

## Bearing the Cross

Mark 15:16-22; Matthew 27:32; Luke 23:26

Palm/Passion Sunday, (April 2) 2023

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*Must Simon bear the cross alone,  
And other saints be free?  
Each saint of thine shall find his own  
And there is one for me.  
Whene'er it falls unto my lot,  
Let it not drive me from  
My God, let me ne'er be forgot  
'Till though hast lov'd me home.*

-Thomas Shepherd, 1693

*He never spoke a word to me,  
And yet He called my name.*

-Countee Cullen,

“Simon the Cyrenian Speaks”

*Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear.*

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

I've long thought it interesting that the Gospels are full of people who “lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” to quote George Eliot at the end of *Middlemarch*. Think about all the people who are mentioned just one time or in just one or two verses and then never heard of again?

I am thinking of the widow who dropped her small coin into the temple offering and was noticed by Jesus. Who was she? What happened to her? Or the

little boy who offered his few loaves and fishes so that Jesus could feed a multitude.

I'm talking about those people, some named, mostly unnamed, whose lives we know mostly by their encounter with Jesus.

I'm interested in these people because that is who most of us are. We live our ordinary lives, doing fair to middling most of the time, and then Jesus comes along, sometimes grabbing us, calling us, getting us involved. Afterward, sometimes we go back to normal living. But most of the time, our lives become different in one way or another. People like us, who live in out-of-the-way places, like Nacogdoches, who live faithfully a hidden life.

Of course, if Jesus does not mean something for the normal, ordinary sort of people, then he doesn't mean much. So, I like to look for the moments when the spotlight shines on some ordinary person. We see ourselves in that person and take heart.

We begin today as Palm Sunday, the beginning of this week in which the great, cosmic drama of redemption is being worked out, and we'll end today as Passion Sunday, as we head toward the cross. This week great forces are at work. The characters are large – Jesus facing crucifixion, Pontus Pilate, the Pro-consul of Rome, the Sanhedrin with the powerful presence of Annas and Caiaphas – the High Priests, the disciples like Peter who begin with the best of intentions and then falter and fail. In the midst of all these, the spotlight falls briefly on a man named Simon of Cyrene.

We know nothing of who he is except that he is from Cyrene, a region in North Africa, and that he is the parents of Alexander and Rufus. Who were they? Perhaps they were known to members of the church to whom Mark was writing? What was Simon doing in Jerusalem on that fateful day when the procession of soldiers passed by and a man bent, obviously being tortured, was carrying a cross? Luke says Simon was coming from the country, but we don't know why or how or anything else. Not a word is spoken of him again.

Yet he is remembered by name. All because on that particular day, while in the middle of a crowd alongside of a street, a Roman soldier pointed at him and said, "You, come over here. Help this prisoner drag this cross up the hill."

Matthew and Mark say Simon was compelled and Luke says the Roman soldiers seized him to bear the cross of Jesus, because Jesus was unable carry his own instrument of death, which the Romans loved to further traumatize the accused and terrorize those who looked on. Over the centuries, the church looked back to Simon of Cyrene and said, "Remember, Jesus told us to take up the cross. Look at Simon. He showed us how."

The Black church has long looked to Simon of Cyrene as a model of discipleship and an inspiration in dealing with crosses. And while he may be a minor character in the New Testament to most of us, in the Black church he has long been a major character. Along with the Ethiopian Eunuch over in Acts 8, Simon of Cyrene, often known as Black Simon, is specifically from Africa. The full Christian tradition has always asserted that Simon was dark-skinned, however,

the Black church recognized that he was not only dark-skinned but more importantly he was the only person who actually carries the cross of discipleship.

Notice that the cross was not something Simon chose. Matthew and Mark say he was compelled to carry the cross. Bearing the cross was not something chosen. Simon was just part of the crowd, perhaps he had just come into town from the country, as Luke says. But for some reason, perhaps his Cyrenian clothing caused him to stand out. Perhaps it was his dark skin, although in Jerusalem in that day and time, what would have stood out, would have been the lighter skin of the Roman soldiers. Everyone else would have had some shade of dark skin.

