

Take Up Your Cross
Sermon by Lori Erickson
New Song Episcopal Church, September 4

As many of you know, my husband Bob was very sick in June from a tick-borne disease called erlichiosis, an illness that landed him in the ICU at Mercy Hospital. During those long and difficult days, I found it comforting to see the many crucifixes on the walls of Mercy, which is a Catholic hospital. The crucifixes were above the doors and tucked into the corners of rooms, unobtrusive but still very much a presence once I started noticing them.

I have mixed feelings about these crosses that carry a suffering Jesus. As a Lutheran, I didn't grow up with crucifixes. In fact, I remember my mother's vocal dislike of them, which to her were just another example of Catholic idolatry. She was a life-long Lutheran whose distrust of Catholicism was bred into her bones, no doubt a legacy of Martin Luther's fight with the church hierarchy long ago. For her, a crucifix was just plain mystifying. Why should we focus on an image of a suffering Jesus on his cross when we believe that he rose from the dead?

So my mother's words echoed in my mind as I sat in various hospital rooms with Bob. But still—I had to admit those crucifixes were comforting. I found my eyes often drifting to them, drawing strength from what they symbolized.

This morning I want to reflect a bit on what both a crucifix and a cross symbolize, because maybe you are wrestling with how to relate to them too.

The reading we heard from Luke is one of many passages in the gospels that contain references to a cross:

“Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

In this passage, and in many others, Jesus puts the carrying of a cross at the very center of his ministry. If you're like me, you've grown so used to hearing this phrase about taking up your cross that you may not realize just how complex and mysterious a command it is.

Theologian Frederick Buechner puts it this way: “In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks [they] can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.”

For the original followers of Jesus, it must have been unsettling indeed to hear his command to take up a cross and follow him. But they clearly remembered what he had said, and recorded it as a central message in the Gospels.

Some biblical scholars speculate that during the first centuries of the church, the cross was so ambiguous and complicated a symbol that it was used very little. It was, after all, an instrument

of torture for the Roman Empire. To wear a cross as a symbol of the Christian faith likely came later, once people who remembered seeing crucified people hanging by the roadsides were displaced by new generations. It was only later that the cross was fully embraced as a symbol.

And so part of the genius of Jesus, and by extension part of the genius of Christianity, is to take a symbol of torture and make it so multi-layered and powerful that we're still trying to plumb its depths two thousand years later.

Even non-Christians know that to carry a cross means to bear a burden. "That's his cross to bear," we might say of someone who has a chronic illness, for example. And I always find it intriguing when I see someone wearing a cross, because it makes me wonder what it means to them. This morning I'm wearing a cross as part of my liturgical role as a deacon, and many people, women especially, wear a cross on a necklace. For some, it's no doubt a reminder of their commitment to the Christian faith, but for others it's likely more of a fashion accessory. And who are we to be dismissive of that? I suspect Jesus would think that something is better than nothing, and that it might be the first step into a deeper commitment.

We don't talk that much about bearing a cross in the mainline Protestant churches, at least in my experience. But maybe we should, because it's a rich metaphor indeed. The most common interpretation of bearing a cross is that we are to follow Jesus no matter what the cost or burden. To be a disciple is to sacrifice your desires, your will, and your life to serving him.

Another way of looking at the cross comes from the Christian mystics, especially those in the Roman Catholic tradition. Many of them, including the 20th-century Franciscan friar and mystic Padre Pio, have had visions of actually sharing the burden of the cross. In Padre Pio's words: "The Lord sometimes makes you feel the weight of the cross. Although the weight seems intolerable, you are able to carry it, because the Lord, in His love and mercy, extends a hand to you and gives you strength."

There's another way of looking at the cross that appeals to me even more. This interpretation says that when we follow Jesus, we don't get a brand new cross to carry, because we're already carrying our own crosses. They come in the form of disease or anger or sadness or whatever our own personal form of suffering is. When we follow Jesus with that cross, he already knows how heavy it is and can help us bear its burden.

And I think this interpretation gets to the heart of why a crucifix or cross can be comforting instead of grim. It's a reminder that all of us are poised on the razor's edge between life and death, and that God has been in this same spot before us. He knows what it's like to be broken by the forces of the world.

And that can be extraordinarily comforting when you're in an intensive care unit, or a foxhole, or any other place that's dark and dangerous. God knows what it's like to be scared and vulnerable, and when we are suffering, he shares our suffering.

I want to end with one of my favorite poems, even though it's a little long. It's about identifying with God so completely that we merge with him. It's based on a passage written a thousand years

ago by a saint and mystic known as Symeon the New Theologian, who was born in what is now Turkey. He's well-known in the Eastern Church but not so much in the Western. I've often thought I'd like to have this poem read at my funeral, but really its message is for any time and any place.

*We awaken in Christ's body,
As Christ awakens our bodies.
There I look down and my poor hand is Christ,
He enters my foot and is infinitely me.
I move my hand and wonderfully
My hand becomes Christ,
Becomes all of Him.
I move my foot and at once
He appears in a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous to you?
—Then open your heart to him.
And let yourself receive the one
Who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
We wake up inside Christ's body
Where all our body all over,
Every most hidden part of it,
Is realized in joy as Him,
And He makes us utterly real.
And everything that is hurt, everything
That seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
Maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged
Is in Him transformed.
And in Him, recognized as whole, as lovely,
And radiant in His light,
We awaken as the beloved
In every last part of our body.¹*

To me, this is what it means to take up the cross and follow Jesus. Amen.

¹ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Hymn 15, "We awaken in Christ's body" from *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 38f.