

September 24, 2006 ~ 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Susan Morrison

**Mark 8:27-38**

<sup>27</sup>Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and pick up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when all stand before Our God in glory with the holy angels.”

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Jesus was looking at the calendar. It was already midway through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Jesus was feeling discouraged. The world that he loved was falling apart. Many of his long time disciples were aging, some even making the journey from this life to eternity. He needed to find new disciples. He was eager to reengage those who had previously signed up for discipleship. He was willing to partner with those who wanted to be disciples, to help them grow in their discipleship and to spend as much time as necessary coaching and encouraging them. But how to find them and invite them into a lifelong partnership was the challenge.

And then Jesus remembered a conversation he had overheard when one of his contemporary disciples was looking for the perfect mate. She had talked about a novel new dating service of the electronic age. The website was called *Match.com* and it promised a money back guarantee if you didn't find the perfect match within six months.

Jesus figured, what did he have to loose? Perhaps he could interest a number of people to be a disciple! There would be new energy and a wave of newly committed disciples in the world. So he went to his computer and double clicked into his Internet Explorer and typed in *Match.com*.

And there he discovered a rather long questionnaire that asked him to create a profile of himself. It would be this profile that other seekers would find and to which they would respond. Very thoughtfully he began to fill in answers to the questions.

**What is your marital status?** Single.

**Where should we look for a match?** Any where in the world.

**What describes your eye color?** Brown.

**What color is your skin?** Olive.

**Hmm. Body art. Tattoos? Pierced ears? Belly button ring?** None.

**Brag a little. What is your best feature?** My smile.

**Do you enjoy traveling?** Absolutely. I would go by foot, bike, train or plane to meet with people anywhere in the world.

**What describes your diet?** I still enjoy Middle Eastern food the best but am always interested in learning about and tasting foods from any culture.

**What kind of a job do you have?** My mission is one that God created. I spend my day in prayer, seeking God's will. And then I share God's intentions for peace and justice, love and acceptance with anyone who will listen. I enjoy teaching and especially story telling. I have the power to heal and make whole.

**Current annual income?** None. I rely on the hospitality and generosity of my disciples. They are the ones who clothe and feed and shelter me. In fact, when they offer such acts of care to anyone, anywhere, they offer it to me.

**Which ethnicities describe you the best?** Middle Eastern.

**How would you describe your education?** Godly.

**Where is your hometown?** Nazareth.

**How tall should your match be?** Not applicable. Any body type is acceptable for discipleship. I believe that the body is like a temple. Caring for that temple is critical. I would encourage followers to take care of their bodies through exercise, rest, recreation and a healthy diet. Abusing the body with drugs or excessive alcohol is thoroughly discouraged.

**What color eyes do you like to stare into?** All. In fact, I love to look deeply into the eyes of a brother or sister of mine. Eyes are windows to the soul and I want to give unconditional love to those who will meet my glance.

**Send a photo of yourself which can be posted with your *Match.com* profile.** What to send? The best picture is one taken at the wedding at Cana of Galilee. It was when someone captured me laughing heartily. It speaks volumes of the abundant life which I know even as I bump up against the powers and principalities of this world.

**Describe yourself and your perfect match. You can use up to 2,000 words.** Ah! finally a chance to write about that which is really important to me.

Years after my birth and death and resurrection, an English poet named John Donne offered a pretty accurate summary of my life. This is what he wrote:

The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die martyrs but Christ was born a martyr. He found Golgotha even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then, the straws were almost as sharp as thorns after, and the manger as uneasy at first as his cross at last. His birth and death were but one continual act, and his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of one and the same day. (*Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 31, No.3, p. 48)

My whole life was lived in conflict with the authorities of my day. Even my birth created tension and fear for King Herod who wanted to destroy me so that I wouldn't be a threat to his power. Many first born babies of Bethlehem lost their lives because it was reported that the king of the Jews had been born. It seemed that my coming caused evil forces to rage. As I matured and understood that I was God's son, sent to redeem the relationship between God and God's people, I became the enemy of both religious and political authorities because I was a threat to their arrogance and power.

