

## Growing Beyond My Comfort Zone

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As we celebrated Theophany last month, we learned that, just as God's presence was made evident when Christ entered in and called the beauty out of the water and out of creation, so too, we as His children are asked to enter into His creation to call the beauty out of it. However as we now enter Lent, we are reminded that what we are asked to enter with this call has often been marred, corrupted and made ugly—something entirely uncomfortable for us to enter. George MacLeod wrote a poem called, "The Cross of Christ," reminding us of the kind of Christianity that Christ made manifest to us:

*Return the Cross to Golgotha.  
I simply argue that the Cross be raised again  
at the center of the market place  
as well as on the top of the Church,  
I am recovering the claim that  
Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral  
between two candles:  
But on a Cross between two thieves;  
on a town garbage heap;  
At a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan  
that they had to write His title  
in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek...  
At the kind of place where cynics talk smut,  
and thieves curse and soldiers gamble.  
Because that is where He died,  
and that is what He died about.  
And that is where Christ's followers ought to be,  
and what Church people ought to shout.*



This month, as we enter Lent, we encounter an uncomfortable experience. For those of us who choose to participate in Lenten praxis, it means a change of lifestyle that includes dietary difficulties; increased mindfulness of other's needs, coupled with increased prayer; and many more Church services than normal. For those of us who choose not to participate in Lenten praxis, it is still uncomfortable, because there is the constant gnawing reminder that we are choosing to live differently than our spiritual family, apart from the medicine that the Church has given to help us to heal and grow. Lent is meant to be uncomfortable. Christ calls us out of our comfortable space to enter into a crucifixion, not just His, but your own. Midway through Lent, we are reminded of this on the Sunday of the Holy Cross, when in the Gospel reading, Jesus tells those who claim to be followers of His, "***If anyone wishes to come after Me, let them renounce themselves and take up their own cross and follow Me. For whoever works to save their own life will lose it; and whoever loses their own life for My sake and for the sake of God's Good News will save it.***"

So how do I take up my own cross? Taking up my own cross means, that for the sake of Christ and for the sake of His Good News I am willing to enter into the garbage heaps of human experience, where death and darkness reign supreme (or seems to).



It means that I am willing to step out of my comfort zone and into the hospital to offer Christ's love to those dying, even if it causes me emotional pain to watch someone else suffer; or into the prison to visit and offer hope to those who are hopeless, even if I have to consort with someone who might be dangerous; or into the streets to offer a touch and a kind word to those reeking and rough individuals who have been shoved into the margins of humanity, even if such an act of love puts me in direct contact with those

I find offensive. It means that Christ asks me to step into these kinds of places and to see and call forth His beauty therein. It means that I am willing to risk my own suffering, to offer compassion to others who are suffering. When Jesus tells us to take up our own cross, it is no different than telling us to enter into our own **public execution** for the sake of loving others. It means risking some kind of pain to myself, whether physical, financial, or emotional, or something else, so that those held captive to the darkness of corruption and death may experience Christ's light and love.

While this is a frightening concept, it is one that Christ never sugarcoated for His disciples. Instead, He strengthened them with the realization of His Resurrection. In Matthew 16, Jesus begins to equip his disciples for ministry, telling Peter, "*on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*" Then He instructs them that whatever they loose or bind on earth will be loosed or bound in heaven. And after all that is when He exhorts each of them to take up their own cross. In context, He is encouraging them not to be afraid to enter in with faith to those places where death and corruption seem to reign supreme, because He empowers His Church to continue breaking down (to lovingly loose & bind) the gates of Hades, just like He did. Likewise He enlightens His Church with what it takes to guide those inhabitants of darkness out of their captivity. He essentially tells His Church to also have the courage to step into Hades, because **His Resurrection** is what really reigns supreme—NOT death and corruption.

So if I want to follow Jesus, I can't recoil from offering love amidst those places that bring the risk of pain to myself—I can't be most concerned with saving my own skin—because as Christ says "*whoever works to save their own life will lose it.*" Saint Silouan wisely said, "*Keep your mind in Hell, and despair not.*" In truth, we need not fear or despair of the darkness of Hades around us. We MUST stand with courage in the midst of darkness because we each carry within us the Source of Light & Life. The more we walk in union with Him, the brighter that Light will shine from us. May God grant that we each personally encounter the love of Christ Jesus amidst a blessed and uncomfortable Lent, and may we each grow beyond our comfort zone. Amen.

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