

Sandra Brown  
*Cross Ways*  
A sermon on Mark 8:31-38  
February 25, 2018

I'm going to invite you this morning to think back to a moment or a season in your life when you suffered. When you felt totally humiliated. I bet every one of us here can remember a time like that. Maybe it was not making the team, or losing a big game for the team. Maybe finding out that someone you loved was cheating on you. Maybe you are one of the many people who has had the experience of losing your job and being escorted out the door with your box of personal items. Maybe you overheard people you thought were your friends talking about you behind your back, and it wasn't very pretty. Or you had a party, and nobody came. Whatever it is, aren't you glad nobody can hear what you're thinking right now, and aren't you glad they can't see the memories playing out in your head? As you remember your own moments, however recent or long ago they were, does it kind of feel like hot coals pressing down on your heart?

I was trying to think of an example from my own life that I could share, and every time I thought of one, I thought, "I can't share that. I would be too ashamed to share that with anyone. THAT is just too painful to talk about." I also thought about the new kinds of humiliation that technology has made possible, with teenagers being pressured to take nude photos of themselves on their phones and then feeling ashamed if they responded to the pressure to send those photos to people who not only judge the way they look, but don't respect their privacy. It seems like the 21<sup>st</sup> century has made it possible to experience shame and humiliation on a whole new level. Even if you yourself have stayed off the internet completely, you might have a relative who decides to share something personal about you on there, and once they do, it never goes away.

In today's scripture, Jesus and the disciples are on a ROLL. I mean, things are going really well for them. Last week we talked about the fact that before Jesus began his ministry, before he emerged victorious from his struggles with temptation in the wilderness, he was baptized by John in the Jordan River, and as he came up out of the water he received this wonderful divine affirmation that he was God's Beloved Son, and God was pleased with him just the way he was. Now, he has called his disciples, he's cast out demons, healed a whole bunch of people including a man who was paralyzed, and a man with leprosy, and a man who was deaf and a man who was blind, and a little girl that everybody thought was dead. He has walked on water and calmed a storm. He has fed thousands of people with just a few scraps of food. He has sent the disciples out on a journey and they, too, were able to cast out demons and heal people. Things are going their way!

When Jesus begins to teach that he must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and killed, and after three days rise again, from Peter's point of view it looks like Jesus has totally dropped the ball, or worse yet, started playing for the other team. Back in 1994, America beat Colombia in a World Cup game, in part because one of the Colombian players accidentally scored a goal for America instead of Colombia. Several weeks later, back in Colombia, the player was murdered for his mistake. Peter is horrified by what Jesus is saying about suffering and death, and wants to silence him, perhaps for his own protection.

And whereas Peter has taken Jesus aside, seeking some privacy, Jesus turns around with Peter there and scolds Peter in front of all his peers. Peter, the star disciple who had just identified Jesus as the Messiah, gets an F. And then, if that wasn't embarrassing enough, Jesus calls the whole crowd that had been hanging with the disciples, calls *everybody* over and says, "Want to follow me? Take up your cross."

The thing about the cross is, not only is it a painful way to die, but in those days, it was the most humiliating and shameful way to die. It was as emotionally degrading as it was physically painful.

So you can imagine how shocking a statement like, “Take up your cross,” would have sounded to a group that was used to seeing miracle after miracle, success after success. And yet, as Richard Rohr reminds us, “Our central Christian image is a naked, bleeding, suffering man.” When we take up our cross, we take up a symbol of suffering and vulnerability.

Following Jesus does not provide protection against suffering, which Rohr defines as any time we are not in control. It is not a step by step plan for worldly success. It’s an invitation to enter into our own suffering, rather than avoiding it or suppressing it or numbing ourselves to it, or blaming others for it, and enter it trusting that God is in it with us, and will lead us through it to the new life that is on the other side. And it’s an invitation we receive over and over again, not just once and done.

Taking up our cross does not mean we have to submit to abusive relationships. It does not mean we don’t work to make the world more just. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t look for ways to ease suffering, where we can. It just means that there are no shortcuts to transformation. There’s no tram that takes you to the summit of Mount Everest. Sooner or later, life takes us into places where we can’t fix, control, explain, understand, or think our way out of our pain, and again, as Richard Rohr teaches, that is where transformation most easily and deeply happens. If your life is about building as much security for yourself as you can, and insulating yourself from the hurts of this world, that’s not much of a life. As you’ve heard many times, no doubt, we have to let go of the life we have in order to get to the life that’s waiting for us. Even Jesus had to do that.

So yes, we are God's beloved. And God loves and accepts us just the way we are. But Jesus also beckons us to take up our cross, if we would follow him. Billy Graham was one who understood this. He once said, "Comfort and prosperity have never enriched the world as much as adversity has."

Someone else who understood this was Fred Rogers, the gentle Presbyterian minister whose television show, "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," debuted 50 years ago last Monday. Mr. Rogers said many wise things, including this: "There is no normal life that is free of pain. It's the wrestling with our problems that can be the impetus for our growth." He also said, "People have said, 'Don't cry' to other people for years and years, and all it has ever meant is, 'I'm too uncomfortable when you show your feelings. Don't cry.' I'd rather have them say, 'Go ahead and cry. I'm here to be with you.'"

As the body of Christ, church is surely a community where we can be honest about the reality of suffering, and what it really costs to take up our cross and follow Christ. To be with each other as we carry our crosses together. And sometimes, to let each other cry,

I'd like to tell you about a time when someone was the church for me. It was close to seven years ago, when I was serving as associate pastor in Lee's Summit, MO. At that time, the longtime pastor had recently retired, and we hadn't found an interim pastor yet, so I was serving as the acting head of staff, and about two months into it, the man I was married to at the time left. This was going to turn out to be a good thing, but at the time it felt like someone had ripped my heart out of my body and stomped on it with spiky boots. I felt humiliated. I was working with two wonderful women: Lynda, who was the office administrator, and an old family friend whose kids I used to babysit, and Sharon, who was the custodian and also happened to direct the bells, in addition to 500 other things, and one day, a week or so after this happened, they came to my

office, which had a little window in the door. Lynda and Sharon took some white cardstock and taped it over the window, and said to me, as I sat there at my desk just kind of in a daze, “Sandra, you need to cry.” And then they closed the door, with the window now blocked off so no one could look in and see me, and left me to cry. That was just one of many ways they ministered to me over the next year or so, and by far the most memorable. I would have liked to fast forward past all the tears, and the suffering of that time, but if I had, I would also have missed out on the blessings and hard-won lessons that came with it.

I love that next week we will be offering a Sunday School class on the psalms, including some psalms of lament, because lament is so important, and it is another good gift that the church can offer to the world right now. And I love that tonight, we offer a potluck and presentation on the Stations of the Cross and mental illness. And I love that our church is a community where we can eat delicious food, and praise God with beautiful music, and laugh ourselves silly, and also take up our crosses together, and allow one another the gift of tears. If you are seeking a community where difficult feelings are OK, and transformation is something to be celebrated, I invite you to speak with me or with Pat or any of our members about what it means to be a follower of Christ here at First Presbyterian Church. Just as you are, you are welcome here.

