

Risking Love from the Center  
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Have you ever heard anyone say, “Well this is just my cross in life to bear.” Rarely do we hear “I am being crucified by such and such...” That’s a little too dramatic. Bearing a cross is an idiom that is used more for an unpleasant chore or an aggravating obligation. There is a sort of individualistic fatalism about it, and an unspoken plea for sympathy. This is how far we have come from the origin of the phrase, a powerful and troubling statement by Jesus after a heated exchange with Peter, one of his closest friends. “Take up your cross and follow me”...this is not about the chores and obligations of life, but something deeper and more transformative.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, using some equally troubling words: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...” But he follows it with the modifying, “be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Something tells me that these images of cross and sacrifice have something to say about an inner transformation, a re-orienting of outlook, which will lead to a certain way of life. In fact it will change the way we live and die.

Today’s Gospel reading has often been interpreted to justify a rush toward martyrdom: “Take up your cross and follow Jesus into death.” But it seems pretty clear to me that Jesus was not urging his disciples to insist on being crucified. Some **were** executed...but not because crucifixion was the goal. Jesus was speaking of his own willingness to serve and to suffer, to walk down a certain kind of road. The disciples were asked to re-evaluate their lives in the light of his fate and decide what was the most important next step. Jesus is angry with Peter for confusing the “things of God” with “the things of humanity.” He was not devaluing human beings – he obviously spent a lot of time helping all kinds of people toward healing and well-being. He cared deeply about the poor, the hungry, the sick, and seemed distressed by their pain. Here he speaks about human standards or human habits. Our standards are about striving and achieving, becoming powerful and respected, having a lot of money. That’s natural: the impulse toward survival is built into us through evolution. But when this impulse is allowed to work unchecked, something of our human soul is lost.

The Apostle Paul continues his talk of sacrifice in a way that makes it clear that he is talking about a way of life, not a way of death. This is a list of what’s called “exhortations” by commentators: “Do this, and this, and this...” The fledgling Christian communities already had a lot of rules: they taught the Ten Commandments, they read the teachings of Jesus. Paul gives us even more: there are, depending on which translation you use, more than 30 imperatives in our reading from Romans today. It’s a bit different than the usual, “Thou shalt nots.” Here, Paul addresses their hearts: he talks about loving and rejoicing and weeping. How do you command someone to love or to laugh or to cry? The passage begins, “Let love be genuine,” at least in our translation. Another contemporary translation, by Eugene Petersen, says, “Love from the center of who you are” and later says...”discover beauty in everyone.” Love from the center of who you are – that phrase begins to help me think about the transformation I need to undergo to understand Jesus’ rebuke of Peter and his talk of human and divine things.

Paul's exhortations describe a kind of life that keeps giving in different circles of relationship. He speaks of mutual affection and a sort of gentle competition in showing each other honor. These words apply to the inner circles, one's church family, so to speak. I find it amusing that competition is encouraged: he just turns in on its head but saying it's about giving honor rather than grabbing it. Sounds lovely, doesn't it? But make no mistake: this can be a huge challenge, this can be a real cross to bear, when our feelings are hurt or our toes are stepped on. We need to dig deep into the center of who we are, as children of God, taught and claimed by Christ, to find the resources to "discover beauty in everyone" in this room. It means careful observation, rather than quick judgment, of others.

In that 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, Paul goes on to speak about our enemies. There is a new give and take, a new equation, for dealing with enemies and persecutors. Another imperative: "Bless!" is repeated twice, with an exclamation point each time. I think of blessing as something that wells up from the divine spark within each of us and radiates outward. It is not tangible, but it's very real. Paul doesn't let us stop there, though. He gets very particular: "If they are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink." In other words, we have to get close and personal with these enemies and persecutors. We are not given permission to keep our distance. It is a form of self-denial, a cross of sorts, to have to spend face-to-face time with the enemy. And payback, retaliation, is taken out of the equation. It's not our job, apparently. Our job is the blessing and the feeding.

Which brings us to our situation, here and now, in a world where hateful and divisive rhetoric seems threaten the very core of who we are as people and communities and nations. How does the Christian, trying to be at least decent, and perhaps grace-filled, respond? Can we respond with more than silence, can we risk loving from the center of who we are?

In Germany, they have a lot of experience with hate speech and marches coming from the far right. It is very tempting to engage in retribution and shouting matches. But one town, the small town of Wunseidel, got creative and almost seemed to be using Paul's exhortations as a form of resistance. Neo-Nazis are attracted to Wunseidel because Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess was once buried there. Though his remains were removed to another site in 2011 and his grave was destroyed, far-right extremists still flock to the town year after year. The residents of the town hate it and have attempted protests and numerous legal complaints to no avail – Wunsiedel is still treated as a place of pilgrimage for neo-Nazis all over Europe. What to do?

Three years ago, a group of organizers gathered pledges of financial support to an organization against Nazism. For every meter the neo-Nazis walked, 10 euros was given to EXIT-Deutschland, an organization that helps neo-Nazis and other right-wing extremists escape radicalism and build new lives. The campaign, called Rechts Gegen Rechts — the Right Against the Right — turned the march into Germany's "most involuntary walkathon." Both local businesses and individuals contributed. As the neo-Nazis marched, in somber anger, they encountered writing on the street thanking them for raising so much money to fight hate. They turned the march into a mock sporting event. Someone stenciled onto the street "start," a halfway mark and a finish line, as if it were a race. Colorful signs with silly slogans festooned the route. "If only the Führer knew!" read one. Someone showered the marchers with rainbow confetti at the finish line. The approach has spread to several other German towns and one in Sweden (where it was billed as Nazis Against Nazis). The organizers even set up water tables along the route to "thank" the marchers, a lovely

spin on Paul's command, "if [your enemies] are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" (Rom 12:20).

When we oppose those who do evil in our world with anger and violence, we are more likely to perpetuate the evil they do. So how then do we respond to evil? We take Jesus as our model. Jesus knew that only the willingness to respond to violence with peace, to respond to hatred with forgiveness, can redeem evil. That is one way to follow him and take up a cross. He was calling us all to follow his pattern of responding to evil not with retributive hate, but with true resistance, so that eventually one can embrace those who do evil with mercy and kindness and forgiveness: overcoming evil with good! We can only truly overcome evil if we overcome the tendency for evil in ourselves, so that we are capable of embracing the "evildoers" with compassion, from the center of who we are.

Thomas Merton wrote about our Christian calling:  
"Vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God."

It's very risky. It's very hard. There is no calling in human experience that's more challenging than embracing those we consider evil with compassion. I'm not sure it's possible to do that without "denying self" and setting aside all the selfish ego needs we have to find our true center. We cannot pretend that 'taking up the cross' is only something we embrace with the mind, or even just only in the relatively safe confines of our own congregation, but by changing the very way we live and die. Otherwise we have already chosen death. I would rather choose the life of true community, the life of truth, the life of meaning, the life of joy in all of its fullness.

And I believe that Jesus taught what he did, Paul taught what he did, not because it is an impossible ideal, but because they knew that in our deepest center, we crave that kind of living. It is worth risking all for.

William Stafford wrote a poem about our life's calling: The Way It Is:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among  
things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

May we never let go of that thread, our heart's desire and God's grace, planted deep within us.

Amen.