

## A “Cross and Follow” Kind of Life

I receive each week a commentary on the coming Sunday’s passages written by Rev. Jill Duffield who is the editor of the Presbyterian magazine titled Outlook. Her comments are often very much to the point. This week, although I had already chosen the passage I would focus on and even the sermon title, her opening comments seemed worth repeating to you. They very much relate to my reflections on the passages as I considered them. Her commentary begins: <sup>1</sup>“In between Exodus and Matthew are some detailed instructions on how to live a Christian life. A thread woven throughout these texts is the reality that hearing the Word of the Lord requires a response that entails our entire ways of living and being.” That’s the quote. A Christian life is a response to the Word of the Lord that entails our entire ways of living and being. In many ways that’s just a continuation of an answer to one of those good questions from last week about our response to who we believe Jesus of Nazareth is and what do we do in response to the gift of grace we have received. When we left Simon Peter last week he had just received very high affirmation about his insight into Jesus’ identity: “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.”, he proclaimed. In today’s text he learns that doesn’t mean what he thought it did. It does not mean the overthrow of the Roman rule which was oppressing the region and his people; it does not mean the return of the nation state of Israel under the rule of a king like David, for which most hoped; the role of the anointed Messiah is going to be very different from what is expected. And as Jesus begins to explain it to these disciples this new understanding is not going over well with Peter. Our text begins: “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Peter’s response to this is probably not unexpected. This is someone he has watched do powerful deeds of healing; for whom he has left home and kin to follow expecting great things to happen. This is not news he would be expecting to hear. It would not be welcome news, and he probably did not even hear or would not have understood that part about being raised mentioned at the end of what Jesus said...just the great suffering and death at the hands of their own religious leaders in Jerusalem. So, his response is to take Jesus aside and rebuke him, saying: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Three of the gospel narratives tell us that Jesus was tempted shortly after his baptism by John in the Jordan, but in many ways in the course of his life the human in Jesus must have been sorely tempted often. Consider Jesus’ response to Peter’s reaction to this coming suffering for his friend and leader: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Peter’s response was presenting a temptation. Jesus recognized that, but his reaction was to reject it. Jesus has already set his face toward Jerusalem and what awaits and is now beginning to prepare his disciples for what will happen. Our reaction to pain and suffering is pretty much uniformly the same as Peter’s to this news. We do not like it, especially for ourselves or for those we love. This makes what follows next a very difficult text for us to handle because of the advice Jesus gives to the disciples. “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow

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<sup>1</sup> Reflections on the Lectionary: 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 30, 2020 by Rev. Jill Duffield. Ed. Outlook Magazine

me.” The concept of self denial is not a popular one and to couple it with the concept of taking up a cross makes this a doubly hard and difficult idea for most of us. For one thing, in the world that Jesus knew, cross-bearing was a literal reality—not a metaphor. Crucifixion was a fact of life in the Roman world; a form of torture designed to oppress and subdue the population. In making this statement Jesus was telling his disciples that their choice to follow him was not going to be easy; in following him, there would be pain and suffering ahead for them as well as they proclaimed his message of what the reign of God would be like, what claiming citizenship in God’s reign would mean. Crucifixion is no longer a reality in our world; it is indeed a metaphor for us representing what Jesus did for us. But when we consider this text, we are left to determine what does it mean for us in our context to take up our cross in following Jesus. The issue or problem for us has always been who or what determines what is someone’s cross to bear. What then exactly is a “cross-bearing” kind of life becomes the question for someone who wishes to follow Jesus; to truly become a disciple? History is full of examples of people who have taken that instruction to simply mean to inflict pain upon themselves as a means of self denial. There were monks who wore garments of thorns beneath their robes or used other means to inflict wounds upon their bodies. In doing this they were denying themselves bodily comfort. Considering what Jesus goes on to say, I doubt that is what Jesus had in mind, for when he talks about those who may lose their life, he adds the phrase “for my sake” and that makes all the difference in what is meant. Because in the text context the meaning of the cross-bearing is found as those bearing the cross are also being disciples and following in the ways of Jesus. There also have been many who point to various events in their lives which are painful, referring to these as their cross to bear. Again, looking at the context of what Jesus is describing to his disciples it seems to be related more to what may happen to them as a consequence of following him specifically rather than the more generalized pain and suffering which come in the course of our living. If we go back to what Jesus’ is recorded as saying it is this: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The keys to what Jesus is asking of his disciples seems to be in the denying of self interest in order to be obedient to the ways which Jesus has come to teach about what God’s reign should be and to then be those following those Jesus’ teachings. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s work titled the Cost of Discipleship focuses on the teachings of Jesus and how following them separates one’s choices from those acceptable in the culture and surroundings of most of his world. Following the ways of Jesus Christ can be costly. The same is true of today’s standards. Our world is not very big on self denial—just look at the uproar caused by asking folks to restrict their activities for the sake of public health...much less to reduce over consumption for environmental causes or just plain greed to accumulate ever more possessions. If any would become my followers, let them deny themselves...and we haven’t gotten to the part about what it means to be taking up a cross. Jesus rebukes Peter for trying to “save” him. Jesus asks us to not focus on self-preservation, but on self-denial. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose it for my sake will find it.” Think about how much time Jesus spent among those who were without power; think about those to whom he gave his compassion and healing; think about all those boundaries that he crossed that were so important to those in power; think about those to whom he brought the good news of God’s reign inviting them into the kingdom. Then just think about the enormity of the resources that we bring to bear on our own self-preservation, about preserving our own way of

life when so many have so little in the way of opportunity. Think about how much time and effort we spend preserving our economic system, our economic successes and our political power in the world. How many of these systems and boundaries would have been ones Jesus would have crossed. About that taking up a cross, what if the cross we are to take up in our time is one that comes from the reaction of the world from adhering to true discipleship to the teachings of Jesus? What if it's following those things that Jesus preached and taught that lead to consequences which are the cost of our discipleship that Bonhoeffer to which referred? What if our cross and follow kind of life is living into the challenge of following in the ways of Jesus and crossing those same kinds of boundaries of power structures which leave some marginalized in the midst of plenty? At some point the cross and follow kind of life comes into being when we turn from looking inward as we answer the question Jesus asks about his identity to looking outward to what his identity means for how we respond and then live. There are signs of turmoil around us today that long ignored problems which have been institutionalized in our country are being exposed. There are many who are trying to deal with these; there are many who are trying to exploit the fears underlying them. As was pointed out in the commentary by Rev. Duffield, In between Exodus and Matthew are some detailed instructions on how to live a Christian life. A thread woven throughout these texts is the reality that hearing the Word of the Lord requires a response that entails our entire ways of living and being." The opening of the passage from Romans for today carries some of that advice: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." The Jewish man Saul had a long journey in his transformation to becoming the Apostle Paul; from persecuting those who accepted Christ he became a evangelist to the gentiles. In following his risen Lord, he crossed many barriers and espoused an inclusive community of love. We are challenged to do the same. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.