

CHOOSING THE CROSS
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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“If you want to be crucified, just wait. The cross will come.”

Sound familiar? Well guess what. It’s not Jesus, or a paraphrase of Jesus, or even a Christian writer. It’s the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, from his *Discourses*, written around 108 CE.

Hear how very similar Jesus’ words are: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). The idea that suffering would accompany the embrace of ethical living was quite deeply embedded in the Græco-Roman world that produced the New Testament. This in no way diminishes the importance of Jesus’ words. Quite to the contrary. What it does is remind us that Jesus and his followers took ideas that were common in the culture and applied them specifically to Jesus; the good that was to be embraced was Jesus himself, and this embrace would involve suffering, even death. There is a further difference, though. Rather than waiting for the inevitable cross to come, as Epictetus taught, Jesus’ followers would actively *choose* the cross: carry it, live with it as a central fact of their lives. So suffering was not just an inevitable consequence of ethical living; it was a central *element* of ethical living. Jesus, the Son of God, chose the cross (which, as we heard today, scandalized Peter); even so, Jesus chose the cross, and so must his followers.

Why did the idea of choosing the cross scandalize Peter so profoundly? It was mostly because he saw the cross as an instrument of finality and failure. He couldn’t make sense of the idea that Jesus, the one he had just named as Messiah, would meet with such an ignominious end. What Peter was missing was the connection Jesus was making between the cross and *resurrection*.

Resurrection was another very popular concept in the world that produced the New Testament. There was a profound sense that the end of time was near, and many Jews, in particular, believed that when the end came there would be a general resurrection and judgement. Jesus himself believed that he was ushering in the end of the age, and that his resurrection would be followed by the general resurrection. So, the cross, for Jesus, was the way to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for humanity. This is what Peter failed to grasp. It would be through the suffering of the cross that God’s perfect love would redeem the world. The cross was not an end, but a beginning. And it was the way God chose to usher in a new creation.

What is inescapably true, though, is that the cross involves suffering—Peter was entirely right about this. And we followers of Jesus are asked to choose it. So, what does this mean for us today? What does it mean for us to choose suffering?

Well, remember that the suffering we choose is a *redemptive* suffering. Think of our lives during this pandemic. We are limited, constrained, prevented from behaviors and activities and human contact that we took for granted until six months ago. A friend of mine said last week that it would have been just as believable for her in January of this year that aliens would invade the earth in March as that we would be in a lockdown with no clear end in sight. This time is that bizarre, that unfathomable. We are feeling it unconsciously in countless ways.

What if we were to embrace the idea that, as Christians, the rigors of this time are the cross we are asked to choose? This makes sense when we recognize that there is redemption in the rigors. We are being challenged, in a time of physical distancing, to keep our relationships and communities strong and vibrant. It is hard to do—it requires discipline and intentionality. But so many stories of

redemption are being told. Stories of friendships deepened, marriages strengthened, religious communities staying vibrant and loving. Our own Sister Parishes have grown closer together, faster than we thought possible, during these times of suffering.

Suffering invites discipline, which of course shares the same root as the word disciple. It is the discipline of choosing the cross that opens the way for redemption and new life. We disciples of Jesus have the opportunity now to learn from the disciplines we are being forced to practice. Under duress, we are loving one another better, prioritizing the needs of the poor and the oppressed, setting aside attachments to material things, taking better care of the earth. Maybe, just maybe, we can keep it going even after the rigors of the pandemic are over. That would be a real resurrection. And after all, for us, cross and resurrection go hand in hand.