

“Who Carries It with You?”

Mark 8:27-38

September 15, 2024

Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

There was nothing unusual about that Friday morning when Simon woke up. He woke up before dawn as he always did when he had to make the trek into the city. He quietly got dressed, kissed his boys Alexander and Rufus goodbye as they slept on, and slipped out the door to hit the road. He'd made the trip so many times at this point that he knew he'd make it to the market before 9 as long as he kept a brisk pace. If he got there before 9, the market wouldn't be too crowded yet, he could get what he needed quickly, and be back home by mid-afternoon.

Simon didn't like the city, there were too many people and too many Roman soldiers. He was glad his mother and father had decided to settle well outside the city when they moved from Cyrene when he was just a boy. It was quieter where they lived, the air was fresher, his sons had plenty of space to run and play. But, the trips into Jerusalem from time to time were necessary. There were just some things they could only get from the market there.

He made it through the city gates the same time he always did, but things felt different. Usually people were up and about—running errands, hanging up the laundry, children playing in the street—but not today. Strange, but not a reason to delay getting to the market. Simon made his way up the street and though he didn't see anyone, he began to hear faint sounds that he couldn't quite make out. As he walked the sounds got louder and he realized it was shouting—what could possibly be going on? He got within a block of the market but he couldn't cross the street because people were lined up along it. They were blocking the way and screaming and shouting. Simon didn't know what was going on but he wanted no part in it. So, he walked back down a block and decided to walk over a few blocks and see if he could cross the street there.

Again he couldn't cross the street because the crowd was blocking the street there too, and the crowd at this part of the street was much louder. Simon decided he would just have to try and work his way through the crowd and cross the street. Was it a holiday and he had forgotten? Was there some sort of military parade? Whatever it was, surely he could get across the street really quick and get to the market. He had come so far and he really didn't want to go home with nothing and have to come back again so soon.

He got to the crowd and began to work his way through, quickly realizing that the people were shouting obscenities and insults. He saw some people throwing things towards the street. He was worried, even a little scared but he was already in the thick of it. There was no turning back now. He had just made it to the street when he heard a violent chorus begin, “crucify him!” With horror he realized he had come to Jerusalem on a day they were going to execute criminals. Simon looked to his right and saw a man who had been stripped and beaten, coming up the street with great difficulty as he shouldered the massive cross. It was terrible. Simon felt sick, he did not want to be there. But as the man got closer, the crowd's shouts and jeers got

louder, more violent, and the crowd began to push forward. Simon couldn't move. He was stuck. So he watched on in stunned, horrified silence as the man bearing the cross stumbled in front of him. The man tried to get up, but he fell again. Simon watched a Roman soldier pull out a whip and yell at the man to get up, but the man couldn't. He didn't have the strength after being beaten so badly.

The soldier began to move, not toward the man on the ground, but toward Simon. The soldier lifted his arm and pointed his finger directly at Simon—"You. Come and carry it for him." The world around him froze. His ears began ringing. This couldn't be happening. Simon began shaking his head, but the soldier walked toward him arm outstretched, finger pointing. And Simon knew he didn't have a choice. He took a step into the street, and another, and another. He kept putting one foot in front of the other until he reached the man underneath the cross. The man looked up at him, and Simon's heart broke.

Simon didn't know what the man had done to be sentenced to this type of humiliation, abuse, and execution. But he was certain that no one deserved this. How could anyone ever deserve this? Simon didn't say a word as he lifted the cross up off the man's back, braced his knees, and heaved it onto his own shoulder. The soldier barked at Simon to walk, so he did. He could tell people were shouting, hurling all sorts of insults, but he couldn't hear them. He kept thinking about his family, and hoping he would make it home to them. He thought about his steps, knowing that one misstep could cause him to fall because of the significant weight of the cross. He thought about the man walking behind him, the man whose cross he had taken up. He felt pity for him. He had looked into the man's eyes and seen the agony and brokenness. He didn't know who the man was, but he hoped that what he was doing in some way made the man feel less alone if only for these few minutes.

The procession reached the top of the hill, and the soldiers removed the cross from Simon's shoulders and pushed him away. Simon's part was done. Simon chanced another look at the man. The man stared deep into his eyes, and Simon wished there was something more he could do. The soldiers grabbed the man and forced him onto the cross. Simon didn't want to see this violence, this inhumanity. So he turned and began to walk down the hill, knowing that no matter what no one deserved to die like this and hoping that the man, if only for those few moments, didn't feel alone.

When I read Jesus words to his disciples and the gathered crowd, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Simon of Cyrene came to mind. He's mentioned in all three of the synoptic Gospels, but it's not much more than a mention. He gets a verse in the passion narrative. In Mark's Gospel, the verse reads, "They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry [Jesus'] cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus."¹

¹ Mark 15:21

It's not much to go off of. We don't actually learn much about Simon. He's from Cyrene which is in Libya—Northern Africa. He's a father to two sons: Alexander and Rufus. He lives in the country, so that could have a variety of meanings, but he clearly did not live in Jerusalem. He was a passerby, so presumably was not there to watch this state execution unfold. There's just one verse, one sentence about him, but a simple truth stuck out to me: No one, not even Jesus, carries their cross alone.

Jesus' call to the crowd and his disciples to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," is not easy. A life of following Jesus is difficult, it is not always popular. It goes against the grain, against the way of the world around us. After Peter "correctly" identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus explains to his disciples exactly what that means: he'll undergo great suffering, be rejected by people in power, he'll be killed, but three days later will rise again. When Peter rebukes him, it's because that's not the type of Messiah Peter wants. Peter and many want a Messiah that will conquer. A Messiah who will ride-in with a powerful military marching behind to defeat and run out the Roman Empire occupying the land. Peter can only envision a Messiah who conquers an empire with the way of empire. But, that's not the way of Jesus. That's not who Jesus is.

The way of Jesus is not the way of empire. It's not the way of a conqueror. It's not the way of military might. It's not the way of besting another just to lift yourself above them. It's not the way of republicans or democrats or the moderates they fight over. It's not the comfortable way. It's not the easy way.

But.

The way of Jesus is good.

The way of Jesus is good. It's riding in on a donkey when they expect you to thunder in on a steed. It's grabbing a towel and washing filthy feet. It's talking openly to the foreign woman at the well when people gossip behind her back, knowing full well people will have some things to say about you too. It's feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, proclaiming release to the captives, setting free the oppressed, taking care of the sick, and welcoming the stranger. It's the way of denying yourself, denying the way of empire, denying the powers of death in the world, and taking up your cross and following Jesus. It is the way of life and love and peace and justice.

And this way is not easy. It is far from easy. There's a reason the final beatitude Jesus gives in Matthew's Gospel is "blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." There's a reason, because the way of Jesus is not easy, but my friends, the way of Jesus is good.

Jesus doesn't paint an easy picture of discipleship for the crowd or his disciples or us for that matter, there is a cost. But the promise and the hope is that this cost, this life of taking up your cross is not done in isolation. Though at times it may be lonely, at times it may seem like you

are standing alone, no one carries the cross alone. Even Jesus didn't carry it alone, he had Simon of Cyrene. And Simon had Jesus.