

The Cross: It Was Our Lord's Free Choice

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Sheridan, MT, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
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I'm making a change in the usual order of service today. I want what I say to precede the reading of the Passion rather than follow it. Doing it this way gives the dramatic gospel "the last word," which is how it ought to be.

I want to invite you to think about how to find a personal connection to what we're about to read together. And it seems to me that an obvious connection is with the *act of free choice* we see Jesus making. We value our own freedom of choice above almost everything else, don't we? So an obvious place for us to connect with the story of Christ and his cross is simply this: *he chose it*. He didn't fight it; he took ownership of it. Sure, he was scared. But he accepted this "cup of suffering" as the Father's will and leaned into the pain.

As we go through the Passion, we'll see places where Jesus could escape the cross. In Gethsemane, there's a moment —when Judas and his thugs first arrive—when Jesus might make a run for it. But he doesn't. Later, he could say something diplomatic to placate the chief priests, but he doesn't. And he won't say anything to the Roman governor, even though Pilate has already declared him innocent. Jesus has opportunities to sidestep the whole unfair process. It would have only taken a few words. But, no. He chooses to *embrace* it all: the rejection, the agony, and the awful death.

How unlike *us* He is! We're quick to defend ourselves if we're attacked. That's what we're taught from childhood: "Stand up for your rights!" But Jesus silently accepts his destiny. And he does it for *us*, because that's the only way to make us truly free. The path to authentic freedom lies through chosen obedience.

Many parents choose to die for their children. Many patriots choose to die for their country. Many zealots choose to die for their cause. But Jesus chooses to die for people who hate him, who will treat his death as good riddance. From the cross, Jesus prays, "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.*" That wasn't only a prayer for the Roman soldiers who nailed him to the cross—as they had nailed hundreds before him. It was a prayer for Pilate and Herod and the High Priest and the mob that shouted, "*Crucify him! Crucify him!*"

It was a prayer for those who rejected him then and those would reject him thereafter. It's a prayer for you and me, when we scorn God's claim on our obedience: "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.*" He chooses to die even for those not yet born. . . for *us*, who are so often ignorant of what we're really doing.

We'll read the Passion now, as we always do on Palm Sunday, and we'll remember that Jesus died for us so that we might be free to choose to love as he loved —not just our friends, but even those who despise us.

But before we read the passion, recall the words of Paul's meditation on the self-emptying, sacrificial love of Christ which we heard just a few minutes ago. The most important part for us is right at the beginning: "*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.”

There will be many opportunities to do God’s good work for those who will choose to *empty themselves*, choose to deny themselves. They can heal the hearts of the hopeless. They can create a life-giving fellowship with those who have no rights at all except the right to hope in God.

Here’s a true story from seventy-five years ago. Clarence Jordan, who died in 1969, was a Mennonite pastor and author of the southern dialect *Cotton Patch Gospels*. He was one of the founders of Habitat for Humanity. But long before that, back in the late 1930s, Jordan worked in Louisville, Kentucky, during a time of great racial unrest. One night a group of angry black men assembled in a small room to plan revenge for the lynching of a black man by white racists. Voices grew loud and angry as these poor men, after years of brutal injustice, prepared their act of retribution. They said to one another, *“It’s time to take an eye for an eye.”* One of them kept smacking a section of iron pipe into the palm of his left hand, saying, *“Just like the whites have killed them a Negro, I’m gonna kill me a white man.”*

In that meeting room there was a solitary white face, the face of a man who had always been a friend to the black community, a man they loved and trusted. He stood up then, and spoke out. He said: *“If a white man must die for this. . . then let it be me. Do it now.”* The room went silent. The white man was Clarence Jordan. He had the mind of Christ. He was willing to empty himself of *everything*. And that willingness changed everything.

Do we want to “have the mind of Christ,” the mind of the Son of God who died so we might be free—free to *empty ourselves of self*? The path to authentic freedom lies through chosen obedience.

Jesus obeyed his Father’s plan and chose to walk the Way of the Cross —for us. He did it in obedience, but that was his free choice. Today he invites us to choose to walk with him.