3/13-14/21 Lent in Plain Sight: Cross Rev. Amy Haines

Mk 8:31-38

Throughout this Lenten season, we have been invited to look for God among the ordinary elements of our lives—masks, oil, shoes, and bread. Today, our element is more familiar than ordinary, more symbolic than daily—or so it seems at first glance. For our element today is the cross.

Look around you here in the sanctuary. Take a mental walk through your home or your jewelry box. How many crosses do you see? How many crosses do you own?

Here in the sanctuary there is a cross on the top of the Christian flag, on the light fixtures, on the wall behind me and behind the altar. The cross window is covered for Lent, yet can be seen from the outside. Every time I enter this building I see the United Methodist cross and flame on our sign and on the end of our building. In my office there is a metal cross hanging on my wall.

Around your home you may find crosses hanging on your wall or on a mantel, crosses made of wood or metal, crosses made of yarn or paper if you have kids or grandkids, crosses large or small. Do you own a cross necklace or earrings? Do you own a palm cross or a rosary to guide you as you pray?

As people of faith, we are used to seeing a cross all around us. The cross is the foundational symbol of our Christian faith. Whenever we display a cross, we are proclaiming our faith in plain sight.

Or are we?

Nowadays, unfortunately, the cross has lost much of its meaning. Kids look at a cross and see the letter T. Rappers wear large golden crosses as a cool piece of jewelry then speak lyrics that are the exact opposite of what the cross represents. Some people own crosses as iconic wall art, never thinking twice of the symbol of the cross.

Even as I wrote this sermon this week I looked up from my computer and realized I have a cross above my computer desk, in a Thomas Kinkaid painting called “Sunrise.” When was the last time I looked up and reflected on that painting, on that cross? I confess it has been years.

The cross is seen all around us, in plain sight, and yet, how many people do not even know the meaning behind the cross? How many people look at a cross and never think of Jesus?

Today, we are invited to look at the cross anew and remember the meaning of the cross to our Christian faith. Today we are invited to look at the crosses that surround us on a daily basis and allow them to remind us to heed Jesus’ call to take up our cross and follow him.

Jesus’ call is as hard to hear today as it was when Jesus first spoke it to his disciples. In the Gospel of Mark, the disciples had been on a whirlwind tour with Jesus through the villages of the Galilee region teaching and healing, casting out demons and proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom ways of love and grace. They were excited and amazed by what they saw and heard.

Yet now, in the literal middle of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus pivots from expectation to reality.

Prior to this chapter, Jesus’ disciples have believed that Jesus was living into the long-held expectations of God’s Messiah—one who would be a military hero, a conquering warrior,

one who would restore the fortunes of Israel and overthrow Rome’s authority in God’s Promised Land. They no longer doubted Jesus’ power or authority. They expected him to do more.

Jesus would do more—but not what they expected. He began to teach them the reality of the road for God’s Messiah, a reality that would lead to the cross. He told them that soon he would be rejected, suffer, even killed, before he rose again. This was not a reality they expected. Even though Jesus spoke quite plainly, they struggled to understand and accept his words.

Peter, being passionate Peter, began to rebuke Jesus.

I can only imagine Peter saying, “Jesus, you’re talking crazy! What do you mean you will be rejected and die? You’re the Messiah! You’re the one we’ve waited for!”

Then Jesus turned around and rebuked Peter.

“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” “You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.” (v33 NRSV, CEB)

Jesus was beginning to declare his sacrifice for the world, and his followers still wanted glory.

Jesus was setting his face toward his suffering in Jerusalem, and his disciples still had visions of overthrowing Rome.

Not only did Jesus upend their expectation, he then went a step further, to explain not only that he would suffer and die, but his followers would also face challenge and suffering in their own lives. Following him was no longer for entertainment, but faithfulness. Following him was no longer a journey of curiosity, but a journey of commitment.

Bringing the crowds into the conversation, Jesus explained:

 “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.

All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.” (v35 CEB)

These are radical words, to any and all who have heard and will hear them. For in the time of Jesus, the cross was an instrument of torture and humiliation. In the time of Jesus, the cross was the most cruel and inhumane way to die. In the time of Jesus, the cross was an ordinary element of death.

Nowadays, although the cross is no longer used for the death punishment, the cross is still seen as an embarrassment. It is still a symbol of emotion over logic. It can still represent the powers that be rather than the humility of Christ who cares for others.

The cross is not an easy element to see and claim and remember each day. Yet Jesus, the Son of God, Jesus, who could have commanded any and all to follow him, Jesus, who had the power of God to do anything in this world, Jesus chose to die on a cross. And through his death on a cross, Jesus flipped the cross from a symbol of death to a symbol of life. He allowed the world to see and feel the mighty love of God.

