

## SERMON

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR B

“BEARING THE CROSS”

MARK 8:31-36 / FEBRUARY 25, 2018

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

A magazine cartoon shows two businessmen sitting in a bar. One of them is clearly despondent. The unhappy one says to his buddy, “I was on the cutting edge. I pushed the envelope. I did the heavy lifting. I was the rainmaker. Then suddenly it all crashed – when I ran out of metaphors.”

Metaphors. They clearly play a significant role in our lives, don’t they? Not just as linguistic tools – but as much more. Metaphors shape our thinking, convey philosophy, and even express theological concepts. In my own life, especially in my early, formative years, metaphors were particularly influential in my thinking.

A rather negative metaphor I recall was one my Grade 9 phys ed teacher proclaimed loudly and clearly for my classmates to hear, as I struggled mightily but inadequately, to learn certain gymnastic moves.

“Gilbert,” he yelled demeaningly, “you look like a lame duck.” That metaphor discouraged my participation in physical activities and sports for quite some time.

A more positive metaphor was one my mother used often.

It was a reference to the large Eaton's store in down town Toronto where she would take me from time to time. She would say, "I love you all Eaton's". For me, that was the 'biggest love' imaginable. Its positive impact on me over the years has been immeasurable.

Metaphors, whether short and catchy, or deep and extensive, have been around a long, long time. For instance, we know that Jesus, taught in parables – sort of extended metaphors – beautiful symbolic stories that provoked contemplation and challenged the status quo. Such language was prevalent in Jesus' teachings: "I am the vine, you are the branches." "I am the light of the world." "I am the good shepherd." And he tells us about the pearl of great price; the wheat and the weeds; and the house built on shifting sand. Unlike the businessman in the cartoon, Jesus never seemed to run out of metaphors.

So, not surprisingly, across the centuries there has arisen dispute and debate about metaphoric language in the Bible. How much is to be taken metaphorically; how much literally? And are we to see some stories in scripture as both literal and metaphorical?

So how should we understand today's Gospel text? Metaphorically? Literally? "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition (other translations say "you must deny yourself"), shoulder your cross and follow me."

The cross in Jesus' day was not a logo or a metaphor. The cross was an instrument of pain, shame, absolute loss and death. It was a real weapon:

the only way to, take it up, to shoulder it, was to become its real victim. When Jesus picked up his cross, it was to set himself against the Roman Empire and the temple authorities, against the ideology of the world that oppressed and shackled God's people, and against everything that hindered the in-breaking of God's kingdom.

He shouldered the cross; he picked it up to go to his death, literally. But when the writer of Mark's gospel related Jesus' teachings on the matter, we see that something new was slipping into the meaning and implication of cross-bearing, because as Jesus told it, every one of his followers must bear a cross. Is this meant in a literal sense or not? Well, in Mark's day the threat of crucifixion was still a very present reality.

As this gospel was being written some forty years or so after Jesus' death, conflict was everywhere. Social, political, and religious instability were inescapable. The temple in Jerusalem was under siege and soon to be destroyed while Jews were divided over supporting Rome or rising up against it. And the fledgling band of Jesus' followers was caught in the middle. Their beliefs neither persuaded them to fight Rome nor encouraged them to support Rome. Neighbourhoods were divided; families were divided. It was a difficult, desperate, and dangerous time.

The line from Mark's gospel about cross-bearing reminded Christ's very early band of followers of the cross' very literal potential to take life. Depending on the choices they made, indeed, it might take their lives. But, also, these words spoken by Jesus have reminded them and all future followers of the prospect of the cross offered to help them gain everything.

The Rev. Dr. Robert Baggot, for whom I am indebted for many of today's ideas, tells the story of a clergy friend whose grandfather knew a lot about crosses – literally. It's a story fitting to be told during Black History Month. Back in the 1950s his grandfather was a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. On more than one occasion, his grandfather had led other men in erecting and burning crosses on public property and on private lawns. What motivated the use of these crosses for this purpose? Hatred, animosity, hostility, bitterness, ignorance – all these were driving forces in the life of this grandfather. The implementation of the cross in expressing these emotions scarred many innocent people for life.

Robert Baggott asked his friend how he had reconciled himself to that horrific portion of his family history. He smiled quietly and responded this way, "Well, you see, my grandfather went through a conversion experience in mid-life and the cross began to play a very different role for him. It had been an emblem by which he spewed hatred. But one day, my grandfather said, as the stories of scripture were read in his church, he heard the line about taking up the cross. He realized that every cross he had picked up, He had misused. And so, my grandfather said he knelt and prayed for a little guidance on the matter and God showed him what to do with his cross. My grandfather said he nailed his rage (and racism) upon that cross and let it die there. And with that death something new came to life within him."

