Sermon for The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, September 8, 2019
Title: Fierce Blessings

One of the wonderful things about attending an ecumenical seminary was seeing my own tradition anew through the eyes of others. Yale had an Episcopal seminary embedded in a vibrant University and diverse Divinity School, which, for someone like me, meant the best of both worlds: daily morning prayer and Eucharist straight out of the BCP coupled with late-morning ecumenical Chapel, which was, to put it mildly, innovative and unexpected and occasionally pretty odd. Every Friday, the whole student body and staff came together for Communion (or Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, or the Holy Meal, or whatever we called it) and put aside our differences, including those that said we ought not break bread together, to be nourished by the holy food and drink at the heart of our common life. Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, fundamentalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Evangelicals – all pausing at the end of the week to draw nearer to God and one another.

At the first such service of my first year there, I sat in my chair, excited and overwhelmed and a tiny bit anxious, and looked over the bulletin as people took their seats. I was struck by a rubric on the back cover that read, “You may notice some members of our community approach the altar following the service to eat the crumbs that have fallen off the table. This is an important expression of their piety. Feel free to join in.” I leaned over to my new best friend, whom I’d met 48 hours before, and whispered to her, “Who does that?” looking around the room with alarm, thinking, what have I gotten myself into? Beth, who was also in the process of becoming an Episcopal priest, looked at me strangely, laughed, and said, “Claire, WE do!” It turns out I had a lot to learn, not only about them but about us, and about myself. (Side note – I did eventually become one of those people, but not all Episcopalians are.)

Having a husband from another faith has also helped me see my own tradition anew. I remember once in my second year in seminary, as I worked furiously to finish a sermon for the parish where I interned, he interrupted me with a question. “So,” he began, “you’re allowed to preach before you’re ordained?” “Umm ...” I said, peering over the top of my laptop, “yes.” “But you can’t do that stuff where you stand behind the big table?” I giggled, delighting in his
curiosity. “You mean celebrate the Eucharist? No, I can’t do that until I’m a priest.” He nodded slowly. “Weird.” “Weird?” I asked. “Well,” he continues, “it seems like the priest just reads some stuff out of a book when they celebrate, but preaching, I mean, you just come up with that on your own. No one even reads it beforehand. You could seriously mess things up, right? I’d think the stakes would be lower the other way around.” I closed my computer, keenly aware of the possibility that I could seriously mess things up with my sermon, and acknowledged that I had never thought of it that way.

These are just two examples from years ago, but the truth is we are given countless opportunities to see our own beliefs, customs, and practices anew. Sometimes this can be alarming. Sometimes, hilarious. Sometimes, profoundly meaningful. However we feel about it, having our perspectives shaken up and shifted from time to time is a good and healthy thing. Faith is not a noun so much as a verb – a living, breathing, dynamic, dramatic encounter with a living God, through which we are being constantly remade, constantly restored, constantly resurrected.

This morning, Jesus says some things that might challenge our usual ways of thinking about what it means to follow him. That might trouble, unnerve, surprise, even shock us. “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.” Yowza. For many, this next bit is even harder to swallow, or simply understand: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Whenever I come upon a passage of scripture from which I initially recoil, I try to remind myself that there is probably something there I’ve never seen before; that this might just be a prime opportunity to see some part of my faith anew.

I think reimagining, even recovering, a life-giving understanding of what it means to “carry the cross” is the key to engaging the fullness of this passage. I wonder what you hear when you hear when people talk about “carrying the cross.” What images, thoughts, feelings, or memories does this bring to mind? This is a complicated saying, and there are a whole lot of ways to understand what Jesus might have meant by it. But my guess is we each bring to it some particular perspective, some preconceived ideas, probably not all together positive ones.

I know for some, “carrying your cross” implies a sort of dour, passive, even passive-aggressive obedience: the kind of resentful self-giving rooted not in love but in fear and shame. For others, it brings to mind a sense that there’s just nothing we can do to live up to the
incredible sacrifice Jesus made in his death, and can generate feelings of guilt and a nagging sense of just never measuring up. I’ve seen some interpretations of this idea that focus on the sinful nature of the flesh and see “carrying the cross” as a kind of defiant self-denial and degradation, an active devaluing of our natural desires, interests, and longings. Growing up in a tradition that emphasizes this can leave people feeling at war with themselves, suspicious of their intuition, their God-given and glorious bodies, and their ordinary, everyday thoughts and feelings. But if carrying the cross isn’t about, or only about, these things, what *does* it mean?

