



Finding Your Cross

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost~September 16, 2018

Isaiah 50:4-9a

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Psalm 116:1-8

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| 1 I love you, O God,
because you have heard the voice of my supplication, *
because you have inclined your ear to me
whenever I called upon you. | 4 Gracious are you and righteous; *
you are full of compassion. |
| 2 The cords of death entangled me;
the grip of the grave took hold of me; *
I came to grief and sorrow. | 5 You watch over the innocent; *
I was brought very low, and you helped me. |
| 3 Then I called upon your holy Name: *
“O God, I pray you, save my life.” | 6 Turn again to your rest, O my soul, *
for God has treated you well. |
| | 7 For you, O God, have rescued my life from death, *
my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling. |
| | 8 I will walk in the presence of God, *
in the land of the living. |

James 3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Most of us don't get too far in life before we run into suffering. As children we experience the commonplace—like skinned knees. If we are lucky, we don't experience deeper suffering until we are older—the pain of rejection, the death of a loved one, chronic illness. And many of us spend a lot of time trying to figure out why—believing that if we are good we will escape pain and suffering. Until one day we realize this is simply not the case. We can be as good as gold, and still we suffer. Goodness is no protection from pain.

This is something that should be screamingly obvious to those of us who call ourselves Christian. Jesus was as good as it gets, and he suffered pain of all different kinds: physical certainly, but also spiritual and emotional. What was unique about how he dealt with all of it, all the suffering and pain that life threw his way, was that he leaned into it and, in so doing, showed a whole new way of living. A way few of us actually adhere to. Because despite everything Jesus said and did, we want to hang onto the “truth” we learned early—that being good, believing in God, is protection, a talisman against misfortune and pain. This is, in fact, not the Gospel truth but a huge perversion of Gospel truth.

And so our response is often a lot like Peter's response to Jesus' appalling news that he was going to die—and that his death would be grim—painful, humiliating. Jesus was telling them this beforehand because he wanted to make sure they understood that his death was not some sort of accident, something that should have been avoided. He wanted to make sure they understood that God was in the suffering and the dying—working to turn Jesus' wounded flesh into a body that would last forever.

Peter, of course, got the wrong end of the stick, closing his ears after he heard the words suffering and death. He couldn't handle it, so he “rebuked” Jesus. Remarkable really, for someone who had just nailed the answer that Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter had, we often have, the wrong definition of Messiah. And while it is easy to beat up on Peter for his obtuseness, I think that Peter was just responding the way any of us would to the news that someone we loved was going to suffer and die. Especially when it all seemed so unnecessary. Peter loved Jesus and did not want him to die. Death was probably Peter's worst fear and Jesus' talking about death, his death, pushed Peter's fear up and over the level he could tolerate and contain.

Perhaps what Jesus' prediction triggered in Peter was the surprising and unwelcome news that even Jesus, even the One Peter had just called Messiah, was vulnerable to suffering and pain. And if it could happen to Jesus, it could happen to anyone. None of us would get out of life without suffering and alive.

Jesus' response to Peter is swift and brutal, comparing Peter to Satan. I think Peter's shock, Peter's attempt to get Jesus to change his mind and not suffer and die, triggered in Jesus a flashback to the temptations in the wilderness, when he went one-on-one with Satan, with all his fears, all those very human, very natural desires that could pull him away from God's dream. Perhaps this temptation, the temptation to turn away from death, was the greatest one he faced. On the night before he died, he prayed that there was a way out, a shortcut around suffering, pain, and death. God's answer, of course, was no. And Jesus leaned into it because God had given Jesus a vision of his death that was not all dark, a vision that leaked light—light that clearly indicated that something lay beyond it. And he knew his job, the job of Messiah, was to walk towards it instead of running away.

