

A Cross for Living

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, March 4, 2012.*

The Second Sunday in Lent.

Based on Mark 8:31-38.

As world religions go, Christianity can often become ethereal, churchy and on occasion downright nutty, just one of the reasons why there is a thin line between the extremely religious and the loony tunes! Religion gone wild can lead an otherwise fairly well-wrapped person to do and say some whacky stuff. Regardless of party affiliation, some of the recent conversations in our political process inevitably come to mind. Contraception, for example, comes to mind. Seriously? What century is this? Apparently religion remains a hot topic in this culture.

In the first part of this passage, which in some ways is the easier part, Jesus deals harshly with Peter, in fact calling him the devil, for putting his mind on human things more than on divine things. This passage has been used to teach that our intemperate, unmonitored love of worldly—that would be non-divine—things is wrong, a sin in fact. At the start of Lent every year we confess our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts. And every year, I am guilty as charged: given the choice between comfort and its absence, I will take comfort. Incidentally that is why I don't go camping. I have standards.

Despite that, most of us who try to follow Jesus do from time to time at least think about our lack of self-control about material things. But here's the truth: we play games with ourselves about stuff. Most of us define as intemperate the kind love we have for things that are slightly beyond our capacity to afford—thereby allowing our concern to be mostly about others, those who can afford what we can't.

I am not going to waste my breath talking too much about this because we all get it. Almost all of us have too much—gadgets, clothes, houses, wines, shoes, boats, and books. The best a sermon from this pulpit about materialism can do for you or for me is to make us a little more aware and a little more generous. If you are looking for two simple and immediate Lenten antidotes for this problem, here they are: try to give a bit more proportionally to the church and don't keep a bunch of junk you don't need that somebody else really could use. These actions could change your experience of Lent and transform your life.

And that is just the first and easy part of the gospel. Brace yourselves for the killer verse: "If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

It seems so simple and straightforward, but it isn't. I have known many people who have carried crosses around and almost to a person—forgive me, Lord—I have never been drawn to them. That is a nice way of saying I didn't like them and thought they embraced their martyrdom a bit more eagerly than I found attractive, often being reminded of the Dolly Parton line, "Honey, you need to get down off that cross; somebody else needs the wood." I have never understood exactly what that means, but whatever Dolly says I generally accept as truth. Anyone as bizarre looking and straight talking as she is deserves to be heard.

Though I don't have any idea what Jesus literally said about the cross—not surprisingly most of the language about the cross developed after the crucifixion—the cross is beyond a doubt our most powerful symbol. Nothing else says Christian with quite the same punch as the cross. The irony in how we came to bejewel and encrust crosses with our most precious metals and stones is a story for another day. Because Jesus died, because he was killed, coming to understand his death as the means of our salvation and, even more than that, to see it as exemplary for us was a natural development in the early church. For those who continued to follow him after his death, explaining how the messiah, the king of kings, the lord of lords, ended up getting killed was a challenge. The death, therefore, *had* to become highly significant and symbolic not as weakness but as the purchase price for our eternal life. It is totally sensible to me that in the midst of a culture that understood sacrifice and atonement, the followers of Jesus would adopt this meaning of the cross and indeed his whole life.

Perhaps there is another way of viewing our relationship to the cross, which doesn't have to make the other way wrong. Maybe each in its own way stretches us toward the mystery of God's desire to be in union with us. Over the centuries there have been people who by way of conscience and faith have had to literally take up their cross to die for Jesus, for the cause of Christianity. And though persecution of Christians for the sake of being Christians still exists in the world, it is rare and practically non-existent in the U.S. And for folks like us, taking up our cross and losing our lives for Jesus is a metaphor that has very little power. It is very unlikely that we shall have to put our lives on the line for the sake of Christ. We might find ourselves embarrassed for his sake or mocked by some; but real danger—not so much.

So maybe taking up our cross has to do with *living* for Christ rather than dying for him. If the lectionary grouping were left to me—that is, if I were the one to put the lessons together—the Old Testament lesson I'd put along side this admonishment of Jesus that we must take up our cross to follow him would be the story from Ezekiel in which the people of God are likened to dry bones. Do you remember it? It is a great story. Ezekiel imagines God looking out over a valley of dry bones, worthless, lifeless without dreams or visions or hopes and likens them to the people of God. And then the Lord God says, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. And you shall know that I am the Lord. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." Score one for living: all things being equal, God opts for a spirit-filled life of purpose and mission over a death, no matter how noble.

Let me tell how I see the first part of this passage as related to the last. One of the ways we become dead, as though we are dead, is by losing the very tenuous balance between holy and worldly things. We are not supposed to hate the things of the world; many material things deepen our joy and make our lives easier and freer. There is nothing wrong with that; there is plenty wrong with a few of us having so much while the remainder of the world has so little. But hold that for another day. The problem at hand comes when we mistake what truly matters—the things that last forever—for the things that in the end and increasingly at the moment have no real value. When we do that, we become like a dry bone in a lonesome valley. I don't really have to spell it out for you—for deep inside you know what I am talking about. We know when we are living like the dead; we know when work is less meaningful than it is exhausting; we know when a relationship is all pretense and no meaning; we know when our hearts thrill more about the latest promotion or the latest house or the latest toy than they do about our relationships with those whom we love the most. And when we live like that we know that we are not really living.

Lent, absolutely in the end a construct of the church but beyond a doubt potentially a blessed one, asks us to be alive. Lent asks us to face the areas of our lives that are dead; and if we are willing to breathe it in, Lent also offers a new blowing of the Spirit of God, blowing some life back into the parts of our existences which can look and feel to us like a bag of old dry bones. If we are ever called to die on a cross, I expect it will be obvious to us. In the meantime the living Christ is calling us to be alive.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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