

Growing up in the Bible Belt, I was told I had a lot of crosses to bear. My eyes that traded off being lazy? Cross to bear. Curly hair? Cross to bear. Divorced parents? Mowing the lawn in 110 degrees? That one substitute teacher that was always certain I was goofing off? All of 'em crosses to bear. I learned pretty quickly that my supposed crosses to bear were all those not so great things that were unfair or beyond my control. It was never just bad luck or chaos or even justifiable consequences. Nope. Crosses to bear. And that was a good thing! See, if I wanted to be a good Christian, I needed to do what Jesus said and bear my cross. Given all the crosses I bore, I must've been a really good Christian. I didn't hear as much of that once we landed in the Episcopal Church, but that doesn't mean I never heard it. There was an older man at the church who was an artist. He was single and friendly and taught painting classes on the side, which my sister took until it came out that he was gay. At that point, my mom pulled my sister from his class because she didn't think she could trust him with her. I'll let that one percolate for a second.

I wasn't aware enough to know what gay meant, I just knew that he was nice and now my sister wasn't allowed to see him. I asked mom what happened, and all she said was, "he has a particular cross to bear." And that was that. I knew what crosses to bear meant, so I filled in the blanks and figured he must've had a really bad stroke of luck. Funny thing is, I ran into him years later just as kind and friendly as ever. He had a grace to him, never mentioned those art classes or my mom. By then, I knew a little more about the world and my brain flashed back to those memories I'd long forgotten. And it clicked. Mom didn't want us around him because we might catch his cross to bear, and then where would we be? Maybe he did bear a cross or two, but gay wasn't it.

Thanks to folks like him, I've come to understand crosses differently. There's a tendency among Christians to assign crosses for other people to bear. There was a lot of homophobia where I grew up, so if you were gay, that was a stroke of particularly bad luck, so it was a particularly big cross. Believe it or not, that was the more progressive take because it didn't assume being gay was a choice, it was just the luck of the draw, and what a shame that luck was. But there were others, too. The woman that told me my curly hair was a cross to bear had curly hair herself, and she hated it, straightened it, fought it every morning and lost when humid days turned it all to frizz. If it was bad for her, it had to be bad for me, too. The more I think about it, the more I realize all those crosses were two things: 1) they weren't things I chose and 2) they said more about the person assigning them than they did about me.

When Jesus tells the Disciples to take up their cross, there's some important things going on. First, it's their choice. Take up your cross and follow me, or don't. It's your call. But if you do choose to follow me, there's gonna be consequences. A lot of folks take that cross metaphorically, but I don't think Jesus meant it that way. I don't think the cross Jesus tells the Disciples to pick up is a bad grade in history class or that driver that nearly hit you at the five-way. I think Jesus is saying that if the disciples choose this life, they're also choosing their deaths. As it turns out, the Disciples met their respective ends kinda like Henry VIII's wives. Sidebar: we need a sort of "divorced-beheaded-survived" mnemonic for the Apostles. I can never remember which one died which way, except Peter: crucified upside down because he didn't think he was good enough to die the same way Jesus did. But yeah, following Jesus, they knew what they were getting into. Things got worse and worse, and almost to a person, they stuck with it knowing what waited for them.

As for the second part, who assigns the crosses and what does it say about them? While Jesus and the Apostles chose the lives that would lead to their deaths, their oppressors chose the means of execution: typically deaths reserved for traitors, especially those crucified by the Romans. The Word of God and its followers were treasonous, wimpy, and lazy. Better to kill them than let them infect the rest of us. All that to say, when a man in

church saw my wrinkled pants and a mom raising four kids on a teacher's salary, I don't think he was right to say that poverty was our cross to bear.

People love to look at others' misfortune, or perceived misfortune, and label it in a way that makes sense to them. Sometimes that comes from a place of deep kindness, an attempt to understand someone very different from themselves. But sometimes that comes from a place of meanness with very little empathy. If we're trying to make sense of difference, we're going to stumble. But we'll keep trying until we know them and they know us and love grows in the space between. Maybe there's an unspoken offer to help if they ever get tired. But it's not our place to label their difficulty as a cross. We can't choose that for them. Also, whatever it is might not even be a cross! It might not even be inconvenient. Take the artist that tutored my sister. He didn't see being gay as a cross at all. But in those meaner places, we do a lot of damage with the crosses we assign. See, if I get to decide what each person's cross is, I've got a lot of power. I get to look at all the things I don't like and name them as crosses, that is, punishments. Got a cross to bear? Must be your own fault, and now you've gotta deal with the consequences. And because it's your fault, those consequences are justified. Jim Crow was a great example of this. Ukraine in Soviet Russia. Even modern Palestine. You can look at someone else's suffering and shrug your shoulders so that "it's just their cross to bear" really means "what a shame." Where and when you were born (and who you were born to) is enough to assign crosses. Black in 1950s Alabama? Cross to bear. Starving because your government decided you're disposable? Cross to bear. Dying at a rate 20 times higher than your oppressor? Cross to bear. What a shame. Then shrug your shoulders, move on, and justify more crosses still.

