

September 16, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### The Way of the Cross

Mark 8:27-36            *"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."*

The story of Peter's confession of faith and Jesus' teachings on the way of discipleship is very fitting as we draw closer to our annual recommitment silent retreat on October 6, and day of re-commitment on Sunday, October 7. Who Jesus is and what it means to follow him are at the heart of our reflection as current Covenant and Community Members, as we decide whether or not to commit for another year.

As the disciples and Jesus are walking along, Jesus asks them what they've heard people say about who he is. They report various rumors and speculations. Then Jesus puts the question to them: Who do YOU say that I am? Peter eagerly jumps right in. "You are the Messiah, the one God has sent to save us, to show us the way." The church has called this the "good confession," and has made it the gateway to Christian faith and life. It is our recognition and affirmation that God's love and will are fully present to us in Jesus, and in following him, we find the path of authentic life.

Instead of praising Peter for his insight, however, Jesus "sternly orders" the disciples to say nothing about it to anyone. You would think Jesus, if he is trying to build a successful religious movement, would want to get the word out. Well, that's just it. Jesus never seems interested in a big, successful religious movement, or in people worshiping him. And this is nowhere clearer than in this story when Jesus "sternly orders" the disciples to say nothing to anyone about who he is. This curiosity is found throughout the gospel of Mark, and in the other gospels as well. It is worth exploring why it might be important to NOT talk about Jesus. That, I think, is what the rest of the story is about.

Jesus then tells the disciples that the Son of Man will suffer and be rejected, be killed, and then raised after three days. The harmony of Jesus' life with God's purposes clashes with the purposes of those holding religious and political power. They responded with violence. That's the cross of Jesus, a path that will include suffering and struggle because it is in tension with much of life around us, including much "religious" life. And it is in tension with the way we have been acculturated, the ways we have been taught to see and live our lives.

Peter thinks this is crazy talk. It sounds negative, defeatist, weak. He takes Jesus aside to set him straight. Peter is probably of the school that expected a Messiah who would bring people success, power, national restoration. In other words, a successful religious and political movement. Who in the world is going to buy into suffering, rejection, and death?!

Jesus doesn't talk about avoiding or doing away with suffering. The drive to avoid discomfort is strong in us. It leads us into all sorts of difficulties and neuroses. We try to bury our hurts and pains only to find them growing in intensity. We avoid uncomfortable things in or around ourselves. We try to construct lives that are "care free," isolating ourselves behind walls of affluence, materialism, or just numbness.

Years ago I had the privilege of driving Mr. Elie Wiesel from the Roanoke airport to Lynchburg College for a lecture. He, as you know, is a Nobel laureate whose novels and other writings explore the horrors of the Holocaust and its continuing effects on the human spirit. He was fifteen when he was taken to the death camps, where he lost his family. His experience has given him a keen sense of what is important and what is frivolous. As we drove into Lynchburg, we passed a sign advertising an upscale housing development. It proclaimed: "Who says you can't have it all?" Mr. Wiesel spotted the sign and said in his quiet voice, "That's what is wrong with us." What he meant, I think, is that we live in a culture dominated by the illusion of a suffering-free, pain-free life, and that the answer is accumulating as much stuff, material and otherwise, as we can. The way of Jesus embraces suffering and struggle as the path to true life, to new life.

Jesus now reprimands Peter in front of the disciples. You are not thinking of life in relation to God, but only on the human level. You are in the way of what God is doing. Then he addresses the disciples and others who have gathered, which includes us: *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.* Now Jesus is talking about our cross, living our own lives out of our relationship with God and God's purposes. There is a clear sense in the gospels that Jesus as the messiah of God saves us, leads us into wholeness, not by doing it FOR us, but by opening up the way for us to follow. It is the wisdom of the old spiritual: *Jesus walked this lonesome valley; he had to walk it by himself. Nobody else could walk it for him; he had to walk it by himself.* Then it says: *You've got to walk that lonesome valley; you've got to walk it by yourself. Nobody else can walk it for you; you've got to walk it by yourself.*

Taking up our cross involves self-denial. Self-denial is not self-hatred or ignoring our own needs. It is not self-destructive attitudes or behavior. It is not 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 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 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 like marbles, 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 seeing 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 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 life and 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 not the center of the universe! I am literally not alone! Self-denial is no problem! That self simply does not exist.

