

Karen Hollis – Sermon
Feb 25, 2018
Mark 8:31-38

Lent never promised to be easy. 10 days into the season we are faced with the core of Jesus' message of discipleship: take up your cross and follow me. I don't think I have it all figured out, but the following is some of what I've been thinking and praying about it this week. As always, let us first turn to God in prayer. God of the journey and the cross, may your word be known here this morning, may your word be spoken and only your word heard. Amen

There is something distinctly different between feeling convicted by something, doing acts of service and taking up one's cross. Two weeks ago students around the United States were not speaking publically from their convictions about the importance of gun safety. They may have been vaguely worried about the possibility of being "next" in the ongoing narrative of school shootings. They may have had an underlying feeling of anxiety about growing up in a country and a time where this kind of thing happens regularly. But on Ash Wednesday after 17 people were killed at Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, something changed for students in the school and all over the country. Burdened by a horrifying experience, students and supporters from that school are taking the lead in pushing back on the powerful structures that made the attack possible. Over the last 11 days they have been speaking with their voices and actions, walking out of classes in protest and speaking to the media. A student named Alfonso said:

“This matters to me more than anything else in my entire life. And I want everybody to know, personally, I’m prepared to drop out of school. I’m prepared to not worry about anything besides this...I know everyone else here will fight for the rest of their lives to see sensible gun laws in this country, so that kids don’t have to fear going back to school.”

With this violent act, gun violence for many in the US is no longer just a national conversation. For some it is a feeling of conviction. Life as they would like it cannot exist until this issue is dealt with. For some it is an issue of the cross.

Bearing the cross is not just a matter of suffering the hand we were dealt. It’s not just about living with chronic pain, grieving a loved one or enduring a life situation like healing from a school shooting. And it’s definitely not about doing things that benefit only ourselves. Jesus uses some tricky, subtle language to get his point across. He’s asking us to be obedient to God in our life context, saying yes and pouring out our lives. Bearing the cross includes recognizing that this is not what I thought my life would be, this is harder than I ever thought it would be, but I cannot brush off this call on my life. For some of those kids it could mean obedience to God as a lifetime battle with the gun lobby to bring about sensible laws.

We each have a unique burden on our hearts from God, which may also include being mysteriously tied to our own weakness, our own growing edges. So saying yes to God is for many not at all easy and straight forward, it triggers our most basic fears and can bring out the parts of ourselves we like the least.

For some, it's parenthood – giving of one's self every day for a lifetime, being the kind of parent God would have us be.

What else is it? What are other examples of bearing the cross?

Marriage – serving each other for decades and humbling ourselves.

What else is it?

Caregiving – we watched “Breathe” last week

It's not what the disciples had in mind when they left their lives to follow Jesus - it was going to be amazing following this teacher. But then it gets real when Jesus starts talking openly about how he must suffer and die, but then 3 days later he will be raised up. What kind of Messiah is this if he's going to suffer and die? Is this the kind of Saviour we want to be associated with? This isn't right; this isn't how it goes. In their blindness the disciples distrust and criticize Jesus for this insane notion, so Peter gets in Jesus' face and I'm sure immediately regrets it. “Peter, get out of my way,” says one translation, “Satan, get lost! You have no idea how God works.” They don't understand that life with God is paradoxical. The first are not the honoured – the first are the humbled. In order to gain life, we must offer it, give it, lose it for the sake of another. It's pretty scary in the losing, the letting go of self, the unknown. Jesus does not ask less of them in their struggle to understand, but works to heal their blindness by teaching them about God's way. This is Eugene Peterson's translation from the Message – listen to these words:

“Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat; I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self.”

Jesus says, get out of my way, Peter; self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving your true self. Get out of the way and let me lead you to yourself. We find our true selves in God’s Kingdom, remember, that realm we find folded into the fabric of our world. Jesus describes here how to access it: in obedience to God and self-emptying for the sake of others. When we do this we serve the realm of God and a doorway is opened for all who are present and able to experience it. We offer ourselves and it brings our greatest joy. God says open your eyes and come with faith enough to put your lives in my care and you will know what real living is.