

YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO! (a.k.a. "Gladly!")

A Lenten Sermon on Luke 9:23-26—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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Then [Jesus] said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" [NRSV].

David James Duncan writes about a boy who named his teddy bear Gladly.

"'Why Gladly?' someone asked him.

"'Cause he's cross-eyed,' the boy said.

'What's crossed eyes got to do with the name Gladly?' the questioner wondered.

'We sing it at church,' the kid explained.

'It's a hymn. Called "Gladly the Cross I'd Bear."'"ⁱ

I can just see the boy clutching his cross-eyed bear, the boy and the bear smiling with delight over the marvelous origin of his name. Gladly.

In the reading we just heard from Luke's gospel, Jesus discusses bearing crosses, but it doesn't sound like a lot of fun and gladness.

1.

When Jesus suggests the disciples pick up their crosses and follow him, he says so when they had not yet seen Jesus drag his cross along Jerusalem's city streets to Golgotha. For all we know, the disciples may have not yet seen anybody crucified: it was a distinctly Roman form of capital punishment, probably more common around Jerusalem, where the

Roman occupation was most intense, but perhaps rare in back country Galilee where the disciples were from. Still, the imagination can help the disciples and us think about picking up a heavy, unwieldy object like a cross and carrying it around behind us, remembering that those who drag crosses are usually then crucified on them. It's a weighty symbol of suffering and death.

So to pick up your cross and to follow Jesus sounded from the outset like a losing proposition. No thanks, Jesus, the disciples were probably saying, I'll just go for the saving my skin strategy instead of the losing my life one. I can ruffle some feathers but bearing a cross, that even we your disciples have to draw the line somewhere, Jesus.

2.

Picking up a cross sounds like an equally tough sell for Christians today. It's true that crosses have been beautified by Christian architecture and jewelry makers. That's because we prefer our crosses on necklaces, tattoos, or hanging above the pulpit, not tearing into our shoulder as we drag one, the massive burden driving us into the ground along the way, so that we may be hoisted up on one and left to die painfully on it. That painful death is what crosses were originally designed for. You know what they say: You can take the cross out of an execution, you can't take the execution out of a cross. Who really wants to have their life cut short by an excruciating death at the hands of the state? Inviting people to literally take up a cross is not an effective recruiting tactic.

Maybe Jesus doesn't mean let's head to pain and suffering and death ASAP, maybe he's warning us that his way is a way of love for all people, which inevitably leads to sacrifices, difficulty and persecution, not necessarily unto death but still substantial. That figurative interpretation of Jesus' words may still be hard to swallow for us modern mostly middle-class Americans who over the last few generations have become more and more conditioned to convenience and comfort. We who lead the church, for instance, can strike up a prolonged conversation about whether in winter the Sanctuary should be heated to 66 degrees or 68, but meanwhile there's folks not far from here who are living without heat at all. We have the luxury of debating whether the coffee downstairs should be made in the big urns or the Bunn-O-Matic when there are people in Flint, Michigan, and other places in this country and around the world who don't have clean water to drink. We debate whether to sing from the New Century or Pilgrim Hymnal when there are Christians being executed by ISIS simply because they choose to sing praises to God in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let's face it: we who have so much freedom and so many choices, so much comfort and convenience, we can have a soft, cushy faith at times. We'll follow Jesus if the cross we carry is light as a feather and cushy, or can fit in our pocket (like our smart phone). I'll bear THAT cross gladly, and easily, we say. Something more onerous—a commitment that takes more than an hour a week, that requires hard decisions, sacrifice—that's another story. That's not so easy a choice.

3. But the word choice is key here. For the different translations of Jesus' words from Greek into English show us how significant choice may be in Jesus' words. The New International Version translates Jesus' words as "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." 'If anybody's heading my way, they HAVE to take up the cross every day.' Little choice is communicated in this translation.

But the New Revised Standard Version translates it this way: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." No reference to daily cross bearing, but references to choice. Not 'must' follow, but 'If any WANT to become follower, LET them deny themselves.' And I think this translation is closer to Jesus' meaning.

The disciples clearly have a choice of whether or not to follow Jesus. They're hoping everything turns up roses as they are about to set out for Jerusalem, but Jesus gives them a reality check, and they choose to go anyway. When they desert Jesus at his arrest, when they are scattered like sheep without their shepherd, it's tragic, yes, but their desertion is a consequence of them having a choice of whether to follow Jesus or not. Later, they change course. On Easter and beyond, they choose to follow Jesus. And in so doing they sow the seeds of the Christian church. They also do lose their lives in many cases—that's why when you look at the symbols of the twelve apostles, they mostly point to their deaths—Peter is symbolized by an upside-down cross because he insisted on not dying

the same way as Jesus; Thomas gets a spear; Matthias, a battle-axe. James, a saw.ⁱⁱ They knew what they were in for, though, Jesus warned them, they saw it coming. They choose anyway because the message of God's universal love and resurrection hope was stronger than any threat of pain and death could muster.

