

“Is it Possible to Embrace the Cross without Glorifying Suffering?”

Mark 8:31-38

Andrew Foster Connors

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Jesus is so frustrating. The stuff he says is sometimes offensive, the actions he takes don't always make sense. His behavior is erratic, his spiritual life chaotic, and his choices inconsistent. I think that's probably what keeps me coming back to him even with all other choices available in the marketplace of spirituality today. I know that's not necessarily a popular opinion today. There are more people interested in being spiritual but not religious. People who want spiritual life freed from the shackles of church and doctrine. I don't want to be completely dismissive of those attempts, certainly not of the people trying to live that way. A big part of me also wants what some local colleagues call “church without all the crap.” It's just that the spirituality that gets produced often seems more like another “commodity,” in the words of Will Willimon “produced for our private consolation.” “What passes today for ‘spirituality,’” Willimon writes, “was invented to silence the church in order to make way for the omnipotent state and its capitalist economy. The government has found that Christians (or any believer who thinks that his or her God might be more important than the state) are easier to manage if they will confine their faith to something within.”¹

I think that's why I keep coming back to Jesus even though he frustrates the heck out of me. It's the troubling stuff that makes God interesting. It's the confusing stuff that prevents me from getting too settled in my ideas about God. It's the challenging, even offensive stuff that keeps me agitated enough to keep questioning this “Way” that Jesus is promoting. In today's text Jesus interrogates the disciples in private – “Who do you say that I am?” Peter says “you're the Messiah,” answering correctly (8:29). Jesus then sternly orders his his disciples not to tell anyone who he is (8:30). At this point Jesus says the Human One² must suffer greatly, be rejected by the religious authorities, and be killed before rising from the dead. When Peter protests, Jesus calls him Satan, then gathers the crowd and tells what I'm guessing is a confused bunch of people that they better not be ashamed of him and his words. It's confounding. If I was Peter I'd be like, “Look, you just told us not to tell anyone who you are, now you're telling everyone that we better not be ashamed of you?”

It's the cross bit that's even more challenging. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my

¹ William H. Willimon, “Spiritual But Not Religious,” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2012, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 10-12.

² I prefer the inclusive language translation's “Human One” to “Son of Man.” However, it is important to know that this phrase “son of man” is lifted from the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament, specifically the book of Daniel.

sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35). It seems like a fairly straightforward teaching. Deny yourself and do what God wants you to do instead.

It's what a lot of Christians have been trained to do during Lent. Give up something. Deny yourself chocolate or alcohol or sugar or coffee – basically anything that makes life pleasurable. Make yourself semi-miserable and call it Christian discipline. Ched Myers calls that understanding "bourgeois exegesis" – taking the severity of Jesus' words and spiritualizing them into personal asceticism: a clever copout. If I give up chocolate I'm taking up my cross, so I can feel good about do what Jesus asked me to do. Myers points out that the cross was a political and military punishment, carried out by the Romans on the lower classes – people who had no rights. Denying yourself isn't an invitation to private spirituality. It's a call to live in God's way even at the cost of death. Myers calls it "a test of loyalty."³ Will you be loyal to Jesus' program or the program of fear pushed by the imperial state? Will you be loyal to Jesus' way of self-giving that is so threatening to the state's program of self-protection? Will you be loyal to Jesus' economy of abundance or to the state's zero sum game of "if I share with you there won't be enough for me?"

Delores Williams, a Womanist theologian argues that the cross has often meant oppressive things for black women. Black women's experience includes the forced surrogacy of the slave institutions of America. Since the mainline Protestant's traditional notion of the cross says that Jesus redeems us by dying on a cross in the place of humans, taking human sin on himself, then Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate. If black women accept this idea of redemption, Williams ventures, they risk accepting the exploitation that this surrogacy brings. "God did not intend the surrogacy roles that [black women] have been forced to perform. God did not intend the defilement of their bodies as white men put them in the place of white women to provide sexual pleasure for white men during the slavocracy. This was rape. Rape is defilement, and defilement means wanton desecration. . . the cross is a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social relations and arrangements sanctioned by the status quo."⁴ For Williams, there is nothing redemptive about the cross. "Black women cannot forget the cross," she writes, "but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement."⁵

Shelly Rambo in an excellent book that McKenna Llewellyn has recommended to many of us argues that we should focus less on suffering and more on trauma. "Suffering is what, in time, can be integrated into one's understanding of the world" she says. "Trauma is what is not integrated in time; it is the difference

³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (New York: Orbis), 2002, pp. 245-249.

