

Lenten Series: A Time to Repent
Part IV: Overlooked
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A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. -- Mark 15:21-25, NIV

In a recent article in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, researcher Daniel Simons talked about a video he and his colleagues created that went viral. You may have seen it. It showed people passing a basketball and those watching were asked how many times the three basketball players wearing white shirts passed a ball. After about 30 seconds, a woman in a gorilla suit sauntered into the scene, faced the camera, thumped her chest, and then walked away. When asked about it later, half of the viewers missed her completely. In fact, some people looked right at the gorilla and did not see it. The video was such a sensation they decided to make a sequel. This time viewers were expecting the gorilla to make an appearance, and it did. But the viewers were so focused on watching for the gorilla that they overlooked other unexpected events, such as the curtain in the background changing color. In his article, Simons asked this question: "How could they miss something right before their eyes?" He goes on to say that this "depends not on the limits of the eye, but on the limits of the mind." ("But Did You See the Gorilla?", *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2012) The reason they overlooked what was right before their eyes was because of "the limits of the mind."

In recent weeks during this season of Lent, our theme has been "A Time to Repent." If you've been here or have been watching online, you may remember that we have said the word "repent" in the Bible means "to change one's mind or way of thinking, which leads to a change in what we believe or in the way we act. For those who overlooked what was right before their eyes, they needed to change the way they were thinking -- to change their mind in order to see things how they really were. During this season of Lent, we have been talking about ways we may need to change how we think in order to see things as they really are, and to live our lives the way God created us to live them.

The story we have just read from Mark's gospel contains things that I have overlooked during my years as a pastor and a preacher. Today is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. But in our lectionary, which is the guide for the passages of scripture suggested for us to read on this Sunday, it also calls today "Passion Sunday." "The Passion" has to do with the death of Christ on a Roman cross. So, as preachers we have to choose. Do we focus on Palm Sunday with Jesus' triumphal entry on the back of a donkey into Jerusalem and the crowds waving palm branches, or do we focus on the passion of Christ and his death on a Roman cross? Or do we try to do both and start with Palm Sunday, then transition into the crucifixion? My guess is that most of us

would rather start with the joy and excitement of that Palm Sunday parade and the cheering crowds, and then just kind of skip over the crucifixion and come back next Sunday on Easter when we celebrate the joy of the resurrection. But in doing that, we would be overlooking something very important. We normally have a Maundy Thursday service combined with our Tenebrae Service in our Chapel which focuses on the death of Jesus, but for a number of reasons we will only have an online version of the Maundy Thursday service. This year it will focus on the last seven words or sayings of Jesus before he dies and will culminate with the celebration of communion.

While I hope you will attend that service online, I have to acknowledge that we usually have smaller crowds for that service on Thursday evening, particularly in comparison to Palm Sunday and especially Easter Sunday. Now maybe it's because people don't want to get out at night or they're not used to attending a worship service on Thursdays, but sometimes I wonder if it's because that service is dark, reflective, and focuses on the cross. Maybe we would all just like to overlook the cross. Maybe we would just like to ignore what Jesus says in Luke's gospel: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23, NIV) But the passage we're looking at today shows something we may overlook, not only about the importance of the cross, but *what* carrying the cross of Christ might look like, as well as *who* is chosen to show us that.

In Matthew's, Mark's, and Luke's gospels, they all mentioned him by name -- the person chosen or forced or compelled as the King James version put it to carry the cross of Christ. Now this takes place after Jesus has been arrested, appeared before the Jewish Sanhedrin, sent to Pontius Pilate so that he might be crucified, appeared before the crowds who end up shouting to crucify him, and flogged by the Roman guards. We find him carrying his cross to the place of crucifixion. Paintings traditionally show Jesus carrying the whole cross, but more likely the practice was simply to carry the cross beam which was still 30 or 40 pounds.

We assume that Jesus has suffered so much that he's having a hard time carrying this, so the Roman centurions who would be escorting him to his crucifixion "chose" somebody from the crowd, but the word used there in the NIV is "forced" -- implying there was no choice. And all three gospels identify him by name and where he is from -- Simon from Cyrene. Mark even adds that he is the father of Alexander and Rufus, and that he was passing by on his way from the country.

Now I have to admit that if you had asked me prior to this week the name of the person who was forced to carry the cross of Christ and where he was from, unless it was a multiple-choice answer, I am not sure I could have come up with the name, and I am positive I could not have told you where he was from. I guess I had simply overlooked him.

Both times I have visited Jerusalem, our tour group has walked the way that Jesus would have walked during these last hours of his life. One of the stops along the way marks the place where Jesus fell and Simon was forced to carry the cross of Christ. But for some reason I had overlooked not only who he was, but where he was from.

As I've shared with you in previous sermons, I have been reading Esau McCaulley's book, *Reading While Black*. I've talked about how our experiences, or what we read, may open our eyes to see something we had not seen before. And it was McCaulley who talks about Simon in his book. He said that Simon was from Cyrene, which is Africa -- northern Africa to be precise, what we would call today "Libya." Now we may assume that this area had more of an Arab influence because that's what it is like today, but scholars are not in agreement if that's what it was like in the time of Simon. There was a large Greek city there in which perhaps up to 100,000 Jews lived. Maybe Simon was one of those Jews visiting Jerusalem for Passover, but maybe not. Maybe he was really African -- in the sense that he may have looked different from the rest of the people in the crowd, or he may have dressed differently. We may not know exactly why the Roman centurion chose him. Maybe it was only because he looked young and strong so he could carry the crossbeam. Or maybe, in the same way that Mark and the other gospel writers choose to note not only who he is but where he is from, maybe he was chosen because he was "different" and it was apparent he was "not from there."

