

The Cross

The Rev. William W. Rich
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Second Sunday in Lent
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In the name of God the Creator who made us to bear one another's burdens. In the name of Jesus The Christ, the Son of God who showed us how to bear the cross with love and in the name of God the Holy Spirit whose fiery power makes it possible for us to bear what we could not otherwise. Amen.

Soaring two hundred and eleven feet above us at the very pinnacle of this church or around your neck. Either hidden so that no one can see it but you and no one can know that it is there but you, or worn so that it is revealed to the world so that can see it. Or as a sign you trace on your body to remind you of Christ and the love with which He bore the cross. Whether proclaimed to the city and the world from the top of this church or from around your neck or proclaimed only to your own heart and proclaimed mostly in quiet, there is the cross.

So what is it to you, the cross? Let us first be very clear that in Jesus' own day as He was speaking to His disciples and the crowd that He called together in that story we heard from the Gospel this morning. They did not understand the cross as a symbol. It was a harrowing reality. When Jesus said, "take up your cross and follow me", he was not speaking metaphorically. The cross was to them, and they all knew about it, an instrument of torture, death and shame. It was a means that the Roman State used to keep order by means of fear, intimidation and humiliation. It was the chosen instrument of punishment for the underclass, for slaves and for the subject peoples of the Empire who, like Jesus, His disciples and His fellow Jews, were under the thumb of Rome. It was not used against citizens. The cross was not yet a symbol of life and redemption, nor would it become that for the church for several hundred years. The first time that the cross appears in church decoration and art is in the middle of the 400's. It was simply too terrifying, too shaming, too fearful, too much of a reminder of death to be used. Christians used other symbols but never the cross.

And now let me be even more specific and bring it into the present. The cross that Jesus mentions and asks us to take up in this morning's Gospel, is not the kind of cross that appears in the phrase that you and I use. Yes I use it too, and we hear people who are not even Christians use, as in XY or Z is my cross to bear. Because almost inevitably, what we mean when we say such and such is my cross to bear, is our own completely individual and small problem. As painful and all consuming as the problem may be to us, this is not, if it is just our own, the cross that Jesus bids us take up. Now I know how terribly painful it can be to bear a conflict with one's boss, or mother-in-law, or one's father or child or spouse. I know how painful it can be when your body hurts, when your skin is consumed with eczema. I know how painful it can be if you are depressed by the dreary long days of late winter. But these are not the cross that Jesus bids us take up.

What is this cross? How might we discern it in our own lives and in a wider way? Several criteria for you to consider taking up your cross always will hurt. It will hurt you in your body, or your soul or sometimes both. It will involve the giving up of something that is valuable to you, but you will be giving it up for something more valuable yet. I'll say more about that later. This suffering will not be understood simplistically and self-referentially as "for my own good" or to "build my character." It will be not suffering merely for the sake of suffering. That is called masochism, my friends. It will be more than simply bearing up under suffering. It will be as Jesus says in this morning's Gospel, "suffering for His sake and for the sake of the Gospel, the Good News." And lest I leave it unsaid, remember the Good News is that the love of God can transform and make possible the bearing of anything, even the most horrible suffering. Yes, even the most shameful suffering.

Taking up your cross will not be just for your own good, it will always be because it is for something larger, or someone or one's larger than yourself. It will be redemptive beyond your own life. Taking up your cross will make some people turn away from you or outright abandon you, or, even try to shame you and tell you that it is crazy, wrong or criminal to do this. God can't be in this, they will say to you.

Taking up your cross will not entirely of your own choosing. Yes, your will will be involved in it, but it will also come to you by fate. By the will of God, by circumstances, or, I would like to think and for you to consider, that maybe it comes, the cross we are asked to take up, by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In taking up your cross you will enter into combat against the brokenness of the world and not just your individual brokenness. This is what we as Christians call sin. You will taking up the cross to battle against thoughts, feelings, actions or mere circumstances that work against or cut you and others off from the love and goodness of God. The love and goodness that God intends to transform the whole creation including all suffering.

