

6th Station of the Cross:
"Simon of Cyrene"
Mark 15:21
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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." As we begin to put this scene into focus, we'll see how a single verse in the Gospels has throughout history provided the Church with one of its most inspiring moments. Only the evening before, Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane by a great mob of soldiers and dragged in chains before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin- our FIRST Station of the Cross. It was essentially a "kangaroo court"- one in which Jesus' sentence had already been determined long before any evidence was ever presented. However, lacking the authority to sentence him to death, they had Jesus transferred to Pontius Pilate, who ALONE had that power. This was our SECOND Station of the Cross.

However, because Pilate didn't want to get involved in a what he considered a Jewish problem, he had him transferred to the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, the king over the region of Judea and Galilee- the THIRD of our Stations of the Cross. Herod had heard of this Jesus, that he was a great teacher who could also perform miracles. Intrigued, he demands a magic show from him but when Jesus refuses to entertain him, Herod grew bored and had him returned to Pilate. The Roman Governor, finding no real fault with the man, wants to have him beaten and then released. But when the Jewish leaders protest, insisting that Jesus was a rebel who wanted to overthrow the empire, Pilate, fearing any disruption that could upset Caesar, had no recourse but to condemn him to death.

In one last effort to get him released, Pilate resorts to the Jewish tradition of releasing a prisoner at Passover time, confident that that they would choose this good rabbi over a ruthless criminal whom he personally would select- a murderer and a thief named Barabbas who'd been charged with the same crime JESUS had. This is the FOURTH Station of Jesus' Cross. To Pilate's great surprise but also consternation, the people clamored to have Barabbas released INSTEAD. At that point, Jesus' fate is sealed and there could be no sparing him from the cruelest and most painful form of execution in the ancient world- crucifixion. Throughout the rest of the night, Jesus was beaten, mocked, and spit upon by the soldiers and crowds. Scourged with a leather whip that had pieces of bone and metal attached to it, two huge rough beams of wood were then placed across his shoulders which he was forced to carry to the place of his execution just outside the city. This was our FIFTH Station of the Cross.

We come now this morning to the SIXTH Station, where we see Jesus, considerably weakened by the abuse and scourging he had received throughout the night, struggling to carry his cross to the place of his own execution. Along the Via Dolorosa, the road that 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 who would be executed beside him. But eventually the lack of sleep and physical exhaustion had become TOO MUCH for him. Under the weight of that cross, our Lord can continue no further and he collapses to the ground. Like a broken horse, the soldiers mercilessly beat him, screaming for him to get up, but it was soon evident that Jesus could not continue any further under his own strength.

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 to come into contact with such an instrument of death 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.

It has been assumed that Simon was dark skinned as 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 Black Jews living there. We can infer that he was not only BLACK, but that he was also a JEW who 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, he 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 enjoy fellowship with them, no chance to go to the Great Temple and worship with them. All that careful preparation, all that travel and money spent, all the high hopes and anticipation would have been for naught. It would be like saving up a whole year to go to the Super Bowl and then after purchasing the tickets, being told you couldn't attend ANYWAY. I'm sure Simon protested vigorously, trying 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.

Now 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 here- they use the Greek word "angareion" which means "compulsory work without pay." You see, 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. In order 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.

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 this 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.

Like Simon, life often 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. In 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 then, at the age of thirty, with a husband and six small children to care for, symptoms of the disease began to manifest themselves. The disease progressively 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 1936, 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. She had 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?

Similarly, whether we want to or not, every one of US is asked to bear a cross- perhaps some of us bore one when we entered this sanctuary this morning. There is the cross of sickness and disease upon many a shoulder. There is 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, the cross of the coronavirus- 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 NO ONE can avoid it- it's part of the human condition!

All the while we are praying and imploring God to REMOVE that cross from off our shoulders, God surprises (or perhaps disappoints) us with an altogether DIFFERENT response. The great Episcopal 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 with Christ at our side, he helps us to carry OURS. When life lays that cross upon our shoulders, as heavy as it may seem at times, our text reminds us that we NEVER carry it alone, that our Lord is there to help bear its weight.

