

(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

### Take Up Your Cross

If you were here two weeks ago for Mardi Gras Sunday, this passage probably sounds somewhat familiar. Two weeks ago I talked about the two-beat rhythm of Christian faith—the yes and the no—the austerity and the extravagance. The transfiguration is the extravagance and in the story I just read we hear the austerity in Jesus' words about suffering and death.

Up to this point in Mark's gospel, Jesus has been doing a lot of teaching and healing. Everywhere he goes, he teaches about the realm of God and everywhere he goes, people seek him out to be healed and Jesus heals them.

But now in the middle of Mark's gospel, Jesus says it's not enough to follow him because of the wonders he can do. It's not enough to follow him because of the healings he performs. Now he says to the crowd and to his disciples, "If anyone wants to be my follower, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me."

And here, don't you want to say, "Oh Jesus, couldn't you make it just a little bit easier for us? We like you, we think you're great but you're always raising the stakes and asking more of us. We like it best when we just get to tag along, say we're one of the group, and ooh and aah at what you do."

Even more, Mark's readers would have recoiled in horror when Jesus said, "Take up your cross." Because the cross had only one connotation in the Roman empire—it was how dissidents were executed. Take up your cross, writes Ched Myers, "could have no other meaning except as an invitation to share the consequences facing those who dared challenge the ultimate hegemony [or dominance] of Rome."<sup>1</sup> Nobody was going around wearing a cross for jewelry. "Nothing could have sounded less fashionable to the ears of Mark's readers than...Jesus [comparing] discipleship to the public spectacle of the cross. With this horrific image, Jesus demands that those who would follow him move beyond the safe confines of private religious experience." To take up your cross is a call "to public ministry that confronts whatever powers prevent the saving work of God."<sup>2</sup>

Yet that is the way Jesus invites any of us who would be his followers.

But is the way of suffering the whole point of taking up one's cross? Is suffering what God intends for us when we follow in the way of Jesus?

I don't think so.

I don't think that God wishes for us to suffer or that God sets out our lives as primarily about suffering or that when we follow Jesus we commit ourselves to a life of suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p246, quoted in Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002, p149.

<sup>2</sup> Blount and Charles, p149.

The whole first half of Mark tells stories about Jesus healing people of all kinds of ailments: leprosy, blindness, fevers, paralysis, demons, hemorrhage, even death. Jesus never says, “God’s will for you is to suffer.” He heals, bringing health and life to person after person.

And yet the word he gives to those who would follow him is “take up your cross.” This seems to be the unexpected way of Jesus.

For much of the history of Christian theology, God has been portrayed as tough, powerful, unfeeling, immutable. We expect God to be free from pain and suffering. Power—and God’s power—is so often associated with the ability to “affect others for good or ill but yet remain unthreatened by them [and] invulnerable [to them].”<sup>3</sup>

And that’s what first century people were expecting in Jesus too—the culturally conditioned messiah who would ride in on a powerful horse and smite the Romans. He’d be someone who would work miracles, gather other freedom fighters around him, put down their oppressors and then be crowned “King of the Jews.”

And in a way, that’s what Jesus does. Only it’s not anything like anyone expected. He chooses the way that leads to the cross because he chooses the way of love. God in Jesus chooses to love us and in loving us to be vulnerable to us. Carter Heyward says, “Jesus did not come to reveal God’s power, God’s might, God’s victory. Rather, Jesus came...into the pain, the passion and the wonder of creation itself. Jesus accepted the vocation of being truly human in the image of an enigmatic God.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus chooses the way of love. Now that’s not the same as choosing the way of nice. Nice isn’t really a word to use for Jesus. He could be confrontational. He turned social convention on its ear. He didn’t cower to those who tried to scare him with their power.

Choosing the way of love is also not about feeling warm and fuzzy toward everyone. The way of love means standing up to injustice and saying “no” to the powers that rob people of their dignity and worth.

In choosing the way of love, Jesus chose a way of suffering. C. S. Lewis reminds us that “to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one...[then] it will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and [disturbances] of love is Hell.”<sup>5</sup>

So perhaps, taking up one’s cross is not just about suffering but it’s at its root about loving. Loving one’s enemies. Loving people who everyone else says you should just pass by. Loving in a way that we become vulnerable and our hearts will be wrung and possibly broken. And more than our hearts, even our lives will be wrung and possibly broken.

I wonder if this isn’t part of what motivated Tom Fox to go to Iraq. Fox went as a Christian peacemaker. In October 2004 when he first was in Iraq he wrote in his blog about fighting or fleeing—about anger and fear.

"It seems easier somehow to confront anger within my heart than it is to confront fear. But if Jesus and Gandhi are right then I am not to give in to either. I am to stand firm against the kidnapper as I am to stand firm against the soldier," he wrote. "Does that mean I walk into a

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<sup>3</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, p5.

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Placher, p16.

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Placher, p20.

raging battle to confront the soldiers? Does that mean I walk the streets of Baghdad with a sign saying 'American for the Taking'? No to both counts. But if Jesus and Gandhi are right, then I am asked to risk my life and if I lose it to be as forgiving as they were when murdered by the forces of Satan."<sup>6</sup>

There is a vulnerability born out of opening one's life to others. Not being stupid. Not seeking out suffering as if there's something inherently good about suffering just to suffer—I don't think there is. And I'm certainly not talking about staying in abusive relationships where you are experiencing cruelty and harm at the hands of another person.

Suppose, as William Placher says in his book *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, that "God, more than anything else, freely loves, and in that love is willing to be vulnerable and to risk suffering."<sup>7</sup> Suppose that is what Jesus means when he says, "take up your cross and follow me." Freely loving and in that loving being vulnerable and risking suffering. That certainly seems to be what Jesus chose to do.

Jesus suffers because Jesus is vulnerable, and Jesus is vulnerable because Jesus loves—and it is love, not suffering or even vulnerability, that is finally the point. And if we believe that God is acting in Jesus, then we can truly say, "God suffers because God is vulnerable and God is vulnerable because God loves"—and that is finally the point.<sup>8</sup>

Now when it comes to us making those choices it gets a little more dicey. Because we know that it is possible to destroy ourselves when we take on more pain than we can bear. "There is, however, no such thing as more pain than God can bear, and part of what it means to trust in God is to know that God can and will bear whatever cost in suffering faithfulness in love may require. To know that such a God loves us enables us to take risks of a kind we could not otherwise dare.

"If God will be with us in our suffering, and God's love sustains us, however, then we can dare to love and live the risks entailed in the realm between heaven and hell where we dwell and to which God freely came."<sup>9</sup>

And so we take up our cross and can dare to live in love.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/national/AP-Hostage-Killed.html>

<sup>7</sup> Placher, p10.

<sup>8</sup> Placher, p18.

<sup>9</sup> Placher, p20.