

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 8:27-28

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 116:1-8

James 3:1-12

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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Let me take you back to 1999 - to the first time I went to Israel. I found myself wandering through the walled alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem. Past shops filled with souvenirs and spices, up slippery stone steps worn smooth from decades of feet and hoofs and carts that had gone before me. Past the sounds of church bells and the call to prayer, past languages I could not understand. Around corners, bumping into strangers on a hot summer day. And then I walked around a corner and was immediately pressed to the wall by a crowd of tourists – a crowd of people led by some priest of a denomination I could not identify and together they carried a cross.

A real wooden life size cross – held by many hands, resting on shoulders, sweat dripping down their faces. As they walked through the alleyways, everyone would step aside against the wall to let them pass. Sometimes these tourists sang. Sometimes they would just breath heavily as they labored that cross up those well-worn stone steps.

And then I realized, I was on the via Delarosa – the biblical road that Jesus walked carrying his own cross to his crucifixion. I have to admit...I didn't understand at the time the tourists' need to reconstruct Christ's final hours. In fact, at the time, I was more than a little frustrated at this attempt to carry a cross that I doubted was as heavy as the one Jesus had to carry. I found myself cynical. From that day forward I vowed not to be one of "those" tourists. Walking up ancient pathways in some show of faith and devotion for others to see.

I wondered what they did when they got home. How did carrying that cross change them, or did it change them? Were they faithful Jesus followers on their own turf away from the thick religiosity of that Holy Place?

In fact, I was so cynical that I kept my vow through 4 more trips to Israel – to never walk the via Delarosa and to never carry a cross like those tourists that day. However, on my last trip to Israel 6 years ago I had a change of heart and decided to face my cynicism and I walked the path. I didn't carry a physical cross but I walked along that same route, marking each station of the cross where Jesus stopped along his way to Golgotha.

On that particular day, I realized something. I realized that there are times that I simply need to be reminded of what Jesus did for me. To be reminded of why I call myself a Christian. To be reminded that in calling myself by that name, I have a responsibility to walk my own paths with my own crosses. I had avoided that road for 16 years and I was so glad to finally walk those steps and remember.

I have often wondered why that encounter in 1999 had such an impact on me. I realized over the years that I struggled deeply with why some folks needed to demonstrate their faith in such an outward, dramatic way – I mean I had seen far too many people who were either really good at talking about their faith and horrible at living it. Or, people who were good at showing up to check a box on Sunday mornings to live into the image of a good Christian but didn't really believe in anything that grounded their actions beyond the church walls.

In other words, I thought it just felt shallow, this carrying of the cross. And I was skeptical for a long time trying to reconcile in my mind how we talk about our faith and how we live our faith.

And when Mark describes the scene with Jesus and his disciples he's setting the stage for a similar tension. It's the tension of what we say about our faith and what we do with our faith. What we say and what we do.

The conversation starts innocently enough... Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is, what are they saying about him. It's a rather generic question – generalized and broad. However, I am not sure he was really that interested in generalities because he immediately asks another more personal probing question...who do you say that I am? In other words, what are you willing to tell others about me. That's the first point in our Gospel. ***What will you say.***

Peter, quick to answer, says – well, of course, we are saying that you are the Messiah. Jesus took hold of this statement and goes into great detail about what that really means and it isn't too cheery of a description. And the answer that Jesus gives isn't what Peter expects. Peter doesn't want to hear the difficult parts of what it means to follow Jesus. He didn't sign on for pain and suffering. He begins to rebuke Jesus. I can almost hear him complaining – that's too much, it's too hard, I'm not sure that's the kind of Messiah I want – at least the suffering, rejection and death part. It's there another way? A happier way? An easier way to follow you?

Jesus, however, sees what is going on. Peter was quick to talk about his faith but struggled when it came time to apply his faith. He wanted it to be easier. But...as Jesus so often does, he turns the tables – as if to say, Peter, it isn't so much about what I can do for you...how I can make your life easier. It's what you can do in my name...at whatever cost.

And then, Jesus gives the punch line...If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. That's the second point. ***What will you do.***

In between what we say and what we do there is an interesting thing to consider. It's the shift that happens in our attitude about faith. It's the thing that happens after we verbally claim Jesus and when we begin to apply Jesus to our daily lives. It's the cross that represents not so much the question of who do you say that I am but who do you say that you are when you follow me?

Because if you really proclaim who Jesus is, something within you surely changes. And when we claim who we are in the name of Jesus, our actions change. Our commitments change. Our

prayer changes. We want to carry that cross in whatever way we can because claiming Jesus means claiming a changed life and a changed heart. Because when Jesus says who do you say that I am, he isn't interested in what you think others are saying or doing. He's interested in you. Who do you say that you are? How has your life changed because of Jesus?

But, we all know that putting our faith into action is not always easy. Picking up a cross, whatever it may be, in the name of our faith, can be disruptive and can make us vulnerable to those who may disagree. As one theologian stated, "Truth-telling and faithful living are rarely popular vocations."

What I have come to learn about myself is this...That day on the via Delarosa was about my own inability to listen to what Jesus called forth within me. It was my inability to carry a cross for fear of what others might think. It was my inability to be the kind of person Jesus desired me to be. Like Peter, I wanted it to be easier.

Here's what else I have learned...Jesus tells us to walk that path anyway. No matter what anyone else may say. Who do you say that I am?

We won't necessarily carry a physical cross and we may not stand on a street corner, bible in hand, proclaiming the Good News. And, honestly, thank goodness those outward signs of faith aren't a requirement to following Jesus. I would fail miserably if they were!

So maybe we can think of it like this...

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who picked you up when you felt you had lost hope in this life, be willing to pick someone else up who has lost hope.

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who loved you when you were put down and rejected in this world, be willing to love someone else who has been put down and rejected.

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who fed you when you were hungry, be willing to feed someone else who is hungry.

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who forgave you when you made a harmful mistake, be willing to forgive someone else who has made a harmful mistake.

And, finally, be willing to speak boldly about what Christ has done for you when the opportunity presents itself and be willing to carry the cross when it matters because Christ has carried it for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.