

**The Way of Our Cross**

Mark 8:31-35

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It has been said so often that it is a cliché, but even as a cliché it holds truth for us, "Life is a journey." We pass along this way gathering love and scars, sometimes even learning something worth knowing.

My mother-in-law told me the story of a male senior citizen who bought a brand new Mercedes convertible SLK. He took off down the road, flooring it up to 80 mph and enjoying the wind blowing through what little hair he had left on his head.

"This is great," he thought and floored it some more. Then he looked in his rearview mirror and there was a highway patrol Trooper behind him, blue lights flashing and siren blaring.

"I can get away from him with no problem" thought the man and he floored it some more and flew down the road at over 100 mph. Then he thought, "What am I doing? I'm too old for this kind of thing," and pulled over to the side of the road and waited for the state trooper to catch up with him.

The trooper pulled in behind the Mercedes and walked up to the man. "Sir," he said, looking at his watch, "My shift ends in 30 minutes and today is Friday the 13th. If you can give me one good reason why you were speeding that I've never heard before, I'll let you go."

The man looked back at the trooper and said, "Years ago my wife ran off with a state trooper, and I thought you were bringing her back.

The state trooper replied, "Have a nice day."

I would say don't count on speeding away from the problems and judgments of life. Slow down and live.

In the middle ages, during the crusades, some of St. Francis' friars found and taught a way for the crusaders to slow their lives down and live. The Franciscans were the keepers of the holy sites. They were the only ones that both the Christians and the Moslems trusted. Even today all of the old holy sites in the region of Jerusalem have the Franciscan cross marking them as sacred and protected. And in spite of the continuing violence in the region, these sites, with rare exception, remain protected by all sides.

The method that the Franciscans developed to slow the crusaders down and to cause them to think about where they were and what they were doing in light of Jesus, they called the *via crucia*, meaning the way of the cross.

Along the streets of Jerusalem, hopefully along the very path Jesus took from Pilate's courtyard to the hill of crucifixion, the little friars (as they were called) marked Jesus' journey with their characteristic cross. Along the way there were 14 spots marking the events of Jesus' final walk. Even today, travelers to Jerusalem can take this walk and look for the Franciscan crosses marking the narrow lanes of the old city.

Today, some five centuries later, almost every Roman Catholic

Church, and every retreat center and abbey or monastery, has the 14 stations for the way of the cross, either in its sanctuary or on its grounds, to remind those who want to think upon Jesus and their lives, to remember Jesus *via crucia*.

Not all the events and spots are biblical, some are simply long told tales, but each of them marks something of significance for Jesus' last journey. As we near the middle of Lent, the season in which we remember Jesus long, slow journey to death, the Stations of the Cross, as they are now called, can help us to also slow down and live. And maybe today, as we are in the midst of war, this ancient way of slowing down to see life's essential meaning can be useful to us.

**Station 1:** The judgment of Pilate: Often the walk toward dying begins with someone who has authority over us as Pilate had authority over Jesus. It was not Jesus' decision, or even God's decision, to die. Jesus does not want to die any more than we do. But Pilate, bending to public will, political necessity and fear, sends Jesus to his death. Sometimes our Pilate is a doctor, and our judgment a serious illness. Sometimes our Pilate is a president or a dictator and our judgment is war. Sometimes it is a spouse or friend and the judgment is brokenness and grief. In all these ways we are sent down an unchosen road to death.

**Station 2:** The taking of the cross: When Pilate says Jesus must die, Jesus is given a cross. When some power greater than ourselves dictates death, then we are given a cross. It is our cross to carry. We can resist, whine and throw temper tantrums, but whatever cross has been given to us will still be there and will still be ours to carry. So sadly and with no desire, we hoist what is ours to bear.

**Station 3:** Jesus' first fall: Carrying the cross is no easy journey for Jesus or for us. There will be times when, despite our best efforts, its burden becomes too great and we fall under its weight. Even so, it is our cross and no matter how tired we become, it is we who must once again pick up its enormous weight and stagger on.

