

## **If I Cannot Carry His Cross**

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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*Proverbs 1:20-33; Ps. 19; James 3: 1-12; Mark 8: 27-38*

A story is told of a man, his wife and an actor, who, for many years, played the part of Jesus in an annual passion play. On one occasion the couple was invited backstage after a performance to the actor's dressing room. The husband noticed in the corner of the dressing room the great cross that the actor carried in the play. Handing his camera to his wife, he asked her to snap a picture of him carrying the cross. But when he went to pick it up, he couldn't get it even an inch off the floor. Turning to his actor friend, he exclaimed at its weight and allowed as how he had expected it to be a prop – hollow, light, easy to carry. The actor is said to have replied, "If I did not feel the weight of His cross, I could not play my part."

If I did not feel the weight of his cross, I could not play my part. The actor chose the weight of that cross for the part he was given to play.

Let's look at carrying a cross, walking the way of the cross, bearing the weight of the cross.

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Reading the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, I often find myself wondering, "What in the world does that mean?" Someone asks Jesus a direct question, and he responds by telling a convoluted parable, for example. The people to whom he speaks are often left scratching their heads, and so are we. It's not the distance of 2000 years. It is that what he says is often intentionally opaque, so that his hearers will go away and ponder all the possible facets of what he has said. And be changed

In the passage we read this morning, however, Jesus is about as direct and clear as can be. Like Peter, we may not want to hear what he says, but we can't mistake it. He is going to take up his cross. Those who follow him must choose, **must choose** to take up their cross, must choose the way of the cross, the weight of the cross for the part they are called upon to play. The crux of the matter is allegiance to Jesus – to his teaching, to his way of life. The crux of the matter is commitment to him whatever the consequences. The crux of the matter is laying aside every other weight for the weight of the cross.

Consider Peter. Peter carried the weight of his expectations of the Messiah. When he declared, "You are the Messiah, the Christ," he declared Jesus to be the long awaited national hero Messiah, who had lodged in the hearts and the expectations of the people of Israel. A conquering hero, who would subdue the nations, including Rome, and render Israel triumphant over all. This was the long expected Messiah Israel longed for, yearned

for, wanted in the deepest, most heart-felt way. Such a Messiah would not suffer and die. Such a Messiah would subdue and over-power the enemies of Israel. Jesus didn't get it. Peter would set him straight; rebuke him for even thinking of suffering, rejection, death. And, whatever it meant, after three days rise again!(?) In some ways Peter's concept of Messiah recapitulated the temptations Satan offered Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry – temptations to world domination, temptations to play God. That is why, in my opinion, Jesus responded to him, "Get behind me, you are a Satan (an adversary)." He challenged Peter to lay aside the weight of those dearly held expectations of Messiah so that he might take upon himself what the true Messiah asked of him. As we all know Peter would try and fail, try and fail many times before he was able to take up the cross and become the rock that Jesus knew he could be. He would commit to follow Jesus, and in the end his commitment would cost him the suffering he could not bear to hear about at Caesarea Philippi. His commitment would cost him his very life according to our tradition. But wait, his commitment, along with the commitments of Paul and Barnabas and many, many others would found the church and make him a faithful steward of the Messiah's peace and the Messiah's message in the world. He bore the weight of the cross; walked the way of the cross.

Stewards of the Messiah's peace and the Messiah's message. That is who we are called to be.

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We are called to just such commitment as his. Called through our baptism. As I read Scripture I find a Jesus who wants us to choose him. To lay down the heavy burdens that result from the lure of other gods and take up the weight of the cross, follow the way of the cross by choice with God's help. That is what we commit to do every time we repeat the baptismal covenant. Together we declare:

- We will worship with other members of our community – the words we actually say are, "... continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in the prayers."
- We will endeavor to live according to the values Jesus teaches us. And when we fail at this, we will – with Jesus' help and the support of the community– turn from the ways of evil and death into which we have strayed – and return to those values Jesus teaches us.
- We will proclaim Jesus Christ through our speech and in the way we live our lives.
- We will look for the Christ in each person we encounter. (When you pass the peace in a few moments to the persons near you in the pew, look into their eyes, look for the Christ in each of them.)
- We will live in ways that promote justice and peace on earth, and we will therefore respect the dignity of every human being.

We will remind ourselves and one another that we can only do this through God's help and with one another in the community of Christ's love. That none of us can or should try to shoulder all this weight alone. There can be no solo Christians. That we must turn

to one another and together to Messiah, Christ. It is by Christ's commitment to us that we may enjoy the many beautiful consequences of our commitment to the way of the cross, and it is with Christ's help that we will endure the consequences that spell suffering, even, possibly, death for his sake. The cross I bear next to you and the cross you bear next to me and to her and to him and so on and on and on – these crosses build up the kingdom. Through our own commitment with God's help. Let's be clear - a dread disease or a mean mother-in-law or a reversal of fortunes – these are not crosses in the sense that Jesus uses the words, even though we may mistakenly refer to them as crosses we bear. They are the result of being alive, they are things that happen. They are not choices we make for the sake of our God, whom we have come to know in Jesus, Christ our Lord. The commitment to God in Christ, the willingness to suffer the consequences of our commitment – these are what constitute taking up our cross, carrying it, bearing its weight. Always we do this in the company of Jesus, who first bore his cross to the place where he died for us, and who comes back as our companion on our way. It is the weight of his cross that enables us to bear the weight of the cross each of us is given, enables us to live the way of the cross in his world. It is total commitment to that way that Jesus calls upon us to choose in this passage from the Gospel of Mark.

Let us pray.

Lord, keep us mindful that...

Before we remember you, you are thinking of us.  
Before we talk to you, you are listening.  
Before we know we are in trouble, you are saving us.  
Before we try to please you, you are loving us.  
Before we recognize our sin, you are forgiving us.  
Before we see each other, you are gathering us together.  
Before we invoke your presence, you are here.

Keep us thankful Lord for your steadfast love so that we might shed the weight of things that separate us from it in order to take up the weight of the cross you have for us and go the way of the cross with you. Amen