

## LENT TWO, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 28, 2021

Over the last 20 years the cross has become more than a religious symbol that a lot of Christians wear. It has become a fashion statement with crosses emblazoned on tee shirts, jackets, jeans, boots and even purses. You can find every style of cross to suit whatever mood you are in. It is intriguing to see the cross as a standard fashion accessory.

However, the cross didn't have any religious meaning in Jesus' time. A cross was an instrument of torture and death that the Roman government used to keep people in line. The road to Jerusalem was often literally lined with crosses, each one with a dead body hanging from it which was an effective tool for intimidation. To be crucified was gruesome, painful, shameful, degrading and the horror kept you from doing anything to warrant it. In fact, the cross did not become a symbol for Christianity until Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century, and abolished crucifixion as a form of punishment, and promoted the cross as a Christian symbol of faith. Prior to this time, the fish was the popular symbol of Christians. Unfortunately, even after the cross took on a religious significance it was used by many groups over the centuries, including the KKK and other hate groups, as a symbol of intimidation and persecution. So how are we to interpret Jesus' meaning when he tells us to take up the cross?

Up to this point in the gospel, Jesus' ministry had been a soaring success in the hills of Galilee. He was met with crowds wherever he went whether teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick or breaking bread with the unclean. Everyone was fascinated with who Jesus was and the amazing things he was doing. But still there were some who disliked and distrusted him or felt he was a heretic. Many questioned who he really was. Was he the Messiah? Was he a prophet? Or was he simply a man out of his mind?

Jesus chose this moment to tell the disciples plainly who he was. In the verses prior to today's reading, Jesus asked his disciples two questions. He asked, "who do people say that I am" and "who do you say that I am?" The disciples shared that other people said he was John the Baptist, Elijah or another prophet. Then Peter said, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus confirmed this was true and then he began to reveal what his mission as the Messiah would look and that he needed to go to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die. This was contrary to what the disciples and much of Israel believed. Judaism's concept of the Messiah was he would be the victor and rid them of Roman rule. When Jesus said he would suffer and die they couldn't comprehend that concept of the Messiah. It was the antithesis of what they believed.

Not surprisingly, the disciples didn't like what they were hearing. Peter pulled Jesus aside and started rebuking him. "Why are you saying this? Have you lost your mind? We've got something good going here. Let's forget Jerusalem. You're the Messiah, God's anointed, you're not supposed to suffer and die. That's absurd. You can almost hear Peter say, "Let's just focus on our clear objectives, and keep building on our success, and we'll be fine." Peter was frightened by what Jesus was saying. Part of it was if Jesus was vulnerable, then they all were. The cross meant shame and brutal death.

At this Jesus turned and then blasted Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" The harshest rebuke Jesus ever gave anyone. And then he told his disciples and the gathering

crowd what neither they nor we want to hear. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel will save it."

What exactly does that mean – to take up your cross and to lose one's life? When Jesus told his disciples to take up their crosses, he was saying that there are worse things than death—things like failing to never really live up to the person you are truly called to be, living in fear, or never quite getting around to giving ourselves to any cause bigger than our own. You notice Jesus doesn't say, "Take up my cross," as if we are expected to imitate him. He says, "Take up your cross," which is two fold - the cross that's already in your life waiting for you to pick it up and the cross you bear for others.

Jesus tell us this involves an active involvement in choosing to walk towards the death of those things that destroy us internally in our souls and move towards those things that are in tune with Jesus' commandment to love and help our neighbors. Taking up our crosses isn't a passive act but an active one. It's something we should choose every day to rid ourselves of things that destroy our souls. What are those things?

Do you struggle with anger? Then take up the cross of humbly walking into a counseling office to heal the wounds from which your anger explodes from.

Are you controlled by an addiction? Take up the cross of asking for accountability and being willing to receive the help offered.

Is your heart hardened with bitterness because of past wrongs against you? Take up the cross of untangling those wrongs and applying to them the same forgiveness Christ has given to you. There are many crosses we can add to this list.

But as you can see acknowledging and accepting our cross doesn't simply mean taking responsibility for what and who we are it means taking responsibility for what we are doing with what and who we are and going outside of ourselves to also help others.

If we think that to lose our lives for others or bearing their cross, means to make some huge and heroic sacrifice on behalf of Christ and the world, then most of us fail miserably in the "following Jesus" department. Instead, we live perfectly ordinary, pedestrian lives. We just have to open our eyes and look around to see the pain and struggle and human need around us to see what we can do.

The truth is we give a part of ourselves away in the name of Christ in little acts of sacrifice and kindness every day. It might be listening to your neighbor's problem, helping your grandchild with a project, providing a meal for someone who is ill, treating the person at the checkout counter in the store with respect whether you think they deserve it or not. Again, the list goes on.

Usually, giving our lives to Christ is neither glorious nor spectacular. It's done in little acts of love, living the Christian life little by little, day after day, over the long haul. And over the long haul those little acts add up and when we look back, we realize that we indeed have become more of who Jesus has called us to do and be. So the question remains do we truly know who we are called to be and what that requires of us?

Let me tell you a quick funny story. A politician was at a big campaign rally where they were having a fried-chicken dinner out under a tent. The candidate had spent several hours passing out campaign buttons, shaking hands and kissing babies. After he made his speech, he wandered over to the food tent. As he went through the line he was handed a plate with potato salad, green beans, a biscuit and a chicken leg. He leaned over the table and said, "May I have another piece of chicken?" The woman replied, "One piece

per person.” He tried again, “I’m a big guy and I’m pretty hungry and this is just a little bitty leg.” She said, “One piece per person.” Finally, the man tried to pull rank, “Look, do you know who I am?” She said, “No sir, but I know who I am. I’m the chicken lady, and it’s one piece per person.”

If we know who we are as beloved and baptized children of God, marked with the cross of Christ forever, then every day is alive with possibilities, rife with opportunities to die a little to those things that destroy us and to live a bit more for someone else.

Do you know who you are? The server in the tent knew who she was. She was “the chicken lady,” and her job was giving out chicken, one piece at a time.

Do you know who you are? Jesus knew who he was. He was the Messiah and his job was to preach, teach, heal and go to the cross.

Do you know who you are? We are invited this day and every day to remember that we are baptized and beloved children of God, marked with the cross of Christ forever. Amen