

Sermon for March 24, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Phil 1: 1-8; Luke 24: 19-21, 25-27
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Cross Words

Let the words that come from my mouth become your words, O Lord. Amen.

Is anyone feeling out of sorts today? Is anyone feeling tired, bedraggled, or weary? Anyone feeling bereft, grief-stricken? Anyone feeling overworked or unappreciated? If I asked you, "How is it with your souls today?" what would you answer? We've been talking about our souls on Wednesday evenings during Lent, how our souls can become hardened, or shallow, or cluttered, and that seems to me to be an appropriate topic to think about, and to feel about, during Lent. While the trees are blooming and the daffodils, hyacinths, and tulips are showing off, some of us are in the darkness and some of us perhaps would answer that all is not well with our souls. And that's okay, because scripture shows us that the unease of souls happens quite frequently. In fact, it seems to be the human condition.

Consider our two fellow pilgrims on the road to Emmaus. As we've learned over the last two Sundays, not all is well with their souls. They are heart-sick and soul-sick. They thought they had everything going for them; they had been with the man they believed to be the Messiah so nothing could go wrong for them. They had the golden ring in their hands.

Sometimes we Christians are just like those disciples. We think that because we are believers, because we wear a cross around our necks or hang one in our church or in our homes and have a Bible around somewhere, we are somehow protected from harm and disappointment. And then, like those two disciples, when we find out we are wrong, that we, too, are part of a broken world and the cross is not a magic charm that prevents disaster, something happens to our souls. They become hardened, or shallow, or cluttered.

This state of confusion is where we find these two followers of Christ this morning. Pilgrims on a journey. Walking. On a road. Out of nowhere, a stranger joins them. It is the risen Lord but they cannot recognize him. And after he hears their story, he says to them, in their brokenness: how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Now, I've done a good bit of pastoral care, and I don't suggest saying such harsh words, such cross words, to a person in crisis. But Jesus did so, and maybe he had every right to say those words having experienced the reality of a wooden cross and iron nails himself.

If you look through the gospel of Luke, you will find that Jesus tells his followers on three different occasions that he is going to be turned over to the authorities. That he is going to be found guilty. That he is going to be crucified, and that he is going to die. How much clearer could he have been? But no one understood, we are told. Maybe they just didn't want to. Maybe they just didn't want to imagine a cross, a cross that would affect them.

We all know about crosses. They come in many different shapes, sizes, and seasons. Indeed, Jesus tells his followers, and us, that unless we are willing to shoulder our crosses and follow him, for the sake of the gospel, we can't be his disciples. It's not the message we want to understand, either. But it's true.

Many years ago, when I was in my thirties, my path crossed with a woman who was in her fifties. For the sake of this story, let's just call her Ann. Ann had been married to her husband, a respected military man, for twenty years when she found out that he was being unfaithful and having an affair with an aide. The news was devastating to her. She had faithfully uprooted the family and herself time and time again to follow him wherever he was sent. She had never complained. She understood what being a military wife meant. So, this deception struck her to the core. It became her cross to bear.

When confronted, the husband admitted the affair and deeply apologized and expressed his great remorse. He ended the affair. He offered to go to counseling. Ann refused. He offered to do anything she asked of him to save the marriage. Ann refused. He offered her a divorce, if she wanted one. Ann refused. Instead, she picked up a book called *People of the Lie* by renowned therapist Dr. Scott M. Peck, and she became so attached to the evil behind lies that she could not look beyond that darkness to anything else.

When I met Ann, she was carrying that book, like a purse. When I asked her about it, she told me that she kept it with her, all the time, to remind her of what her husband had done to her, and to remind him, as well. Oh yes, he had kept trying everything to make amends. He had ended the affair and never had another, and he would not leave her if she did not want a divorce, but that had not changed Ann.

As I came to know Ann better, she told me that she never would divorce her husband, even though she had quit trusting and loving him. She would never set him free. By staying married to him, she would make him see, every day of their lives, what his lie had cost. And they did stay married, if married is the correct word. By the time I met her, they had been living in this dark trap for ten years. Ten years. Imagine all the missed opportunities. Ann's cross had changed from sorrow and hurt into vengeance,

and there was no way she was going to give up that cross. Her soul had hardened to the point where there wasn't a crack left to let the light shine through.

I don't know what happened to Ann and her husband. They moved not too soon after that, and I lost track of her. I am sure she left their former home with that book in her hand, which makes this one of the saddest encounters I've ever experienced in my life.

John Ortberg, in the video we are watching on Wednesday night, says we live in a world of lost souls. Ann was one of them. A lost soul doesn't need to be as drastic as the shooter of the Muslim worshippers in New Zealand to be lost. It can happen to any of us when we forget.

Ortberg also claims that we can choose the health of our souls. We can choose whether to be people with hardened or shallow or cluttered souls. I believe we can also choose some of our crosses, not the crosses that life hands us for unknown reasons, like illness, death, disabilities, grief, and concern, but crosses like bitterness, unforgiveness, selfishness, jealousy, inferiority, pride, ambition, apathy, prejudice, self-righteousness, guilt, and discord. I think we can get right under those crosses and carry them to the end of our lives, if we choose. But at what a great cost when we forget.

Jesus' cross words to those two disciples are his cross words to us. How foolish our choices can be, when we forget. How slow we are to believe, when we forget. What the disciples were so focused on was Jesus' death and the death of their hopes and expectations. What they *failed to remember* was the rest of what Jesus also predicted: "Yes, I will die, but on the third day, I will rise again." I will rise again. Nothing will be as it was. All crosses will be overcome. That is the good news of the gospel.

These two disciples forgot that. They were walking to Emmaus on the third day. Jesus was in their midst, on the third day. Joy was available to them, on the third day, if they released that cross of lost expectations and simply remembered Jesus' promise.

Part of the Emmaus story is about setting our crosses down—those that we choose to carry—and remember the hope we find in Christ. The story reminds us to let go of our crosses of choice and to look up from our bitter, deep hurts, our self-interest, our lack of forgiveness, our human condition, and see that Jesus is right in our midst as well. But we can't do it alone. We need Christ with us, and so we remember his invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." We are invited to choose the hope of

resurrection, and to let our souls rest in the light. John Ortberg is correct. It is our choice. Thanks be to God.