Maybe he was just a passerby in the wrong place at the wrong time. One person in commenting on this said,

Nor, does it much that Simon happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rather, the significance of the story of Simon of Cyrene is that the most important crosses that we will bear in our lives belong to someone else. Like Simon, we rarely have an opportunity to select the crosses that we are compelled to carry. And yet, like Simon of Cyrene, it is typically the case that the most important thing that we will do in our lives is carry someone else's cross, if only for a little while, until they are able to pick up their cross and resume their journey. (Maurice C. Taylor, "Africentric: Lessons from Simon of Cyrene", *Catholic Review*, March 7, 2012)

I find it not only interesting but profound that in this story told in all three of the gospels, the person who models what it's like to take up the cross of Christ is someone who is "not from there" -- in this case, from Africa. Maybe he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, or maybe the Roman centurion chose someone who was different, but as a good Presbyterian I have to wonder if somehow it was in God's providential plan for him to be there at that time and in that place -- God chose that person who might even be easily overlooked to carry the cross of Christ.

We don't know for sure what happened to Simon. However, it does mention his children Alexander and Rufus. If we look over in Paul's letter to the church at Rome, a letter that takes place after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus -- at the very end of his letter Paul is sending greetings to all of those whom he knows in the church. In Romans 16:13 Paul sends this greeting: "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too." (NIV) Now we don't know if this is the same Rufus who Mark mentions as one of the sons of Simon, but it could be.

However, there was a burial cave in the Kidron Valley right outside Jerusalem discovered in 1941 belonging to Cyrenian Jews and dating before 70 AD which was found to have an ossuary, which is the box in which they would put the bones of somebody who had died after the body had decomposed, which was inscribed twice in Greek with the words "Alexander son of Simon."

There's even one tradition that Simon becomes an Archbishop and he himself later crucified for the cause of Christ.

Another person was writing about Simon and was very honest in how this story affected her saying, "I would love to say that every time I enter into another person's suffering, I enter out of love. In reality I am often a reluctant cross bearer, motivated by fear, helplessness, or a frantic desire to get the unpleasant task over with as soon as possible." (Debie Thomas, "When We are Simon of Cyrene We'll Crack Apart. We'll Change", *The Christian Century*, March 3, 2021) In thinking about how this should affect us, she concludes saying this:

An easy piety would argue that we have a choice to make: either will allow the strain of our crosses to crack us apart, or will allow suffering to change us for the better. I'm not a fan of easy piety, so I'll argue this instead: life being the messy thing it is, we will choose both. Or we won't choose both, but both will happen. We'll crack apart, and we'll be changed. We'll bear our burdens resentfully, and we'll bear them in love. The pain that enters into our lives will both deform us and transform us, over and over again. This is the road Simon walked. The road we walk, accompanied by Jesus, until the resurrection comes.

So how will we choose to encounter the cross in our lives today? Will we simply try to overlook it and focus only on the happy good stuff, or will we let taking up our cross daily and the pain that goes with it not only deform us, but transform us over and over again? Are there those around us whom we tend to overlook, whose stories we need to hear because they have an experience different from ours?

Last week I went by Zaxby's to pick up some salads for lunch. The drive-in line was really long so I decided to park and go inside. Everybody was standing around with masks, but I went to the counter, placed my order and then just sat down to wait. I noticed among the guests one African American man who was looking at his cell phone, but he had a rather interesting sweatshirt on. I thought about telling him that I liked what his sweatshirt said because it had to do with some of the struggles we are facing today related to race and how to approach it. When he looked up from his phone, he glanced at one of the chairs next to me and I thought he was going to simply ask if I minded if he sat down. Instead, he came up and asked about my University of Virginia sweatshirt. He asked me if I had gone there. I told him I had, and he said that he had, too. I remarked that I was probably there way before he was. He told me he had finished in 1997 and I told him I had finished in 1979.

We started a conversation and it came up that I was a pastor. We talked about Charlottesville and I mentioned how sad I was that Charlottesville was now known for the riots that took place there and the deaths. He remarked that that kind of thing is actually everywhere, which was important for me to hear. He also spoke about the need for us to be able to talk about these things, simply to have conversations.

While I had intended to reach out to him, he reached out to me first and ended up giving me the gift of his insights, which I needed. One of the best pieces of advice I heard recently in talking about the stories of those who come from different racial or ethnic backgrounds from us is to just

simply listen when they're telling us their story of their experiences. Just listen. We may discover something we had overlooked.

Yet, it is easy to overlook things that are hard, like our struggles with racism, the viewpoints of those different from us, or even the challenges of the cross. I am sure that most of us would just like to ignore it, if we could, but that would be overlooking something essential to being a follower of Christ.

Friends, we serve a God who “give it all” on a cross out of love for each one of us. Jesus actually gave his life for you, for me, and for the whole world -- in order that we might live this new life as followers of Christ. So, what can we do in response? That great hymn of the church, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” seems to ask that same question and gives this answer: “Were the whole realm of nature mine,/That were a present far too small;/Love so amazing, so divine,/Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

So, remember the cross. Look out for those we tend to overlook, those whom God may have put in our lives to either help us see things differently, or to serve with the love of Christ. And remember that the same Christ who walked that road to the crucifixion, walks beside each one of us every day through the good times and the hard times. In the strong name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.