SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

February 28, 2021

*“The Bothersome Cross”*

Jesus and Peter have such an interesting relationship. In one moment, just before the passage we just heard, Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah—“You are the Messiah,” he says. [Mark 8:29] In the very next breath, we find Peter chastising the very One he has called the Christ for talking about his impending death, and Jesus scolds him, even calling him Satan!

In other places in their life together, it is Peter who sees Jesus walking on the water. Being as impetuous as he is, he jumps out of the boat in (I believe) a real desire to be more like Jesus. Unfortunately, he loses his nerve and begins to sink and has to be rescued. [Matthew 14:22-31]

Finally, at the last supper, Peter is the one who promises to be perfectly faithful. Jesus’ response is to tell Peter how he will deny him, not once but three times—and in only a few hours. [Mark 14:29-31]

Perhaps if Jesus had not said that part about the cross—the “take up your cross and follow me”—that part. I think if Jesus had left that out Peter would have been fine. He would not have been so startled and put-off.

It’s the cross that bothered him.

Funny thing about the cross: it bothers a lot of people.

The Bible does not actually tell us what he was feeling, but Peter was *very* bothered. Because he took Jesus aside and began to “rebuke” him, we can assume that his feelings were quite intense. After all, Jesus is his rabbi. Disciples did not regularly *scold* their rabbis. This just was *not* done, not in an age where respect for authority was so important. You did not scold, you did not talk back—at all.

I wonder if we can imagine Peter’s discomfort.

You and I wear crosses as a matter of pride and with a sense of honor. We honor the One who hung on a cross. We are honored to self-disclose that we are followers of that One, that Christ.

And so, I wonder if we can really fully comprehend Peter’s dismay at hearing the conversation he was having with Jesus suddenly turn toward death. Can we appreciate how shocked Peter must have been to hear this man, whom he has just affirmed as the Messiah, not only talk about *dying*, but *dying* at the hands of the Temple authorities, and on a Roman *cross*? Can we really grasp how scandalous Jesus’ suggestion was for him?

At this point in the narrative, Jesus has not actually said that *he* would die on the cross. What he said is (that those who would follow him) “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” [Mark 8:34] That is what he actually said. The mere *mention* of having anything to *do* with the cross was so shocking to Peter that he could not help himself from *admonishing* his teacher.

Can we understand his discomfort and his shock?

Well, to answer that let me ask this of all of us: how many of you wear a cross? I do every Sunday. You usually cannot see it, you probably have not noticed it, but it is just out of range of the camera, I guess it would get lost on my dress—but here it is. It is a Koa wood cross. It is about 4 inches by 2 ½ inches. It is kind of big. It is not readily to see in these videos.

I mention the cross because of what it signifies to me. I suppose that seems obvious: “the cross of Christ”—*that* is what it means to me. Well, yes, but there is something else, too, that most of you will understand right away. Most of you may even have come to wear the cross *you* wear for the same reasons.

I actually have two or three other crosses of this size and distinction, all of them are different, and *all of them were given to me*. They were gifts. Right at this moment, there are probably several of you who are wearing a cross that was given to you, too. And I imagine the cross you wear reminds you of the person who gave it to you, just as mine does me. That person may even have been the one who brought you to faith. If not, then it was most likely given to you by someone who honors your faith and supports you in it. And so, all of the crosses that we wear have a special meaning. We are glad to remember where or from whom we received them, and we are proud to display the symbol of our faith.

For Peter, and everyone else of that time and place, it would have been like wearing a noose around their neck, or an small replica of an electric chair, or of a bloody guillotine. It would have been like hanging a sign around you neck that said, “criminal,” “immoral,” “disgraceful”—*that* is who had to do with such things as a cross. *That* is how the cross marked you.

To invite people to “take up” their own cross would have seemed excessively offensive, even vulgar. It would have reminded Peter and the others of their Roman occupiers because this was *their* preferred way of executing people.

The cross would have also associated Jesus, and the lot of them, with offenders—and worse, strangers, *outsiders*, people who did not belong to “polite,” or respectable society. Or perhaps, and even more importantly, it suggested they were people who simply did not belong…anywhere.

Perhaps worst of all, it would have made them *unsafe*. Fear is one of the greatest and best motivators. So, to talk about the cross (the way in which Jesus was doing here) is to embrace something shameful and frightening to the ancient Israelites.

The cross! A grim reminder of the vicious way the foreign occupiers could execute you. And a loving—even *gentle*—reminder of family, and friends in the faith who are encouraging all of us, those of us who wear these gifts to remember Christ, to remember Jesus. The cross is both of these things in different times…

I do not know how Christ regards the gentle and loving way we embrace it today, but I believe he was actually glad that Peter was so bothered by the cross.

Even as he was rebuking Peter for rebuking him, I believe Jesus was very glad that Peter had gotten the point, had answered his test correctly again.

Peter was *bothered* by the cross—just as he should have been; just as we *all should be*.

Yes, continue to wear your cross as a reminder of the ones who gave us the crosses we wear, but let us also remember the one who originally gave all of us the cross. Remember, especially, that Jesus took upon his own, and also gave us our cross not because he wanted to burden or hurt us, but so that we would confront the evil and sin in the world ourselves, so that we could confront the evil and the sin in the world and actually construct these crosses.

Each cross everyone carries is a sin that exists in our midst. It may not be our personal problem, but we are called upon to let it be our cross. We are called upon to make a commitment to destroying it, and every cross that every other human being is forced to bear; every cross upon which every other human person in nailed upon; every cross upon which our own lives have hung upon.

That is what Lent is about. It’s about reflecting on the cross. It’s about willingly taking the cross upon our own backs so that no one else will have to carry it again.

Let us take up the cross then and carry the cross of hunger that so many struggle with every day. In a world with so much, no one should be hungry, but millions are. In Texas last week, we saw for ourselves (once again) that hunger is a distribution problem—not a lack of food.

Depression and loneliness—let us take up and carry the cross for those who are isolated.

Whether it is in our own hearts and spirits, or in material shackles of injustice that imprisons, let us confront that sin that burdens people. Let us offer a hand of friendship and caring. Let us recognize each other’s humanity.

Let us take up and carry the cross of the many indignities that so many people suffer every day—sometimes with our full knowledge, but also unintentionally by continuing in old biases and prejudices. By old biases and privileges also.

Let us be so bothered with the crosses we carry and see others carrying that we do our part to carry it with them so that together we may destroy them all.

Peter will be forever be remembered for a great many things, not the least of which is being told by Jesus that he was behaving like Satan. However, I find myself convinced that Jesus was glad that Peter was so boldly bothered by the cross. And I pray that we will be, too.

Amen.