

## **“CARRY YOUR CROSS,” A Sermon by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, October 23, 2022**

Congregation, over the years I have amassed a considerable collection of crosses. As you can see from the array on the table below the chancel steps, each cross is rather unique in design. At the same time, they are all more similar than not, combining as each does two perpendicular lines—basically a center stalk with cross arms. However embellished, the cross is a symbol well-known to all of us and recognized across the globe, even to its farthest reach. It stands as emblem of our cherished faith. Yet many of us as Christians almost take the cross for granted. What a mistake. Because the cross carries with it a legacy that should never be taken lightly.

No one speaks more eloquently and movingly about this danger than the Apostle Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians where he says: “For the message about Christ’s death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God’s power.” (*1 Corinthians 1:18*)

Hard as it may be to imagine, the cross wasn’t always the symbol of Christianity. In fact, the earliest Christians shunned any association with the cross. In the first century of our faith community, folks were still too close to the trauma of Jesus’ crucifixion. Although these early Christians loved Jesus with all their heart and believed in him to the depths of their souls, the cross was a lingering point of embarrassment and shame. In fact, across the Roman Empire, where Caesar ruled, crucifixion in all its messy and brutal cruelty was reserved for those deemed to be the worst of the worst criminals. No one in Roman days wanted to be associated with anyone crucified. The stigma extended to the crucified’s family as well.

Embarrassed by the fate of Jesus on Calvary’s hill, a whole group of Christians in the century after the fact began arguing that as God’s true son Jesus could never have actually suffered on the cross as it outwardly appeared. Instead, given his divinity and the power that goes with it, he did not have a natural or physical human body as we do. Consequently, Jesus must have been simply projecting the semblance of anguish and suffering so as to register his sympathy with our plight as human beings.

Based on the Greek work *dokein*, meaning “to seem” or “to appear,” this Christian group who denied Jesus’ full humanity came to be called Docetics. Their doctrine and movement within Christianity was thereafter known as Docetism.

For a time, this stance proved rather popular in some quarters, particularly in the extensive Christian communities which then existed across North Africa and the Middle East. However, the rest of the Christian Church pointedly disagreed, condemning the denial of Jesus’ suffering on the cross as heresy or bad belief. We see docetic doctrine emphatically refuted in the New Testament’s First Letter of John, as penned by either the apostle directly or one of his close pupils. Specifically, the First Letter of John, which we are currently reading in our Tuesday morning Bible Study, states that “anyone who

acknowledges that Jesus Christ came as a human being has the Spirit who comes from God. But anyone who denies this about Jesus does not have the Spirit from God. The spirit that he has is from the Enemy of Christ.” (1 John 4:2-3) In other words, belief in both the humanity and suffering of Jesus is a litmus test of true, unadulterated Christian faith.

In keeping with this admonition and warning credited to John, the Docetic idea was most conclusively condemned by the famous Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in 325 and 381 A.D. That condemnation is reflected in the Nicene Creed which emerged from those gatherings, affirming Christ as a fully physical human being who truly suffered on the cross. Eventually, the Docetic movement did disappear, in many cases actively suppressed by fellow Christians who knew better.

Of course, defending the reality of Jesus’ humanity and suffering on the cross did not automatically mean that mainstream Christian Church was quite ready and poised to hold the cross of Christ high. At least for its first four centuries, the Christian Churches preferred the sign of a fish over the sign of the cross. In fact, if you visit the catacombs of Rome and other places where early Christians often secretly gathered to worship in order to avoid persecution, simply made outlines of a fish are to be seen, drawn or etched on walls or altars. The fish image served as a positive token of faith. It not only offered a reminder of the beautiful miracle of fish and loaves in Jesus’ ministry where he fed an entire multitude with just a few small fish and seven barley loaves. (*Matthew 15:34*). It also harkened back to the powerful Old Testament story of the reluctant prophet Jonah who, running away from God’s command to preach his word to the distant and sinful city of Nineveh, is swallowed alive by a giant fish only to be spit up along a beach three days later. (*Jonah 2:10-3:10*)

Early Christians keenly appreciated the Jonah story because they saw parallels between the that reluctant prophet’s three days in the belly of the fish and Jesus’ three days in the grave before resurrection. They also identified with Jonah because many of them were also fearful about preaching the gospel, which could get them killed. They too were tempted to run the other way. Indeed, living amid the Roman Empire as they did was not unlike living in the belly of a beast. For them the ultimate triumph of Jonah’s subsequent preaching and prophesy at Nineveh was also a source of hope and encouragement for them in the face of a sinful, hostile Rome. Thus, a fish struck them as both a beautiful and fitting symbol of their Christian faith.

