

**“Cross = Power of God” 2nd Week of Lent, Sun., March 5 & Mon., March 6, 2023
Mark 8:31-38; Hebrews 12:1-3; I Cor. 1:18-35 NRSV New London UMC Rev. Rich**

We’ve all seen different movies or paintings that depict Jesus struggling to carry his cross, or at least one beam of wood that will be part of the cross he is crucified on. So in our minds we see this big, ungainly timber of wood when we hear Jesus say, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” And already we’re thinking: “I don’t know if I can even LIFT something like that up, much less carry it!” It seems like it would be physically impossible to take up a cross like that and carry it ALL the time. We’d always need to have both hands on it and stay focused on not jostling it around so we wouldn’t lose our balance or whack into anybody!

And maybe that’s Jesus’ point. We’d have to let go of everything else if we’re going to grab hold of a cross like that. We’d have to keep our attention centered on how we’re carrying that cross and where we’re going with it. If we’re going to take up a cross like that we have to be willing to lose our lives – to stop following our own whims in order to follow Jesus, and to not be ashamed of following Jesus. Because choosing to take up that cross is a major commitment. And if we’re holding on with both hands to a massive cross and someone sneers, “I suppose you’re some kind of goody two shoes follower of Jesus, aren’t you?” it’s going to be next to impossible for us to say, “Who me? Oh, no, I’m not a follower of Jesus. I’m just holding this cross for a friend. They’ll be back in a minute.” That would be like denying there’s an elephant in the room when there *is* an elephant in the room! If we’re going to commit to following Jesus by taking up a big ol’ cross to lug around, then it is pointless to deny that is what we’re doing.

But what if taking up the cross isn’t so glaringly obvious? What if taking up the cross means we choose to be active members in a faith community – when many people in the greater community around us see active church membership as a complete waste of time and energy? What if taking up the cross is more than NOT being ashamed of Jesus, but to be willing to give our lives to Christ – when members of our own family express no interest whatsoever in Jesus, God, or religion? What if taking up the cross means wearing a former symbol of execution to signify our new life in Christ – instead of wearing it as a fashionable accessory? What if taking up the cross means becoming part of the Christian minority in this country – instead of sliding along as part of the “majority”?

I think taking up the cross means knowing that we are followers of Jesus and children of God; and then not denying that is who we are and whose we are. While that may sound simple, it is a constant choice to be made that requires on-going re-commitment to being a follower of Jesus, to living as a child of God. And I don’t know about you, but some days I am weary of it, and some days I lose heart, and on those days I just want to set my

cross down. Perhaps you have also felt that way. That's why it is good for us to be reminded that there is this great cloud of witnesses who have come before us – who also had their good days and their weary days. Just as it is good for us to remember that when we look to Jesus – “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” – we see someone who needed to take time to disengage, who had to go apart to pray and refocus, so he could endure what he had to face day in and day out.

It is also good for us to see the disciple Peter as NOT being a consistently wonderful disciple 100% of the time. He had his off days, like the one in our reading today from the Gospel of Mark. It says that Peter took Jesus aside, and Peter began to rebuke Jesus. Now the Greek verb that has been translated into English as “rebuke” was often used to refer to silencing demons. It would seem that Peter felt that Jesus had been possessed by a demon, and it must have been the demon talking when he said that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering; be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes; be killed; and after three days rise again. Peter believed that Jesus was the Messiah. And Peter had to have believed that only a demon would say God's Chosen One would HAVE to suffer like that! That it certainly couldn't be Jesus, the Son of God, talking that way! . . . Just consider that it made MORE sense (and was easier for Peter to believe) that Jesus had suddenly been possessed by a demon that needed to be exorcised THAN to imagine that Jesus was prophesying the kind of suffering that would lead to his death, and his rising from death three days later. Peter simply couldn't put the thought of “suffering” and “death” together with “Messiah” and “God's will” together in his brain. There was no way! It couldn't be! Peter was desperate to stop this evil talk!

Imagine Peter's horror when Jesus turned away from Peter to look at the other disciples, and then REBUKED Peter by saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Jesus was not going to have any other disciples follow Peter's lead. And he certainly wasn't going to give Peter a chance to say anything more. Can't you see Peter standing there with his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open with the shock of being so COMPLETELY WRONG ABOUT THIS!

It's a real shame that Paul had not yet written his letter to the Corinthian believers, because Peter sorely needed to know that “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Because Peter needed to know that God could take the ultimate symbol of Roman oppression, humiliation, and death, and use it as the starting point for the ultimate transformation of death into resurrection life. Peter needed to know that the only demon that needed to be rebuked that day was the demon of limited expectation – his own limited expectation of what is possible for God. . . . May we rebuke that same demon in ourselves each day and believe that God will help us to take up the cross and follow Jesus. Amen.