**Station 4:** Jesus' meets his mother: As we stumble forward those who love us will meet us. They will care, they will listen, they will weep for our suffering, and by their love we are given strength for the way of the cross.

**Station 5:** the bearing of the cross by Simon of Cyrene: Thankfully there will be times when by grace the weight, for an eternal moment, is lifted. Someone says the right thing, someone finds a help, someone makes us laugh when we thought we had forgotten how, and our burden, in that moment, lightens and sometimes is even relieved. But such a lifting is only temporary, and our cross returns to our shoulders to be born alone once more.

**Station 6:** the wiping of Jesus' face with a handkerchief by St. Veronica: Along the way we will meet souls of great depth, souls who had we not been burdened so greatly, would probably have passed our notice. These are great souls who seeing our labor cool our faces with a gentle cleansing. Had we not been carrying the cross

we would not have known Veronica's greatness.

**Station 7:** Christ's second fall: But even encouraged by the love of a mother, and assisted by the courage of a stranger, and cooled by the gentleness of a saint, still we find that the cross is too much for us and again, a second time we fall, scarring our knees in prayer.

**Station 8:** Jesus' comforts the women of Jerusalem saying, "Weep not for me." As peculiar and counter intuitive as it may seem, it is just when we know the suffering of cross carrying, when we are most in need of comfort, that we are most able to comfort others as they carry their crosses. The mothers of Jerusalem are those whose sons have already hung from Golgotha, and those whose sons will soon die in their own cross carrying. Christ, as he rises from his second fall, comforts the mothers of the world who have lost and will lose their children to violent brutality.

**Station 9:** Jesus' third fall: And still, even in the midst of compassion, Jesus falls again. There is no easy way to carry our cross. There is no promise to any child of God, not even Jesus, that our cross will not drive us to our knees more than once and even more than twice. Crosses are heavy and they rob us of strength. But still Jesus and we go on.

**Station 10:** Jesus is stripped of his garments: Is it not enough to be judged and condemned, to carry one's own cross through the narrow lanes of the old city, to be ridiculed and rejected not only by the enemy's army, but also by the crowds of the streets, and even by beloved disciples? Now Jesus is stripped of all he has left and must carry his cross on, naked and humiliated. How well we know this stripping when we can no longer hide that chemo has taken our hair and that war has taken our child. We are like the emperor who vainly thought he could hide his nakedness and met the small child of truth who exposed the illusion.

**Station 11:** the crucifixion: And after all of this, Christ, naked to the world in body and soul, is nailed to one of the cruelest tortures devised by us. With spikes driven through his wrists and ankles, with IVs hung all around, with bullets coming from unseen enemies, with every word made cruel, with hearts broken and pierced, Jesus is raised upon the cross he has carried to strangle in his own weariness. And it will be weariness that will claim most of us as well.

**Station 12:** Jesus' death: To suffer only to die is an ignoble ending to the grace of our lives. We have loved so deeply and now Alzheimer has taken what little memory of love was ours. We have given so generously and now we have nothing, not even a breath, to share. To take the way of the cross is to begin a long suffering until we die.

**Station 13:** the descent from the cross: At the end we no longer have any control of what happens to us. If we are to escape the cross we have carried so long, so faithfully, to our death, then it is others, even strangers, even enemies that must lower us and carry us away from our crucifixion.

**Station 14:** the burial: The body of Jesus is placed in a cave

where it will rot until it is nothing but bones. And then those bones will be placed in a corner, or even thrown away, as waste to the world.

There is nothing glorious or beautiful about the *via crucia*. The Franciscans wanted to remind the crusaders, and the church wants to remind us all, that crosses are heavy and death is ugly. Only when we remember how dark the night of the soul is, do we wonder at the bright beauty of what will come when God resurrects Jesus, and resurrects us. Only by tasting the true bitterness of Lenten tears do we taste the true sweetness of Easter laughter.

I invite you to take your picture copy of The Way of the Cross home with you and post it someplace as a reminder of the Lenten journey which was Christ's and is ours.

Shalom and Amen.