

Palm Sunday
"I, Simon of Cyrene"
Mark 15:21
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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Our text from Mark tells us nothing more than: "And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross." Matthew says even less: "As they were marching out, they came upon a man of Cyrene, Simon by name; this man they compelled to carry his cross." Only the evening before, Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane by a great mob of soldiers and dragged in chains before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. From there he was taken to Pilate who in turn sought to transfer jurisdiction of the prisoner to Herod. But Herod wanted no part of Jesus and had him returned to Pilate.

During Passover, it was a Jewish custom to pick out a criminal and grant him unconditional freedom with all crimes charged against him completely wiped away. However, when asked who they wanted freed, Barabbas or Jesus, the crowd's bloodlust was SO great that they demanded the former, a thief and a murderer, to be released over the latter, a simple rabbi who preached and practiced peace and love. Surrendering to the crowd's will, Jesus was then taken away and throughout the rest of the night, he was beaten, mocked, and spit upon by the soldiers and crowds. After being scourged with a leather whip which had pieces of sharp metal attached to it, two huge rough beams of wood were placed upon his shoulders which he was now forced to carry to the place of his execution just beyond the city walls.

Along the Via Dolorosa, the Roman "Road of Pain and Suffering" which will take him to Golgotha--"the Place of the Skull"--the crowds entertained themselves by goading and jeering at the three prisoners- Jesus and two thieves. But eventually the lack of sleep and physical exhaustion became too much for our Lord and, under the weight of that cross, he collapsed to the ground. Like a broken horse, the soldiers continued to beat him, screaming for him to get up, but it soon became evident that Jesus could not continue any further.

Now nothing would be more degrading than for a Roman soldier to carry another man's cross. And certainly, a JEW wouldn't dare touch it for were one to have contact of any kind with such an instrument of death, it would then render him ceremonially unclean and unable to participate in any of the Passover festivities. So, the question becomes, if Jesus could not go on, then how would he get to the place of his execution? Who would possibly help him? Apparently, the soldier in charge saw a tall, broad-shouldered black man in the crowd- one Simon of Cyrene, and assuming him to be no more than a slave, commanded him to carry the cross the rest of the way. We can infer he was black because Cyrene was a city in northern Africa located on the Mediterranean in what is now known as Libya. During Christ's time, it was controlled by the Romans though we do know there was a large colony of Jews living there. We can also surmise that he was a Jew who just happened to be in Jerusalem to participate in the Passover celebrations- a holy week for which every Jewish male was obligated to attend.

For months, Simon had lived in anticipation of this event and all the food, fellowship, and worship associated with it. However, as an observant Jew, he knew full well that were he to merely touch that cross, he would be rendered ceremonially unclean. This would mean that for the duration of the Passover festival, he would have to be quarantined from his family and the rest of the people of God and thus have no opportunity to eat and fellowship with them, no chance to go to Temple and worship with them. Hence, all that careful preparation, all that travel and money spent, all the high hopes and anticipation would have been for nought. It would be like saving up a whole year to go to the Super Bowl and then after purchasing the tickets and hotel room, being told you couldn't attend anyway. I'm sure Simon protested vigorously, attempting to explain to the soldier that he was not a slave but a Roman citizen with rights like other citizens. The soldier, however, had no time for explanations- he had his orders and so with the crack of his whip, Simon was instantly pressed into service.

When Mark and the other gospel writers say that Simon was "pressed" into service, they use a very deliberate word to describe what has happened to him- they use the Greek word "angareion" which means "compulsory work without pay." When Cyrus, the King of Persia, conquered Palestine, he created a kind of postal system throughout the region whereby royal messages from the government could be sent throughout the land. To relay these messages with the utmost speed and efficiency, couriers or mounted messengers (called "angaroi") were stationed at main points along the highways with their horses ready. At any time of the night or day, no matter what the weather was like, they were expected to drop what they were doing and deliver the message to the next station. But these couriers also had the power to press into service additional men and horses and even boats at any time, if it was necessary. Somebody just might be walking or riding by and the courier would rush out and "press" that person into the delivery service without any objection or refusal. The inhabitants of the region found it oppressive, inconvenient, risky and without any compensation, thus it was viewed as forced labor by a very proud and independent people.

Therefore, when Simon was "pressed" into service to carry Jesus' cross, he had no choice in the matter- it was OBEY OR ELSE. Reluctantly placing the heavy cross upon his own shoulders, he plodded slowly through the winding streets towards the gates of the city, enduring the scorn and contemptuous gaze of the crowds while Jesus struggled to walk in front of him. How humiliated, how embarrassed, how totally discouraged this Roman citizen and faithful Jew must have felt- to be mistaken for a lowly slave and THEN, to bear upon his back the most shameful and degrading symbol in the ancient world.

