

Voluntary
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Medford UMC; NJ
Sunday, February 28th, 2021

Let us pray: Empty us, Great God, of all that prevents us from hearing what you want us to hear. Empty us of our preconceptions, our preoccupations and our prejudices. Empty us that we might be filled with your Spirit and your Word. Empty us that we might be filled for ministry and mission. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

A preacher in a small New England town named George Thomas once came to his church carrying a rusty, bent, old bird cage, and set it by the pulpit. Several eyebrows were raised and, as if in response, Pastor Thomas began to speak: "I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me, swinging this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, 'What you got there, son?' " "Just some old birds,' came the reply.

"What are you gonna do with them?' I asked.

"I'm gonna take 'em home and have fun with 'em. I'm gonna tease 'em and pull out their feathers to make 'em fight. I'm gonna have a real good time,' the boy said.

"But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?' I asked.

"Oh, I got some cats,' answered the boy, 'They like birds. I'll take 'em to them.'

"I was silent for a moment. 'How much do you want for those birds, son?' I inquired.

"Huh?!" said the boy, 'Why, you don't want them birds, mister. They're just plain old field birds. They ain't even pretty!'

"How much?' I insisted. The boy sized me up as if I was crazy and said, '\$20.' I reached into my pocket and took out a 20-dollar bill. I placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. I then picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, I opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars, persuaded the birds out, setting them free."

Well, that explained the empty bird cage on the pulpit, so then Rev. Thomas began to tell this story: "One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. Satan had just come from the Garden of Eden, and he was gloating and boasting. 'Yes sir,' he said, 'I just caught the world full of people down there. Set me a trap, used bait I knew they couldn't resist. Got 'em all!'

"What are you going to do with them?' Jesus asked. 'Oh, I'm gonna have fun!' Satan replied, 'I'm gonna teach them all sorts of horrible things - how to hate and abuse each other and themselves. I'm really gonna have fun!'

"And what will you do when you get done with them?' Jesus asked.

"Oh, I'll kill 'em,' Satan answered.

"How much do you want for them?' Jesus inquired.

"Oh, you don't want those people,' said the devil. 'They ain't no good. They've done horrible things! You don't want those people!!'

“How much?!” insisted Jesus. “Satan looked at Jesus and sneered, ‘All your tears, and all your blood. Your whole life.’”

“Jesus said, ‘Fine.’ And he paid the price. And with that, Jesus picked up the cage... and opened the door.”

Today we’re going to talk about the importance of willingly taking up the cross of suffering. At this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is kind of starting to get through to the disciples. We see a tiny bit of the thick fog lifting around them and they are finally starting to see Jesus as the Messiah. We’ve already had Jesus’ baptism, the Transfiguration is coming up quickly. These are the texts where Christ’s identity as the Messiah is outright stated. So let’s unpack what’s happening in today’s text: Jesus makes a claim that the Son of Man (the Messiah) must suffer. Peter has the audacity to pull Jesus aside, while He is teaching a lesson, and give Him a piece of his mind. The Greek word that the text uses for the way Peter speaks to Jesus, this idea of Peter correcting or rebuking Jesus, is used elsewhere in scripture as a word for getting rid of demons - which is just wild. You would never speak to anyone, particularly your teacher, like this. I imagine the rest of the group just sitting there with jaws dropped. And this helps make sense of what happens next, so Peter pulls Jesus aside and is speaking to Jesus like someone trying to silence a demon, and Jesus responds with, “Get behind me Satan! You have no idea what you’re talking about!” And why this whole outburst? Because Peter doesn’t like the idea of a suffering God. He wants an all-powerful, authoritative God. Peter’s fear of suffering speaks to his denial of Christ that we know will come later. But God didn’t become flesh to flex how great God is, God became flesh to voluntarily join us in our suffering. It’s the whole reason why this text uses the phrasing, “Son of Man” to begin with, as opposed to “Son of God” or “Messiah” – it humanizes God. In Jesus’s sharp reply to Peter’s rebuke, we can look at it not as hostility towards Peter, but a response out of Christ’s own human fear in knowing His painful fate. Jesus knows how this ends, and it’s bad.

