

Exodus 3:1-15  
Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 16:21-28

There are some strange things going on in the world nowadays....like the lawsuit filed by a 26-year-old man in Brooklyn, New York, against one of the credit rating agencies because it refuses to acknowledge his first name: God. There's at least one other American you can find online named God, and he is very strange. Apparently he likes to run around his town in Arizona naked. He owns a bar and if you let him firebrand an image of his face on your body, he'll give you a discount on drinks for life. The discount? Fifty cents.

There are some strange things going on.....

That certainly must be what Moses thought when

he story is told of a woman who walked into a jewelry store and asked the twenty-something, multiply-pierced, busily-texting clerk if she could see a cross that she could wear on a chain, around her neck, as a necklace. The clerk asked if she wanted to see a plain cross.....or one with the little man on it.

For those who identify themselves as Christian – who believe that God has been made known through Christ – the cross holds special meaning. Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Power of Myth*, wrote that the cross “symbolizes not only a specific, historical moment on Calvary, but the mystery through all time and space of God’s presence and participation in the agony of all living things.”<sup>1</sup>

That's a lot to digest! Let's look at that again: The cross represents mystery. It is a mystery into which we all have stepped, by virtue of our faith. In this mystery, we believe that throughout time and space God is present with and participating with the agony of all living things.

That's kind of a hard thing to hear in a sermon, isn't it, that there is agony in life. We somehow concoct this crazy personal theology that there's only agony in life when we screw up; when we're bad. If we agonize, we wrongly believe; then it's our own fault.

But Joseph Campbell goes even further by saying there is agony in *all* living things: the amoeba, the aspen tree, the barn-yard cat. Once we get that out on the table; admit it; we find freedom. The truth will set you free. Life, and especially religion, is not about white-washing our existence with the phoniness of a clown's painted-on smile. The starting point to an authentic life is to admit there is suffering and there is agony.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted from “Synthesis: A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship following the Revised Common Lectionary,” for Proper 17-A; Brunson Publishing Co., Boyds, MD

We are approaching the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in a few weeks. No doubt the questions will be raised again: Where was God in 9/11? How could a loving God allow such a tragedy as 9/11? Sometimes, I think there are questions which one cannot answer. But there is a solution, if not necessarily an answer. The solution is to *live* the question. Don't just ask it and walk away; live it. If you live the harrowing – but very real and justified – questions of 9/11, you may come to **experience** that God is present inside the agony of life and does not abandon us to face it all alone.

The agony of life is represented by the cross, on which God suffered alone in the form of Christ. If you look around this room at the fourteen Stations of the Cross we have displayed, you will see how prominently the cross figures into every scene.....suggesting by its very proliferation that the cross is at the center of our faith and how we practice that faith out in the world, every day.

A parish member of an Episcopal Church in Michigan was asked by her priest to provide a reflection on one of the Stations. I found this woman's reflection so true-to-life that I would like to quote from it at length.

She begins: "The contrast between the life of Jesus and the way he suffered.....and my life and the way I suffer.....is embarrassing. And while I do believe that what is important to me is important to God, the reality is that Jesus takes up his cross, and I take my kids to school, a private school, in a safe neighborhood, so they will have every opportunity for a good life and a big income.

"Jesus takes up his cross, and I take up my fork to eat something from the abundance in my cabinets and refrigerator. Jesus takes up his cross, and I take up my knitting, in front of the television, where I watch a show I like.....with a husband I love in the warmth of my house on a comfy couch.

"Again, the list goes on. And, again, I am embarrassed. How can I possibly relate to the cross? When I try to identify with Jesus and suffering, I feel like an utter fraud."

This woman, whose name is Ellen Armentrout, came upon a website article that began to give her some perspective. She said the article "put into words what I was feeling: that while there are indeed people who bear crosses that I cannot even begin to imagine.....it makes no sense for me, in my circumstances at this point in my life, to try to compare what I suffer in taking up my cross to what Jesus suffered when he took up his cross."

Then, she says, the article turned it around for her! “What all of us in *my* situation should do is take a look at our lives and think about how we *add* burdens to the cross that Christ carries for us. And then we should think about what we can do to lighten that load.”

She admitted that what she took away from many of the sermons she heard was “Be a nice person” or “be a decent human.” Now she understood that it simply wasn’t enough just to be nice. “What I should be doing,” she said, “is lightening Christ’s burden by doing everything in my power to live God’s Kingdom here on earth.”

She selected the notion of “radical welcome” as her means of helping to bring God’s Kingdom to earth.....and of lightening the suffering of Christ. What is that, anyway? What is the suffering of Christ? It is the cosmic, collective suffering of us all.....rolled up into one giant mess and lain upon Jesus.

In beginning to practice radical welcome, Ellen Armentrout decided to judge less and blame less.....to forgive more and seek vengeance less.....to welcome all people into her life and especially into God’s church.<sup>2</sup>

It would be interesting to check back with Ms. Armentrout and find out how she is faring with radical welcome. Does she find it easy? Does she find it hard? My guess is that yes, indeed, it is hard to actually do what Jesus of Nazareth beckons us to do and what he patiently role-modeled in his own life. The good news is that with lots of practice, doing what Jesus taught does become easier.....but it almost always continues to include some amount of personal sacrifice and suffering.

The whole of God’s Kingdom on earth is really the same thing as the whole of “take up the cross.” It is *love*. And love is risky business, often dangerous – just try to offer radical welcome to a Muslim and you’ll see how quickly you come in for criticism and alienation. Love is risky and dangerous; politically incorrect in just about every epoch of human history; and it makes us inwardly vulnerable.

The whole of God’s Kingdom on earth is really the same thing as “take up your cross and follow Christ.” It is *love*.

“The great paradox of the Christian life—that by dying, we live; by giving, we receive—comes into its clearest focus in the cross. In denying ourselves, we truly become.”<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Kari Jo Verhulst, quoted in the Synthesis previously noted.