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Text: Mark 8:34-35
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Navigating Turbulent Waters

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ 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.

I have recently experienced emotions I have rarely known. A sense of joy and gratitude continues, but also a new emotion that I can best describe not as fear or anger but as a deep sadness.

As far as I can tell, this sadness does not arise from a change in my disposition or a change in my personal life circumstance. Rather I believe the source of this sadness is a confluence of changes in the world around me. Now as the Buddha’s first noble truth teaches, suffering has always been part of life. But somehow, I recently have this sense of suffering on steroids. The war in Ukraine, the growing crisis of hunger around the world, gun violence, so many unhinged from truth, growing animosity between increasingly polarized factions and the day to day impact of climate change to name just a few that I’m sure impact us all. For me personally I also feel a new level of panic and sorrow as more and more people find themselves unable to find decent affordable housing. The lives of very poor people in our country have always been hard but I feel people reaching a new level of stress and even despair.

I’m not surprised that a new sadness is arising in me. It has, however, become an urgent task for me to explore this new sadness—trying to figure out a way to learn from it and find ways to live fully despite it. You will not, I’m sure, be surprised to hear that I have found myself turning for guidance to the Buddhist and Christian spiritual traditions that have grown ever more important in my life.

Both spiritual traditions share the insight that we must be willing to enter into (rather than run away from) the sadness I’ve described if we hope to know the fullness of life. Our natural instinct, of course, is to get as far away from sadness and suffering as we can. We have so many strategies.

Pushing the suffering of others out of sight. Hardening our hearts to suffering by finding ways to blame those who suffer for the hardships they endure. Escaping suffering and sadness around and within us by overwork, by misuse of drugs or alcohol, by simply not paying attention.

But faith traditions and the best of depth psychology tell us, I think, that accessing the fullness of life in a world filled with suffering requires that we find ways to engage the suffering around us with an open and vulnerable heart—rather than run away from it. The only way out is through. The only way to find a healthy way to live in the face of suffering is to authentically engage with the reality of that suffering.

Each tradition has so much wisdom to share as I try to walk this path of engagement.

Particularly important for me at the moment from the Buddhist tradition is the call to bring a deeper awareness to this sadness I am feeling. Buddhist teaching, for example,

encourages me to bring mindful attention the way emotions such as sadness literally feel in my body. For me this new sadness most often feels like a cloudy/congested feeling in the center of my chest. Somehow focusing on sensations in the body helps to create some space around the sadness making it easier to work with. From there the Buddha gives guidance on observing that emotions like sadness that at first feel like something solid are actually composed of multiple changing thoughts. This practice of breaking down sadness into smaller component parts has also made it easier to work with.

Not surprisingly, however, I turn primarily to the gospels. There are so many insights in these remarkable texts but today I would like to ponder particular wisdom that we find repeated in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Jesus is about to turn toward Jerusalem and clearly knows what is ahead—very turbulent waters and much suffering.

When his followers ask Jesus what they must do in the face of what is ahead, in all three gospels he tells them to “take up their cross”. (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34 and Luke 9:23).

The cross is not only an event of history. The cross, I think, stands for every place within and around us where there is suffering—especially suffering caused by human greed, indifference or hatred. The suffering of the earth, the suffering of war, the suffering of poverty of course. But also all the day-to-day suffering large and small that are part of our experience. The disappointments, the intended or unintended hurts, the losses, the insecurities. All of us can, I am sure, think of way too many crosses we confront every day.

In the call to “take up your cross”, I hear Jesus telling me to respond to my feelings of sadness in the face of suffering by engaging rather than running away from that suffering. Jesus calls on his followers to--Take up—enter into—engage with the cross-like places of suffering around us.

Take up the cross not as a burden but as a doorway into a deeper life. Take up the cross not as a test that requires us to engage all the suffering of the world but rather a call to listen to our hearts and respond where we feel called. Take up the cross not as an obligation but rather as an act of love.

This is very hard to do. But we are not alone as we take up whatever cross calls to us. Being willing to taking up the cross is the start of the process not the end. We get a glimpse of the next step when we remember that Jesus told his disciples to pick up their crosses and FOLLOW ME.

I propose that, follow me, means to let the example of Jesus, the power of life we call Christ and the love of God empower and guide us. Follow me means to reaffirm the remarkable power of love even in the face of suffering. Follow me means to remain confident in our ability to act in ways that heal. Follow me means remaining hopeful based on remembering the resilience of the human soul.

Follow me means having the courage to patiently stand beside each other even when progress is slower than we want. Follow me means believing that new life is always waiting to break forth.

At maybe the deepest level, follow me means courageously committing ourselves to lose one life—a life focused primarily on ourselves, a life driven by ego, and take up another life—a life grounded in a sense of community—a life lived interconnected with all of creation, a life devoted to the thriving of the whole.

Probably the most concrete manifestation of taking up the cross and following Jesus is responding to the suffering of the world with service. Service that takes many forms—offering friendship and encouragement, providing material support where we can, treading more lightly

on the earth, reaching out beyond our normal boundaries. So much of the gospel points in this direction but I think especially this morning of John's version of the last supper where Jesus acts out a profound parable of humble service

From the gospel of John: "Jesus, ...got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him."

Jesus uses their last few hours together to share an ancient symbol of service, hospitality and community by washing the feet of the disciples. Showing what it means to "follow me" even in the shadow of the literal cross ahead of him.

There is a song by Michael Card (Basin and the Towel) that I'd like to share with you as it preaches this text so much better than I ever could.

And the call is to community

In an upstairs room, a parable
Is just about to come alive
And while they bicker about who's best
With a painful glance, He'll silently rise

Their Savior Servant must show them how
Through the will of the water
And the tenderness of the towel

And the call is to community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free
In humility, to take the vow
That day after day we must take up
The basin and the towel

In any ordinary place
On any ordinary day
The parable can live again
When one will kneel and one will yield

Our Savior Servant must show us how
Through the will of the water
And the tenderness of the towel

And the space between ourselves sometimes
Is more than the distance between the stars
By the fragile bridge of the Servant's bow
We take up the basin and the towel

And the call is to community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free
In humility, to take the vow

That day after day we must take up the basin

And the call is to community

The impoverished power that sets the soul free

In humility, to take the vow

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That day after day we must take up

The basin and the towel

The basin and the towel may seem like inadequate tools as we seek to engage whatever cross calls to us. Especially the seemingly small basins and towels we each have at hand. But as Michael Card says, the basin and the towel open a door to a seemingly impoverished power that can set the soul free. A soul not free from sadness but rather a soul freed by the power of love to engage a turbulent world with the compassion and even joy.

Amen