

AT CROSS PURPOSES
Good Friday Meditation
March 30, 2018

(These introductory words were spoken at the outset of the service and not as part of the sermon, but I insert them here.)

It may seem paradoxical we call the day Jesus was crucified, "Good."

Good Friday is the day the Living Water said "I thirst."

It is the day the Bread of Life hungered.

It is the day the Resurrection and the Life died.

It is the day the Priest became the Sacrifice.

It is the day the King was executed like a common criminal.

But the sorrow of this day reminds us salvation, shalom, wholeness, redemption
comes through the sorrow of a loving Father Who was profoundly moved
by the plight of His children.

Good Friday recalls for us the greatness and wonder of God's good love ... that in
His incarnation He should submit to death for us in order to make it possible for
us to be "good" in the sight of God.

The sad commemoration of Good Friday, this unhappy celebration, serves to
remind us that only One is good enough to save us, only One is good enough to
cover us with His goodness.

Only One is good enough to make us good in the sight of God.

And that He chose to do so is indeed ... Good.

Last night we remembered how Simon had been the very first to acknowledge and confess that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. As recorded in Matthew 16, Jesus had affirmed him for that, telling him, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*" Jesus honored Simon by giving him this new name, almost as an affectionate nickname. "*You are Peter, the original Rocky.*" The very next thing Matthew records is that Jesus began to explain He must go to Jerusalem suffer and even be killed, and Peter took hold of Jesus and said, "*Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!*" To Peter, this talk of suffering and death was literally **at cross purposes** with what he envisioned a Messiah would do! Peter did not yet understand **the cross' purpose**.

We read that Jesus then turned and said, "*Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things and the ways of men.*" Now, I don't think he was actually calling Peter Satan. I think he was saying, "*Get back in line; Peter, because you are out of line! Don't get ahead of Me, don't run away from Me, don't walk counter to Me; that's what Satan would have you do. Get behind Me, and follow!*" Jesus goes on to say, "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*" In Luke 14:27, Jesus reiterates, "*And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be my disciple.*" And toward the end of his Gospel, Luke tells us Jesus carried a cross down the road to the place where He would hang upon it. Many people lined the road as Jesus was led away, including women who wailed in grief for him. Then we have these words in Luke 23:26, telling us of another Simon - "*As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.*"

This Simon was just a relatively anonymous man in the crowd, who had just come to town from the country. Cyrene was a city in northern Africa where a large Jewish community lived, and Simon had most likely come to celebrate the Passover along with many other Jewish faithful from all over making this annual pilgrimage. He more or less just stumbled into this scene. Suddenly, some soldiers grab hold of Simon, they drag him out of the crowd, they lay that cross upon his shoulders, and force him to carry it behind Jesus ... which is eerily reminiscent of Jesus earlier words: *"Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple."*

Not to wax overly allegorical, but a day may come for any one of us where we will stand right where Simon stood. You'll be just another face in the crowd, minding your own business. Like Simon, you certainly won't have volunteered to carry a heavy burden. But suddenly, something happens. Something that you didn't plan seizes you, something that will change everything about your life. An automobile accident, a random act of terror, a job loss, a loss of a loved one or the loss of a relationship, a grim diagnosis ... whatever it may be, one day it just takes a hold of you. Whatever it is, you can't believe this has happened. A heavy burden has been laid across your unwilling shoulders, and now you are traveling down a road you never expected to walk.

When our lives are seized by that which we were not looking for, we face the great choice of how we will respond. We can respond by saying, *"Why me? I was just minding my own business. Why should this happen to me?"* A whole lot of people spend the rest of their lives asking that question, but it really doesn't get them very far. But others ... others choose to look up when a burden is placed on their shoulders. They choose to look up and see the cross they are bearing as the cross spoken of by Jesus Christ. They choose to look up from underneath this burden thrust upon them in order to see a whole new vision of Jesus, Who is just up ahead.

Now, I don't mean to trivialize the cross of Christ by placing it on a par with the burdens we are given. On one hand, many of us do bear difficult burdens; however, on the other hand, to compare our difficulties, large as they may be, to the trauma and trial of Jesus' cross can be a little grandiose, to say the least. First, I doubt any of us here today will ever bear the martyr's burden of the cross of Christ, and second, He is literally bearing the weight of the world, the weight of the world's sin. But all of us will bear some burden; if you are not doing so already, I guarantee one day you will. Whether the burdens come through suffering from our inevitable lot in a fallen world or through suffering for our faith, such burdens can serve to transform us into better people, rather than bitter people; people who discover a wholly new, real, and vital vision of Jesus leading just ahead of us. It was the Greek playwright Aeschylus who wrote in the fifth century BC ... *"He who learns wisdom must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain which [we] cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."*

We may have to carry the burden of heartache and grief for a while; we may even have to bear it all the way to our dying day. But your calling, my calling, our calling is just to keep following Jesus ... until He takes the cross back. While we are beneath this burden, the most amazing things can and do happen. Ask anyone who has been through one of the great crises of life who, along the way, discovered a new vision of Jesus ahead of them, leading the way. They will tell you bearing that cross transformed them. It made them into people they had never been before; it made them into better people, better disciples. They've learned Jesus works **at cross purposes** ... transforming oppressive crosses into wonderful means of God's saving grace and refining, redeeming blessing.

We are not told what happened to Simon after Jesus took the cross back and died upon it. It is interesting, though, that the Gospel of Mark (Mark 15:21) introduces Simon by naming his sons, Rufus and Alexander, as if the church that would be reading this Gospel would know them, as if they would recognize their names.

Perhaps Rufus and Alexander were members, even leaders, in the early church. And maybe they had come to the church because their father spent time beneath that cross ... and after spending time beneath the cross of Jesus, Simon was never the same again.