



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 12, 2013

"Have You Had a Simon of Cyrene Moment?" (Gospel of Luke Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

A video clip showing Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus carry the cross is shown.

This morning we are going to talk about a man from the Bible who is not so well known. You saw him on the video. His name is only mentioned thrice in the Bible: once in the Gospel of Luke, once in the Gospel of Matthew, and once in the Gospel of Mark. His name is Simon of Cyrene. A man not many are familiar with.

Who is this guy? Let's read the only three verses about him.

Luke 23:26 As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

Matthew 27:32 And they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry His cross.

Mark 15:21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

First let me give some historical background, and then let's figure out what Simon of Cyrene has to do with us, and how his story can help our faith.

First, where is Cyrene? It was an ancient city in North Africa, located

in modern-day Libya. Originally a Greek colony, Cyrene was taken over by the Romans in 96 BC. It was known for being rich in corn, wool, and dates. Today we know Cyrene as the city of Tripoli.

Ancient historian Josephus wrote that Cyrene encouraged Jewish settlements, and so historians believe that Simon of Cyrene was probably a Jewish pilgrim who might have saved up his money to make the 800-mile journey to the city of Jerusalem for the holy Jewish feast of Passover.

So here's the scene. Simon makes this religious pilgrimage. After 800 miles, he finally arrives in Jerusalem. Walking in Jerusalem, he sees a horrible procession of a man carrying a wooden cross. He knows that the Romans, who ruled over the Israelites, used crucifixion as a sentence for their lowest-of-the-lowest criminals.

Carrying a cross would be as foreboding and humiliating as carrying your own electric chair that you would be made to sit in afterward. It would be like carrying the sword with which you would be beheaded, or carrying the blade of a guillotine that would be used on you.

Here was this poor criminal, who was actually the innocent Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe, who had come to the earth to tell us to love one another. He was perfect and loving in every way. But now He was made to

carry a cross that the Romans planned to use to nail him to and then hoist Him up until He died from severe difficulty in breathing and from loss of blood.

Simon hears the commotion, sees the crowd, and makes his way to the front to see Jesus. He sees that Jesus is not only carrying a cross but is already bloodied from being beaten and whipped the night before, even before His death march.

Maybe compassion moved Simon to do something. He knew that the Romans would often flog their convicts, as they may have done with Jesus, with a whip made of 39 lashes that had bits of glass or sharp bones in them to make the flesh wounds deeper. He knew that they probably pummeled the man the night before.

As he stared at poor Jesus, who was now walking by him, Simon suddenly felt perhaps a tap on his shoulder by the flat side of a sword or a spear. The Roman soldiers who occupied the land could commandeer a man at any time to do their bidding.

Maybe a soldier called out to Simon, "Hey you, come here! Pick up this man's cross and carry it for him for the rest of the journey!"

And here the Bible text says (Matthew 27:32 and Mark 15:21) that Simon was **COMPELLED** to carry the cross for Jesus! Compelled. Forced to do it against his will.

Why did the Romans demand Simon's help? It was probably because Jesus was so weak from no sleep the night before after He was arrested and after having been tortured. The soldiers now were worried that He would die from the exhaustion before they had the chance to nail Him to the cross. So Simon was randomly pulled from the crowd to help Jesus. Simon must have been shocked, scared, and humiliated. He suffered the pain with Jesus but then his life was also transformed!

Simon must have been stunned and thought, "Here I am, minding my own business. I was just arriving in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, and then I get caught up in a crowd. I was just watching when suddenly I am enlisted, more like drafted against my will to carry a man's cross of death."

He was perhaps scared and thought— I have never carried a cross. What if I can't make it? What if they whip and beat me? What if they decide at the end to put me on the cross too? I am a father of two kids. What will happen to my family?

How humiliating it must have been to be treated like dirt—a man with no rights, to be forced to do something he didn't want to do by people he had come to hate for their occupation of his country. How humiliating to carry a cross like a common criminal. How humiliating to be the object of scorn and jeers or even to be hated by the Romans. Yet, here was Simon – forced into the service of helping Jesus.

Whoa, let's stop right there! Have you ever had a Simon of Cyrene moment? Have you ever felt forced into the service of helping others for Jesus? Well, maybe you didn't know you were being asked to do something in the service of Jesus, not at the time.

But what I am saying today is that sometimes we are blind-sided by a request or a demand to do something (and we DON'T WANT TO DO IT), but it is actually a request to do something for Jesus.

