

Cross Purposes Matthew 10:24-39

Today I want to talk about Cross-purposes.

A cross-purpose is something that keeps the pet-lover with allergies constantly sneezing and snuffling while joyously playing fetch with the dog. A cross-purpose keeps the gardener moving slowly and cautiously on arthritic joints while gleefully playing in the dirt.

A cross-purpose keeps the football-loving dad at his daughter's Sunday afternoon ballet recital instead of in front of the TV watching the game. Making choices that run counter to our interests, making decisions that are at cross-purposes with that which is easiest or enjoyable, is a central paradox of the Christian faith.

Paul declared unequivocally in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that for most of the world the message about the cross is foolishness. So how can such foolishness bring the power of God, the gift of salvation, to those who follow Christ's crisscrossed path?

In this week's gospel lesson Jesus combines a message of "have no fear" with a litany of fearful directives.

- "Have no fear," he counsels, of proclaiming his mission and message "from the housetops."
- "Do not fear" the repercussions that may come from such pronouncements, for enemies can only (only!) kill the body, not the soul. "
- "There's no hiding the fact, Jesus said, that discipleship may divide families, strain or even snap the bonds that keep human homes and hearts together. "

The final directive Jesus gives in this list of discipleship duties is the ultimate test of commitment, the greatest evidence of foolishness for Christ's sake: "take up the cross and follow me" (verse 38).

What could seem to be more of an absolute cross-purpose with life than Jesus' admonition that "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (verse 39)?

I find in our lesson this morning, three cross-purposes disciples are called to embrace in our service to our Lord: a Cross-over; a Cross-back; and a Crossroads.

First, the Cross-Over. Throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, he was constantly crossing-over boundaries and barriers that separated people from God's love and life's gifts.

- Jesus accepted dinner invitations and sat down to banquets with those who were considered sinful, unclean, and unfit.
- Jesus reached across the barrier between the diseased, the outcasts, and drew them back into health and wholeness with his healing touch.
- Jesus bridged the yawning gulf between social and economic classes of his day.

Crossing-over boundaries is risky and often puts us at cross-purposes with those in authority.

What are some of the boundaries in our community that need to be crossed-over by the cross of Christ? When was the last time you found yourself at cross-purposes with some group or someone because you crossed-over?

Next, there's the Cross-back. Jesus was constantly crossing-back to rescue the lost one, the alone one, the forgotten one. A life of constant cross-purposes, or what Paul called the "foolishness of the Cross," was evident in the way Jesus traveled.

Instead of preaching and teaching just in the metropolitan center of Jerusalem, Jesus' cross-purpose mission led him to wander here and there, back and forth, sometimes making complete circles. Dusty villages, even just a wide spot in the road, became the focal points for great messages and miracles.

In the middle of nowhere, out in a leaky, listing little fishing boat, Jesus stretched out his hands and calmed the winds and the waves. Yet in the middle of the Sanhedrin, in the heart of the Jerusalem power structure, Jesus said nothing. Jesus uttered not one word of defense. Jesus performed no miracles.

Instead Jesus' words and works were most often directed at those who were out-of-the-loop, with little power or prestige, those left behind by the culture.

In many societies the practice of abandoning unwanted or imperfect infants has long been an acceptable practice. In the ancient world, children with obvious birth defects, girl-babies, mixed-race offspring, and other undesirable kids were by definition outcasts at birth, and so were quite literally cast out.

The child would be taken to the outskirts of the village or city and left there, unprotected, and on their own. One of the foolish acts practiced by early Christians was the cross-back, the intentional rescuing of these abandoned children.

Jesus taught a discipleship that required crossing back to get those left behind. If the two-for-a-penny sparrow in the marketplace and even the number of hairs on your head was a concern to God, how much more, Jesus preached, are you worth? Every child is a child of God. Every child is God's concern.

This is the cross-back, cross-purpose of faith: in order for our community of faith to grow into the future and into the world, its members must constantly be crossing back to recover and reclaim those left behind.

Finally, there are Crossroads.

The discipleship journey Jesus laid out for his followers not only requires crossing-over some rough, frightening terrain, it also means being at cross-purposes with the easy, established, well-trodden path.

And the discipleship journey Jesus maps out in today's lesson not only requires crossing back to pick up stragglers and abandoned strangers - being at cross-purposes with the expected, the normal, the straight-forward.

Jesus' discipleship journey is a roadway constantly intersected by competing path and forks in the road where we'll have to choose . . . life or death, family or faith, pleasing others or pleasing God.

Sometimes you'll need to decide which road to take: the road to Jericho which leads to service, or the road to Damascus which brings us closer to a fresh encounter with the divine? Will it be the road to Emmaus, to the resurrected Christ, or will we travel on the Via Dolorosa, the road to Golgotha, where suffering and pain and even death are likely?

Crossroads: moments on the journey where a definite choice to go left or right must be made - are a daily encounter for Jesus' disciples. Sometimes the signs at these cross-roads make it difficult to know which is the right direction, for the signs can be misleading, enticing, cajoling.

Jesus warned his disciples not to be led astray, even by such seemingly right choices as love for family, or companionship, or even life's comforts.

Our lesson this morning teaches us that the Christian life is a life lived at cross-purposes with the world. How are we doing?