The cross is at the heart of our faith. It’s all over this sanctuary: the frontal, the windows, the cover of all the Books of Common Prayer. It might be hanging on your necklace; emblazoned on your pin. But there’s something about the cross that might also make us a bit squeamish. It is the terrible instrument of torture on which Jesus took his last breath. In ancient times, it symbolized the death penalty, not the gateway to eternal life. We know that death is central to the story of our faith, but we are “an Easter people.” We’d probably rather talk about new life than painful endings. And yet, the truth is, being an Easter people means we are, by definition, also a Good Friday people. We do not get resurrection without the tomb. We do not taste the sweetness of life in the spirit with the sting of loss and grief. And I don’t just mean this in some cosmic, ultimate sense. This is also the pattern of our ordinary, everyday lives – our ordinary, everyday experiences of growth and change.

Perhaps taking up our cross simply means living a resurrected life: acknowledging the pain and suffering that human life inevitably brings, and remembering, even in a season of sorrow, that death and darkness never have the last word. To take up our cross, in this sense, is to live fully: free from convention, from attachments to power and possessions. To let life change but not crush us. To trust that God is moving in our bending, our breaking, and our blossoming.

Jonathan Rowson is an applied philosopher, a celebrated author, and a former chess grandmaster. As director of the London-based research institute, Perspectiva, he’s investigating the peculiar ways in which we think, make decision, form relationships, and, naturally, delude ourselves. He’s particularly interested in what he calls “stealth denial,” a widely-practiced tendency to avoid hard or painful truths to which we are prone when what we know – the facts – and how we feel about what we know – our feelings – are out of alignment. A great example of this, he argues, is how people respond to climate change. Even those who intellectually accept the reality of this massive environmental crisis are not confronted daily with the kind of
information that might make it feel – really feel – urgent and alarming. It is easy to pretend this is not a pressing problem, but that doesn’t mean it is not a pressing problem.

Rowson’s research on denial opened up into the interesting and complex field of post-traumatic growth. He explains this as a phenomenon wherein people experience some kind of trauma – a cancer diagnosis, an accident, a sudden loss, a violent assault – something serious enough to overwhelm them and trigger real and enduring symptoms of stress. And yet, over time, sometimes years, many report that the incident actually helped them to turn their lives around. Now, let me first be clear – these traumas are awful. Terrible. No one would ever welcome such things with open arms. But they happen. They come. And we survive. We endure. And when we do, and we are loved enough and seen enough and supported enough, sometimes – not always, but sometimes – these terrible twists of fate actually open up into new possibilities and new life.

When this happens, people report enjoying a more meaningful existence; refocusing on vital relationships; increasing in their service to others. When Rowson and his team ask such people why they changed, they generally say, “Well, I suddenly realized I might have died.” The irony, he is quick to point out, is that on some level they already knew that. They were always going to die. We all are. But it took this shock to the system, this unwelcome interruption, for them to really know this. It took this shock to break their stealth denial.

The truth is, suffering and loss and illness and pain – the cross – will come our way. If they have not yet arrived on our doorstep, they will eventually. It is just part of the deal. When we gather around this table - Episcopalian, Anglican, Christian, curious – however we identify - we tell a story about suffering and isolation and betrayal and loss. We tell a story about death and heartbreak. It is a story that invites us all in: that binds up the threads of our stories and weaves them all together, so that by the time we get to Jesus dying on the cross, we know this is not only a story about a guy from Nazareth who lived some two thousand years ago. It is also a story about us. About you and me. It is our story. Which also means that what comes next is our inheritance, too: recovery, revival, renewal, resurrection, reconciliation, resilience.

We come to this table to remember something that is real but hard, true but easy to avoid, a complicated, perhaps unwelcome, a shock to the system. We come to this table to be awoken, shaken out of our denial and dread and despair, and as we share in the holy meal, we come to

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know more truly those things that already were and will always be true. And we are changed. We are remade. We are reborn, as we claim the fierce blessing of this dying and rising God, and leave a little bit more alive, a little bit more ourselves, eager to follow Jesus into the world and ready to see it all anew. Amen.