



BROOKSIDE COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Bearers of the Cross

Pentecost 4A - Matthew 10:37-42
Michael Anthony Howard

Sacred Community Symbols

Flags are totems that allow us to imagine and identify with our community. The flags we carry tell the world who we are and what we stand for.

It's amazing the things we take for granted and how things change over time. On Tuesday, the streets here in Brookside will be flooded with people waving flags,. The streets are already lined with flags. There will be flag t-shirts, flag colored balloons, and I bet you will even see flag colored ice-cream. And since we want to honor our country and have a little Jersey pride, there will be people honoring the Boss by wearing flag bandanas. But it wasn't that long ago when people were a little more reserved with their flag wearing.

On the night of May 27, 1970, if you tuned in to watch the Merv Griffen show, you would have heard the president of CBS, Robert Wood, begin the program by explaining why during a portion of the show the guest would be blacked out. At the beginning Abbie Hoffman came out wearing a suede jacket, only to take it off during the interview to reveal he was wearing a flag shirt underneath. Wood explained that Hoffman's image was being blacked out "because of the possibility of violation of law as to disrespect and desecration of the flag, and to avoid affronting our viewers." My, how have changed since then.

This week, while Americans carry, wave—or even wear—flags to show their patriotism, our text this morning calls us to be bearers of a different totemic symbol: the cross. Now, I don't currently want to spend any time this morning comparing the flag to the cross or the relationship between patriotism and Christianity. That conversation is needed, but I don't know how fruitful it would be in this space at this time. Except, I will say this, they both function as sacred totems, symbols that—as any student of Durkheim would tell you—work to shape our imagination of ourselves and our communities. In order for a community to exist, it must first be imagined, and that imagination begins to take shape around sacred community symbols, like the American flag or the Christian cross.

“Take up your cross!” What does that mean?

To be a carrier of the cross is to identify yourself with the God who suffers with those who suffer.

In our text this morning, Matthew 10:37-42, we are continuing the passage where Jesus is giving marching orders to his disciples just before he sends them out. He says, “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Take up your cross? What does that mean?

For most of us today, our understanding of the cross is very limited. We use it as an adornment, to decorate our altars, mark our buildings, or even to hang around our necks. That doesn't mean it doesn't have meaning for many of us. But for most of us, whatever meaning we have of the cross is spiritualized and disconnected from the narrative of the Gospel.

Henri Nouwen, a favorite of mine when I'm reflecting on pastoral care, says that in the cross we see "God suffering—for us. And calling us to share in God's suffering love for a hurting world." I agree with that! But Nouwen also says, "Maybe we can't stud, maybe we are handicapped, maybe we suffer from depression, maybe we experience conflict in our families, maybe we are victims of violence or abuse. We didn't choose any of it, but these things are our crosses. We can ignore them, reject them, refuse them, or hate them. But we can also take up these crosses and follow Jesus with them." Well, it's not that I think Nouwen is totally wrong here. But I do think there is enough distance between what Nouwen is saying and the historical context of gospel that may cause some problems. It could be quite easy to take pastoral phrases like this—meant to help people find meaning in their suffering—and turn them into theological justifications for suffering where people begin to think that God likes it when people suffer. Nothing could be further from the teachings of Jesus. There is nothing in the cross of Christ that says "God likes it when we suffer." What the cross teaches us is that it is not our suffering that is redemptive, but what we choose to do with it.

Let's look at the context of this morning's text. The cross was a tool of torture and state-sponsored execution. A modern day equivalent—which we supposed to be more humane—would be the electric chair. Or, a few generations back, we could point to the lynching tree. (By the way, if you haven't read James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, I'd say that's a great place to start a serious reflection on what it means to "take up the cross.")

The cross was a tool of propaganda. Ancient Rome used crucifixions as a means of execution for centuries. One of the most famous examples that illustrate its usage was a mass crucifixion in the 70s BCE after a slave uprising led by Spartacus. Contemporary sources tell us that the entire Apian Way, the main road into Rome, was lined from Rome to Capua with 6,000 crucified slaves. Because crucifixion was such an excruciating way to die, Rome did not impose this kind of punishment on its citizens.

Taking up your cross is a reference to suffering

When Jesus was calling his followers to take up their cross, he was referring to what anyone would expect to happen to revolutionaries. Jesus was calling his followers not to be passive victims of the powers of death at work in the world—oppression, exclusion, condemnation—but to confront them head on, even to put their own lives in jeopardy. (This is what I preached last week.) But nothing about the cross says, "God likes it when you suffer."

Let's look at the narrative. The book of Matthew opens by presenting a competition of kingdoms—murdered children and crying mothers, suffering was part of the story from the beginning. John the Baptist proclaims that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and Jesus hears the voice from heaven declaring him God's beloved. After overcoming the temptation to prove his belovedness, Jesus goes about gathering the marginalized, the outcasts, the hurting and the sick, and declares to them that they are blessed by God, they too are God's beloved. Jesus' preaches his first sermon and charts an alternative community, a community of trust and care. Then, Jesus goes about acting as an alternative boundary keeper.

It was the suffering of the sick and demon possessed that provoked Jesus to work for their healing— But that didn't make their suffering redemptive. That didn't indicate that God likes it when people suffer. Rather, it was Jesus' acts of healing and restoration that witnessed God's presence in the world. And in his actions, Jesus was healing and redrawing the boundaries put him at odds with the authorities. Now, Jesus is sending out his disciples—"Go and do what you saw me do... but be ready for trouble. If you want to be my disciple, you've got to take up your cross."

The cross reveals that God chooses to be present with those who are suffer pain and rejection.

- a. **The Suffering-With God:** The message of the cross is that God is a *suffering-with* God. To identify with God means to choose to be present where God chooses to be present.
- b. **Those who suffer:** For those who are rejected or suffer, it reveals God chooses to be present with them.
- c. **Those who suffer-with:** For those who dedicate their life to following Jesus, we become bearers of this cross—illustrating to the world the *suffering-with* God by being a *suffering-with* people.
- d. **Those who gain from the suffering of others:** But for those who give their lives to gaining comfort, privilege, and power, the cross is foolishness. For those who seek to follow Jesus, the cross is the wisdom and power of God.

I want you to think about something this week as you see flags everywhere. Our public rituals will involve hardly any critical reflection on what those flags mean or what it means to be an American. And the most patriotic among us might even be wearing clothing that just a few decades ago would be considered illegal and "un-American."

But when it comes to cross bearing—This is how we tell the world who we are. We need to be willing to do the critical work of asking, what does this mean? Is it helpful? Is it useful? Is it redemptive?

Here is my suggestion: For those who suffer, it is a sign of hope that God is with them. For those who follow, it is a call to action to stand with those who God choses to stand with, to be willing to suffer alongside those who suffer.

Crosses, like flags, shape our imagination and how we identify with our community. They tell the world who we are and what we stand for. Who are we? What do we stand for?

[Cover Image: *Crucified Tree Form*, by Theyre Lee-Elliott (1903-1988), 1963. Courtesy of Methodist Modern Art Collection, <http://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/reflecting-on-faith/the-methodist-modern-art-collection/index-of-works/crucified-tree-form-the-agony-theyre-lee-elliott/>]

