

“Pick up your cross?” – Rev. Jennifer Adams

March 8, 2009 – Lent 2B

So here’s what I wanted to do this morning. I wanted to be able to get up here at sermon time and explain to you exactly what “take up your cross and follow me” means. I’ve gone through various understandings of that phrase myself, figured I probably wasn’t alone in that and thought that maybe 2009 was the year I’d be able to get up and somewhat definitively lay it all out for us in thoughtful, pastoral, theologically-coherent terms.

But here’s my problem. My crosses aren’t that clear. It’s not that definitive in my own life, so can I offer that to you? Here are some of the things that happen to me as I consider “my cross.”

Every now and then, I’ll begin something that I’m sure is the burden I am supposed to bare for the good of humanity and possibly my own salvation and so I pick it up and I walk with it for awhile. But then after not too long, I come to the realization that actually, it wasn’t my burden at all but someone else’s, and not only have I taken on that person’s responsibility, but in doing so, I’ve failed to pick up my own.

Or I interpret an *annoying* part of my life as “my cross to bear.” You’ve heard this approach before where that nagging relative or acquaintance or bothersome life situation becomes some sort of faithful task you’ve been given by God for your own good and the good of whomever it is that is “your personal cross.” And so you go along satisfied with yourself that you are doing faithful, self-sacrificial work simply by allowing this person to be in your presence on a regular basis. Until your eyes open in new ways and you realize that’s not a cross it’s a human being who gets on your nerves or pushes your buttons and you decide not to let it get to you so much and you go on with your days. And if things turn out as they often do, that person actually teaches you something you need to know rather than actively bringing about your personal crucifixion.

Or sometimes I get a really, really huge vision in my head of a cross that stands down my own road a bit and I faithfully, attentively move towards it one step at a time and I allow it’s weight to

settle into my soul long before I even arrive there. I imagine the struggle and the pain and the personal sacrifice it will cost me, but by the time I arrive it's not nearly as big as it looked and it doesn't require my death and actually, often, it turns out to be my own imagination that put the cross in my road in the first place. So, by the time I actually arrive at the point in the road where I thought the cross would be, there isn't anything there but more road.

Those are just some of the things that happen that make me wonder if I really know what a cross is, what my cross is. And so I wrestle with what crosses look like for me and for you right now, today.

And when I ask those questions, really ask those questions of myself, the first thing I become aware of is my privilege. The fact that this is a hard question for me to answer says that while my life is not without its challenges or pain, I don't face my own death-by-cross on a regular basis and that's just the truth of it. I'm guessing that for those who sit huddled a corner in Gaza or in a corner in Israel or in refugee camps in Kenya or in the Sudan this is an easier question to answer, and they probably don't have a whole lot of energy to spend wrestling with the possibilities. And so first, when I ask this question about my cross, I get perspective. And I am humbled. Which doesn't mean that we don't have pain and suffering here at Grace Church. I am very aware that self-sacrifice happens here among you all the time; it just means that I want to take the sermon in a different direction today.

And so then I wonder if privilege itself (economic privilege, educational, first-world, ethnic, racial, all of these privileges) is what I have to sacrifice, what I have to offer for the sake of my own salvation and the good of humanity. And then I think about stripping away some of the layers of my own life that separate me from the crosses that others in our world bear on a daily basis. Not just so that I can have a cross too, but so that some of my let-go layers can be used for other purposes: to help keep others warm or fed or safe or freed or, at least to help their stories be better known. Even taking away the layer that protects me from those true every-day stories would be a faithful and needed step that I believe has something to do with the cross of Christ.

And so... then I wonder if that's how the crosses eventually disappear once and for all. Maybe the divine mathematics of this are actually more simple than they are mysterious. The goal of course is not to create enough crosses so that everyone gets one, but to create a world where there aren't any crosses at all. And maybe if I shed some of what protects me from the crosses of the world, others would be removed from them. And maybe if I picked up the cross that is truly mine, others would have fewer on their backs. Maybe if we who are privileged in many ways, exposed our lives to those who are facing crucifixion in this world, sacrificed something of our own protections, we'd clear the crosses on the roads of others too. If nothing else, it couldn't hurt to try. Or it will hurt to try, but it will be hurt for good faithful, loving reasons.

And so today, March 8, 2009, I think our crosses are about us and not about us. And I believe that letting some things go might be part of what picking up my cross looks like. And I challenge myself and all of you to strip a layer or two -- really see the crosses that exist in our world and pray on a day and dream on a day and work for a day when there aren't any crosses at all.

Amen.