

Crossroads

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Mark 8:27-38

What does our tradition teach us about suffering? In particular, what does our tradition teach women, children, the poor, and sexual and ethnic minorities about suffering? My guess is that the teaching has been oppressive enough over the years that some of you cringe at hearing Jesus' invitation to "take up your cross." The church, and in particular, churches with a strong emphasis on discipleship, have often distorted this teaching.

Occasionally, the church has not only fetishized suffering by telling people that their station in life is "their cross to bear," but it has also sometimes created and handed people that cross. "Keep silent in church — that's your cross to bear." "Be single and celibate, whether you want to or not — that will be your cross to bear." "Remain in an abusive relationship — that is your cross to bear." "Submit to my authority — that is your cross to bear." Strangely, the people hammering together those crosses often seem to see their own power and authority as a cross to bear. It creates a nice little self-perpetuating cycle.

With all this cross-carrying, it is remarkable that people find additional things to call a cross. They turn any instance of human inconvenience or pain into their "cross to bear." I'm ill — that's my cross to bear. My mother-in-law is obnoxious — that's my cross to bear. (For the record, mine isn't.) This phrase has become so overused and abused that it dulls us to the true meaning of Jesus' call and distorts the meaning of the cross. It has nothing to do with the true discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

First of all, the cross is not like a sickness or illness. It can generally be avoided. Illness and infirmity is common to all humanity; they are not a product of discipleship. Second, no one can choose our cross for us or command us to pick it up. Jesus clearly identifies taking up the cross as a voluntary action — a singular and individual decision. That is not to say that others can't help us along the road, but it is clear that we are not to load crosses on one another's backs.

Third, and perhaps the greatest distortion in these understandings of "bearing the cross" is the implication that suffering is imposed upon us by God for our own benefit. This notion presents an offensive notion of God that is foreign to what Jesus' taught.

We should look to the nature of Jesus' cross to understand what he really means to carry our own. The cross isn't simply arbitrary suffering, nor is it redemptive in and of itself. The cross we are to carry is the consequence of choices. It is the cost of our discipleship.

The cross — persecution, suffering, pain and all that it entails — is the response of the powers of the world to a threat. In a very literal sense, the cross is capital punishment. Imagine that you are walking with Jesus in this day and age and that he says to you, "If you want to follow me, you must take up your electric chair. You might lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, but it will be worth it."

In Jesus' time, the cross was a very particular and public type of execution, and it had heavy political overtones. Those crucified were political dissidents and insurrectionists. Jesus' followers would have understood his call

to take up the cross as a political one — they were to rebel against the powers of their age — but they were to expect suffering as a result.

Jesus faced his own cross because he was a threat to existing power structures. His message of liberation and his ministry across ethnic, social, religious and gender boundaries shook the social order. Jesus recognized that what he taught and lived would lead him to a confrontation with those powers.

I am struck that the cross Jesus bore was on behalf of others — not simply that Jesus suffered TO give life to the world, but in that Jesus suffered BECAUSE he gave new life to the world. He advocated for them and alleviated their suffering. He healed and taught, empowered and loved. And for all of that, he received the cross.

So what can we say of our own crosses? What are we to take up and bear? Not all suffering is the cross. Not all pain is redemptive. And not all faithfulness leads to suffering. Are we to feel guilty when we are not persecuted for our discipleship? Are we simply too comfortable? Perhaps this is the liberal equivalent of cross distortion — the notion that if we were really radical enough, we'd surely be persecuted.

What I see in Jesus is a call to live in a way that empowers and enables others and to serve and to love. This is a way of living that gives life and glorifies the creator. This is also a way of living that is at odds with the predominant way of the world. “Me first,” profit driven, coercion-based ways of living are at odds with the Gospel, and acting in a contrary manner means that we need to be prepared for backlash.

So how do we prepare to take up our cross? Jesus points to life after the suffering. Indeed, for him, new life toppled the cross in his resurrection. The suffering and persecution that sometimes accompanies following Christ represents the birth-pangs of the New Creation. In assaulting Christ, the powers of the world found their weapon smashed. In persecuting and killing Martin Luther King Jr., the structures of segregation cracked. In imprisoning Mandela, apartheid exposed its injustice to the scrutiny of the world. When the righteous suffer for righteousness' sake, the world changes. It is not the suffering itself that is redemptive; it is the new life that comes afterwards.

My intent is not to ask you all to go out and become martyrs. And if you have suffered and have found ways to view whatever suffering you face as something that builds character or that has produced new life, I do not mean to diminish your experience. But I do not believe that suffering in and of itself brings redemption.

Our goal in this is not to seek suffering for its own sake — our goal is to put an end to all suffering because that is the work of God. Our call is to live as citizens of the New Creation — as resident aliens in sometimes hostile territory. Taking up our cross means asking “what would I risk for the sake of the New Creation?” This willingness to risk, to step out into the world to join in the work of God's kingdom, despite threat to reputation, career, and even life, this is taking up the cross. And this is walking with Christ.