For the message about the cross is foolishness to some and the very power of God to others. What is the message about the cross, to you?

In the past two Sundays, we’ve taken time to look at the symbol of the cross, to really stare down the reasons why now, in 2015, the cross can seem like a foolish symbol, especially to those of us who believe in a gospel of peace, because of the ways it has been used in the intervening centuries and millennia since this letter was penned to the believers in Corinth.

Last week Randy Newswanger told, and also quite literally showed, us many of the ways the cross has been seen, understood and used. Having looked at these, we are still faced not just with this symbol, but with the story it links to and its prominence in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

The disciples could not understand it – not when it was but a future possibility (as in Mark 8 for today) nor when it was the reality unfolding before them on Good Friday. The early church clearly struggled with it – the folks in Corinth must have been arguing the foolishness versus wisdom of a religion whose God who gets themselves killed so easily. Clearly, to the writers of the letters to the early churches, and to those who wrote, edited and canonized the New Testament, the cross was absolutely crucial (pun intended) to understanding Jesus, and therefore what following him would/should look like.

Why did Jesus insist on dying, rather than avoiding the cross, when his path led him inexorably there?

Why did he tell his would-be followers that part of following him would be that they, too, would need to carry their crosses?

Why is the message of the cross the very power of God?

We are like Leonard Cohen’s “baffled” King David, “composing” triumphant “hallelujahs” for Easter. For the story through which we arrive in Lent (the death of our beloved teacher, brother, and embodiment of God and Love), leaves us, like most of the resurrection witnesses in the Gospels, uttering holy, but very broken, hallelujahs.

Jesus often spoke in parables, answering questions with more questions, or responding to a fill-in-the-blank question with an oblique or uncomfortable essay. On this subject, though, he seemed to speak clearly: his path would involve suffering, and he had no intention of avoiding it if doing so would mean contradicting the message he embodied.

He did not model a life of suffering or asceticism – his was a life

of teaching,

of healing,

of making turning a not-enough food into enough-for-leftovers,

of making sure feasts had not just water, but wine,

and not just wine, but good wine,
of meeting people at those sacred, hurting, teachable places,
of eating lots of food, with lots of folks at lots of tables.

However, one of the things Jesus seemed to know, was that suffering is not necessarily an indication that one has taken the wrong path. He went out of his way, literally endangered himself, to stop people from inflicting suffering on others, and sometimes to take on suffering in place of others. He had strong words for those who had no compassion for those who suffered. He even confessed, before his death, that he desired a way to walk his path that would avoid suffering. In other words, he didn’t enjoy, seek out, or glorify suffering, but he seemed to know that suffering simply is part of the human project. Especially, perhaps, the more faithfully and authentically a human you’re being. He seemed to know, and accept (again in the words of Cohen) that “love is not a victory march/...and it’s not a cry that you hear at night/it’s not somebody who's seen the light/It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah.” But it is an hallelujah.

**hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah ...**

In verses leading up to today’s passage in Mark, Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” The answers were all rather congratulatory: “they say you’re Elijah,” “one of the great prophets...” Then he asked them, “who do YOU say I am?” And Peter goes even further, saying: “You are the Messiah.” Jesus’ response seems to correct them, emphasizing his humanity, not his divinity, (“I am the Son of Man”), and that suffering and rejection would be part of his story.

Peter rebuked Jesus for saying this, protesting, “surely, if you’re really God, these things won’t happen to you. Isn’t that the point? If you’re divine, you’re above all that; you can avoid it.” And Jesus rebuked Peter right back – “You don’t understand!” Not only does he reiterate, by allusion, that he will suffer and die (“lose his life”), he also tells them that they, too, if they wish to be his followers, will need to take up their cross and follow him. They will need to choose their path based on love and faithfulness, not on ease and affirmation.

What might this mean – to take up our cross and follow?

“The basic meaning of airo, [in Greek] is to ‘pick up and carry,’” so as one commentator speculates, the “taking up of one’s cross” might be more about “the criminal (or an unlucky bystander)” in Jesus’ case, “carrying the cross through the city, rather than the actual crucifixion.”

The act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt which resulted in ridicule and scorn from the people. With this understanding, the phrase might be paraphrased: ‘be willing to publicly display your faith and suffer the consequences that such a display might evoke.’ Often, our reluctance to publicly display our faith is the fear of what others might think or do to [us].[1]

I don’t know about this author, but I don’t think this displaying faith is about witnessing in a tract-handing-out sort of way, but simply being willing to be seen, and to have our deepest hopes and truths on display. Being willing to choose our actions and words from our true self, not based upon our surroundings or the perceptions of others. Brené Brown, in her books, *Daring Greatly* and *The Gifts of Imperfection*, writes of the significance of being willing to be seen. For her, that willingness to be seen, or vulnerability, is the key to living authentically and abundantly, and not being ruled by shame or the negatively projected perceptions of others.

“Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.” [2]

For her, the cross and the God’s eye are inextricably linked – suffering and love, or in her words: the beauty and the struggle.

The most beautiful things I look back on in my life are coming out from underneath things I didn’t know I could get out from underneath. You know, the moments I look back in my life and think, ‘God, those are the moments that made me,’ were moments of struggle. I don’t see many people do it gracefully. I’m sure some people do it gracefully, not anyone I know. But, um, I think it’s the long walk from what will people think? To I am enough. I think it is recognizing that, if courage is a value that we hold as important, that vulnerability is the only way in and through. It starts by an openness to seeing ourselves and seeing kind of how we’re protecting ourselves from vulnerability. [3]

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity.[4]
You could say that Jesus’ path to the cross was one of authenticity and vulnerability. What more vulnerable position is there than (arms spread wide)? He did not choose or desire the violent response, but offered his true self, anyway. In all its divine and human glory, to be seen and known, and had the courage to act out of who he knew himself and God-self and Love’s self to be. I don’t think the call to carry our crosses and follow him is a call to crucifixion, or self-denial in the abdication-of-will or –intellect sense. I think it’s a call to live out and not deny our true selves. To be willing to publicly carry our crosses, our struggles, those things which would seek to weigh us down or kill us, physically or spiritually. To be willing to be seen as we really are, people who love deeply, care deeply, worry and doubt deeply, who battle against our own negative scripts and the negative scripts (real or imagined) of others.

Maybe this invitation of Jesus’ to pick up our crosses and follow is simply an acknowledgement that we each have crosses. And if we don’t pick them up and bring them with us, we will be planted with them on a hill not of our choosing. Perhaps you’ve heard the phrase, “it’s a hill I would die on.” From what I can tell, it comes from military use: soldiers under attack choosing not to retreat, but rather to stake their flag on the hill they’re on, and defend it to the death. It seems to me that the phrase could work well, if ironically, for Jesus and the hill (Golgotha) he made his stand upon. He decided that the good news of an upside-down way of living, i.e.

- living rightly now, not just in the best of all worlds/conditions (heaven)
- refusing to be assimilated by sacred or secular institutions of power
- refusing to return violence for violence
- standing between us and the stones we throw at one another
- all these things, but also us... We were, and are, the hill on which he was willing to die.

Is the place where your cross currently stands a hill you’re willing to die on? Does it reveal your heart and hopes? Or is it simply the place you found it, the place where its weight caused you to falter and stop your forward movement? Perhaps you stopped in order to try and hide your struggles and obstacles for fear of looking foolish? For fear of imperfection? For a feeling of shame at having to struggle? For caring what others think?

Maybe Jesus’ invitation to pick up our crosses and follow is a call for us to remember that challenge and suffering are part of life, part of the struggle for us all. But that we have a choice about whether and how to be defined by it. The most courageous, faithful, thing we can do is to keep living through and with the struggle. To follow anyway.

Maybe Brené Brown is getting close to what Jesus was trying to show when she says: “hope is a function of struggle … not an emotion, [it] is a cognitive, behavioral process that we learn when we experience adversity, when we have relationships that are trustworthy, when people have faith in our ability to get out of a jam.” [5]

We have a God who experienced adversity, who experiences it with us now. A God and a community in whom we can trust, and who have faith in our ability to get out of a jam. Maybe love, too, is a function of struggle. Maybe the cross is inextricably linked to the love.

*It’s a holy and a broken hallelujah

*Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah *

In closing, hear this prayer:

*Into the Eye of God*

by Macrina Wiederkehr
For your prayer
your journey into God,
may you be given a small storm
a little hurricane
named after you,
persistent enough
to get your attention
violent enough
to awaken you to new depths
strong enough
to shake you to the roots
majestic enough
to remind you of your origin:
made of the earth
yet steeped in eternity
frail human dust
yet soaked with infinity.

You begin your storm
under the Eye of God.
A watchful, caring eye
gazes in your direction
as you wrestle
with the life force within.

In the midst of these holy winds
In the midst of this divine wrestling
your storm journey
like all hurricanes
leads you into the eye,
Into the Eye of God
where all is calm and quiet.

A stillness beyond imagining!
Into the Eye of God
after the storm
Into the silent, beautiful darkness
Into the Eye of God.

Reference:

Although I didn’t directly quote it, I found the ideas in “Not a Super Hero, But an Authentic Human” by Caspar Green on the Scarlet Letter Bible blog helpful. [1]
http://scarletletterbible.com/authentic-human/


