

## extraORDINARY Cross

Mark 8:31-38

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

I had to laugh a little bit this week when I realized that I really couldn't start my sermon this Sunday the same way Pastor Lauren started hers last week... Last Sunday we considered God's extraORDINARY provision through the image of bread, and Pastor Lauren lead off with the question, "When is the last time you thought about bread?" A relatively harmless, lighthearted question... It would probably be too extreme of a shift in tone to just cold open this sermon on this week's image—The Cross—by asking, "When is the last time you thought about violent systemic injustice, sham trials, extra-judicial murder, and state sanctioned violence?"

Too much? Yeah probably... But maybe it's the uncomfortable jolt we need.

We are moving quickly away from the comfortable and palatable image of bread this past week to now consider "The Cross". I'm sure a question about systemic injustice and gruesome murder wasn't what you were expecting as we drew our focus to the cross, and honestly that's a problem. A broken justice system and state sanctioned violence might seem a little too unsettling this morning, but as we continue our Lenten series of considering God's extraORDINARY love for us by drawing our attention to *ordinary* objects, I think it's important to remember what the cross was *really* all about. It's important to remember this because I would argue that the cross has perhaps become *too ordinary*.

Crosses are everywhere. When I was serving in Luray and driving to Harrisonburg to visit friends, I always loved the one moment as you came down Massanutten Mountain, down Rt. 211, where the trees opened up for an instant and all across your vision... before you saw any buildings, or people, or roads, you saw little steeples, crosses raised triumphantly and high across the low skyline of New Market, Virginia. Crosses raised high over the town, just as they are here in this community. Everywhere you go in town I'm sure you'll see a cross raised high. Here in this room, I'm sure many of you could tune out the rest of this sermon, the rest of the service for that matter, counting all the crosses in the room. And there's nothing wrong with this, but by a show of hands, how many of you are wearing a cross of some kind right now? Necklaces, earrings, rings, tattoos... crosses are everywhere.

Why? Because (what I shared with our children at the start of the service is true...) the cross is a sign of hope! It's a sign for us that death does not get the last word, that Christ has defeated sin and death, and that salvation is freely given to all. We are each marked in baptism with the sign of the cross, as we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. This cross will never go away, and neither will our hope, God's grace, or our transformative new life in Christ. The cross is a sign of hope that belongs to the Lord.

But the Cross didn't always mean that. It didn't mean that in Mark 8, when Jesus says to the crowds, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Jesus was not proclaiming a sign of hope to those who heard him. He was speaking plainly and realistically to a people who would have known good and well what the cross was all about.

This statement was no mere foreshadowing. The cross was perhaps just as common a symbol in Christ's time as it is today. Jesus of Nazareth was not the first person to be put to death on a cross. The Roman Empire, the stewards of the great *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace, maintained this peace through the violence of the cross. Daring to lead a revolution? Even a revolution of love like Jesus? The cross is what awaits you. The cross stood for Systemic injustice against those who were subjects of Rome, sham trials for those who resisted Roman occupation, the murder of subjects on crosses in public to quell any thought of further rebellion, and all this violence legally sanctioned by the almighty Empire... *this* was the nature of the cross as Jesus told his followers "Take up your cross".

No necklaces, no steeples, no proud gold, no hope-filled story of triumph. Just the somber and selfless reality that the way of the cross was a way of resistance that would lead to death. Jesus was making it abundantly clear to his followers that to follow him would mean that thinking only of your own vain self-interest would no longer be possible. Following Jesus means resisting injustice and those who perpetuate it wherever they are found. Following Jesus would mean standing up to the empire when it was corrupt, and it would mean standing up to your neighbors when they perpetuated systems of sin. The cross was a place of glory for no one, it was a place where Rome attempted to shame their subjects up to and even after death. To take up your cross and follow Jesus is to put all others, and namely the good of all others, above your own self-interest and self-preservation. This, Jesus says, is the way of discipleship. Through the cross, God calls us to extraORDINARY self-denial.

Now we're privileged to know the end of the cross' story, but we can't forget the beginning. We know that the cross is a sign of hope, a promise of victory over death and sin, but we can't forget the first part. Christ is our example in this journey to the cross, because he—as God himself—denied his own divinity, glory, and power and laid down his life on the cross for the good of all creation.

God's response to our violent and sinful way was to take on the cross and all its injustice that sin may have no power over us. We know that in the presence of God's love, even this symbol of evil, oppression, injustice, and suffering was transformed into a sign of hope. In the presence of God's extraORDINARY love all things are being transformed, all things are being made new. To take up our cross and follow Jesus is to be real and honest about confronting the pain and suffering of this world, it's about denying our own self-interest, not that we might ascent to some verdant plain of differentiated self-righteousness. Self-denial in the Christian life is about seeking the needs of our neighbors above our own, and it's about witnessing to God's transformative power. This isn't a one time transformation, but a life-long pursuit of God's redemption in the face of all that would stand in the way of God's beloved community here on earth. As Dr. Clifton Black would say, "Christian faith is not a life-style choice; it is a vocation to never-ending struggle."

This never ending struggle is what we call discipleship. It is the way of life-giving self-denial that breathes care, compassion, hope, and mercy into a weary world in such a way that God's creative and

redeeming love is made known here and now. This self-denial is for the sake of those we love, and those we've never met. This self-denial lifts up others, and the promise and trust of community is that there is always someone looking out for us as well. We are never alone, especially as we deny ourselves for the sake of others. This is the way of the cross that transforms and redeems our lives and the world around us. This is the way of repentance and reparation that leads to new life here and now. We can do this in simple, daily ways—we can do this in dramatic and systemic ways—but how this way of extraORDINARY self-denial is lived out is what we're meant to discern together.

We are blessed that there are so many crosses around us, that this sign is so ordinary in our world. It is a sign with the power to call us back always to the hope and struggle of our Christian calling. It is a sign all around us that is meant to draw our hearts and minds first to the love God has poured out for us, and immediately to the suffering of our neighbor. As we recall our own liberation from sin and shame, we are being sent in great love to liberate our neighbor. The cross is a sign, an invitation to extraORDINARY self-denial. This self-denial is *ordinary* in that it may not take much to consider the needs and worries of those around us. This self-denial is extraORDINARY in that if the whole Christian community practices this way of repentance and resistance, we will see God transforming all of creation in love.

Be mindful of the crosses you see this week. Each time you see one, ask yourself, "Who is suffering, and how may I meet them with love?" Start this morning as you leave this place of worship. Look up at our own high steeple, adorned with perhaps my favorite cross. It is a cross of arrows, pointing outward in all directions, breaking free from the box that would bind them. This Muhlenberg Cross is a reminder that God's love cannot be contained by our own vain self-interests. The heart of the cross is a deep care for all who are weary, suffering, and oppressed. Look up, and look out. The ordinary crosses of our world are each calling us out to meet the world with God's extraORDINARY, transformative, and redeeming love. This is the way of the cross.

Amen.