

# “Following Jesus: 3) Bearing the Cross”

a sermon by

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**Text: “They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.”  
(Mark 15:21)**

Over the past weeks we have looked again at the Gospel of Mark as a way of discerning the meaning of discipleship today.

This morning we are focusing on a little known figure of the New Testament, but one who had a very dramatic role in the crucifixion of Christ, a man by the name of Simon of Cyrene.

We don't know much about Simon, though he is mentioned in each of the Synoptic gospels. He was from Africa and probably had come to Jerusalem as a pilgrim to Passover. He was on his way into the city when something happened to him that surely must have changed his life forever.

As he walked down the road, he saw a sight that was very familiar in Jerusalem. There was a group of Roman soldiers surrounding a man who was carrying a cross on the way to his execution.

Then something happened Simon could have never imagined. This man, Jesus, who was carrying his cross to Golgotha, suddenly stumbled and fell, the weight of the cross being more than he could bear. Whereupon a Roman soldier turned to this bystander, Simon, and said to him, “You there! Carry this cross.”

So Simon was forced to carry the cross of Christ to the “place of the skull” where Jesus was crucified.

## I.

There is something heroic about the crosses we choose to bear. Often we read in the newspaper accounts of medical teams going to Haiti or some far off spot to bring much needed assistance.

Nicholas Kristof wrote in last week's *New York Times* about a highly successful businessman, Richard Stearns, who left a high paying job as a CEO of a large company to head *World Vision*, the largest international relief organization in the world. In his book *The Hole in the Gospel*, Stearns tells of a life-changing experience when he came face-to-face with a 13 year old boy, an AIDS orphan in Uganda, who was raising his younger brothers by himself. Stearns thought to himself, "What sickened me most was the question: Where is the church? Where were the followers of Jesus Christ in the midst of perhaps the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time?"

The result of this encounter was Stearns leaving behind a successful business career to become the head of *World Vision*.

Now, one has to applaud a person like Richard Stearns. There is a certain heroism in the cross a person chooses. Simon of Cyrene, however, is a symbol of a great company of men and women in every age who are forced to bear a cross they did not choose. Where, if anywhere, is there meaning to be found in the cross not chosen?

One thinks of the people today who find themselves walking along some unexpected Via Dolorosa, people who have been thrust underneath a cross not chosen. I think of families who struggle with a child facing a serious handicap and know they will have to bear that cross to the end of their days. I think of men and women who have served in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, some of whom have sustained an injury to body or mind that will be with them to the end of their days. I think of the people who have suffered a bad marriage and now are face-to-face with an even worse divorce. I think of people who are facing a serious mental illness, knowing that this is a cross they will have to bear for as long as they live.

The point is that every one of us one day, like Simon of Cyrene, will face a cross we did not choose to bear. So what is the message spoken to us in this man, Simon of Cyrene, who they compelled to bear the cross of Christ?

## II.

One thing is quite certain. In order to deal with the cross not chosen, Simon had to deal first with himself. Why me? Why of all the thousand pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover did Simon have to be the person standing at the wrong place at the wrong time?

Often we find that there are two philosophies of life that compete with one another. One is the philosophy of determinism that believes that our lives are shaped solely by our genetic predispositions. The other is free will, which says, "No, we can do anything we choose." Each philosophy is wrong when taken by itself. Determinism is wrong by itself. Heredity and genetic predisposition do not determine everything we do. Free will is also wrong by itself for there are some limitations that cannot be overcome.

Somehow the two must be held together in tension, if the real story is to be told. For when heredity and environment have done their worst to us, there still remains in each of us the strange capacity to take what has been dealt to us by forces beyond our control and to answer it with our own individual response.

Some years ago the University of Glasgow in Scotland gave an honorary degree to Helen Keller. There she stood – one of the most pitifully handicapped people you could have imagined – born in a world without sight or sound, and yet one of the most radiant and useful personalities of her generation. As the national anthem was sung and a thunderous applause erupted from the audience gathered – which she alone could not hear – she responded through the voice of her interpreter by saying, “Darkness and silence need not bar the progress of the immortal spirit.”

Simon may have been compelled to carry that cross, but Simon had to decide how it would be carried. Simon took the cross and carried it to the top of the hill.

### III.

There is another factor at work here as well. Somehow Simon was able to see that the cross not chosen had a positive and not a negative effect on his life. It called out of him resources and powers, capacities and faculties that pleasant and prosperous circumstances never do. That profound experience had a positive effect upon his life and through it he became more than he could have ever imagined.

One of the most important dimensions of our faith as Christians is our confidence in God’s providence, that is in the power of God to provide for our needs, order our lives, and give meaning to our lives even in the face of tragedy. Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of God’s grace not only as forgiveness and power, but as the ability of God to bring good out of evil.

The providence of God is a theme that occurs from Genesis to Revelation but nowhere is it more succinctly stated than in the story of the Patriarch Joseph, who though sold into slavery by his brothers, could one day stand before them and say, “You meant it to me for evil, but God meant it for good.” (Genesis 50:20)

I have often wondered what happened to Simon of Cyrene. He is like so many characters in the drama of Holy Week, who seem to play a bit part and then disappear from view.

There are, however, several clues that give us an insight to what happened to Simon. One of these clues is in Mark’s gospel where Simon is identified as the “father of Alexander and Rufus.” (Mark 15: 21) Mark is very sparse in his gospel so he must have included these two sons of Simon for a reason. Scholars have believed for many years that the Gospel of Mark was first written for the Church at Rome. We read in Romans 16:3 where Paul in his letter to the church at Rome gives his salutation “Greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord, also his mother and mine.” Could this Rufus be the son of Simon?

And again in the Book of Acts there is a list of the men of Antioch that sent Paul and Barnabas on their epoch-making first mission to the Gentiles. One of these is a man called Simeon

of Niger. Simeon is another form of Simon. Niger was a name often associated with people from Africa.

Now, none of us can be sure what happened to Simon, but there is certainly more than a little evidence that this man who was forced to bear a cross he did not choose was later an important part of those who followed Jesus.

There is one thing we do know and that is the power of God to take something that seems terribly bad and transform it for God.

Martin Niemoeller, the German pastor who was imprisoned for his opposition to the Nazi regime, once wrote this from his prison cell in Berlin.

“Let us thank God that He upholds me as He does and allows no spirit of despair to enter into Cell 448. Let the parish office know that in our ignorance of what is coming I am confident, and that I hope to be ready when I am led along paths I never would have sought for myself.”

Thank be to God.