

## Mark 8:31-38

### Lent 2

#### **Scripture: Mark 8:34-38**

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

#### **Lent in Plain Sight: Cross**

Have you considered how bizarre it is that the most often used symbol of our faith is an instrument of execution? Can you imagine a religion directing its praise toward a guillotine or an electric chair or making necklaces with little syringe charms on them? Since coming back to Christianity and the church as a young adult, I've struggled with the symbolism of the cross and the ways in which the Christian tradition talks about it. The idea of "clinging to the old rugged cross," as the old song goes, honestly makes my stomach turn a little bit.

When I was a child, our family often watched TV while we ate together. One night, we were having beef stroganoff for supper and watching the musical, Jesus Christ Superstar, which was being shown on HBO. As we sat down to eat, the scene in the musical when they flogged Jesus was on the screen. My stomach started to churn, which is what it does when I witness violence, whether on TV or real life. The show moved on and I started to eat as I continued to watch. I saw Jesus being made to carry the cross on which he would be killed and I saw another man forced to help him carry it as they made their way to the hill on which he would die. Once there, it wasn't long and the Roman soldiers picked up the big spikes and the hammer and just as the hammer hit the first spike, I bolted from the table, ran to the bathroom, and vomited. I haven't eaten beef stroganoff since, nor have I watched Jesus Christ Superstar, The Passion, or any movie in which the crucifixion scene occurs.

I am pretty sure that moment was the beginning of my discomfort for the way the cross has been revered in our tradition. In seminary, we studied all manner of ways of thinking about the cross, Jesus' death, and resurrection. I learned ways of talking about it that didn't make me feel sick. I also learned that I didn't have to believe Jesus' death on the cross was required by God or reconciled humanity to God to call myself a Christian. I knew I would never be able to wrap my mind or heart around a theology of the cross that elevated it to more than a way of killing people who challenged the ones in power. Whether I like it or not, though, the cross *is* more than that in our tradition. And honestly, I think Jesus would be a bit befuddled by that if he was here.

Our text today in which the author of Mark tells us Jesus said, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," was written a full generation after Jesus' death. The author of Mark was not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, crucifixion, or the events that followed. He wrote for a community of people who were trying to exist in first century Israel while it was occupied by Rome, at a time when being a follower of Jesus, the outspoken critique of the government, was not a good thing, in fact, for some, it was dangerous. So, all those years removed, how did the author of Mark know Jesus said those words about the cross?

There is a group of scholars who have spent a lot of time combing through ancient documents to be able to make some educated determinations of how much of what the gospel authors say Jesus said was likely really said by him. This group of scholars is called the Jesus Seminar. Several of the professors at Phillips Theological Seminary, where Rev. Hubbard and I went to seminary, were part of the Jesus Seminar. So, as you can imagine, the work of this group of scholars was widely studied and embraced by a lot of us. Some members of the Jesus Seminar, whose names you might recognize are Dr. Brandon Scott, John Dominic Crossan, and Marcus Borg.

One of the things I learned as I studied the work of these scholars was that one of the telltale signs that Jesus did not say something a gospel writer claimed he did is when we find him talking about something that only became significant after his death. Today's text is an example of that. Here, it sounds like Jesus related pretty strongly to the cross, strong enough to use it as a metaphor when he was talking to his followers about what it meant to be his disciple. But Jesus would have had

no reason to be talking about the cross at all. The metaphor of carrying a cross would likely not have occurred to him until he had actually physically carried a cross.

The gospel writers used words attributed to Jesus to help bolster the importance or meaning they placed on details that reflected, not the time in which Jesus lived, but the time after Jesus' death in which they were writing. According to the Jesus Seminar scholars, "The admonition to take up one's cross appeals to the fate of Jesus as the standard of commitment. It probably reflects a time when the Christian community was exposed to the pressures of persecution. There is no evidence that the cross served as a symbol of radical self-denial outside the context of the crucifixion of Jesus or prior to that event."<sup>1</sup> So, Jesus only talked about the cross because it fit with the gospel writers' narratives about Jesus' death. This doesn't make them bad people or bad writers, it just means we need to remember, as we interpret these texts, the Bible is not a history book. The gospel writers were writing to give their communities hope and to hold them together around the common idea that Jesus' death on the cross was, not a plan gone wrong, it was the plan.

I share this, not because all of us need to believe the same things about what Jesus' crucifixion meant or means, but because it's important to me that you know what I believe and why, just as it's important to me to know what you believe and why. The most important thing is that whatever we believe about Jesus be filtered through the lens of God's love for all people and that what we believe impacts the way we live. Honestly, though, at this point, after more than 2000 years, the cross' role has been so embedded into the Christian tradition that we cannot and should not pretend the cross only means what I think it means. It means different things for different people and, if we are candid, we know that is true about nearly everything when it comes to faith. Theology is a human construct.

