

**Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38**  
**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost B; 09.15.24; G. Miles Smith+**

It was a jarring thing when Jesus talked about...how he would “undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and...killed...” Peter just could not accept it. It is hard for us to hear it too. But we know the story...so it does not surprise us like it did the disciples then. But what *should* surprise us is when Jesus went on to say...*that if we follow after him...then we too will take up our cross...and suffer.*

It is definitely not a “marketable” kind of teaching! We wouldn’t want to put that on a church banner to invite new people to church! And the truth is...it should *not* be the message that the Church should *lead* with anyway--not because it is hard to hear...but because suffering our crosses is not why any of us become Christians. *But it does help to know what to expect.*

*So what kind of cross...is Jesus talking about...a cross which will come to us too if we follow him?*

The most familiar shape that cross has taken in Christian history is when empires and governments have felt threatened by Christians and persecute them. You may recall that this happened to the early Christians by the Roman Empire and it resulted in the martyrs—the Christians who died rather than renounce their faith in Christ.

But it is not just a thing of the past. Just 17 days ago, on August 29<sup>th</sup>, the Nicaraguan government “dissolved” the entire Episcopal Diocese of Nicaragua. | And that was after having earlier “dissolved” the Moravian Church...the Christian Reformed Church... and a denomination called the Evangelical Alliance. The government has also expelled from Nicaragua 3 Roman Catholic bishops and 136 priests, along with the entire Jesuit religious order. 11 evangelical pastors have been imprisoned and fined \$80 million dollars. Christians in Nicaragua are very much having to carry heavy crosses. The suffering of the persecuted have long been one of the ways that Christians have had to carry a cross because they are a friend of Jesus.

Sometimes there is talk about such things happening in America. But I do think the nuances of the differences matter. Christians here have always disagreed with the government of their time over various issues but the government usually has not gotten crosswise with church. But there *is* a pervasive secularism here. And, really, I have appreciated secularism for the fact that it creates a lot of freedom for churches to exist and it also prevents one particular denomination or expression of Christianity from having political power forcing us to conform to their Christianity. But I am also now becoming increasingly aware of the cost of secularism and that it has the effect of sidelining the Church, or any religious group, as group of people who have a lot of unusual private religious opinions which don’t have a lot to do with “real” life. That working assumption of secularism puts the Church in a pretty small box that Christians cannot agree with. Secularism isn’t the same thing as persecution—and yet it does create a tension for Christian self-understanding...when according to secularism the world outside the churches is supposed to be more real than the world inside. So, secularism is a sort of cross we have to carry once we awaken to its *mental and spiritual* constraints. |

[And yet, a great irony of the past several hundred years is that...Christendom...and especially Protestant Christendom...has helped give birth to secularism. In other words, the secularism that both frees and diminishes the Church in America is to some extent a “stepchild” of the Church...that we have become estranged from...and still don’t quite know how to have a relationship with. But that is a whole ‘other topic for another day.]

There is one kind of suffering that falls to Christians...which most definitely is *not* a matter of carrying our crosses and has *nothing* to do with Jesus...and it merits briefly mentioning. It is when Christians *notoriously misbehave... or are cruel...or simply obnoxious.* When Christians experience any consequences to being

*un*christian then we are not being persecuted...nor are we “carrying our cross”—we are just experiencing the consequences of bad behavior.

And there is another kind of suffering...which is not the same as carrying our cross...but it is actually well-intended. An example is when we are in a conversation with someone who is sharing some very vulnerable suffering in their life with us...and then we might say to them something like: “Yes, we all do have our crosses to bear.” In other words, we may turn Jesus’ words into a kind of *universal truth* that, yes, *everybody suffers*. Well, it *is* a compassionate thing to say, and it *is* true. But that actually is *not* what Jesus was talking about. Instead, he meant that there is something about *being Christian...that will specifically bring suffering on us*—which is different from a universal truth of the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”.

What Jesus *is* talking about can be found throughout the New Testament, but here’s three scripture quotes that point to why following Jesus will give us a cross to carry:

- John 1:9-10: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, *yet the world did not know him.*”
- 1 John 3:1: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. *The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*”
- Luke 9:58: “And Jesus said..., “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, *but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*”

What the New Testament talks about in different ways is the inexplicable mystery...that the whole creation, while having come into being from God...*has fallen into an alienation from and disconnect with God...*such that when Jesus came from God to the world...he was *rejected*. Another way of talking about this is to say that...just as Jesus was not easily welcomed in this world and was homeless within his own home...*then we too shall find ourselves homeless in this world at times...feeling like we don’t quite belong.*

- When we pass the *Peace* in our liturgy, from one sinner to another—and then walk out the door to where the world routinely passes along *injury and insult*...then we should expect to *suffer the contrast and feel out of place in the world.*
- When we pray, as Jesus taught us, “give us this day our daily bread”---but we are aware that so many others will not have their bread today...then we should expect to be *unsettled.*
- When we follow after Jesus...and learn the language of *faith, hope, and love*...but then experience so much in the world that *transgresses against* faith, hope, and love...then it is painful.
- To go from church where we are immersed in the language of *faith*...and then into the world where faith is not assumed to be relevant to anything that really matters...that is a *tension*...and a cross to carry.
- And once we have tasted *hope* from God...then it is painful to wade back into the swamps of *cynicism* in the world...and *that is a cross to carry.*
- Once we have experienced *divine love* through gracious people in churches...and divine love through the Holy Spirit...but then are witnesses to so much *cruelty and wrath*...then *that is a cross to carry.*
- Once we have seen what is really so *beautiful* about God...then the human *vandalism* of God’s creation...and the *defacing* of governments, institutions, cultures, men, women, and children...becomes intolerable...and *is a cross to carry.* |

But still, the power and purpose of the Christian life is not *crosses*...it is not *suffering*...it is not *tension*...nor *conflict*. The power and purpose of the Christian life is *resurrection*...and finding our true *life* and our *belonging* in God. The revelation of the goodness and glory of God...endlessly pouring down upon our evil world—*that is the point.*

And yet such resurrection, and goodness, and glory, and the grace of God does end up casting in sharp relief all the persistently wayward impulses in the world and in us still. It is a great irony...and a cross to

bear...that *finally finding our true life and belonging in God through Christ*...also ends up revealing even more...all the ways the world...resists God. And we can still find that resistance within us.

Nevertheless, Jesus believed the risk of such a painful dissonance in our experience is worth it...*that it is worth it...for us to find our true life and deep belonging in God...and to be awakened to compassion for one another.* |

In John, chapter 6 (60, 66-69), it is written:

**When many of Jesus' disciples heard [his words], they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?..."[and] many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."**