

The Cross of the Christian¹

I'd like to speak to any of us here who are enduring terrible suffering. If your life is happy and full right now, that's great. You might want to listen along in preparation for a time when things aren't so great.

When I talk about terrible suffering, I'm not only talking about a physical ailment, like cancer, or great loss, like bereavement. In fact, you may actually prefer the physical problem if you could only be relieved of what really hurts you. Let me illustrate.

I knew of a legal librarian who married a guy who was kind of dull in dealing with emotions. She always wanted to be swept off her feet. As a little girl she dreamed of her prince coming. But she married the village fool. At 32 it dawned on her that she was never going to have a romance. She grieved that fact. The one thing in life she wanted was never going to happen.

That's not the kind of loss that friends send you a Hallmark card for. No one's going to bring over a casserole and say, "when you're ready to talk, I'll be there for you." I'm talking about the kind of suffering that drives you to pray desperately, "Lord, nothing's changing. Can't you do something? Take my job away, take away the house and lifestyle, take away anything except this. I'm dying here. Lord, I don't think I can stand to go on without this one thing!

¹ This sermon was preached by Douglas DeCelle on August 31, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

If you've prayed like that you know what I'm talking about. It could be your reputation, a relationship, success, a sense of a happy childhood success, a sense of a happy childhood, being accepted

What I'd like to say is that you may be experiencing what Jesus is talking about in your text today. Jesus says that not only will he head to Jerusalem and face a cross, but that each of us, as disciples, will at some point face our own version of the same fate. That little saying about "we all have our cross to bear," is actually a helpful way to look at the pain in our lives.

What I'd like to do is to reflect out loud with you in the time which remains on what it means for you and me, comfortable and safe American Presbyterians, to find, pick up, and carry a cross. How can these words become part of our lives as well. My thoughts resolve into four points:

First: every disciple of Jesus Christ will be confronted by the invitation and necessity to pick up his or her cross. If anyone would come after me, Jesus says, let him follow in the way of the cross. So, we're not talking about the missionaries in Egypt who are in danger of persecution. We're talking about LaGrange Georgia.

Walk through a museum of Christian art or read the life stories of famous Christians. There will be a common theme. There is invariably the presence of suffering. It may be quiet and very private. The suffering may be quite overt, such as the persecution of Christ's witnesses through history.

Have you been following some of the inside information about Mother Theresa's spiritual struggles that has become public in the last year or so? It seems that Mother Theresa endured for most of her life without a sense of God's presence or encouragement. What once for her was a rich sense of Jesus always being near, turned into a desert of spiritual dryness that lasted decades and never left. Mother Theresa accepted the Nobel Prize and was applauded by the whole world, but she lacked the sense of God's applause. And that pained her to depths of her soul.

So, taking up a cross becomes a reality for each of us. It's part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It may not be your reality now, but as Jesus speaks here, it is clear that cross bearing is a part of every disciple's existence.

Second, the cross of the Christian is different and specific for each of us. Maybe our cross is a broken childhood, the loss of a relationship, a personal failure, or a physical ailment. Being an American where religious liberty guards us from the most blatant forms of persecution, means that you and I probably won't be sacrificed through persecution as have many Christians. Nevertheless, there will be ways that we will be confronted by a painful situation which may take from us what may as well be our lives or what gives us life.

I'm recalling the story of the religious brother—a Catholic monk—who found himself embroiled in a controversy with others in his

religious order. Apparently, in all of the give and take of the argument, there were false charges put forth which threatened to mar this monk's reputation permanently. He was infuriated and wanted to fight back with all of his might. But as he prayed he felt God calling him to permit the charges to be made and to do nothing to defend his honor. He later understood the entire incident to be a way of freeing him from the burden of his own self-righteousness and concern for his image in other's eyes. In other words, it just killed him to see his reputation ruined. And in the eyes of his faith, he realized that suffering that loss was the cross that God was asking him to carry.

So the crosses to which you and I are called are different. But they represent what, for us, is life. When we pick up and carry our own special crosses we are permitting our lives to be marked and fundamentally changed.

That brings us to the third point. Why is it that the Christian life always and eventually brings us to a cross? The answer is that through our own cross bearing, God most deeply and profoundly shapes our lives. The holiness and sanctification that is God's destiny for us is only possible through a cross-experience.

In my early years of ministry some of the women of my churches would tell me that they read the inspirational books of Joyce Landorf. Joyce Landorf would tell how Christian women could achieve happiness and fulfillment in their Christian walk, their

relationships, and in service to others. Then, at the zenith of Joyce's career as a celebrity Christian, she got a divorce. Her public largely abandoned her. She had difficulty getting speaking engagements or written materials published. She called her divorce her personal holocaust. But as Joyce Landorf came out of that experience—a feat that took several years—she did so with a fresh appreciation for God's grace, for forgiveness, and the need for love in the community of faith. Her message and books after her divorce were even deeper in spiritual profundity and power.

The cross that God asks each of us to pick up and carry has as its purpose our deeper sanctification and transformation into the people who more and more resemble Jesus.

Our fourth and final thought is that the cross which inevitably confronts the Christian is different from Christ's cross but participates in his work.

What Jesus Christ did when evil people put him to death was to make a revolutionary change in the world. Jesus' cross paid the ransom to release our souls from the bondage to sin and death. On the cross, Jesus Christ made a full, perfect, sufficient sacrifice for the restoration of the whole world.

When you and I as disciples are asked to follow Jesus and take up our crosses we aren't adding anything to Jesus' work. What we are doing is somehow participating in his redemption already under way and our lives are pointing to his life.

Do you remember Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador? Here was a bright and well-educated churchman. In the late 1970's the Vatican made him Archbishop of San Salvador. Shortly after his elevation, he became increasingly concerned about the secret killings and political oppression in San Salvador. He launched inquiries and began to speak out about what was going on. Soon common Salvadorians were flocking to his masses and listening to the diocesan radio station. Then in 1980, as Oscar Romero was lifting the chalice at a public mass, a lone assassin shot him through the heart. Oscar Romero's death has done much to awaken the entire world to the oppression in San Salvador. Perhaps more than that it turns our minds to the death of Jesus Christ many centuries before. Somehow Oscar Romero's life and death fits in with and brings to mind the work of Jesus Christ.

When you and I take up our crosses we proclaim, in the most powerful way imaginable, Jesus the Christ who is redeeming the world.

How can you and I accept this invitation and make what we've been talking about real in our own lives? Surrender your struggle against your cross. What precisely is Jesus asking us to do? Pick up our cross. When the condemned man bent over to pick up and carry his cross, he was surrendering to his fate. The way of redemption demanded that Jesus' life be wasted too in part; that he be humiliated, and that he die. As he faced that destiny, a whole new flood of life burst into the Creation. Now you and I are invited to

join. The salvation of the World and our own salvation goes the way of suffering. We're united with Christ in this. His work has become ours. And so has his victory!