

## BEARING THE CROSS

Mark 15:1-39

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I have probably mentioned this before over the last 11 years or so, but when I was younger we would have had two different Sundays that covered all the material we read to you today in our text. We had Palm Sunday and then we had Passion Sunday. I remember, as much younger person liking Palm Sunday a whole lot more than I liked Passion Sunday.

It was suggested that these days were combined to place more emphasis on Palm Sunday. However, since the two events are combined as Palm/Passion Sunday it gives me a choice, as to which theme I will use today.

Probably not the choice that you might wish I would have made, but today I would like for us to take a closer look at the theme for Passion Sunday. The truth is we might not have had Passion Sunday if what happened on Palm Sunday had not happened. You see Palm Sunday joy, the welcoming Jesus received as he entered the city on the back of a donkey with the waving Palm branches, disturbed both the political and religious authorities. So, there is the turning of the crowd as Jesus did not turn out to be the person who would overthrow the Roman rule and he got enough attention from the crowds that the religious leaders were upset so things turned from joy to arrest, trial and crucifixion.

So, as Jesus walks His path to the cross in our scripture for this morning, the question I pose for today is a simple one. Jesus walks the path to his cross but he does not do it alone. We are enlisted to walk with him, to help him carry his cross. Will we do so?

Our Gospel text for Palm/Passion Sunday, is not only among the longest of the year but are also among the most theologically significant. We have in Mark perhaps our earliest account of Jesus's last week. And Mark uses his full artistic abilities to craft an unforgettable story that is a rich feast of sermon possibilities but also in teaching the reason Christ was born into this world.

The One who is welcomed as "*King*," earlier in Mark, with memories of great King David will be the One who by the end of this fateful week will be crucified as, "*King of the Jews*," (Mark 15:2, 26).

And as he is overturning our expectations of God, Jesus is also overturning our notions of ourselves. You see, in Mark's short summary of the events of the week leading up to the crucifixion, we have mention of an otherwise unknown person, Simon. Simon is enlisted (not by Jesus but by a Roman soldier) to help Jesus carry his cross up Golgotha, and this Simon will represent us this morning.

I know that while our chief focus for today should be on Jesus, we could well

benefit upon a focus on the first crucifer.

(A crucifer is one who carries the cross—particularly at the head of a procession of worship leaders in a church.) This first crucifer is Simon.

One pastor said to a person as he talked to a small group of teenagers about what they would be doing in worship—*"This role is simple, he said. "Anybody can do this!"* He was talking with an unwilling adolescent trying to talk him into being the crucifer for next Sunday's service. *"Nothing to it. Just hold up the cross and walk in with it, put it in this spot and walk back out."*

The young man said, *"I'm willing to be an acolyte, light the candles and stuff. But get somebody else to carry the cross. I'm not the right person for crucifering."* (Not sure there is such a word but that is what he said.)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say that after his bogus trial, and assorted torturing by the authorities, after the mob had called for his crucifixion, Jesus, in one final act of public humiliation, was forced to carry his own cross to the place of execution.

Along the way, someone, presumably one of the soldiers overseeing the spectacle, said to one of the onlookers, *"Jew, help carry the King of the Jews cross up the hill."*

*"Simon, a man from Cyrene, Alexander, and Rufus' father, was coming in from the countryside to participate in the required trip to the Passover. They forced him to carry his cross."* (Mark 15:21)

We have only the man's name, Simon, which is strange because the Gospels almost never mention anyone's name unless they are a certified follower of Jesus. We only have speculation about Simon and what happened to him after this.

My point this morning is that Jesus did not carry his cross alone. Simon was ordered to help him. Simon, the first crucifer. Jesus didn't ask Simon to help him bear his cross; but bear his cross he did. Simon, the first crucifer, first cross-bearer.

Earlier in Mark 8:34, Jesus had said that if anybody wanted to follow him, they should take up their cross and follow him. Simon didn't take up the cross of Christ, it was thrust upon him. What if the cross is not something that you choose to take up but something that, if you choose to walk with Jesus, the world will put on your back?

*"It's just my cross to bear,"* you have heard people say of some unwanted misfortune they had suffered. But "cross" as Jesus speaks of it before his crucifixion is not a bad back or a difficult-to-get-along-with relative. The cross is what the world did to Jesus and, applied to us, what society does to those who would follow Jesus.

Though Simon is given no speaking part in Mark's Passion drama, he could tell us: Walk along with Jesus long enough, some cross will be LAID on you.

