

Gladly, The Cross-Eyed Bear
Mark 8: 27-38
Don Lincoln

Twenty years ago yesterday, Linda and I were standing at the guard station at the US Army base in Vicenza, Italy. We were checking in. Good friend Army National guard chaplain Ed Brandt – then pastor at Red Clay Presbyterian Church down in Hockessin – was fulfilling his two week summer guard duty in Italy – Ed had a knack for landing hardship assignments.

Linda and I and Ed's wife joined Ed for what we thought would be a leisurely, nine-day vacation in Italy. We were going to stay in the Army's hotel on base – a very reasonable accommodation – and have a chance to explore the countryside – and vineyards, churches, and great food.

On the way to the base from the airport we learned a plane had crashed into one of the twin towers in NYC – tragic news – but we couldn't fathom what would follow. We were chatting with the MP checking us in at the base, and suddenly up roared an army vehicle, and out leapt a lieutenant colonel who announced a second plane had hit the other tower – the US was under attack. Within seconds our Italian vacation was commandeered by soldiers in full tactical gear, front end loaders appeared with concrete barriers for the gate, and we were whisked to the hotel on base and told to stay there; we would be kept informed. Not quite the vacation we expected, as the world as we knew it changed.

Twenty years later, the September kick-off Sunday of my final year of full-time ministry – doesn't feel quite like a kick-off in the midst of a global pandemic. The choir loft has never been empty on this Sunday and while there's a good crowd in the pews, it's probably about 25% of what I would anticipate on this day. Everyone is masked, and we keep wondering, "How long O Lord?"

And about halfway between those two experiences – 9/11 and pandemic – we had an economic meltdown – the great recession – when the stock market lost half its value – the housing market collapsed – the world's economy went off the rails – about the same time Westminster committed itself to buy \$2.7 million dollars' worth of land next door.

How often I hear people say of themselves or others in challenging circumstances, well, this is the cross I or she or we must bear. You know how it is. Someone faces some kind of loss – major or minor; significant or insignificant – job, loved one, mobility – and someone else says, "O, that's the cross he must bear."

But **taking up a cross** is not something that happens **TO** you. Any more than my cross was the inconvenience of having our first dinner in Italy be at the Burger King on an Army base rather than a bistro in downtown Vicenza.

Any more than watching my 403(b) diminish by nearly 50% in 2009 was “bearing a cross.”

Any more than facing the reality that my last year of ministry at Westminster is unlikely to mimic anything close to my first 21 years here.

NO! This verse doesn't say anything like that at all. Jesus says, “If anyone wants to become my follower, let that person deny themselves; take up their cross, and follow me.” **This is about choosing to be on the way of Jesus.**

Many of us make a fundamental mistake when talking about the crosses we bear. We confuse the suffering inflicted upon us by the world – a suffering that comes without our choice or decision – with that which comes **because you or I have chosen to be faithful.**

A cross is not something that falls upon us because we are made of mortal flesh and live in a broken world. Taking up a cross is continuing to follow Jesus in whatever circumstances you and I find ourselves; being faithful to the ways of Jesus, in season and out of season.

It's clear the disciples weren't any better understanding Jesus than it appears at times we are.

This commendation to cross-bearing comes during the disciples' midterm exam on Christology. The exam has only two questions. 1) Who do people say that I am? 2) Who do you say that I am.

Question #1 is a relatively safe exercise. Christology done this way asks the student to report on what others think about Jesus – whether they be Pharisees or scribes, theologians like Karl Barth, your Sunday school teacher, or the general public. It's an academic exercise reporting second-hand information.

But Question #2 brings it home. “Who do **YOU** say that I am?” While the answer may not really reveal who Jesus is, **it will certainly reveal who the disciple is.** Peter's exclamation that Jesus is the Messiah appears to give hope that the disciples – or at least one of them – are starting to understand who Jesus is. Unfortunately, it is a false hope. Peter's “correct confession” – “You are the Messiah!” – is deceptive.¹

As soon as Peter makes that confession, Jesus begins to explain what the Messiah must undergo – what Jesus Himself will **choose to face for the sake of the salvation of the world.** Suffering, rejection, death. Immediately Peter says, “No way. Not you LORD! Not You.” Peter held those common notions that the Messiah would be strong, courageous, powerful – a winner by the world's standards – who above all would destroy Israel's enemies and set the nation free from its oppressors.

You may recall in the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus is tempted by Satan to think that God's anointed can avoid suffering, rejection and death; that God's rule means power without pain, glory without humiliation. This is Peter's way of thinking too; and Jesus, perhaps remembering that temptation in the wilderness in the beginning, identifies Peter's suggestion as a devil of an idea.²

Jesus' rebuke reminds Peter where the disciples belong. The words "Get behind me" in vs 33 and "follow after me" in vs 34 are identical in the Greek. Get behind me means exactly that. Fall in line. Follow my steps.

So, let me say it again. The cross Jesus invites you and me to take up refers not to the burdens life imposes on us from without, but refers rather to the redemptive – and often costly – and sometimes even painful action – voluntarily undertaken for others in the midst of whatever burdens we may be bearing. And we know what it looks like. To follow Jesus is to follow Him on a costly way.

The call to discipleship is not to a life of abundance and prosperity – it is a call to self-denial, perhaps even humiliation and suffering – for the sake of the other. For the sake of the outcast. For the sake of the broken. For the sake of the sidelined. For the sake of the ones who weren't born into money or station or circumstances or bloodline that lift them high above the rabble.

That's why in season and out of season – this church continues to do and be what we are called to do and be in the world. Feeding the hungry; clothing the naked; visiting the sick and imprisoned. Denouncing prejudice; welcoming the refugee; befriending the outcast; listening to and lifting up those on the margins. It's why Linda and I pledge every year to the budget of this church, as well as support other agencies and ministries near and far. To follow the way of Jesus. To expend ourselves for the sake of the other.

Whether we're living through an attack on this nation that killed more than 3,000 – or a pandemic that has taken the lives of 200 times as many in the US as died on 9/11 – we do not stop doing and being the church – pouring ourselves into worship – in whatever way we can; finding ways to house those without shelter; providing solace and comfort to those whose despair is great – giving of ourselves in whatever way we can to model God's grace and love for the whole world. Choosing the way of the cross. Losing our life perhaps along the way, that we might find out and gain the true life He promises.

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Andre Resner, *Feasting on the Gospels*, Commentary on Mark 8: 27-38.
2. Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation*, Commentary on Mark 8: 27-38.