⁴ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of womanist God-Talk*, (New York: Orbis), 1993, 166-167.

⁵ *Ibid*, 167.

between a closed and an open wound. Trauma is an open wound.”⁶ For those of us who survive trauma, she argues, the experience is close to death, but death that hasn’t fully ended. It’s death that persists. “The experience of survival,” she writes, “is one in which life, as it once was, cannot be retrieved.” Yet, “the promise of life ahead cannot be envisioned.” This “middle” as she calls it is a “perplexing place of survival.” This is the place where redemption is possible.⁷

I don’t know if it’s possible to reconcile these three understandings of the cross of Christ but I hear echoes of all three of them in the world today. The gun debate that’s taking place this week is evidence to me of Ched Myers’ argument that Jesus’ way sometimes demands a choice. In my opinion, the NRA’s starting point – that the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun – is simply not compatible with Jesus’ starting place of community that begins with me putting my neighbor’s wellbeing as important as my own. A nation with 270 million guns does not need more. As a Christian I cannot see compatibility between Jesus’ vision of the beloved community and the NRA’s vision of the armed nation. We have to make a choice.

Delores Williams challenges us to remember that theologies of suffering have too often been used as tools of oppression. Jesus doesn’t call us to suffering, but to a different kind of living. Denying ourselves isn’t a call to masochism. It is a call to embrace a vision that’s larger than ourselves, that trusts in the possibility of abundance for everyone knowing that there are powerful forces who are arrayed against that vision. As Firmin DeBrabander, professor at MICA pointed out this week, the people likely to benefit from the security promises of the NRA are defense related corporations – who have already lined up to sell bulletproof backpacks for students, bulletproof whiteboards and clipboards for teachers, bulletproof blankets that children can take to feel safe, and bulletproof armor that can be pulled off the ceilings or walls. The military industrial complex that a Republican President once warned us about – greed that drives us to fear and war for profit. If faith involves suffering it is only because God is not naïve about the length that powers of fear will go to in order to silence voices that dare to challenge those narratives.⁸

And maybe Shelly Rambo’s plea to take seriously the trauma created by the cross – the open wounds that remain in the body of Christ and in us – would have us pay more attention to the public crosses that are wounding too many people in our community right now. Maybe her vision would have us pay more attention to the trauma of those wounds within many of us in our own congregation, and so many in our city who have lived through the trauma of violence, a kind of death that doesn’t end. Maybe taking up your cross is less of a call to suffering and more of a call to

⁶ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), p. 7

⁷ Ibid, 7-8.

⁸ Firmin DeBrabander, “For the NRA, ‘freedom’ means being heavily armed and scared to death,” *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/02/23/for-the-nra-freedom-means-being-heavily-armed-and-scared-to-death/?utm_term=.7094f5659468

embrace the middle place of survival in between death and life we can't yet imagine. To stay closer to those who have been lifted up on the crosses of our mean-spirited immigration policies, the children surviving trauma in our streets, those caught up in criminalization of addiction, even the earth bearing the scars of our own wounding so that we find ways to treat those wounds, to dress them, to nurture them toward as much healing as we can give, as much healing as can receive.

We say in Lent that it's a time when we journey toward the cross but I'm afraid the church has mostly stopped contemplating what that actually means. Because we've stopped contemplating what that means I meet people all the time like a new visitor to our church who told me, "I think I want to be here but I'm not sure I believe the church's teaching that Jesus died somehow to appease God's wrath." We've received pithy statements from on high about Jesus dying for our sins without too much reflection on the truth that the wounded often come from below. Like the man one of my daughters and I ran into two weeks outside the Chipotle on Charles Street. He asked us for money but I didn't have any cash so he asked for lunch. He told me he'd been on the street just 6 weeks. "My girlfriend and I lost our baby at just 2 months of age," he told me. "Then our relationship fell apart and I lost my job at the same time. They always tell you that you can get a job at McDonald's," he said, "but I don't have an address now and you can't get a job without an address." There are too many like him – thrown away by systems larger than any one of us. Thankfully Jesus hasn't forgotten about them or any of us who still carry our wounds. I think that's why I keep coming back to him. I think that's why I keep coming back to this odd God who doesn't live outside of our lives, outside of our world, outside of our pain, but chooses to get close to our pain – to transform it and us. The crosses that we carry – it's where God's power can be found.