The Black church looked to Simon because he was simply in the crowd and the Roman soldiers grabbed him to carry the cross. They knew the long history of just being in the crowd, maybe simply walking by, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and a mob grabs you and lynches you.

Martin Luther King's father, "Daddy King," wrote in his autobiography, the first time he saw "Judge Lynch" as he put it. He was just a boy, but he remembered it as an event so terrifying that "I thought I was going to pass out." A group of disgruntled white men, complaining about [n-word] taking their jobs, decided to take out their frustrations on a black co-worker at the mill, who merely was walking by, on his way home.

The white men taunted him, then they grabbed him taking his payday money, then they began to beat him and kick him severely. "They pulled him right past me," Daddy King remembered. Then "one of them took off his belt and

wrapped it around the Negro's neck. They lifted him up and tied the end of the belt to this tree and let him go . . . his feet about five or six inches off the ground."

Like Jesus, hanging on a cross, this nameless black victim, hanging on a Georgia tree, was left to die a shameful death—like so many other innocent blacks.

Merely a child at the time, Daddy King was shocked into silence, as he helplessly watched a lynching take place only a few feet away. "All I could do was to run on home, keep silent, never mentioning what I'd seen to anyone, until many, many years later, when I understood it better."

So, when the King James Version says in the book of Acts (5:30, 10:39, 13:29) as well as in Galatians (3:13) and I Peter (2:24) that Jesus was hung from a tree, you get the connection. And when Black Simon was grabbed from the crowd to bear the cross – you get the connection.

But there is more. And this is essential. What others do for harm; God turns to good. God took the lynching of Jesus and turned it into our redemption. And the Black church long knew that because God was at work through the lynching of Jesus, God in Christ was in solidarity with them. Furthermore, even though White Supremacy meant lynching for evil, somehow God was at work. After the cross, there is the promise of the resurrection.

Martin Luther King preached, "Life is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way

which comes only through suffering” (quoted in David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*).

Part of what I want us to know this morning, is most of the time, we don't choose the cross. The cross chooses us. We are compelled. We are chosen. We are called. The old word is “vocation.” There are times, when we are ordinary, everyday people going about our lives, and something, someone lays their hand on our shoulder and says, “You. Come here and bear the cross.”

Sometimes we realize God is calling us to take up the cross. I remember back in the early 1990's when we were worried whether we would survive or not as a church. When we were not expecting it, we saw a need come to us by helping what was then called The East Texas AIDS Project do a food drive. Eventually, of course, the East Texas AIDS Project became Health Horizons, which became the Brown Family Health Clinic.

But at the time, we were not looking for it. We were looking for traditional ministries which would help us grow and thrive. We were not looking for ways to gather food, raise money, and work in solidarity with gay men and drug IV users who were HIV+/AIDS. But God called us. And we heard God's call to mission and ministry and service. It was a call to bear the cross.

Sometimes we're simply bystanders who see a need and are compelled to involve ourselves. Like Sue Winner, coming out of the grocery store and seeing an older Latino couple trying to put groceries in the trunk of their car, while a belligerent White man drove up to them and sat down on his horn. Sue and another

bystander, put down their groceries and intervened, placing their bodies between the couple and the man in his pickup, helping them put their groceries away.

Simon is us. We are minding our own business. When to our surprise, we are called to come forward to bear the cross of Jesus.

