

“Receive 100 Times as Much...with Persecutions”

Mal 3:10

2 Corinthians 6:2b-13

Mark 10:29-31

We continue this morning with our sermon series of questions from the congregation. Here it is: “On several occasions, Jesus told his followers, ‘take up your cross and follow me.’ This implies a burden, which seems contrary to the liberating joy of salvation. Are we falling short if we do not always feel challenged?” I like this question because it’s so big, but at the same time, it goes to the heart of so many decisions that we make on a daily basis. It’s hard not to compare our own walk of faith with others – to wonder if we are where we need to be. Is it supposed to be easy? Is it supposed to be hard? Is it our place to tell someone who is soul stricken and struggling that they should lighten up because of joy in Christ? Is it our place to confront someone who revels in the joy of G-d’s creation that they must not *really* be following Jesus to Calvary and beyond?

As I meditated on these and other questions, I was surprised to find myself thinking about a book that I read almost 20 years ago. Now, I know how much everyone loves 19th century Russian lit., so you’ll be thrilled to know that the book that came to mind was Crime and Punishment by Dostoyevsky. If you haven’t read it or if you’ve successfully repressed all knowledge of it, it’s the story of a university student named Raskolnikov. He can’t afford to keep going to school any more, but he learned something that stirs him to action. He’s decided that there are certain people – special people – who transcend the limitations of the masses. He believes that morality is really only for regular people, but special people – like Napoleon – don’t get held accountable for things that regular people get arrested for. And, wouldn’t you know it, he figures that he himself is one of these special people. So, he reasons, it won’t matter

what he does even if he murders someone! He doesn't want to do this for money or even for some kind of thrill, but just because he believes he's morally superior. The dramatic majority of this quite long book reflects Raskolnikov increasingly burdened by guilt that he never foresaw.

As the reader, we see the world from Raskolnikov's point of view – so there's no whodunit mystery here. But what captured my attention and stuck in my memory even after 20 years when most of the book was forgotten, was a curious plot development pretty early on. One floor below where the murder took place, a painter and his brother were working. One of the painters, Nikolai, confessed to the crime. He turned himself in, he let himself get interrogated, he sat in jail waiting for trial and punishment. Nikolai didn't know Raskolnikov, he wasn't homeless or starving to death, or anything. He had no reason to confess, but he did.

Later in the book, the detective on the case talks about this curious confession, which even the detective thinks smells fishy. He says that Nikolai's family was part of an old separatist religious sect. Years before, Nikolai had been trained by a holy elder secluded in the wilderness. He had been taught to read and reread the “true books” for the hidden wisdom. And now that he's in jail, he's dived into the Bible. The detective tells Raskolnikov, “Do you know what they mean...when they talk of ‘taking suffering upon themselves’? They don't mean suffering for anybody in particular, just ‘one has to suffer.’ That means *accept* suffering; and if it's from the authorities, so much the better...”

This was probably the first time in my life that I had ever heard of someone who believes that the central message of our faith is that we should and must seek out suffering – embrace suffering and hold it up as a badge of our faithfulness. And we can read the Bible in this way. We can read the suffering servant passages from Isaiah, especially Isaiah 52 and 53, which talks of a great one who will serve G-d: “despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering.” Or take

that passage that Joe read from 2 Corinthians. Paul says, “as servants of G-d we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings...” You get the picture – if we are reading the Bible to glorify human suffering, we can put together passages to do just that.

On the other hand, and probably less surprisingly, there are others who read the scripture looking for the Bible to be a key to the easy life. The passage from Malachi is a favorite among this crowd. If you give your full and complete offering to the church, to the preacher, to G-d, then test G-d and see how it rains money for you! There are those who would read these words from Luke 1, “nothing will be impossible with G-d” and they would reduce that to G-d as a cosmic genie who grants our wishes and gives us all the desires of our hearts. There are Bible verses that seem tailor-made for this kind of theology. Like John 14:13-14 where Jesus says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

Is your faith too hard or is it too easy? Because the same Jesus who said, “take up your cross and follow me” also said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” And this means that our faith must hold both clearly in view. But perhaps it also means that we need to look very closely about what we think the cross is and what we think abundance is. Jesus chose the cross. By this, I mean to say that Jesus could have been wealthy and comfortable. He could have limited his ministry to the “right” people. He could have kept his mouth shut and avoided a lot of pain and heartache on our behalf. For that matter, he could’ve chosen to be born in a tropical paradise.

Every day with each decision, Jesus chose the path that led to the cross and beyond because the path that leads to the cross is the one that sees the world through eyes of love. This

love does not turn away from suffering hearts – no matter what society tells us is wrong with them. This love looks at our divisions and our prejudices and understands them as well as an infant would. And Jesus loved with his whole being no matter who it bothered. And he found others who marveled at such love and were drawn to it and wanted to learn to love as G-d would have us love. Questioning who is worthy of G-d's love (everyone); who is worthy of dignity and respect (everyone) - this is what led to the cross. Some days when we practice loving like that, that love is welcomed and shared – celebrated among strangers who become friends. These days are like the sun coming out from behind the clouds and filling us with warmth and strength. Other days that love is not shared; it is not believed and it is rejected – sometimes violently, tearing at our souls. Then we hold Jesus tight and ask him to hold us up – to give us the strength to stay on the path that loves no matter the challenge.

If we look closer at these passages that talking about suffering and the ones that talk about abundance, we see grace, joy, and endurance interwoven in each one. It's one of the things I love so much about the 2 Corinthians reading. It's not just Paul complaining to the church at Corinth about *everything* he's had to endure on *their* behalf. This is not an epic, biblical guilt trip here. He freely admits the hardships that can come in serving G-d and following Christ, but that's not the end of the story. He has also shown himself to be a servant of Christ, "by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of G-d." There are those who treat him as a phony, a nobody, a nothing to be cast aside. But he knows that in Christ, he is true and alive and rejoicing. By the standards of abundance of the world, he has nothing, but in Christ, he has everything.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells us that when we break away from the familiar and follow him – wherever he leads us – we might be tempted to see only what we've

lost. But nothing is lost in G-d. Jesus says: right now in this age, what we let go of is returned a hundredfold: a home, a family, a livelihood. But there are persecutions – there is a cross that comes from living in love, but it comes amidst daily blessings and grace and brothers and sisters in Christ who adopt as right back.

This morning, we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism – a sign and a seal from G-d that reminds us that our walk of faith is no burden. Embraced by G-d, we revel in the liberating joy that our salvation is in the hands of our maker, our redeemer, and our sustainer. And that means that together, we can find the way of love –whether easy or hard – to bring glory to G-d's holy name. Amen.