

“The Weight of a Cross”

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James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

It's Blessings in a Backpack Sunday, here at our church. When I read about this I was so excited. This program is love in action for the children facing hunger issues in our community. I hope we all give generously so that the children in need can slip their arms through their backpacks and feel comforted and hopeful.

Now onto our passages of the day:

James in his epistle says the hardest thing to control or tame is the tongue. “A restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

We live in a country today that has been emboldened to speak with the ugliness of hate, the cruelty of bigotry, and the isolationism of racism. Even if we don't consider ourselves haters, bigots, or racists – the language of hate comes easier.

We look at a bigot and call him an idiot. We look at a racist and call her a moron. It's justified. It makes all the sense in this non-sensical world to hate the haters.

There you have it. Stop hate with hate.

Or, we can acknowledge the fact that hate breeds hate, and as hard as it is to stop our tongues from slinging more mud around, we are called to know and speak words of kindness and hope.

This sermon is for me today. I am completely aware that standing in this pulpit is not only an honor but carries a responsibility to share Good News. As a student, my friends and I were commanded by one of our New Testament seminary professors to preach the Good News every time we stood in the pulpit.

So, here it is, the message for today: Control your noxious tongue, then pick up your cross and follow Jesus right on into death.

What are the practical ways to live as a Christian in a world where the definition of who we are is confusing and fractured? To be honest, there are some Christians I would rather not be associated with. Bible verses taken out of context and judgments handed down with venom, don't represent how I view my life as a Christian. Please don't lump me in with all Christians. Just listen to me, know me, understand me.

I wonder if Muslims feel that way? All lumped together, the many seen as one? The African American community? The Latino community? The LGBTQ community? All the republicans or all the democrats?

To take a group of people and strip them of individuality and personhood must grieve God. For each of us has been created in God's image. That image cannot be boiled down to a few traits or beliefs.

We celebrate God. How do we celebrate our own diversity?

Our Gospel passage this morning is one where Jesus is trying to teach the disciples and they can't comprehend. Peter believes Jesus is the Messiah, but for the disciples a Messiah is going to save Israel from the Romans and bring victory and success to the God's chosen people.

When Jesus tells them that he must go through great suffering and be persecuted by all the church leaders, then die and rise again, this bit of news does not sit well. This is not what Messiahs do. They overcome and overthrow and bring a new order to the world. They don't die. And the whole "rising again thing" makes no sense.

Peter objects loudly. Jesus calls him Satan.

When Jesus was in the desert after his baptism, Satan showed up and promised Jesus every earthly power to be king of the world. Jesus said no. Jesus does not need his disciple Peter to also offer a way to get out of his mission of salvation.

He needs his disciples to expand their vision of a Messiah for the world and not just for the Jews. They need to expand their vision because they will be part of the work to carry on Christ's mission. Their work will carry on the Good News and go beyond borders and ethnicity.

Which is what we are called to do too. We are called to share the Good News with everyone. Good News is news that is really good. It is hopeful. It is exciting and welcoming and interesting and empathetic. The Good News is relational with a willingness to live in another person's story for a while. Good News doesn't take away someone's personhood but celebrates and legitimizes it. Good news does not overpower another person.

A theologian named "Bernard Loomer described two kinds of power: unilateral and relational. Unilateral power builds walls, silences opposition, decides without consultation, and separates the world into us and them. It is willing to destroy the world to save a handful of sycophants. Bullying and bloviation characterize unilateral power.

Relational power leads by empathy and, inclusion, listening and receptivity. It transforms the world by a dynamic process of call and response. Of adjusting to the experience of others. God saves the world by love and not coercion, by embrace and not alienation." (Bruce Epperly; Christian Century, August 29, 2018)

I believe we see evidence every day of what unilateral power looks like. It is anyone who bullies their way through situations, slanders others, spews disdain, and then ultimately dehumanizes anyone who is different. The stress of having this kind of power leading a country, a corporation, a church, or a household can be overwhelming and debilitating. God is not to be found in this way of wielding power. There is no redemption in this kind of power.

Relational power almost doesn't sound like power to me. It sounds like shared responsibility and filial joy. Inclusion, respect, and being other-focused are the key-points of relational power.

Jesus Christ embodied love, suffering, rejection, inclusion, death and resurrection to bring the world face to face with God.

As his followers, we have been given a task. We must take up our crosses and follow Christ into his mission and vision.

What is the weight of that cross? How heavy is that burden we must bear? What does this actually mean?

If Jesus would have carried his entire cross it is estimated to have weighed 300 lbs.

Most likely, he carried only the cross bar at 100 lbs. But that amount of weight on a tortured back seems unbearable.

How can we do this?

The cross we must bear is one that is selfless. Does that sound too heavy? Is the weight too much? Let's look at it like this, what can we leave behind to lessen the weight?

We can be relieved of our egos. That lessens the weight.

We can be relieved of our own personal desires when they are all-consuming. That lessens the weight.

We can be relieved of our anger. That lessens the weight.

We can be relieved of unnecessary words. That lessens the weight.

We can be relieved of the pressure to fix it all. That lessens the weight.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and I ask you to wonder with me. If we take the crosspiece of our cross and curve each side down, instead of a cross to carry, we have a heart to wear.

Something like a backpack. So much easier to carry. Full of all that is good, life-giving, life sustaining, and ready to go with us into this world to share the relational love and power of Jesus Christ.

The weight of a cross? I don't know. Too much.

Maybe the better question is, how much does love weigh?

Amen.