4.

And because of the sacrifices of apostles and martyrs and countless saints leading up until today, we at least for the time being do not generally have to decide on whether we will get the chair or the firing squad because of our faith. The Christian faith, although not the center of American culture anymore, still receives general respect because of the choices people like you and I make for the sake of others and the sake of the Gospel.

It's like when someone gives a Valentine's Day gift to someone who doesn't expect it from us. "You didn't have to!" they say. "Sure," the giver replies, "but I wanted to." The choice makes the gift all the more meaningful.

God offers us the meaningfulness of choice in our faith. Karl Barth refers to this choice as the freedom to love. And this freedom to love transforms what might otherwise be interpreted as sacrifice into glad offerings of grace.

-A spouse, child, or friend cares for an ailing loved one. Gladly.

-A volunteer happily waits in their car in the church parking lot to let someone borrow our Emma Davis Medical Equipment. Gladly.

-A youth spends their first week of summer break in Austin, Texas, rebuilding homes

damaged and destroyed by last year's floods, sweating it out. Gladly.

-A twentysomething, despite their fear of needles, decides that because their momentary pain and inconvenience may help save a life, they choose to make their first blood donation. Gladly.

-A neighbor with toes freezing makes one more pass with their snow blower over their elderly neighbor's sidewalk. Gladly.

-Or there's Concepcion Picciotto, who died last month. Concepcion (also known as Connie) and fellow demonstrator William Thomas began a peaceful vigil by the White House fence in 1981 proclaiming the need for nuclear disarmament and the end of war. William died in 2009 but Connie kept on going until 2013, "persisting through cold and rough weather...a fixture outside the White House, where she was often called the president's closest neighbor."ⁱⁱⁱ "From her outpost in a park on the northern side of the White House complex, Picciotto saw both tourists and presidential administrations come and go. Against a backdrop of hand-painted signs with messages like "Live by the Bomb, Die by the Bomb," she handed out pamphlets and urged people to reject violence." "Through her presence, she said she hoped to remind others to take whatever action they could, however small, to help end wars and stop violence, particularly against children." She protested with deep Christian conviction, not deterred by derision. Regardless of how we feel about her ministry, we can agree that she did this both with seriousness, but also gladly.

I can see Peter at the pearly gates saying to her, "Connie, you didn't have to! You didn't have to do all that over all those years."

“Of course I didn’t have to. I choose to. But gladly that cross I bore in the image of the Christ who bears the cross for us.”

As people of faith, we don’t choose to suffer for others because we’re suckers for punishment. We take up our crosses because we take up the good news that Jesus gladly comes to be with us, gladly bearing his cross both figuratively and literally. On this Valentine’s Day, when we bow down at the shrine of romantic love, we recall that Jesus is to us Love come down on Christmas. Jesus by his very incarnation bears the suffering that we all inherently experience as humans. Through Christ God voluntarily takes up that pain and finitude, the sorrow of family and friends dying and suffering, the disappointment of people not hearing him, the anguish of adversaries who plot to have him killed and who eventually succeed. But as Jesus says in John 10:17-18: “The reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” Freely, voluntarily. Gladly.

ⁱ From *God Is Love*, ed. Brian Doyle, page 25, from “Gladly,” by David James Duncan.

ⁱⁱ From *Symbols of the Christian Faith*, Alva William Steffler, pages 89-96.

Not in a masochistic way. Not because Jesus finds pleasure in pain. Not to take on our sin from an angry God. No, he gladly picks up the cross because his love is true, he remains faithful to his good news, to his message of God’s undying love. No threat or actual suffering sways him from his mission, no resentment or anger convinces him to back down from his proclamation and his embodiment of God’s love. Pain and death are real but they can’t kill God’s love. That is how Jesus on the cross says in Luke, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. His executioners don’t understand who they’re killing and they don’t see that their crucifixion fails to eliminate Jesus’ threat to the system of death because Jesus loves them gladly even in the face of death and Jesus is vindicated by the glorious power of God on Easter morning.

Jesus didn’t have to. And yet gladly the cross he bears.

Gladly the cross of sacrifice and grace awaits us to choose it this Lent, to lose our life and therefore to gain it in our God-given freedom to love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/26/464420101/longtime-white-house-protester-dies-after-vigil-that-started-in-1981>