

Sermon: The Way of the Cross Mark 8:31-38 Lent 2 February 25, 2018

In *The Merchant of Venice* William Shakespeare writes: "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose."

Our Holy Book is sometimes used in a way that does violence to its true meaning and in a way that does violence to others.

Jesus said, for instance, "The poor you shall have with you always" These words are sometimes quoted as a justification for ignoring the poor. Jesus said there will always be poor people so why bother addressing poverty and inequality? But to make this argument you must take the words from their context and then you would have to set aside 100's of scripture verses that speak out against inequality and need.

In one of the two Genesis Creation stories, the divine invitation to "have dominion over the earth" has been used in support of environmental degradation, ignoring the nearby image of humanity as the gardeners, tenders and keepers of what God has made...

There are 6 single verses in the Bible that are taken out and used like a cudgel against the LGBTQ2 community. Violence against sexual minorities may be rooted in what are called the *lobber verses*- 6 verses from a book of more than 31000 verses that have been misused as a buttress for fear and prejudice.

The devil can cite scripture in support of his own point of view and so can we. We even make up Bible verses to make our points "God helps those who help themselves."; that phrase isn't even in the Bible but people quote it as if it was holy writ to support not helping those in need.

Our gospel reading today holds a phrase, an image that has been weaponized and used against vulnerable people. Jesus says "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Deny yourself. Take up your cross.

Sometimes when people have a burden to carry, others will name it as their cross to bear,

Bullied at school? In an abusive relationship? That's your cross to bear.

Poor or disadvantaged? That's your cross; take it up

Struggling with gender identity? Fearing to come out to friends and family? That's your cross to carry.

Being treated unjustly? Carrying the burden of loss or grief? It's your cross, carry it.

Sick or disabled. That's your cross...

Jesus invitation to take up a cross is twisted and misused to tell people to just put up with things, to just endure. Don't expect help or compassion. Don't complain. Deny yourself. Take up your cross.

This reading or misuse of the gospel shared today does violence to the text and sometimes does violence to vulnerable people.

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"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."  
How do we faithfully hear these words of Jesus?

First we can hear the words as an invitation. Any cross we carry is one we decide to pick up. It is not imposed on us. We choose to carry it.

And what is Jesus inviting us to choose in picking up a cross? He is inviting us to choose a community, an identity, a particular group of companions on the road of life.

We live on the other side of Easter. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we live looking back at the cross of Jesus through the lens of Easter.

But for Jesus companions in Caesarea Philippi long ago, Easter was still to come. A cross was seen through a different lens. Crucifixion was a form of Imperial execution. Caesarea Philippi was the seat of Roman power in the north of Israel. Jesus spoke of a cross in a place where the empire's power could be seen all around them.

The cross was an instrument of power used by Rome only on non-citizens. The cross was a means of capital punishment. A cross was carried by the outsider. The cross was meant to make its carrier feel powerless. And it demonstrated the absolute power of Rome. And the act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt and shame which resulted in ridicule and scorn.

In saying that *he* would take up a cross, Jesus was telling his disciples whose side he was on. Jesus was with those seen as outsiders. Jesus walked in solidarity with people who do not belong, with people rejected by power and establishment. Jesus was with scorned and the ridiculed. And he invites his followers to be on their side too.

In the Mediterranean world of Jesus individual identity was not so important. Then every person was embedded in others, his or her identity was found in relation to groups that they belonged to. For most people this was the family, and it meant that individuals neither acted nor thought of themselves as persons independent of the family group. The people of Jesus time and place were what anthropologists call "dyadic," that is, they are "other-oriented" people who depended on others to provide them with a sense of who they are.

The invitation of Jesus to take up a cross is an invitation to choose your group, to join with Jesus in identifying with those who bear crosses.

So... those bullied at school? In an abusive relationship? Poor or disadvantaged? Jesus walks with them.

Those struggling with gender identity? Fearing to come out to friends and family? Jesus helps lift their burden

Being treated unjustly? Grieving loss? Sick or disabled? Jesus is with them...

Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." These words are an invitation into compassion and community.

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So the Olympics are ending today. In the L'Arche community they tell the story of the Special Olympics. In the L'Arche community people live in partnership with people who have developmental or intellectual disability. The Special Olympics is an athletic competition for the intellectually disadvantaged.

A member of the L'Arche community watched the Olympics and decided that he wanted to run in the Special Olympics. So he began to run and train and get ready. He spent months and months working hard to attain his dream; he wanted to run and win.

After much hard work and dedication the young man got to the starting line in his Olympic race. The gun went off and he ran very well. He took the lead. The finish line was getting close. He was in first place and knew his dream was going to come true. He was going to win. Get a medal. Stand on the podium.

But then, in the corner of his eye he saw another runner stumble. His competitor fell. And so he stopped. To everyone's amazement the young man stopped before crossing the line, went back to help the fallen runner to get to his feet and together they crossed the line, tied for last place.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."