Ultimately, it took many generations and several hundred years for the cross to supplant the fish as the central and compelling image of Christian faith. Ironically, it was a pagan Roman leader, the Emperor Constantine, who helped make the cross the powerful symbol of Christian faith it remains today. On the eve of a great battle that seemed likely to determine the fate of the Roman Empire and his own leadership, Constantine reputedly had a dream in which he saw a cross rise up and heard a voice say to him, loudly and clearly: “In this sign, you shall conquer.” Conquer Constantine did. Supposedly moved

by this same dream, Constantine decided to end all persecution of Christians and to make Christianity one of the received or accepted religions of the imperial Roman realm. Out of respect for Christianity, Constantine also abolished human crucifixion. Thereafter, the cross of Christ was no longer the conspicuous point of shame as it had been.

I think the cross of Christ is something beautiful to behold. I mean this spiritually, not as a matter of mere aesthetics. Oh, I know that some people have gotten carried away with the cross. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it became almost custom to portray a full-bodied Jesus on the cross in the most graphic way, bleeding from head, hands, and feet with fluids streaming from his abdomen where his side was pierced by a sword. In the Middle Ages, when uncontrollable epidemics swept Europe causing violent human deaths and untold human suffering, it was common practice to depict Jesus on the cross as a plague victim in a moment of total agony and anguish. We don't have to go to Europe to see examples of this. Crucifixes from this terrible era are on display at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

In their day these crosses featuring a bloodied Jesus may have served good spiritual and psychological purposes, reminding people that Christ on the cross suffered that they were suffering. Yet I prefer the so-called "resurrection cross" that was embraced by Protestant Christians during the Great Reformation of the churches in the 1500s under Martin Luther and John Calvin. The "resurrection cross" is empty of Christ's body. That emptiness witnesses to the fact of the resurrection that we celebrate at Easter and every other time of worship.

With the "resurrection cross" what happened at Calvary is not forgotten. But it is put in the context of what was joyously discovered at the empty tomb three days later. As the angel said to the women who came to anoint Jesus's battered, broken body: "He is not here; he is risen!" (*Luke 24:6*) In our own day, we should strive to keep this balance between cherishing the cross and celebrating the resurrection.

For me the cross, kept rightly contextualized in the good news of the resurrection, is very important. It's central to what appeals to me about Christianity as a faith. What the cross in our Christian worship underscores is that the evil and tragedy which Jesus experienced is an in-our-face everyday reality. At one time or another, something is going to happen in this sinful world that breaks our hearts and more. Who knows what it will be? It could be dire physical illness; the death of a parent, child or spouse; an unexpected betrayal of us by family or friends, or financial disaster brought on by a loss of job. Alternatively, we may have to face tornado, earthquake, or fire. No one gets through this life without hurt or suffering at some point along the way, whether sooner or later, regardless of the way it might look. If we survive our own experience of crucifixion, as many of us do, we end up among the walking wounded. Besides having to deal with the fact that we may now have a limp—whether physical, psychological, and spiritual—and must live with the crimping awareness that we are not indestructible and that something bad could happen again. The cross can be a potent reminder that we are not alone in our suffering, grief, and loss.

Jesus has already known the anguish that we are now experiencing and through the resurrection spiritually survived it. Here and now, Jesus also offers us his love and spiritual companionship. As Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch watchmaker and Christian evangelist who endured a Nazi concentration camp, once declared, actually quoting her late sister Betsie, who died there: “There is no pit so deep for us that Jesus is not deeper still.” When we face the worst of life still trusting in God’s love we just come closer to Jesus crucified.

