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Easter Sunday Sermon: “Carrying Our Own Cross”

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“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.” The idea of carrying another’s burden has been central to Christian theology since the life and death of Jesus developed into the religion we now call Christianity. In fact, as a concept, bearing another’s load is a paramount in all the great religious traditions of humanity. The Buddhists talk of compassion and suffering, Judaism works toward righteousness, Islam practices charity toward the downtrodden and our Native American cousins believe in a generosity to all who are in need. This altruism is corner stone of the best of our human attributes.

Yet part of the Easter passion always presents Jesus as bearing his own cross for part of his journey to Calvary. Bearing our own loads conceptually is also a part of all religious thought. So one of those balancing acts we perform as peoples of faith is to try to determine when to help each other and when to allow our sisters and brothers to struggle with their own crosses.

We find this struggle enacted daily in our society as a function of religion.

When the scriptures tell us that Simon and Jesus carried his cross, the image to our twenty-first century ears is very much heard as a burden. It was not always heard that way. As a symbol, the Cross, wasn’t adopted by the church until sometime after 700 Common Era. In fact, the cross does not appear on any early frescos or mosaics depictions in the church. For the early church the Greek symbol for fish was the primary symbol. The Cross, you see was not in vogue. For the early Christian, the cross was not a symbol to be honored. It was seen as different from a burden, but as a symbol that would indicate that the family of the dead person was dishonored. The death by cross would be like in our time like being put to death by the state. It was to die as a traitor to Rome, high criminal without honor, without righteousness, as the worst that Rome Society could impose upon a person’s legacy. It would be like having instead of an eagle in the center of the seal of the United States having a turkey buzzard, a bird that lives on dead carcasses.

The idea of carrying a cross is to bear a token that was dishonored and rejected by the world. The cross was such a powerful sign in the first century that in our society it might be like being placed on a public list as a child molester, a person who by their own actions damns their life's legacy by being despised by all segments of society. Yet time has evolved this image to one much more favorable. It is a symbol that is universally used in Christian churches. The Methodists have combined it with a red flame where the cross signifies Jesus and the flame the Holy Spirit. The American Baptists combine a stylized world with a superimposed cross. The Presbyterians stylize the cross into the Greek letter R (Rho). The Roman Catholics use the cross with the body imposed. The symbol of the Red Cross across the world has indicated help. The symbol for the Universalist Church of America prior to merger was a circle with an offset cross. It was this symbol with the chalice exchanged for the cross that became the symbol of our association after merger, the chalice coming from the symbol the Unitarian Service committee adopted as a covert sign to identify people they were helping to leave Vichy France before the last world war.

So for us in modernity we see carrying a cross as bearing a burden. Part of the public and private debate on this religious issue has been deciding when to bear another's hardship and when to allow the individual to shoulder their own. The public debate about social security is an example. During the Depression Roosevelt's New Deal enacted social security to cushion that portion of society that were not able to take care of themselves at the conclusion of their working life. It was not intended as a national pension scheme, but as a minimum help for those non-working years. FDR did this by taxing the current wage earner to keep the former generation from total poverty, or put another way, the present generation was bearing the former generation's load. It worked because the number of workers exceeded the number in retirement. But it helped establish a concept of society having a moral responsibility toward another less fortunate segment of society and a welfare society was born. Yet the idea of a welfare state goes back to the ancient Hebrew law of Jubilee where every seven years' debts are eliminated and all grain fields left a portion of the grain for those who were unable to raise their own.

Bearing another's cross became a matter of legal as well as moral responsibility. Yet today's arguments are not as much about the responsibility we have toward each other as about how and who should bear this burden. The shift to private

retirement accounts takes the responsibility from society, from the idea of bearing another's burden, and places that responsibility back on the individual. So legally and morally each individual assumes responsibility for his or her crosses. We see the same trend throughout our society. The law to limit bankruptcy and the amount of federal funds available for schools and Medicare are all about the public versus private responsibility for the less fortunate among us. The real debate about the affordable health care is about the healthcare responsibility being a burden on the individual or on society. This year's political debates have dealt with these issues directly. What public responsibility do we have towards refugees, or immigrants. Is healthcare a right, or a private responsibility?

