

Why One Suffering Mother Chose to Lift Her Hefty Cross

One tends to think of the Christian life in terms of softness, of words such as love and grace and peace. Those words are real to be sure. Yet there are other words in the walk of Christ—tough, rugged words—words that are hard to hear, hard to say and harder still to live. This part of the vocabulary of the faith is replete with angular words, sharp words with none of the corners rounded off or sanded down.

The cross is just such a word. Pain, horrific and humiliating pain, and all the rest of the human nightmare of abandonment and betrayal are in that one word. I passed a jewelry store window in which were displayed some of the most gorgeous, bejeweled crosses I've ever seen. In the midst of them was this sign:

These Crosses on Easy Terms

Jewelry-store crosses may well come on easy terms. The real ones never do. Theological crosses, the ones talked about in seminaries, may sound as if they come on easy terms. In real life, they never do. It is in human relationships that the cross is always the ugliest and most expensive. It is not in Good Friday devotionals but in human relations where we encounter the real cross, the wretched, blood-soaked cross still unsoftened by the pastel colors of Easter decorations.

We know the catechism. We know about the depravity of man. Theoretically, that is, in our heads. Where the cross hurts, where its nails become real, more real than we were ever told they would be, is when the depravity of others touches our lives.

The soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross were not actors in a passion play. They were very real human beings manifesting

all that “theoretical” depravity. So were the religious leaders who plotted Jesus’ arrest and betrayal, as was the mob that howled for his blood. The weak-kneed, morally compromised and calloused civil servant who gave Jesus over to be crucified was not a prop in a movie. “Suffered under Pontius Pilate,” is not just a line in the Apostles’ Creed. It was real life. A real man suffering real pain, unimaginably real pain, at the hands of, or at least at the behest of, another real man. That is what the cross means. Suffering, sacrifice and pain in real life. In other words, the cross is not real until it’s real.

The cross of Christ leaps from Sunday school lesson to real life when we suffer at the hands of others. It becomes even more real, even harder to bear when those we love suffer at the hands of others. Where the nails thrust themselves through our flesh and straight on into the wood is where the depravity of others becomes our unbearable pain.

I know I am called to a life of forgiveness, but I cannot forgive until there is something to forgive. Until my flesh screams, the cross is theory. Then, suddenly, it is altogether more real than I could ever have imagined it would be. It’s not characters in a Bible story who make the cross real. Sinful spouses do. So do irritating in-laws and wretched neighbors. When the soldiers gambling for Christ’s clothing at the foot of the cross morph into real thugs with real guns, the cross causes real pain, not Sunday school pain. That kind of cross never comes on easy terms.

I invite you to click on this link and read a story written not by a theologian but by KLAS-TV Channel 8 in Las Vegas, Nevada. It’s not the story of a murder but of the aftermath of murder. It’s not a story about the depravity of a sinful gunman, but of a woman who bore the cross of grief and pain he fashioned. The kind of cross she hefted never comes on easy terms and hers certainly did not, but lift it she did.

After you read her story, think on this. On the other side of every cross there is a witness to the Resurrection. The pain of her life became the testimony of Christ's redeeming love. Now read again the words of the defense attorney, Joe Abood. "I've never seen anything like it." I should think not. It is rare indeed.

There is only one way, only one terrible place to get a view on that kind of victory. It can only be seen where the unspeakable pain of the cross of Christ becomes real in a real life. There where real faith lifts a real cross, the Resurrection of Christ becomes real as well. {eo}

Dr. Mark Rutland is president of both *Global Servants* () and the *National Institute of Christian Leadership* (). A renowned communicator and New York Times best-selling author, he has more than 30 years of experience in organizational leadership, having served as a senior pastor and a university president.