Here’s how my brain imagines the rest of today’s story going: This little heated exchange just went on, the dynamic dozen are hanging out, inviting the locals to join in, ready to take notes at their daily lecture from teacher Jesus, and Jesus says the outright craziest thing imaginable: “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” Now remember, we’ve been around the cross symbol all our lives, it’s in the front of the church, it’s on our hymnals, it’s on our necklaces, maybe it’s on a funny little “What would Jesus do?” keychain you got going on. But these guys only have 1 and 1 context alone for what a cross is. So I just imagine Jesus proclaiming this to the group and them just being like “[] When you say / cross. You mean the / the thing they use to execute criminals? Surely He doesn’t mean, I – I just – the only people who pick up crosses are carrying them to their death.” What we first need to understand is that this is coming out of totally left field. They were not prepared for talking about such a thing as walking towards their execution. And this here is the first of three texts seen in Mark where Jesus is basically foreshadowing the crucifixion. And all 3 of the foreshadowing texts have about the same format: disbelief from the disciples, them being terrified or not understanding what’s going on, and then a lesson on the importance of suffering.

The word “suffer” comes from the Latin root meaning to, “bear, undergo, carry”. It’s fitting here in our Lenten journey as we venture towards the Passion of the Christ, which in and of itself means the suffering and death of Christ. Let’s be clear about something: God doesn’t like suffering. Jesus is constantly healing people of their suffering, but to do so, He takes on suffering Himself.

Because there are people who suffer though, so Jesus is asking something very specific of the disciples, very specific of us: to voluntarily suffer along with them. “Voluntary” being the operative word here. Do what we can to ease the load for someone else. Not every task or every act of assistance is “Taking Up the Cross”, typically it’s just being a decent person. What Jesus is asking of us here is to make a choice to acknowledge that there is outright suffering in the world that we can easily turn our back too, “That’s a shame, but it doesn’t really affect me, why would I get involved? It’s

not my cross to carry, it's not my responsibility." But, we are being asked to voluntarily step in anyway. Toss aside ourselves, our reputations, our comfort, and take up a voice that proclaims God's work in the world. God did not have to become flesh, walk the earth, serve the oppressed and the marginalized, and die the most violent, humiliating death imaginable. God was God before Jesus and continued to be God after. But God stepped in anyway, saw us suffering, and grabbed a spot in line. Jesus is the Messiah, but that means nothing without God's willingness to suffer with us. Without that, nothing changes.

Pop Quiz: What is one of the best attended church services in the year? Answer: Easter Sunday. What is one of the least-attended services? Answer: Good Friday. We want the resurrection, just without any of the suffering or cross-stuff.

To spread the Good News of Christ, to live into a calling from God, to be Christian, there's sacrifice. Voluntary sacrifice. Voluntary suffering, of course, isn't easy, but the cross is only central to the Gospel because of suffering. Since the disciples have agreed to share in Christ's ministry, they have also agreed to share in Christ's suffering.

If we're being honest, it's actually a weird thing to be asked, because if you think about it, we spend most of our time in worship praying for suffering to be removed from us, not for us to take it on. The difference though, can be seen in say, between praying for someone sick to be healed and praying for the strength to care for the sick person. Jesus is not exclusive. To have the Jesus of the miracles we also must have the Jesus of the cross. Prayer is for centering ourselves around what God wants from us, not to try to get God to do what we want. To take up the cross, we have to toss a lot of things aside.

A number of years ago, the Church of the Holy Cross in New York City was robbed twice. First, a metal money box was stolen. A few weeks later, however, thieves unbolted a 4-foot long, 200-pound plaster Jesus from a meditation area, but left the wooden cross on the wall. David St. James, the caretaker for the church, was amazed that someone would just take Jesus. He said, "I figured that if you want a crucifix, you take the whole crucifix. But I guess, there are some people out there who just want Jesus without the cross."

How often are we each guilty of that: wanting Jesus, but without the cross? If our faith is not asking us to take up the cross, is not asking us to make sacrifices, is not asking us to change who we are then we're not actually close enough to it. To truly do what Christ is calling of us here means tossing aside who we once were. It's tossing aside self-interest and self-preservation and willingly taking up the cross so that no-one suffers alone. It means choosing others over ourselves. I don't know about you, but I want a faith that when asked to take up the cross, and my mind starts filling up with reasons not to and my own self-interest, that I know to snap back, "Get behind me, Satan. I've got work to do"