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Genesis 17: 1 – 7, 15 – 16

Ps. 22: 22 – 30

Romans 4: 13 – 25

Mark 8: 31 – 38

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I had been in seminary for a month or two, when all of a sudden, one day, the middler and senior classes burst through the double doors into our junior classroom, right in the middle of Becky Wright's Old Testament class. She, of course, knew to expect this. Many of the upper-class seminarians were wearing crazy costumes – a lot of togas or Biblical- bathrobe-looking things. One of them was carrying a large cross which was then firmly planted in the middle of the front of the classroom. They proceeded to provide us with entertainment – a variety of short skits, and songs with familiar tunes but altered words. Interspersed with the different 'acts' of the show, they kept coming back to a chant: "We're all in this together. We're all in this together..."

Unbeknownst to us, this little interruption was a time-honored tradition at Sewanee, and I suppose it still is. It was a way of saying, "Yes, we know all of this is very strange to you. Yes, we know that you had to uproot everything and let go of the way your life was. Yes, you may be feeling alone or confused or disoriented, but we've all been there, too. And we want you to know that you are not alone. We've had rough times and great times and so will you. We're here for you. We're a new community in Christ. Welcome. We're all in this together.

I've never forgotten that experience – obviously. It was lovely and friendly and funny and poignant all at the same time. It was what most of us needed and didn't even really realize it. Our class, then, had the fun of returning the favor for the next two classes after us.

We're all in this together. It's one of the things that seems to not quite have settled in with Jesus' disciples yet. In Mark, we hear Jesus beginning to transform his disciples' idea of messiahship. Peter has just burst out with the pronouncement that Jesus is the Messiah. But Jesus knows that Peter and the rest of his disciples are not understanding where all of this is leading. They're thinking white horse, shiny armor, victory! Jesus throws a bucket of cold water on that image by saying no, it's not a crown but a cross to which I'm heading.

'I'm going to be crucified,' Jesus says. 'If you *really* want to be my followers, you need to realize that you are also headed for persecution and an ignoble death. Instead of following a conquering hero, you need to be prepared to suffer and be rejected on my account. You need to take up your own cross and live like I do.' Bucket of cold water, indeed!

Mid-twentieth century Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once said that "the principle of sacrifice is that we choose to do or suffer what apart from our love we should not choose to do or suffer." That is where the disciples suddenly find themselves. They are left pondering how high a cost they are willing to pay to align themselves with Jesus and one another and the suffering that is to come. How much do they love Jesus? What does authentic, persevering faith in their erstwhile 'hero' truly look like? They might have to give up everything on earth that is dear to them, including their lives – can they bear that cost?

Yes, Jesus' demands are daunting, but what would help the disciples is to remember that they're all in this together. It's been said that 'if you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to go far,

walk together with others.’ Jesus is not leading his followers on a pleasant afternoon hike, but on a walk into danger and mortal risk. The disciples need one another for what lies ahead.

A couple hundred years after Jesus is having this conversation with his disciples, a man named Cyprian, from Carthage in North Africa, sits down to write his friend a letter. “Dear Donatus,” he writes, “This seems a cheerful world...when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet, in the midst of it, I have found a quiet and holy people. They [have] discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure in this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians – and I am one of them.”

Cyprian, who will go on to become a bishop in the early church, has been attracted to the way of life that he observes among this community willing to bear the name of Christ. “A quiet and holy people.” A people, a community, who, despite ill treatment and persecution, show a solidarity in love, even in suffering love. In the face of rejection and death, this community has found its identity in Jesus Christ and an acceptance that God’s will be done in their lives. Their sense of security is not tied to anything earthly like status or wealth or power, but rather to the life they share as the Body of Christ. They know that they have one another, and they know that they have Jesus. They are willing and able to take up their cross, no matter the cost, and it will indeed grow and bear fruit in unimaginable ways.

What does it really mean, though, to ‘take up one’s cross and follow Jesus?’ It has become a catchphrase in our culture, a metaphor for bearing whatever hardships come one’s way- like dealing with a difficult in-law or living with a chronic disease. In his 1947 book, *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “Some people when they say that a thing is meant metaphorically conclude from this point it is hardly meant at all. They rightly think that Christ spoke metaphorically when he told us to carry the cross; they wrongly conclude that carrying the cross is nothing more than living a respectable life and subscribing moderately to charities.” In the 1960s, author Douglas Webster wrote that Christians are ‘told to take up their own cross, not as a quick getaway in some mystic realm of sweet withdrawal but as a binding weight which will plunge them down into the squalid cellars of their souls where psychiatrists can roam and rummage but only God can rehabilitate.’

Contemporary author, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, has a bit of a different take on it. She writes that “the deep secret of Jesus’ hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it.” Then she draws this analogy: “Life,” she says “cannot be shut up and saved any more than fresh spring water can be put in a mason jar and kept in a kitchen cupboard. Oh, it will remain water, and if you ever open it up, you can probably still drink it, but it will have lost its essence, its life, which is to be poured out, to be moving, living water, rushing downstream to share its wealth without ever looking back.”

We need to remind ourselves sometimes, that we’re all in this together as the Body of Christ. It’s a very counter-cultural message – and a necessary corrective – to our American way of life. What is the cross that each of us must bear in following Jesus? Well, that’s part of our journey to discover that and then to choose to pick it up. But that’s part of the reason why we’re here – to help one another do that. As the people of God in community, we take up our crosses, we follow the cross, and we go to the cross together. We *are* all in this together, like all the individual molecules of water, bound together,

that form the stream. We're all in this together, to enable each other to be poured out, to be moving, living water, rushing downstream so that we might share our wealth without ever looking back. +