

A SELF BIGGER THAN DEATH

Passionate Lord, walking to Golgotha in the midst of our confusion: free us from our images of you which keep you enthroned in idle power, apart from the pain and sin of the world; lead us to embrace the scandal of the cross and let our violence die that greater life might rise; through Jesus Christ who took the form of a slave.

A Collect for Proper 17A, Prayers for an Inclusive Church

THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 17A: Romans 12:9-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28

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ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 16:21-28

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Jesus didn't need a crystal ball to know what he would face when he got to Jerusalem.

This reading makes it seem that Jesus was reading his horoscope or had a Ouija board or any of those things that fascinate us as we try to gain an inside track on reality.

In fact, Jesus knew there was a cross ahead for him because he had been carrying cross after cross after cross already.

Stop for a moment and think about what a cross is. Or think about what makes a cross a cross and something more than two sticks of wood put together?

We don't have much experience with crosses in the way Jesus is talking about them in this gospel reading today. We see a cross as a religious symbol, not a device for execution.

The Romans used crosses to threaten people to stay away from boundaries they wanted to enforce. They were saying, here's a line in the sand, if you step over it, we will kill you with this cross.

So for two boards to be a cross, it has to be something that threatens your humanity, your ability to keep living. Usually it is coming from somewhere else or someone else. It has power over you. It comes with its own story, its own lines of dialogue about what it represents and how vulnerable you are.

So if you look at the whole story of Jesus, you can see that it is cross after cross after cross – basically from before his birth when Mary crossed an enforced boundary (where she could have been stoned) and agreed to bear him as an unwed mother. All the circumstances of Jesus coming into the world were challenged by threats.

All that he did in the constant movement of his public ministry, his journey with his friends through the world, through cities and villages and the countryside in between, was encountering crosses over and over – poverty, hunger, class distinction, social boundaries, the physical

world. Think of the feeding of the multitudes, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, being run out of the synagogue, his constant run-ins with both religious and civil authorities. Think of what he was saying in the beatitudes about poverty, hunger, mourning, violence, persecution, human hatred....

The frustration Jesus had with Peter in this reading, it seems to me, was not just a moment's misunderstanding on Peter's part, but an overall lack of awareness about everything that Jesus was doing, day by day by day among all the people they encountered. Jesus again and again and again revealing life, revealing God, revealing faith, revealing our oneness with God through healing and feeding and moving in freedom beyond the religious and civil authorities and their legal, religious, and social constraints that were killing people.

The cross that Jesus would eventually encounter on Calvary was nothing new at all.

But incited by Peter's rebuke on this matter of the central reality of his life, in a way the essence of his entire work of revelation on earth, Jesus gets to the point and drives it directly home: don't worry about my next cross, Jesus says, take up *your* cross – *that's* the point.

Jesus was never about having a bunch of people standing around

ogling him, seeing him as a spiritual curiosity, someone who could see around corners or had special powers. He never sought worship. He always said he was showing us a pattern of life, a way for *us* to live, not dazzling us with his magic.

The point of Jesus was to show us – to show all of humanity that we are inherently, already, always one with God. Who we are does not depend on any of the things that we invest with power, any of the things that place enforced boundaries in front of us, anyone or anything that threatens us with a cross, anyone who says I will annihilate you if you cross this line. And, by the way, that includes the little terrorists we harbor inside ourselves and our own social and cultural executioners that we often accept without examination.

So when Jesus tells us to take up our cross – meaning the reality of our lives – which does involve many crosses – (and this also applies to us together as a faith community, by the way) Jesus is saying: face the reality of where your existence comes from and what it really is. There is nothing about taking on a kind of sentimental, self-inflicted, glum suffering, burdening yourself: “this is just my cross to bear....” No, to take up a cross is to *relieve* yourself or a group of people or the whole world of a burden and a lie: the burden of believing that life is somehow handed out, controlled,

empowered by anyone or anything that is not God.

Fr. Richard Rohr writes: “Along the journey to God, the self that begins is not the self that arrives. At the outset, our self is who we *thought* ourselves to be. This self dies along the way until in the end ‘no one’ is left. This ‘no one’ is our true self. It is the self that stands prior to all that is ‘this or that.’ It is the self in God, the self bigger than death yet born of death. It is the self God forever loves.”

Fr. Richard quotes Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) saying: “*It would be absurd to suggest that someone go into a room she is already in!*”

We are going to get – are getting – plenty of practice and plenty of invitations to attempt to avoid our crosses, to accept *another* story about who we are, another story about the source and end of our lives – and so to pretend that we are not already living in this vast, spacious room of life that we did not make and that we did not enter.

Our made up stories about ourselves come to constitute our “false” self – and it is that untrue story that Jesus calls us to deny in taking up our cross. Faux fur is fine, but no “faux” you – leave the fakes to the street vendors....

As we carry our cross, the mystery of our humanity that is love that comes from love, life that comes from life, while facing the whole

mixture of challenge and threat of darkness, we come more and more into our wholeness, into a freedom that is not of our own making and not given to us by anyone or anything but Existence itself.

James Finley, who lived with Thomas Merton for several years in the monastery at Gethsemane in Kentucky writes about actual power: “And how does God display this power? Above all, by existence itself. ‘The One Who Is’ sustains us in many ways, but above all God sustains us in existence. Our reality is truly our own, given to us by God, but it is nevertheless a *received* reality.”

Jesus says: “For those who

want to save their life will lose it... For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

The cross, the crosses that Jesus bore, our crosses, the cross of our own lives reveal – as we take them up – that we have life that is not life we have gained, not life that is our own work of supposedly saving our life by avoiding a cross that is before us, not life that we can pay for, not dependent on any reality outside of God because all reality (the really real) is already within God – where we and all people, the whole creation will always, actually be.



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