Our church, in fact all churches and religious organizations, display this same community burden-bearing. During the cycle of our lives we have periods where our resources both physical and emotional are less than our needs.

Churches are places where we go to be helped and to help. Our church food ministry is an excellent example. We offer our help and resources to lessen the burdens of others. We make an active commitment to help another bear their cross. The sponsoring of refugees illustrates this balance: for about six months the refugees are supported by our committee, but by six months they are expected to be self-sufficient.

When we bring our burdens and stresses through our doors to our community as ministry, we expect the members of our church or more generally the church community to help us either in physical ways or through moral support. At other phases of our lives we function as church community in order to maintain the sense of community or to particularly find an avenue to help an individual or help change society for a positive outcome. Both phases of our life are part of the church community experience. James Luther Adams expressed this relationship by saying that "Church is the place we come to practice being human."

If we conceptualize the carrying his cross passage through a more traditional Christian lens we see a human, Simon, bearing the burden of the god who came to earth.

We find this myth repeated in other cultures like the story of the labors of Hercules, where his seven labors are the work of the gods. This conceptual idea is consistent with my understanding of how the kingdom of God is created. The

creation of which occurs because we as the inhabitants of this planet create a society that is based on righteousness or justice, this was the origin of the Kingdom of God.

This is why this community is or should be so important to each of us. This community is the microcosm of the macrocosm that is our world. If we can't create real community here, what chance have we of creating any kinder society beyond the portals of this edifice. Yet we know churches, all churches, are fallible. If we look at a joke about Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday, a family's 6-year old son had to stay home from church because of strep throat. When the rest of the family returned home carrying palm branches, the little boy asked what they were for. His mother explained, "People held them over Jesus' head as he walked by." "Wouldn't you know it," the boy fumed. "The one Sunday I don't go to church, and Jesus shows up!"

The presence of Jesus or the spirit of Jesus is wherever acts of Christianity are performed. This is the real resurrection of Jesus. The same metaphor works for the Buddhist nature, and other religious expressions. One of the more meaningful images in thinking about the balance between helping another and allowing them bear their own burden is that the “view of the cross is very different from the view from the cross.”

If we look at the Black Lives Matter movement, this is what it is or should be about. As privileged Anglo heritage people, we can't possibly know the experience that our black brothers and sisters have lived through. Looking at the cross is different from the view from the cross. If we look at those places that have had racial issues over the past year; the Ferguson's and Staten Island's and the others, it is difficult to see the image from the cross. The news media and on television and the papers give us a good view of the cross, but the view from the cross is hard to comprehend intellectually, because that is not our experience.

We as a group don't worry about our children when they're in school. They are safe. But for other children, the school environment is the safest place they will be all day. There are in danger in their homes, and on the walks to school. In February 2015 a Chicago youth of 13 was shot dead for posting the picture of an argument his 16 and 17-year-old sisters were having on Facebook. There were over 20 youths shot dead in Chicago so far that year. This is a societal burden worth bearing.

Looking at that other side of the issue as Jesus was said to have shared carrying his own cross to Calvary, so too must we, to some extent. Each time we share our joys and our sorrows. Our “touch of the hand” program of sharing these beautiful flowers is another example. The individual is bearing their own cross, their own sorrow or misfortune and the community is asked to help with moral support through prayer and flowers. Here we accept part of another’s emotional burden and the carrier gives us all the opportunity to feel empathy and compassion for another. In carrying our cross we recognize that we are all imperfect human beings. It acknowledges that we all have burdens that we must carry as part of our history or past or genetics that forms who we are and who we have become.

Carrying our own burdens gives us permission to deal with our imperfections in such a way that we take responsibility for our inherited or developed flaws. When we take responsibility for our burdens we are given permission to shift those handicaps, to not blindly accept these faults. Communally we can only partially see the person with their cross, the view of the cross is always different from the view carrying ones cross.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.