

“Dropping to Carry”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19B) – 12 & 13 September 2015  
Mark 8:27-38

There’s a parish in Virginia that outgrew its tiny colonial-era chapel about a decade ago. The late morning Eucharist was packed to capacity, and the mid-morning Eucharist was almost always standing room only. Concerned that these space limitations would put an artificial cap on growth the parish decided to build a new, much larger chapel.

Upon completion, everyone delighted in its spaciousness and beauty, but something was missing, and surprisingly it took a little while to figure out what it was, but before long it occurred to people that the cross, the central symbol of Christian faith and devotion, was present but not prominently displayed. With all the many things it takes to build a place to worship, somehow putting the cross of Jesus at the center got overlooked.

Of course, this oversight was quickly remedied. Much reflection and conversation went into what type of cross to buy and where to put it. Many worthy ideas were proposed. Yet in the end, people opted for a life-sized cross made of English oak. They wanted a cross large enough that you could actually crucify someone on it, which probably made their Rector a little nervous from time to time.

The parish commissioned a gifted local craftsman to make the cross, asking that he use only hand tools and techniques similar to those that would have been used to make the cross that Jesus carried and died on, so that it would be realistic, rough-hewn, like that old rugged cross people love to sing about; not an attractive work of art, but a raw, utilitarian device of cruel execution. Once finished, it took four strong men to carry that unwieldy cross into the chapel ,

and it took heavy chains to hang it securely from steel beams above the ceiling behind the altar. The cross' horizontal beam alone weighed about 80 pounds.

Even if you're fit, eighty pounds can be heavy, especially if it's a seven-foot long, awkward-to-handle hunk of wood. That's what Jesus would have carried, the horizontal part of the cross, through the streets of Jerusalem, with people mocking him and soldiers prodding him onward. Having recently lost a lot of blood through torture, sleep-deprived, Jesus was not strong but weak and probably had trouble keeping his balance, even without this cross beam on his shoulders.

Perhaps the saddest part of the whole scene is that Jesus would find relief from this burden only once he reached his final destination, a hillside outside the city walls, where the vertical beam awaited the arrival of the horizontal beam, so that the two could form a cross where an even worse agony would be inflicted. All of this horror was flashing through Peter's mind as Jesus matter-of-factly described to the disciples how he would suffer and be killed. Crucifixions were so common that Peter had almost certainly seen at least one, and there was no way that he was going to let Jesus go through all that. So Peter confronted Jesus and refused to accept that this was how it had to be. Big mistake.

Peter had the best motives. He loved Jesus and wanted to protect him, in no small part because Peter had just identified Jesus as the Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to conquer, not die. The Messiah was supposed to release people from captivity and oppression, not become a victim himself. Everyone knew this to be true. Scripture was clear; the tradition of interpretation consistent over centuries, but Jesus rebuked Peter fiercely. "You're in league with evil, Peter, too focused on the human way of looking at things. You need to focus more on the new thing that God is doing, even if it's unexpected and frightening and offensive to you. You

think the cross doesn't belong in my life or as part of God's purpose, but the cross matters more than anything else."

Then Jesus turned to the crowd and summoned them and announced, "You think it's bad that there's a cross in my future? Well, let me tell you something, I'm not the only one that's going to be hauling heavy wood. Anyone who wants to stick with me will do the same and pick up the cross." That had to come as quite a shock to people, especially if they interpreted his words literally, which would have been a natural reaction. After all, if you associate with someone who gets crucified, it substantially increases your chance of being crucified, too. Guilt by association, you see, and indeed many gathered there would suffer death for their faith, some by crucifixion, including Peter.

However, only a tiny fraction of Jesus' followers have made the ultimate witness of martyrdom, so there's definitely a symbolic, figurative way to understand what Jesus said, and though we can be rightly relieved that few if any of us actually need to die to follow Jesus faithfully, the figurative interpretation of Jesus' words and how they apply to our lives of Christian discipleship might actually be worse than literally dying for the sake of the Gospel. Getting killed takes a relatively short span of time. This figurative type of taking up the cross and losing our life lasts a lot longer, an entire lifetime to be more precise, and it is an intrusive and comprehensive process.

Taking up our cross and losing our life means letting go of everything else, because a cross beam, whether literal or figurative in nature, is too heavy and unwieldy for us to carry anything else. Go get a seven-foot long, eighty-pound piece of wood and try to carry it a mile with a full suitcase in your other hand. You need both hands and all your strength to carry the cross. All that other stuff we haul around has to be dropped to the ground: shame, guilt, self-

loathing and self-punishment – drop that garbage on the ground; fear, pride, that unhealthy anger that yields judgment and resentment – they go on the ground, too; unbridled ambition and the desire for wealth, fame, prestige and power – down on the ground; most of our assumptions, preferences, opinions, ideologies need to be left behind.

That sounds impossible, and if you think of this transformative experience as a “flip-the-light-switch” sort of endeavor, then you’re right. It is impossible, but picking up the cross and letting go of everything else isn’t an instantaneous event. Maybe for a rare few, people we call saints, it happens like that, but when we consider how clueless Peter was about what Jesus was saying, it seems that even for those closest to Jesus, carrying the cross is a gradual process in which we become increasingly aware of God’s grace and increasingly willing to receive God’s grace, which is what empowers us to let go of whatever it is that’s keeping us from picking up the cross. But how we can respond to Christ’s call? Where do we start, and why would we want to?

Well, back in college, I accepted an invitation to work with youth in a local parish and in the diocese, and this included weekends and whole weeks during the summer at the diocesan camp and conference center, nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. It was a glorious place, full of caves to explore and cliffs to climb, but before you could be part of the team that led the youth on these adventures, you went through an orientation, which included learning the hiking trails and the climb routes for the cliffs. It was physically arduous yet very satisfying until . . . until we made it to the top of this one column of rock, about 80 feet high. I thought, “OK, we’ve made it. It’s time to climb down. There’s no place else to go.” And then, one of my instructors jumped across this five-foot chasm onto an adjacent rock, smooth and

slanted at a 45 degree angle, no good place to get any purchase with your feet, and he said, “Alright, Michael, your turn.”

Now it was just five feet across, shorter than the length of our altar, but beneath that gap there was 80 feet of solid nothing. We weren’t tethered to each other with ropes, so if you don’t make it, you die. (Amazing what they’d let you do with youth in the ‘90’s.) And though I loved these guys, I wasn’t sure if I was ready to trust them with my life. They kept encouraging me, and I kept standing there for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, just as I thought they would relent and call it a day, this big guy named Chris standing next to me went over the edge, very carefully, and wedged his body between the two rock walls, with his back against one and his feet pressed against the other, and he said, “If you don’t make it, I’ll catch you. I won’t let you fall. I promise.” And I took a five foot leap of faith and landed safe on the other side. It was a transcendent experience, full of freedom and relief and joy, and I knew that I could help others overcome their fear and feel the same sense of wonder and awe. That’s how we take up the cross: one little leap of faith at a time, knowing that there’s someone ready to catch us if we fall, and his name is Jesus.

As to why, that’s fairly simple: to quote an old hymn, “for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” The only way for us to experience the hope and joy and peace and love we most need and crave is to pick up the cross and follow Jesus and in the process, piece by piece, let go of everything else. Our perspective will change, which in turn will alter our very identities, and a lot of that is going to feel weird and dangerous. But the choice is stark. We can keep carrying around stuff that will lead us nowhere, or we can drop everything and shoulder the cross of sacrificial love and humility and die so that we can arise to newness of life, just as Jesus did. Amen.

