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Bearing Our Cross

How many of you have heard the term, “it’s a heavy cross to bear.” Or, better yet “that’s their cross to bear.” I’m guessing the majority of us have heard this phrase and/or term at one time or another. But, in light of our passage from Mark this morning I am beginning to wonder if we really understand what it means. Because on the surface it simply sounds like a burden that is placed upon us, or more so one that is ours and ours alone to bear. And, if that is what Jesus is saying when he tells us, “whoever wishes to become my follower must take up their cross and follow me,” well then I want no part of it. But, I don’t think that is really what Jesus means, at all. And in light of his call to take up our cross I thought I would share a bit of my own story, and what I bear, with you.

As an eighth grader, having loved spending every summer away from home at camp, and wishing for more social activities especially as an only child, my parents and I decided that boarding school would be a great fit for me. And so in the fall of my eighth grade year we packed up my Dad’s SUV with all the things from Bed Bath and Beyond and headed to St. James Episcopal school, in Maryland. I was so excited to meet my roommate, to get to know the other girls in my dorm, and the classmates in my grade. My mom helped me fluff up my bed, hang pictures on the wall, and organize my closet, as the Dad’s sat in the hallway trading idle chit chat. And, after I was settled and the final hugs were exchanged, my parents left, and I got to work making new friends. As I chatted with the girls in my dorm it soon became clear that many (if not all) were not there by choice. While I had come to gain an Episcopal education in the space of community and camaraderie, most of my peers had come because of various illegal activities, run-ins with the law, and parents who were at their wits end. And as they all began to trade “war” stories, I began to grow a knot in my throat and an ache in the pit of my stomach. Because the truth was until this moment, while I knew young people did things that were less than desirable, I had never been a part of it, I had never seen it, and I had never heard about it from any of my own peers. And in the moment when the walls of my sheltered childhood came crashing down around me, I realized I was completely and utterly alone. Without the safety of my parents to comfort me, or the familiarity of my own home to withdraw into.

In the days and weeks to follow as I found the tower of my innocence crumbling to the ground, and my false sense of security utterly destroyed, I wanted nothing more than to retreat to the safety and comfort of my mother’s embrace. But, it was nowhere to be found. And for one reason or another, maybe because my brain is wired differently or maybe because I had been so sheltered for most of my life, and then so exposed at a crucial developmental age, I began experiencing (what I called at the time) strange and all consuming thoughts. I began obsessing over the realization that one day my mother would die. And, that one day I would die. And everything else in between. Soon I became so overwhelmingly controlled by my thoughts and my fears, that I could hardly move. And when it became clear that I was no longer thriving, and just barely surviving, my mom came and took me home.

Despite whether we understand the meaning of our cross to bear, I think we can all agree that each and every one of us has (at least) one. And, I share one of mine with you today, because it is the one that has most fully revealed the meaning of Jesus’ call to take up our cross and follow him. After I came home

from St. James, it would be another 2 years until the strange and obsessive thoughts would be diagnosed as an anxiety disorder, and an additional 2 until I was able to tame them, thanks to medication and therapy. And, that help of the diagnoses as well as the treatment were only possible because someone shared their story with me. While, I will admit, at the time I felt cursed by my mental condition and more so truly ashamed of it, today I feel empowered. Because that journey and this cross, while painful and life altering, has taught me that we all have something, and we all deserve compassion and love, especially when our cross becomes a particularly heavy and debilitating burden to bear.

Up and until this point in our Gospel from Mark, Jesus has continually told his disciples, and in particular Peter, not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. I mean in the literal verses right before our passage, Jesus asks his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And, after some back and forth, Peter answered him, “You are the messiah.” At which time Jesus sternly orders him not to tell anyone. And, now here we are as Jesus willy nilly proclaims himself as the Messiah. Revealing what this truly means to be the Messiah who must be “rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Saying it all, as Mark tells us “quite openly.” I mean it’s no wonder Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. His Messiah, the one who is to save him and his entire nation from Roman brutality and occupation has just revealed that instead of gathering together his disciples and followers to overthrow the evil empire, he is going to be killed by the same powers who for too long have imposed their tyrannical rule over God’s people.

But, this is precisely the point Jesus is trying to make. Because, just as soon as Jesus condemns Peter for setting his mind on human things instead of Divine things, does Jesus call for us as well, should we desire to become his followers, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. It’s not an attractive offer to be sure, but it is a real, true, and honest one. And, the thing is, too often we focus just on the cross, that we forget what it leads to which is (as Jesus tells us today) the ability to rise again. It is only when we take up our cross, whatever it may be, whatever burden we have been given to bear, and hold it not as simply a tragedy (which it certainly can be) but also as an opportunity that we can take part in the good news. The good news that we all have crosses to bear and so we are not alone. The good news that we all deserve companions on this journey to help us shoulder the weight and take away, if only for a time, a bit of the burden. The good news that God understands the trials and tribulations of our human condition, so much so that God became human to come and see and know.

Today I share with you my cross, not for pity, but for solidarity. I only have been able to take up my cross in and as much as others have helped me shoulder it. I only have been able to take up my cross in and as much as I have seen what it means to help others shoulder theirs as well. I have only been able to take up my cross in and as much as it has lead me to resurrection. This Lent what does it mean for us to take up our cross, to bear the pains we have been given not as battle scars for glory but as an agent to draw us closer together, to God and to one another and to ourselves. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”