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TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

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Text: Mark 8: 31-38 (B - Lent 2)

It is curious, is it not, the way that sometimes, out of the blue, someone will say something which just grabs you. You have heard it literally hundreds of times before but which now, for some unknown reason, you hear in a new way so that it stops you in your tracks and prompts you to see things from a perspective which you have not done before.

Something like that happened to me several days ago. I was at the hospital visiting one of our members, when I ran into a friend, one of the other pastors in our community. We had a short conversation. Then he asked about one of our other members who is ill and I filled him in on what is going on. It was then that he said that something which stopped me in my tracks. "That is certainly a cross for her to bear," he said. Now I knew exactly what he meant. But for some reason his comment left me uncomfortable and I was not even sure why. In fact, as he bade farewell and walked down the hall, I just stood there, watching him walk away, pondering his words and probing for the source of my unease. "That is certainly a cross for her to bear."

On the surface we all know what he meant. In fact, many of us have probably used that expression ourselves. Someone is ill, bearing some burden which has been inflicted by nature or by some circumstance. Nicholas is born nearly blind: "That is his cross," we might be inclined to conclude. Or John has lost his job because of corporate downsizing and is too close to retirement to find employment: "That is his cross to bear." Or Carol is unexpectedly diagnosed with a shocking disease:

"That is her cross," we might think to ourselves. So, at least in our own minds and usage, "the cross" becomes a byword for any burden or difficulty which we have to face in life.

Now don't misunderstand me. These are indeed difficult and agonizing hardships, the likes of which we cannot fully understand unless we, ourselves, have walked in those shoes. Such circumstances are indeed heavy human burdens which should elicit both our compassion and our assistance. In a sense, perhaps they even are crosses. But my question, and I guess the issue with which I am really wrestling and which my friend's comment brought to awareness is this: *Is this the cross of which Jesus is speaking in the Gospel lesson for today, when he implores us, "Take up your cross and follow me"?*

If it is, who among us would choose that for ourselves? Who would choose to be ill or blind, jobless or forsaken? The truth of the matter is that, at least in the majority of cases, those things are beyond our control, anyway. They may be laid upon us, something which we may be forced to bear, but they are not something which we "take up". So what is Jesus referring to when he says, from the midst of today's Gospel lesson, "Take up your cross and follow me"?

To understand that, we have to look back at Scriptures, and to the words and example of Jesus.

You see, the cross that Jesus calls us to take up is modeled upon his own cross. And this is a cross which has two notable characteristics: First, it was taken up wilfully. And second, it was taken up in sacrificial devotion to others. So if we are going to be faithful to Jesus' words, we must first be very clear as to what he is calling us to be when he says, "Take up your cross and follow me."

To begin with: The cross of which Jesus speaks is something we voluntarily decide to do. It is not something inflicted upon us from without, nor some unfortunate difficulty that befalls us because of our carelessness or neglect. Jesus does not tell us merely to bear the cross, but to take it up.

I hardly need to tell anyone that life is full of burdens we have to bear because we cannot escape them. But the cross can always be evaded. We can always choose not to "take it upon ourselves". That is the meaning of Jesus' struggle which took place the night before his crucifixion in the Garden of

Gethsemane. Jesus had the power to avoid the cross; but he accepted it in order to fulfil God's intention: "If possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." That was Jesus' prayer, and in a sense it is ours, as well. If we would take up the cross and follow in his footsteps, it will be because, at the Spirit's prompting, we have been given the faith and courage to take it upon ourselves.

So often, when we refer to the cross which someone has to "bear", we are referring to a burden which they must endure for their own sake. But the cross we are called to "take up" refers to that which we are willing to shoulder for the sake of others. It is not some suffering we accept so that people will pity us, or praise us for our endurance. It is not some act of penance in which we engage, hoping that it will "make us a better person" or help us to grow spiritually. *The cross refers to that which we are willing to endure in order that others can benefit, just as Jesus went to Golgotha on behalf of the world.*

What that implies is this: To be afflicted with cancer or AIDS is not the cross of which Jesus speaks, torturous as those diseases are. Rather, the cross is *assumed* by those who willingly minister to cancer victims or AIDS victims, when they could avoid it. The cross is *carried* by those who choose to show compassion, when they could just as easily turn and walk away. The cross is *taken on* by those who choose to reach out to others, when they could just as easily rest content because they have looked after themselves. The cross is *borne* by anyone anywhere who, out of concern for their neighbour, is willing to bend and compromise—even though it gains them nothing—simply because it serves the needs of those around them.

