

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 8:27-38

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 116:1-9

James 3:1-12

September 16, 2018

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Let me take you back to 1999 - to the first time I went to Israel. I found myself wandering through the walled alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem. Past shops filled with souvenirs and spices, up slippery stone steps worn smooth from decades of feet and hoofs and carts that had gone before me. Past the sounds of church bells and the call to prayer, past languages I could not understand. Around corners, bumping into strangers on this hot summer day. And then I walked around a corner and was immediately pressed to the wall by a crowd of tourists – a crowd of people led by some priest of a denomination I could not identify and together they carried a cross.

A real wooden life size cross – held by many hands, resting on shoulders, sweat dripping down their faces. As they walked through the alleyways, everyone would step aside against the wall to let them pass. Sometimes they sang. Sometimes they would just breath heavily as they labored that cross up those well-worn stone steps.

And then I realized, I was on the via Delarosa – that biblical road that Jesus walked carrying his own cross to his crucifixion. I have to admit...I didn't understand at the time the tourists' need to reconstruct Christ's final hours. In fact, at the time, I was more than a little frustrated at this attempt to carry a cross that I doubted was as heavy as the one Jesus had to carry. I found myself cynical. From that day forward I vowed not to be one of "those" tourists. Walking up ancient pathways in some show of faith and devotion for others to see.

I wondered what they did when they got home. How did carrying that cross change them, or did it change them? Were they faithful Jesus followers on their own turf away from the thick religiosity of that Holy Place?

In fact, I was so cynical that I kept my vow through 4 more trips to Israel – to never walk the via Delarosa and to never carry a cross like those tourists that day. However, on my last trip to Israel 3 years ago I had a change of heart and decided to face my cynicism and I walked the path. I didn't carry a physical cross but I walked along that same route, marking each station of the cross where Jesus stopped along his route.

On that particular day, I realized something. I realized that there are times that I simply need to be reminded of what Jesus did for me. To be reminded of why I call myself a Christian. To be reminded that in calling myself by that name, I have a responsibility to walk my own paths with my own crosses. I had avoided that road for 16 years and I was so glad to finally walk those steps and remember.

I have often wondered why that encounter in 1999 had such an impact on me. I realized over the years that I struggled deeply with why some folks needed to demonstrate their faith in such an outward way – I mean I had seen far too many people who were either really good at talking about their faith and horrible at living it. (I have referred to those folks too many times as those Bible beaters) Or, people who were good at showing up to check a box and make an outward statement of faith, to create an image of the good Christian but didn't really believe in anything that grounded their actions. (The religious do-gooders)

In other words, I thought it just felt shallow. And I was skeptical for a long time trying to reconcile these images in my mind of talking about our faith and living our faith.

And when Mark describes the scene with Jesus and his disciples he's setting the stage for a similar tension. It's the tension of what we say about our faith and what we do with our faith. What we say and what we do.

The conversation starts innocently enough... Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is, what are they saying about him. It's a rather generic question – generalized and broad. However, I am not sure he was really that interested in generalities because he immediately asks another more personal probing question...who do you say that I am? In other words, what are you willing to tell others about me. That's the first point. ***What will you say.***

Peter, quick to answer, says – well, of course, we are saying that you are the Messiah. Jesus took hold of this statement and goes into great detail about what that really means and it isn't too cheery of a description. And the answer isn't what Peter expects and he quickly backtracks. He begins to rebuke Jesus. I can almost hear him complaining – that's too much, it's too hard, I'm not sure that's the kind of Messiah I want – at least the suffering, rejection and death part. It's there another way? A happier way? An easier way?

Jesus, however, sees what was going on. Peter was quick to talk about his faith but struggled when it came time to apply his faith. He wanted it to be easier. But...as Jesus so often does, he turns the tables – as if to say, Peter, it isn't so much about what I can do for you. It's what you can do in my name.

And then, Jesus gives the punch line...If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. That's the second point. ***What will you do.***

In between what we say and what we do there is an interesting thing to consider. It's the shift that happens in our attitude about faith. It's the thing that happens after we verbally claim Jesus and when we begin to apply Jesus to our daily lives. It's the cross that represents not so much the question of who do you say that I am but who do you say that you are when you follow me?

Because if you really proclaim who Jesus is, something within you surely changes. And when we claim who we are in the name of Jesus, our actions change. Our commitments change. Our

prayer changes. We want to carry that cross in whatever way we can because claiming Jesus, claiming the Messiah means claiming a changed life and a changed heart. Because when Jesus says who do you say that I am, he isn't interested in what you think others are saying or doing. He's interested in you. Who do you say that you are? How has your life changed because of me?

But, we all know that putting our faith into action is not always easy. Picking up a cross, whatever it may be, in the name of our faith, can be disruptive and can make us vulnerable to those who may disagree. It can make us a bible beater or a do-gooder – at least from others who may judge our actions. But again Jesus doesn't care what others are saying. He cares about you and who you are.

So maybe we can think of it like this...

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who picked you up when you felt you had lost hope in this life, be willing to pick someone else up who has lost hope.

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who loved you when you were put down and rejected in this world, be willing to love someone else who has been put down and rejected.

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who fed you when you were hungry, be willing to feed someone else who is hungry.

If you say Jesus is the Lord and Savior who forgave you when you made a harmful mistake, be willing to forgive someone else who has made a harmful mistake.

Speak boldly about what Christ has done for you and be willing to carry the cross when it matters because Christ has carried it for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.