February 25, 2024 @ Trinity Bixby

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Mark 8:31-38, Romans 8:5-18

Sitting in a circle like we are today, we see things a bit differently than in our comfortable rows. The change, even after a few weeks, still feels new and different – perhaps subtly wrong, even – and we find ourselves looking both at the symbols of our faith, that are sitting on the table in the middle – AND at the people sitting across from us. Our attention may wander, as we see movement in many places, hear sounds that we’re not used to – but a phrase may pull us back into connection with the worship service.

Maybe it’s something you’ve heard in church a hundred times, but it sparked your interest today. Maybe it’s a window you’ve never seen before, or really looked at deeply. Is this wrong? We’re certainly taught to pay attention to one thing at a time, especially in worship settings. If you ever lose your path, there’s a map in your hands – the bulletin. Where are we? Oh yes, in the sermon time. Good, that’s comforting.

It's normal and good for us to see things in new ways from time to time, and it’s also normal and good for us to want to return to the familiar ways we’ve known before. Sometimes, we can, and sometimes we can’t. That’s certainly a part of living life, of facing new changes and recognizing that the path we’re on leads us past them, or back through them, sometimes multiple times.

Jesus’ path led him through times of difficulty, of suffering, at many points. From ditching his folks to go to the temple at age 12, to fasting in the wilderness, to the exhaustion of long travel, and of course, the strong suffering of what we call Holy Week – Jesus was no stranger to suffering. Yet, when he tells his disciples of some of what he is soon to face, Peter reprimands him, telling him such bad things could never happen, that God would protect him.

Jesus’ response is stronger than anything we’ve heard him say before: “Get away from me, Adversary! You are seeing things from a human point of view, not from God’s.” Jesus then calls the whole crowd together with the disciples to hear his next words. This is sure sign that what he’s about to say is meaningful, and will need to be remembered.

Jesus then says, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.”

As powerful and straightforward as this is, it caused confusion with the crowds then, and confusion within us today, too. Part of the trouble, then and now, is the lack of context. Before Jesus suffering, death, and resurrection on the cross, the expression “take up your cross” probably sounded incredibly odd. And even today, we still are lacking the context of life after resurrection – what will it be like to see the world from God’s viewpoint instead of our own?

Let’s unpack this statement a bit, starting with the first line. “Deny yourself” is better translated as in the version of scripture we read this morning, “give up your own way.” Stop following yourself, and only yourself – like a puppy chasing its tail, and wearing itself out in one place.

Perhaps you’ve been on a car journey with a number of others – whether your family, a school trip, or something like that. When we’re excited, the volume can naturally rise, as each conversation group tries to speak louder than the last, until absolutely no one can hear themselves think over the din. Then, the roar from the driver cuts through – “Quiet down! I will turn this car around, if I have to!” Usually, that’s enough. Conversations settle down, but inevitably, they’ll bubble up again and again. No one person in any of the conversations has control over the full volume – it’s only collectively that the volume can be changed. And to do that, it takes everyone being on the same page about it – that the volume levels in the car are important, and matter, despite the individual excitement.

This presents a choice, then, that is echoed in many places in our lives – the choice between following our own desires, heedless of the ramifications for others – and the choice to put our own needs behind someone else’s – even many someone elses’ at once. When we “give up our own way,” we can look at the impact of our choices, noticing that little Thomas has been covering his ears for the last ten minutes, because the noise is just too loud. Then, we choose to keep our voice lower – to benefit everyone, and especially those who were suffering previously.

When we sit in the round like this, it becomes easier to pay attention to each other. To see someone shiver in the AC – and be able to offer them a blanket. Our own focus shifts from ourselves to the cross at the center of the circle – and to the people gathered together. In his letter to the Romans, Paul puts it this way, “The attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God… But you aren’t self-centered. Instead, you are in the Spirit… If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God’s righteousness.”

So, we are called to give up our own way – and then “take up our cross.” I wonder what this means. Does it mean that we must seek out suffering? Or even death? Or is suffering and death only Jesus’ cross, and our cross is different? I wonder what the crowds around Jesus would have understood this to mean. In Greek, the word that means cross is much older than the torture device used by the Romans. It means “stake” or “pole” – and was also used for fence posts, for tentpoles, and for wide beams that support roofs. From there, you can get a sense of how it might also be used for what we call a cross. Given that, it’s not clear to me what the crowds might have understood. Take up our fenceposts? Pick up your tent? Or, perhaps, bear your part of the weight of the house. I wonder, too, if there’s a bit of both-and in this. Take up your fences – we are not to be separated. Pick up your tent – this is a trip, and it seems to be one-way. When you take your cross, you lighten the load for everyone else.

Once again, the cross in the center of the circle reminds us that Jesus has born our burdens, and we can help share each others burdens, too. Every one of us who takes up our cross finds that it is, indeed, our part of the one Cross of Christ. The fear we’ve had, of taking up this burden, is eased when we find that it is shared not just with each other, but with the one who created the universe. Surely, together, we can proceed as Jesus leads us.

As Paul puts it, “All who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s children… You received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as God’s children… But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God’s heirs, and fellow heirs with Christ – as we suffer with him, we will be glorified with him.”

So, we have eschewed our own way, taken up our part of the burden of the cross, and found our leadership in following Jesus. In focusing on the cross at the center of our circle, we naturally look to each other, too. We encourage each other to grow closer together – for as we get closer to the cross, we also get closer to each other. In the same way, as we get closer to each other, we also get closer to the cross – so long as we are not following our own way, away from the center.

My friends, during this Lenten season, let us support each other, recognizing that by sharing in each other’s burdens, we reduce the suffering for all of us. When we turn to follow Jesus, we turn to help each other. Our lives will all contain parts that are difficult, and parts that are easy, just as Jesus did. Together, we can follow Jesus, helping to distribute the weight of our difficulties and the joys of our differing perspectives around the circle.

May you hear the good news of resurrection when Christ calls you to follow. May the Spirit fill you with God’s grace and love, that you would have the strength to reach out to others when you are in need. May God’s presence with you always give you the will to help lift up the burdens of those around you. Amen.