

Choosing the Cross
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Jesus once said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." [1] As we delve deeper into Lent, I often think of these words. What does it mean to take up our crosses and follow in the footsteps of Jesus every day of our lives?

When I think of the cross, I think about the sorrow of the crucifixion and that the Romans reserved this punishment for political insurrectionists and rebellious slaves. I think about how much I have struggled with penal substitutionary atonement, which is the fancy theological way of saying that the cross is punishment for sin applied not to deserving humanity but to the innocent scapegoat Jesus, and that the result of this sacrifice is God's forgiveness and reconciliation with all of us. [2] I don't buy that penal substitutionary atonement is the heart of the cross, never have and never will.

When I think of the cross, I'm sometimes left speechless, which is a little rare for me. But I think it's a profound example of unconditional love, a demonstration of how far God is willing to go to identify with humanity, to truly share our common lot. If we journey with Jesus to the cross and if we take up our own crosses and follow him, we are actively choosing to struggle and that's not easy. We are choosing to walk through darkness, grounded in the love of God. Like Jesus, part of our struggle is embracing people who may reject us in the end. For in journeying to the cross, Jesus acts as a moral exemplar. Even at the end of his life, he embraced the thieves crucified on either side of him. Jesus' life and death embody reaching out to and loving other people.

One moment in my life where I chose to take up my cross and thereby embrace another person happened when I was a hospital chaplain at The Cleveland Clinic. With patients coming from all over the world, we chaplains had sensitivity training to prepare us for our visitations. One of the groups we spoke about was the Amish. Ohio actually has the largest population of Old Order Amish in the country and though the Amish don't use any form of modern technology in their homes, they will sometimes go to area hospitals for medical care. I was advised that with the traditional gender roles in the Amish community it was likely that my visitation would be rejected. I was told that it would probably not go well if I tried to minister to an Amish man in particular.

Looking down at my patient list one day I noticed that a new patient on my surgical telemetry unit was an Amish man in his 70s. To be honest, I considered not going to visit thinking that he was going to reject me anyway since I'm a woman in my 20s, but I decided to just go after realizing that I couldn't avoid all the patients who may not approve of me. Deep down though, I was preparing myself for rejection.

I walked into his room and announced myself as the chaplain. With raised eyebrows this Amish man looked at me and then to his wife, sitting next to him in her traditional bonnet and dress and said, "Well, you don't look like a chaplain." I quickly stammered "Well I'm an intern here for the summer, and I saw you arrived here yesterday and wanted to check in". He then quietly asked me a question, "Are there a lot of women doctors at this hospital?" I didn't know where he was going with this and related that I see far more male doctors than female doctors around, but that there are, of course, female doctors. He looked down at his lap and said, "Well, my doctor is a woman and I was just wondering."

I tried to put myself in his shoes. Here he was, an Amish man in his 70s with advanced pancreatic cancer. He was far from the beautiful countryside of Sugarcreek and instead in downtown Cleveland. Here he was, a man who normally wears black pants and a blue shirt and yet he was wearing a hospital gown and had a female doctor examining his body. That must have been mortifying for him.

Here was a man from a sect that rejects modern life, who drives a horse and buggy down windy country roads, and he was surrounded by technology, with machines beeping and distributing medicine into his IV and a TV right in front of his bed. He might as well have been in a different country with strange ways and strange customs. And I felt nothing but sympathy for him.

To my surprise, we ended up speaking for a long time. We spoke about his cancer and the sadness he felt about leaving his family behind. He asked me if I would pray for him and he reached out to hold my hand. And we prayed together, the three of us. After my prayer, I raised my eyes to look at this man and his wife and saw that they were both crying and they thanked me as I left the room. I felt completely overwhelmed by this Amish couple actually accepting me. The thing is, sometimes we go into new situations and expect the worst. In the spirit of self preservation, we put up walls to keep others at a distance.

Though some people accepted Jesus with open arms and glad hearts, Jesus also experienced profound rejection. In Luke, Jesus encounters some Pharisees who inform him that Herod wants to kill him. Jesus knew that his ministry was threatening because he spoke the truth to power and called people to be in right relationship. Like the prophets who came before him, Jesus knew that he would share a similar fate—that he would be persecuted for what he said and did.

So in line with the prophetic tradition, Jesus laments over Jerusalem. He lifts up his voice, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing."^[3] He could have just steered clear of the lion's den. Jesus had some support in Galilee and would have been much safer ministering to people in that region. And yet he traveled back to Jerusalem time and again, he kept showing God's love knowing that he would be persecuted but doing it anyway.

Theologian Dorothee Soelle says that Jesus "left his Father's house of his own free will. It was his own decision to leave Galilee, where he undoubtedly had stronger support. In the end he went freely towards his own catastrophe, which we call the cross."^[4] Jesus actively chose the cross, his own catastrophe. And what's remarkable is that despite his difficult journey and the difficult choice he made in the form of the cross, he continued to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God until the very end of his life. Even if people rejected him, he kept going.

That summer of hospital chaplaincy turned my assumptions about people upside down. The one person I thought would reject me as soon as I walked into his room literally reached out to hold my hand. And other people I thought would be open to me just weren't. People can surprise you, and it's hard to put yourself out there when you've experienced any form of rejection in the past, as I believe most of us have.

But there's something inside of us that can help us reach out to people regardless of their response. Like Jesus, we want to lament and curse people and yet gather them together and love them. There was something that drove me to that Amish man. Some part of me wanted to show him the love of a God who desires nothing less than gathering all of creation under Her wings and protecting Her children from the harsh world.

I think this is what taking up our crosses daily is about. It's about embodying Christ's call to reach out to others. Theologian Miroslav Volf speaks of the Christian call to love "the other" in his work *Exclusion and Embrace*. Volf argues for Christians to take the dangerous step of opening ourselves to the other, writing that "at the core of the Christian faith lies the persuasion that the 'others' need not be perceived as innocent in order to be loved, but ought to be embraced even when they are perceived as wrongdoers."^[5] That's what Jesus' lament is about. Of course he was angry that the religious elite sought to punish him. In his eyes, they were guilty of exploiting the people but he speaks of his desire to embrace them in spite of themselves.

Looking to the example of Jesus and trying to follow him, we know that we will struggle and that there will be people who reject us along the way. But we have much to learn from the cross and the journey Jesus made that led to his crucifixion. Dorothee Soelle said that "When Christians meditate together on the cross, they are not interested in a contemplative enjoyment of all that Christ has done for us. Their purpose is participation, identification. Let us choose the cross, the struggle."

The cross, the central symbol of our faith points to a moment of profound weakness and sacrifice on one hand, and yet courage, perseverance, and awe-inspiring love on the other. As Christians we must consider the cross and what it all means, though this is a difficult task, "let us choose the cross, the struggle."^[6]

We can put ourselves out there and embrace others. And from my experience as a hospital chaplain called to minister to a sick and dying Amish man, I've learned that putting yourself out there is worth the risk of rejection. The next time I went to visit him; he'd already been released and was back home in Amish country. I don't know how much longer he lived, but he taught me that we all have a choice to make in this life. We can exclude ourselves from one another and from the rest of the world, or we can open our arms to embrace others. We can embrace others even if we don't fully understand them or agree with them. Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."^[7] May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Luke 9:23.

[2] S. Mark. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, 21.

[3] Luke 13:34.

[4] Dorothee Soelle, *Choosing Life*, 54

[5] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 85.

[6] Dorothee Soelle

[7] Luke 9:23