



Sixth Sunday in Lent, Palm/Passion Sunday, March 25, 2018

Rev. Robert Brown & Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Daily Cross – Everyday Choices

Luke 9:22-23

Jesus said: 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'

23 Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

SERMON

(Sing verse one of "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back – no turning back.)

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke we find almost verbatim instructions from Jesus to his disciples about taking up their crosses and following him. Luke, however, adds the word "daily;" "take up your cross *daily* and follow me." This adverb stands out and gets us to wondering what Jesus and then, Luke, meant, and thinking about the cross differently.

Taking up a daily cross defines it as something *more* than the tool of execution. It also implies that Jesus took up *his* cross daily, not only on the Friday of his crucifixion. As I pointed out to the children, if the "cross" means making the choice to follow what God wants, then we see Jesus taking up his cross on Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem; he chose to celebrate with the city all that God had been doing, even when there was trouble on the horizon. **If the cross is choosing to follow God's will every moment, then Jesus must have done so on every day of Holy Week, and we can learn from his choices for taking up our own crosses.**

Movement One

On that first Palm Sunday, once the crowds had dispersed, the donkey had been returned, and people had picked up the palms and reclaimed their clothes – after Jesus had gone into the Temple and looked around – he went back to Simon the Leper's house at Bethany, a few miles outside of Jerusalem. The guests were just sitting down to dinner when

an unknown woman came in and poured that alabaster jar of expensive oil on Jesus. Apparently she wanted to honor him and to anoint him as God's ruler. By doing so, she also empathized with him in his death and foreshadowed his burial. Jesus could have succumbed to the pressure that evening, sided with her critics and declined her gift, but *he* chose to let someone do something beautiful and generous for him in his vulnerability. Jesus, who constantly gave of himself, accepted *her* gift and let it meet his need.

Therefore, taking up our crosses daily can be choosing to let others minister to us in our times of need: to visit us, to listen to us in our confusion or pain, to walk with us during trouble, and to help us experience God's loving presence.

I read the story of a young mother named Linda who, battling cancer, chose not to let it rule her life. She was determined to participate in the family vacation in the Cayman Islands and took scuba lessons in preparation. On the day of departure, she monitored her blood count and took her medication. She got on the plane, and once arrived, she rested, watching as her children enjoyed the water. On the diving day, she so wanted to see the reef with them, and the diving instructors offered to help her do so. Linda allowed them to devise a way. Her spine was too brittle to bear the tank, so they floated it above her, carefully weighting it until she was safely submerged. For nearly an hour, the family was able to explore the underwater wonders together.

When Linda's husband, Steve, tried to pay for their time and extra effort, the dive team turned him down, thanking *him and his family* for the day instead: "We know this reef so well, but seeing it through *her* courage and zest for life was incredible!"

(Sing verse two: The world behind me, the cross before me. The world behind me, the cross before me. The world behind me, the cross before me. No turning back – no turning back.)

Movement Two

On another night of Holy Week, following the Last Supper with his disciples, the group went out to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was feeling agitated and distressed. The reality of the coming arrest was sinking in. He needed to name his fears and struggle through all the possibilities with God. Maybe there was another way to accomplish God's greater good? So he asked a few of the disciples to stay awake with him while he went into private prayer, weighing out the consequences of various paths, and wrestling with God. Jesus could have succumbed to the pressure that agonizing night, because the disciples were less-than-present, but God was present, and helped Jesus face his death in advance, with dignity.

Therefore, taking up our crosses daily can be choosing to deal with our own deaths ahead of time and praying them through. This might be planning for our loved ones and making a will, or journaling our feelings and setting goals for the time remaining – resolving with God to go forward with courage.

The summer of 1939, noted German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with the decision of whether to return to Germany or stay in the United States at Union Theological Seminary, lecturing and studying, far removed from the conflict in his home country. The Nazi military was growing in strength, had annexed Austria and Poland, and the Resistance needed assistance. Through his prayerful deliberations, Bonhoeffer concluded: "I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany *after* the war unless I share the trials of this time *with* my people." He made his choice and boarded one of the last ships from New York City to Germany before war broke out in September.

Bonhoeffer's subsequent faith choices led to his execution on April 9, 1945. His last words: "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."

(Sing verse three: Though none go with me, I still will follow. Though none go with me, I still will follow. Though none go with me, I still will follow. No turning back – no turning back.)

Movement Three

Across the next twelve hours, Jesus stood before religious and secular authorities. The hearing before the Jewish Council was no genuine investigation. It was full of conflict, ulterior motives, political maneuverings, desperate accusations, and inconsistent testimony. The Council had arrested Jesus and put him on trial, but *he* decided when to be silent and when to speak. Eventually, Jesus acknowledged that he was the Messiah, and the high priest condemned him as deserving of death, though this sentence awaited the approval of the Roman Procurator. After the religious leaders had beat Jesus, they bound him and sent him on to Pilate, who during the interrogation was amazed by his self-control. Despite the noise of the accusers and the crowd, Jesus chose to listen to the Holy Spirit, which grounded him.

It was my privilege to baptize a veteran named David when I was the minister of First Christian Church in Fayetteville, NC. He told me how his faith journey began years before in a Vietnamese prison camp. His captors forbade him to speak under threat of reprisals. So David did not utter a word, but he 'spoke' by drawing crosses on the dirt floor. When he did so, they beat him. David was not a professed Christian at that time, but he told me that drawing the cross was the way he stayed in charge of himself, and that doing so had kept him alive.

Therefore, sisters and brothers, taking up our crosses daily can also be choosing when to speak and when to be silent during times of stress and conflict. Jesus reminds us that we need *not* get caught up in the frenzy of fear and violence, whatever the surrounding context; the Holy Spirit has been given to ground us as we follow Jesus.

(Sing verse four: Will you decide now to follow Jesus? Will you decide now to follow Jesus? Will you decide now to follow Jesus? No turning back – no turning back.)