

Follow Me (to Ferguson)

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
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A call to conflict

It was almost exactly one year ago that Sherri and I came to Lendrum. That same summer, Eric Garner was choked to death in New York, and Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri. Throughout this last year, while I have been getting to know all of you at Lendrum, conflict has been bubbling in Ferguson. Last summer, I was so busy packing and moving across the country that I didn't notice what was happening at first. But the conflict has continued, and it won't go away, because there still hasn't been any justice.

Throughout the last year, Dr. Cornel West has been involved in the protests in Ferguson. Dr. West is a Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at Union Theological Seminary; he's Professor Emeritus at Princeton University; and he has been thinking about the meaning of the cross for a long time. Here is a video of him in 2004, speaking with Toni Morrison about Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, and what the cross means today. [Video: [Cornel West and Toni Morrison](#)]

Dr. West reminds us that the cross is not a decoration. It is a tool of Empire to control subjugated people. And so what does it mean when Jesus commands us to take up our cross? What does it mean to take this death sentence which is imposed on me against my will, and to flip the table and to enter into it willingly and unnecessarily? I think Dr. West shows us by his example what it looks like to take up your cross in this way. Last October, Dr. West was arrested in Ferguson, after standing in solidarity with the victims of violence. And last week, Dr. West was back in Ferguson, and was once again arrested. [Video: [Cornel West on CNN](#)]

What drives a man like Dr. West, a distinguished professor, a man who has clearly achieved some "success" in worldly terms, to intentionally go and get arrested? He doesn't need to do this; he's got job security; he's not being personally oppressed in this way. It seems foolish to us, but Dr. West certainly isn't the first Christian to willingly enter into solidarity with the victims of oppression and violence.

In the lead-up to WWII, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." This phrase has always stuck with me, because it can mean so many things. What is it that must die? Is it my selfish ambitions? My image in the community? My anger? My wealth or status? My desire to have things done my way? My sentimentalism? At times, it can be many different things. But for Bonhoeffer it ultimately meant putting his body on the line. Bonhoeffer's conscience led him to resist Hitler, and he was caught and executed.

Taking up your cross is at the origins of the Anabaptist movement too. It was about the year 1516 when Menno Simons was ordained as a priest in the Catholic Church. He was just starting his ministry. In 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, sparking a debate which produced the protestant reformation. In the early 1520s, Luther published a Bible in the people's common language, using the newly invented printing press. And in 1525, German peasants who had been reading the Bible for themselves began to believe that it was wrong for them to be mistreated by their rulers. As a result of their religious convictions, the peasants began to demand equality, but their movement was put down brutally by the better-armed militias. It was partially because of this failed attempt at violent revolution that the Anabaptists, who were mostly peasants, rejected violence less than a decade later.

And yet, this did not mean that the early Anabaptists rejected conflict with the authorities. Before he was killed, one of the early Anabaptist leaders, George Blaurock, reportedly made a habit of interrupting worship services in Reformed churches. He would enter the church and listen to the message until the moment was right. Then he would stand up and preach a message of repentance, conversion, and (re)baptism. (Hopefully none of you do that to me this morning!)

But this wasn't unique to George Blaurock. Historian Roger Olsen writes that “many of the Anabaptists were fairly confrontational in their methods of winning converts and defiant of what they considered apostate religious and civil authorities” (Olsen, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 417). They refused to take off their hats before nobility. They disrupted the legal system by refusing to swear oaths in court. They were an incredibly provocative movement! And they did it because they took the words of Jesus seriously. (Sounds a little bit like the black lives matter movement!)

So my first point is this: taking up your cross means choosing to enter into places of conflict. But it doesn't end there. By taking up our cross, we proclaim Christ's victory over death, and we witness to the power of resurrection.

Victory over death

When Jesus calls us to take up our crosses, Jesus is calling us to boldly and directly enter into suffering and conflict. But the call to take up our cross is not just another duty, another obligation, a work that we must perform in order to be saved. Jesus doesn't say, “if you want to be saved, here's the list of things to do for me first, and one of them is you have to take up your cross.” Salvation is not a transaction. Taking up your cross is not a deal that you make so that you will get eternal life.

