

Bearing the Cross

communion meditation

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Mark 8:27-36

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In the mid-1990's a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon depicted two of the city's fashion setters looking admiringly at the pectoral cross a bearded Orthodox patriarch was wearing. "Fantastic crucifix!", one of them commented to the other. At the time, crosses were hot items; and the writer of the magazine's *Talk of the Town* column went to Macy's department store to check out its new "Cross Culture" boutique. Crosses, it seemed, were a rapidly rising fashion statement. A counter once laden with scarves and evening bags, now sported elaborate and bejeweled crosses. "We have one of the best selections in New York City," the clerk boasted; "but honestly, I'm a little low on crosses right now. They're flying out the door" [Patrick J. Willson, *Living by the Word*, "Cross Culture"].

Indeed, crosses can be beautiful. Whether displayed in the rich colors of stained glass in our sanctuaries, crafted by some master craftsman in rich cherry or walnut to focus our thoughts in worship, or poured in gold or silver and lying around the house until the moment they again become fashionable, crosses are a part of our lives. As a matter of fact, the cross can be so familiar to us, so common, that we hardly notice it at all and even less hear or comprehend the shocking nature of Jesus' invitation: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

I recall the horror that greeted Larry's suggestion some years ago that the beauty we associate with the cross would have been foreign to early Christians who knew the cross for what it was—an instrument of torture and shame. The *ichthys*, the sacred fish whose letters formed the acrostic of "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior," is prominent in early Christian symbolism and art, as are palm branches, the dove, the peacock and the Chi Rho (the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ), but not the CROSS [James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*, 174-175]. Larry went on to suggest that we might understand the repulsion early Christians felt to the cross if we imagined the state's primary instrument of torture and death of our day, the electric chair, crafted in gold and bejeweled as a piece of jewelry to hang around our necks. A near riot ensued.

How can we in this season of Lent regain something of the offence associated with the cross? How can we hold onto the deep significance the death of the Christ has for us without slipping on the one side into a grossly manipulative play on the cross that glories in its gore or on the other side into domesticating it and making it little more than a comfortable cultural symbol? Some seventeen hundred years ago the Roman emperor Constantine had a vision of the cross emblazoned with the words "by this conquer" and turned the cross into a sword of persecution and control. His imperial cross has left the church a legacy of shame as Christians through the ages have utilized the sword, the torture chamber, canons and bombs and gas chambers to rule the world.

Can we in this Lenten season experience the cross anew? Can we move beyond a maudlin use of the cross as nothing more than an instrument for our personal comfort? A nonthreatening fashion statement? A symbol of force and domination? Or an embarrassment that broadly educated believers seek to distance themselves from in a pluralistic age? What is the meaning of Jesus' cross and his invitation for us to pick up our cross and follow him?

The cross speaks of a God of love. To say that the cross was not a symbol utilized in early Christian art is not to say that Jesus' death was unimportant to the church. Commentators have long spoken of all of the gospels and particularly the gospel of Mark as the passion of Christ with an extended introduction. Jesus' turn to go to Jerusalem and the cross is at midpoint in Mark's gospel; and the story of Jesus' travel toward Jerusalem, his final week there and his crucifixion occupy fully half of the book. Operating in a time and place in which the cross was a *scandalon*, a scandal and a stumbling block, one of Mark's primary tasks in putting together the first of our four gospels was to deal with the embarrassment of the cross.

"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering . . . and be killed," Mark has Jesus say. We shouldn't rush, however, to turn Mark's use of the word *must* into a full blown doctrine of penal substitution—the teaching that humankind had sinned and God's righteous anger demanded a sacrifice and Jesus had to die to appease God. Such an interpretation, as my friend and teacher Frank Stagg used to say, is problematic at several points. It risks turning Jesus and all the characters

in the story into puppets on a stage. Absent free wills, they merely play a role predetermined by God. Furthermore, and perhaps even worse, it sets Jesus and God over against one another as if Jesus is on our side and dies to appease a distant, angry God. Yet the most joyful, the most grace-filled proclamation of Scripture is the affirmation placed on the lips of Jesus himself, "I and my father are one" (John 10, 17); or in the words of Paul, "God [*italics mine*] was in Christ, reconciling the world" (2 Cor. 5:19) and in Christ, we discover that "God is for us" (Romans 8:31), not against us [See Frank Stagg, *New Testament Theology*, 140-143].