And finally, by taking up your cross you and I will cooperate with God in a mysterious transformation that is beyond your control. That requires God's power and grace and that will bring good out of it. Sometimes you will not be able to see the good. It will be as Jesus says in Gospel, "that you will see the seed falling into the ground and dying." And that's the part you know. And you will not know the springing up to new life, you will not see the flowering, or maybe you will. But the flowering will come and so will the new life. Remember maybe not for you but maybe for others around you or generations yet unborn.

It will include you in a way that I will talk about in a minute. It will transform you to bear your cross. It will lead to what we call resurrection. Resurrection is not life after death, it includes that, but resurrection is the transformation, by God's power, of all sin and suffering and death is merely one form of that.

Where might you and I look for the cross? Two places come to mind, there are many, but two let us think about together. The first is in sickness. Sickness, physical or emotional or both. What is it like to bear a cross in sickness? There was a wonderful article in the

Boston Globe recently about one of our own parishioners, a woman who has had cancer herself and presently does not. She has decided, in response to her own experience of cancer, her own suffering, to work with others who have cancer, to be with them, to listen to their stories, to weep with them. Whether they are being healed and cured or are being healed and dying. Make no mistake about it, though she bears the cross of her own suffering, because surely it must remind her of her own cancer, she is also bearing a bigger, wider broader cross as she carries the suffering of those she meets. Sometimes she sees resurrection; sometimes people are healed and cured. Sometimes she does not see resurrection because their healing is through their dying.

Could you take some form of illness in your own life in something like that way? So that it is not just your own, so that it is for others? And can it bring transformation to you and to them? I think that is Jesus' invitation as He asks us to take up our cross and follow Him.

The second place we might look is in the social ills of our world. You might say the sicknesses of our society. There are many, as you know, I do not need to tell you. And they infect not just the world outside, but the church. The one I want to speak to you about is the brokenness and illness of our world that we call hunger, physical hunger, the hungering for bread. Most of the world as you, I hope, know lives on less than \$2 a day. And they do not get to choose what bread they will eat. They must take what they can find. Perhaps we can join them in their hungering for transformation. And perhaps we can begin to work, in a tiny way, for the transformation of hunger in two ways here.

One way, as you are aware if you were here last Sunday, we have moved from using rather expensive, tasty lovely bread at Eucharist, to using not very expensive, not very tasty, dry wafers. Let's face it friends, they don't taste good. Now you could bear that as your own suffering and you might even complain about it. It stuck to the roof of my mouth this morning. But you might bear in a different way and so might I, by remembering that by eating that bread we are joining others who have no choice about the bread they eat. And, that by deciding not to use that tastier bread that is quite a bit more expensive, we are able to go on funding Justice ministries and not cutting those.

And there is a second way, which you heard the Vicar mention to you. There is the annual drive known as Loaves and Fishes here. How much effort would it take, this week, for each of us to take one bag or two and to fill and bring it here next week? Yes, it will involve money, yes, it will involve time, yes, and it will involve the physical labor of carrying it. Can you and I be transformed as we eat differently and as we reach out to feed differently?

If you think, I cannot do this. I do not want to take up a cross at all. I am like the early Christians. I am scared to death of the cross. I empathize with you. Taking up one's cross is only possible if we do it along with Christ. It is in realizing that the cross we are called to bear is too much for us to bear individually; that we are driven to our knees, driven into the arms of the crucified Christ and driven into one another's arms. Driven to find companionship in suffering and hope for transformation. This crucified Christ is the one

we will see at the end of Lent, who is Himself transformed, resurrected. His death, His suffering will become the seed of new life, transformation for our own dying. He is planting greater love and compassion in us through the crosses we bear. Will you deny Him or take up your cross and follow?

Lift high the cross, we will sing, lift high the cross. Follow in the footsteps of the one who bore it for us knowing that by doing it you will find deeper meaning and yes, transformation and new life. Through your cross bearing with Christ, you will find your own transformation; you will find yourself cooperating in the redemption of the world. Amazing stuff! If it were not Lent I might say, Alleluia. Amen.