, joy, peace, and patience. You see everyday people enjoying everyday activities; you see the promise of life: A family shares Saturday breakfast in their pajamas. A man goes off to work with a spring in his step. A mother bakes cookies with children. A father washes the car with his teenage son in their suburban driveway. A husband and wife recline in separate outdoor bathtubs that they have found by a wooded stream. It happens all the time. Everyday things are what you see. But in your hearing someone talking fast and quietly is announcing the disclaimers: *In some studies use of this product has been shown to cause abnormal behavior. Stop using and consult your doctor if you experience aggressiveness, agitation, hallucinations, or confusion. Side effects such as throat or tongue swelling occur rarely, and may be fatal.* Excuse me again. Did the announcer just say taking this drug may be fatal? Did Jesus just say that following him may be fatal? I like life, and life likes me. I don't want to lose it. Make the way of the cross my way? No thanks, conclude many people intent on the good life. The cross is in the way of the good life.

Those of us who worry that the world's version of the good life is a shallow and superficial thing, may press on and ask, what would it really take for the cross to be our way, rather than in the way? What does it mean to take up the cross and follow Jesus? How do we walk as a child of the light? Some years ago a fad that swept through popular theology boiled it down to four letters: WWJD. The letters stood for “what would Jesus do?” If you wanted moral clarity in any and all situations, if you wanted to follow Jesus and walk in the way of the cross, simply ask yourself “what would Jesus do?” and then do it. It sounds easy enough until you think through the

implications. First, we can't always be entirely clear what Jesus would do. Second, and most importantly, we're not Jesus. We can't do what he did.

What did Jesus do? On the cross Jesus took away the sins of the whole world. He fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, and took upon himself the worst that the powers of evil can inflict upon a person. St. Paul writes that in absorbing the sting of death and sin, Jesus disarmed the principalities and powers (Colossians 2:15). Therefore, death no longer has an eternal claim on us. Even though we die, we live. Even though we go down to the grave, we make our song Alleluia. All that belongs to the Father will be ours, and we will always be with him. Once the message of the gospel really sinks in, it's enough to start changing your life even now. Once you realize that God in Christ did all this for you, it's enough to set you free – free to live a life of gratitude, free to serve the Lord in ways you wouldn't have thought possible.

Perhaps you know the story that a former Cardinal Archbishop of Paris told on himself, about himself. Many years ago on a Saturday afternoon three brilliant graduate students from the Sorbonne stepped into the rear of the Cathedral of Notre Dame to amuse themselves with the spectacle of religious practice. As they wandered the aisles they soon came upon a small group of unremarkable people waiting in line by the side of a confessional booth. Being devout atheists, and feeling quite superior to the guilt-ridden penitents, the students snickered at the notion of subjecting themselves to ritual of so little rational merit. One of them hit upon an idea: for twenty francs he would go through the whole rite of confession, and no one would know he was faking it, not even the priest. The wager was on. The student took his place at the end of the line, and waited for his turn to enter the booth. His friends who watched from a distance were thoroughly entertained.

As he waited in line, the student listened carefully to those ahead of him, and learned that he must confess to God his sins of the week. Afterward he would say to the priest, "Now Father, what must I do for penance?" His moment arrived. He knelt in the booth, and spun for the invisible priest a tale of sordid thoughts and acts. At the end of the session, he concluded properly with the question "And now Father, what must I do for penance?" The priest said to him, "This evening, when the crowds are gone I want you to come back to the cathedral and stand in front of the altar. You are to look at the figure on the cross while you repeat three times this statement: '*You did all this for me and I don't give a damn.*' After you have said this three times, your penance is complete."

The student left the booth triumphant. He had pulled it off, and his friends laughed and laughed as he told them the whole story of the sham. Nevertheless, they insisted that to earn his twenty francs, he would have to go back to the cathedral and complete the deal. So that same evening, before the cathedral closed, the student approached the altar, looked up at the cross and the figure hanging on it and said: "*You did all this for me, and I don't give a damn.*" Then he said again, "*You did all this for me, and I don't give a damn.*" Then he said, "*You ... did all this ... for me ...?*" He could not continue. At that moment the message of the gospel sank into his soul. The word of the cross, that earlier in the day was foolishness to him, now would become his way. Soon he would lose his old life, take up his cross, and follow Jesus into a new life.

Today and every day, our question is not so much "what would Jesus do?" Rather, it is "what *did* Jesus do?" On the cross he took away the sins of the world so that we might live, and live abundantly, and live eternally. He did it all for us, and now we are free – free to live as God's grateful people, free to make the way of the cross our way, free to walk as children of the light.

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