For many Christians, Jesus' death on the cross is the focal point of their faith, even more so than Jesus' life. The statement, "Jesus lived to die," is incredibly meaningful for many of our siblings in faith. That may be true for some people in this room. And let me be clear, it is okay for your understanding of the cross, or

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<sup>1</sup> Funk, Robert and Hoover, Roy, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* Polebridge Press: New York, 1993, 78-79.

anything else in the Bible, to be different from mine and different from the people sitting around you. What I think is important is that we recognize there is beauty in diversity, and remember we have a lot to learn from one another.

Scholars agree Jesus was crucified. They just don't agree on how we should think about his crucifixion. Whatever you believe about the cross, I would bet you can't look at it without thinking about suffering. Jesus, or any person who was killed by crucifixion, suffered. And we can all relate to that. Some of us have had some pretty terrible things happen to us or people we love lately. Inevitably, we will all suffer and some of what brings us suffering does not always come with an explanation. It is suffering that comes from being a human being. And it happens to everyone.

It is unbearable that Jesus, the embodiment of peace and love, who offered grace and healing to all people who were suffering, should die in such a terrible way. Some Christians believe he had to die, "Jesus died to save us from our sin," we've been told. The idea that "Jesus died for my sin," is only true for me in that Jesus died as a result of the sin of the political and religious leaders at the time and I (and all of us) are not immune from the same kind of sin: greed, selfishness, abuse of power, and fear of the other. So, yes, Jesus died for sin just like the sin I struggle against and that you struggle against. And I believe when human beings suffer, God suffers. God does not turn away from the suffering we experience or even the suffering we cause, God dwells there with us. So, in a sense, I could even say, "God suffered on the cross."

This is heavy lifting theologically and emotionally. Was Jesus' death on a cross the inevitable conclusion of a life spent critiquing the Roman government and temple authorities? In other words, was he killed as punishment for bucking authority or was he killed to serve as an example to others who were considering similar action? Was Jesus born to die, specifically, was his crucifixion pre-ordained by God as atonement for the "sins of the world?" Did Jesus save us by dying and, if so, from what did he save us? And of course, this leads us to questions about whether Jesus was human or God or both. All of this requires a lot more unpacking than one sermon allows. Perhaps, as you reflect this week on what the cross means to you, these questions can serve as guides. And I would love to know where your time of reflection leads you.

Regardless of how you see Jesus' death, Christian tradition has generally presented the cross as a symbol of an inversion of all worldly forms of power. Money, success, dominance, and political clout are proven worthless in the face of Jesus' humble willingness to be executed and his ultimate victory over death through resurrection, whether spiritually or physically. This is what biblical writer, Paul, was getting at when he wrote that the message of the cross is "foolishness" to those who don't understand. It does seem foolish, in the eyes of our society, and even by many Christians, to choose the way of humility and compassion over the way of power and wealth. Whatever you believe about why Jesus ended up on the cross and what it means, I would guess most of us believe the way of Jesus is humility and compassion and peace and justice.

That is what the author of Mark wanted his community to understand when he wrote that Jesus told his followers to take up their cross. Followers of Jesus are to understand that we willingly take a path others will call foolish. This path might mean taking up the burdens of others, suffering with them, and making sacrifices for the benefit of other people. It might mean using our voices to speak truth to power and injustice or sitting with a friend who has made a life-changing mistake. Taking up the cross might also mean laying down a lot of the things we were taught to pursue—even when laying those things down seems foolish or countercultural. I think it is worth our time to reflect on the place we give money and material things in our lives. Our culture has taught us one thing and the way of Jesus teaches something else.

This week I've been reflecting on the tension that exists between "take up your cross," and "take care of yourself." More and more, we hear doctors and other experts tell us the importance of self-care. For some of us, following the ways of Jesus and focusing on ourselves seem to be at odds. As people who are earnestly trying to follow the ways of Jesus, we are called to sacrifice our comfort, resources, reputation, and time for the common good, for the well-being of all creation. But we are also told to love our neighbors as ourselves, which implies we love ourselves. So, part of following the ways of Jesus involves loving ourselves enough to make sure we get plenty of sleep, feeding our bodies what makes us feel healthy, drinking water, using sunscreen, and showing ourselves the same compassion we show other people. If you wouldn't do it to your best friend, don't do it to yourself.

What I know for sure is that two things can be true at the same time. I find myself saying that a lot lately. We can live lives of sacrifice and love for our neighbors, for other creatures, for the earth, and live into the command to love ourselves too. As I look around this room, I see people who have devoted a good part of their lives to working for the common good. That may seem counter cultural or even foolish to many people. But what I've noticed is that in this community of love, sometimes taking care of ourselves seems counter cultural. Sometimes we put taking care of ourselves way down at the bottom of the list.

I want you to know that your care and compassion and sacrifice for peace, love, and justice inspires me. I see it and I see you every day. I also want you to know that you deserve to be cared for. You deserve rest and you deserve to play and laugh. We all do. There is a lot of hard work in "taking up our crosses," but there is also joy in the journey if we do it right. This week, as you reflect on what the cross and what "taking up your cross," mean to you, I invite you to allow yourself, not only to see the suffering of other people, but your own suffering too. Have the same compassion for yourself as you would for someone you love deeply. Whatever you have been through or are going through, you are not alone. In the kin-dom of God, suffering is met with community. Amen.