

21From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

24Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? 27"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

I need a cross to carry. Seen any around here?

There is a cross. Solid, heavy. If only I had some tools to get it off the wall. It used to be on the altar – some people told me that whenever they worshipped they would look at that cross on the altar and remember what Jesus had done for them – it helped them love Jesus even more. But then I came and the first thing I did was to move the cross to the wall so I would stand behind the table for the liturgy of the communion meal. But that is another story.

A cross. You would think that somewhere in a church we would have a nice carrying cross. What about back here?I think this will do just fine!

Jesus said, "Take up your cross." Now what?

I could carry it around on Sunday mornings and you would all remember Jesus carrying his cross to Golgatha. This one looks really heavy but it is not so heavy – mostly awkward. I will carry the cross around and around – I will be like Jesus and burn off some calories at the same time. It will be good for me. If I do it long enough I might even begin to suffer. No pain, no gain – that was the sign in the wrestling room at Milan High School. Maybe that is why Jesus wants us to take up our cross. A little suffering strengthens us. Paul said, "Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been give to us." I could use some more character;

maybe cross carrying will do it. Think of the character those marathon runners in the Olympics have. I do not think carrying the cross around here will give me that kind of character.

Anyway I am getting tired - time to put down this cross.

Jesus did, you know. Some of the gospels say that Jesus only carried his cross part way to Golgotha. Simon of Cyrene came along and they forced him to carry the cross for Jesus. Maybe I should get one of you to carry for me? No. I will just leave it here.

Somehow this whole cross exercise has not been very fulfilling today. I think maybe I am missing the point.

Love is the point, isn't it? Not crosses nor suffering but love. There were three crosses on Golgotha that day – two were for robbers being punished for breaking the law. But Jesus was led to the cross by God so that you and I might share the eternal love of God, the eternal life of God. Not punishment but love for you was the meaning of Jesus cross.

I have been reading a book called Amish Grace. The book begins with the school shooting at Nickel Mines School. The day of that shooting, the families of the girls who were killed went to the home of the family of the killer to let them know that they forgave the murderer of their children. Forgiveness.

The book has many more stories like that to tell – Amish newly-weds on their honeymoon traveling to relative's homes as it their custom. Their buggy was struck by a 17 year old speeding. The bride was killed. As soon as he was able to move about the groom went to the young man who had killed his wife – forgave him, and began a friendship with him that has continued through the years. Such forgiveness is not easy – but for the Amish it is what Jesus' followers do. "If any would come after me let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

In our second lesson Paul writes: "Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If your enemy is hungry feed him, if he is thirsty give him something to drink."

Has anyone ever done evil to you? Hurt you through carelessness or meanness? Is it possible to love such a person? It is as difficult as being hung on a cross. But from the cross our Lord prayed, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

I think that for some here it took a while to forgive me for coming in and moving the cross from the altar. But they did.

“Love your enemies,” Jesus said. “Pray for those who persecute you.”

This love is not something we feel, a feeling of warmth and affection. This love is something we do, treating the one who has done evil to us not as they deserve but as God desires. You and I cannot do that. But God is able to make it happen.

Pray for your enemies – ask God to do every good thing for them and bless them. Maybe your heart will follow.

Dick Sering who began Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries was fond of saying, “We do not think our way into a new way of acting but we act our way into a new way of thinking.” Pray for your enemies, ask God to do good for them. You yourself feed your enemy, give your enemy something to drink – your heart may be changed.

Jesus did not want to go to the cross but he knew it was God’s will for him and so he went. Ever since you and I talk about the cross as showing Jesus love for us.

Could the same happen with you? Could you let God lead you into deeds that are very difficult and costly even if you do not feel like it? Could God create the miracle of love for an enemy in you?

I am sure that the bridegroom who lost his bride but in forgiving her killer gained a friend would tell you that God can and does. Amen.