

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Bethany Ulrich

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We've all heard it a million times: "Oh, it's just my cross to bear." This phrase repeated often and used to express a kind of *powerlessness* in our suffering completely misses the point of the original context, which comes in our gospel text today. Yes, Jesus urges his followers to take up their cross, but the complete phrase spoken by Jesus in Mark is: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross **and follow me.**" When we look at the whole phrase, we remember that Jesus offers an invitation to not just an action, but to a whole *way of life*, to a path to follow.

The way or the path that Peter was expecting Jesus to describe for him and the disciples was one with the marks of a glorious Messiah: defeat of enemies, a triumphant march, restoration of honor to Israel, and perhaps even the image of a king on a throne with power and servants.¹

Peter was expecting Jesus to define the path, the way forward, like *he* was defining it.

If we are honest with ourselves, we too tend to have our own defining marks of the paths we walk in life.

I've spoken before about how sometimes I've needed an outside perspective to see myself more clearly. And as I think about what path I am on and what guides me

¹ Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Maryknoll, New York: Oris Books), 244.

on that path, in everyday decisions—I think of a friend in Mexico who had traveled to the US and opened my eyes one day when he recounted how surprised he was at how much of life in the US revolved around **comfort**. He recounts the huge houses that people go into debt for, the air conditioners that keeps us from sweating, the dishwashers that save time and work, even the shoes that are built for maximum comfort. He noticed how different this is from his context where you don't find as many of these things and companies don't often use comfort as a selling point. I realized that seeking and safeguarding my comfort level is something I and a lot of people in my culture, this country, value and let guide us. Could it be that we are so focused on safeguarding comfort because we are especially fearful of suffering, death and the realities of our own mortality?

If you are like me, when we are on the road of life, on autopilot, the signs we use to tell us if our life is going well or on the right track, sometimes are a little off, like Peter's. Like Peter, we have a tendency to let things like comfort or power, guide us to paths of fame, or paths of riches, we aspire to paths of great knowledge paths of great prestige, and paths that take us to great experiences.

We define our paths by what preserves our safety, our comfort, our standing in the world, and sometimes, by what everyone around us tells us we should want.

Christ sees that Peter thinks his discipleship journey will be marked by triumph and earthly glory and Jesus quickly corrects him. He tells him that following him means following the *WAY* of the cross. There will be *other* signs of success. Jesus calls them – and us- to stop clutching so desperately to our comforts and other ideas of

what makes life great.² And to finally realize as theologian Debie Thomas puts it, that so many of the ways we seek to save and protect our lives actually “robs us of the abundant life Jesus comes to give us.”³

There is no denying that in Jesus’ time the cross meant torture, humiliation, suffering and death. But it also was a way/road marked by resistance to the roman empire, a break with cycles of violence of the ruling power, it was solidarity with the disempowered victims of the political system, it was STRUGGLE for liberation and struggle to make the vision of God a reality.

So too, for us, following Jesus, is to walk a path marked by resistance and struggle. Not by passive suffering, and definitely not by some kind of redemptive suffering... No! we are called to end all oppressive forces upon us and others. To paths like *THIS* of resistance and struggle, and to paths like *THIS*, where we can confront broken systems and policies and struggle to bring more abundant life to all people. They may not be comfortable or convenient paths, but they have the potential to bring abundant life for all people.

Jesus also offers trail markers on the way of the cross in the form of practices that he urges his disciples to adopt. As we heard two weeks ago in Pastor Jason’s sermon, Jesus calls his disciples to pray, to give of their financial gifts, and to fast as ways to stick close to this way of the cross. Not so that they suffer, or silently withstand pain in their lives, NO! Rather, so that they can have some indication that they are walking with Christ on a path that leads to abundant life.

² Debie Thomas, “Gains and Losses,” Journey with Jesus, pasted February 21, 2021, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

³ Ibid.

So too, we especially remember these guideposts during Lent, So that we don't get lost in the thick of life's messiness, being guided by a vague sense of what is good or what is comfortable – because we've established that these may be our OWN markers for our OWN path, but not only aligned with Christ's best for us. We make time to pray, we spend money on others instead of ourselves, and we fast from the comforts of life- to follow the practices Christ has left for us, like trail markers on a difficult path, or crumbs to lead us when we lose our way.

Dear friends, I say *all this* to emphasize that we don't bear our cross for needless or redemptive suffering- rather we follow the WAY of the cross, guided by these sign posts, So that we don't let life fall through our fingers while we are trying to save it.

And as we follow the path Christ has invited us to, we find life where there was none. We find the promise of life that God made with Abraham. Just as Abraham suddenly receives word of new life in the form of a baby. So too, on this way of the cross, God creates life where there was none.

Following the way of the cross- marked by resistance, struggle and solidarity, and marked by the Lenten practices - we find life in the midst of death, abundant life in place of grasping at life itself, and we find grace in the midst of the Lenten wilderness. AMEN.