

Episcopal Church of the Resurrection – Lent 2B – 3/08/09 – Homily by Ruth Eller

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:34-36)

What is a cross?

Historically speaking a cross was an instrument of torture which was also a means of execution. The Romans used it to punish those convicted of crimes against the state—which could include any number of things. It was also a handy way of teaching others to submit to Roman rule. As you approached a town of any significant size, your route would pass alongside a row of crosses with bodies still hanging on them in various stages of decay. In Europe even as recently as two hundred years ago, the bodies of condemned felons or rebels were left to rot on the gallows just outside town. This exhibition was a warning to all: Break the law, or try to change the status quo, this is what you will come to.

In this time and place we do the dirty work of executions behind closed doors. The edge has been taken off for us. But try to cast your mind back a few centuries. Or for that matter, think of the electric chair or the gas chamber or the gurney with the guy strapped to it, his body jerking uncontrollably after the supposedly lethal injection.

That's the basic definition of a cross, and you can see why the idea of taking one as a religious symbol might be considered pretty perverse.

Which leads us to religion. In Christian terms, we speak first not of *a* cross but of *The Cross*. For Christians, that instrument of torture and death is transformed into the means of healing and life. It symbolizes God's limitless love for us and for the whole world. Why? Because this love was so great that God subjected the divine essence first to the cross of a human body, so easily hurt, so time-bound; and then allowed this God-self in Christ to die like a criminal on the Romans' cross. And all this was done so that we might know that God is present among us, sharing our suffering, and finally raising us with Christ to new life, more abundant than we could have imagined for ourselves. That's the meaning of *The Cross*, for Christians.

But there are other crosses, too. These all radiate from what Jesus says to his disciples in today's gospel lesson: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

What might our cross be? Is it the same for all of us, or is it unique to each individual? Is there something all crosses have in common?

Starting with the last question, it seems that Jesus thinks all crosses are alike in one way. When we take up our cross, we are denying ourselves, following him, and losing our life. The following part sounds great—but denying yourself? losing your life? Who'd want that? But then Jesus adds, in his maddening, mysterious way, that when you give up your life for his sake, you actually gain it.

What can this mean? Here's where we get to the unique part. Because the life we lose and the life we gain will be different for different people. Denying self isn't like the self-denial of, say, giving up chocolate in Lent. Nor is it even turning yourself into a

doormat for Christ, living for others so there's no *you* left at all, except the bit that feels tromped on and resentful. ("Making dinner and washing up every night for these ungrateful idiots is just the cross I have to bear...") No. That's not giving up self at all, is it? Giving up self involves a deeper, more fundamental change.

In simplest terms, it's all about *letting go*. Last week I talked about stripping down for Lent. Jesus calls us to live out the ultimate stripping down. That would be letting go of whatever it is we think we just *have* to keep, to be who we are. The thing that we guard jealously, perhaps secretly. The thing we're terrified of losing.

The easiest example is some kind of addiction. If you think that you just have to have all that liquor or pot, if it's part of your self-image; if you think that people will not recognize you or like you if you give it up—then taking up your cross will be losing that part of yourself. It will be painful. Part of you will die. But you will come out the other end into new life, with the energy and time to be who you really are. Oh—and the people who really care about you will actually like you better. The others will just have another reason to hang out with each other and complain.

Or suppose you adore your spouse or your child so much that your whole life revolves around him or her. How could you let that person out of your grip? You want them always there, and always exactly the same. Even when they take a new job or go away to college, you just can't let go. But when God gives you the strength to take up the cross and let go, what happens? Your own horizons expand, so you can be more fully yourself, not just a wife or a father. And your relationship with the beloved object will be a lot better, too, since they will be relieved of the burden of your all-consuming devotion.

And by the way—all of this can be applied to a certain kind of devotion to the Church—in particular, your own parish. Not wanting anything or anyone to change in it. To keep a tight lid on the comfort it offers, so only you and the ones you deem worthy can enjoy it. How different life would be for you, though, if you just opened the doors and invited all of God's beloved children to share what you have! The Church belongs, after all, not to you, but to Christ.

I think all of these patterns of behavior illustrate what Jesus is talking about. In each case, in giving up one way of being, the person is freed from—well, sin. Freed to become a true follower of Christ, to do what Christ is calling them to do in the world. The cross itself isn't the giving-up part, it isn't the dreaded separation from our old self-image. It's what happens after that. It's the way we follow Jesus; the way we live our lives.

To find examples of what our particular cross might be, we need look no farther than the gospel from which our lesson is taken. When Jesus says this about losing your life and taking up your cross, nobody knows (but him and us) that *The Cross* lies ahead for him. But he has prophesied his death, and Peter has objected—which leads to these sayings about cross and death. The way that Jesus has been walking so far will finally bring him to *The Cross*. You could say that *The Cross* is just the culmination and full expression of the cross he has been bearing all along, the way he has been living his life. And that cross gives us examples of the various individual crosses we might be asked to bear in our lives as his followers.

What forms has Jesus' cross taken so far? Here's a list, taken in order from the gospel according to Mark:

Being baptized—in other words, starting on a new course in life

Going into the wilderness; resisting temptations to walk another path
Calling people to repentance and proclaiming Good News
Calling disciples
Preaching and Teaching
Praying
Healing and casting out demons
Feeding people (two versions: 4,000 and 5,000)

These are all things Jesus has done up to this point. Can you relate to any of those ways of the cross?

If you belong to the church, you have already taken the first step by being baptized. Then all of us have had our desert times. And chances to resist temptation appear every day.

We all have opportunities to proclaim the Good News of God's love, too. Sometimes we do it in words, sometimes by acts of generosity and kindness.

Some of us preach and teach. Some help those in need of healing, whether physical or spiritual. Most of us can give or work to feed the hungry, here and all over the world. We can feed people's spiritual hunger, too, by inviting them to the Lord's Table. And all of us can pray.

This is what it means to take up our cross and follow Christ. True, in order to do any of these things whole-heartedly some part of ourselves will have to die. Also true, none of us is perfect enough to stay the course without detours or at least hankerings back to the old self we left behind. But that's where *The Cross* comes in. Unlike Peter in today's gospel, we can see the Cross of Christ lifted before us. Peter didn't know what was coming. We do. We know that the very lifeblood of God is poured into us and the whole world every day. We don't have to bear our cross alone.

What is a cross? It's the meaning of our little life; it's the meaning of history. It's just all there is.