

“He’s my cross to bear.” My mother would sigh, whenever she would say this. My older brother, Richard had been a troubled kid. As an adult, the military had given him a medical discharge, after discovering that he was mentally ill, with schizophrenia. He was fine as long as he took his medication. But, of course, then he felt fine, so he thought that he didn’t need it. It’ was a vicious cycle. Mostly, Richard chose self-treatment with marijuana, which was illegal at the time, and later with other, even more potent drugs. Whenever mom spoke of him to her friends, she often concluded the conversation with, “He’s my cross to bear.”

Many of us have heard these words in the past. Some of us have even said them. At times they’ve referred to our acceptance of a situation that couldn’t be changed, but must be borne with patience and perseverance, in humility, by leaning on the strength of Christ. Sometimes, the words are uttered with a distinct air of martyrdom by people who hope to gain the admiration of others for their humble acceptance of such a burden. Most often, however, it's a complicated mixture of the two. I think my mom probably fit into this last category.

With this common use of Jesus’ words, occurring in the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark, we’re left to wonder what Jesus really meant when he said, “*Deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me.*” Crucifixion was an ordinary means of execution used for those of the lower classes: slaves, foreigners, traitors, and thieves. The process could take days, beginning with torture in both cruel and public ways. Then, the “guilty party” was forced to carry their own cross to the site of their further torture and death. Although we’ve domesticated the cross, making it pretty and sanitary, it was a very real metaphor for the gospel writers, and for those of their time.

Jesus seems to sense that his time is growing shorter... that his ministry and actions are swiftly driving him toward suffering, death, and the cross. Maybe he’d love to hear a word from God telling him that he didn’t need to go through with it all. “Remove this cup from me,” would be Jesus’ prayer in Mark 14. Perhaps this is why he reacts so strongly to Peter’s rebuke.

It's interesting, however, that Jesus criticizes Peter for thinking like a human being, even though that's exactly what he is. Yet, Jesus has been trying to teach Peter and the rest of his disciples to move past such self-centered, human ways of thinking. Jesus wants all of his followers, including us, to understand that, "survival of the fittest," is not God's way. In fact, Jesus offers an entirely different way... The way of the cross... which is exactly the opposite of our very human ways. The way of the cross means putting others first.

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."* Jesus doesn't say exactly what our own crosses are meant to be, but if we look at his teaching, we can see that they must have something to do with love... beginning with how God loves us... as well as how we love God... and others.

Pastor Brian Stoffregen suggests that for a better understanding we should look a little more closely at a few of the Greek words. For instance, the word translated as "pick up" or "take up" can also mean to "carry," as criminals were forced to carry the cross of their execution through town. It was a public display of their guilt, resulting in ridicule and scorn from the towns people. So, "carrying" our cross, means a public display of our faith, even when we're afraid of the response of others.

The way of the cross means moving past our very human ways of thinking, by losing our attachments to self-preservation and shifting our focus to the needs of others. The way of the cross means giving up our privilege, be it "white privilege," "male privilege," "wealth" or "education" privilege, and all other systems that favor one people over another. The way of the cross means participating in God's kingdom... God's rule... in ways that aren't always popular in today's culture. The way of the cross means openly sharing our faith, not just on Sunday, but with every word and action we take... each and every day.

Our cross purposes begin in those places where God calls us to be..... places of brokenness and suffering, where our own gifts might be beneficial to someone. Our cross purposes are in places where we're called to take a stand on behalf of others; lifting up our voices against injustice, rejecting the violence of the world, emptying ourselves... giving up our

own words, places, and position, so that someone else might be able to rise up and find their own voice. Our cross purposes are always driven by love... the love of God... and of others... both of which are always intertwined.

My mom's cross to bear wasn't her long suffering or disappointment in her only son. No, her cross purpose was to love him unconditionally, to help him in whatever way she could – even if it meant tough love at times. The cross she carried... enabled her to be present for him in every shadow and valley of his life, offering comfort, being an advocate, and freely giving him the blessing of her forgiveness, earned or otherwise.

As we follow Jesus, we respond to our cross purposes, by seeking to serve others... by living in the world and completing every activity in the name of Christ... sleeping in the name of Christ... eating in the name of Christ... shopping in the name of Christ... driving in traffic – in the name of Christ... learning in the name of Christ... and playing in the name of Christ. How different could our world be, if we learned to do every activity in the name of Christ... if we remembered that every vocation and every task is holy.

Our cross purposes may have a cost, but it's not one that we would seek or imagine. Taking up our cross is not about patiently enduring suffering for sufferings sake. Nor is it abuse or oppression of any kind. God's work of costly grace brings new life to the world by being present for us all in every shadow and valley of our lives, offering comfort, being an advocate, and freely giving – to us – God's blessing of forgiveness – earned or otherwise.

Jesus' words, today, may sound like bad news..., but there is good news here! Through the cross of Christ, new life can, and does, break forth. God's will continues to come among us – on earth as it is in heaven... even in the midst of our own self-centered ways... in the midst of a world-wide pandemic... in the midst of division and violence... and in the midst of ever-present death. Jesus invites each of us to take up and carry our crosses... to follow him with our actions and our words.

Theologian, Darrell Lackey, notes *“What we speak to God, whether out loud or in our hearts, whether formal or off the cuff, our prayer becomes the movement of our bodies and spirit. We pray and we are our prayers.”*

I close this morning with a prayer written by Cameron Belim of Seattle, Washington, called **“Prayer for a Pandemic.”** Perhaps this prayer will help us ponder our own very human ways, and help us to wonder... *“How have we (or how will we) respond to Jesus’ invitation... and our own cross purposes?”*

Let us pray:

May we who are merely inconvenienced  
Remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors  
Remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have the luxury of working from home  
Remember those who must choose  
between preserving their health or making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close  
Remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips  
Remember those that have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market  
Remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home  
Remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country,  
let us choose love.

During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,  
Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.

Amen.