



Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Rev. David Owren

Proverbs 1:20-33

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Psalm 19

Dear Friends in Christ,

Spartacus lived in the 1st century before Christ. He was a Roman soldier and then an enslaved gladiator. In 73 B.C.E., Spartacus escaped from a gladiatorial school with about 70 other gladiators. Spartacus and his small group defeated several Roman military units and soon the group grew to 70,000 former slaves and others.

Now Spartacus and his army threatened Roman authority and the status quo. This was the third time slaves revolted against Rome in 62 years. The Roman general Crassus finally defeated Spartacus and his followers in 71 B.C.E. and crucified 6,000 rebel prisoners on the Appian way, from Rome to Capua, a distance of 105 miles. That's about the distance from Coeur d'Alene to Lewiston with a bloody body on a cross every 92 feet. Think of the ignominious spectacle of those gruesome crucifixions. The message was clear to every traveler who passed by—don't mess with Rome! Don't buck the system! Be content with the status quo.

Jesus was also crucified by the Romans. How ironic that the cross, in many forms, shapes and sizes, has been a symbol of Christianity since the 2nd century C.E.¹ As one commentator put it: "A Roman execution device isn't exactly a picturesque scene of divine love on display. It [would] be the equivalent to having three criminals side-by-side in electric chairs. Or a firing squad having their criminals in a line with crowds watching and laughing. We would] never turn that scene into jewelry or bumper stickers; it's disturbing. The cross is a symbol of torture and cruelty, blood and death. It highlights the abuse of power and an undeserving punishment. Yet it's in that place that God does the scandalous. He turns the excruciating event of the cross into the perfect display of a scandalous, unmerited love for the undeserving."²

On a personal level, sometimes we are plagued by our past which we cannot change. Sometimes we are anxious about our future which cannot know. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by our chaotic present which we cannot navigate. And then we are told to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. This makes no sense. The world doesn't work this way. But the Kingdom of God does.

The cross was a scandal for Jesus and the cross is a scandal for us. Think about what happened on the cross. One Christian author described the cross of Jesus this way:

"On the cross we sinned our sins into Jesus and he forgave us.

On the cross Jesus became the sacrifice to end sacrifice.

On the cross Jesus became the scapegoat (lamb of God) who saved us from the foundational sin of scapegoating.

On the cross Jesus took the blame to save us from blaming.

On the cross Jesus shamed the principalities and powers of sacrificial religion and violent power (represented by Caiaphas and Pilate).

Through the cross Jesus judges sin, casts out Satan, and re-founds the world.

¹ The crucifix, a cross upon which an image of Jesus appears, did not come into use until the 6th century C.E.

² RJ Grunewald, "The Scandal of the Cross," www.1517.org, 06/06/18.

In the cross of Christ the world is re-founded from an axis of power enforced by violence to an axis of love expressed in forgiveness.

At the cross Jesus gives the world a new organizing principle: Love.

At the cross Jesus gives the world a new end: Peace.

At the cross we discover a God who shapes the world, not by coercion, but by love.

In his crucifixion Jesus achieves solidarity with all who suffer.

In his crucifixion Jesus reorients the way of the world from the way of Cain (collective murder) to the way of Abel (co-suffering love).

At the cross Jesus reveals a God who would rather die than kill God's enemies.

The cross is God's alternative to the sword.

The cross is the coronation of the world's rightful King.

In the crucifixion we understand that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God...not the other way around!

At the cross Jesus doesn't save us from God, he reveals God.

At the cross Jesus saves us from the coming wrath that is the inevitable result of following the ways of pride and power.

In his crucifixion Jesus joins humanity in death that we might join him in resurrection.

In his crucifixion Jesus tramples down death by death.

Through his death on the cross Jesus descended into Sheol/Hades that he might open the door to eternal life.

In his death and resurrection Jesus inaugurates the world to come – the world of New Creation.”³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian and pastor, who was martyred by the Nazis in WW II, in his book The Cost of Discipleship described the significance of the cross:

“The cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and to the fullest...The cross is laid on every Christian. When Christ calls [you] he bids [you] him come and die....But we do not want to die [to our old selfish ways] and therefore Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. ...The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life.”⁴

In other words, to pick up your cross and follow Jesus is a commandment that supersedes all others. Cross carrying doesn't care about your politics, your friendships, your age, your gender, your ethnicity, your likes, your dislikes, your looks, your health, your....No matter who you are, what you are, or where you are, you are called to suffer and be rejected just like Jesus!

How do you like that? Most people don't. Because suffering and rejection are not only painful, it means the death of our own ego, our own selfishness, our own comfort zone, our own little world where we are safe and secure. To carry a cross for Jesus launches us into a world of the unknown. And that is scary! As Mark Twain wrote, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

But think of carrying your cross this way.

You will be lonely, but you will not be alone.

You will die, but you will be born again in Holy Baptism.

You will be hungry, but you will feed on the Bread of Life. You will be thirsty, but you will drink from the cup of salvation.

You will be lost, but you will be found.

You will be despised, but you will be favored.

