

+
AMDG

Proper 17A, September 3, 2017

The passage in today's Gospel is not for those who like their religion light and happy. It's not for those who come to church just to hear a nice message and sing a favorite hymn or two. Today's message is for the hard-core, those for whom following Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. It's for those who know that following Jesus, though full of challenges and risks, will lead to life abundant.

So, if you're not one of those hard-core Jesus followers; or if you are, and just aren't in the mood for a challenging message today, I give you permission to stop listening now - mentally work on your grocery list, or flip quietly through your prayerbook. Because it's time to talk about the Way of the Cross.

This passage is the hinge between Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the passion in Jerusalem. Up until now, Jesus has been teaching, healing, telling parables, and performing miracles - wowing his followers and perplexing them.

But, now Jesus tells his followers that his life will take a horrible turn. He will suffer and be killed. And Peter cannot accept this. The Rock on whom Christ would build his church is now the stumbling block. He can't accept that Jesus has to die, and it must have sent a shudder down all the apostles' spines to hear that in order to gain their lives, they would have to lose them.

Jesus now begins to help his followers understand the great mystery of faith embodied by his life - that accepting God's transformative love and living out that love in the world is risky and dangerous...-and that there's really no other way to live it. -Living in complete expectation of God's guidance and protection - though it may feel fraught with danger - is the way to life eternal.

Jesus - in the fullness of his humanity and the fullness of his divinity - at one with us and at one with God - absorbed all the uncertainty, resistance, hatred and cruelty that life could throw at him. At the cross Jesus took it all on and did not respond with vengeance or power or

control. Instead he responded with confidence in the face of persecution; acceptance in the face of rejection; hope in the face of despair. He modeled trust in God's love even when all seemed lost. And the result? Resurrection! Life eternal.

Jesus chose the cross out of his radical love for God and for us. He exemplified the mystery behind suffering - that suffering and death are not necessarily the end. With the transformational love of God, suffering and death (both figurative and literal) lead to resurrection.

So what is meant by the way of the cross in this passage? It's easy to misunderstand, so let's start by saying what it is not.

The way of the cross is not suffering as a penance. "I'm such a bad person, I deserve to suffer." or "I don't deserve good things, so I will deny them to myself." "Or I need to suffer to deserve God's promises. This attitude denies our true nature as beloved of God, and denies our redemption in Christ.

The way of the cross is not suffering for its own sake, suffering to gain approval or recognition, boasting about the sacrifices we make, or the challenges we endure. This is selfish, ego-driven behavior and not the full life God wants for us.

The way of the cross is not mundane inconveniences. Heavy traffic is not a cross to bear, nor is the yogurt shop being out of our favorite flavor, or the friend who won't stop talking. Characterizing the everyday bumps of life as suffering trivializes the true suffering many endure and distorts the message of the cross beyond recognition.

These false ways of the cross are not what Jesus calls us to, because they are all based on our own ego-driven needs for attention, pity, and control.

So, if all these things are not the way of the cross, then what is the way of the cross?

Paul gives us some examples in his letter to the Romans. However, cross carrying and self-denial are so personal, that each of us must look deeply within to discover things truly impede the fullness of life Jesus promised. I've found that the best place to start is by honestly identifying my lingering fears and resentments.

I had a very wise spiritual director who patiently listened to me recount the pains, insults and injustices I had borne from others. He would

quietly nod, smile, and ask, “Ok, so, what’s your part in this?” Though I hated hearing this, it helped me see that I would continue to be unhappy if I blamed others for my troubles and did not take responsibility for my own part. In looking at my own part, I identified my desire for control and began to let go and open my life to God’s guidance and protection. Our crosses often include letting go of control and the need to be in charge - which is actually fear that we won’t be taken care of. For many, our cross is accepting life’s struggles, messes and uncertainty. Allowing ourselves to be in that discomfort can help us feel God’s love and support, feel the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and guidance, and understand the grace of acceptance.

Another cross could be pushing ourselves to help those we’d rather not. We can explore the anger, prejudice or other feelings that hold us back from loving others fully. We may lack the self-love needed to truly love others and need to accept that we are all beloved, made in God’s image and likeness.

Taking up our cross could mean letting go of something we’ve used to avoid the big issues and questions of our life. As Richard Rohr states in *Falling Upward*, it is numbing addictions, diversionary tactics, and mindless distractions that keep us living in the superficial and prevent us from exploring the depths of our souls - precisely where God is to be found.

Self-denial could mean letting go of a few luxuries or comforts. Living a simpler life so resources are available to help those in greater need. But self-denial could also mean letting go of the guilt and shame that prevent us from fully accepting life’s blessings.

Losing one’s life to find it may mean letting go of self-sufficiency and accepting the love and support of those around us.

These are not easy things to do. They may represent great suffering and even a kind of little death. But we do not bear these crosses alone. In the Psalm today we are told to call upon God’s name and to continually seek God’s face. That face is never far. The people right in front of us can be the face of God. In this pursuit it’s helpful to have someone we trust - a spiritual advisor or good friend - who can call us on our stuff, who can be very honest with. For some, just being able to listen to criticism is a cross to bear. There are many among us who have taken big risks, made

difficult decisions, and borne crosses which brought us closer to God. We should be sharing our stories, so we can help each other take the great risks God gives us - crosses borne that became a joy to carry. Self denial that brought gifts beyond imagining. Losses that opened the door to impossible beauty. In each other's successes, we see the face of God. This is the Good News for us. We are called to live a radically transformed life in the Love of God. And that call often comes with tasks that seem impossible. But when we call upon God's name and seek out God's face, we find that our yoke is truly easy and our burden light. We discover that in losing we win, and in sacrifice we gain much more than was lost. This is the mystery of our faith. Thanks be to God!