Well, that's all that our scripture text tells us about Simon but we know that there is so much more to the story. Like Simon, life has a way of pressing US into service, of forcing US to carry somebody else's cross and thus becoming the burden-bearer of another person's affliction. During the middle of the Great Depression, my mother--a young girl barely twelve years of age--watched her OWN mother suffer and eventually die from Hodgkin's Disease. Hodgkin's Disease is a cancer of the lymph glands and though today it can be treatable if caught early enough, back in 1930's, there was little that doctors could do about it. She told me stories of how creative her mother was- how she could juggle and sing and entertain the family with her guitar. But at the age of thirty, with a husband and six small children to care for, symptoms of

the disease began to manifest themselves. It gradually progressed to where it claimed her eyesight, and then she grew so weak that my mother was forced to become her private nurse-feeding, dressing, and washing her each day. Over the next few years, my mother became the de facto head of that household, making breakfast and dinner for the family, shopping for and clothing each of her five young brothers and sisters, making sure they all got off to school and church on time. Then one spring day in 1937, while my mother was gently cradling her in her arms, her mother--my grandmother--closed her eyes and she quietly passed away. Her suffering had finally come to an end.

For my mother, there was no choice in the matter. Her mother, whom she loved dearly, was stricken and she had to grow up very quickly. She was forced to sacrifice her childhood and become an adult well before her years- for the sake of her father and five younger siblings. Like Simon, she had been "pressed" into service; she had been "forced" to carry the cross of somebody else who could not carry her own. There was no option to refuse it- only the decision to bear it quietly, patiently, lovingly, courageously, which she did. Life has a way of forcing its crosses on people's shoulders and the choice is rarely one of IF we will bear it, but HOW will we bear it- with selfishness, anger, and resentment, or with faith and patience and love?

For months now, we've all been praying for my dear friend Phil Moran. Phil and I were roommates together throughout seminary and even best men in each other's wedding. Last year, after more than 30 years pastoring the same church, he knew it was about time to retire. He preached his final sermon to the congregation and then began to make plans for the REST of his life. He had just become a grandfather a couple of years before and was looking forward to spending time with his new grandson. He and his wife Charla also anticipated traveling some as well as playing a little golf and doing some flyfishing amid the beautiful landscape of western Idaho. He still wanted to serve a church though, like me, only in a part-time capacity.

But then this past summer, he began having trouble walking and swallowing. He visited a specialist who after a series of tests delivered the sad news he was suffering from the most virile form of ALS- also known as "Lou Gehrig's Disease." Told there was no cure and that little could be done other than to make the end as comfortable as possible, he will eventually lose all control over his bodily functions, including his capacity to walk, talk and feed himself. While remaining mentally alert, he will in time become a prisoner within his own body. The doctor instructed him to go home, get his affairs in order, and then prepare for the inevitable.

Two months ago, a small group of his closest friends, me included, flew out to Boise where we spent a couple of days with him and Charla. He couldn't speak but was able to communicate by typing into his phone and it would speak the words for him. When it was time to say our goodbyes, there were buckets of tears along with prayers and expressions of our love for each other; we have already planned to hold another reunion with him later this summer. Often, I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about him and praying that the end will come quickly and painlessly, but such concerns are offset by his tremendous faith- one which continues to overflow with gratitude to God for all his grace and strength. He's aware there will be no holidays with his grandchild, no golf or flyfishing with friends, and certainly no opportunities any more for him and Charla to do the traveling they both looked forward to- just

the long, painful trip down his OWN Via Dolorosa, the SAME "Road of Suffering" CHRIST HIMSELF traveled on the way to his OWN death.

I have to say that nothing heartened us more than a recent note we received from him. He told us not to worry about him, that he does not fear death as he knows his hand is in the hand of One who has walked with him every minute of every day on THIS side of life and who will CONTINUE to be there with him and for him on the OTHER side AS WELL! Phil understands how his Lord is no dispassionate or disinterested observer as to what happens to us for no one knows BETTER that "road of suffering" than CHRIST does. It is a road Jesus walked NOT ONLY ONCE but a journey he has made a million times or more SINCE- EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY. Every time WE--as Christ's own brothers and sisters--find OURSELVES forced to make that long, lonely march, we can be confident that we will never do so alone. The famed preacher Phillips Brooks used to say, "I pray not that God will take away my burden, but that God will give me a stronger back" and that is precisely what God does for US- he strengthens our back by offering us ANOTHER shoulder--his OWN--to help bear its weight. As Simon helped carry HIS cross, so NOW Christ helps us to carry OURS. When life lays that cross upon OUR shoulders, as heavy as it may be, and we must journey down our OWN Via Dolorosa, "the Way of Suffering and Pain," he promises that our knees shall never completely buckle beneath its load. He walks beside us with that heavy crossbeam upon his OWN shoulder and, to FURTHER lighten our load, offers us the strength of OTHER shoulders- through the care, compassion, and comfort we receive FROM OUR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS AS WELL AS OUR CHURCH.

