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CMC Sunday Meditations, March 15

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The Cross and Redemptive Suffering



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A word from Joel:

Here's a riddle:

What's more important than going to a concert, or the library?

What's more important than going on vacation, flying overseas?

What's more important than kids going to school and college students attending classes? More important than testing and labs?

What's more important than the NBA, NHL, MLS, MLB, NCAA, March Madness, high school and youth athletics?

What's worth risking loss of production, loss of profits, loss of wages? What's more important than the Dow, the S&P, and the GDP?

What's more important than Sunday church?

What's more important than all your well-crafted plans?

Your answer here: _____

Prayers of the People

Prayers of thanksgiving for the arrival of Asher James Ryan-Simkins on Thursday, March 5 at 9:25pm. He weighs 8lbs 10oz and is 21 inches long. Congratulations to Kelsey and Mike!

Jeri Arent is having open heart surgery this Wednesday to repair or replace the mitral valve. The place is for her to remain in the hospital several days and return home to recover. We pray for a successful surgery and recovery for Jeri.

Poem

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.

Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.

(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.

(Surely, that has come clear.)

Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

--Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

Sermon/Scriptures/Guided Meditation
EternallyLiving, by Mark Rupp

[These non-standard times call for a non-standard approach to worship. To that end, what I'd like to offer is a guided meditation, loosely shaped around the practice of lectio divina with spaces for reflection, time for silent meditation or prayer, and invitations to engage the Word in other ways. Of course you can still choose to read straight through, but as we

figure out what it means to worship in these strange times, you are invited to engage in whatever ways you find most meaningful.]

- Take a few deep breaths before reading the scripture passage below.
- Read slowly (perhaps out loud) and pay attention to any words or phrases that stand out.

Matthew 16:21-26

From 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But 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."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For 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?"

- Spend a few moments in silence, meditating on the word or phrase that caught your attention.
- Questions for reflection:
 - What is your initial reaction to this passage?
 - What "cross(es)" have you taken up to follow Jesus?
 - What have you lost and what have you found by choosing to follow Jesus?
 - What role does suffering play in a life of discipleship?

On the bulletin board behind my desk, there is a copy of a painting by an artist named Mark Malone that is titled, "**The Fence: A Tribute to Matthew Shepard.**"



The painting depicts the fencepost near Laramie, Wyoming where Matthew Shepard was tied up and left to die after being severely beaten because he was gay. When I think of “the cross” this is one of the first images that comes to mind. Similar to some of the other depictions of crosses that we may see, the image of the fence is devoid of any visual connection to the horror that was perpetrated there. The sprawling landscape and beautiful sky surround a rugged-looking timber fence.

Unless you know the context, you might not realize that this fence is where Matthew was found by a passing bicyclist, who, at first, mistook him for a scarecrow. His head was completely covered in blood except for the tear tracks on either side of his face. He was found barely alive, but died six days later. Matthew Shepard’s murder helped bring attention to the need for federal hate crime legislation, and in 2009 a national law bearing his name was signed by President Obama.

Sometimes the picture gets partially covered by the many other things that get tacked up on my bulletin board, but it has been there since my first year pastoring at Columbus Mennonite. I added it to my bulletin board shortly after the national Mennonite Convention in Kansas City in 2015. That was the gathering where decisions related to LGBTQ+ people were coming to what seemed like a breaking point. Tensions were very high throughout the convention, and my experience as a gay man in that space was deeply affected on many levels.

One evening late in the week, I was leading an end-of-day debrief with our group of young people, trying to help them understand the significance of what was happening around them. In the middle of the discussion, one of our young people asked me very directly, “Why do you stay? What keeps you from just walking away?”

The questions caught me off guard, and I don’t remember exactly how I responded. I think I muttered something about how, for all its faults, the Mennonite denomination is where I’ve felt most at home, and I want to be able to show other LGBTQ+ people, especially young people, that there are Mennonites who celebrate who they are regardless of whether that puts them at variance with “official” teachings.

Those are definitely good reasons to stay, but the question continued to haunt me. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that one of the most important reasons I stay is the conviction that the things we believe truly matter not just in some supernatural, disembodied way but in a very real, living, experiential way. The theologies we preach and teach have the ability to move us toward life or death, toward liberation and justice or bondage and oppression.

I chose the painting of the fence to be a visual reminder of this conviction. Not only does the image serve as a very personal reminder of how the violence of the cross continues to plague the world, it also helps me think critically about what it means to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

- Questions for reflection:
 - What images come to mind when you think of the cross? How have these images shaped you?
 - What keeps you from “just walking away”?
 - How does theology (the way we talk about God) matter in your life?
- Listen to the song, **“Scarecrow” by Melissa Etheridge performed by the Columbus Gay Men's Chorus**. This version pairs some strikingly beautiful images with Etheridge’s lyrics.