Rather, the call to take up our cross is itself a call to be saved. It is an invitation to move *through* conflict and death, and *into* resurrected life. Suffering and conflict are going happen in our lives. That's just inevitable. Our temptation – our wish – is to avoid suffering and conflict as much as possible. We're in a room, and there's a burning door, and we think, “I need to stay as far away from that as possible.” But as long as we remain inside the room, we aren't at peace. We are afraid. We don't have life. We've just delayed death. Eternal life... shalom... peace... all of that is on the other side of the door. And to get there, we might have to get burned. Like Cornel West, we have to put ourselves at risk.

There have always been Christians who know this. If you look for it, you'll see that a thread of fearless martyrdom¹ runs all throughout Christian history, all the way back to the first centuries after Christ.

The earliest martyr story outside of the Bible is called the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Polycarp was an old man. The story says that he had been a Christian for 86 years. At that time, the Romans were persecuting Christians, and one night Polycarp had a dream that his pillow was on fire. When he woke up, he told his friends that he was going to be killed by burning.

¹ The English word “martyr” comes from the Greek verb *martyreo*, which means “to bear witness.” So if you were called to be a witness at a trial, you were called to be a *martyr*, which we translate as “martyr.”

In today's English usage, we often think of a martyr as someone who is persecuted or dies for a cause that they believe in. But the reason this word has taken on this meaning is that, for the earliest Christians, to be a witness or to give a legal testimony in favour of Jesus, often meant persecution or death. Jesus was sentenced to death as a political radical, and his followers were considered to be subversive of Empire. So when Christians testified that Jesus was their Lord, and refused to show allegiance to Empire, their “witness” turned to martyrdom.

This is what it means to be a witness for Jesus.

When the authorities finally arrested him, they recognized that he was a holy man, and they did not want to execute him. They tried to persuade him just to say the words, “Lord Caesar” and to burn some incense. It would have been so easy for him to save himself. The authorities *wanted* him to save himself. But Polycarp replied in clearly *political* terms: “Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” After being asked to show allegiance to Caesar, Polycarp calls *Christ* his King. After that, the authorities piled up the firewood and burned him in a public execution. A lynching.

Two centuries later, St. Athanasius wrote, a book called “On the Incarnation,” in which he attempts to defend the reasonableness of Christianity. But Athanasius didn't use historical texts and archaeology. Rather, his “case for Christ” drew its evidence from the lives of Christians themselves, and especially from the martyrs. Athanasius said that you could see that Christ has been raised from the dead, and that death itself has been vanquished, because Christ's followers had no fear of death.

“Is this a slender proof of the impotence of death, do you think? Or is it a slight indication of the Saviour's victory over it, when boys and young girls who are in Christ look beyond this present life and train themselves to die? Everyone is by nature afraid of death and of bodily dissolution; the marvel of marvels is that he who is enfolded in the faith of the cross despises this natural fear and for the sake of the cross is no longer cowardly in face of it.... Indeed, there have been many former unbelievers and deriders who, after they became believers, so scorned death as even themselves to become martyrs for Christ's sake.”

For St Athanasius and the earliest Christians, it was their lives that were the evidence and the witness that the gospel and the resurrection are true.

Training to die

But notice something peculiar about this passage. Athanasius wrote that they “trained themselves to die.” Contrary to what we might believe, their boldness didn't just come naturally. Rather, it seems that they talked about it, and prepared themselves. They may have walked through some of the scenarios. Assessed the risks. They trained themselves to die.

So taking up your cross means willingly entering into places of conflict. By doing this we witness to the power of resurrection. And it takes practice. We need to train ourselves to die.

How can we witness for Christ today? How do we train to die? Some of the people who do that today are members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams.