He tried to get his disciples to see this—he asked them to follow him. He told them that if they were not afraid to lose their lives, paradoxically, they would find them. He invited them to pick up their cross. At the time he said this, the cross, of course, had no meaning other than as an instrument of fear—the way Rome executed criminals. It was not a symbol of hope or triumph—it elicited fear the way the thought of hanging, the electric chair, or lethal injection strikes fear in us. The road to Jerusalem was often lined with crosses, each one bearing an “enemy of the state” who was hanging there as punishment and warning. It was highly effective at both. Anyone who witnessed it would understand that avoiding the cross was worth any cost.

And then Jesus trots out “pick up your cross and follow me”. Almost as if he was suggesting that death is not the worst thing in the world, the worst thing that can happen to us. As if he was suggesting that fear, living in fear, is higher on the list than dying itself. That if they were going to let fear run their lives, then fear would become their god. All behavior would be measured against that standard—if something increased fear, don't do it. If it alleviated fear, go for it. Whatever the effects are for others, well, too bad. And of course, in the end, when their years of living anxiously ended in death, as all lives do, they would discover they had never actually lived.

Jesus offered another choice: rather than surrender to fear, surrender to God. Deny the panic stricken voice inside them that frantically ordered them to play it safe, to lie low, to do whatever they needed in order to feel safe. Instead listen to the other voice, the one that said, “Breathe. Follow me. Do not be afraid”. That voice never, ever, promised safety—but it does promise life. It has never promised freedom from pain, but it has consistently offered freedom from fear.

I want to be clear, God does not want us to seek out suffering. Jesus didn't run around trying to hop on every cross he saw. There is nothing inherently redemptive about suffering, and life is not a contest to see who can suffer the most. God does not take pleasure in human suffering, quite the contrary. God's heart breaks when we suffer. But God's heart also breaks when we live small, narrow lives, suffering profoundly because they are constricted by fear—fear that prevents us from living into the person God has created us to be.

In asking us to take up our cross Jesus is not saying we literally need to die in order to follow him. Some have. Most do not. And in Luke's telling of the story, Jesus invites his followers to take up their cross daily, which sounds more like a way of life, than an invitation to die.

And, if you read carefully, you note that Jesus doesn't tell them to go in search of their crosses—I think because he was well aware that they knew exactly where their crosses were. He just encourages them to go ahead and bend down and pick the wretched thing up, stop tripping over it, burying it in layers of dirt, or pretending they don't see it. He urges them to get down to ground level and wrap their arms around their cross and pick it up so they can find out for themselves that there is much more to life than being afraid of death.

In 2018 our crosses don't have much to do with standing up to the Roman Empire. But fear is timeless, and the way it distorts our lives is the same now as it was then. We know what fear does to us on a personal level—how it shrinks and disfigures us, and we are seeing it writ large on a national level right now. Fear of change. Fear of becoming irrelevant. White fear of black and brown people. Fear of poverty. Fear of the other. These are very real. And these fears cause us to turn inwards—leading to such spectacles as the apathy, or even support for, government separation of migrant families on the part of Christian leaders or the race based neglect of hurricane victims in Puerto Rico.

Our personal fear may be related to admitting we have an addiction, tackling a memory that we have avoided for years, fear of standing up for something we believe in because we might look foolish or strident, fear of telling the truth to people who are going to condemn us for it.

Whatever it is that scares you to death, so that you start bargaining, offering to do anything, pay any cost, to just make it go away—that is your cross. And if you leave it lying where it is it will eventually kill you. If you turn away from God with the excuse that this should never have happened to you and it is all God's fault, then you deny God the chance to show you the greatest mystery of all—that right there, smack in the middle of the pitch black darkness of your fear, is the door to abundant life.

It is hard. It is counterintuitive. Everything in us screams to run the other way. But Jesus says, stop running from your cross. Bend down, pick it up. It is not nearly as scary as you think once you have it in your arms. And you do not have to carry it on your own. Believe in God more than you believe in your fear and you will hear the voice that says, pick it up, come on with me, and I will show you the way to the door.

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