

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent: Mark 8:31-38

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Many years ago, my sisters and I were staying with my grandmother. My grandfather had just died after a prolonged ordeal involving a particularly nasty brand of cancer, and we were camped out in my grandma's apartment as a sort of base camp for family obligations. Now, Grandma Sue and Papaw Doc had been divorced for many years by this time, so while she was grieving, it wasn't exactly the raw grief you might expect from someone who had just lost their spouse. In fact, they'd both been romantically entangled with a number of others since their own wedded bliss had come to an end. Nevertheless, it was Grandma Sue's duty to show up as the regal Southern woman she was, shed an admirable tear, and receive well-meaning mourners like Vivien Leigh surrounded by courtiers. This was her cross to bear.

A sidebar here about names. Like Abram and Sarai and Cephus and Saul, too, we all go through periods of life when our names change, sometimes for sacred reasons, and sometimes just 'cause. Papaw Doc, Billy Richard by birth, was a veterinarian, so everyone just called him Doc. About the time he started having grandkids, someone's sick sense of humor connected the hillbilly Papaw to Doc as a play on the Haitian despot Papa Doc and it stuck. Also, Grandma Sue is sure to be rolling in her grave at this very moment because I'm calling her that. She loved being a grandma, but she hated being called grandma in public. Once at a very full buffet, she was so tired of all nine million of her brood yelling "grandma, grandma" over and over again right there in front of all sorts of people that could *hear* us, Grandma Sue mistakenly told us mischievous grandkids that we could call her anything we wanted except for "grandma." We took her up on the offer with everything from Granny PooPoo to, inexplicably, Charlie. While we came back to those often, the one that really stuck was, simply, Lady.

So, Papaw Doc was waiting somewhere in a wooden box, ready to be delivered to a funeral home where the rest of the mourners were already gathering and a curtain off to one side was still pulled shut, marking off the wing where the family could emerge with dignity and privacy both intact. Lady had been ready to leave the base camp apartment for a while and was getting impatient with us grandkids that were only halfway invested in getting ourselves dressed in full funeral regalia. I had a cowlick that just wouldn't go down. The twins were ready to go in every way except they both needed to go to the bathroom just as their tights got pulled all the way up. And my oldest sister was doing her best to wrangle all of us alongside Lady, when the unthinkable happened. Lady looked down and saw that, even though we were well passed Labor Day, Amy had the audacity to wear white shoes with her funeral outfit. The shame of it all. This was one insult to the day too far, and Lady threw up her arms and stormed into the backroom for a moment to cool off. While she was back there, I remember hearing her holler, presumably at God, "it's just too many crosses to bear!" When she emerged a few moments later, she gathered us up, dressed to the eights, and bore us all the way to that curtained mourning wing. We were, of course, the first ones there. Everyone else in the family had their own crosses to bear that day, and it was no small miracle that we made it through with only one person among us buried.

But throughout that day, and many others like it, I heard the same phrase more times than I could count. "It's my cross to bear." Now, I've heard this said about all sorts of things. From cowlicks to white shoes to seasonal allergies or hard days or pandemics that won't go away. And, sure, maybe there's something to identifying those things that make us suffer with a cross to be borne, but it's all metaphor. I think a lot of us know that. Some of us even say it tongue-in-cheek, like the actor who said with a smirk that the attention, wealth, and love interests that came with fame were his crosses to bear.

But here's the thing. When Jesus tells his followers to take up their cross and follow him, we're fairly certain he didn't mean that as a metaphor, and we're fairly certain they didn't hear it that way either. When Jesus says "take up your cross and follow me," they may not know that he's going to be crucified just yet, but

they do know he's pointing them in a very dangerous direction. Crucifixion was a known punishment for a very particular set of crimes, crimes against the empire, crimes of treason, sedition, and anything that had the potential to threaten the status quo of the empire. When Jesus tells them that following him is their cross to bear, what they hear is that the road ahead will be very dangerous indeed. Not because someone wore the wrong colored shoes or their bed head just couldn't be fixed. But because, where they're headed, they will meet death because of what they stand for, because of who they follow, because of what they believe. And what is all that? Well, of course, they follow Jesus, the Christ, the one who preaches a king greater than any emperor with a kingdom that is both greater than and encompassing all the empires of this world. They stand for grace and love that threatens to upend social stratifications. They believe the poor are worth more than the wealthy, the meek stronger than the powerful, the masses greater than the thrones. It's no wonder, when these people led by God-Among-Us, it's no wonder the empires of this world took them all to the grave via cross or sword or spear or flame. "Take up your cross and follow me" was as much a warning as it was a command, and still, they followed.

