

March 16, 2003
Second Sunday of Lent
David L. Edwards

No Handle on the Cross

Mark 8:31-38 *“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.”*

This reading from Mark’s gospel is the second half of a story that is at the core of Christian faith. In the first part Peter makes the “good confession” that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. This is the foundation of our faith. It is the recognition that in Christ God’s love is fully given to us, that in Christ God is present with us and for us in the very midst of human life.

Now Jesus talks to the disciples about what kind of messiah he is. He will take the path of “great suffering” and of rejection by those who hold religious and political power. This will lead to his execution, and eventually to his resurrection.

Jesus’ suffering and death resulted from his complete oneness with God’s loving purposes for life. This aroused the ire and insecurity of those in religious and political power. So they responded with violence, which is always a sign of insecurity. Jurgen Moltmann, in his book The Crucified God, puts it this way: *Jesus was folly to the wise, a scandal to the devout and a disturber of the peace in the eyes of the mighty. That is why he was crucified. If anyone identifies with him, this world is ‘crucified’ to him, as Paul said. He[or she]becomes alienated from the wisdom, religion and power politics of his[or her]society.*

That’s the cross of Jesus, the one he bore for all humankind, showing us the path of true life, of union with God and God’s loving purposes.

At this point Peter interrupts Jesus. He takes Jesus aside and whispers to him, “Uh, Master, we need to talk. What do you mean, suffering? What do you mean, rejection? What do you mean, be killed?” The bit about the resurrection might catch our attention, but it was lost on Peter.

Jesus’ talk of suffering, rejection and death got Peter upset. That’s negative, defeatist stuff. People wanted a messiah who would throw off the yoke of Rome, who would give them standing and respectability. Nationalism and religion—we know that story today. The idea of God is joined with nationalist pride, creating a heady concoction of self-righteousness and arrogance. No one is going to be impressed the way Jesus is talking. It does not spell success.

Maybe there’s something even deeper in Peter’s response. Jesus doesn’t talk about doing away with suffering, but embracing and passing through suffering. The drive to avoid discomfort is strong in us. It leads us into all sorts of difficulties. We bury our hurts and pains only to find them growing in intensity. When we deny our pain, we end up being controlled by it in subtle and unconscious ways. When we try to build for ourselves a life that is “care free,” we isolate ourselves behind walls of affluence and materialism, leaving us spiritually and emotionally empty.

Quite some years ago, I had the privilege of driving Elie Wiesel from the Roanoke airport to Lynchburg College for a lecture. Elie Wiesel is a Nobel Prize winning writer whose books explore the dark mysteries of the Holocaust. He was fifteen when he was taken to the death camps, where he lost his family. His experience with life and death has given him a profound knowledge of what is most important for us and what is frivolous. As we drove into Lynchburg, we passed a sign advertising an upscale housing complex. It proclaimed: "Who says you can't have it all?" Mr. Wiesel spotted the sign and said in his quiet voice, softened by all the pain he has experienced and seen, "That's what is wrong with us." It was his way of saying that we live in a culture dominated by the illusion of a suffering-free, pain-free life, and we will do nearly anything to get what we want, to grasp the illusion.

Peter, you see, tries to set Jesus straight on a more reasonable, respectable, and successful approach, one that will appeal to people, not turn them off with talk of suffering and death.

Jesus then makes public what Peter whispered in private. He tells Peter that he is on the side of evil, not of God. He tells the disciples and others who have gathered to hear his teaching what it means to follow him: *If any want to be 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 gospel, will save it.* We were talking about Jesus' cross. Now he is talking about our cross.

The first step of discipleship is self-denial. To "deny the self" means to turn away from one's self and look only at Christ as he goes before us, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it. Self-denial isn't self-hatred. It isn't self-destructive attitudes or behavior. It isn't wiping out our sense of identity or dignity. Jesus means losing one self and finding another self, letting go of one kind of life and finding a new kind of life.

Jesus is talking about the false self that has turned away from God and neighbor. It is the self that is under the illusion that we can exist independently of the rest of life and of God. There is a Buddhist concept I have found very helpful in understanding the nature of the self-denial Jesus teaches. It is the concept of "emptiness," and has been misunderstood and misrepresented by Western religion and thought. Emptiness means being empty of a separate existence. We try to build our identities on individualism and the assumption that we are each separate lives that simply bump into each other, that we live in a world that we also simply bump into and use as we wish. Becoming aware that we are "empty of a separate existence" means that we understand that we are related to everyone and everything in the universe. How can I say I am separate when I am the product of my parents' physical, emotional, and spiritual union? How can I say I am separate when I am sustained every day by water, food and air, which in turn are the products of natural and human interrelationships? How can I say that I am separate when so many people have nurtured and nourished my spirit? When I understand that I am "empty of a separate existence," I find a more real and joyful awareness of my life as interrelated and interdependent. I am literally not alone! Self-denial is no problem! That self simply does not exist.