Then his friend went on to say that that decision had made all the difference in his grandfather's life, which was clear from what happened

years later. “I had been invited to play the golf course located in my grandfather’s hometown,” his friend said. “A green van from the golf club picked me up at the airport along with several friends. The driver of the van, an African American, introduced himself to me. He picked up the golf bags and luggage, then off he went. Driving through my grandfather’s hometown in that van, I told my friends about my own family history there – not the KKK part, of course. I even pointed out the downtown block where my grandfather had owned a loan company for many years.

When we arrived at the golf club, the driver walked around the back of the van and began to unload the bags. One by one, each of my golfing friends walked away until I was the only one left with the driver of the van. When the driver handed me my bags he said, “I knew your grandfather. After his conversion, he was a changed man. If it weren’t for him, many of my people would have gone hungry. He was always willing to give you money if you needed it.... loaned it to you sometimes for no interest if you were really hard up. He was a good Christian man and you should be proud.” How about that? From a grand wizard to a humble Christian with the heart of a servant. The power of the cross.

If I were to ask you if the cross still had its uses for your life, what would you say? Of course, the cross is no longer used as the Romans used it in Jesus’ day to put insurrectionists to their literal death. In contemporary times, we might understand the cross to be the place of our ultimate transformation... a place to hang our arrogance, our rage, our bitterness, our prejudice, our greed – and then let them die, so that something more eternally good and grace-filled and Christ-like may be resurrected. When

Jesus died on that cross so too did his desire for vengeance, for retaliation, for hatred; what came to life were forgiveness, mercy, understanding, and transformative love.

Let me ask you in the context of this metaphor for the cross: What do you need to hang on the cross this day?" Is there something within you or around you that should be hung there? Does something in your life need to die for something else more gracious and good to live?

Think of the innumerable Christians who have trusted in the power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus to change things, whether in their own personal hearts and souls, or whether a change was required because of a social condition, a political injustice, or a national disgrace. Such cross-bearers often carry a heavy, heavy load, as they take up their crosses to follow Jesus. But they have done it time and time again with the sure conviction that the potential and power of the cross that burst into the world when Jesus first shouldered it is now accessible to every one. The cross is now our means to grasp and enlist the transformative power which is capable of making God's kingdom more fully present among us.

William Wilberforce shouldered his cross for many years. He introduced the first bill into the British parliament in 1788 to abolish the slave trade. It was soundly defeated. So Wilberforce began a campaign with other Christian abolitionists. Year after year they continued their campaign of advocacy and education to have slavery abolished. Finally, just days before Wilberforce died he saw his dream come true when in 1833 an abolition bill was once again introduced to parliament. And just before the vote was

called, one member rose to give a stirring tribute to Wilberforce and his unwavering conviction to end evil. Then the vote was taken: 16 against and 283 for. At last – the motion carried overwhelmingly, and Wilberforce sat quietly, head bowed, tears flowing down his wrinkled face. And while Wilberforce metaphorically shouldered his cross, all the while, he hung upon it the shame of slavery until it died there. And what came to life was freedom.

Crosses. Jesus carried one, literally. And his followers have been asked to shoulder them ever since. Following Jesus asks for a life that in one way or another has the cross deeply embedded in it. There is a sacrifice expected as we are loyal and committed to Christ's way – which is God's way. In a sense we give up our lives. Interestingly, the first half of the Gospel of Mark is about "how to live." Jesus gives instructions of one kind or another on how we might best fashion our lives. And, then, at this pivotal point right in the centre of Mark's gospel account, Jesus makes a shift. He begins to show us "how to die." Now that we have been given life, he demonstrates how to give it up... or how to give it away.

Jesus makes it absolutely clear in this 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark that God isn't so much interested in our creature comforts and safety. God cares about a holiness that can reside in us, a holiness that will bring joy and meaning far deeper than some mere comfort in living. Jesus is saying that if you want a worthwhile life, you're going to have to look for ways to give that life away. You're going to have to think more of loving than of being loved, more of understanding than of being understood, more of forgiving than of being forgiven.

Auguste Rodin, the great French sculptor, one day found an enormous, carefully carved wooden crucifix beside a road. He brought that cross he so admired and had it carted to his home. But when it arrived he found that the cross was too big to fit inside his house. So, he went about knocking down the walls, raising the roof, and rebuilt his home around that cross.

Now isn't that a lovely metaphor? What if the cross was central to our lives, to our homes, to our very being? What if we lived under its shadow every day? What if it stood so near that we could pick it up whenever its power was needed? What if we were poised to hang every evil on it, every injustice on it, and every hardship and pain on it, to let the cross do its work as it has for countless people over two thousand years. Then it would be more than an empty metaphor; it would still be doing its work. And what's more, we who shoulder the cross would be God's agents of transformation. We would be, metaphorically, the cutting edge, pushing the envelope, doing the heavy lifting, the rainmakers.

"Shoulder your cross and follow me," Jesus says. What greater call could we ever accept than that? Amen.

*Major Sources:*

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*September 17, 2006*

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*March 01, 2015*