

I was sitting in our minivan outside of a McDonald's  
somewhere along the highway between Florida  
and home after our annual family  
vacation to our beloved Destin beach.  
When out of the blue, sitting with my spouse,  
I hear the words you never expected to hear  
from the person who also said until death do us part.  
I just don't love you anymore.  
Or more directly, I'm not sure I ever loved you.

You don't know what to say or think,  
and as I sat there with our daughter,  
enjoying her chicken nuggets in the back,  
I was watching in my mind's eye my whole world fall apart,  
and thinking I certainly didn't sign up for this.

Maybe you have had a moment like mine  
when you, too, found yourself  
in a place of desperation or pain,  
saying to yourself I didn't sign up for this.  
Maybe that moment was in the sterile silence  
of a hospital room or a doctor's office,  
with a diagnosis you never expected to receive,  
filling you with a fog that seemed surreal.  
Or for some of you, it is that call from the police  
about your prodigal child, and wondering  
what trouble they have found themselves in now.  
Or on this March 15 six years ago in 2020, we all felt  
that way as we had to walk away  
from our sanctuaries and didn't know what was next.

Life seems to hand us moments that we did not  
sign on the dotted line to experience.  
Most days, we just want good things to happen,  
for life to be comfortable, and to avoid conflict.  
But then there are moments that we can't ignore,  
and in Luke's gospel today, that certainly is true for Simon of Cyrene.

**26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country**

Cyrene is located in modern-day Libya,  
off the northern coast of Africa.  
The trip to Jerusalem would have been over 850 miles.  
That would be like walking from the middle of Ohio to the Gulf of Mexico.  
Scripture doesn't describe Simon as a Jew,  
though we can assume he was in Jerusalem for Passover  
rather than on a random sightseeing tour.  
And it is possible this is Simon's first trip to Jerusalem.

**He is only mentioned once in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke,**

and not at all in John's Gospel.

And although Matthew and Mark mention Simon,  
he seemed more willing than forced to carry the cross.  
Luke, however, described Simon as more of an innocent bystander,  
visiting Jerusalem, minding his own business.

Let's paint a picture.

Simon was filled with awe and wonder  
while the city was filled with chaos and chatter.  
The streets of Jerusalem were packed with merchants,  
persistent and pleading, and plying their trades with the shoppers.  
Simon moved carefully through the crowd  
as he made his way to the Temple, looming large  
in the distance with its white stone  
reflecting the radiance of the sun.

But as he made his way through the other pilgrims,  
shouts rang out, and the voices were different.  
They were angry, and suddenly, he noticed  
Roman soldiers pushing a man forward,  
his back bent under the weight of the wooden beam he carried.

**Simon stepped closer to get a better look,  
and he saw this man, blood-stained with a crown of thorns,  
collapsing onto the street.**

And whether Simon cried out or even said  
someone should help this man,  
He couldn't help it; he had compassion, it was just who he was.  
And then the soldiers noticed him.  
And before he could turn away,  
one of the soldiers grabbed him by the arm and made a command.

Now, remember, Simon is just a guest here. A tourist.  
Can you imagine being in another country  
and being told to be a part of something  
political or horrible that was going on?  
Simon didn't sign up for this.

**...and they laid the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.**

Simon got a good chance to look at this man.  
And he probably had questions like,  
"Who is he?" What did he do? Why is he being crucified?  
But the Romans weren't talking, and they had a job to do.  
And they just needed Simon to carry the cross  
because obviously, this Jesus was too beaten to do it.

**Step by step, he walked with this man he didn't know,**

a stranger bound to this man in his suffering.  
And Simon begins to realize that this is  
no ordinary religious rebel because  
while there are many hurling insults and hard words,  
there are others who are like the women  
who are wailing and showing their deep grief.

**A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were  
beating their breasts and wailing for him.**

How can such love and hate be in the same place?  
And maybe for Simon of Cyrene,  
even though he didn't sign up for this,  
he knew in some way that this was an invitation,  
a God-planned moment, into something  
that was greater than he ever could have expected.

Somehow standing out from the chaotic crowd,  
Simon became an unexpected companion  
to Jesus on his via dolorosa,  
his way of sorrow and suffering.  
But it was not only Simon but also these wailing women.  
In one of the most brutally honest  
moments in the Bible I can think of,  
Jesus shared with the women what he thought

was happening and would happen...

**28 But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.**

**31 For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”**

Meaning if Jesus, who is innocent, holy, and alive, is treated this way, how much more will God’s judgment come to those who are guilty, dead, and deserving of destruction. Together, Simon and the women walked into one of the most intimate and sacred moments of Jesus’s journey. Simon shouldered a weight that was not his to carry, and these women ensured that Jesus did not suffer alone and that he was loved.

