Get behind Jesus

Good Shepherd, Burke

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

February 25, 2018

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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Psalm 22:22-30 Romans 4: 13-25     Mark 8:31-38

1. Today’s sermon is brought to you by Grandma Jill’s cross collection! [Hold up poster board with crosses taped to it].

Grandma Jill is my husband’s 95-year-old grandmother.

She is a fashionista with great taste.

She has been systematically thinning out her worldly goods

over the past few years.

A couple of years ago, she delayed dinner and led me into a closet

where her entire cross collection was displayed.   
She said, “Pick out the ones you like best.”

She was only marginally satisfied

when I chose a dozen instead of taking them all.

2. Now I have a cross to wear for every occasion.

I can match my mood

with the shape, color, and composition of each cross.

If there’s a baptism, I wear this big James Avery cross

with a descending dove in the middle.

If I’m traveling or working with children,

I wear the little orange cross with a dried flower in the middle.

If I’m all dressed up, I wear Grandma Jill’s favorite black cross

with gold trim.

And today,

on the last Sunday I’m preaching for awhile at Good Shepherd,

I thought I’d wear the prettiest cross:

This ornate silver one with a purple stone in the middle

to match our Lenten vestments.

It represents to me the beauty of this congregation and my time here.

3. But this is not the cross we get today.

The one I’ve chosen is dwarfed by the heavy, ugly, splintery

wooden monstrosity that Mark’s gospel unceremoniously drops with a thud at our feet.

This gospel reminds us that the cross we choose

is not always the one we get.

Crosses are not about what we might be in the mood

to take on in a given moment.

Crosses are sudden, rude interruptions on the path

we were walking along contented.

They are rarely something we look for, deserve

or would wish on ourselves or anyone else.

We can pray a cross will pass from us or compel someone else to carry it, but in the end it’s ours.

4. The cross represents suffering and death, one way or another.

Personal crosses are unavoidable, hard to miss.

It’s your diagnosis, your loved one dying or ill, your broken relationship. I’ve seen many of you live out Jesus’ teaching of discipleship

in the face of such burdens:

You drop whatever you’re holding to, grab your cross

and get behind Jesus.

A mother whose daughter is diagnosed with MS drops her passion— leading a non-profit-- to free up time.

She picks up responsibilities to care for her daughter and grandchildren. A father drops his drinking, picks up AA,

and offers his dependency and addiction to Jesus.

An adult child takes over care for an elderly parent.

5. Carrying a cross is not easy or pleasant.

Peter thinks it’s not a strong selling point for recruiting disciples.

Jesus begins to teach his disciples that the Son of Man

must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders,

the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed

and on the third day rise again.

Peter takes him aside to rebuke him.

Whatever Peter says, he doesn’t get very far.

Jesus refuses to be taken aside or to let this matter be

swept under the carpet.

He turns and looks at his disciples

with his gaze that penetrates their bodies and souls:

“Get behind me Satan!

For you are setting your mind not on divine things,

but on human things.”

6. I’ve always felt a little sorry for Peter

getting chomped in front of everyone.

But in studying this passage last week,

I noticed something I hadn’t before.

“Get behind me” is the same verb as “Follow me.”

Just as I do so many times, Peter has gotten out in front of Jesus;

He pulls Jesus down the path Peter thinks is best

—the most expedient path politically,

the path that will please the most people,

the path that lines up with

his narrative of a strong, effective Messiah.

Jesus barks, “Get back in your place, Peter.

You don’t know where we’re going.

I do, and it’s not going to be easy.

The only way through it is through it.

On the other side is new life. Spring. Resurrection.

But there’s no way around winter, suffering and death.

No matter how much you fool yourself into thinking

this cross isn’t yours, in the end,

it will still be there staring you in the face.

Best to meet it head on. Pick it up and follow me.”

7. It’s not enough for Jesus to set Peter straight in front of the disciples.

He calls the whole crowd over.

He wants no one following him under false pretenses:

“If you’re coming, come on. Drop whatever you’re holding onto. Grab your cross and get behind me.

