

“AT CROSS PURPOSES”

Matthew 16:21-26

In his book entitled, The Screwtape Letters, C. S. Lewis, that great interpreter of the Christian faith, recounts a fictional correspondence between the devil and his representative on earth. The devil, he names Screwtape, has sent his agent, Wormwood, to try to turn a new Christian believer away from his faith in God. Wormwood offers several arguments to try to make the young Christian realize the absurdity of his new faith. His efforts include pointing to such things as fractionaeism in churches, emptiness in religious rituals and the denial of pleasure-seeking as a primary aim of life. But the faith of the believer is not shaken. Screwtape and Wormwood finally identify the most convincing argument regarding the folly of Christianity is that God has told his followers that suffering is an essential part of discipleship.

Understanding our personal abhorrence of suffering, it does seem rather odd that in the scripture we just heard we find Jesus making a clear call for his disciples to be prepared to suffer. Are not our natural desire to avoid suffering, on the one hand, and Jesus’ call to carry a cross two concepts which are “*at cross purposes*” with one another? Additionally, to focus on the cost of following Jesus does not seem like a very effective way of attracting new members to a congregation. I recently read of a pastor at a party who met a couple who had just moved to the community. Upon learning that he is a pastor, the couple wants to know more about the congregation he serves because they are looking for a new church home. The couple is expecting the pastor to tell them about the facilities, programs and activities the congregation could offer them. Instead, the pastor says, “*If you come to our church, we will cause you suffering.*” The couple is surprised at this answer and laugh nervously. Finally, the wife responds, “*You are kidding, aren’t you?*” The pastor assures the couple he is not joking. He goes on to explain that members of the congregation he serves are expected to pay the price of becoming involved in the pains and problems of others. The story did not report whether the couple ever visited that church.

As absurd as focusing on the cost sounds for a twenty-first century congregation which wants to attract new members and grow, this seems to be the method Jesus used. Commentators note the scripture we just heard as occurring at a pivotal point in Jesus' ministry. Up until this point, the crowds have been eagerly responding to Jesus by coming to hear his sermons and being attracted by his miracles. But now Jesus is headed to Jerusalem where he warns his disciples he will suffer and be put to death. We can likely identify with Peter's objection when this disciple speaks up to say, "*God forbid it, Lord! That must never happen to you!*" It just does not seem right that Jesus would suffer and die! Interestingly, Jesus gets angry that Peter refuses to accept his announcement that his going to Jerusalem will mean his suffering and death. Jesus rebukes Peter, "*Get behind me, Satan. You are an obstacle in my way.*" This is an interesting rebuke to the one who Jesus just a few verses earlier had referred to as the rock on which the church would be built.

Then Jesus goes on to suggest the same suffering he is prepared to experience is to be expected of his followers also. Jesus says to them, "*If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*" What does it mean to carry one's cross? I sometimes hear persons refer to the difficulties they face in life in this way, "*Well, I guess this is just the cross I must bear.*" It may seem insensitive of me to suggest these problems of life are not what Jesus meant when he called his followers to carry a cross. William M. Clow (1853-1930) has been helpful to me in his book, *The Cross in Christian Experience*, when he makes a distinction between three things—burdens, thorns and crosses. Clow suggests all of us as human beings bear *burdens*. Pain is just a part of life. We experience the pain of broken and strained relationships. We grieve the death of a loved one. Illness and accidents happen. As we grow older we experience more physical pains. These are the burdens which are a part of being human.

Secondly, Clow suggests we experience *thorns*. The apostle Paul wrote of suffering from "*a thorn in the flesh.*" The most common interpretation is that Paul was afflicted with either epilepsy, malaria, poor eyesight or a speech impediment. The point is, it was a condition with which Paul needed to learn to live. The thorns in our lives may be cancer, a heart condition,

diabetes, poor eyesight, arthritis, being crippled as the result of an accident or military injury. We hopefully learn to live with these handicaps or limitations, as did the apostle Paul.