That's why there is so much "cross talk" about me. I did not desire execution or even see my sacrifice as a virtue. Can there be such a thing as redemptive suffering? With fear and trembling, I accepted that my death was the inevitable consequence of living a non violent, all-encompassing love that challenged oppression and injustice in what ever forms they presented themselves.

So I would invite anyone who is willing to "pick up my cross" and be my disciple. If you can do this you would be my perfect match!

Perhaps it would be helpful for me to explain what I mean by "picking up your cross." Picking up your cross has nothing to do with bearing physical aches and pains. It is not to shoulder a burden. It is not to get along in life as best you can with a physical disability. It's not about feeling like you have a cross to bear because your kitchen faucet leaks or your basement floods or you have to sit in traffic to and from work every day. *Picking up your cross is not usually something that happens to you but rather something that you choose to do.* It's one thing to receive discomfort or suffering or pain as it comes, it is quite another to seek it out.

Cross bearing is something that we do in service to others. It is becoming a part of the solution to today's problems. It's a willingness to resist systems that perpetuate injustice. It's using your time and talent and resources to work for justice and peace and the well being of all creation. It's sacrificing some of what we "want" so that others can have what they "need."

I think of the college students who chose to spend their spring break helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi and Louisiana. These young adults spent their own savings and their own free time to be in service to others. That is what it means to "pick up your cross." I think of those unsung heroes and saints who make moral and ethical choices at work and as a result lose their job or are passed over for a promotion. That is what it means to "pick up your cross."

I think of Rosa Parks, willing to take her seat for the sake of racial justice. That's what it means to "pick up your cross." I think of gay and lesbian colleagues who "come out" and put the denomination on notice that their call to ministry is as valid as their heterosexual sisters and brothers. These are men and women who will loose their ministerial credentials because of their courageous challenge to the system. That's what it means to "pick up your cross." I think of those who are scorned by their friends because of their intolerance of racial and sexist jokes. That's what it means to "pick up your cross."

Surely if you are considering being a "match" with me, you can add to this list some of your own ways that you, too, have picked up your cross.

But let me remind you that by doing so, you are gaining a life, not loosing it! It is when you pick up your cross that you get a life! I mean "what good would it do you to get everything you want and lose, you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?" (*the Message*, Eugene Peterson, Mark 8:36) When you and I are partnered it is then that we can truly dream, create, have joy, make mistakes, suffer, dance, sing, and celebrate: instead of being death-like, life will be full of abundance.

That's why I love the Nicaraguan crosses. They are filled not with a dying image of my crucifixion but rather with life-giving symbols such as farmers and their animals; mothers and their babies; children at school; corn and beans and tortillas and pineapples and mangoes. Justice making and peace making deeds lead to the death of injustice and sin and promise resurrection and new life.

So, here's the deal. If you would like to learn more please respond to this *Match.com*. My commitment to you is that I will always be with you. You will never be alone. You cannot walk the path of discipleship alone. You will do it in a loving community and I will be your guide. And when you are ridiculed and suffer for my sake, I will give you the strength to carry on. Once Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* posed the question: "What image of God can help us to make any sense out of our pain and trauma riddled existence?" Not the "God of the gaps," the God who leaps in from "out there" to rescue us in our hour of need. That will not fit the absurd drama of life witnessed in this century. No, he concluded, our God is the God who has allowed Godself to be edged out on a cross, who not only suffers for us but with us." (*Lectionary Homiletics*, September, 200, p. 19)

Just as Simon of Cyrene helped me to carry my cross, I will be there to help you carry yours.

Let me know if you'd like to be a match. I am eager to hear from you. Come, partner with me, pick up your cross, follow me and have a new, abundant life!

Amen and Amen.