

We all have our favorite verses and favorite books in the Bible, which is natural, since the various books of the Bible speak to different personal and cultural situations in history. The lectionary readings try to focus on some of the most important passages, and if a preachers use the lectionary, they naturally choose sections that they resonate with, or feel their congregation may appreciate most. So this morning, I chose that well-known little phrase, "Take up your Cross and follow me." It actually seems strange to read it at this point in the Christian year, since we deal with the symbol of the cross more often during Lent and Holy Week. But Jesus did mention his suffering and upcoming death often according to the gospel accounts, as we see here in the middle of the Gospel of Mark. I added the related verses from the Gospel of John that actually do come from the Last Supper of Holy Week, the part about laying down one's life for one's friends.

Soooo... the Cross. There are several ways to interpret this central symbol of the Christian faith. The most common is probably that Jesus suffered and died to save us or free us from sin, even taking upon himself a punishment in our place. Yes, he died while loving and teaching us, but I follow many theologians who don't resonate with Jesus "substituting" himself for the punishment of death we should have received. For me and others, a punishing God with Jesus' death as ransom payment for everyone else does not make a lot of sense. They are ancient metaphors of a sacrificial system, but if they still work for you, good for you.

A second way to look at The Cross is that "God so *loved* the world..." that in Jesus, God was continually loving and teaching *to change* the world, and thus he was killed by the powers that be, by the Roman occupiers. It was an execution of a rebel by an authoritarian government, as we see even nowadays in countries

with people who speak against dictatorial leaders. And Jesus said that if we follow his way, that we too will be persecuted, just as all the Jewish prophets were persecuted. I remember when I was in college, a young adult preacher gave a slide show of kinds of heroes in our world... probably today the preacher would show slides of famous quarterbacks, the richest billionaires, Taylor Swift, etc. Then the clincher for his presentation was a moving painting of Jesus bleeding and dying on a cross; Somehow in the painting we could see compassion and love coming from Jesus face... we could imagine him saying his "last words" such as "Father, Forgive them for they know not what they do." We could imagine the incredible *love* of Jesus that was rejected and killed by rulers fearful about change.

A third way to look at the cross, and surely there are more, is to look at the "universal" truth that *any* suffering or sacrificing for the sake of another is a way of "saving" them, helping them, setting them free. It is called sacrificial love, or redemptive suffering, and is not found in just Jesus. Following Jesus' example, we do it for others. One paraphrase of "take up your cross" is: "You must put aside some of your own needs and pleasures, for the sake of another." Someone is hurting or in need, and we put aside some of our own needs and plans to spend time helping the one in need. Jesus says that when we minister to even the "least of these" (the poorest or most vulnerable) we are ministering to him.

The most obvious example of *sacrificial love* in human life may be that of caregivers: childcare and eldercare and care for anyone who is sick. Yes, there are things in our own life that we must "lose," or sacrifice, in order to spend time caring for children or caring for elderly parents and friends. And caregivers usually have to be very forgiving of the limitations and mistakes of the very

young and the very old. To be very forgiving is not to demand accountability for every failing, mistake, or accident. We give up or “sacrifice” wanting perfection from another, We give up wanting perfect reciprocity, accountability and fairness in all our relationships. It is a reality that we sacrifice or give up some self care, some needs of our own, when our time and energy is spent serving others. Yes, we do need to set limits on self-sacrificing, limits on our serving others; we do need to practice self-care. Caregivers must find rest, and find others to help in caregiving.

Let's be clear that when Jesus says “Take Up Your Cross” and follow me, I think we can assume that he was not calling every one of us to to literally shed blood, nor to face imprisonment or execution by our government. The sentence says Take up *your* Cross. Each Cross is *unique*. We might be called to enter the army and risk our lives in the front lines of a necessary war. We might be called to resist our government and be put in jail for doing so. We might be called to stand up to a bully or stand up for another who is being bullied. We might be called to be a caregiver for several years. Our cross to bear might be a chronic illness, some pain that won't go away, as with the Apostle Paul, who pleaded with God... Take this “thorn” from me, but he felt God's response as “My Grace is sufficient for thee.”

Everybody has something, some suffering...either that came upon us, or that we chose to bear as we try to make the world better. There is a story about a person entering the “Pearly Gates” of heaven, asking St. Peter, How come I had that kind of suffering when I was on Earth? And St. Peter, says, “Look around, Do you see all these crosses (all different in size and kind). Would you like to do your life over choosing another cross out there? Hmmm,

thought the person...I guess the cross I know is more bearable than trying on one I don't know!

I'll close with a reminder in a song... that there are many kinds of crosses many ways of sacrificing for others. They all represent our calling to "give our life" or we could say "give of our life." Yes, giving our time, talent and treasure for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of a different kind of kingdom, for the sake of what we often call a KINdom, or a Beloved Community... For the sake of the reign of Love in this world. Here's a message of the cross, a song called "The Greatest Love," by Ken Medema:

*1. Suppose I brave the winter winds for you, to be sure you're safe and warm: this is love! Suppose I swim the flooded rivers, to protect you from the storm: this is love! Suppose I stumble through the darkness, when I hear your urgent call: this is love! But if I give my life to save you: this is the greatest love of all! 2. Suppose I walk through wind and fire, just to be here at your side: this is love! Suppose I give up friends and family, suppose for love I lose my pride: this is love! Suppose I lose my reputation, lose my name, my face, my all: this is love! But if I give my life to save you: this is the greatest love of all! I've heard it said that love's a feeling; this is only just a start. Most feelings change as fast as weather, but love's a matter of the mind and will; a matter of the head and heart.*

*3. Suppose I walk a thousand highways, to bring you back when you are lost: this is love! Suppose you cost me my possessions, and I gladly bear the cost: this is love! Suppose I face the soldier's weapon, suppose I climb the prison wall: this is love! But if I give my life to save you, this is the greatest love of all. This is the greatest love of all. This is the greatest love of all.*