

Take Up Your Cross
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"Take Up Your Cross" Homily, Pilgrim Church UCC, March 1, 2015—Second Sunday in Lent
(Mark 8:31-38)

We're in the midst of Lent, quite a holy time in the Christian Liturgical Year. I love Lent—there's no pretenses, no masking the hard aspects of our faith, no pretending that life is always simple and neat and easy. When Jesus tells his disciples what will happen to him in the Gospel of Mark—suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection—Peter quickly takes him off to the side and rebukes Jesus. Keep in mind that Peter had just declared, "You are the Messiah" and now he's realizing that Jesus' description is not the kind of Messiah the disciples have in mind. Jesus will not be a simple, neat, and easy Messiah.

At this time, some folks thought that the Messiah would be a supernatural figure who would come to secure the victory of the Jewish nation over its oppressors—this would be a miraculous event culminating in war and victory for the righteous. Others thought that the Messiah would tell people the will of God as God's spokesperson, even greater than Moses. Some thought the Messiah would be a priestly leader who could provide authoritative interpretation of God's law. Finally, the Messiah could be a David-like King—a political leader who would once again establish Israel as a sovereign state.

No one thought that the Messiah would suffer, be rejected, and die on a Roman cross. It's too much for Peter to take. It's almost as if Peter is saying, "Don't you know that you're scaring everybody, Jesus? Don't say these things, please." Peter's reaction probably resonates for all of us on some level. After all, do we like to talk about suffering, rejection, and death in church very often? Look at attendance at Good Friday services versus Easter Sunday and the answer is pretty clear about where we prefer to focus our attention. And that's completely normal, it's understandable. But when we ignore the difficult stuff, when we ignore the suffering, rejection, and death aspects of our faith (as Jesus outlines in Mark's Gospel) and our lives in general, what do we lose? That's what I'd like to focus on today. Perhaps we lose perspective, the opportunity for solidarity with those who suffer, and a deeper connection with Jesus.

Losing perspective. If we deny or ignore the hard aspects of life, then perhaps it cheapens the good aspects. It's been a terrible February in the greater Boston area. Bad winter weather has been nearly impossible to ignore—with all of us dealing with snow and ice and ice dams and leaky roofs and slippery commutes to work and snow days and on and on. We can do our best to ignore the mess or we can engage with this awful weather to put some things into perspective. For the most part, we have homes that we can worry about and cars that we can navigate on icy roads. Many of us have jobs that we may be late to. Some of us have kids who may be home from school more than is good for them. It's not to diminish that these past few weeks have been rough. But engaging with the difficulties can also put our relative inconvenience into perspective. Are we in such bad shape? Should we classify this as deep suffering? Can we use this experience to yearn for spring and appreciate it all the more when it arrives? Engaging with the hard stuff helps us put our lives into perspective and appreciate the good times all the more.

What else do we lose if we don't engage with the difficult aspects of life? We lose the opportunity to stand in solidarity with those who suffer. Francis Spufford, the British writer, discusses what happens when a friend may confess something to you. Now, confession is a central element of Lent—we have Prayers of Confession every Sunday to acknowledge that Lent is a time for repentance, to turn and return to God. Spufford writes, "If you tell somebody

that, as a decent person, they cannot have done anything questionable, you may mean to be nice, but you are in reality denying them sympathy. You are refusing to go to them where they are, you are declining to join them in the emotion they are finding painful.”[1]

Some examples: your friend calls you and says that her cancer’s back and she just can’t take the anger she feels and keeps lashing out at her family. And you immediately say—well, I’m sure that it’s still treatable and your family can just deal with your outbursts, they’ll be fine. Your brother calls you and tells you that he had an out of control fight with his wife last night and it got violent. And you immediately say—well, I’m sure it was the first and last time that will ever happen. Don’t worry about it, I’m sure that you’re sorry. Your son or daughter comes home and confesses that they bullied a child in their class. And you immediately say—well, I’m sure that it wasn’t that bad, your classmate needs to get a thicker skin anyway. These exaggerated responses to confession hopefully illustrate how denying someone’s feelings of pain makes us unsympathetic in the end. Because in so doing we are refusing to go where that person is emotionally. Can we stand in solidarity with people, even if they caused pain and need to confess, if we just deny the hard stuff? We lose so much and can’t be sympathetic in the end.

The third and final thing we lose when we ignore the difficult aspects of our lives is a deeper connection with Jesus. What makes Christianity a unique religion is the Incarnation. Because of Jesus’ and God’s connection, deep in God’s being—God gets suffering. A great articulation comes from the poet Christian Wiman, who wrote *My Bright Abyss* as he came to terms with cancer. Wiman wrote, “I don’t know what it means to say that Christ ‘died for my sins’ (who wants that? who invented that perverse calculus?) but I do understand—or intuit, rather—the notion of God not above or beyond or immune to human suffering, but in the very midst of it, intimately with us in our sorrow, our sense of abandonment, our hellish astonishment at finding ourselves utterly alone, utterly helpless.”[2] This theological reflection voices the conviction that God gets suffering, a claim we see most clearly when we fix our eyes on the cross. As Spufford writes, “Some people ask nowadays what kind of religion it is that chooses an instrument of torture for its symbol, as if the cross on churches must represent some kind of endorsement. The answer is: one that takes the existence of suffering seriously.”[3] Our religion takes suffering seriously, always has and always will.

At the end of the day, Peter’s response to Jesus is understandable. Who would want to hear their beloved teacher say that I’m going to suffer, be rejected, killed, and eventually rise again? Who would respond—well, sign me up for this adventure, can’t wait! Peter takes Jesus aside to try to reason with him, to talk some sense into him. Since Peter had just declared that Jesus is the Messiah in our story, he wants to remind Jesus what that means for people. You can’t go getting yourself killed, Jesus, not when you’re meant to save us.

Jesus responds harshly, and goes one step further: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”[4] Jesus is saying, guess what folks, you had better be prepared to suffer for the sake of the realm of God, just like me. Don’t be afraid to feel the consequences of loving humanity. Take the leap of faith.

It would be so easy for us to pass this off as hyperbole, as Jesus not really being serious. It’s easy for us to pass this off as intended for an ancient audience, many of whom would suffer martyrdom for the faith, and that it’s therefore not applicable today. Yet, I wonder how Christians in Syria and Iraq read Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Mark as they fear what ISIS will do next to their Christian communities. I wonder how it sounds for God’s children in that war-torn land to hear the words of Jesus: “And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”[5]

If we rationalize Jesus' difficult words away throughout the holy Season of Lent, we will lose so much. We won't put our inconvenient winter into perspective and wait with open hearts for the spring to come. We could ignore the confessions of people in pain, and therefore lose the chance to be sympathetic and stand in solidarity with them. We could lose the chance to find a deeper connection with Jesus if we ignore this foreshadowing and his eventual suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection simply because that's not how we want the Messiah to be either.

The beauty of our Christian faith is that God gets how hard life can be at times. Ours is a religion that takes the existence of suffering seriously—holding up the cross of Christ to prove it. No matter what we face, no matter what we may be up against, no matter how dark the night of our soul—God is present with us. God is there to love us with wild abandon, to bid us come and follow, and to save us for new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity can still make Surprising Emotional Sense*, 42.

[2] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 134

[3] Spufford, *Unapologetic*, 162.

[4] Mark 8:34.

[5] Mark 8:35.