



The Stakes Are High
“SO SURRENDER!”

Rev. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Luke 9:18-24

What is the most recognizable symbol in the world? What do you think? For centuries it has been the Christian cross. Are any of you wearing a cross today? I'm wearing lots of crosses this morning. But today, in 2014, the cross is probably no longer the most recognizable symbol in the world. Depending on whom you ask, you'll likely get these answers: a Coke bottle, the golden arches of McDonald's, the Islamic star and crescent, the Nike swoosh, the Olympic rings, a smiley face, Mickey Mouse, the Apple symbol, and Red Cross.

For me it's probably a toss-up between the Nike swoosh and the golden arches of McDonald's. I kind of like the swoosh because Nike's slogan, "Just do it!", is something I confess I say a lot. I often have little patience for excuses and procrastination in myself or for people who say, "I can't do this." "Of course you can," I say. "You can do whatever you set your mind to doing. Just do it."

On the other hand, the golden arches, greasy hamburgers, chicken nuggets and syrupy pop of McDonald's probably shape the image of America around the world more than anything else. Did you know that:

- There are 34,480 McDonald's in the world in one hundred and nineteen countries.
- One in eight Americans has been employed in a McDonald's.
- McDonald's is the world's largest distributor of toys.
- McDonald's feeds sixty-eight million people a day.
- McDonald's sells more than seventy-five hamburgers every second.

Americans spend more dollars on fast food than on higher education, computers, cell phones or cars. As the old saying goes, "We are what we eat." I'd like to propose another saying this morning: "We are what we bear." I'm referring to the cross.

The cross is the central symbol of our faith. It's the logo of Christianity, isn't it? How ironic, then, that the cross was an ancient instrument of death. The use of an upright stake and a crossbar to display a body or torture or execute someone was widespread in the first century B.C., especially in times of war. Crucifixion is most closely associated with the Romans.

Standard crucifixion practices included a flogging or beating, parading the victim to the site of execution, and wearing a placard around the neck with words describing the type of crime committed. The prisoner was stripped and fixed to the crossbar with ropes or nails driven through the forearms. The weight of the hanging body made breathing difficult, and death usually came from gradual and excruciating asphyxiation. Crucifixion was viewed by the Romans as the most wretched of deaths.

Jesus knew what crucifixion was. When he was about eleven years old, Judas the Galilean led a rebellion against Rome. He raided the royal armory at Sepphoris, which was four miles from Nazareth, where Jesus lived. As retaliation the Romans burned Sepphoris to the ground and sold its inhabitants into slavery. And two thousand of the rebels were crucified on crosses that were set in lines along the roadside as a warning to others who might think about rebelling. Jesus knew firsthand what crucifixion was all about. Yet not only did Jesus himself endure the cross, he says that you and I must also be ready to endure the worst that life offers for the sake of following him.

Our Scripture for today has been called the turning point in the gospels. For three years Jesus has been preaching and teaching about God's love. He has been healing bodies, renewing spirits and changing hearts. He has been a bearer of hope and joy. One day Jesus is alone with his disciples and asks them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They reply, "Well, some say you're John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the prophets." "What about you, though? Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "The Messiah of God." This is the first time in the gospels that Jesus is identified as God's son, the anointed one, the one for whom the Jews had waited for centuries.

But, notice, Jesus doesn't go on to describe upcoming military victories or an overthrow of the Roman government. He doesn't talk about conquering armies or becoming a political hero. No, he tells them that he's going to have to undergo great suffering, that he will be rejected by his own people and killed. Then he says, "If any would become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." The bearer of hope and joy now becomes the bearer of the cross.

If you and I, too, claim Jesus as the Messiah, what, then, is our response? The stakes are high for us as individuals, for the church and for our world. How does Jesus ask us to live our lives? Who is Jesus challenging you and me to become as we participate with Jesus in redeeming our world?

Quite simply, our call is to bring in God's kingdom of grace, hope and love. We are called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Jesus says we need to take up our cross daily and follow him. What matters is not recognizing the cross, wearing the cross or worshipping the cross. Will you bear the cross or just wear it?

During this fall season Gary and I are asking you to look seriously at your life, because the stakes are high. We only get one chance at this life, don't we? We only get one chance to be a disciple of Jesus, one chance to change the world. But I can't make a new me, and you can't make a new you. That's one thing I've discovered the hard way over the years. I've learned that despite my best intentions, I can't change my life without God's help, even if I'm wearing a

cross. My hesitation, denial and unwillingness to surrender to God is, in effect, a decision to stay right where I am.

I want to share with you several observations about bearing the cross, not simply wearing the cross.

First, bearing the cross is voluntary. Have you ever heard people talk about a particular cross they have to bear? They may be referring to chronic pain, unemployment, cancer treatment, problems with children or grief over the death of a loved one. These unfortunate happenings are not really crosses, however. Unchosen suffering is painful and heartbreaking, and we need to help each other get through those tough times, but it's not a cross. It's simply part of what it means to be human.

Bearing a cross is that difficult thing we choose to do because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. It's surrender. It's deliberate self-denial. We admire those who bravely endure crises and suffering, but true surrender comes when we consciously decide to carry a cross. We do the things we don't have to do and probably don't even want to do and will perhaps carry a huge cost.

