

The cross can mean many things. For some it is just a piece of jewelry, while others see it is a strong statement of following Jesus and the Christian path. A common meaning, from the Bible itself, is that Jesus “paid a price,” a “ransom” for our sins... that he took upon himself the penalty of death, in our place; it was a “substitutionary atonement” for all human beings. You probably know I say it makes little sense to me in our time and place; this language comes from a time and culture that had sacrificial offerings for people’s sins; doves and lambs were killed on an altar to appease (or make payment to) a punishing God. I’ve said many times that what makes the most sense to me is that the cross is a symbol of LOVE, actually “suffering love”; the cross is a symbol of compassion, that anyone who can walk with us, even suffer with us, helps us to overcome, to live with courage. My friend Ken Medema is an example of a Christian leader who emphasizes this compassionate meaning of the Cross, how *compassionate love, companionate love, love that suffers alongside another, can bring about new life*. Ken uses Jesus’ paradoxical words... “those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Ken calls such a gospel paradox a “riddle.” Please listen closely to his lyrics!

THE RIDDLE (FINDING LEADS TO LOSING), by Ken Medema:
*So we're bound away on a long journey. God only knows where the road will end; surprises are waiting just around the bend. Will you take my hand and walk beside me? The road will be long, and sweet will be our rest. Won't you take my hand and walk beside me? And the answer to the riddle will be our quest. **Chorus: And the riddle says: finding leads to losing, losing lets you find. Living leads to dying, and life leaves death behind. Losing leads to finding. That's all that I can say. No one will find life in any other way.** So we're bound away on a long journey, walking through the*

*darkness of the night; we're seeking the bright clear morning light. So take my hand and walk beside me. Help me find my way when the path is unclear. Take my hand and walk beside me, cause I think that I can make it if you are near. **Chorus.***

Such a beautiful song, echoing the gospel lesson that life is difficult, so we must face losses and suffering... but also emphasizing that Love conquers all. Having a hand to hold, having a caring friend or support group, can give new courage, new hope, and new life.

I want to share with you now the perspective of a couple professors at Princeton Theological Seminary, where I went to school. One was a beloved professor of Psychology and Christian Education, James Loder. I went to Professor Loder one day and told him about my year-long church internship experience. I told him that a woman in the choir gave me a copy of a mystical book called *The Urantia Book*, about the planet earth and our spiritual destiny of love and peace. The book claims to have been written by celestial beings, and claims to have advanced spiritual truths. I read some of it, and it gave me the impression of the Marianne Williamson kind of writings: Everything is about love and peace, and all of us growing in Love. It's nice, good feeling stuff.

So I wondered with Dr. Loder if there were any differences with the kind of Christian Education we were studying, and he had a very simple but challenging answer: My impression of the book seemed to be missing *The Cross of Christianity!* (Jesus did say: “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me). Yes, in my time with that book, I did not recall hearing or reading anything about a cross.

However we interpret the cross, it surely is a central part of Christianity. I've already said that the meaning that makes the most

sense to me is that the cross is a symbol of “suffering love.” The first part I think is clear: The cross is a symbol of *suffering*... Yes, the world can be a harsh place, with much suffering, pain and death. Some of it comes in the natural cycle of life, (sickness and death), and some of it comes at the hands of cruel people with power, who try to solve life’s problems with dominating violence.

The first meaning of the cross is accepting the truth of *suffering*. A second meaning of the cross is Love. Another professor at Princeton Seminary, Diogenes Allen, insisted that acceptance of loss and death in life is precisely what *causes* a greater love to happen. He tells of a story, fictional but with deep truth, of a man sinking in a bog, contemplating a sure death. It’s from Iris Murdoch’s novel, *The Unicorn*. Quoting Dr. Allen about this man sinking in a bog: *“He was a colossal egotist, a vain man. The nearness of death enabled him to become full of the presence of other things. He confronts for the first time, the fact of his death. It is by facing the fact of death for the first time that he escapes the blindness caused by his self centeredness. He sees for the first time the reality of **other** things, as totally independent of himself... things that are not himself, and not in orbit around himself. The nearness of death enabled him to become full of the presence of **other** things. He became aware that he had no power or control over them. It is the withdrawal of power or control which is fundamental to a recognition of the independence of things. And with their independence, they can confront him with their glorious radiance and preciousness.”* (Mature parents lose the idea of children in orbit around themselves; Losing lets you find! They find and cherish the preciousness, and independence (!) of their children.)

So the experience of facing our own death, or facing the painful hardships of life, or *at least facing the limitations of our life*

and power, can be the very thing that opens up our eyes and our hearts to the world around us! We learn, the hard way, that “no man is an island,” that isolation is not the way of strength and living fully.

We need other people; we need to be in relationship; an ember of burning wood or coal that is separated or isolated will be die out quickly. The search for friendship and companionship in life is universal! We hope that friends can always be found here at Belleville; some we may see only once a week; others with any luck become deeper friends and more constant companions.

Ken’s words echo in my head: “Take my hand, walk beside me, cause I think I can make it, if you are near.” To be with someone in time of suffering is indeed Love. It is “suffering Love.” My life has had plenty of low times when I’ve needed a “lifeline.” Sickness in body or in spirit. Who can we call? We can call a friend, a sibling, a spouse, a parent, a pastor, Jesus himself! ... This is the way we find new life. In some ways we may be “losing” our self, or at least losing our pride, to ask for help, understanding or support... which then we can also offer to others who need some help. In many cases, the worst thing we can say to one suffering is “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps, get it together, Oh, you’ll be past this in no time.” Our burdens are truly lightened when they are shared!

When there’s a cross I need to face, a cross I need to take up, a crucible time in my life, “Take my hand, walk beside me, I think I can make it, if you are near!” I’ll say this to a friend, or the Risen Christ himself. “Precious Lord, Take my hand, lead me on, help me stand.” Amen.