

The Cross at a Crossroads

Matthew 16:21-28

August 27, 2023

Rev. Scott Anderson

It's hard to imagine. One moment, Jesus is saying to Peter that you are "the rock on which I will build my church," our text from Matthew last week, and a few verses later, in the text before us today, Jesus is calling Peter "a stumbling block." A stunning reversal of relational fortune all because Peter could not believe Jesus' prediction that his life would end on a cross, nor his command for Peter to take up his cross and follow him.

In the first parish I served, a young woman who was not a member of our congregation stopped by to see me one afternoon. She lived in our community, had neighbors who attended our church, and drove by the church on her way to and from work.

In tears, she told me her story. She had been physically abused repeatedly by her husband at home. Up until the night before, she was the one who had always been on the receiving end of the violence. But the evening prior to our conversation, their daughter became the target, and that was the last straw for her.

So, she called the police. The laws are more stringent now than they were back then, and for whatever reason, the officers who responded that night determined an arrest was not necessary. The young woman had not pushed the matter with them, because frankly, she was not used to her voice counting for anything. But even though her voice was quiet and often shook with emotion, she still had the courage to tell me why she was in my office.

"I attend another church," she said. "But my pastor doesn't understand. I once told him what was happening with my husband, and my pastor told me that the violence must be my cross to bear. I needed to just pick it up like Jesus did and deny myself to save my marriage and keep my family together. He told me it must be God's will and to pray that I might learn to accept it."

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." It is a troubling text, because for generations these very words of Jesus have been taken and twisted into commands that serve only to legitimate violence in the name of faithfulness.

Unfortunately, this young woman's experience with this text, and others like it, is not particularly unusual, even today. Delores Williams, a womanist theologian, has written about the real danger of interpreting Jesus' words to imply that women--and particularly for Williams Black women--must suffer and stay in "their place" in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

Williams claims that phrases like "take up your cross" have been so destructive that, for her, the cross is not the symbol of redemption or salvation. Rather, she believes that Jesus' life and ministry are what save us and show us what faithful living looks like (Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, pp. 165–167).

One of the most provocative questions Williams asks is what might have been different in the course of Christian history had the primary symbol for our salvation had been loaves and fish—a symbol of God's extravagant love—rather than the cross. What if that symbol is what we wore around our neck and had displayed in the front of our churches?

For indeed, from the Crusades to the KKK to those Christian flags at the Jan 6th insurrection, the symbol of the cross has been co-opted to be a symbol of God-sanctioned violence against those considered "other." Loaves and fish might have been a much more difficult religious symbol to twist around and misuse.

Of course, in the time when Jesus and his disciple Peter lived, there was absolutely nothing religious about the cross. Rather, there was only one purpose for a cross in the first century of the Common Era: execution. The cross was both the symbol and the means of political and military punishment for dissidents and criminals. It was Rome's version of the electric chair or the strap-covered gurney sitting by the lethal injection machine.

In Jesus' day, the cross had no veneer of redemption, no hint of life, and absolutely no connection with the divine. It was an instrument of suffering and death for those hung upon it, as well as an instrument of fear and intimidation for everyone else.

It was common for the road to Jerusalem to be lined with crosses, each one of them bearing a body (Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain*, p. 59). Each of those crosses was its own sermon about the Roman Empire—"Look and see," the cross would proclaim. "Look and see who holds your life and your death. You can worship whom you want but look and see and don't forget under whose power and reign you truly live."

Frankly, that kind of sermon was what was being proclaimed to the abused young woman who came to see me when her pastor told her that the violence in her home was her cross to bear.

Undeniably, with that interpretation of "taking up your cross," she was also being told whose she was, her husband's. And she was being told under whose power and reign she lived: his alone. No wonder she struggled, so much so that she was willing to tell me, a stranger, a man no less, her story in the hopes she might hear a word of life rather than another tired word of death.

I wonder if that was part of Peter's struggle, too. With all of those crosses of the Roman Empire bearing down on him, preaching words of oppression and death day after day, perhaps he found Jesus' words about Jesus' impending suffering and dying to be as horrendous as I found the words of that young woman's pastor, "God forbid it, Lord. This shall never happen to you," Peter protested.

No one chooses to bear a cross. It is always imposed onto one by those more powerful. That was Peter's experience. And I wonder if it flashed through Peter's mind that if something like that could happen to Jesus, to the one he just claimed as Messiah, then it could happen to any of the disciples. And none of them signed up for defeat. None of them signed up for rejection. None of them signed up for suffering. And certainly, none of them signed up for death.

But perhaps this Jesus, this one whom they loved, this Jesus was trying to *redefine* the cross for them. I wonder if by inviting them to take up their cross, he was telling them to stop giving the fear of the cross so much power. To stop letting death determine their every move. To stop allowing the Roman empire's threat to have the last word on whose they were and under whose reign they lived.

"Take up your cross," Jesus said, "and stop worshiping fear and death as your gods." That's how I read this text. "Take up your cross and *follow me*," Jesus said. Take up that horrible cross as a sign that you believe in the life-giving power of God more than you believe in death-dealing power of fear.

Take up that cross and see for yourselves the empty threat it represents. For God is the one who holds your life, not the empire. God is the one who will walk with you through death, not the empire. God is the one who will give you new life, not the empire.

God is the one under whose reign and under whose power you live and move and have your being, not the empire or whatever is ruling your life right now—not an abusive partner, not the economy, not the pandemic, not your addiction, not your wealth, not your poverty, not your

security, not your health status, and not even your family. God alone is the one to whom you belong.

And that means *you matter* to God, regardless of what other kinds of things you are told based on your gender or your race or your sexual orientation, or the amount you have in the bank. Take up your cross as a sign of your protest against all of those voices and follow Jesus.

I have wondered what might have happened in my office all those years ago if the young woman who came to see me and I had talked about this passage in this different way. What if Jesus' call to take up our cross is actually meant to *empower* his disciples, to give us courage to take a stand against the empire, against violence, against any fearful voice that tries to define us and lock us down?

What might have been if this abused young woman and I had redefined bearing the cross as a way of proclaiming her freedom in God, her freedom that could lend her courage to live a more abundant life, a life where she and her children were able to break free from the domination of her abusive husband?

If we can summon up our courage to take up that cross and follow, one foot in front of another, Jesus promises us we will slowly find our life, not lose it. A life that begins, ends, and begins again in the light of God's care and reign and not in the captive shadow of whatever gods are ruling our lives. Certainly not in the captivity of abuse, violence, or fear.

The young woman who came to see me that day eventually left her home (after a long time) and went into a shelter, getting her life back on track. Her husband sought counseling and they eventually reconciled. She called me occasionally just to check in, just to tell me she was OK, just to let me know that she finally knew to whom she truly belonged and trusted that as her truth. She called me because she wanted me to know she finally felt free, and that she was continuing to follow Jesus, bit by bit, day by day, into her future.

For this young woman, beloved daughter of God, that cross became not only a symbol of her protest, but also the means to her liberation. May it be for each of us as well.

Amen.