Very significantly, Jesus, anticipating all the anguish of the cross he was soon to suffer, had some advice for us as we confront tragedy and loss. Specifically, In the Gospel according to Matthew, he says: “...he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses it [by taking up the cross] will find it.” (*Matthew 10:38-39*) Elsewhere in the same gospel, Jesus adds: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up the cross and follow me.” (*Matthew 16:24*)

Yes, congregation, pick up your cross and carry it. Don’t ignore it. Don’t pretend it doesn’t exist. Don’t run away from it. Accept it. Embrace it. And not because we are masochists who like pain but because we trust that God is going to help us bear what at first seems unbearable and this gives us the courage to do what may have thought impossible.

Ordinary people like you and me who pick up our cross and carry it, just as Jesus encourages us to do, can discover a new sense of purpose and meaning for our lives. I have known former drug addicts who confronting their demons and their brokenness, which led them astray, have found the grace to become drug counselors with the experience and gifts to save other people’s lives. Likewise, those parents who lost children at the Sandy Hook School massacre in Connecticut have also bravely carried their crosses. More than a few of the bereaved parents have emerged a powerful advocates for sanity and truth, not only in trying to bring sensible gun control to American life but also by challenging in court crazy conspiracy theorists who have made money by cruelly claiming that the death of their sons and daughters was all made up. No less inspiring are those cross-carrying folks who receive tough cancer diagnoses yet do on to live as vitally as possible each and every day.

In calling upon us to pick up and carry our cross, Jesus let us in on some surprising wisdom. When we do get up, get going, and get carrying our cross, the going and carrying often isn’t as tough and impossible as we initially feared it would be. Maybe it’s because the grace of God kicks in to help us out.

Of course, Jesus illuminated all this more perfectly than I ever can. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assures us that faithful people who are mourning, suffering, and persecuted will be blessed by God. Upon them will be bestowed a peace, joy, and love that passes all understanding. (*Matthew 5:1-12*) And later in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says: “Come to

me, all who labor and are heaven laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gently and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (*Matthew 11:28-30*) Again, the key here is owning and accepting our cross to bear rather than trying to evade or escape it.

As the pandemic of the past two years loosens its hold on us, an epidemic of addictions persists—in some cases exacerbated by the isolation that became our way of life. I don’t mean to be reductionistic, claiming that one explanation fits all. Yet in many cases, the addictions that have become so rampant arise because folks are trying to run away from their cross rather than face it honestly, squarely, faithfully, and courageously. And their escapism is destroying their lives and ruining the lives of many people all around them. We can’t control what others do. But we can make good choices for our lives. Positive choices. Faithful choices. Courageous choices. And that means picking up our cross and carrying it as best we can, trusting that the same God whose son died on the cross for us only to be resurrected, is going to help us deal with today and tomorrow and see us to a better day.

The way of the cross is the way to a better life, more spiritually healthy and whole. Yes, as the Apostle Paul says, for some the cross is stumbling block and total nonsense. But for those of us who tried the way of the cross with Jesus have learned that it is our hope and our salvation. (*1 Corinthians 1:18-25*)

Unfortunately, in America today there are some ostensibly Christian churches which join in shunning the cross again. Their defection is disguised behind a conspicuous display of a descending dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit that alighted upon Jesus at the River Jordan. It is further hidden behind all the happy praise music that avoids any somber notes or sobering words. This time the shunning of the cross is not due to any shame on Christ’s behalf but, rather, because these Christian churches don’t want to “depress” people. “We’re not a death church,” a charismatic Christian preacher once bluntly informed me when I asked why there wasn’t any cross to be seen in their congregation’s sanctuary. As the pastor of a church that continues to conspicuously display the cross, I could have recoiled at this insult to us and our faith. Yet, instead, I found myself feeling sorry for that church and praying just a little variation on the words that Jesus prayed from the cross at Calvary: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they say or do.” (*Luke 23:34*) In the end, we deny the cross to our own spiritual peril. Yes, friends, beware of any church that runs away from the cross, especially in this modern age.

We close our service today with the singing the of an old Protestant hymn which I have come to love. Old-fashioned as its words may be, they remain poetry and truth to my ears. As our hymn prescribes, let us cherish Jesus’ “Old Rugged Cross,” even as we carry our own, confident that amid both suffering and sacrifice we will through God’s love and the grace revealed in Jesus Christ gain the life that matters, now and eternally. **Amen.**