

Can we handle the truth?
Sermon Second Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Martha Tucker

Blessed be God who animates our lives and offers us the holy and hard invitation to participate in eternal life if we but take up our cross and follow Jesus. AMEN

Today on the Second Sunday in Lent with still 4 more weeks until Easter, we, like the disciples and Peter, are met with the difficult but clear news that we are to take up our cross and follow Jesus. We are to lose our lives as we know them in order to find our eternal life in God.

We already know what they did not, that this is a road fraught with peril and evil. We already know that the road to and through Jerusalem will involve the betrayal torture and death of our Savior...on a cross...AND we already know, which they did not, that Easter will come in the form of resurrection in great glory with great joy.

But imagine the disciples without this salvation historical view.

Imagine them having witnessed healing and miracles and teaching and coming to that point where they are actually believing this just might be the Messiah. And so their minds turn to what they think they know about messiahship: it is going to be awesome and powerful and grand and glorious and oppressive regimes will be overthrown and something like Eden will happen but with kingly regalia and jewels, not just fruit.

And just as they are leaning into this dream of glory realized, Jesus tells them something too horrible to fit into their working model. Too impossible to absorb. He will be tortured and die and rise in three days (I am not sure they heard or processed the rising part?!) Jesus must be wrong or perhaps he has himself succumbed to the devilish temptations and Peter must step in!

Like a campaign or stage manager who has to sit down with his candidate who has botched a speech, Peter rebukes Jesus and is worried about clean up!

Here is where the plot turns dramatically. Here is where a surprise ending begins to be revealed. Here is where we enter stage right!

For Jesus' campaign or stage manager is not Peter; It is God!

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Jesus at this critical moment (remember the words crisis and cross are intimately related) simply, clearly and with all the Authority of God commands us, does not ask us, to take up our cross and follow that we might know life everlasting.

That is the Answer...Period. (pause)
NO Cross No Resurrection life
could it be that simple? YES AND NO

We, like Peter, are left whirling, We like Peter are not comfortable with answers imposed / not to mention those we did not predict or foresee. There is increased and heightened anxiety when what we need, especially now, is predictable calm certainty.

For me the questions and emotions which this passage raises are very much like those when Jesus told those fisherpeople to drop their nets and follow him. Being a disciple involves turning our lives on a dime and turning them upside down. There must be some divine inbreaking of clarion call about which there is no question, that is if we indeed have faith. If we are obedient.

Nothing could be clearer: Jesus is the way the truth and the life. Just pick up your cross. Yet we don't or we hesitate or worse we turn away...

Such clarity and authority are usually met with suspicion. The human response is to hesitate, to question, to want more information. Prove that you are really Jesus calling!

Being human I have a few more things I want to know. I am not as good as I would like to be at radical change! Even though all that I am and have been formed to be says I want to be. I want to be that radical Christian or crazy Christian as Michael Curry says. I want to take up my cross and follow Jesus because I know with all my heart that if I did I would indeed be on the true path toward, perhaps even within, everlasting grace and peace.

I want to be courageous and faithful and I have always always wanted to be passionately radical!

What stops me? Well two things really. I want to choose **my** cross and I am not sure I can die to my false self completely.

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First, I am not sure that the cross I think is mine is really the one Jesus has in mind! I might like to choose the cross I want to bear, after all it says take up YOUR cross. I must own it and control it, right? Wrong!

Crosses come in all sizes and flavors. There are fat ones and skinny ones, bejeweled and plain, gilt and wooden, crucifix and bare. They are one shape, though, two arms intersecting at an essential critical point and outstretched toward love.

Many of us want the light, gilded one with jewels because it is aesthetically pleasing.

This reminds me of a story of a man who did not like the cross he had to bear. surely God would give him a different more enjoyable one?! So in a dream he found himself in a warehouse of crosses. he laid his down and went around holding and admiring the others. After doing so for quite a period of time he picked one and went to the cashier who was God in disguise. "Interesting God said, That is the one you came in with.

God gives us our crosses. just as God gave Abraham and Sarah their names. They are made of joy and of sorrow. But they are ours, unique to us. The one thing which is very clear about the cross we each take up is that it is not something we pick or choose or design but one which is given to us, like grace. And like grace it is costly and precious. The reward however is priceless.

The second stumbling block which I must get past is that taking up one's cross and following Jesus involves shedding a lot of stuff...it is like the story of the rich young ruler...it is really really difficult to deprive ourselves of our well earned expectations for our lives.

This downward mobility is exemplified by the life of Henri Nouwen whose authentic cross to bear became the shedding of all titles and fame and fortune in the halls of Harvard and Yale to become the chaplain at L'arche in Canada. L'arche is group of communities which provide homes for mentally challenged adults.

For Henri to give up the academic life and priesthood and literary success was to let go of all he thought his parents admired and would earn him love. Yet to take up the challenge of caring for adults some of whom could

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not even speak and had been caged like animals offered the paradoxical moment of belonging which is like coming home. In fact, one of the teachings of Henri's journey is as the prodigal son who is welcomed home into the arms of the God who loves him. To take up his cross Henri had to move from his head to his heart where his treasure resided.

Taking up his cross while difficult and countercultural took him HOME for the first time he felt he belonged.

In the end Taking up our Cross and following Jesus is the story of redemption and release, simple and complicated, burdensome and emancipating. Whenever I think of this paradox, its simplicity and complexity, I think of the poem Final Notations by Adrienne Rich:

Final Notations"
Adrienne Rich

it will not be simple, it will not be long
it will take little time, it will take all your thought
it will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
it will be short, it will not be simple

it will touch through your ribs, it will take all your heart
it will not be long, it will occupy your thought
as a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
it will take all your flesh, it will not be simple

You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
you are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
you are taking parts of us into places never planned
you are going far away with pieces of our lives

it will be short, it will take all your breath
it will not be simple, it will become your will

Taking up your cross will not be simple even though it is the simplest of symbols, concrete and clear, leading to the most extravagant wondrous life! It will take all our heart as following God is like falling in love and it takes our breath away

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Just as you are invited to enter into a holy Lent, I invite you to take up your cross. I invite you to consider the array of crosses in your dreams and to discern through prayer and repentance which is your true cross, which is your true self. And then just imagine all of us, every last one of us laying those crosses on the altar on Good Friday just as the clergy will a large wooden heavy weathered and cracked one, and then imagine God blessing each one, transforming our crosses which might have been so difficult to bear, so filled with desolation and anxiety and fear that we transforming our desolation into consolation, our pain into joy, our anxiety into peace...That is resurrection life obtainable by way of the cross of Jesus!

May taking up your cross and following our lord and savior become your will. AMEN