

Take Up Your Cross

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, March 8, 2015

Third Sunday in Lent

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity

Text: Mark 8:27-38

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

In my 40+ years of ministry, I can't recall preaching a sermon on today's text. I'm not entirely sure why this is the case. There are three different versions of this story in the New Testament—one each in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And each of these versions appears at some point in the three-year revised common lectionary. So it would seem that I have purposely, not accidentally, avoided preaching on this text—until today. On the one hand, it is a difficult text; on the other hand, it's one that is worth wrestling with.

My first observation is that there's a lot going on in these twelve verses. This episode in Mark's story of Jesus begins with a question that Jesus poses to his disciples, as they are on their way to the region of Caesarea Philippi. "Who do people say that I am?" I find myself a bit perplexed by this question. Is Jesus asking the question because he really doesn't know what people are saying about him? And if this is the case, how likely is it that the disciples would know any more than Jesus about what people are saying about their leader?

In any case, the disciples tell Jesus that some people say he's John the Baptist risen from the dead (since Herod has by this time in the narrative already had John the Baptist killed). Some people say he's the prophet Elijah, come down from heaven to bring God's judgment. Still others say that he's one of the prophets from long ago, suddenly and unexpectedly risen from the dead.

Jesus then asks a followup question: But who do **you** say that I am? Peter answers (presumably on behalf of the twelve): You are the Messiah. So the disciples (like the demons earlier in the narrative) have reached a new level of understanding the identity of this charismatic teacher who has called them to follow him. For now, though, Jesus sternly orders the disciples to keep this confession confidential.

The verses that follow explain why, in a roundabout kind of way, why the disciples are to keep this confession confidential. It's because Jesus is not, and will not become, the kind of Messiah who is expected in the popular imagination. He will not be a powerful rebel against the empire, raising a mighty army to drive the Romans out of Palestine. Rather, he will be a suffering servant, not a triumphant hero. Peter isn't at all happy to hear this news. It's not good news to his ears, so he takes Jesus aside and speaks sternly to him. To which Jesus responds by speaking sternly to Peter, in front of the rest of the disciples, so that they can hear his stern rebuke of Peter.

I can readily understand why Peter doesn't want to hear about a suffering Messiah. If your leader is going to be the victim of imperial violence perpetrated by the powers-that-be, then he might be remembered as a martyr, but he won't have changed the course of history. I can image Peter saying to Jesus, "Look, this martyrdom thing, it's not what I signed up for. There's been a whole lot of martyrs in recent years, and we're still oppressed by the Romans and their collaborators. One more martyr won't help us."

As Jesus continues to teach his disciples—and the crowds—about the kind of Messiah he intends to be, it gets worse for Peter and his band of brothers. "If you want to become my followers, you'll have to deny yourselves and take up your crosses and follow me."

Here's what's behind this reference to taking up one's cross. If the Romans and their collaborators suspected that you might pose a threat to the security and stability of the empire, then you would be arrested and convicted of sedition in a kangaroo court and sentenced to die on a cross. Your arms would be stretched out and tied to a heavy cross beam, and you would have to carry this heavy cross beam on your shoulders to the place of crucifixion, where soldiers would nail your wrists to the cross beam and hoist you up on the vertical post of the cross and nail your ankles to the post. That's where you would remain, for as long as it took you to die.

It wasn't pretty, this crucifixion thing. It was a brutal form of capital punishment. It was a public form of ultimate humiliation. It was perhaps the empire's favorite form of authoritarian social control.

Very few Christians in our time have to face the fear of being killed because they are followers of Jesus—unless, tragically, they are among those Assyrian Christians being held hostage by the fanatics of ISIS. None of us here today will ever be compelled to take up a cross—at least not in the literal sense—as a consequence of being a follower of Jesus.

Nonetheless, we continue to use Jesus' image metaphorically, for instance when we say that “everyone has a cross to bear.” According to one online definition I read this week, “If someone has a cross to bear, they have a heavy burden of responsibility or a problem that they alone must cope with.”¹ There's only one thing wrong with this definition: from a faith perspective, we never bear a cross alone. The burden of cross-bearing is a shared burden: it's a burden that Jesus shares with us, a burden that we share with one another.

The cross a person has to bear can be partly or wholly of their own making, or it can be imposed on them by circumstances they cannot control. I think it's often not an either/or situation, but rather a both/and. I may, because I am human, make bad choices, the consequences of which I have to take responsibility for. At the same time, my faith community or my society may be reluctant to grant me the opportunity to express remorse and try to make amends for the consequences of the bad choices I have made.

Here's an example of what I mean. In 1998, a woman named Kelly Gissendaner “was convicted and sentenced to death...for persuading her boyfriend to kill her husband, Douglas. Gissendaner has admitted her guilt and expressed remorse, and by all accounts has undergone a profound transformation while in prison.” She has also completed a theology studies program while in prison, and has been providing pastoral care for other inmates.

According to an online article provided by Religion News Service, “the visible, concrete fruits of [Kelly Gissendaner's] transformation are in the lives of all the people she reaches that no one else can: the at-risk youth she mentors, the suicide attempts she has averted, and the many inmates in despair to whom she has offered pastoral care. Prison guards and wardens esteem her as a calming influence on inmates who contributes to building a respectful and

¹ <http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms/cross+to+bear.html>.

peaceful atmosphere in the prison.”² More than 600 clergy, religious leaders, and theologians have written in support of her request for clemency.

Twice in recent weeks, Kelly Gissendaner's execution has been postponed: once because of the weather, and once because the lethal drug with which she was to be injected didn't look right to the pharmacist who inspected it. This second postponement has been described as “indefinite.” There are those among her supporters who see these postponements as signs of divine intervention. I'm not sure I would reach the same conclusion.

And yet, the state of Georgia, where she is scheduled to be executed by lethal injection, has refused to grant her request that her death sentence be changed to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Meanwhile, her former boyfriend, the one who actually killed her former husband, is serving a life sentence and will be eligible for parole in eight years.

If Kelly Gissendaner is successful in having her death sentence commuted to life in prison without the possibility of parole, then she will still have to bear the cross of being a murderer and a prisoner for the rest of her life. This cross, of life in prison without possibility of parole, is a heavy burden for her to bear. But she is using the burden of her own suffering—which she helped to bring upon herself—to be a caring presence in the lives of both inmates and prison guards.

Elizabeth Keaton, who describes herself as “a joyful Christian who claims the fullness of the Anglican tradition of being evangelical, Anglo-Catholic, charismatic, orthodox, and radical,” has written this reflection on the meaning of bearing one's cross. “It is a mystery to me, but I know this much to be true: it is often through suffering and sacrifice that we find the path to creativity and meaning and yes, even beauty. It is not the only path to creativity and meaning and beauty, but it is one that is sure and true; ancient and well traveled by those who want to make a difference in this one life.”³

Kelly Gissendaner has found this path and walked along it. She made a terrible choice when she was 28 years old. But she's not the same person now at age 46 that she was eighteen years ago. One of her many supporters in her bid for clemency has referred to the “vast moral distance between her crime and the life she now leads.”⁴ There is likewise a vast moral distance between execution and life in prison without possibility of parole. I hope and pray that life in prison will be the cross that Kelly Gissendaner will continue to bear.

² <http://pressreleases.religionnews.com/2015/03/02/theologians-call-clemency-death-row-inmate-kelly-gissendaner/>.

³ <http://telling-secrets.blogspot.com/2009/03/lent-ii-take-up-your-cross.html>.

⁴ <http://pressreleases.religionnews.com/2015/03/02/theologians-call-clemency-death-row-inmate-kelly-gissendaner/>.