In 1984, Mennonite World Conference met in Strasburg, France, and our church sent a choir. At that same meeting, Ron Sider challenged Mennonites with these words:

“We must take up our cross and follow Jesus to Golgotha. We must be prepared to die by the thousands. Those who believed in peace through the sword have not hesitated to die. Proudly, courageously, they gave their lives. Again and again, they sacrificed bright futures to the tragic illusion that one more righteous crusade would bring peace in their time, and they laid down their lives by the millions.

“Unless we... are ready to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice, we should sadly confess that we never really meant what we said, and we dare never whisper another word about pacifism to our sisters and brothers in those desperate lands filled with injustice. Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent attempts to reduce conflict, we should confess that we never really meant that the cross was an alternative to the sword...”

Today, Christian Peacemaker Teams go into areas of conflict around the world: in Colombia and Iraqi Kurdistan; in Palestine and the African Great Lakes; on the U.S. - Mexico border; and in Canada at Grassy Narrows. Teams train themselves to die, and so become witnesses to Christ's power over death. [Video: [CPT interview](#)]

So what about us at Lendrum? Not all of us are called to go to Ferguson or to Hebron. But all of us are called to take up our cross. So how will we train to die?

I would suggest that, as with any training, we should probably start small.

1. Name the conflict. I think we need to get into the habit of naming conflict when it exists. It can be tempting to think that if we don't talk about conflict, then it isn't real. But often, the most difficult part of a conflict is just being willing to talk about it.
2. Enter into solidarity. Even if the conflict doesn't directly involve you, try to feel what those who are suffering feel. As we've heard today, most of the martyrs throughout history were given plenty of opportunities to escape suffering. Instead, they willingly entered into the suffering of others. When you see a story on the news, or you hear about a situation from a friend, choose to listen with the ears of those who suffer, rather than those of the authorities. Choose in your heart to stand with them.
3. Get involved. If you're riding on the bus or having coffee at Tim Hortons and you hear something racist or hateful, try pushing yourself to say something. It may be awkward at first, but we need to learn how to do this in love. Or another step would be to go out and get training in nonviolent conflict resolution. Learn the steps of how to deescalate a situation. Remember: this is practice. It's exercise. So we will need to stretch and develop these muscles.

Just as soldiers exercise and train to do battle for their country, peacemakers must practice being witnesses for the Prince of Peace. I believe we can do this by naming conflict, entering into solidarity, and then getting involved.

Conclusion

Jesus has called each of us to take up our cross and follow him. Taking up your cross involves being present in places of conflict. When we enter into places of conflict without fear, we witness to the power of resurrection. And because we are not afraid, but have trained ourselves to die, we can have courage to face Empire in places like Ferguson and Hebron.

So how will we respond to Jesus' call to take up our cross?

For Dr. Cornel West, it means going to Ferguson to go to jail. By not being afraid of Empire, Dr. West witnesses to Jesus' victory over the Power of Empire.

For the early Anabaptists, it meant making waves in their society, daring to be different from those around them, and even using confrontational approaches. Their boldness was a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit at work within them – the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

Jesus has called each of us here today to take up our cross, to enter into difficult, contested, and protested spaces, to join in solidarity with those who are oppressed, and to get involved. By going into dangerous territory fearlessly, we witness to Jesus' victory over and through death. Our lack of fear does not come from our own strength, our seeming invincibility, or our ability to avoid death. It is not because of our technique, which makes us impervious to attack. That is the way of Empire, and it is a brittle, fragile strength. Rather, the Christian's strength does not avoid death at all, but moves *through* death to resurrection. It is the gift of God, won for us by Jesus Christ's victory on the cross.

At the end of time, Jesus isn't going to rescue us from the world. No, Jesus is going to redeem the world. Colossians 1:20 says that "through Jesus God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." Jesus' great mission is to reconcile the world to God. And so our mission today is a mission of reconciliation: to go into messiness and discomfort; to be present, and to be counted; to be arrested, and even to die if necessary.

So my question for us all today is this: will you, will I, follow Christ?