

## BEARING THE CROSS

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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In case you missed it, this past July was John Calvin's 500th birthday. It prompted me to re-read his historically influential, 2-volume tome: "Institutes of the Christian Religion." Calvin was a French Catholic and one of the forces in the 16th century reformation of the European Church. His writings and work gave rise to what we call the Presbyterian or Reformed tradition of Christian faith.

With the Bible in hand, he attempted to discredit and dismantle what he considered superstitions in the church and culture of his time. In my view he missed the biggest superstition of all—the big "elephant in the room." This morning I'd like to take on that "elephant" that was too big for Calvin to see. Many other Christians have noticed it, too.

There is a popular form of Christianity that claims every single person deserves eternal damnation and shall be damned unless they accept the one and only remedy, which is the death of the one and only innocent person that ever lived, namely Jesus of Nazareth who was both fully human and fully divine and thus able to pay off our infinite debt of guilt. Was that a long sentence or what?

According to this popular form of Christianity, Jesus magically bore the sins of the whole human race in his body on the cross and thus erased our guilt, appeased God's holy wrath, and won for us eternal bliss—but only if we believe it. Believe it and your worries are over. Don't believe and you're doomed to eternal damnation. It's that simple. It's that absolute.

The evangelists and salesmen of this Christianity will tell you that this remedy is an over-the-counter prescription but, as it turns out, you can't get it because they're holding it over your head. Salvation is free they say but, guess what: you've got to pay their price, recite their creeds, and say their particular prayers or else. Or else what? Eternal damnation—that's what. Damnation is not good enough. It's gotta be *eternal* damnation!

This form of Christianity may be popular, powerful and a thousand-years old, but it's based on some outrageous superstitions about heaven and hell arising from serious misinterpretations of the Bible and opportunistic appropriations of certain blood curdling, hair raising medieval graphic novels about a fictitious hell. Popular Christianity has reduced the life and teachings of Christ to a life insurance policy. Tragically, this superstition is embedded in culture, not just the church.

Jesus as "the way, the truth and the life" originally meant a *way* to live, namely the way of love as embodied and exemplified by Jesus. But popular Christianity has turned *the way* into a "fire escape" from this world into another. It would be laughable were it not so pervasive and powerful. Those who hold this threat over our heads get rich, build ornate churches and global evangelistic enterprises. Follow the money.

No one can save us or our loved ones from dying, not even Jesus. Jesus didn't want to die. *O God, he prayed, remove this cup of death from me.*

Jesus loved life and lived it to the hilt. What Jesus tried to do was to save us from half lives, inauthentic lives, lives unspent, lives lived under the tyranny of others or under the tyranny of our own petty self. For Jesus, salvation was more about here and now not there and later.

Jesus lived a certain way and got nailed for it. He was one of thousands of Jews crucified by the Roman Empire's occupying forces, not unlike hundreds of Palestinians who have been routinely killed over the past 40 years by another occupying force on the same soil that Jesus once walked.

It wasn't easy for Jesus to practice non-violent resistance to evil in his day and it's not easy for Palestinians to practice it these days. But many are trying. This past week I read "A Palestinian Christian Call for Reconciliation" by Naim Ateek, an elderly Christian pastor who is a Palestinian native. It tells of the efforts by Jews, Muslims and Christians in resisting occupation forces in a non-violent way. It's not easy.

The life and death of Jesus reveals something which we might otherwise miss: even if you do the right thing, even if you do the right thing all the time, the world can tear you to pieces. Life on this planet is treacherous and unfair but still we have a calling. In our baptism we receive an invitation, a vocation to keep working to make the world more just, holy and wholesome no matter what. Can you hear it? Have you quieted your life enough to listen?

Yes, it's hard work but as the story of Jesus suggests, we have help and, as it turns out, it's worth it. In the wake of such living love multiplies. You can shoot it down, bury it in the ground and roll a boulder over it, but it keeps coming back. Easter is the comic relief of the world's daily tragedies. And it keeps happening. We saw it in the singing and dancing of thousands of Haitians following the devastating earthquake. Faith, joy and hope are irrepressible.

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Jesus got nailed to a cross. Martin Luther King got gunned down on a Memphis motel balcony. Bishop Oscar Romero got gunned down while celebrating mass in an El Salvadoran church. Gandhi was gunned down on his way to lead prayer in Delhi. When you live a certain way in this world, there's a price to pay.

Brave women have also stood up for justice and have paid a price. Many were beaten, reviled and imprisoned. Joan of Arc, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Day, and Rosa Parks. Rachel Corrie stood up to the occupying forces in Palestine and was crushed to death by a bulldozer.

The way of the cross is for everyone but not everyone can walk the way of the cross, at least not every day or every moment. I can't even though I believe it is the right and true way. It's a hard row to hoe. It requires grit but also grace.

Jesus bids us follow if we can. If we can. But if we can't, he is not going to condemn us to hell. That's not the point of his invitation.

The invitation is just that: an invitation to learn by way of practice how to love God and others more fully than we might otherwise do—often in small, quiet, inconspicuous ways. No, it's not easy and, yes, it might lead to the death of our selves in more ways than one.

There's a certain form of our self—the self-centered self; the self full of fear—that needs to die daily for the other self to arise. We need to be born again daily. It's not about being crucified or gunned down for living bravely. Martyrdom is the exception not the rule. It's about living and loving more fully in your world day by day, inch by inch, one kind word by one kind word, one deep listening moment after another. It's about living and loving fully and not even being noticed. In fact, you might be considered "irrelevant" by the world's standards.

We don't follow Jesus or bear the cross in order to be crucified but in order to live and love fully without fear.

As a first century Jew Jesus would have thought or worried very little about the so-called “afterlife, about life beyond this one. In his society “resurrection” meant the “revival” or “restoration” of his oft-crushed people. Jesus, like people in every time and place, might have speculated about the wonders of life beyond death but he had no more certainty of the details than we do, only that he, like everyone, would be in God’s hands.

Jesus might have said, as I’ve heard other Jews say: *God was at the beginning; God will be at the end whatever the end might mean or be. We can’t know so we trust.*

We simply trust that in life and death we belong to God and then get on with it. Which is why Jesus and other sages from various religious and ethical traditions have said over and over: let’s make this world and this life as wholesome, holy, peaceful, loving and just as we possibly can. And here’s a way to do that: humbly open yourself to the Spirit every day. Love one another, including your enemies, even if it kills you.

And that, says Jesus, is what I’m going to do. Anyone want to join me?

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-11)*

And, in case you’ve forgotten, you, too, are made in the form (“image”) of God. What are you going to do?