

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

THE REV. LAURA MURRAY
February 25, 2018
Year B
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:22-30
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

I remember the first time I came into this church. It was for the Celebration of New Ministry a couple years ago, and even though I'd driven by countless times, I wasn't prepared for the inside view. The wood, the shape of the nave, its beautiful ceiling; for me, it really was love at first sight. But what really captivated me, what drew my eyes again and again during that service and those that followed, were the crosses.

Three crosses, one coming from the back to the front, one formed from the chancel to the top, and of course, the one actually suspended over the altar. The cross is foundational to this place—part if its very structure—a silent and yet formidable reminder for us every time we meet of who we are, and what, finally, must be at the center of our lives together.

“If any want to become my followers,” Jesus tells us, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Jesus' terms for being one of his disciples in Mark's gospel seems more of a warning than anything aimed at attracting a multitude, but here, on our second Sunday of Lent, it is good for us to remember what discipleship entails, because aligning ourselves with Jesus almost always requires letting go of who we once were. Taking up our cross; Losing a bit of our lives.

For the first disciples, like Peter, crucifixion on a Roman cross was a very real likelihood, and we've all heard stories of the early Christian martyrs like Perpetua who chose death over recanting her beliefs.

For these earliest disciples, alive when Christianity was just an offshoot sect of Judaism, claiming authority in the risen Christ over and above Caesar, was treasonous.

We have come a long way since the beginnings of our faith. Over the last couple millennia, the story of Jesus and his revolutionary effect on the occupied land of first century Palestine has become domesticated, somehow. It has been distilled into lectionary cycles and illustrated bibles, and we have become people who would prefer to focus on the glorious moments of our faith—the Easter mornings and midnights at Christmas rather than linger too long on Good Friday. And the cross.

Except, here we are in a small Episcopal church in Poulsbo, Washington in which the very architecture of the building won't let us forget.

So what does it mean to lose take up our cross, to lose our lives?

Chances are, none of us will face the impossible choices presented to our mothers and fathers in the faith. Choosing between denying Christ outright or death is probably not going to happen.

However, in the hundreds of decisions we make each and every day, we are very likely facing the same choice on a smaller scale: Is the Christ taking center stage in this decision, or are my own wants and desires?

Putting Christ in the midst of our decisions means that we will necessarily choose actions, from time to time, that will run contrary to what seems right, or safe, or even sane to our culture. In the honor and shame culture of the first disciples, aligning yourself with a man who gave preferential attention to society's outcasts—the unclean, the diseased, the mentally ill, the possessed—and who was ultimately executed, was akin to social suicide.

Jesus' disciples then, needed to be able to face not only the most humiliating, painful, death Rome had devised, they also needed to be willing to accept the shame of being outside of community. They had to risk looking foolish, losing family and friends; they had to risk losing every aspect of their lives.

So what might this look like today?

About a year and a half ago, Mary and Tony noticed a woman living in her car. She was parked off the beaten path, but near enough that they regularly encountered her. Eventually, they struck up a conversation with her and not long afterward, they invited her to come stay with them. She accepted their invitation, and for the first time in too long, she enjoyed the blessings that come with dependable shelter: a warm bed, a hot shower, food and, above all, safety.

She had found herself in a bind—I don't remember all the particulars—and she just needed a bit of time to get things sorted out again. She needed to be able to depend on having access to a phone, and the Internet; she needed to be able to really rest and rejuvenate her body and mind.

They provided her with that and no, before you ask, it wasn't all sweetness and light with choirs of angels singing in the background. There were adjustments to be made; there were expectations to be met, and I imagine there were many nights spent with one ear tuned in, on alert. Still, when the choice presented itself, these two opted to follow the path of Christ rather than stay in their own comfort and safety. They stepped out in trust, and love, and faith—not blindly and not without some reservation. The choice meant that they would be relinquishing a bit of their lives---certainly their routines and their space; but what if she proved to be mentally unhinged? What if she robbed them blind in the middle of the night?

These are justifiable fears.

Just yesterday I read an article in the New Yorker about a man who preyed upon the kindness of people looking for a roommate. The tales of attempts to remove him from the homes of his victims are terrifying. The truth is, there are always people who will take advantage, there are always going to be folks who are unstable, or who have criminal records. We know that. And still, the Christ lays down the conditions for being his disciple. Listen again:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it”

And I don't know about you, but sometimes I wish it wasn't quite so demanding of a condition. Sometimes, I wish it *were* just about Easter morning and Midnight Mass; sometimes, I want to leave the cross on Good Friday and only come close to it once a year. Except, here it is, and here we are, and here I am.

And just to be clear, I'm not telling you to go out and invite a homeless person into your home, although some of you may. And I'm not telling you we need to put our very lives on the line for our faith, but there may come a time when we do.

What I AM telling you, is that your everyday decisions matter to the world, they matter to us, they matter to God. There are no throwaway choices, my friends. We are either living our lives as disciples of the living God, or we're not, and the litmus test to our discipleship lies within our cumulative moments. This one, and this one, and this one.

As I recall, the woman lived with Mary and Tony for a couple months, maybe three. Just long enough for her to unravel the bureaucracy of agencies and resources; enough time for her to make connections and come up with a plan. They didn't solve all her problems for her, nor did they even really know how to help. They just decided to relinquish the comfort and the shape of their lives for a time. And, in the relatively affluent community in which they lived, they were cautious about sharing their decision—they knew their friends and family would question their sanity, they knew they would receive unasked for warnings, they knew people would think they were foolish, naïve, suckers for falling for her story.

But her story wasn't nearly as ludicrous as the story of the man who would be Messiah. Who dined with the unclean; who broke the Sabbath prohibitions in order to heal; who touched lepers and reclaimed Lazarus from death. Who died and rose again. Mary and Tony know his story well, and the truth of it is played out in each decision they make.

May it be so with each one of us, as well.