

Love's Stretch
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson
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“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” So, how’s it going for you? “taking up” your cross? How’s it going for you right now? My question is not meant to be flip, but, telling my husband the first line of my sermon caused him to literally stop in mid-stride. Perhaps you’re having the same reaction - and frankly, saying it to you this morning causes me to stop mid-stride. As familiar as Jesus’ saying is, thinking about “taking up a cross” in these times - Covid, racial unrest, economic chaos, political divisions - can cause a little catch in the breath or tightening in the belly.

Right now, we are bearing so much hard stuff in our lives and through the news of our world. And we know that mostly we are the lucky ones. The degree and descriptions of what we’ve lost of our lives right now isn’t in the same league with millions of people - some just miles away and others spanning the globe. Still, we feel the weight. There is a heft to extended isolation for those of us who live alone - or whose living arrangements require staying in a very small physical and social space. And at the other extreme, it’s a heavy load to live with 2 generations under current close social restrictions. You parents are asked to manage your own life demands while you’ve taken up many more for your children - school work, finding creative ways to keep them safely connected with friends, manage their understandable emotional swings - along with your own! So,how is it to hear Jesus’ words about “taking up your cross” this morning? How is taking up your cross going for you in this stretch of hard time.

“A stretch of hard time” is one way I connect with Jesus’ words about the cross because, not since the very first, have disciples actually taken up a cross as part of following Jesus. So, it doesn’t make sense to me that Jesus is speaking literally. So, when actual wooden beams are taken out of the picture, I believe Jesus points to the cross as his time of being tested to the core of who he is and what he believes. Think about his experience. All the props of the outside world are stripped away. One by one: his freedom, his physical safety, his garments, his dignity, his strength, his community - taken away until he is bare, striped. There is no place to hide. No one to save him. Jesus is left with what truly belongs to him, inside of him. He is left with the relationship he and God have been shaping and strengthening all of Jesus’ life. He is left with his core trust in God, a trust based on love.

Left with only that as he experiences the exchange of losing to saving, as he trusts losing parts of his life in order to know the depth and strength of his true and holy life, the one connected and held by Holy Love. And it’s a hard stretch to get there. We know how the story goes for Jesus. We hear it every Holy Week and Good Friday. Over those days, his connection with God’s Love keeps getting stretched and stretched until there is no more to give. All the limbs of his very body are literally stretched beyond human endurance. Until only love hangs there, caught in a few words: “Forgive them.” Stretched. Until in the end, love does what only love can do: be returned, fill back up, find a way, be the path to renewed life. This is the way of Jesus and he is calling us to follow him.

Take up your cross. Follow the love. And yes, love will stretch us. We all know that and we knew it before this hard time. We knew it every time a commitment to another person or community found us

needing to stretch love in order to stay connected. Our caring was stretched. Our compassion was tested. Our energy was drained. This current time is not the first time our love has been stretched.

Yet, for me, this time has revealed deeper and more profound levels of love. Remember those first amazing stories of responders from the fire and police to those serving in hospital wards? Weren't we totally in awe, like the brand-new awe of a child seeing or hearing something for the first time? Again and again, we wondered, "how can they do it?" And the "it" was not the medical skills which are beyond most of us, but the repeated commitment and compassion to risk their own personal lives, often without adequate PPE, to keep the life-pulse alive in others, usually complete strangers. Day after day, shift after shift and now, month after month. Stretched to love.

At some point early on, before the death of George Floyd, I remember hearing someone remark about these first responders stories, "Now that we know how incredibly good we are at stretching to love a stranger, one person at a time, maybe this time we can learn how to love a whole community." And here we are. Struggling to stretch our love beyond our own comfortable familiar circle. To love a whole community. We are being asked to stretch our love that far. To love those different from us, to care about their struggle and commit to right injustices.

Here we are stretching under the weight of our personal crosses and voices are asking us to do more. And it would be so easy to tag those voices as coming from all sides of political arenas. But Jesus' life and cross, his voice, also asks our love to stretch to include even our enemies. Jesus asks our love to stretch until we are able to love a whole community. Which brings us back to where I began - acknowledging what a hard time this is. And talking about the cross doesn't make it any easier..... unless..... unless, we hold on to power of the cross and face what is not life-giving in ourselves and practice letting go of those parts so new life might be born. That's what we believe about the cross, Jesus' path to wholeness and resurrection. God is here in this hard time and, like Jesus, will bring us through to fuller life. Like a mid-wife, God is with us, helping our love to stretch. It is God's love, working in us and carrying us through.

On the shore of a lake in the Grand Teton Mountains sits a small Christian chapel. The wall behind the altar and large cross is made of clear glass framing the water and mountains. It is this spectacular view that opens in front of any one entering. A story is told of one visitor who, upon seeing the the view and walking toward altar, remarked, "What an incredible view. It's too bad the cross is in the way." Yes, the cross is "in the way" because the cross is God's way of love. Amen.