

“Giving Away Diamonds”

Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Summer ends: not by the solar calendar but certainly by the cultural calendar. The commencement of activity related to church, school and community reminds us that nothing lasts forever, except the word of the Lord. (Isaiah 40:8 and I Peter 1:25) Still, if you're like me, you're holding on to summer on this day before Labor Day. A week of pleasant weather evokes thoughts of time away, rest, even indulgence.

So why does the lectionary spoil summer's blessing by reminding us that the Christian faith is cruciform? I want to jump into the Gospel and argue with Jesus face-to-face: *“Why must Christian ministry end at Gethsemane and Golgotha? Must a Christian be a masochist?”*

Theologically the answers are “It doesn't” and “no.” Christian ministry does not end at the cross: it begins there and with the resurrection. And, no, Christians need not be masochists. Over and again the Bible trumpets the magnetic joy of Jesus and the early Church.

Yet let us not be naïve. Evil surrounds us, from war as diplomacy to the scourge of addiction to bullying and abuse. This is why Jesus speaks of our need to take up our cross.

Today's special music comes from the Taize community, founded in response to evil. In 1940 Brother Roger Schutz, a Swiss Protestant, created a monastic community in the village of Taize, Burgundy, France. As the Nazis rolled over France and Western Europe, Taize harbored thousands of refugees. For 75 years, Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have found, in the simple values and contemplative worship of Taize, a commonality that transcends differences. Their four principles—join a local praying community, extend friendship beyond the boundaries that limit us, share and pray regularly with others and make the Communion among all who love Christ more visible—resonate with our understanding of faith community.

Yet this commitment did not keep Brother Roger from bodily harm. A decade ago he was stabbed to death in a public gathering by a Romanian woman who was mentally ill. So Brother Roger's death, and the suffering of so many, throws us back to the words of Jesus: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."* (Matthew 16:24)

Let us be clear what cross-bearing is and what it is not. It is not enduring unavoidable suffering, as we so often imagine when we describe some illness or adversity as *"my cross to bear."* Nor is cross-bearing submitting to suffering injustice that must be resisted, as we say we are called to do in our baptismal vows. Cross-bearing is taking on **avoidable** suffering. It is the suffering that is chosen, risked and endured in order to eliminate suffering that can be ended or to stand with others whose suffering cannot be ended.

Most of us do not choose suffering. We recoil from it, even if it is anticipated. I count the cost, find insufficient spiritual capital, and don't even lift the cross—all while singing lustily "Take Up Thy Cross." Woe to me, always at risk of casually preaching the cross. Woe to us for casually wearing or speaking of the cross. Christ calls for such a radical change it can only be called dying—losing the life for which I've longed and striven and which I've learned to value.

Still, we long for things besides our carefully guarded lives: depth, truth, integrity, community, God. Like Moses struggling with his call in today's Hebrew scriptures, we may want to run from or argue with choices that are mutually exclusive, but eventually we must choose. The late Dorothee Soelle, a German Protestant theologian, said of her own faith *"My faith comes from the German catastrophe, Auschwitz."* She explains cross-bearing this way: *When you look at human suffering concretely you destroy all innocence, all neutrality, every attempt to say, 'It wasn't I; there was nothing I could do; I didn't know.'* *In the face of suffering you are either with the victims or the executioner—there is no other option.* (Suffering, Fortress Press)

Some of us, understandably, turn away from cross-bearing. Our own suffering is too much! How can God ask us to take on more?

Because there is a blessing in extending ourselves to another even while wrestling with our own suffering. The clergy have known for a long time *“if you are having a bad day, visit someone home-bound.”* The challenges of most home-bound folks put our own sufferings in perspective; and offering a kindness and listening ear sets aside, at least for a moment, the problems that consume us. It is a long way from the cross-bearing of Jesus but it is a start.

The cross is also necessary for healing through social structural change. The recent violence in Ferguson, Missouri engendered by the shooting of an unarmed Black teenager by a white police officer has again lanced the wound of race relations in America. Even a cursory reading of the reports indicates there is plenty of blame to go around. The question is whether we, as Christians, are going to be part of the “blame-game” or be willing to examine our own hearts, our own prejudices, the ghettos of our own making; and be willing to let the love that Christ revealed on the cross transform us to build relationships across the divides between us and whomever we view as “other.” To do so is one measure of our compassion, “suffering with” others.

This takes a different kind of thinking, an understanding of joy and value and treasure that rooted in something other than the things we often carefully—even jealously—hold on to. The story is told about a senyassi, and Indian holy man. One day the senyassi approached a village and a man ran to him breathless and said, *“Good sir, last night I had a dream and was told you were coming, and that in your knapsack you carry a very precious stone.”* The senyassi smiled, opened his bag and pulled out what must have been the biggest diamond in the whole world. Cautiously, the disbelieving villager asked, *“Would you give it to me?”* *“Yes,”* replied the senyassi, *“I found it in my travels and you are welcome to it.”* The villager took the treasure, overjoyed at his incredible good fortune. But soon he thought less of the diamond and more of the holy man. Finding the senyassi again, the villager said, *“I*

want to return the diamond to you and ask that you give to me the secret of the riches that allowed you to give the diamond away so easily.”

This is a beautiful story. But I guess it's a bit simple, even unrealistic. Heck, it goes against what we've learned about life, doesn't it. Few of us have met a senyassi. And people don't give away diamonds. Or do they?

Giving away diamonds was the call I received last Wednesday. Maybe you have a better explanation for it. The member was present last Sunday for our meeting that approved our handicapped-accessible renovations to the Wesley Center educational wing. They saw the presentation by the capital campaign committee that the project is going to cost \$400,000. And they saw that the lead gift was \$60,000. Unbidden and unsolicited, they called me and said they'd like to give that gift.

I was thunderstruck but elated. I managed to stammer out “thank you” and they said *“Please don't thank me. I have been praying about this and now that I have made the decision I feel nothing but joy.”*

We don't all have \$60,000, of course. But we all have something. And because we do there is something very real, very alluring about the story of the senyassi, and of our member. Maybe it is the paradox that gets to us, the seeming contradiction, the absurdity that one can gain riches by giving them away. Maybe it is the absurdity that by losing our life we will find it. Just like bearing the cross, it makes no sense. Just like bearing the cross, it makes all the sense in the world.