

Homily
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 4th, 2022
The Rev. Victoria Scott
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

Readings: JEREMIAH 18:1-11; PSALM 139:1-5, 12-17; PHILEMON 1-21; LUKE
14:25-33

A cross-shaped life. What is the shape of your life? What is the shape of our life in community here at Ascension? Last week, I invited you to think about strings of power and control, and heartstrings. Which ones are pulling us? Which ones are we pulling on? Those strings give shape and direction to our lives. This morning, we have another opportunity to think about what shapes us. We have rich imagery of potter and clay in our reading from Jeremiah. We have vivid language in our Gospel passage - seemingly harsh words about the cost of discipleship, carrying the cross, and following Jesus. The image of the cross, so central in the Christian faith, helps us to work through these words by inviting us to see our lives, as followers of Jesus, as cross-shaped.

This morning's Gospel passage feels severe. Hating father, mother, sister and brother? What does this mean? Many generations have wrestled with these words! The issue is not the despising of mother and father as human beings, but the roles they played in that first-century world: life that put families at odds with Kingdom living. Jesus invited – and continues to invite – into a family of choice bound together, not by patriarchal or any other societal notion of the ideal family, but by radical equality, and living for the wellbeing of one another and serving each other to that end. Kingdom living is a cross shape of rootedness with God, reaching out to one another. It is a cross-shape of **connection**: with God, and with one another and our world.

A cross-shaped life *is* both rooted and reaching. The vertical beam reminds us of our connection to the Divine: a connection that is the source of life, and a horizontal beam reminding us to reach out into the world.

This gives new meaning to “carrying our cross”. Carrying our cross is not about a burden – a cross to bear – but about connection. Today's Gospel passage

is often titled “The Cost of Discipleship”. “Cost” is transactional. It makes it about giving up. Denying. Sacrificing. Discipleship is about choices. It’s about choosing connection, with God and with one another. That choice shapes our lives.

The shape of the cross reminds us that all of creation is beloved. The cross reminds us that all of life is an intersection of God and humanity. When we carry our cross and follow Jesus we acknowledge our connection with the Divine Source of life, and we let that connection orient us and stretch us, into the world.

We have more “shaping” imagery from Jeremiah this morning: God is the potter; we are the clay. We heard: “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 18:2 ‘Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.’ 18:3 So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 18:4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel...” (Jeremiah 18:1-4)

Sam Wells says: “This is the story of Israel: the vessel was broken, the covenant was spoiled, and God made something beautiful by fashioning it into a pot shaped around the Jew named Jesus.”¹

God made something beautiful by fashioning – reworking, reshaping – something broken – a spoiled covenant – into a pot shaped around Jesus.

I love this language and imagery, and I love the invitation here for us – as individuals, and as a community – to think about what we are doing, and what we *might* do to shape our lives around Jesus. God’s wheel of creation turns. What shape are we? What shape might we become? Are we centering our lives around Jesus so that we can open up into something beautiful? Is the outside of our life conforming to the inside? Are there things in our lives that are wonky, and that need redeeming? Are we willing to be reworked?

As we think about shaping our lives around Jesus, it helps to think about the shape of Jesus’s life – and it was cross-shaped. His actions made the shape of the cross in his connection with God, and his connection with those he walked with in his earthly life. Jesus was drawn toward Jerusalem, to the cross. Some see this as

Wells, Samuel. “Learning to Dream Again: Rediscovering the Heart of God”. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition, page 60.

predestined: Jesus, born to die, to redeem us. I see the shape of the cross come out of Jesus's choice to continue toward Jerusalem. The shape of the cross is made as Jesus continues that long straight path to Calvary, and as he stretches out his arms to keep his followers with him. He stretches out his arms in love, drawing us in to relationship with God. Saying stay with me. Refusing to flee to the hills to live as a rabbi, where he would have made a difference locally, but not in the unfolding of human history. Maintaining his integrity to God's vision of love.

In his book "Naked Spirituality", Brian McLaren offers this invocation about identity:

Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?²

These are cross-shaped questions: they intersect, and they shape our lives if we let them. Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?

Who am I? Who are you? These questions are the vertical beam of the cross. That vertical connection to the Divine is essential, life-giving. I pray that this time we share here this morning will be a reminder for us of that connection. I pray that our Anglican rituals and tradition will remind us of it. May we tap into it, letting it refresh and restore our souls.

And the horizontal beam. This intersecting of vertical and horizontal beams is a reminder of the connection between God and all of creation. And that horizontal crossbeam reaches, stretches into the world, connecting us with others, and with our world. This horizontal beam reminds us that the whole of our lives is shaped and guided by the question: who are we together? Who are we with God, with Jesus? Who are we with the Spirit guiding us? Who are we with each other? These are the questions of discipleship!

And so, may our lives be cross-shaped. May we be attentive to our souls, to the vertical beam of the cross: our connection to the Divine. May we strive and stretch into the world as the horizontal beam of the cross reminds us to do. May we carry our cross as a reminder of connection: with God, and with each other, today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.

² McLaren, Brian D. "Naked Spirituality", HarperOne, page 60.