

## The Discipline of the Cross

1. “Jesus hath many lovers of his heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of his cross.” (Thomas a Kempis)
2. We just came out of the season of Easter. We’ve told the stories we usually tell and a couple of new stories as well. This week, I want us to think about living on this side of Easter.
3. The cross is the hinge point of history. Everything on this side of the cross has been affected by the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I’d like to mention a few ways this story has and should change our story.
4. The man in Dundonald. The man sent in for last chance counseling. The discipline of the cross – of imagining a cross between me and the person I judged – changed my interactions with them. It was a humbling and necessary reminder, a check on my pride, and a reminder of my position in the universe: servant, not judge.
5. I took to carrying a small metal cross in my pocket. Whenever I reached in, I felt the cross and was reminded of the story that changes everything. I share this confession with you in the hope that you may be able to use it in your life, even if you don’t tend to be judgmental.
6. There is also the matter of carrying our cross. [Matthew 16:24-26] If you remember last week and the story of Lazarus, Jesus loves us too much to ride to our rescue...even though we beg him to do so. At some level, we can understand this – parents who hover and do all the hard things for their children produce adults who cannot function in society.
7. But there are other times that our hearts are broken by the world and by our own sin – or the sins of others. We wonder “does Christianity work for me?” You are not alone. [Romans 7:14-24]
8. Had Paul stopped writing at that point, we would be in quite a state. But he goes on – [Romans 8:1-11]

9. How can we make sure the Spirit lives in us and through us? First, by carrying our cross with faith and integrity. Our cross(es) take many forms – family, health, finances, job, mental state. One of the few truisms in psychology is that what happens to you matters, but what matters most is your reaction, the decisions you make in response to what happens to you. (Jennings church forgiving the burglars. It's how you play the hand you were dealt. Overcomers pay a price for overcoming)
10. But God requires more from you than just carrying your cross: He commands us to help others carry their cross. In fact, doing so is all that God asks of you for it fulfills the Law of Christ. [Galatians 6:2-10]
11. During the Dark Ages, the Catholic Church was unable to grow in Mainland Europe...but the Irish Church, often called the Celtic Church, grew and established new churches throughout Europe. How? They did not build an edifice and then call people to join them and conform to them. Instead, they entered a community and served the community, inviting others to join them as they went along. They carried their own crosses and helped to carry others.
12. The first Christian emperor of Rome, Constantine, reported that he saw a vision in the sky of the cross along with the words "In this sign, you will conquer." That night, he had a dream where Jesus visited him and spoke to him. It convinced him to make Christianity one of the official religions of the Empire. (we would certainly question whether God encouraged a military strike on other human beings)
13. For centuries, Christians have made the sign of the cross. Sadly, some of the beauty and purpose behind that has been lost in long, drawn out arguments about left to right, right to left, which fingers are used, etc. That is tragic because the sign of the cross is a valuable action...
14. Rituals are important. The physical can reflect what is going on in the metaphysical/spiritual realm or it can actually direct our spirit. As in carrying the cross in my pocket or imagining the cross between

me and a difficult person, making the sign of the cross is not a superstitious good luck charm but a reminder of who we are in the Easter story -- and who He is.

15. I trace it on the forehead of children, not because I believe it is magical but because it reminds me of whose they are and what they are: hand made creations of the Most High God.
16. In Ezekiel 9 (a VERY troubling chapter) God tells his executioners to place a mark on the foreheads of all of those who are appalled at the obscenities in their culture. That mark saves them for no power is given the right to harm the one God has marked as His own.
17. In Exodus 28, God places a mark on Aaron's forehead to set him apart for the priesthood. We are priests and we, too, are marked by God. [Revelation 9:4] This may be a mark only God can see, but the mark on our foreheads, the mark on our hearts, matters to God.
18. But God is not the only one going around placing his mark on people. [Revelation 13:16] This probably refers to emperor worship but, if we are being honest, we can see how easy it is to trade away our convictions and faith to get along with the world. When we do so, we are bearing a mark, but it is not God's mark.
19. So...I imagine the cross. I often carry a physical cross. I certainly carry my cross and I pray that I do so honorably and well. I help others carry their crosses and others help me carry mine.
20. And I quietly go through the ritual of the sign of the cross as a reminder of the ultimate reality of our story -- and story that must change everything it touches. May God remind us of our story and of the cross.