In this Lenten series, we are considering the different ways that the cross provides meaning in our lives. Joel began the series with the image of the stained glass cross as a metaphor for the ways the cross allows us to see the world in a different light. The cross is a lens that alters, colors, distorts, and filters the way we see the world.

With Mark Malone’s painting and Matthew Shepard’s story as our unique lens, what meaning does the cross hold? And, perhaps more importantly, why does it matter?

With one shift of the light, this image of the cross allows us to see so clearly the way the cross represents the very real physical violence that LGBTQ+ people have endured over the years. We don’t need to know whether Matthew’s murderers were formed by any specific religious tradition to recognize our need to lament and repent for all the ways the Church has perpetuated the dehumanization of LGBTQ+ people.

In this light, the cross allows us to see so clearly a concept that was coined by Walter Wink called the “myth of redemptive violence.” In short, this is the belief that by projecting evil onto an “other” we can then achieve redemption by violently destroying that other. It is the narrative that only violence can save us. The problem with this myth lies not only in the ever-escalating nature of violence but also in how it seems to work only until we’ve found a new evil that must be projected on a different other to be destroyed.

The myth of redemptive violence is an important aspect that the cross allows us to see, but that is not where I want to focus our lens. It is easy to see this concept at play in the story of Jesus’ crucifixion and in the story of Matthew Shepard’s murder, but the passage from Matthew 16 where Jesus tells his disciples to take up their cross and follow him raises the question of redemptive suffering.

In learning to recognize the problems of the myth of redemptive violence, it can be tempting to want to move swiftly toward the idea of redemptive suffering as a corrective. Obviously violence isn’t the answer, and Jesus tells us we are called to

suffer with him instead, right?

But many feminist and womanist theologians have pointed out that the glorification of suffering has been used to maintain the subjugation of already oppressed people, especially women. Rather than the projection of evil, the myth of redemptive suffering relies on the introjection of evil onto one's self, with the remedy being the acceptance of suffering as deserved and redemptive. It is this narrative that has been used to keep people, especially women, in abusive situations.

The myth of redemptive suffering convinces us that it is the very act of suffering that will save. If I am not suffering, then I must not be following Jesus.

Katie Cannon refutes this notion bluntly when she writes, "Theologians need to think seriously about the real-life consequences of redemptive suffering, God-talk that equates the acceptance of pain, misery, and abuse as the way for true believers to live as authentic Christian disciples. Those who spew such false teaching and warped preaching must cease and desist."

When I see the image of the fence where Matthew Shepard died and think of the cross, I am reminded of the ways that many LGBTQ+ people, myself included, have spent so much of our lives believing in the myth of redemptive suffering. I'm not sure when exactly I internalized the "false teaching and warped preaching" that my sexuality meant that I was inherently sinful, but somewhere along the line I became convinced that the only way to reconcile my faith and my sexuality was to "deny myself and take up my cross." I spent years convinced that the suffering I experienced through the repression of my identity was what God required of me.

At some point, however, I realized this way of living was only moving me toward death and not toward life.

In an article that explores the role of suffering in Christian theology, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Palmer reframe the problem in this way: "It is not acceptance of suffering that gives life; it is commitment to life that gives life. The question, moreover, is not, Am I willing to suffer? but Do I desire fully to live...If you believe that acceptance of suffering gives life, then your resources for confronting perpetrators of violence and abuse will be numbed."

Do I desire fully to live?

It is not suffering (or violence) that saves but a radical commitment to life lived to the fullest through communion with God, justice with others, and integrity with self. This vision for life is what I believe we have lost sight of when we talk about eternal life. We typically only speak of eternal life in relation to death, but perhaps we ought to start thinking about eternal living as something that is available to us in every moment. It is a commitment to this way of life that compels us toward the crosses that Jesus tells us to take up and not a call simply to suffer for the sake of suffering. When Jesus tells his followers to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" it is not a call to passively suffer but an invitation to accept the system-shaking consequences of living life to the fullest.

Much of my thinking on this has been shaped by Cynthia Crysdale's book, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today*, and she sums up well the importance of this shift in focus from suffering toward life. She writes, "What Jesus chose was love, not suffering...Jesus accepted suffering, he did not choose it. Likewise, our entrance into the Jesus narrative may result

in suffering, but what we choose is positive, to be in communion with the Risen Lord, the Creator, and the Spirit, to love the world with their love.” While we may have to accept the reality of the cross, we must resist glorifying either its violence or its suffering as redemptive.

Instead, let us find our hope in a vision of eternal living that begins every time we choose to love.

- Questions for reflection:
 - Where do you see the myth of redemptive suffering operating in your life or the world around you?
 - How would life be different if you “desired fully to live”?
 - What does eternal living look like and what does the cross have to do with it?
- Read Matthew 16:21-26 again, paying attention to any ways that your thoughts may have shifted and any invitation that this text is making to you.
- Listen (and sing along) to the hymn [Will you come and follow me \(STS #39\)](#).

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I answer emails Tuesday-Friday, rarely Saturday and Sunday, and (almost) never on Monday.