You may think you’re saving your life by looking for a detour around suffering and death or looking for a scapegoat,

or avoiding responsibility.

But you damage your soul with such lies.

If you give up all you have for my sake

and for the sake of the good news

—if you replace denial with self-denial, blame with responsibility, indifference with love—you will save your life.

There’s nothing this world can give you that is

the equivalent of your life, your soul.

Don’t be ashamed of this message of the cross.

It will prevail when this world comes to an end

and only the glory of God with the angels remains.”

8. I’ve been thinking this week, that it’s much harder to see a cross as ours when it’s a cross of corporate sin or greed.

When it’s systemic sin that oppresses others but benefits me.

Our culture is one of denial, blame, and indifference

when it comes the epidemics of mass shootings,

opioids and even our own political polarization.

We cry and wring our hands for awhile and then go about our lives hoping these problems will disappear.

We blame one another instead of moving forward with compromises. We look at the issues and say,

“What a mess,” assuming there’s not much we can do

and shrug it off.

Jesus, who took on all of the sin and suffering of this world to redeem it, does not want us weighed down by helplessness in the face of evil, sin, and death.

He wants us to pick up what’s in front of us and keep moving.

To keep following him in the way of self-denial,

responsibility, and love.

9. When I was little, my mother, a naturalist, would make each of us

pick up trash on the side of the road or on mountain trails.

We’d complain, “I didn’t leave that there.”

She’d reply, “But if you live on this earth and want it to be

a healthy place, pick up the trash that is in front of you anyway.” We never got all of it up, but there was something empowering

about picking up even the one or two pieces closest to us

and putting them in a trash can.

10. In the face of these bigger issues that paralyze us,

we can start by picking up responsibility for one problem

close to us if for no other reason than we live here

and want this world to be healthier.

One of the victims of the shooting in Florida was a Jewish man,

Scott Biegel, a first-year geography teacher.

He had a sense of corporate responsibility.

He had already done enough—he’d hidden his students in his classroom and locked the door.

He unlocked again it to let in some terrified stragglers

and was killed as he tried to re-lock the door.

He has been called a hero by those he saved,

but his family insists he was a hero all along

on the ordinary days of his life.

He’d practiced living a life of self-denial, responsibility, and love.

Some outspoken teenagers in Florida have dedicated themselves

to living lives of meaning and relevance

in the wake of the shooting.

They have spoken quite openly about our corporate responsibility

for making sure school shootings do not happen again.

When one senior in high school, Emma Gonzalez, was told

that she should stop speaking out and take the time to grieve,

she said, “This is the way I have to grieve…

I have to make sure that everybody knows

that this isn’t something that is allowed to happen.”

11. Jesus models living a life of risk, responsibility and love.

He gives us power to follow him in living that way as well.

I have seen this congregation embrace costly discipleship;

Your walking the way of the cross together is as beautiful

to behold as this grandma Jill cross.

It has been a privilege to preach and serve among you at Good Shepherd from just before the 2016 election until now.

Walking with you through this time of polarization and finger-pointing has strengthened me and given me confidence

to pick up what I can and follow Jesus.

We may not agree on how to move past impasses in our society,

but it is a start to kneel here together

and admit that we cannot save ourselves.

To confess our sins and to take responsibility for our share

in the brokenness of our world.

To put Jesus ahead of our self-serving interests.

This congregation has a true humility about it.

You have learned the hard way to drop anything you’re holding onto

take up the cross, and get behind Jesus.

You daily chose self-denial over denial, responsibility over blame,

and love over indifference or pettiness.

12. So, we go out into the world and rededicate ourselves

to living lives of meaning, passion, and relevance.

There’s nothing easy about the way of the cross.

There’s no way to avoid suffering and death.

But the good news is: We follow one who promises to lead us through the worst of human experience into new life.

He will not leave us alone.

So let’s drop whatever we’re holding onto, grab our cross,

and get behind Jesus.

Amen.