

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

Luke 18:31-34

March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A LUKAN LENT GRASPING 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.

In 1969, Swiss-American psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published her book *On Death and Dying* which became an international bestseller. Perhaps the most famous and enduring portion of that book is her division of grief into five stages. The five stages are: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. Over the last fifty years, this model of grief has been applied to many different kinds of loss, not just death and dying. And, as you all too well know, grief doesn't follow this model in a nice, linear progression headed toward a definite ending point.

According to an article describing the Kübler-Ross Model of Grief, in Stage 1: Denial, "It's not unusual to respond to the intense and often sudden feelings by pretending the loss or change isn't happening. Denying it gives you time to more gradually absorb the news and begin to process it. This is a common defense mechanism and helps numb you to the intensity of the situation."¹

It's always dangerous to apply 20th and 21st centuries models onto 1st century people. You run the risk of what's called "psychologizing the text." But think about the disciples' reaction when Jesus told them how he "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Luke 9:22) Jesus told them that not just once, not twice, but three times – and all three times, Luke reports that the disciples "understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what he said." (Luke 18:34)

In a classic case of denial stemming from getting unimaginable bad news, when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Of course, Peter gave the right answer; he made the profoundest profession of faith. But "Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:29-31) The gospel says, "He said all this quite openly," sort of like another time when Jesus said to his disciples, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." (Luke 9:44)

And do you remember Peter's reaction? It sounds like denial – "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him." (Mark 8:32) At the risk of putting words into Peter's mouth, can't you imagine him telling Jesus, "Don't talk like that, Jesus! I don't

understand what you're talking about. That could never happen to you. I don't want to hear about you suffering and dying"?

So why couldn't the disciples "understand about all these things"? Why couldn't they "grasp what was said"? How much plainer could Jesus have made it for them? "We're going up to Jerusalem and I'm going to suffer and die and be raised again." One Bible scholar has written, "It is almost inconceivable that anyone could fail to understand the plain words of [Jesus – 'for he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.']" "Here," the scholar writes, "lies the real difficulty standing in the way of faith."²

The apostle Paul said the same thing in his first letter to the Corinthian Christians: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . . . 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 1:18, 22-24)

Maybe the disciples didn't get it and couldn't grasp the cross, because it just wasn't in their frame of reference. "You're the Messiah!" Peter had confessed for all of them. "And messiahs certainly don't get handed over, mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, and killed. What good is that kind of messiah? And what's this talk about being raised up on the third day? Maybe some time in the future, in the general resurrection, on that great getting-up morning! But on the third day – what are you talking about, Jesus?" [Not to mention the fear and uncertainty and grief and sadness that must have confronted the disciples if they even let themselves think about what Jesus was telling them.]

But there is a troublesome little phrase at the end of today's gospel story: "in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." (Luke 18:34) In my sermon preparation this week, I came across an interesting phrase that describes the disciples' dilemma: "human failure and divine purpose." We can't let the disciples completely off the hook for not understanding what Jesus was talking about. After all, they were real-life, flesh and blood folks just like you and me, full of fears and doubts and questions and expectations and ideas about "the way things ought to be."

On the other hand, believing and trusting in Jesus and following him – especially when it means going to Jerusalem and going to the cross – involves more than just understanding what Jesus says on an intellectual level. In *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, Donald G. Miller noted, "This was all beyond the understanding of the disciples **at this moment** [emphasis added]. 'They did not grasp what was said' (vs. 34) It would take Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost to fill it with meaning."³ In other words, as they say, "you have to go through Good Friday to get to Easter Sunday!"

The disciples didn't know the end of the story as they made the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. But, as we make our Lenten journey through Luke with Jesus to Jerusalem, we **do know** the end of the story. The glory and celebration of Easter Sunday don't diminish the grief and suffering of Good Friday, but they reassure us and

give us hope that the Messiah who was nailed to the cross on Friday is the risen, living Lord we worship and serve today.

But how often do we not grasp the cross? It's not as if we don't understand the words that Jesus says – "Love your enemies. Seek first the kingdom of God. Take up your cross and follow me." Too often, though, it's as if we're in denial. We'd rather adorn the Easter cross with spring flowers than pick up our cross and follow Jesus where he leads us.

There is a word of grace on this journey. Why in the world would the disciples continue on the journey to Jerusalem after hearing what Jesus had to say? But they did. They didn't get it all right. They argued along the way about who was the greatest. Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied Jesus. They all abandoned Jesus in his time of need. But, after Good Friday and Easter Sunday, "after he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." (John 2:22) And Jesus commissioned them and sent them out to continue the work he began.

Jesus still speaks the word of the cross to us today and sends us out to continue the work he began. During this Lenten season, as we anticipate our Easter celebration in three weeks, let us grasp the cross and its meaning for our lives as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ.

In 1653, Sigismund von Birken of Nuremberg, Germany wrote a hymn called "Jesus, I Will Ponder." Perhaps the lyrics will help us grasp the cross of Jesus today:

Jesus, I will ponder now On Thy holy Passion; With Thy Spirit me endow For such meditation. Grant that I in love and faith May the image cherish Of Thy suffering, pain, and death That I may not perish.

Make me see Thy great distress, Anguish, and affliction, Bonds and stripes and wretchedness And Thy crucifixion; Make me see how scourge and rod, Spear and nails, did wound Thee, How for man Thou diedst, O God, Who with thorns had crowned Thee.

Yet, O Lord, not thus alone Make me see Thy Passion, But its cause to me make known And its termination. Ah! I also and my sin Wrought Thy deep affliction; This indeed the cause hath been Of Thy crucifixion.

Grant that I Thy Passion view With repentant grieving Nor Thee crucify anew By unholy living. How could I refuse to shun Ev'ry sinful pleasure Since for God's only Son Suffered without measure?

If my sins give me alarm And my conscience grieve me, Let Thy cross my fear disarm, Peace of conscience give me. Grant that I may trust in Thee And Thy holy Passion. If His Son so loveth me, God must have compassion.

Grant that I may willingly Bear with Thee my crosses, Learning humbleness of Thee, Peace mid pain and losses. May I give Thee love for love! Hear me, O my Savior, That I may in heaven above Sing Thy praise forever.

Let us pray: Eternal God, holy and faithful, what can we give in return for our life? Teach us to take up the cross of Christ with grateful hearts and humble spirits, offering all for the sake of the gospel, so that we may receive life in fullness; through Christ, who is coming in glory. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “What You Should Know About the Stages of Grief,” at www.healthline.com.

² Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 288.

³ Donald G. Miller, *The Layman’s Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke*, Balmer H. Kelly, ed. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), 131.