

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2017
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A Cross-Shaped Life

Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee, take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love. Take my heart it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne. Amen

It is good to be home again. The greatest gift of having some time away is an opportunity for perspective. With time for prayer and reflection, I was filled with a sense of gratitude for the abundant life we have here at Holy Cross. Faith, love and commitment live amidst this community, and we have much work to do in a world that needs healing and grace. In the mire of day to day tasks, it is easy to lose sight of the larger picture.

Walking the beach, I asked for clarity of vision as we grow spiritually and relationally. To understand our mission and purpose as the body of Christ, we must ask ourselves defining questions. What is the character and narrative of this community? What values guide our practices and how do they reflect our love for Christ? We are poised to make a difference friends, if our purpose is grounded in our identity as Christ followers.

As I pondered these questions, a word came to mind so clearly. It was the word surrender. I was immediately reminded of that scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the wicked witch spells out the words “Surrender Dorothy” and the feeling I had as a child, that surely evil would have the last word. But as an adult, I see surrender with less fear. Recognizing and letting go of those stumbling blocks that keep us from following the way of Christ is a choice. It takes courage and imagination to believe that when we let go, God will fill the gap.

If we truly become followers of Jesus, we are not less vulnerable, but more. We are not more secure, but susceptible to suffering. We are not more comfortable, but on the edges of life. It is human nature to hold on to what we know. When we surrender those things we grasp in fear, we are freed then to choose. You see the cross is not just a symbol of salvation but a place of intersection in our lives from which each of us must decide a way forward. We all encounter these intersections but will we choose to follow Christ?

So what in the world does it mean to be a Christ follower? With all of the competing voices and priorities, how do we make the intentional choice of a cross shaped life? When Jesus invited his disciples to take up their cross and follow him, it meant leaving behind old lives and learning new ways of being in the world. Peter loved his Lord and could not imagine Jesus suffering at the hands of the high priests and said “God forbid it!” Jesus rebuked him as a stumbling block for setting his mind on the things of the world.

In those times people wrestled with how to stand up to an imperial Roman system of privilege and power. In their fear, they longed for a mighty warrior Messiah, who would overcome the forces of domination. But Jesus introduced a different vision, one that embraced forgiveness, mercy and love rather than retribution, violence and hatred. The fulfillment of his purpose revolved around the cross and his embrace of sacrificial love. Ultimately, through the cross, love prevailed.

No matter the generation, there will be tension between a faith community and its surrounding culture. The church is to be set apart with its focus on the divine. We too, are invited to choose lives shaped by a cross of love, compassion and hope. The question remains, are we ready to lose the lives we know, for Christ’s sake?

If we turn to our second lesson today from Paul’s letter to the Romans we get a clearer vision of what it means to live a cross shaped life. “Love one another with mutual affection, outdo one

another in showing honor... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer..extend hospitality to strangers. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Fair enough you might think, but Jesus taught that we must go beyond ourselves. "Bless your persecutors... Never pay back evil with evil. ... Never try to get revenge. ... If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat; if thirsty, something to drink. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Renowned theologian Henri Nouwen wrote this about Paul's words. "These words cut to the heart of the spiritual life. They make it clear what it means to choose life, not death, to choose blessings not curses. But what is asked of us here goes against the grain of our human nature. We will only be able to act according to Paul's words by knowing with our whole beings that what we are asked to do for others, is what God has done for us."

We are about to embark upon a new program year at Holy Cross. With intention and purpose we will set our course to understand with our hearts and minds what it means to take up our cross and be a Christ follower. We will explore the attributes of Christ and incorporate them into the character and values of this community. We will strive to integrate these attributes into our practices inside and outside of these walls. We will learn together what it means to be the body of Christ. We are on a unique but communal journey, some at the beginning, some facing crossroads. One thing is certain, we need all of our gifts to go out into a world that often chooses hatred and revenge over grace. We need God and one another to never lose sight of the bigger picture.

My challenge to each of you this year is to take one step deeper into your journey of becoming a Christ follower. Try something new to step out of your comfort zone. Loosen your grasp and allow the Spirit to show you the path forward. Depend upon those words of Paul to focus your vision and guide your actions. Together we will face fears of surrender and pray for one another when we cannot see how God will fill the gap. We are poised to make a difference my friends, if our purpose is grounded in our identity as Christ followers. Join me in this great adventure as we seek to choose a cross shaped life. Amen.