In her small but powerful 1999 book, *Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust*, historian Victoria Barnett looks at three villages during WWII and the Holocaust comparing how they responded. One village was called “Sonderburg,” a stable village of 4000 located in Germany, in which Jews and non-Jews were largely integrated and neighbors. But soon after the Nazis came to power in 1933, the Jews discovered they had few friends. More and more they were excluded and belittled, harassed, and discriminated against until they were eventually rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Barnett says, “Under Nazism, the non-Jews of Sonderburg became bystanders to the Holocaust. These people, who had gotten along with their Jewish neighbors before 1933, had simply proceeded with their own lives after that date – not completely oblivious to what was happening to their Jewish neighbors, but oddly uninvolved, as though it had nothing to do with them.” Barnett goes on to ask, “At what point does laissez-faire turn into indifference, indifference into disrespect? And when, by implication, do disrespect and indifference contribute to something far more malignant?” (p. 5).

She also looked at the small Austrian village of Mauthausen, with a concentration camp located nearby. At first, the camp was seen as a Nazi thug intrusion. The camp was brutal for all to see. So much so, that eventually brutality, killing, and terror became commonplace. Soon the villagers figured out, that if they

kept their mouths shut, looked the other way, and offered no resistance, they could continue their lives. They just needed to become bystanders.

Jews and others were marched through the village from the train station to the camp. Many were shot or beaten to death along the way. Again, the villagers were not involved and looked the other way. In Feb. 1945, 495 Russian prisoners escaped into the countryside. Eventually, with the aid of local villagers and farmers, 300 of them were recaptured, only 57 alive. The villagers and farmers had joined with the SS, in hunting them down and killing them.

A subsequent study done on the village said that as the villagers treated the camp and the prisoners as invisible, both the inmates and villagers internalized that invisibility, so that they all became humans without substance or shadow. They became unreal; they became dehumanized (p. 9).

Finally, Barnett looks at Le Chambon in southern France, which we have long talked about. A village of 2500 people who sheltered and smuggled to safety over 3000 Jews over five years. Why was Le Chambon different?

Barnett highlights several things. First, with the leadership of their church, they knew God was a participant in this world and not merely a bystander. God in Christ got involved. And God in Christ calls us, compels us to get involved, too. She quotes theologian Robert McAfee Brown that a “moral society will be a society of *participants* rather than *spectators*.”

Second, the people of Le Chambon, knew that God has made us one with

each other. We are connected. We are community. Not private individuals, isolated, and unconcerned, but neighbors with one another. Therefore, we have empathy, the ability to reach out to the other. Or to put it in Jesus' language, "to love our neighbors as ourselves." French philosopher Rene Girard called it "disruptive empathy." Which means an empathy that is not passive but resists isolating dehumanization and actively participates in justice and goodness, mercy, and love.

Bear with me as I tell once again this good, quick story which comes from friend of this church Bill Moyers. A man walked out in his front yard and saw down the street some people gathering. He went down to see what was going on and saw two fellows squaring off against one another. The man stepped forward, "Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?"

We're not in a private fight. We are called, compelled to join in the fight for public schools with proper funding and stand against vouchers using public money to pay for private schools. We are involved in racial justice and getting to know our neighbors across lines in this town which means everything from nurturing relationships with Zion Hill this afternoon to participating in the community-wide Holy Week services at noon starting here tomorrow. It might even mean that our church needs to do such simple things as show the movie *Ruby Bridges*. We need to support our public library actively and vocally. It means that believing in sidewalks is about having a town where we can get to know one another. It does not mean we're a bunch of "Marxist Socialists" as one city council candidate says. And it means that we speak out and practice disruptive empathy against the scapegoating our LGBTQ neighbors.

Most of us are busy and tired at the end of the day. We feel as if we're doing all we can just to get by. But what if God is calling us, perhaps calling us again? We're not called to solve everything. We're simply called to take that first small step, out of the crowd, toward Jesus.

This week we remember the greatest, largest matters of our faith. Following Jesus, crucifixion and death, and the resurrection. The battle against evil and death is huge, cosmic, eternal. But on the way, a few ordinary, everyday little people are called out of the crowd to be disciples, to help Jesus carry the cross. From time to time, it is our turn.

The old hymn, which we will soon sing, asks "Must Jesus bear the cross alone?" No. From out of the crowd, a few ordinary people are called to bear it before the world and with him.

That's you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.