Persons do not choose their *burdens* or *thorns*. They are just a part of life. In contrast are the *crosses* to which Jesus refers. In this scripture Jesus says to his disciples, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

Carrying a cross is something persons voluntarily choose to do. It is a deliberate choice which involves a life of self-denial and sacrifice. It means taking upon oneself the thorns and burdens of others. To deny ourselves and carry a cross is an extraordinary step in a society where persons put themselves first and are seemingly willing to step on others in order to get ahead.

In one of his novels, South African author Alan Paton (1903-88) portrays a character speaking of heaven saying, *“When I go there—which is my full intention—the Big Judge will say to me, ‘Show me your wounds?’ If I say, ‘I don’t have any,’ I fear the judge will say, ‘was there nothing worth fighting for?’”* That is a question, I believe, each of us needs to answer. If we have difficulty pointing to any wounds, we can expect to be asked, *“Have you become so comfortable you are not bothered about person’s who live in poverty or experience discrimination because of the color of their skin? Are there no problems in society which seem worthy of your efforts? What wounds do you have to show for your life of discipleship?”* Voluntarily taking upon ourselves the burdens of others is what Jesus was referring to when he said to his disciples, *“If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross and follow me.”*

So, the question which comes to my mind is this, *“If following Jesus involves voluntarily suffering by taking on the problems of others, why in the world would anyone want to be a Christian? What would motive a person to inflict themselves with the wounds of others?”* It is almost as if Jesus anticipates these questions because Jesus goes on to answer them. Jesus goes on to say, *“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”* Jesus’ words sound like a bunch of double-talk. Again, *“Needing to lose one’s life in order to find it”* sounds like concepts which are *“at cross purposes”* with one another.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and promising theologian who earned his doctorate in theology from the University of Berlin at the age of 21. He wrote a well-known book entitled, The Cost of Discipleship, which is a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. In it he defines the Christian faith as an act of radical obedience to the ways of Jesus Christ. When Jesus says, “*Deny yourself*,” Bonhoeffer writes it means to put Jesus and his will at the center of one’s being. When Jesus says, “*Follow me*,” Bonhoeffer writes it means to hold nothing back. Just before the start of World War II, Bonhoeffer was in New York City at the invitation of Union Seminary. His friends in the academic community encouraged him to remain in America where he would be safe. It was on Krystallnacht—the so-called “*Night of Broken Glass*”—when the Nazis went on a violent rampage against synagogues, Jewish homes, schools and places of business breaking windows, that Bonhoeffer decided he could not be just a bystander by observing what was happening in his native Germany from a safe distance in the United States.

So Bonhoeffer took the risky step of returning to Germany where he became involved in the Confessing Church which was outspoken in their opposition to the anti-Semitic policies of Hitler. True to the title of his book, Bonhoeffer paid a cost of being a disciple of Jesus by joining other Germans in their opposition to the Nazi regime and its unjust treatment of the Jews. When Bonhoeffer’s involvement in helping Jews escape was discovered, the pastor was arrested and spent two years imprisoned. Bonhoeffer even became involved with a group who plotted the assassination of Hitler—an interesting stance for a pacifist. For that he was hanged at the age of 39, just two weeks before the liberation of the concentration camp. An English officer who was a fellow prisoner recounts that when the guards told Bonhoeffer to get ready to go with them—words every prisoner knew meant the scaffold—Bonhoeffer said, “*This is the end, but for me, the beginning of life.*” Yes, as Jesus promised, “*Those who lose their life by voluntarily picking up the burdens of others will find true life.*”

While hopefully following Jesus will not be so dramatic for any of us as requiring us to literally give up our physical lives, we dare not minimize Jesus’ call regarding carrying a cross. New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson put it this way, “*The woman who devotes her life to*

raising children in need of a home, the man whose devotion to a mentally ill wife, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience sake leads to prison—these are among the countless thousands who, through the centuries and in varying contexts, have interpreted this text with their lives.” **Jesus promises that those who “deny themselves by picking up a cross”—meaning voluntarily taking upon ourselves the hurts and burdens of others—shall experience the fullness of life.**

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