³ Brian Zahnd, *The Crucified God*, brianzahnd.com, On March 3, 2014

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1960), 96, 98-99.

You will be rejected, but you will be welcomed.

You will be depressed, but you will be given hope.

You will be an outcast, but you will find community.

You will be ridiculed, but you will be justified.

You will be hated, but you will be loved.

All because you follow the Christ, the anointed One, Who made the baptismal sign of the cross on your head and your breast with His own blood.

Remember this. You are not forced into cross carrying. Rather, you answer the call of Jesus, God's only begotten Son, who invites you to a new way of living by dying. Jesus welcomes you into the Kingdom of God where everything seems upside down and backwards—life is death and death is life; the first are last and last are first; many are called but few are chosen; whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it.

Cross carrying is hard work and confusing to many of us. But you and I are not alone. The collect and lessons for today promise that the Holy Spirit will direct us and rule our hearts in all things. If we listen to God, we don't have to be afraid of life and the disasters that we encounter. Because God is our strength and redeemer. And God has given us speech to bless the Lord with words that proclaim Christ crucified.

Jesuit priest and war protestor Daniel Berrigan said, "If you want to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood." Because you will be carrying your cross for a while.

One Episcopal priest said, "The work of the cross is often painfully slow. If I've learned one practical thing in all my years of ministry it's this: God's timeline doesn't often conform to mine. But... with Christ no one suffers alone, and no one suffers in vain. If you choose to take up your cross, you will be in strange company, but good company. If you choose to follow Christ, to take up your cross, you'll be standing with a wildly diverse band who believe the world can be re-shaped by sacrificial love."⁵

The next time you look at a cross "Look at the center of any cross, where the two beams intersect and join together. The vertical one representing the relationship of love that God has for you and you have for God, and the other horizontal one, which represents the love of God for the world and our obligation to care for others. In the center of this beam is where you find your cross. Another way to perceive this is to think of that intersecting beam as your vocation. Frederick Buechner once wrote: "Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need." There it is, at the heart of the cross."⁶

The late Bishop Desmond Tutu looked at the cross of Jesus this way and understood what carrying a cross was all about. He expressed the love of Jesus like all cross-bearers by living a life of sacrificial love, grace and forgiveness.

"When Nelson Mandela left prison after 27 years, he consulted with Bishop Tutu. Mandella could have have called for vengeance and retribution against the whites, but he did not. Instead, he called for forgiveness. Mandella asked his old friend Desmond Tutu to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The rules were simple: the perpetrators of hate crimes had to tell the truth, the whole truth, and their victims were given the opportunity to forgive them.

As a result, a frail black woman rose slowly to her feet

⁵ Posted by [Mike Angell](#), Sermon, [September 8, 2019](#). The Rev. Mike Angell is rector of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

⁶ The Rev. Melanie McCarley, "CARRYING YOUR CROSS," February 28, 2024. <https://stpauls-dedham.org/content/carrying-your-cross>.

in a courtroom trial in South Africa. She was more than 70 years old. Facing her from across the room are several security police officers.

One of them, Mr. Van der Broek, has just been tried and found guilty in the murders of many people, including the woman's son and the woman's husband.

Mr. Van der Broek had come to the woman's home one night, brutally taken her only son, shot him at point-blank range while she watched, and then burned the young man's body while he and his officers partied nearby.

Several years later Mr. Van der Broek and his cohorts returned. This time they took away the old woman's husband. For months, she heard nothing of his whereabouts. She did not know if he was alive or dead.

Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, Mr. Van der Broek came back to fetch her. How vividly she remembered that night. She was taken to a riverbank. To her surprise she was shown her husband. He was alive but tied up and badly beaten. She rejoiced to see he was still strong in spirit as he lay on a pile of wood.

Then she watched in horror as Mr. Van der Broek and his fellow officers poured gasoline over her husband's entire body. The last words she heard from her husband's lips as they set him on fire were, "Father, forgive them..."

Now this dear wife and mother was standing in the courtroom listening to the confessions of Mr. Van der Broek who confessed to killing her son, her husband and had committed horrible atrocities against other human beings.

Then a member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turned to woman and asked, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?"

Calmly and confidently the woman replied: "I want three things."

"First I want to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

She paused, and then continued. "My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. Van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining in me."

"Finally," she said, "I would like Mr. Van der Broek to know I offer him my forgiveness because I have been forgiven. Jesus Christ died to forgive. The wish of my husband was to forgive.

So, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so I can take Mr. Van der Broek in my arms, embrace him and let him know he is truly forgiven."

As the court assistants came to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. Van der Broek fell over in a dead faint, overwhelmed by what he has just heard. As he struggled for consciousness, those in the courtroom, family, friends, neighbors of the woman—all victims of decades of oppression and injustice — began to sing, softly but assuredly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."⁷

That woman picked up her cross, followed Jesus and changed the world, one person at a time. Jesus is calling you today to do the same. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Susan Holsinger, 'An African Mother', Meandering Melodies, May 08, 2019, carrollcountycomet.com. (Craig A. Smith 2004)