

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My dad was the king of dad jokes before dad jokes were “the thing.” Not only did he tell corny jokes that made you groan (but were funny), he told them over and over. I remember well one particular joke. My dad’s name was Addley, which may explain why he liked to tell this joke (you’ll understand in a minute).

A little boy came home with his parents from church one Sunday. He seemed a little depressed, so his mother asked him if something happened in Sunday School class that he would like to talk about. He told his mother, “Well, we were singing songs and the teacher made us sing about a poor bear named Gladly who needed glasses and I can’t stop thinking about him. She said he was cross-eyed and I feel bad for him.”

The mother couldn’t understand why the teacher would teach such a song in Sunday School, so she called her. To the mother’s amazement, the teacher said she only taught the children hymns that morning. Then the teacher began laughing and said, “I know what he’s talking about! We learned the hymn ‘Gladly the Cross I’d Bear.’”

Even though there is not a hymn called “Gladly the Cross I’d Bear,” it’s still a funny joke. The line actually comes from an 1890 hymn by Fanny Crosby, who wrote more than 8,000 hymns and gospel songs. The third verse of “Keep Thou My Way, O Lord” says:

*Keep Thou my all, hide my life in Thine;
O let Thy sacred light over my pathway shine;
Kept by Thy tender care, gladly the cross I’d bear;
Hear Thou and grant my prayer, hide my life in Thine.¹*

Simon Peter certainly didn’t tell Jesus “gladly the cross I’d bear.” Instead, when Jesus “began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised,” Peter pulled Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, as you might try to set a child straight. We don’t know Peter’s reasons for talking to Jesus this way. Maybe he couldn’t wrap his head around a Messiah who would suffer and die. Maybe the thought of his friend and teacher suffering and dying horrified him. Maybe he put two and two together and realized, “If they do that to Jesus, I might be next!” Maybe he thought all of these things. No matter what he was thinking, Peter said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” and not “Gladly the cross I’d bear.”

Six verses earlier, as we heard last Sunday, Jesus commended Simon for his declaration of faith and said, “I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Now Jesus turns and rebukes Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” If that sounds

vaguely familiar, it's probably because you remember Jesus saying the same thing to the devil when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. "Turn these stones into bread! Jump! Worship me!" the devil said, and Jesus responded, "Away with you, Satan!" The devil was tempting Jesus to be a different kind of Messiah than he was called to be. He dangled the charms and lures of the world in front of him — "Serve yourself. Dazzle others so they'll follow you. Sell your soul for the things of this world." But Jesus resisted — "Get behind me, Satan!"

Peter tempted Jesus in the same way — "You can't be that kind of Messiah, Jesus. Messiahs don't get nailed to crosses and die. That doesn't make any sense." But Jesus sets Peter straight and calls him a "stumbling block," which is another way of saying, "Peter, you're tempting me to sin. You may be the Rock, but right now you're a rock that might make me stumble." Doesn't that sound a lot like what Hope read from Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians? "For Jews desire signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

This wasn't the first time Simon Peter had heard Jesus tell him to "get behind me." Interestingly, Jesus uses the same language in a positive way when he calls people to follow him. When Jesus saw Simon and Andrew his brother by the Sea of Galilee, he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Actually he said, "Come behind me . . ." And after Peter rebuked Jesus because he talked about suffering and dying, Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Actually he said, "If any want to come after me, let take up their cross and follow me."

"Get behind me!" We need to hear Jesus say that to us both ways.

When we try to get out in front of Jesus and go our own way because his demands just seem too hard, we need to hear him say, "Get behind me, that's where you belong!" When we wonder how to be Jesus' faithful disciples, we need to hear him say, "Get behind me, that's where you belong!" But it's that next part — "take up your cross and follow me" — that is so often the stumbling block in our trying to follow behind Jesus.

What does it mean to bear your cross? We easily say, "Well, I guess that's just my cross to bear" when we talk about an overbearing boss or a difficult co-worker or the pain of inherited osteoarthritis or a broken down air conditioner in August in southeastern North Carolina or . . . whatever. But that's not what Jesus is talking about. Listen again to Jesus' call to follow him: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life **for my sake** will find it." (Matthew 16:25) A difficult boss, an irritating co-worker, or physical discomfort may be difficult to put up with, but they are part of being human, not because we declare our faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and try to follow after him.

We Presbyterians are not known for making "the sign of the cross" in our personal devotions, prayers, and worship — "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit." However, Jesus calls us to make "the sign of the cross" in how we live as his followers. As I shared in the Children's Sermon, the symbol of our Presbyterian

Church (U.S.A.) declares what we believe, front and center. All of the other symbols make up the cross, which shapes and defines who we are as people who follow after Jesus Christ.

According to tradition, all of Jesus' disciples, except perhaps for John, were martyred for their faith (but not all by crucifixion). Some of them literally "took up their cross" and followed the way Jesus walked. That doesn't mean that you and I are literally going to be nailed to a cross. For that matter, "taking up our cross" for Jesus doesn't necessarily mean we are going to die physically because of our faith, although many Christians have and continue to die for their faith. Jesus doesn't even suggest that we ought to go looking for ways to suffer on his behalf. Sad to say, that can easily lead to self-righteousness ("Look how much I've suffered for Jesus!"), which is the exact opposite of denying ourselves and taking up our crosses.

Instead, making "the sign of the cross" in how we live is a matter of priorities. Frederick Dale Bruner has said, "It is possible to be Christ-centered but not cross-centered." That's what Peter was there in Caesarea Philippi. He got the WHO of Jesus right — "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," but he got the HOW of Jesus all wrong — "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

In her article called "Defining Moment," Deanna Langle writes, "The way of the cross is the way of faith. . . of claiming life and truth in the face of everything that tells us not to. This path of the cross is never lived outside of God's love. We are not to forget who we are, but rather to figure out who we are through Jesus and as people carrying the name of Jesus."²

No, we Presbyterians may not make "the sign of the cross" with our hands in worship and prayer, but we are called to make "the sign of the cross" in everything we do and in how we live. Making the sign of the cross means committing ourselves to follow Jesus, no matter where his way might lead us. Making the sign of the cross means standing up against powers and ways of the world that deny the claims Jesus puts on our lives as Lord and Savior. As one person has said, making the sign of the cross means being willing to speak up for those people the world would crucify. Last week's sermon ended with the question "How will people know?" our answer to Jesus's question "Who do you say that I am?" Today we hear Jesus call us, "Come after me, follow me, make the sign of the cross in everything you do."

"All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died. O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, your death has brought us life eternally. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name."

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you call us to turn away from ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow you — to find our lives by giving them up to your greater purpose. Open our eyes to your presence, open our ears to your call, open our hearts to one another; then send us into the world to live and work as your faithful disciples. Amen.

NOTES

¹Some versions of the hymn have “gladly the cross I’ll bear” while others have “gladly the cross I’d bear.”

²Deanna Langle, “Defining Moment,” August 23, 2005 at www.christiancentury.org.