Were you following the story of Dr. Meriam Ibrahim earlier this year? Ibrahim was born in Sudan to a Christian mother and a Muslim father. In this Muslim country children are required to adopt their father's religion, but Ibrahim was raised by her mother as a Christian.

Trained as a physician, Ibrahim married Daniel Wani, a Sudanese Christian who came to the U.S. as a child refugee and is now an American citizen. In May Meriam was arrested in Sudan and charged with two crimes: apostasy, that is, leaving the Muslim faith, and adultery, marrying a Christian man when she was really a Muslim. Before sentencing the judge gave her three days to recant her faith, but Ibrahim was resolute that she never was a Muslim. "I am a Christian," Meriam said. She chose to bear the cross. Sentenced to one hundred lashes and death by hanging, Ibrahim was imprisoned while pregnant with their second child and was forced to give birth while in shackles.

According to Islamic law in Sudan, Ibrahim could live with both children in prison for two years, after which the baby would be weaned. Then she would be hanged. After an international outcry, Ibrahim was released this summer and granted asylum by the U.S. government. Their family flew to New Hampshire where they are beginning a new life.

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." Losing our life is not a strategy for successful living but a way of being faithful. Losing our life is not a back-handed method of gaining popularity but implies real pain and hurt and a price to be paid. Losing our life is not like all those miracle weight loss programs where we can eat Big Macs and fries every day and still drop the pounds. No, losing our life means that we, like Jesus, may well have to face suffering, ridicule, embarrassment and even rejection. But we are never forced to carry our cross. We do it willingly. And, as Luke alone of the gospel writers says, we do it daily. Will you bear the cross or just wear it?

Second, bearing the cross stands for the worst and the best that life can offer. Both Roman law and Jewish piety said that it was necessary for Jesus to die in one of the cruelest ways possible. Dying on a Roman cross was scandalous to Jews and Gentiles alike. Yet the apostle Paul claims the cross as a source of boasting because God acted through the cross to bring us salvation. The greatest evil became the greatest good.

The cross is the symbol of a transformed existence, how Jesus willingly took upon himself the worst the world could offer and turned it into an act of love. By bearing our cross, by allowing ourselves to be crucified with Christ, we, too, take upon ourselves the world's pain and transform it into hope and love. It's no coincidence that, thirteen years ago, out of the rubble of the World Trade Center a cross was erected, a powerful symbol of how love will ultimately triumph over hate.

Just as the cross stands for great evil and great good, so the capacity for great evil and great good lives within each one of us. Have you ever noticed the war going on inside you? The good urges us on to higher things, to love God and neighbor, and live nobly and serve selflessly, while the evil in us urges us to indulge our lower nature, act in self-centered ways and go along with the crowd.

We want Christ, but only somewhat. We love God, but only moderately. We'll follow Jesus, but only so far. Jesus doesn't want your promises and resolutions to attend church every Sunday, serve on a committee, go to a Bible study, visit people in nursing homes, make an estimate of giving for 2015 and promise to do better next month, although they are all important. Jesus wants you to bear the cross, not just wear it.

Finally, bearing the cross means that Jesus invites you to wave the white flag, to surrender our will and our very lives. The summer after seventh grade I read J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* followed by the three-volume *The Lord of the Rings*. I was utterly fascinated by these books, which took me into a fantasy world of which I had never dreamed. Never could I have imagined that *The Lord of the Rings* would be captured in epic films in 2001, 2002 and 2003. These were followed by *The Hobbit*, a three-part fantasy adventure film series released in 2012, 2013, and 2014. The last film, *Battle of Five Armies*, will be released this December. J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Christian, and all of these movies are filled with Christian themes.

Tolkien's fantasy world, called Middle-earth, is populated by dwarves, elves, humans, wizards and hobbits. *The Fellowship of the Ring* is about Frodo Baggins, a hobbit, who has been given a ring. This ring possesses ultimate power and will determine the fate of Middle-earth. Frodo chooses to travel into the land of Mordor to destroy the ring. The only way to destroy it is by returning it to the volcano in whose fires it was forged.

Frodo chooses to bear the ring because the stakes are high. It's a terrible burden, an incredible responsibility, but Frodo freely chooses to bear the ring, not just wear it. He says, "I will take the ring, but I don't know the way." Gandalf, the wizard, and his friends vow to help and travel with him.

As this fellowship of the ring journeys to the depths of the dark world where the ring was forged, they're attacked by evil at every turn by those who would take the ring away. At one point, Frodo says, "I wish I had never seen the ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" "Such questions cannot be answered," says Gandalf, who is a Christ figure. "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have... And now the decision lies with you. But I will always help you... I will help you bear this burden, as long as it is yours to bear."

Gandalf suggests that Frodo does not have the ring as an accident. He was meant to bear it. So, as disciples of Jesus Christ, you and I are meant to bear the cross. It's our calling, but it's also totally voluntary. Jesus will never force the heart. All he wants is for you to surrender. Jesus wants you to be all in. Will you bear the cross or simply wear the cross? The cross is not meant to be put back in the hymnal rack when you leave the sanctuary. Wear it as a logo on your heart.

How will you take the cross on the road this fall? The stakes are high. Will you pause before putting on your Nike's and leaving home for McDonald's, the mall, school or the gym and intentionally bear the cross? Will you find some way to serve that may be challenging, difficult, or even distasteful, but is a sign of God's love, reconciliation and shalom for the entire world? "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Will you bear the cross or just wear it?