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## "Carry the Weight"

Mark 8:31 – 38 2nd Sunday in Lent, 2018

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"Self-denial" – It's not a popular notion in this American culture. Jesus says: *"Let them deny themselves; take up their cross; and follow me."*

Is this a call to be patient and long-suffering, and take up one's cross, and "grin and bear it"? Or, is it a 'silver lining'? A promise that all things, even something as awful as the cross, DO work together for Good, in the words of the Apostle, "for them who love God? (Rom. 8:28) Or, maybe we should ask: what sort things have we used to save ourselves rather than giving ourselves over to the words/work of justice? Then ask if we are ashamed of Jesus' words.

COULD be that there's a touch of "All That" in there; but I think the call of this week's Gospel, particularly in light the violence and brutality that seem to be everywhere, is to be willing to embrace the burden. Embrace the burden of others and then to do what we can to help carry it, shoulder it, and bear it for the sake of the Gospel.

The Gospel isn't 'cheap'; it's not for sale. Any attempt to do a 'work around', or to find a 'path of less resistance' – as Peter did - will bring about a rebuke! Shoulder it. Bear it! – for the sake of the Gospel. Now "Gospel" means "Good News" (simple); and that's the conundrum, isn't it? How can "CROSS" have anything to do with "Good News"? That is Peter's problem and "Peter" is "Us". Yes?

One thing that has struck over my years of ministry, that unifies people at a very deep level, is that **each of us has experienced brokenness**. It may be large. It may be small. It may be that a parent abandoned, or walked out on us. Perhaps it is the betrayal of a loved one, the loss of a child, the death of a dream, abuse by those who hold power over us, or any number of things. But this one thing remains: to live is to struggle, to hurt, and to experience loss; brokenness.

I have learned that the reality is, on most occasions, we prefer to **hide** that brokenness from others. Perhaps that comes from a kind of embarrassment – we do not know if others will respect us if we show our wounds. Perhaps it comes from a fear of being vulnerable – we wonder if others will take advantage of us when our guard is down. Perhaps it comes from a fear of being overwhelmed by loss and grief. The reasons differ; I suspect it is all of these and more, varying from occasion to occasion. But I do know that we tend to favor strength, health, and self-sufficiency, or at least the appearance of these things; over weakness, pain, and dependence. Peter's issue again. Yes?

But while this predisposition is so understandable, I think that ultimately it is neither faithful to the Gospel nor likely to draw us more deeply toward becoming the persons we have been called to be. The Gospel passage for this week is that we are called to take up our cross. **Carry it!** Expecting that God is most clearly and fully present in the suffering and brokenness of the world. We are called to take up our cross by being honest about our brokenness and thereby demonstrate our willingness to enter into the brokenness of others. We are called to take up our cross because we follow the One who not only took up his cross but also revealed that nothing in this world, not even the hate and darkness and death that seemed so powerful on that Friday we dare call good, can defeat the love and light and life of God.

Denying brokenness and pain may indeed be so incredibly understandable. Just as understandable as Peter's being run over by a Mack truck; with the possibility that God's promised Messiah had come not to conquer and rule, but rather to suffer and die. No wonder Peter rebuked Jesus. Peter knew where to look for God and it was in places of strength. Isn't that almost exactly what we mean when we speak of God's omnipotence? For this reason, he could only imagine that grief, loss, betrayal, suffering, and death were things to **avoid**, because those places are, quite literally, God-forsaken. Yet in the cross, God **embodies** that there is no place where God won't go.

Here we should be both clear and careful: entering into another's pain and loss is not the end of the story. When we embrace each other's brokenness, we experience first that God is with us through the cross and then also hear and experience God calling us to life and courage in and through the resurrection. "How" that resurrection call will take shape is hard to predict. **Perhaps** it will be to believe without question the person who has shared a story of sexual assault or to stand faithfully with a person seeking fair treatment. **Perhaps** it will be to keep faith with the one who no longer remembers you because of dementia or to hold vigil with the one near death's door. **Perhaps** it will be to call for action when action needs to be taken. However God's cross and resurrection

comes, embracing another's pain will not stop with "thoughts and prayers" but moves us on to TAKE ACTION, for and with and on behalf of, those for whom we are praying.

Why? Two reasons. First, I don't think we can stand with people by standing over them! That is, reaching from our places of strength to comfort or help them. (WE'VE got the answers, and THEY need to see it our way.) We meet people most authentically when we can admit (embrace) that we are like them (sounds like incarnation, doesn't it?).

Secondly, when we discover that God is **not absent**, but indeed **powerfully present** in our brokenness, it transforms how we look at everything and courage rises within us, as we face the struggles of this life. After all, if loss and suffering and death cannot separate us from God's love, then what is there to fear?

I'm a Baby Boomer. Even the Beatles sang:

Boy, you gotta carry that weight  
Carry that weight a long time  
Boy, you gonna carry that weight  
Carry that weight a long time  
I never give you my pillow  
I only send you my invitation

Today is also Stephen Ministry Sunday – as we commission 6 new Stephen Ministers to their task and calling to be disciples: 'walking the road' during a tough patch with others. Sharing the load. Yet the cross is not "dealing with chronic health problems" or "dealing with disobedient children" or "experiencing problems in a relationship" or "having one of the worst jobs on the planet". I don't think we can say, "That's the cross I have to carry," if we're referring to things that cause us problems in life.

The cross of Christ, was never about Himself, but about others. We carry the weight of the Cross, bear the burden of the Gospel, for the sake of others.

For the sake of the world.

Amen.