Years ago I visited a church member who was hospitalized for a serious condition. She had always been what we call “independent.” She tended to hold herself back and apart, keeping a rather chilly distance from others. Now in a situation of dependency, she found herself glad for and touched by the visits from others in the congregation. One day she told me that she had never before 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.

Taking up our cross and denying our selves means intentional suffering, the suffering or difficulty that we willingly take on in order to be channels of God’s redemptive love for the world. It is not suffering for suffering’s sake, making ourselves chronically unhappy or always in conflict with something or someone. It is the struggle to be faithful to our truest self, to who and what we most deeply feel God calls us to be and do. We leave our “comfort zones” in order to reach out to a stranger or to someone who may feel alone. We decide to live toward material simplicity out of respect for others, the earth, and ourselves. We drop our judgmentalism, which is our way of separating ourselves from others, and we grow in fuller, deeper understanding of and community with others. We commit ourselves to some mission for the sake of others, accepting the challenges it will bring. This kind of cross-carrying keeps us growing in the knowledge that we are “empty of a separate self.” It is the process of dying to the old, unsatisfying, fear-driven life, and being born, or re-born, into the new life of our true Self, the larger Self created by and for God’s love.

This kind of cross-carrying is at the heart of the life of our community, as we commit ourselves to the disciplines of membership, of following Jesus, and as we take up the ministries to which we feel called, as persons and as mission groups. Through a commitment to a disciplined life of faith and to being part of a community of God’s love in Jesus, we endeavor 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.

I think all of this has to do with why Jesus told Peter and the disciples not to say anything to anyone. It is so easy to misunderstand this life, to talk about it too much, or too cleverly and eloquently, without LIVING it, which is what Jesus calls us to do. I read an interview with Henri Matisse years ago. When asked what he thought about artists who talk about their work, he made a cutting

motion with his fingers: "They should have their tongues cut out!" Better to paint than to talk about painting. Better to live the life of faith than talk about it. This past week we have seen vivid and horrendous examples of what happens when, as the Letter of James puts it, the tongue ignites a fire that can burn down a forest. What we say and how we say it can bring comfort and strength, as our reading from Isaiah said. But our words can also cause enormous damage. For James, it is better to live our faith than to talk about it. I think that is what Jesus meant, as well.

We have also seen what happens when we make our religious founders, our spiritual leaders, into objects of worship. Then we start defending our religion rather than living it. We find this in every religious tradition, including our own. Jesus showed no interest in making himself an object of worship, but in calling us to and empowering us in the life of faithful children of God. As we carry this cross of God's love day by day, endeavoring to meet each person or situation with God's love, learning little by little what it really means to deny ourselves, to die to the old, unsatisfying, false self, and be born to our true, God-created self, we find that we are on the road to new life, the path toward resurrection. Not somewhere in the distant future or in some far-off heaven, but now in each precious moment of life, here on this precious earth, God's good creation, with these precious lives of ours.

I would like to close with this tender and thoughtful poem by Wendell Berry, called "Amish Economy":

*We live by mercy if we live.  
To that we have no fit reply  
But working well and giving thanks,  
Loving God, loving one another,  
To keep Creation's neighborhood.*

*And my friend David Kline told me,  
"It falls strangely on Amish ears,  
This talk of how you find yourself.  
We Amish, after all, don't try  
To find ourselves. We try to lose  
Ourselves"--and thus are lost within  
The found world of sunlight and rain  
Where fields are green and then are ripe,  
And the people eat together by  
The charity of God, who is kind  
Even to those who give no thanks.*

(A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-