In that moment, Simon and the women embodied what it means to walk alongside each other in pain. Not with the intent to fix the pain or remove the suffering, which many of us want to do, but simply to be present.

A couple of months later, after McDonald's, it was time to decorate for Christmas. All alone, I tried to put up our family tree, and the memories came crashing down. I couldn’t do it, and I made a call for help, and the next thing I knew, 20 Andrew Ministers from the group I led were there decorating everything. They carried my cross.

Jesus was surrounded in his final moments by those who mocked him but also by those who loved him.

**The women, the female disciples, were there mourning** his suffering and refusing to look away after all the other disciples fled in fear. They could not carry the cross like Simon, but they could carry the pain of his suffering.

Sometimes that is all we can do, too.

There are many bedsides, hospitals, and funeral homes  
where I have stood, and all I can do is bring  
a ministry of presence in the midst of suffering.  
I have no greater power to heal someone or save them.  
I'm as helpless as family and friends  
standing by the graveside or hospital bed,  
suffering and feeling lost.  
But I can be the presence of Jesus.  
Help them remember that they are not alone.

No one escapes suffering in this life.  
But you know what makes the difference?  
It is whether we suffer in isolation or  
in the presence of people who love us.  
Simon of Cyrene carried the cross.  
The women wept at Jesus feet.  
Jesus was still crucified, but he was never alone.

As we walk through our own  
seasons of grief, hardship, or uncertainty,  
just as Simon did, we are called to carry others' burdens.  
But to remember that we are not  
called to fix the burdens of others.  
Most of us are not qualified or equipped  
to solve someone else's problems, so we shouldn't try.  
But what we can do is be present  
with one another to ensure no one suffers alone.  
The bottom line is that we need people,  
particularly when walking through the  
valley of the shadow of suffering and even death.

And as Rachel reminded me,  
it is often difficult to let people in during these times.  
I completely understand that.  
I have the habit myself of not letting people see me hurt.  
Of being there for other people but not letting them in for me.  
When I was going through my dad's illness and death,  
I had someone on my staff at Good Shepherd who walked with me.  
My friend Davis was there every step of the way.  
I led my dad's funeral.  
I couldn't see how I could live with myself if I didn't.

It was one of the hardest things I have done in my life.  
And after I finished at the front, I literally collapsed  
into the arms of my family and friends,  
no longer able to bear the weight of pain and suffering any longer.

And it was Davis who took me to  
to watch one of our favorite Christmas movies,  
Christmas Vacation, which had been re-released.  
We sat there and laughed and cried together.  
Several years later, his dad would die,  
and I would be there for him.

It has been in moments like that that I have  
discovered my deep need for people,  
even when I think I am better off alone.  
Because the truth is that trying to carry grief or stress,  
or sorrow alone is not really strength or resiliency;  
it just isolates us on an island.

**Although Simon of Cyrene** was  
an unlikely companion for Jesus,  
perhaps suffering itself is the most  
unlikely companion we ever journey with.  
Suffering is not something we ask for,  
and yet it is always present in our reality as human beings.

And those of us who call ourselves Christian  
are called to carry our cross and  
follow a Savior who suffered for our sakes.  
That is hard to bear sometimes, isn't it?  
But could suffering be a pathway  
to growth, to life, and ultimately to love?  
I have found that to be true in my life.

We as humans attempt to avoid pain at all costs  
by medicating it, distracting ourselves from it,  
and silencing it, but Jesus didn't.  
He walked through suffering, and when he did that,  
he showed us that suffering is not the end of the story, right?  
The cross wasn't the end like everyone expected.

Rachel said this that spoke to me...

What if instead of running from our own pain, we allowed it to shape us?

What if we, like Simon, carried our pain not as a burden to break us,  
but as a companion to teach us?

You probably have a moment of suffering, past or present,  
or a cross you are bearing that you have been avoiding.

You don't want to talk about it or think about it.

But the pain and suffering are always there  
just below the surface in everything you say and do.

What if you took a different approach right now?

Instead of numbing or ignoring our pain,  
what would it look like to sit with it?

Name it? What if we took time to grieve it?

And when we are ready, like Simon of Cyrene,  
we can step forward and carry it.

But knowing we do not carry it alone.

Walking with it is important,

but I have learned more importantly,

it is about letting others walk with us.

And my prayer is that on the other side of suffering,  
we discover resurrection waiting.

What cross are you carrying that you need to share?

I want to invite you to light a candle.

for the suffering and pain you are carrying.

Or for someone else.

The light is a sign for us that we do not suffer alone.

And when we witness all the candles we will light

during hard moments in our life

we can remember that we are not alone.