Maybe it was something you were asked to do by your parents, your supervisor, a friend, some group, or your church. And here is your reaction, which is like Simon's reaction. First there is shock from the tap of the spear or sword on your shoulder that seems to say, "Hey you!"

"What? Why me?"

Maybe it's like Moses tending his sheep, and then God speaks to him through a burning bush to tell him he has been chosen by God to lead his people out of Egypt. And we're like Moses who says, "What? Me? Not me? I don't speak well. I am slow of speech. Ask my brother Aaron. He speaks really well."

But God says, "No, I want you!"

It's like Gideon in Judges chapter six. He is hiding in a huge winepress from his enemies, the Midianites, and God sends an angel to him and says, "I see you! The Lord is with you! Hail you, mighty warrior!"

And Gideon says in essence, "Say what? Who are you calling a mighty warrior? Can't you see that I am HIDING from my enemies? And if the Lord is with us – why are there so many Midianites in our land?"

And the Angel says, "Yup I got that, so I am commissioning you to go fight them!"

Read it yourself in Judges 6:14: "Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you."

"Who me?" Gideon must've thought. "You, Mr. Angel, are crazy!" Gideon is having a Simon of Cyrene moment.

Have you ever felt that yourself? You have just been blind sided by something in life when someone asks you to do something that you feel you can't do.

Perhaps you might feel humiliated by having been asked. "Who do they think they are by asking me to do this? This is such a lowly thing to do! I am not going to do that!"

Sometimes we are given a duty, a job, or a responsibility that we think is beneath us! Mothers of little ones may say, "All I do is change diapers, wipe butts, talk baby talk, and run after toddlers. It seems all so menial."

But remember that it all depends on our attitude and perspective. And actually, God is using that request for you to do something for Jesus. To get through it, it all depends on perspective and attitude.

Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli tells a parable about three stone-cutters building a cathedral in the Middle Ages.

You approach the first man and ask him what he's doing. Angrily, he turns to you and says, "Are you crazy? Use your eyes! They bring me a rock, I cut it into a block. They take it away, and they bring me another rock. I cut it into a block, they take it away. I've been doing this since I was old enough to work, and I'm going to be doing it until the day that I die."

So you quickly back off and go to the next man, and ask him the same question: "What are you doing?"

The second man smiles at you warmly and tells you, "I'm earning a living for my beloved family."

With my wages I have built a home. There is food on our table, and the children are growing strong."

Finding that interesting, you move on to the third man with the same question: "What are you doing?"

Pausing, this man gives you a look of deep fulfillment and says, "I am building a great cathedral, a holy lighthouse that will help people lost in the dark find their way. This cathedral will stand for a thousand years!"

These three men are doing the exact task of cutting stone, but each differs in how he looks at it. Each man is doing back-breaking work but it is for a grand purpose, if they could but see it. And in this case, building a cathedral is suffering for Jesus for a great cause. These stone-cutters can be transformed by their work if they choose to see the grand purpose.

If we find personal meaning in our work, we will have fulfillment and joy in even the most routine of tasks.

Shocked, scared, humiliated, suffered for a purpose (like doing work for Jesus), and finally transformed, like Simon of Cyrene.

What can we pull out from what little and few verses we read about Simon of Cyrene? Let's look at the passage from Mark again:

Mark 15:21 They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.

Wait a minute. Simon of Cyrene was known as the father of Alexander and Rufus. Normally, if names of people are mentioned in the Bible in this way, it means they are probably Christians and are well known in the community. So can it be that this Jewish pilgrim from Cyrene became a

follower of Christ? Probably so! And not only did he become a Christian but his entire family too!

Simon was shocked to have been forced to help carry the cross. He was scared and humiliated until He reached Golgotha—the site of the crucifixion—where he could finally throw the cross down. He did his duty, and now they can nail Jesus to the cross. Simon could now flee.

But maybe he didn't flee. Maybe he was tired, and so he collapsed and sat down. He reflected over what he just did, how he carried that cross for a stranger, that man now up on a cross. That man Jesus seemed so different, different from any other man. He didn't seem guilty of a crime. Something about Jesus fascinated and intrigued him.

Maybe Simon didn't leave the scene. Maybe he witnessed Jesus being nailed and then put up on the cross. Maybe Simon heard Jesus say, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." And maybe Simon thought, "Who is this man? Only God could have that kind of forgiveness for enemies!"

The Gospel of Mark was written to the Christians in Rome. And if we turn to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans in the 16th chapter, we read this stunning mention in verse 13:

Romans 16:13: Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also.

