

Uncomfortable Faith: Uncomfortable Cross  
Mark 8:34  
St. Mark's & St. James UCC ~ August 9, 2020  
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I have in my office a number of decorative crosses of beautifully finished wood and colorful epoxy with meaningful words etched along the transverse or median length of the cross. And I have several crosses I wear along with my robe and stole or sometimes just as part of my day.

But, truth be told, these crosses are somewhat misleading. They do just what Charles Spurgeon cautions against when he said:

*Hide not the offense of the cross, lest you make it of none effect. The angles and corners of the gospel are its strength: to pare (strip, trim, whittle) them off is to deprive it of power. Toning down is not the increase of strength, but the death of it.*

These crosses, in the very beauty of their making, give the illusion of something other than what we in our hearts know to be true. That one day:

On a hill, far away. Stood an old rugged cross. It wasn't polished or colored for decoration. Any words of encouragement carved upon those limbs were not those of: love, strength or character.

This graying, splintering, rugged and cracked old cross was the emblem of suffering and shame. It was here that our dearest and best ~ for the rest of the world, a world filled with sinners, out of touch with God, lost in their sin, was slain. It was here that Jesus gave his life for those who had not and could not earn it themselves.

It is this old, broken, rugged cross that so much of our world despises

This is the cross, that calls to me.

This is the rugged cross that I hold true.

This is the splintered, cracked and bloodstained wood that holds shame and reproach in bold question asking each of us, will you bear this? Will you carry this? Will you take your cross and join with the He who has already done so?

You might say, Pastor, sounds like you are telling me that if I'm going to be a follower of Jesus that I am going to either be put on a cross to die; or if not that then made to feel really, really uncomfortable – possibly filled with shame and reproach; and if not that, then at the very least that this road of Christianity will be hard, perhaps cruel and maybe others will be filled with contempt and disdain for me. Pastor is that what you are saying? Because if it is, I'm not sure I want to take up this journey.

And I would say I hear you. But, let's be clear. It's not me (the Pastor) saying this is what the road is like. It's Jesus saying. Now, I'm not passing the buck. Because I believe these words to be true. But I want to give credit to the original speaker. Jesus.

To say everything uncomfortable about Christianity begins and ends with the cross – would seem a stretch. This was true, even for those in Jesus inner circle. Just after Jesus told his disciples that he was the long-awaited Messiah he next said:

*“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.”*

*Suffer? Rejection? Death?*

But Jesus wasn't finished. As if that wasn't enough he charged and challenged his disciples saying: *“If any would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.”*

Want to follow Jesus? Meet him at the foot of the cross.

Want to be a follower of Christ? Join him at the cross.

Want to be a Christian? Abandon comfort and endure suffering. Lose your life to save it.

Isn't that foolishness? At least in the eyes of the world.

The gospel of our country is one of plenty, plus more.

The gospel of the cross will never be popular because it humbles our pride.

It champions weakness and the least and the last.

But, you and I know that for many of us today our commitment to follow Christ doesn't mean death by beheading; or being nailed across two pieces of wood. So, denying ourselves must mean something else today. And there are many "*deaths*" it could mean. But this morning I want to talk about this in particular:

We Americans are a people who thrive on independence, freedom of choice, and being our own boss. We love having the opportunities and abilities to work our way up the career ladder; taking charge of our own lives. We are a DIY nation, self-made, unregulated, Freedom Fries!

We live by mantras like, "Be who you want to be"

    "Follow Your Dreams"

        "Find Yourself"

            "Express Yourself"

                "If you can Dream it, You can Be it"

But as much as we want to have complete control over our lives, following Jesus means we have to give up or surrender our will to him.

This may be one of the hardest things we will ever have to do.

Jesus is Lord. And I am not.

Jesus is in charge. And I am not.

Jesus calls me to change my life. I don't call Jesus to change his expectations.

All this to say, Christianity isn't about "your best life right now"

Some do approach Christianity with a "What's in it for me?" attitude.

The preacher wants to promote his or her latest book from the pulpit.

The musician wants to play his or her song and hear the applause.

Worship designer wants pictures of their set in every newsletter, bulletin and Facebook page.

And everything the church does is for the comfort of the congregation.

But in relationships and in faith it's about commitment rather than consumerism; finding ways to serve rather than being served; filling a need rather than finding a niche. This is uncomfortable, but it is a crucial cost of following Christ.

Perhaps more than anywhere else, we feel that impact directly upon our pride. The cross of Christ gives insider access to prostitutes, tax collectors, thieves, murderers, addicts, followers of Christ and non-followers of Christ as much as it does to the religious elites.

The dying thief on the cross, next to Jesus, did nothing good to save himself, yet Jesus welcomed him into his kingdom. Some find this offensive.

In 2007 a Korean film *Secret Sunshine* winning a number of accolades captures the scandal of grace. Shin-ae goes to visit her son's murderer in prison. Her son was 10. Shin-ae was newly converted to Christianity and wanted to forgive him. She doesn't have to go see him, but she wants to see him face-to-face and see first-hand the look on his face when she gives him the gift of forgiveness.

When she sits down on the other side of the glass, the prisoner is unexpectedly happy, joyful, peaceful. "You look better than I expected." She tells him, before explaining the peace, love, and new life she'd found in God had led her to forgive him.

She's so happy to feel God's love and grace. And wanted to share that love by coming to visit her son's murderer. But then, the prisoner, the killer of her son, tells her:

"Since I came here, I have accepted God in my heart. The Lord has reached out to this inner"

"Is that so?" Shin-ae asked. "It's good you have found God."

The convicted murderer continued, "Yes I'm so grateful. God reached out to a sinner like me. He made me kneel to repent of my sins. And God has absolved me of them.

This is where Shin-ae begins to lose it.

"God... has forgiven your sins..."

“Yes... And I have found peace. Now I start and end each day with prayer. I always pray for you, Ms. Lee. I’ll pray for you until I die.”

Shin-ae leaves. Overcome by the horror of an idea she had never considered – God beat her to the punch in forgiving her son’s killer. How can she, a law-abiding, God fearing, good citizen *and* a convicted child-killer be on the same level in terms of God’s grace?

That’s just wrong! Isn’t it?

That the sufficiency and availability of God’s grace to all people is fine as long as it covers me; until it covers someone, I don’t think it should cover. Someone who has hurt me deeply and personally.

We are prideful creatures. Right living puts us in better standing in God’s eyes than,

Terrorists, rapists, and pedophiles.

We want God to reward us for being good and punish others for being bad.

There has to be value attributed to *earning* and *deserving* God’s grace, right?

And yet are we not told, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*” And the true value of any gift is not in the having of it, but in the giving of it. And should we be the ones to tell God who to give the gift to?

Far from the symbol of shame, the cross is a symbol of victory for those who believe. It is a symbol of triumph – of life over death; of resurrection over crucifixion; of light over dark and it serves to remind us that we too are triumphant in Jesus.

The cross is victory over sin and it destroys the one who holds power over death. It sets men and women free from sin and breaks the bonds of death which holds us.

When Jesus said, it is finished ~ it was.

Uncomfortable. Ugly. Bloody. Rugged. Shameful the cross may be. But it is sufficient. It is everything.

Thanks be to God.