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## Choose the Cross

### Mark 8:31-38

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 1, 2015 by Maryann Verghese  
*(Trinity '15, Duke Chapel Student Preacher 2015)*

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Although Lent may be a strange time to talk about Christmas, Jesus' words in this passage reminded me of a particular gift from my childhood. One from my great-grandfather. Now, Papa was a man raised in ultimate practicality. A survivor of the Great Depression, and a World War II army veteran, Papa knew what it meant to survive. So, receiving Papa's Christmas gifts every year was interesting to say the least. In contrast to the neatly wrapped and adorned packages under the tree, Papa's present was lumpy and small. It was no surprise on Christmas morning to grab that present, and pull off the wrapping to reveal—not crayons, not a doll, not Legos—but a pair of socks. Not just one year, but every year. A pair of socks. Now, this was not just some inside joke or plain laziness, but simply his assumption of a useful gift. Everyone needs socks, right? These socks were not the first thing to be played with on Christmas morning, but truthfully were tossed aside, filed in a dusty drawer for that one moment when a pair of socks is needed. But when I needed a pair of socks, there they were. Useful. Warm. A Gift, when I least expected it.

On this second Sunday of Lent, we are still quite far from Jesus' death. Around this time, I have to acknowledge that I have already failed in my Lent plans. Compared to Advent, the other season of preparation, Lent just seems so hard sometimes. Advent is a season of joy and hope, preparing for the birth. Lent, on the other hand, is a period of intentional restriction and discipline. Instead of birth, Lent prepares for death. Yet, in this season that seems like the opposite to the joy of Advent, there is still a gift.

And we see this gift in today's passage in Mark. Jesus tells Peter and his disciples the uncomfortable reality of his ministry. Jesus must die, and not even a peaceful death, he is going to suffer and be crucified. This death will be pain and anguish and despair, and Jesus is willing to talk about it. Now imagine you are the disciples. You have been following Jesus around, learning and listening from him. You've dropped your entire life, and lived on the road. Abandoned the fishing business. Hung up your tax collector's license. You've witnessed him feed five thousand people with a small boy's lunch. You've seen him bring a dead girl back from the dead. You are convinced that he is the Messiah. And now, now, after all of this, Jesus is spending his time on earth talking about his death, talking about leaving you-- behind.

Peter is uncomfortable in Jesus' speech, and we are too. I imagine that after all Peter has gone through, the thought of losing Jesus, his friend and teacher, is just unthinkable. Peter and the disciples were expecting a conquering, warrior Messiah, and instead their Messiah is acknowledging his defeat. This long-expected present from God is not the biggest, the flashiest, or the trendiest present. Instead, this gift comes in a lumpy, ugly package. Peter and the other disciples see this confession as the ultimate weakness. Their great Savior is not supposed to simply die; there must be more to the story.

But, Jesus criticizes them for this thinking. He even calls Peter Satan. Now, is there a bigger insult than the Son of God calling you Satan?

But why? Why is this so horrible? Peter's rejection of death and suffering is supposed to be natural, isn't it? We are taught in this world that our status, our position, our wealth are what makes us powerful. But what Jesus is doing here is denying all power by worldly definitions. His power comes from his humility, from him being willing to submit to human suffering. God loves us so much that Jesus is willing to die for us. This gift of his vulnerable self, the gift of a perfect man willing to humble himself so low that he will be punished for no crime. Peter sees this as a moment of humanity, but in fact, this is a glimpse of Jesus' divinity. Perfect, blameless, Jesus is willing to sacrifice himself, to lower himself so much because of God's love for us.

Now, of course, this gift is radically different from a pair of socks. Growing up in southern California, I lived in flip flops and bare feet, weather permitting. Socks are not something I often view as necessary. However, the gift Jesus provides is something that is essential. The divine example of humble submission even to death on the cross is the reason for our faith. Jesus subjects himself to the worst possible death that we may find reconciliation with our God, and forgiveness for our sins.

Yet, there are other consequences for this gift. This is not a present that can be received passively. God's gift does not end on his sacrifice. Jesus' story does not end on the cross, on the pinnacle of suffering, and even at his subsequent resurrection. No. This is not the end. Jesus shares that we are invited to follow him, even after his death. Jesus invites us to take the journey with him. His gift is one that does not end in his own vulnerability, but asks to humble ourselves in his footsteps. "Take up the cross," he says.

Here, he is not talking about simply wearing the cross around our necks as jewelry or hanging it on our walls as a beautiful art display. The cross is not a pitchfork to condemn others for behavior we deem immoral. It is not a microphone to project our voices over those whose voices we believe should be silenced. Jesus does not say to climb to the top of the cross and stand above it, but instead to take it up, to raise it above ourselves, so that we are standing beneath it. Underneath the cross is a place to reconcile how great a love Jesus has given us, and what that means for our lives. This is an invitation to grow and recognize the depths of God's love and the power Jesus demonstrated in conquering death.

