

One of the benefits of having a Morning Prayer as our Sunday service is that a brief homily or meditation on the Gospel is offered rather than the longer sermon given for the Eucharist. Good news? Perhaps. However, today's Gospel from Mark really doesn't lend itself to a few pithy statements on what it means to "take up your cross and follow" Jesus especially when you consider how this statement has been interpreted and the cross used throughout church history. You know as well as I that the cross is not a symbol of a happy shiny kind of good news. I don't think I am telling you anything new, spoiler alert, but the cross was a form of execution during Jesus' time, and Jesus died on one as a convicted criminal! If this statement makes you uncomfortable, you are in good company. Even Peter had some difficulty with Jesus over this point. It doesn't help that the church's track record for using the cross as a symbol of love rather than hate is not great. Yes, the cross was given credit for Constantine's victory in battle and his subsequent conversion to Christianity which established Christianity as a state sanctioned religion in Rome. Good news? Hmm... Probably not if you were on the other side of Constantine's sword. Christianity did spread significantly, and the early church no longer had to hide from persecution after Constantine became its protector, but tying Christianity to the empire and success in battle led to the cross being used as a field sign by Christian troops during the crusades, not one of our finer moments as a young religion. This connection to nationalism is with us today and is perhaps the reason the Ku Klux Klan and Neo Nazi groups have claimed the cross as their symbol as well. With that kind of baggage attached to the cross, I have to admit, I haven't been eager to wear one out in public out of shame and embarrassment for what the cross signifies.

So why am I wearing one today, you might ask? Well, that is a result of God's beautiful irony and an interpretation of "take up your cross and follow me" that I think is the true heart of

healer, teacher, and hope for the restoration of Israel. People are flocking to him from all around. It is standing room only wherever he preaches and heals. Then the plot turns in our passage for today as Jesus adamantly denies that he is a health wealth gospel preacher or revolutionary political leader. Instead, Jesus brings up the crosses the early church would have passed on a daily basis, put up by the Romans to intimidate and oppress them. Jesus uses a common symbol of Roman domination and torture to not only foreshadow his own death but also to teach his followers not to fear their own. Indeed, he transformed the cross into a sign that God is with us in the worst of times, and God does not want us to turn away and ignore what crosses have been set up around us but instead lift them up to be transformed by Jesus' powerful act of reconciliation and love.

I promised I would be brief, so I want to leave you with some comfort and challenge. First, know that when you are in a thick place, where God's presence feels too distant, if not absent all together, that you are in good company. Jesus has been there himself and he will not leave you comfortless. He did not turn away from the cross but conquered it in his own way through loving the hell out of us. And here is the challenge. Jesus is here today and has been throughout the church's history even though we haven't done a great job of showing it. The sordid aspects of our history do not need to define us, however. We can change the story by being the body of Christ in our community today, the way Jesus was, willing to risk it all out of love for God's people. I know it's possible. I've seen you all in action. You are picking up crosses all over the place and turning them into figurative plowshares and literal toothpaste drives. I have known it possible in my own life as a 55-year-old divorced single mom in seminary for the second time who thankfully has this beautiful piece of art around her neck to remind her of God's love. Thanks be to God.