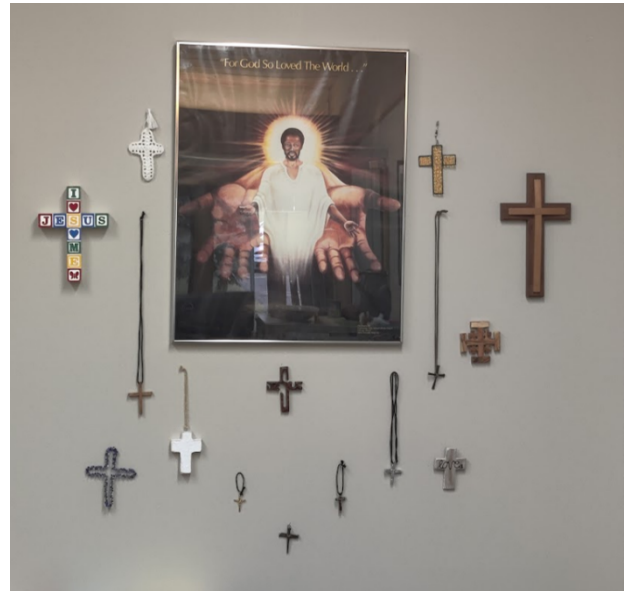


If you've ever been in my office – you may have seen my wall of crosses. It's this eclectic collage of gifts and souvenirs from places I've visited. Every one of them has a story. A relationship. A connection to a place or a person.



Crosses are a common decoration. We wear them around our necks. Hang them from our rear-view mirrors. Needle-point them on throw pillows. Carve them into wall-hangings. Crosses are everywhere in our world. Our children's messages have often opened our eyes to them out "in the wild."

Which I think is both really cool ... and ... kind of strange. Now don't panic, just hear me out!

When I got this cross necklace – I was at one of those "at-home" jewelry parties, hosted by a former congregation member. If you've never been invited to one of these – usually a salesperson displays a whole collection of jewelry to a private party of guests invited for the occasion. You're able to try things on, get advice or feedback from the other guests, and order items from the company's catalogue.

While I was there, I tried on this cross necklace and the saleswoman told me (and I quote) “Crosses are very ‘IN’ this season.” I remember being dumbfounded ... “crosses were IN?” Really?!?! I felt like asking her if she knew that this was an instrument of torture? A weapon of fear wielded by an authoritarian and oppressive government. Is it trendy or seasonal to celebrate an instrument of murder?

Now, I didn’t ask her any of those questions ... but I did **buy this cross** – so that I could tell you THIS story years later!

In our Bible story today, Jesus keeps showing his disciples about the **suffering** he will endure. He foretells the violence & agony of the cross. The way the powerful chief priests and scribes will come after him. And of his being raised from the dead.

These days it’s challenging for us to “imagine the effect these words must have had on Jesus’s disciples ... But what would happen, I wonder, if we shook ourselves out of our familiarity for a few minutes, and heard Jesus’s words as his first listeners heard them two thousand years ago?”<sup>1</sup> We would know nothing of crosses as ‘on-trend’ decorations or declarations of the Christian faith – and instead hear these words as **gruesome predictions** of impending torture – as his first hearers might have.

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas. Losing and Saving. From JourneyWithJesus.net. Posted 23 August 2020

“For those of us who've grown up in the Church” or even been aware of Christianity and crosses in our society, “the actual scandal and strangeness of Jesus’s death has perhaps long faded away. But here’s the bottom line: **God died**. And not only that: God died the **humiliating death** of the unjustly accused. The death of the lethal injection. The death of the electric chair. The death of the lynching tree.”<sup>2</sup>

It's easy for us to be judgmental of Peter– and say “c’mon man! You just proclaimed Jesus the Messiah, and now you’re telling him he’s **doing it** wrong?” And instead, see that Peter isn’t stupid ... He just understands the context of what Jesus is **actually saying** in a very. Practical. Way. and **he doesn’t like it**. Peter is trying to make sense of it ... that instead of overthrowing the Roman oppressors with a military revolution –Jesus will be handed over to these political enemies and suffer.<sup>3</sup> Peter is learning that the movement they’ve been part of – that has drawn crowds, produced miracles and healings, and proclaimed a new kind of kingdom will **not** produce their “longed-for future. Their cherished dream. Their chance at liberation.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, it will end with the 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine version of a state-sponsored execution.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas.

So “What could be more disorienting, more ludicrous, than the news that their would-be champion was determined to walk straight into a death trap? To give himself over not only to severe physical pain, but to humiliation and disgrace? To surrender without a fight to a common criminal’s death?”<sup>5</sup>

When we allow ourselves a bit of space and time to reflect – I feel a lot more empathy for Peter. This cross business didn’t really line up with the disciple’s hopes and dreams. Or what they thought they had signed up for. Especially when Jesus says these words:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Peter and the disciples are coming to terms with the real implications of ‘taking up their cross’ and following Jesus. Being aligned with the losing side ... not the winners. Facing public humiliation and disgrace. Losing life itself – **perhaps violently** for the sake of this Kingdom they have heard so much about. It’s a LOT to make sense of. AND it’s a real risk.

And so Peter says “NO” to Jesus. “No, Lord, this must never happen to you.”

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas.

The way of God. The way of this new, earth-shaking, love-overpowering, grace-filled Kingdom – is **NOT** the way of the world. By all of our human measures and analytics and feedback – it is flat-out failure. It looks like losing. And losing pretty badly. And it tastes like death.

And this, dear friends, is what we're invited into. What we are baptized into. The losing way of Jesus' death on the cross. We no longer need to try to impress or conquer the world according to its rules. And so the losing way of the cross is lovely and liberating and ground-breaking. Because the love of Jesus is **so much bigger** than human expectations, or even our greatest aspirations, or broken political systems, **or death itself**. God's love sees beyond our failures, or humiliations, the moments when we fall on our faces, do exactly the wrong thing ... or like Peter – SAY exactly the wrong thing.

In Christ's death and resurrection, he **took on** a powerful symbol of domination and cruelty – and **TRANSFORMED** it into a symbol of life GREATER than death. Of promises bigger than **any** of our failures. Of a God who releases us from the control and fear and anxieties our world tries to wrap around us and **INSTEAD** speaks hope and peace into our brokenness. **The cross** – whether roughhewn wood or



bedazzled jewelry is a complex reminder of how God defeats **ALL earthly expectations** by taking the side of the loser.

So, the next time you notice a cross – whether alongside a highway or tattooed on your own skin -- may it be a reminder to you that you are part of Jesus' clan – a beautiful and blessed group of those who have been claimed by Christ. Called to live into **God's love** by setting our minds on divine things – and following Jesus and his ways of mercy - instead of the ways of the world.

May the cross remind you anew of the immense LOVE that God has for **this world**. A reminder that you are loved and that God makes a way, when our human minds cannot fathom how.

May the cross remind you that you are LOVED by a God of transformation. A God who chooses the losing way & who defeats death itself on the other side.

You, dear friends, are God's beloved – in the power of the + cross of Jesus.

May you have the courage to take up your cross and follow.

Amen.