The central affirmation of the Christian faith is that the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus give us first and give us foremost our best picture of who God is. It is not the only valid picture of who God is, but for the Christian faith, it is primary. God is the shepherd who at great risk goes and rescues the lost sheep. God comes in Christ not to condemn the world, but to give us life. God is love and all who would serve God must serve in love.

Holding Jesus and God together, holding onto Scripture's affirmation of a God of love is critical to how we do church and how we relate to our world. An angry, distant, judgmental God too easily becomes translated into a faith that either emasculates believers who always live under God's righteous frown or it becomes the occasion for the believer and the church to become angry and judgmental in the supposed defense of God. Neither represents the Christ who welcomed sinners, embraced children, removed dividing walls and graciously included the outcasts of society in the family of God. Service to an angry, fearsome God degenerates, Jurgen Moltmann suggests, into a religion of fear. Such a religion,

tries to protect its 'most sacred things', God Christ, doctrine and morality, because it clearly no longer believes that these are sufficiently powerful to maintain themselves. When the 'religion of fear' finds its way into the Christian church, those who regard themselves as the most vigilant guardians of the faith do violence to faith and smother it [*The Crucified God*, 19].

The cross calls us to service, not domination. Contrast those who would seek through force to subdue and dominate the world around them to the Christ who shouldered a cross and called upon those who would follow him to shoulder a cross. Perhaps his insistence that he "must" undergo great suffering and be killed spoke more to his insight into the principalities and powers that dominate this world than of a predetermined plan already scripted by God. Throughout his gospel, Mark tells us that Jesus had utterly refused to present himself as an instrument of raw, divine power. Time and again, Jesus silences demons who alone seemed to know who he was. Repeatedly upon healing people, he cautions them not to tell what he has done. And at every point he cuts off conversation when the disciples or the crowd want to urge upon him an earthly throne. Yet, Mark says, when it came to the point of talking about the cross, Jesus spoke plainly. He held nothing back. "He said all this," Mark notes, "quite openly." When Simon Peter rebuked him, he rebuked Peter, calling him beyond his dreams of earthly glory to the walk of discipleship. Calling the crowds and his disciples together, Jesus again spoke frankly about their future, just as he had spoken of his own: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Not only would a cross be shouldered by Jesus; it must be shouldered by "any" who would be his disciple. The believer's cross has been many things through the ages. Some of the early monastics interpreted it in terms of asceticism, withdrawal from society for a life of meditation. For some it became self-flagellation—either literally or figuratively through harsh self-depreciation and psychological abuse. Increasingly, commentators are seeking to distinguish Jesus' call to self-denial from a glorification of suffering for suffering's sake, particularly when that call to suffering is directed toward women and becomes the occasion for their enduring abuse at the hands of a spouse or other acquaintance. Counselors in shelters for abused women are increasingly insistent in seeking to free women from this interpretation. Jesus did not pursue a mission of calling us to self-effacement or condemnation. Indeed, his message was just the opposite. He came welcoming us into the family of God. If God did not condemn us, we should not condemn ourselves.

Yet, if "any" (Jesus' word, not mine) who would follow him must take up a cross, what does it mean? Perhaps it means for us just what it seemed to mean for Jesus. Perhaps Jesus recognized that following him would mean that his followers then and now and in every age would come into

conflict with dominant earthly powers and values. It would mean identifying as he identified with the poor and despised and taking up their cause for justice and equity, access to basic needs and a respectable place to stand in the world. Far from devotion to self or power or privilege, one who follows the way of Jesus does not frantically like Luke's Rich Fool accumulate everything he can store in his multiple barns. The way, Jesus tells us, to real life is not the path of accumulation, but the way of giving.

Indeed, rather than reassuring ourselves that Jesus did not really mean all of those words about self denial, maybe we should look again.

Most commentators rush to assure us that self-denial does not mean denying oneself certain pleasures. No doubt they're right, but in a world brought to the edge of economic collapse by highly leveraged over-consumption, crazed self-indulgence, not morbid self-denial, seems to be the greater danger. . . . Perhaps self-denial is an idea whose time has come again, a lifestyle for all disciples in all seasons [Marvin Lindsay, *Join the Feast*, Union-PSCE, 2009].

Maybe Jesus is doing just this: Rather than blessing us in our harried pursuit to get ever, ever more, maybe he is calling us in this Lenten season to penitence and serious reflection. Maybe he is calling us to rest and focus and a grace-filled life that has grace to spare. Come now to his table, knowing that the one who meets you here in grace leads you forth to bear grace in the world that he loves. Amen.