People come to their pastor to talk about many different things. One lady came to me to talk with me about a situation at work. She had discovered that her boss was engaged in some kind of illegal financial activity and she wanted my help to think through her responsibility. We talked about various courses of action. I urged caution because of

various legal implications for her if she only suspected something and it proved not to be true. We rehearsed different ways she might bring up the subject with her boss. We had prayer and she left saying, *“I think I know what I need to do.”*

Next Sunday, coming out of church, she said to me, *“You know that situation we discussed?”*

*“The thing at work?”* I asked.

*“Right. Well, I prayerfully considered what I ought to do. I made an appointment and carefully presented what I knew to my boss, telling him that I wanted to work with him to make things right. Well, in two hours a letter was hand delivered to me at my desk, telling me I WAS TERMINATED, for not being a ‘team player.’”*

There are rewards to be had for following Jesus. A sense of peace, confidence in your faith, and things like that. But we have not told the truth if we don't say there are risks as well. Can we use here the word *“cross”*?

In fact, if I have never experienced some discomfort, or social disapproval, or censure from the world because of my witness to Christ, it could suggest that my witness may be so shallow and innocuous that the world sees no need to nail me to a cross.

I have never been fired because of a sermon I've preached. Maybe I have some explaining to do!

I remember hearing a scholar, a historian, tell about her research into Nineteenth-Century Christian novels, comparing them with Christian fiction in our own day. She said that the typical plot line of contemporary Christian novels go something like this: My life was a mess—due to childhood trauma and unhappiness, or problems with my marriage, or troubles in the family, or an overbearing boss at work, or various kinds of addiction—and then I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior. Everything turned around. I started to make more money. For the first time in my life, I felt really happy and fulfilled. I began working out and eating better. Took up tennis.

She said that Christian novels from a hundred years ago followed a very different line. The narrative was more like this: I was living a fairly normal life but then I had this dramatic religious experience. For the first time I knew that God was real. I surrendered myself to Christ and vowed to serve him all my days. And...my family thought I was crazy, or my husband said I was not the same person he had married, or even folks at my church started shunning me because *“you've changed”* or *“you think you are better than us.”* On top of that, I quit my job because I just could not do that sort of work that wasn't right. Today, I can barely provide for my family.

The historian said, *“Behind these different ways of writing about being Christian are two very different perspectives on Christian salvation. Today, it's possible to think of the Christian life completely disconnected to the cross.”*

I am thankful that in the church's wisdom, we are forced in these forty days of Lent to talk about the cross whether we want to or not. Glad for this week where we are

forced to listen to this excruciating account of a most violent week. We are thereby saved from perverting the good news of Jesus Christ into some kind of spiritual deal whereby we are given a get-out-of-pain-free card.

Mark doesn't say if Simon welcomed the opportunity to help Jesus bear his cross up Calvary. Maybe Simon felt humiliated by being singled out from the crowd for this task. But perhaps the story of Simon being forced to help carry Jesus's cross is mostly a story about the way of the society we live in and the way it tends to clash with Christ's way.

When Jesus speaks about our "*cross*," he doesn't urge us to welcome the cross that the world may put on our backs. He doesn't tell us to smile and be happy about it. In a number of places, Jesus predicts that the world will make his followers miserable by putting some cross or other on their backs. He urges them to receive whatever cross they receive but he doesn't tell them to be happy about it and in no way does he glorify their suffering.

The church doesn't say, "*Become a Christian and enjoy the pleasure of being nailed to the wood.*" NO, the church says, "*Come, follow Jesus, and, if you do it well, the world may react to you in much the same way it reacted to Jesus.*"

Down through the ages, the church has never taught that it's a virtue to choose martyrdom, to seek it. But the church has always taught that if you follow the way of Christ, there's a chance that martyrdom may seek you.

So, let's allow Simon, first cross-bearer—Simon who didn't ask to help carry Jesus' cross, Simon who maybe didn't look for trouble and would have been just as glad not to have to carry the cross—let's allow Simon to remind us that all of us are called to be crucifers, whether it pleases us or not.

And perhaps Simon would also warn us. Just show up, stand on the sidelines this week, watch the Son of God, savior of the world, whipped, spit upon, and then made to carry his own cross up to where he'll be executed, and there's a chance that the world, in one way or another, will call you out of the crowd, and ask you to take up the cross with Christ.

If we really get close to Jesus, there's a good chance you'll end up as crucifer.