Down in Oklahoma, there's a mighty cross on display right now. The official statement is that a non-binary kid named Nex Benedict died the day after they got in a fight with other students. I point out that that's the official statement because something's rotten in Oklahoma. The official statement has changed a few times already, which can happen for good reason, but it contradicts what people who were there say happened. It also uses language that deliberately shifts the blame onto the victim. The official statement downplays the intense bullying Nex received leading up to their death. I guess all that bullying must've just been their cross to bear. See how it makes it sound almost ok? It's a shame, but they must've done something to deserve it. Nex chose that cross and with it the inevitable punishment, too. See how fast this gets twisted? The official statement simply says Nex got in a fight in the bathroom. Nex said while being bullied in the bathroom, they threw water on their attackers, which set off the vicious beating. For what it's worth, Nex was in the bathroom of their assigned sex in accordance with a new Oklahoma law. School officials then downplayed the attack and didn't provide necessary medical attention or call the police. They did suspend Nex, though, and an Oklahoma senator called them "filth." Using the "correct" bathroom was just Nex's cross to bear. Nex died the following day. The official statement claims there is no connection between this otherwise healthy child, the beating they received, and their death within the next 24 hours. Mysterious, spontaneous death: just another cross to bear.

Now look, I understand that the whole situation and what exactly happened, I understand all that's still getting unpacked. I understand there's probably going to be some video coming out or autopsy reports or interviews with the kids that did the beating. I understand the story isn't settled. But I also understand that this is happening in a part of the world that really likes to assign crosses to others and then excuse what people do with those crosses. That's not as clear as I'd like to be, so I'll say it differently. Nex was bullied relentlessly for being non-binary. Nex was beaten by their peers. Nex died the next day. Meanwhile, official reports keep searching for ways Nex must've deserved it. Even if the other students didn't mean to kill them, why was it excusable for Nex to get beaten up? Why was it acceptable for them to be bullied? Why keep Nex on that cross while we search for a reason for it to be okay that they're up there in the first place?

This isn't just an Oklahoma problem. We're seeing moves around the country to single out and condemn people for who they are. It seems we've got an inexhaustible store of crosses just waiting for bodies to hang on 'em. And then once they're up there, we ask what they must've done to deserve crucifixion. All this stuff with Nex isn't isolated and it is predictable. When we assign crosses, we create a need for victims. And when we supposedly need victims, we create them from the same groups we always do: immigrants, minorities, and the poor. Our country's full of cross makers priming us to name their victims. The more talk there is about how bad any group is, the more likely we'll see them attacked, killed, even crucified. It's no wonder the Jim Crow era made such a strong connection between the cross and the lynching tree. Vitriol only stays verbal for so long. Eventually it will find an outlet. The new cross might be a barbed wire fence, an assault rifle, a beating in a bathroom. Hate will always find a way to come out. But that's just a cross to bear. What a shame.

Now, I know folks in this room are all over the spectrum of accepting or rejecting the societal norm of a gender binary. I get that. And for the most part, I'm ok with that. You get to think and believe whatever you like. But regardless of where you land, I ask you this one thing: please, please, please, please, please be careful how you express your opinions. What you say has consequences. Who you blame when tragedy strikes has consequences. Your children, your grandchildren, the kids you see on Sunday mornings, they're listening. And kids will do what they think the adults in their life want, or at least what we'll allow. All those kids need protecting from hate. Don't poison a kid so badly they beat another student for being who they are. And don't poison a kid so badly they think they deserve those beatings. These are not crosses to bear. They are crosses assigned. Let them be kids. Let them play with sandboxes and gender and whatever they fancy (as long as they aren't running around with scissors and striking matches).

That line from Jesus is the recognition that following him means, if we do it well, there are hard places we'll have to go. And maybe the hardest place is between the overwhelming power of destruction and its victims. We literally could be killed there. Our history is full of martyrs in that place where allies act as shields. To say everyday misfortune -- or even just difference -- is a cross to bear diminishes our call, diminishes the true cross, and diminishes the suffering of the innocent. Our faith could very well lead us to that place, and we choose to take up the cross anyway. Our job is not constructing crosses for others. It's cutting them down. The world doesn't need more innocent martyrs. It needs more people standing in the breach between oppressed and oppressor. That's not misfortune. That's not inconvenience. That's the reality of our cross to bear.