

BEARING CROSSES
Sermon for Lent 2B—Mk 8:31-38
LPC, 3/8/08

I'm sure you've all heard the story about the Sunday School pupil who was asked by the preacher what her favorite hymn was. The child promptly responded, "I like the one about the bear." Glancing nervously at the Junior Choir Director, who shrugged, mystified, the preacher turned back to the child and pressed, "Which bear, dear?" The little girl piped up, "His name is Gladly. Too bad about his eyes, though." Now thoroughly at sea, the preacher asked her to sing her song. The child launched into a hymn that the choir director and preacher instantly recognized as the old favorite "Keep Thou my way, O Lord," by Fanny Crosby. The mystery about the bear was revealed as the child sang the last verse:

Keep Thou my all, O Lord, hide my life in Thine;
O let Thy sacred light over my pathway shine;
Kept by Thy tender care, gladly the cross I'd bear...

This hymn was written in the nineteenth century, when people were much more prone to talk about bearing crosses as a virtue than they are today. However people still say things about bearing their cross. Unfortunately a lot of what people say about bearing crosses is unbiblical nonsense.

Think of how this expression is used. Usually the circumstances include something unfortunate that no one can do anything about. The situation is usually a chronic illness, or children who have turned out badly, or something that was done that can't be undone. "It's just my cross to bear," people say. Sometimes you hear this expression in the third person, "Poor so-and-so. She has a hard cross to bear." This is usually pronounced in a pitying tone.

In today's Gospel lesson from Mark Jesus talks explicitly about cross-bearing. A careful, prayerful analysis of this lesson shows that the popular understanding of cross-bearing misses the mark.

The context of this passage of course is Jesus talking about his own cross. He teaches the disciples about what is going to be expected of him: how he must suffer, be rejected and killed, and rise again. Peter, aghast, tries to refute this prediction and is roundly scolded. Why? Isn't Peter just expressing concern for his beloved friend and teacher?

Yes and no. Jesus knows that his suffering, death and resurrection are God's plan for him. Furthermore Jesus trusts that God will provide him with the strength to fulfill this plan, just as God has empowered his ministry so far. Suffering, death, and resurrection is what Jesus has been given to do, and he has been given the tools to do these things. Suffering, death, and resurrection, are, in other words, Jesus' work, his

particular vocation, his place in God's plan to redeem Creation. Peter is rebuked because he would distract Jesus from his vocation and derail God's plan of redemption.

We see from this exchange that Jesus has a choice in the matter of his own cross. Other passages also plainly emphasize Jesus' freedom of choice. Jesus chooses to go to Jerusalem, knowing that people there are plotting against him. At the Last Supper, Jesus knows that Judas is leaving to fink on him and he chooses to let him go. At his arrest, Jesus chooses to restrain his disciples rather than let them fight for his freedom. At his trial, he chooses not speak in his own defense or to call his own witness. And on the cross, he chooses to remain and die rather than use his miraculous powers, which had healed so many, to heal himself.

In short, Jesus chooses to take up his cross. The cross is not something he has no choice about, but something he very much has a choice about.

What would happen if we looked at our own crosses in the same way? What if the cross we have to bear is not something we don't choose, but something we do? What if our cross is something we can do something about? What if, like Jesus, your cross is what God has given you to do? What if, like Jesus, our cross is something God has given us the tools to do? What if, like Jesus, our cross is our work, our particular vocation, our place in God's plan to redeem creation?

Of course, Jesus' cross meant suffering. Our cross may mean suffering too. Or not. Yes, that's what I'm saying. Taking up your cross does not necessarily mean suffering. Taking up your cross means doing what God has given you to do.

One more word about suffering: Inevitably, if we live and love, we suffer. That does not mean that God sends the suffering. Often it means that actions have consequences, or just that the universe is still unredeemed. God will always use the suffering that exists to further God's plan of redemption, but God does not send suffering for perverse reasons we could never fathom. How could the Lord of Love do this?

In a way, believing that our cross to bear is suffering that God lays on us exonerates from responsibility: "Well, God sent me this suffering; I guess I'll just suffer." On the other hand, believing that our cross is the work God has given us to do in support of God's kingdom carries with it a responsibility to discern and carry out that work. But remember that God does not give this kind of cross without God's power.

These empty pews may provide a clue as to what our collective cross may be here at Lawrencefield Parish Church. What is God giving us to do in the service of God's kingdom? How is God gifting us for this purpose?

We have a choice. The question of the cross is not, "How do I endure this?" but "How can I help? What can I do? What is my place in the plan?" Perhaps the answer to this question is something we can perform gladly, if not cross-eyed.