

The Way of the Cross

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from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church Champaign
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Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Mark 8:31-38

Tucked near the beginning of most services of Christian worship is a prayer of confession in which we admit our wrongs and ask God for forgiveness. Confession is a front door through which we enter worship. It's a clear-the-air prayer, and is a time when we admit two things: we break promises and God keeps promises.

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God is in the promise-making and promise-keeping business.

In our Old Testament lesson today, God promised Abram that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16). God said Abram and Sarai's offspring would be as numerous as the stars—which is an interesting promise for an old, barren couple (Genesis 15:5). Next clear night, go outside and look up. Let the stars remind you of God's promise to old Abraham and Sarah.

In Mark's gospel, God's promises take the shape—starkly—of a *cross*.

In our Gospel passage today we find that Jesus is out of the wilderness, but he's still being tempted. This time, it's not the devil doing the tempting but, surprisingly, it is Peter.

Jesus is telling his disciples that he must suffer rejection and crucifixion, and that he must rise again. But Peter won't have any of that. Peter doesn't want his friend to suffer. Peter wants to suggest another way, a more reasonable way, because Jesus' way of the cross doesn't seem wise or fair. Who can blame Peter? He loves Jesus and wants to protect him. *It's not fair that you, Jesus, who are so good, will be treated so badly. It is not fair that you, who are preaching about life, will be nailed to a cross. It's not fair.*

And it's *not* fair.

But Jesus knows that his rejection, death, and resurrection is not the expected or conventional way, but it is the best way. The empty cross will show the world more powerfully than anything else how serious God is about his promises. [No, Peter doesn't want Jesus to follow this way. I may not want it. You might prefer another route. Paul calls the way of the cross a "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1).] But this is the way Jesus chooses. He sets his face to Jerusalem, towards betrayal, to a hill, to a cross.

A cross.

Because of the cross, humankind will know once-and-for-all that God promises to love the world no matter what, and that love redeems the world. God's love will win. Hope will abound. Light will crack and shatter darkness. Justice will flow down like mighty streams. Joy, finally and forever, will rise up. This is the sort of promise God is fond of making. And keeping.

And the symbol of this promise?

A cross.

A common, wooden cross.

For all ages, the cross remains a symbol of God's wondrous, glorious love. What Jesus knows that Peter does not is that sometimes glory not only shines, it bleeds.^[1]

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One of the things our weekly prayer of confession reminds us of is God's promises. Our confession also reminds us that we often compromise our promises; despite our best efforts, we live lives that are deformed by brokenness and sin. Our love is a little "off" and otherwise distorted by selfishness. We often break our promises.

But God does not. God never breaks a promise.

Just look at the cross.

We look at the cross and we see the one who went the extra mile for us. We look at the cross and we see the one who loves us no matter what—to hell and back. We look at the cross and hear him say, *I stand in solidarity with the poor, and I want you to stand with them, too. I stand in solidarity with the forgotten and the powerless who have no voice, and I want you to stand with them, too. I stand with the aged, the faithful-old like Sarah and Abraham; I want you to stand with the old, the young, the haves, the have-nots, the addled, the anxious, the mentally ill, the shooter, the victim, the Muslim, the Jew, the gentle, the harsh. I want you to stand with each other in love. Be my hands in the world. Heal the world with my touch.*

Jesus' way of saying this is, "Take up your cross and follow me."

A cross.

Maybe this is what frightened Peter more than anything. *If you lead, LORD, I may be compelled to follow, and your lot will be mine, your life, your death, your glory.* Maybe Peter knew deep in his trembling bones that the cross shows us a kind of life that is both worth living *and* giving away.

Poet W.H. Auden puts it this way:

*O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With [all] your crooked heart.^[2]*

Take up your cross, Jesus says. And follow me.

Let us pray:

Lord, it is easy to say "I love," but not to practice what it means.

When we see your love and the extent to which such love is prepared to go, we know our love is paltry and self-seeking.

When we consider your love,
as evidenced in the cross,

And when we consider your forgiveness,
which overwhelms us and heals us,
we know our love is often cheap,
and our forgiveness is empty, judgmental, and graceless.

Teach us to love you with heart, soul and mind,
to love our neighbor and our enemy.
Teach us to forgive as you have forgiven us in Jesus Christ.

Most of all, teach us to follow your lead and to do your bidding. AMEN

This prayer of confession is adapted from John de Gruchy,
Cry Justice: Prayers, Meditations, and Readings from South Africa

Prayer for Illumination: No place had you to lay your head O Christ whom we call King of Kings; you came to share the painful lot of all the homeless, life's foundlings. You had no home to call your own though earth is your footstool, heaven your throne. At last through wood and nails, you found a home on the cross, where all could see the face of God made one with human pain and human loss. Lord, Make us restless till we rest in your good will for humankind that, while the birds each have a nest and foxes holes, we learn your mind: that all your cherished human race may claim a sheltered dwelling place.

- Ian Fraser (adapted)

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16 1When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. 2And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." 3Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."
15God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

GOSPEL MARK 8:31-38 31Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?
38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."