Jesus didn't have to follow the way of the cross. Just as he made his choice, I wonder if we can fully accept the gift of Jesus as a sacrifice without following his example of embracing weakness. And Jesus never promises that this will be easy. Yet through death and resurrection, he urges us to die to our own desires and what we cling to as identity so that he can make us new. The death on the cross is not the end of the story, but the beginning of a new life in Christ. Recognizing that following a true Christian lifestyle means dying to all those individual desires, and instead discovering the desires Jesus asks for us under the cross.

Jesus is calling us to be vulnerable in the same way that he shows this vulnerability. To humble ourselves and our self-importance, not to destroy our self worth, but to find our it in Christ's worth, to give us new identities, as a sign of God's love. He is asking us to care about what he cares about. And what is it that God cares about?

In our world, we are in a constant pursuit of worldly titles. After four years of running the race at an elite university, fighting for the best opportunities, the most prestigious internships, and positions, trying to be good enough to fit into the standards of this world, I have felt this pressure personally.

This endless pursuit of the better and the best is the trap of a perfectionist, and it often leads into some messy and unhealthy situations. When we are so wrapped up into seeking status and glory and do not look first to take up the cross, we shun Jesus' desires for our lives. We reject the gift we have been given. We shove that pair of socks into the back of the drawer.

Have you ever caught yourself constantly comparing yourself to others?

Have you ever felt that you just simply will not measure up?

That your best efforts will just never be enough?

I know I have. Jesus is calling us away from these standards in this moment. He is calling us to grasp his gift, and root our new identities in this gift. Now, this rejection of life is not a completely and total abandonment of life goals and ideals; it is simply a re-grounding of identity. We root ourselves in the gifts of God's love instead of \others' perceptions of us. We let God reinvent us as his children. Reinvent us as followers of Jesus. Reinvent us as people who can take up the cross and dare to love as God loves.

And this is not a challenge we take alone. As I was walking in the Chapel the other day, I was struck by the fifth station of the cross, Simon helps Jesus carry his cross. Even Jesus himself did not carry his physical cross alone. And in the same way, we do not bear the burden of our crosses in solitude, but carry our cross with others. The gift of Jesus' vulnerability is not something that has consequences just for our relationship with God, but also with others.

This is against our culture, against every fiber in our being – to share our weaknesses and trust that they will be heard and received well. I know firsthand that disclosing details of your internal self with those around you can be absolutely terrifying. But, this can be an important step for fully receiving Christ's gift of vulnerability. Letting others see your weak and fragile moments, just as God himself let us see his moment. Accepting that sometimes you will need socks when it gets cold, and that, in fact, socks are a useful gift that we all need at some point. This gift of vulnerability is something that we all can receive through Christ.

But the beauty of this gift is that we also can give it. Catholic priest Henri Nouwen talks about this idea of taking up the cross as embracing weakness, he also challenges beyond this. "Once you have taken up that cross," he says, "you will be able to see clearly the crosses that others have to bear." Christ gives us the gift of vulnerability not only as an example, but a call to the vulnerabilities of others. It is an opportunity to not only receive, but to give. Perhaps our friends are our socks at times, and perhaps at other points we are the socks for our friends.

One of the most beautiful things about the community in Christ is that we are called into relationship with those who we will never see, touch, hear, or speak to. This profound love calls us to be a listening ear and an understanding heart to those marginalized by the human sin of the world, and calls us to take on the divine perspective in response. To let our hearts bleed for others in the same way he bled for us. We are called to love and care for those who are physically, mentally, spiritually impoverished. Those living in the woods off 15-501. The man imprisoned for twenty years for a crime that would normally require a five-year sentence, simply based on the color of his skin. The girl that sits across us on the bus, who wonders if anyone cares about her pain. And of course always acknowledging that the face that stares back when we look in the mirror needs this love and care, as well. We respond to the brokenness in our world in the same way we recognize brokenness of ourselves. We embrace our brothers and sisters in Christ, just as we are embraced in Christ's love. Our cross is not a platform of glory, but a symbol of humble love and sacrifice.

It is through this cross that we understand the full power of God. Receiving this gift, choosing the cross, will not be an effortless road to walk. It is through committing to reframing our minds to Jesus' humility, through denying our identities and the ways of the human world, and through taking up the cross that we acknowledge the depth of God's love. When we participate in this relationship with God, when we accept this gift of weakness, we are able to reflect a smidgeon of the infinite love God shows for us. So as we travel this season of Lent, acknowledge the gift Jesus has given us in his vulnerability. Recognize your own need. The gift that is the cross. Carried for you. And stay alert for the day you carry it for someone else.