When Jesus talks about denying the self or Paul talks about the death of the old person, the old self, we must listen very deeply. The first step on our spiritual path, and a continuing process for us, is dying to the self so that a new and truer self can be born. Years ago I visited a church member who was hospitalized for a serious condition. She

had always been what we call “independent.” She was friendly enough and seemed to value belonging to our congregation, but she held herself back, closing off her inner life from others. Finding herself in a situation of dependency, she found herself open and receptive to the visits from others in the congregation. One day she spoke from her heart with me about how she had never really understood what being part of a community of love and care was about and why it was so important. Her old self was dying; a new self was emerging, a healthier, more whole self, connected at a deep level to others.

Jesus says deny your self and take up your cross and follow me. People say sometimes about the difficult things in their lives: *I guess that's just my cross to bear*. A cross, as Jesus means it, is not the same as a burden. As human beings, we will always have difficulties and painful experiences come into our lives. These are burdens that come to everyone, part of our lives as human beings.

Bearing our cross, however, means living intentionally beneath the gracious “burden” of God’s love. Carrying our cross means deciding to meet life with the love and compassion of God. In Luke’s version of this story, Jesus says that we are to carry our cross *day after day*. A burden can become a cross when we meet it, embrace it, and work with it in the spirit of Christ and his love. One who is wounded in life by addiction or abuse or trauma can come to the point of embracing that woundedness and turning it into a healing woundedness, as Henri Nouwen suggests, the healing of oneself and others. As I quoted last Sunday from Elaine Marie Prevallet, in her book In the Service of Life, *everything lives only by sharing its life*. This sharing includes our pains and struggles.

Carrying our cross also means the intentional suffering that we take on in order to share in God’s process of transforming life. We leave our “comfort zones” in order to meet a stranger, to welcome someone who may feel alone. We decide to live in greater material simplicity, in order to be more focused on the things that truly matter in life. We reach beyond our comfortable viewpoints and try to grow in deeper understanding of others. We move out to establish some new venture in meeting the needs of those who are poor, isolated, forgotten, or neglected. Such movements in our lives are a kind of suffering, for they stir up and unsettle us, inwardly and outwardly. But they expand and deepen our capacity to love. This kind of cross-carrying keeps us growing in the knowledge that we are “empty of a separate self,” the process of dying to the old, unsatisfying life, and being born into the new life of our true identity as those whom God has made.

These kinds of cross-carrying are at the root of every ministry and mission, every effort and action, every “success” and “failure” of this community over the decades of its life. Some things have lived on and taken root. Some have foundered and withered away. Some fulfilled their purposes and ended. There are probably more missions that did not survive than those that did. But that is not the point. The important thing is that this community, through its committed, disciplined life of faith, has endeavored to remain on the path of self-denial and cross-carrying, the inward path of dying to the old self and being born to the new self, and the outward path of living out God’s love in and toward the world.

When we take on spiritual disciplines in our lives, we are responding to Jesus’ call to deny ourselves and pick up our cross. When we make a commitment to spending significant time daily in silence, prayer, and study of scripture, we are picking up the cross. When we commit ourselves to living into a community of disciples of Jesus, no

longer withholding ourselves from others, but sharing with them our pains and our gifts, and receiving theirs, we are picking up the cross. When we commit ourselves to struggling with our faith and our money, living toward the point where we can say with complete truth of heart, *All things come from Thee, and from Thine own have I freely given!*, we are picking up the cross. When we are gratefully claiming the gifts God has given us to use for the enrichment of life, and moving out in particular missions for the relieving of suffering in the world or to deepen and nourish this community's life, then we are picking up the cross.

Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese Methodist pastor and theologian, has a wonderful essay entitled "No Handle on the Cross." The cross Christ asks us to pick up and carry, Koyama says, is not like a lunchbox or attaché case, with a convenient handle. The lunchbox or attaché case is a symbol of efficiency and sufficiency. We can carry them smartly down the street as we go our way. The cross, however, is something heavy and cumbersome. No one can carry a cross and look efficient or sufficient. The cross is carried, dropped, picked up again. One doesn't look graceful and impressive, in worldly terms, carrying such a thing. There is no handle on the cross. But as we carry this cross of God's love day by day, endeavoring to meet each burden or situation with God's love, we find that we are on the road to new life, the path toward resurrection.