It's not entirely clear when this phrase became a metaphor, though there is a shift fairly early. Both Acts and 2 Corinthians make reference to other forms of suffering as a means to share in Jesus' suffering. But to be clear, we're not talking about annoying grandkids getting on your last nerves here. We're talking about public flogging for the sake of the Gospel, real and physically excruciating persecution at the hands of the powerful. That's their cross to bear, but it's already started to change at that point. That wasn't a cross and it wasn't necessarily death, though it was severe. But by around the 1500s, "one's cross to bear" had taken on the more metaphorical meaning we're accustomed to today. Your indentured servitude, your poverty, even that pesky king next door could be your cross to bear. It was still suffering, maybe sometimes even dangerous, but it was a little more distant, still, from the grave. It's by this time, too, that we start to hear about other people's crosses to bear as assigned by outside observers. Like, the poor, for example. Poverty was pretty universally accepted to be a state one wanted to avoid, but rather than assisting those in poverty, it was common enough to say of the poor that poverty itself was their cross to bear. Poverty's a pity, the reasoning goes, but if the suffering that comes with poverty can connect them to the suffering Christ endured, then surely there's a nobility to their detestable state. It had become easy enough to identify someone else's cross for them and then nail them to it. I say "the reasoning goes" and not "the reasoning went" because, though the idea is an old one, we still hear it today. And we hear it in all sorts of contexts. The literal flipped into metaphor and then stretched to allow for all sorts of despicable inversions.

If you haven't picked up on it already, I think there's a great disservice we've done with the aid of time and history. We've let this grave statement by Jesus, this painful and revolutionary warning morph into something nearly unrecognizable. His disciples wouldn't have understood in that moment that Jesus really just meant that some things in life will be inconvenient. They would've understood this as a time to begin preparing themselves to give themselves over to God completely, even if, even when it meant that death itself would come.

Two quick caveats. The first being that our tradition has done some weird things with glorifying suffering. Is it possible to understand and maybe even appreciate something more of God's gift to us with Jesus's death on the cross through our own suffering? Yes, of course. But those places where our tradition begins to require suffering to somehow earn the gift of salvation, in that we've gone astray. There's a story of an 18th Century preacher who was preparing for a trip, and one of his friends asked if he would be visiting his estranged wife. He replied, "Sir, I will gladly bear any cross, but I will not seek one out." Suffering will come enough on its own without us going looking for it.

Now, Jesus did tell his followers to take up their cross and follow him, yes. Other Gospels even use the word “bear.” But this idea that one must bear their cross alone, like the poor must bear it without the help of others or you must deal with twins with half as many shoes as they have feet, without asking for help, that’s another perversion of the story. Remember that, while Jesus is literally carrying his cross through the streets of Jerusalem, Simon of Cyrene lends a hand and carries the weight for a spell. Don’t seek out crosses, and when they come, don’t carry them alone.

I know that may be a lot of weight to lay on top of a common phrase, but I think it’s important to be aware of just how we use our story, and even how Biblical-sounding language isn’t always all that Biblical. Especially now in Lent when we’ve each given something up or taken something on, especially in this year’s Lent when the world has taken away so much and we’re stuck enduring and surviving and bearing a whole lot, especially now, it’s important to know the distinction. Is this year, this pandemic, this Zoom stuff, maybe even this sermon, something to suffer through? For some, yes, it absolutely is. But is it your cross to bear? Biblically speaking, no, it’s not. Your arthritis, your gout, your sleepless nights, your Covid vaccine delay, your shrinking paychecks, your absent paychecks, your loved ones lost, your pain, your anger, your boredom, your growing distance from faith or friends or anything beyond the front sidewalk, those are terrible. But they are not your cross.

Our cross to bear is the risk we take everytime we live for the Gospel of Jesus Christ instead of the means of this world. If you live for Christ in a way that puts your station, your comfort, or even your safety on the line, then that is your cross to bear. Again, it’s not about seeking this out. But, when the time comes, when ICE comes knocking, when the empire and its treasuries roar their superiority over God, when lies stand between evil and justice, when this world demands the People of God stand in the rift and either bend or lay down their very selves, it’s then that we have our cross to bear.