

“Turning Point”

**First Presbyterian Church
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March 18, 2018**

Old Testament lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34

New Testament lesson: John 12:20-33

Retired pastor Dean Snyder once said, “There are four crosses in the world. There are four things worthy of us giving our lives to and for. The four things are love, truth, justice and beauty. When we take up one of these crosses and follow Jesus, we deny ourselves on behalf of love, on behalf of the pursuit of truth, on behalf of the making of justice, on behalf of the creation of beauty. We deny ourselves and devote ourselves to these things. But we also find ourselves.”¹

Thinking about this, I realized crosses are like that. They represent a turning point, the intersection of two divergent paths. In today’s New Testament reading, Jesus is at a turning point. Some Greeks have heard about his teaching and healing in Galilee and now they’re interested in who he is. And yet, Greeks were pagans in the days of Jesus, meaning they didn’t believe in the God of Israel. In fact, Jesus’ ministry up to that point had been largely on behalf of the children of Israel, though he did reach out to some non-Jews based on their extraordinary faith.

But the Greeks in today’s reading have not shown any signs of faith in Jesus. As far as we know, they’re just interested in learning more about him. Perhaps they’re at a turning point. We don’t know; the Bible doesn’t tell us. What we do know is how Jesus responds. Jesus, hearing about their interest in him, says, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Turns out, this is really a turning point for Jesus, and by virtue of that, a turning point for all creation, including every man, woman and child on the planet. Jesus is heading to the cross. Like all turning points, this is not easy, even for him. “Now my soul is troubled” says Jesus. Jesus’ soul is troubled. He knows he will be arrested, tortured and crucified – the hardest, most pivotal time of his life.

What’s it like for us when we face the hardest, most pivotal times in life – times like serious illnesses, certainly; career decisions, maybe; getting married – changes everything; having children – *really* changes everything. Talk about giving of yourself for others! -body, mind and soul, and all that you have.

Whatever major turning points you’ve faced in life, look back on them now, remember what that was like. What were your major turning points – maybe marriage, divorce, children, health scares, a new career, starting high school? Whatever you’re thinking of, what was that like?

¹ Dean Snyder, “What does Jesus mean by self-denial?” *Foundry United Methodist Church Website*, August 28, 2005, foundryumc.org.

A bit of fear, certainly; lots of hesitation, maybe; lots of questions – like what will my life be like now if ...? Or looking back, what would my life have become without that turning point? If certain things hadn't happened and your life went in a different direction, what might it be like now? Think about it.

Now, think about what it took for you to make that turn in life, if it was a life changing event? What was your purpose and vision?

Whatever life changing event you thought of, it took something for you to make that decision, or you to get through it. For Jesus, we see his purpose and vision as he prepares to fulfill God's plan for him on the cross.

Jesus is told about the Greeks' new-found interest in him, interest from people outside his circle, outside God's covenant with Israel. And this signals time for a change. Describing the change that is to come, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Jesus is willing to give his life for the fruit of God's blessing spread throughout the earth. Jesus knows that a new covenant is necessary, one that includes all people and not just the Israelites. Jesus knows that he is to be that new covenant.

Realizing what this means, Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." Jesus is clear about God's purpose and vision, saying, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." At this turning point in his life, Jesus knows he must be lifted up on the cross and die for the sake of others. That was his major turning point.

What about our turning points in life? What is it like as a Christian to take up our cross and follow Jesus?

Author and theologian Fred Craddock says, "I think it means to be willing to empty your pockets for somebody else's children. I think it means to treat as father and mother those who are not really your mother and father. I think it means to claim as brother and sister people to whom you are not kin.

I think it means to reach out and touch untouchable people as far as our society is concerned. I think it means to sit at table with people who live far outside the tight social circle of some of your friends.

Break bread together. It means to be a voice for moral values in a culture that will immediately accuse you of sinking into a bunch of moralistic thinking. It means to witness for Jesus Christ when evangelism is being laughed at everywhere.

It means being an advocate, to speak the gospel as though something were at stake. ... It means to continue to give money to others when the paint is peeling in the sanctuary. I think it means that," said Craddock.²

Giving money to church or charity, treating others as we would treat a loved one, welcoming and embracing strangers and those on the edges of society, standing up for what's right and tying that to our faith in Jesus – these can all be turning points in following Jesus more closely, in carrying your cross, in fulfilling God's purpose and vision for your life.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice and that makes all these smaller sacrifices possible. Referring to his journey toward the cross, Jesus says, "Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

As we seek to follow Jesus, let us be mindful of what Jesus put into motion nearly 2,000 years ago. All our worldly concerns about money, about sizing people up or being judged by them, about letting our faith drive our actions *and* being bold enough to talk about it – all these worldly concerns are overcome by faith, faith that Jesus is still working among us and through us.

Whatever you believe your purpose and vision to be, measure it against God's purpose and vision as revealed through Jesus Christ. God's greatest desire is to use us to help the world be more faithful to Jesus and to share with all people his message of love and acceptance. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace, we come to this house of worship and place of prayer with thanksgiving. We come into your presence with gratitude, O God, that you hear our prayers.

Help us when we struggle to carry the cross of Christ faithfully this Lenten season.

For those who tread on ground that is rocky with instability in their homes or jobs, we ask for your calming presence.

For those who are finding their way through the pain and uncertainty of grief and loss, we ask for the light of the Lord to guide them on the journey.

For those who are ill – or providing care for them – we ask for the peaceful serenity of the Holy Spirit.

² Fred Craddock, defining what it could mean to take up the Savior's cross and follow him, at the Princeton Theological Seminary graduation in May, 1989.

Also, Lord, we pray for those who, having taken a stand for what is right, feel abandoned in this world of anything goes. Grant them the assurance of your presence and your wisdom and your victory, Lord.

And for ourselves, Lord, we know that to carry the cross is a commitment to a way of life. We try to carry the cross faithfully, but sometimes we falter.

Help us in our travels that we might walk steadfast and sure to Jerusalem – and beyond. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Christ, and using the words that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**