Many historians believe this is the same Rufus who is the son of Simon of Cyrene! This is mind-boggling! It is an indication that Simon's life was transformed by Jesus. And maybe Simon led his two sons—Alexander and Rufus—to Christ. And perhaps his wife too because this verse says "greet Rufus' mother for she is a mother to me also."

Happy Mother's Day to a spiritual mom whom all moms can be like!

The ripple effect of Simon of Cyrene being forced into the cross-carrying role for Jesus is that his family gets eternal life. His sons become leaders in the early church, or at least well known among the Christians there, and his wife is like a mother to the great and famous Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament! Is that ripple effect or what?!

Do not look upon unexpected tasks as being curses because they could be blessings. The tasks may be difficult at first but if you do them with dignity and a servant's heart, you could get transformed for the good and there can be a great ripple effect.

Some moms and dads are shocked to find out how difficult it is to raise children. It can be humiliating, too, for parents when they are not respected by their children, especially teenaged children. But if they just hang in there, parents can be transformed for the good through their patience and perseverance.

Sometimes people are not able to have children for any number of reasons, and it is hard and scary and maybe humiliating in their own minds, but they will be transformed for the good and be used by God in mighty ways.

Simon's life was transformed on the day when he was what appeared to have been randomly chosen to carry Jesus' cross. It changed his life, his family's life, and the early church. Through his sons and his wife, he nurtured the Apostle Paul, the great church planter, evangelist, and writer of most of the New Testament letters.

Some scholars believe that there may actually be one more reference in the Bible to Simon of Cyrene.

Acts 13:1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul.

Simeon (which, by the way, is the full legal name of our Pastor Sim) is another form of the name Simon. Niger was a name common to men of dark skin who came from Africa, where Cyrene was.

If this is the same man, is it not interesting how again it shows that Simon is close to the Apostle Paul for he is now on the list of the men of Antioch who were prominent teachers of the Gospel. Interestingly, Antioch was the place where the term Christians was first used in the New Testament! And it was these Christians in Antioch who sent out Paul and Barnabas on their initial history-making missionary trip to the Gentiles.

All this because of a man who was unexpectedly called into a scary, humiliating, and surprising task of helping Jesus carry His cross.

Friends, you have been or will be asked by God to do a great thing. Maybe the request is initially recognized as NOT coming from God, as in the case of Simon of Cyrene, who was given a task at that time by the enemies of God—the Roman soldiers.

Maybe there is a loved one you have to care for because he or she is sick or aged. Maybe you have been given a job by your boss that is way too hard. Maybe you have been thrust into a situation to solve, and it seems impossible.

There will be people or incidents that will cast you head long into an unexpected Simon of Cyrene journey that can have great meaning and significance.

Let me close with this story I read from Rachel Naomi Remen, a clinical professor of Family and Community Medicine at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine.

She told the story of a man named Harry, an emergency physician. One day a woman who was about to give birth was brought into his emergency department. Soon a shocking, surprising thing happened. As soon as he examined her, he realized that unless her obstetrician was already on his way, he was going to have to deliver this baby himself.

He had barely finished his examination when the baby's head crowned, and with nurses on either side of him holding the mother's legs on their shoulders, Harry delivered a little girl. She was breathing spontaneously. Suddenly, he felt a familiar sense of satisfaction at his own competence.

Here's Rachel Naomi Remen's words:

"He laid her along his left forearm with the back of her head in his left hand and began to suction her nose and mouth.

"Suddenly the infant opened her eyes and looked directly at him. In that instant, Harry realized that he was the first human being this baby girl had ever seen.

"Deeply moved, he felt his heart go out to her in welcome from all people everywhere, and for a moment he had tears in his eyes.

"All this surprised him. Harry has delivered many babies and has always enjoyed the excitement of making rapid decisions and testing his skills.

"But he had never before let himself experience the meaning of

what he was doing or let himself know what he was serving with his expertise. He feels changed by this moment.

*"In that flash of recognition, he felt years of cynicism and fatigue fall away and remembered why he had chosen this work in the first place. As he put it, "It all suddenly seemed worth it." (Remen, Rachel Naomi, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Riverhead Books, 1996, p 159-161)*

Was it worth it for Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus? You bet. And as you find yourself in unexpected places with maybe unexpected and difficult tasks or maybe even with a serious disease, look for Jesus in it.

Jesus has suffered greatly for you to know You are loved, and know now that He offers you His strength and meaning for life. Look for His purpose in what you are doing. It may not come quickly, but in with the eyes of faith it will come, and you will one day see it. Amen? Amen!

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