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Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

ENDING THE PROTEST

First off, I'm glad the scripture passage about Noah and the flood was last week rather than for today. Second, I'll share a story from Robert Fulgham, who tells about when he was a young man in the late 1950's working at a resort in northern California. His job combined duties of a night desk clerk in the lodge with helping out with the horse wrangling at the stables. The owner/manager had particular notions about conditions of employment. Fulgham writes: "One week the employees had been served the same thing for lunch every single day. Two wieners, a mound of sauerkraut, and stale rolls. To compound insult with injury, the cost of meals was deducted from our check. I was outraged. On Friday night of that awful week, I was at my desk job around 11:00 P.M., and the night auditor had just come on duty. I then saw notes to the chef to the effect that wieners and sauerkraut are on the employee menu for two more days. That tears it. I quit! For lack of a better audience, I unloaded on the night auditor. I declared that I have had it up to here; that I am going to get a plate of wieners and sauerkraut and go and wake up the owner and throw it on him.

As I pitched my fit, Sigmund Wollman, the night auditor, sat quietly on his stool, watching me with sorrowful eyes. He's got good reason to look sorrowful. Survivor of Auschwitz. Three years. German Jew. He liked being alone at the night job - gave him peace and quiet, and, even more, he could go into the kitchen and have a snack whenever he wanted to - all the wieners and sauerkraut he wanted. To him, a feast. More than that, there's nobody around at night to tell him what to do. In Auschwitz, he dreamed of such a time. After listening for a while, Wollman say, "Lissen, Fulghum. Lissen me, lissen me. You know what's wrong with you? It's not wieners and kraut and it's not the boss. You don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire - then you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy. Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much. Good night." ¹

It is inconvenient and a bit frustrating that sometime during the night on Friday we had a third floor radiator that broke and spewed water that spread through a significant part of our church building before it was discovered early Saturday morning. But this inconvenience was nothing like the problem Peter saw when Jesus told his followers that he was about to go through a time of suffering and would be killed. That this should happen to the Messiah was more than annoying. "Peter took (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him." 'You may be dedicated to going this way, Jesus, but let me redirect you.' There probably was a bit of passion behind his statement. But before Peter got finished, Jesus rebuked him 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. In Gethsemane, Jesus would later pray to be delivered from the suffering toward which he was heading, but he finally prayed that it would be not his will, but God's will that would be done.

When Jesus picked up his cross, it was to set himself against the Roman Empire and the

temple authorities, against the ideology of the world that oppressed and shackled God's people, and against everything that hindered the in-breaking of God's reign. He picked up the cross to literally go to his death. But when the writer of Mark's Gospel related Jesus' teachings on the matter, all who were to follow him were called to take up their cross. Will every one of Jesus' followers face his same cruel and tragic death? That would move from being an inconvenience to being a problem.

Well, in Mark's day the threat of crucifixion was still there. As this Gospel was being written some forty years after Jesus' death, 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. Families were divided. It was a difficult, desperate, and dangerous time. This line from Mark's Gospel about cross-bearing reminded Christ's early followers of the cross' very literal potential to take life. Depending on the choices they made, indeed, it might take theirs. But, also, this line spoken by Jesus would have reminded them of the prospect the cross offered to help them gain everything.

I heard of a pastor whose grandfather knew a lot about crosses, literally. As he tells it, back in the 1950's his grandfather was a Grand Wizard of the KKK. On more than one occasion, his grandfather had led other men in erecting and burning crosses on public property and on private lawns. What motivated the use of these crosses for this purpose? Hatred, animosity, hostility, bitterness, ignorance - all these were driving forces in the man's life. The implementation of the cross in expressing them scarred many innocent people for life.

When the pastor was asked how he had reconciled himself to that part of his family history, he smiled quietly and responded this way, "Well, you see, my grandfather went through a conversion experience in mid-life and the cross began to play a very different role for him. It had been for him an emblem by which he spewed hatred. But one day, my grandfather said, as the stories of scripture were read in his church, he heard the line about taking up his cross. He realized then that every cross he had picked up, he had misused. And so my grandfather said he knelt and prayed and God showed him what to do with his cross. He said he nailed his rage upon that cross and let it die there. And with that death something new came to life within him." ²

Sadly, there are places in the world where Christians are being put to death because of their faith. And yet, martyrdom is not typically a threat for you and me. But in our context, we could understand the cross to be the place of transformation - a place to hang our arrogance, our rage, our bitterness, our prejudice, our greed, our cowardice - and let them die, so that something more eternally good and grace-filled and Christ-like may be resurrected! This Lenten season is a good time to consider whether something in our lives needs to die so that something more gracious, good, and generative can be resurrected in us. It will at least help us know the difference between inconveniences and real problems and it may well be a way for us to take up our cross and follow Jesus today.

¹ Shortened story by Robert Fulgham, found at <http://www.livinglifefully.com/flo/flobesigmundwollman.htm>

² From a story shared by Robert Baggott in a sermon, "Cross Purposes," http://day1.org/6454-cross_purposes