

September 12, 2021
“Forget Your Life”
Mark 8:27-37
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Simon of Cyrene was just an innocent bystander on the day of Jesus’s crucifixion. Jesus had already stood trial before Pilate, the decision to crucify had already been made. He had already been flogged and spat upon, his head pierced with a reed of thorns.

On his way to be crucified, according to John’s gospel, Jesus carried the cross himself – as all condemned prisoners were expected to do under Roman rule. The cross on which they would be crucified. Carrying only the crossbar, mind you; the vertical stake having already been set in place. But the crossbar alone was heavy enough.

According to John’s gospel, Jesus carried his own cross. Not so in the other three gospels, and so we note – as we have time and time and time again – that John is an entirely different animal. Which is why scholars find little evidence in John of the “historical Jesus.”

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the so-called synoptic gospels, a stranger – a “passer-by” as Mark’s account describes him – is compelled to carry Jesus’s cross for him.

Simon of Cyrene, referenced only this ONE time in the Biblical record, referenced in a SINGLE verse in each of these gospel accounts, is simply going about his routine, on his way into Jerusalem from the country, when he is suddenly forced by Roman soldiers to carry Jesus’s cross. We can only assume because Jesus was not strong enough at that point to carry it himself.

Simon did not choose to carry the cross, he did not make a conscious decision – these gospels make that clear. And yet all three pay tribute to the act itself by recording his name.

SAY HIS NAME, Simon of Cyrene, the man who is ONLY – but will be FOREVER – known as the guy who carried Jesus's cross. The guy who LITERALLY followed Jesus to the site of his crucifixion. Simon of Cyrene.

It's useful, I think, to keep Simon in mind as we come to this morning's gospel text. This quintessential Christian text is from Mark, the earliest of the four gospels included in the Biblical canon, but we could just as easily have read from – you guessed it, Matthew or Luke.

Addressing both the crowd and his disciples, Jesus lays it out as he so often did – provocatively and paradoxically, forcing them and us to REALLY think about it, to try to wrap our minds and our hearts, and ultimately our lives, around its truth:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

This is the “cost of discipleship” in a nutshell. And discipleship, following Jesus, requires us to choose. We are not compelled, like Simon of Cyrene. Again and again and again, we're invited to make a choice to carry our own cross, our own figurative crosses. And what exactly that means has been the subject of discernment and debate in pre-Christian and Christian circles for millennia.

Jesus suggests that those who would follow him must deny themselves. Must lose their lives in order to save them – or FIND them, as other translations have it. But what does that mean?

Traditional church teaching, based on the misguided and devastating doctrine of “original sin,” has long asserted that we have to deny ourselves because we are fundamentally and primarily sinful, unworthy of God's love. We are the problem, and so we have to continually work against our own human nature, our own selves, if we have any hope of following Jesus.

But that tired and traumatic theological premise has never squared with either the unconditional nature of God's love, or with Jesus's own assertion that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors AS OURSELVES.

To follow Jesus is to follow the way of divine Love, to live into and out of what theologian Matthew Fox and many others since have long described as our "original blessing." We were fundamentally made in love, for love, and so denying ourselves is not about wholesale self-judgment and self-sabotage. It's about identifying and naming and confronting, and ultimately overcoming, whatever in ourselves gets in the way of love. Whatever in ourselves gets in the way of loving relationship – CREATING loving relationship, RESTORING loving relationship, with God, self and neighbor. You know as well as I do that those lists can be pretty long, but that doesn't make us depraved; it just makes us human.

To carry our cross, to take up our cross, has at least something to do with challenging – not ignoring or avoiding or burying or otherwise guarding ourselves against – whatever prevents us from more fully loving the divine presence within and beyond us, our neighbors AS ourselves. It's about risking the vulnerability that is inherent in loving as God intends, as Jesus embodied. That is the stuff of more abundant life. That is risking your life, losing your life, only to find it anew. To save it.

Retired United Methodist pastor, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, puts it this way – as both poem and prayer:

The cross is not jewelry, not a badge nor a shield.

It's a risk, a vulnerability.

It's not an annoyance.

It's the willingness to suffer for the sake of love.

The cross is planted in the great, deep wound of the world,
the foot of the cross sunk in cruelty, injustice and despair.

God, you know how beguiling my comfort is,
how I protect myself from hurt or loss,

uncertainty or struggle.

I don't want to enter that pit.

But if your Beloved are there,

will I not go there?

If I go there for love, is it not love that lifts me

from suffering and despair?

Give me courage, God,

knowing it is you who bear the cross;

I only come along.

When I open myself to the pain of love

it falls light upon me.

Because it is love, because it is yours

it is the cross that bears me.

Loving authentically and fully and consistently is hard work. That's why Peter, earlier in our text from Mark, rebukes Jesus when he starts telling them that he will eventually be killed for his commitment to divine Love. Peter, like most of us, doesn't want it to be true. He's not willing to assume that kind of risk. He's trying to protect Jesus and himself from suffering. And that's why Jesus rebukes him, imploring him to keep his mind on divine things, not human things. Crosses, even if just the crossbar, are heavy.

Crosses are heavy, and we are not meant to carry them alone. In fact, I think it's often the case that we need community, we need each other, to help recognize and confront our crosses; especially, for example, when the crosses – whatever keeps us from deeper love – are the result of trauma.

Friends, we are called to continually – Luke's version suggests "daily" – consider the cost of discipleship. To continually engage the question: What does it mean to take up my cross and follow Jesus? What does it mean to lose my life in order to save it? What does it mean for you, in your life?

Though not his choice, Simon of Cyrene carried the cross to the site of Jesus's crucifixion – Golgotha, Calvary, Calvary, that sacred place where the epitome of human cruelty was met and transformed by the epitome of divine Love.

To carry your cross, for Jesus's sake, for the sake of the gospel (which, remember, in a word, is Love) is to intentionally and willingly – though perhaps hesitantly – follow Jesus wherever divine Love would take you. Wherever the path of divine Love leads.

In that spirit, I want to close with another poem that I think provides some further insight into the essence of Jesus's invitation: to take up our crosses and follow, to lose our lives in order to save them and each other's. It's a poem I've shared before at Calvary – from the 13th century Sufi mystic, Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, otherwise known as Rumi.

Forget your life. Say God is Great. Get up.

You think you know what time it is. It's time to pray.

You've carved so many little figurines, too many.

Don't knock on any random door like a beggar.

Reach your long hands out to another door, beyond where

you go on the street, the street

where everyone says, "How are you?"

and no one says How aren't you?

Tomorrow you'll see what you've broken and torn tonight,

thrashing in the dark. Inside you

there's an artist you don't know about.

He's (or she is or they are) not interested in how things look different in moonlight.

If you are here unfaithfully with us,

you're causing terrible damage.

If you've opened your loving to God's love,

you're helping people you don't know

and have never seen.

Is what I say true? Say yes quickly,
if you know, if you've known it
from before the beginning of the universe.

Forget your life so you can remember what's most important. Open your loving to
God's love so you can be more faithfully and fully present to yourself, and to the lives
and the world around you. Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus says.

May it be so.