To be poverty-stricken due to circumstances of birth or loss of employment is not the cross of which Jesus speaks, unfortunate as such deprivation may be. Instead, the cross is borne by those who do not need to work in soup kitchens or shelters for the homeless, but choose to do so. The cross is borne by those who call for the government to forego a tax reduction, and instead to maintain jeopardized social programs. Those who take such stands will be maligned by those who want lower taxes. And the criticism such advocates accept is the cross. They assume it voluntarily, for the sake of others.

To have a son on drugs or an unwed daughter who is pregnant, or a family member who is mentally ill, is not to take up

the cross. Rather, taking up the cross may mean loving our children when we are more inclined to boot them out the door, telling them to suffer the consequences without any sympathy from us.

Believe me, taking up the cross is never an easy thing. Indeed, it goes against the grain of anyone who is not masochistic. Is it any wonder that when Jesus spoke to the disciples of his own impending crucifixion Peter rebuked him, tried to argue him out of it. But, in turn, Jesus spoke some of the most stinging words ever reported of him: "Get behind me, Satan! For you, Peter, are not on the side of God."

We are not inclined to take up the cross, not in this age when our own entertainment, rights and satisfaction become the measure of whether something is worthwhile or not. But this is the call of Jesus, a call which is pressed upon us daily, especially during this lenten season. But it is also a call which is pressed upon us not just for its own sake, but because it points us to one of the holy mysteries of life. To "take up our cross", to give our life in behalf of others, is to find the truest and deepest expression of what life is meant to be. In a very real sense, to save and protect and hoard our life is to lose it...but to lose it, offering it up to God and in service to our neighbour, this is to find true life indeed.

So *having to bear a cross* and *choosing to take up a cross*, are very different things. But that having been said, it must also be acknowledged that one of the greatest triumphs of life is to be seen at those times when the cross that we have been forced to bear is transformed into the cross which we choose to take up on behalf of our neighbour. Let me give you an example.

Many years ago a friend and a parishioner in one of my former congregations was diagnosed with acute leukemia. Unable to deal with his serious condition in the local hospital, Ron was shipped off to Sunnybrooke Health Centre in Toronto, where he underwent treatment in an attempt to save his life. After he had been there for several agonizing months and was nearing the end of his first course of chemotherapy, Ron awoke one night to the sound of crying. Dragging himself from his bed, he shuffled to the room next door where he discovered a young man newly diagnosed with acute leukemia, who was terrified by the prospects of what lay before him. Through the dark

hours of that night, Ron sat with him, listened to his fears, and shared his own experiences.

In the weeks and months ahead, Ron found a new meaning in his life as he used the experience of his own illness as a bridge to reach out to those around him. With the permission of his physicians and as much as his treatment allowed, Ron made a point of visiting each of the new patients who were admitted to his ward, listening to them, sharing their fears and offering them hope. In the end, Ron lost his own battle with that illness. But in the process, he had discovered a newness and a depth of life which he had never known before. His faith, courage and concern for others deeply influenced those around him, patients and staff alike. He did not choose the cross of illness which had been laid upon him. But he did choose to "take up that cross". And in that, his own weakness and woundedness became his strength, a cross "taken up", as it was offered in service to his neighbours.

What cross are you called to take up during the holy season? In thanksgiving for all that God has done in our behalf, what can you do, what can we do, without thought of reward or even satisfaction, but also without regard for criticism or misunderstanding? Therein may lie the cross which you are being called to carry.

But know this, the power to carry it is not our own. Rather, it comes from the crucified One, who has gone before us, and who calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

May it be so among us. Amen.