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Abington Presbyterian Church

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

GETTING BEHIND

For most of you participating in this service online, it has been a long time since you could come into this sanctuary to worship. I am aware that many of you have experienced such a physical absence as a loss for this past year. I am quite thankful, however, that we can include you in worshipping each Sunday in the comfort of your homes. I'm also excited about the prospect that our pandemic team indicates that two weeks from today the conditions will allow with all the health precautions we are putting in place for limited numbers of you to return to this space for in-person worship. Let me be quick to add that we will continue to live-stream our worship services so that those who cannot physically be here in this space will still be able to join in worshipping with this congregation.

But for those of you who will be coming back into this sanctuary for the first time in a long time, I hope you will look at this room anew to see what stands out for you. I'm sure you will notice the temporary artistic worship enrichment projects: the pictures and poetry having to do with human hands along the walls of the sanctuary, as well as the large cut-paper banners here in the front. While you have been worshipping remotely, you could only see where the cameras pointed for you, but you'll soon have opportunity to look around. Among the things I hope you will notice is the cross that takes center place in our worship space. It is not the fault of the camera people who have been serving that you might not always get a sense that the cross is front and center. Those working the cameras have been instructed to focus in on the worship leaders primarily. But if and when you are able to come back into this sanctuary, I encourage you to take note of the cross.

It is a beautiful wooden Celtic-style cross that reflects our Reformed heritage with artistic carving of vine branches with leaves and grapes. We as Christians have a lot of symbols in our worship spaces, but some form of the cross has to be considered our primary faith symbol. However, the cross held different

connotations for the early church than it does for you and me. As Mark, the earliest of the gospel accounts, was being written some forty years after Jesus' death, the threat of crucifixion for being a Christian was still there. Social, political and religious instability were inescapable. A series of Roman emperors were asserting their power. The temple in Jerusalem was under siege and soon to be destroyed, while Jews were divided over supporting Rome or rising up against it. The fledgling band of Jesus' followers were caught in the middle. Their beliefs did not lead them to fight Rome, but they wouldn't bow down to Caesar. These executions by crucifixion were carried out in public, so each cross served as a threat reminding citizens and non-citizens without subtlety that they were not to challenge the powers that be. The clear message was: stay in line or you could end up carrying your cross to your own execution.

We hear in our gospel text today that Jesus tells those who want to follow him that they will need to take up their cross in order to do so. In exploring what that means for us, we note that this teaching follows an important conversation where Jesus predicts to his disciples that he would have to undergo great suffering, would face rejection by religious leaders, and would be killed, although he also predicts that he would rise again. In response, "Peter took (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him." "You may be dedicated to going this way, Jesus, but let me redirect you." I can imagine that Peter, like any of us, did not want someone he dearly loved to have to go through suffering that would take his life from him. You need to change course, Lord! But Jesus rebuked Peter in return. "You get behind me." That's where followers are supposed to be. Then he called him, 'Satan.' Perhaps Jesus found Peter's objections tempting. Mark tells us that Jesus turned and looked at his disciples while delivering this harshest of his rebukes so they would get to hear him say it. We then hear Jesus say to the crowd as well as to his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Why does the cross, an instrument of torturous death, still have such a central place in our places of worship two thousand years later? Certainly, the cross is a reminder of how far God goes in order to demonstrate divine love for us. It is also a visual sign of God's rich grace and forgiveness offered even to those who reject the

One who came as God in our midst. Yet, it also is an indication that Jesus, filled with the love of God, even at great risk to himself, would not, could not ignore those who were being oppressed by the powerful. He would make himself more vulnerable in order to advocate for the most vulnerable. He would not just focus on his own needs; he was challenging the system that ignored the needs of the many. And he called, even as he continues to call his followers to do the same.

So when we see the cross, I hope in part it is an inspiration for us to be dedicated to more than just our own personal needs and desires. The cross calls us to move beyond our comfort zone to challenge powerful systems that abuse and oppress the most vulnerable. The call of God's love compels us to risk our own position of status on behalf of those who lack status. God's love is so great, that those of us who are privileged in many ways cannot sit back quietly while the disadvantaged are mistreated. The way of the cross today may include peacefully standing up for and standing with those who are victims of hatred, denigration, and violence even when it involves risk to our reputations. This pandemic has made it quite clear that there are inequities in health care and in our education systems, which lead to other inequities. The way of the cross for followers of Jesus Christ cannot ignore such injustices, even when steps to address these urgent concerns may be controversial. Those of us who have plenty to eat are called not only to share what we have with those who have little, but to also work for systems that treat the poor with greater fairness and compassion. And when we have friends who degrade others because of their political beliefs, I hope we will challenge their vitriol even when it might get turned on us.

There might be a sense that our actions can't make a difference, so why put ourselves at risk? Yet, we heard in the story of Abraham and Sarah, that God can work in surprising ways to fulfill divine purposes. Among those purposes is pouring out blessings on some so that those blessings can be shared with others.

The cross that inspires us to live out the love of God compels us to go where we normally would not. It is not just an instrument of death, but a beacon of the kind of purposeful, active-loving life that our Lord invites us to take up as we get behind him and follow his lead.