However, this notion that Christ ministers to us in those moments of our greatest need by helping to shoulder our load is not a MINOR theme within the Gospels. Rather, it is a central premise that goes directly to the HEART of our Lord's teachings- from the very outset of his ministry right on through to his death on the cross. In one of his earlier lessons, Jesus laid it all out for us. He said to his followers, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Here he was employing the metaphor of a pair of oxen used to pull heavy loads. The two animals would be situated side-by-side with a heavy yoke placed upon their necks to bind them together, to make them work as a single unit. One of the animals--usually the older and stronger of the two--was placed on the outside while the younger and much weaker one would occupy the inside. The older, much larger and stronger ox would then be tasked with pulling the majority of the load while the young one hardly pulled any of the weight. The reason for this was that it broke the little ox into the habit of wearing a yoke and pulling heavy loads with it. In time, that younger, weaker ox would replace the older and much stronger one in teaching ANOTHER young ox how to pull a load.

Here, Jesus was comparing himself as the stronger of the two animals, implying that with him always at our side to help us, our load, REGARDLESS OF HOW HEAVY, will suddenly become light and easy, ESPECIALLY since he is shouldering most of it HIMSELF. We may bear half of it, but HE bears the OTHER half, the HEAVIER half. Thus, we can then be assured that if we ever grow weak or stumble and fall along the way, he will be there to support us until we reach our goal- of that we can be confident. It is that assurance of his abiding care and love for us that serves as the basis of all our rest, our peace, and our security.

Now instead of an oxen's yoke, think of that cross placed upon OUR shoulders and having to haul it down OUR Via Dolorosa, our OWN "Way of Pain." He assures us that he is with us every step of the way as we proceed towards our OWN Golgotha, and 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, even offers us the strength of OTHER shoulders- through the care, compassion, and comfort we receive from our families and friends and especially our church.

But there is one more detail we mustn't overlook- perhaps the MOST important one in the entire drama. The fact that Mark not only knows the NAME of this man but the NAMES OF HIS TWO SONS--ALEXANDER AND RUFUS--AS WELL says something highly

significant to us. He would not have made mention of this fact unless all three were then familiar to the early Church in that city, to whom this Gospel is addressed. At the end of St. Paul's Epistle to the church at Rome, he offers a number of personal greetings to the members there whom he had come to know and had tremendous affection for. In verse 13 of chapter 16, the great Apostle calls out two members in particular. He writes, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too." The name "Rufus" was not a common one within the Roman Empire and it is entirely possible that this Rufus--whose mother had become a SECOND MOTHER to Paul--may have been the SAME Rufus that Mark references HERE in our New Testament lesson as one of the sons of Simon of Cyrene. If that IS the case, then it seems likely that Simon and his two sons were probably CHRISTIANS as well as MEMBERS of the congregation Paul had founded in Rome. If so, then that ALSO means that somewhere between the courtroom where Christ was found guilty and the cross where Jesus was hung, Simon of Cyrene--who was forced to carry his cross--along with his entire family all became FOLLOWERS and DISCIPLES of his.

Thus rather than a tale of tragedy and despair, what we have this morning is 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 Christ's life! 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 a CAPACITY FOR FORGIVENESS that could ONLY have come from God.

Friends, whatever that cross may be that you struggle with this morning, and every one of us BEARS one, our text assures us that it is does not have to crush and eventually defeat us. As Simon discovered- DISCOURAGEMENT eventually yields to HOPE, that God offers REST at the end of that long march. Yes, ALL of us, ESPECIALLY as we grow older in life, find ourselves at various moments struggling to make our way down that Via Dolorosa, "the Way of Suffering." And at times, it may seem like 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. And 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, as He walked the way of The Cross, accepted the service of Simon of Cyrene to carry his physical 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," your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.