Do we think of God’s great love when we look at an ordinary or elaborate cross? Do we hear Jesus’ words to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him? Do we think of Jesus’ great sacrifice for our salvation?

We can intellectually look at a cross, and learn the story of Jesus. We can know verbatim the story of Holy Week from a palm parade to a last meal to an ugly cross to an empty tomb. But when does that story, when do those ordinary elements, become images that gives our lives meaning? When do we embrace that the cross is a daily symbol of life, and life over death,

for each and every one of us?

The cross becomes meaningful when Jesus becomes meaningful. And Jesus becomes meaningful when we believe in him as our Savior and our Lord. And as our Savior and Lord,

Jesus calls us to a three-fold discipleship journey:

deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me

This is a hard call to hear, and a harder call to follow. Yet through following this call we also follow the call of God found in Micah 6: Do Justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.

Jill Duffield likens this three-fold discipleship journey to a three-legged stool which grounds our Christian life. Sit on one leg only, and the stool will fall. Stand on all three legs, however, and you have a firm foundation. Jill reminds us:

..The sequence of discipleship is important; one cannot happen without the prior action being done. -adapted from Jill Duffield *Lent in Plain Sight* p43-45

First, we are called to self-denial. We are called to let go of selfish ambitions, ego, and self-protection. For when we let go of our selfish ways, then we can focus more on the ways of God.

When we focus more on the ways of God, we can get out of the way and allow Jesus to lead.

When we allow Jesus to lead, we next heed his call to take up our cross. To take up our crosses means we intentionally choose what we might have avoided, in spite of the risk, in order to share God’s love with the world. We don’t count the cost of such a risk to personal comfort or even our very lives.

Cross bearing is more than being a passive victim or a patient martyr. Cross bearing is not simply wearing a cross or putting one on our wall. Cross bearing means we live in such a way that our faith is in plain sight, even if that faith leads to ridicule or rejection due to our choice to be faithful to the gospel.

Following Jesus minus the cross does not constitute discipleship; only mere curiosity or cheap grace. Following Jesus minus the cross makes faith a spectator sport, not a way that leads to new life.

When we follow Jesus, our journey will *always* lead us to the cross. And at the cross, we find salvation. At the cross, we find forgiveness. At the cross, we find the way that leads to resurrection. At the cross, we find ourselves.

When we take up our crosses, those around us won’t see a beam across our back. They may never see a cross around our neck. What they will see is Jesus’ ways as our ways. What they will see is sacrifice and love and obedience. What they will see is the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection reflected in all we say and do.

When we live as Jesus’ followers, then the cross becomes our faith in plain sight through each and every one of us, and through us together as the community of faith.

Yes, as Paul proclaimed to the church in Corinth,

“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (v18 NRSV)

This foolishness is hard to overcome. We don’t like to stand out from the crowd. We don’t like to offend others with our declarations or our actions. We don’t like to be ridiculed or rejected.

We yearn for faith to be real in our lives, yet balk when our faith calls us to sacrifice and service

in response to our salvation.

As Jill Duffield reminds us,

…God in Christ reveals a wisdom we can never attain on our own and a power made perfect in weakness. We harbor hopes for revenge, Christ desires mercy. We want success, Jesus tells us to be servants. We stay up thinking about how to get even, Jesus commands we love our enemies. We hold grudges, Jesus says forgive seventy times seven.

All of this godly wisdom seems so foolish, but there is nothing more powerful than vulnerable, sacrificial love. No wonder we prefer a sign or some worldly wisdom. But once we’ve been redeemed by such foolishness, all we ever want to be is a fool for the One who saved us.

-Jill Duffield *Lent in Plain Sight* p.49-51

Victoria Atkinson once said,

It is crazy if you think about it. We wear a symbol of torture and death as jewelry. It is, as the text calls it, foolishness. But it is only foolishness to those who do not know the full story.

The cross receives new meaning through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead of being only a symbol of death and torture, it turned into a symbol of conquering death. The cross could not keep our God silent; it could not keep Christ in the grave. The idea really is foolish; it is crazy.

But so is the idea of resurrection, of salvation through grace and faith, and a God sacrificing a son for sinners.

-Victoria Atkinson White 3-11-12 ministrymatters.com

Today, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to once again be fools for Christ. We are called to see the cross all around us, and be reminded of God’s grace. We are called to take up our crosses, so that others will see and hear and experience God’s grace through us. This is a grace displayed fully on the cross, as well as at the empty tomb.

May we then go forth this week as cross bearers, as crown wearers, as those who follow Jesus to the cross, through the cross, beyond the cross, in life, in death and in life beyond death.

Thanks be to God.