But of course, there IS one great difference between the walk JESUS had to make and the one we must take OURSELVES. As the old Negro spiritual goes, "Jesus walked this lonesome valley, he had to walk it by himself. O, nobody else could walk it for him. He had to walk it by himself." However, where Christ had to travel that long, lonely road ALL BY HIMSELF in the interests of saving a lost and broken world, we can be confident that WE will never have to make that same journey ALONE, that with each stumbling step we take, he is right there helping to steady us, offering us his OWN presence as a crutch and, of THAT, we can be CONFIDENT!

And don't ever think that you're some exception to the rule, that you're EXEMPT from ever having to carry such a cross YOURSELF for the truth is that one awaits EACH ONE of US- I know some of you carried one into this sanctuary EVEN THIS MORNING. There is the cross of sickness and disease laid across many a shoulder- the cross of cancer, the cross of Alzheimer's Disease, the cross of Parkinson's, the cross of alcoholism, the cross of drug addiction, the cross of a stroke- each is a very heavy cross to bear. For some, the cross is a husband or wife who remains emotionally distant from you; it is a life of little love and communication. For some, that cross has been a rebellious and wayward son or daughter that has caused you many sleepless nights. Still for others, it might be economic hardship, or possibly a constant battle with fear or depression or loneliness. There is a cross in EVERY man and woman's life and there is NO ESCAPING it.

But there is one FINAL detail we can't overlook- perhaps the MOST IMPORTANT one in the entire drama. The fact that Mark knows the name of this man, and what's more, is aware

of the names of his two sons—Alexander and Rufus--says something significant to us. He would not have made mention of this fact unless all three were then familiar to the early Church. Therefore, it is most likely that Simon and his two sons were probably Christians and members of the church. If this IS the case, then that means that somewhere between the COURTROOM where Christ was found guilty and the CROSS where Jesus was hung, one Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry his cross, became a follower and disciple of his.

Thus, rather than a tale of tragedy and despair, it becomes a story of FAITH and TRIUMPH! For Simon, that one moment of indignity and shame and humiliation would become the occasion of his highest honor and joy. Just what he saw in Jesus, we can only surmise. He had never witnessed Jesus heal the sick or feed the multitude. He never sat under his ministry to hear the teachings that many said could only have come from God. No, he never saw Jesus as he had lived and moved about the Judean countryside- but he DID see Jesus as he had DIED, and IN HIS DEATH, saw more than most people ever saw IN JESUS' LIFE!

And what exactly DID he see? In the hours of the crucifixion, Simon of Cyrene saw the meekness and patience of his suffering. He heard Jesus pardon his enemies with the words, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"- even as they pounded the nails through his flesh. He heard the words of hope granted to the criminal crucified beside him- "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise." He saw the supernatural darkness that covered the earth and felt the ground tremble beneath his feet in which God expressed his own pain and outrage. He heard the final gasps of Jesus as he committed his spirit back to his Father in heaven. And when it was over, he witnessed the centurion at the foot of the cross glorify God, saying, "Surely this WAS the Son of God." In that death was summed up all of his teachings, all of his ministry- the very soul and character of that man. John Wesley used to say of his Methodist followers, "Our people die well" and in Jesus Christ, Simon of Cyrene found the clear example of one dying well. Jesus was proof to Simon that humiliation and suffering and death was not the last word, that in the face of such horrible indignities there was not only room for nobility but a serenity and capacity for forgiveness that could only have come from God.

Friends, whatever that cross may be that you struggle with this morning, and we ALL do, our text assures us that it is does not have to crush and eventually defeat us. As Simon discovered- discouragement eventually yields to hope as God offers us rest at the end of that long march. Yes, all of us, particularly as we get older in life, must arduously make our way down that Via Dolorosa, "the Way of Suffering." And it may seem at times that the exhaustion is too much for us, that we cannot proceed any further. Yet, we are assured that we have a friend in Jesus Christ- in one who UNDERSTANDS crosses, in one whose own burden was FAR HEAVIER than ours shall EVER be, in one whose yoke is easy and whose load is light. With his help, our cross, that "emblem of suffering and shame," can become the ultimate witness to the power and the love and the peace of God in our lives. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, whose most dear Son walked the way of the Cross and accepted the service of Simon of Cyrene to help carry his burden for him: grant us each the grace to gladly bear ONE ANOTHER'S burdens, for the love of him who said, "As you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.