
Which Cross Will You Choose?

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Mark 8: 31-38

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

This phrase from the gospel today is one that is often difficult and commonly misconstrued. We are not sure what we are supposed to be denying in ourselves. And we have a hard time figuring out which cross is ours to take up.

To further complicate our hearing is the common expression you've probably already thought of since I started speaking. "Well, this is just my cross to bear." It is used so commonly and so flippantly that it is almost impossible for us to hear the words of Jesus with first century ears.

The website "About.com" in its English as a second language section defines the expression as "something you must do even though you do not like or want to do it." The example they then give is "I'm afraid that your chores are just your cross to bear" as a helpful example. I found a dieter's blog that equated her inability to put down a potato chip as "simply her cross to bear." She ended her entry by asking what ours was? Cheese? Chocolate?

We might consider our annoying neighbors, a committee meeting, or bad traffic to somehow qualify for that expression. That modern theologian Greg Allman of the Allman brothers tells us describing a broken relationship, "I'll live on and I'll be strong, cause it just aint my cross to bear."

On the flip side, we can misuse the term to describe the most awful suffering imaginable. When terrible things happen we may think we are simply required to struggle with the weight and not complain. After all this is probably our personally selected cross to take up. If God has chosen it for us, are we allowed to say it simply seems too heavy?

We look at others and sometimes give thanks that we have not been asked to take up theirs. We hear of devastating diagnoses, senseless deaths, irreversible financial calamities, and struggle with why some crosses seem so much heavier than others.

But this is not the heart of Jesus' message to us. Taking up our cross is not advice about minor inconveniences or obligations. It is certainly not about looking around corners to see what heavy suffering may come at any moment.

Taking up the cross is not about suffering for suffering's sake. That is where we are at a huge disadvantage with 1st century hearers. The hearers of Jesus would have been much more similar to our brothers and sisters in the two-thirds world. Suffering is a given and not to be avoided or glorified. It simply is. It is not a surprise to discover that life is difficult when you live on less than a dollar a day and have to walk untold miles to collect your family's daily allotment of water. But their

lack of income and available water is not somehow the "cross" they have been asked to take up.

As bleak economic reports continue to weigh us down, we find ourselves anxious and concerned. As we try to adjust and find meaning in this new world it may be tempting to interpret this situation as another cross. But to do that is to send us into a frenzy of weight lifting exercise to build our endurance to survive this cross' duration.

We need to be very careful.

As Christians we claim a God of mercy and love. One who was willing to suffer on the cross in radical affiliation with us. This is not a God who then decides to deal out suffering from a pile of crosses in some sort of a cosmic lottery. Where would there be redemption in that?

When we start figuring out how to carry the weight of our lives, we cannot forget who is really in charge of carrying it. We cannot forget the love of Jesus.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." We are promised that as Christians we now have a different way of being in the world. Our lives are so transformed by the love of Jesus that we are now accompanied by that love and eternally grafted into the Body of Christ. It is not about what crosses are laid on us, but which ones we choose to take up for the sake of one another and the world.

This is good news. Rather than being passive individual victims we are transformed into community. If we feel crushed under the weight of our lives, something is wrong. We either have the wrong cross or we need to let Christ and others help to bear its burden.

If you follow entertainment news, you may have noticed an unexpected comeback a week ago. The team of Siegfried and Roy appeared in what was their final performance at a charity benefit. Up until five years ago, the well known performers on the Vegas strip were undeniably successful with their magical illusions and rare animal act. They performed over 5,700 shows at the Mirage before 10.5 million people grossing more than 1.5 billion in ticket sales.

But five and a half years ago what seemed unthinkable happened. During a regular performance, Montecore, a white tiger Roy had raised from a cub, grabbed him by the back of the neck, almost killing him. He was not expected to live. After making it through a series of strokes, Roy went into years of rehabilitation. While he lives, his life will never be the same and Siegfried and Roy's forty year life on the stage has ended.

Throughout this long period of recovery, Siegfried has been at his friend's side encouraging him and caring for him. It is easy to look at this story and see Siegfried as a sort of hero. Someone who when he saw the suffering of his friend, stepped up to bear a share of the burden.

But, that is not how Siegfried characterizes the journey of the past five and a half years. He is now quite open about what was a period of loss and depression for him. He was smiling when the cameras were on, and adrift in most other moments. He had lost the very thing which had given him his identity and passion for more than forty years in an instant. There had been no chance for a good bye and no preparation for this new phase of life with his friend.

He credits his eventual turnaround to the courage that Roy demonstrated. Roy never stopped loving the animals that had given his life meaning. He never believed that his life was dependent only on his performing. Siegfried said in an interview, "It was when Roy was able to stand by my side that I began to have a chance of walking forward."

Roy's courage was a witness to his friend and allowed him to experience his life in a transformed way. What could have remained a moment of senseless suffering for both of them, has yielded a different relationship of depth and love.

Their final performance last week was ten minutes long. They did not speak. It lacked the glitz and perfectly polished choreography of their earlier days. Roy was no longer the athletic powerhouse who could effortlessly enact the illusions that Siegfried imagined.

As they both came on stage, they were cloaked and masked to conceal their identity. To honor one of their well know illusions, two empty glass boxes were on stage. One of the figures was sealed in the box. Both boxes were covered. At the appropriate moment the second figure tapped the first box and the curtain fell. It revealed Montecore, the tiger who had attacked Roy 5 ½ years ago. The second curtain fell and the other box across the stage showed the cloaked figure transported there. As the tiger and the figure emerged from their boxes, the two performers removed their masks. It was now clear that their roles had been reversed. Roy had transported and released Siegfried and the tiger. Siegfried grasped Roy's arms and they left the stage to a standing ovation.

The announcer said, "The spirit of Siegfried and Roy has left the building."

Amen

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