

Simon of Cyrene

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“Impressment”

Lay Minister

Luke 23:26-31

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What is impressment? It is the act of seizing a person or possession for public use; as you see in the movies when a police officer commandeers a vehicle to chase a suspect. It is usually done against a person’s will. In the 1800s, impressment was used to force British men into the Royal Navy. One could say the United States draft system was a form of impressment for some.

We see that practice in our Bible passage for this evening. By Roman law, anyone that a Roman soldier laid his sword on was to carry his load for one mile. During Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about impressment saying “anyone who compels you to go with them one mile, go two.”(Matthew 5:41) Reportedly, Jewish people hated this law. They did not want to be slaves to the Romans or be required to carry the weight of their oppressor’s. Yet Jesus encouraged them to do it graciously and even to go the extra mile. This is where the saying comes from today, go the extra mile.

So in the text for today from Luke, a man is pulled out of the crowd and forced to carry Jesus’ cross. The man is named Simon of Cyrene. I find it very interesting that Luke records the man’s name because few people are mentioned in the Bible in that detail without a purpose. The gospel of Mark has a similar story and tells us that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus. If you are telling a story and you mention someone’s name it is often because you think the reader or listener will know the person whom you are speaking about. In the book of Romans, we find that Rufus is mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul sends greetings to Rufus who is “chosen in the Lord” and Rufus’s mother who is like “a mother to me.” (Romans 16:13) That is pretty significant.

So what do we know about this man named Simon? He is from Cyrene, which is in Northern Africa, now known as Libya. He traveled over 800 miles to Jerusalem likely for the Passover. This would mean he was a Jew. He likely had dark skin and stood out in the crowd. Many people of African descent use this text to display how Jesus directly invited them into Christianity.

We know Simon was just coming into the city from the country, as Jesus was being paraded out to the edge of the city to be put on display as an example of Roman power. It is not known if Simon had ever heard of Jesus before. It is doubtful Simon had made that kind of a trip before to celebrate Passover, because of the distance, the cost, and the fact he had children. It is not known if his two sons and wife were with him and if they witnessed the crucifixion, but it does appear that the impressment of Simon had a significant effect on Simon and his wife and two children. Biblical scholars have tried to link the Alexander and Rufus mentioned in this text, to two Christian missionaries found in church history. The bones of a man named Alexander, son of

Simon were found and preserved in a manner that would indicate he was a martyr and there is a record of a man named Rufus who was a Christian missionary in Spain. Paul talks about Simon's wife in his letter to the Romans. He refers to her, as a mother to him. It is certainly a possibility that because of Simon's actions in carrying the cross, he and his sons lived to serve Christ. There are some moving depictions of actors playing Simon and Rufus on-line detailing Jesus' death. It is always good to put ourselves into the story of Jesus so we can better understand his sacrifice and get a feel for what was happening.

Historians dispute whether Simon carried the whole cross or just the cross beam and if Jesus was still carrying part of the cross or if Simon bore the whole thing. Luke's version says that Simon carried the cross behind Jesus. Regardless, it is impactful for us to place ourselves in Simon's sandals. He is forced to carry a heavy burden for a bloody and beaten man who takes the time to comfort those weeping for him. He foreshadows to these women that the time is coming in which they will be the ones being mistreated and the Word will be dry.

What would you do if you were Simon in this situation? What have you done in similar situations? What does it mean to bear someone else's cross? Galatians 6:2 talks especially of bearing another's burden, a word defined as "a weight of personal and eternal significance". This is praying for someone we love who is dying or someone else who is making a terrible choice that we know will end badly for them. It is sitting with someone who is in great pain, deep depression or is rattled with anxiety. It is listening, holding a hand, giving a hug, offering your assistance and forfeiting your time. These instances are often avoidable, but when impressed upon us, we cannot help but be impacted.

Was it Jesus's cross or Simon's cross that Simon was carrying? Jesus was the sacrifice for all of us. This burden was an opportunity for Simon and those that he later crossed paths with to truly know Christ.

What does going the extra mile for someone else do for you?

I had to write about a fieldwork experience that incorporated the practice of generosity, for one of my seminary classes. The prompt was to read a poem by Brian Doyle and then respond. Brian Doyle wrote in his poem *In the Old Methodist Church on Vashon Island* about himself signing autographs of his book. He says: "I learned that mostly they do not want my scribble as much as they want to *say* something to me."

Doyle's poem reminds me of going the extra mile. Bearing a cross for someone else is like, holding space. Holding space for someone to get up the courage to say something. Holding space for another person to cry and/or scream in anger, pain or agony. Holding space for yet another to unload the fear or doubt that is weighing them down and preventing them from being in a relationship with God. You don't have to be a trained psychologist, peace officer, or guidance counselor to hold space for another person. This space is sometimes what hurting people need most.

While some people blurt out what is on their mind as soon as they see you because they cannot focus on anything else, others need some time to be able to share. They may not even use words to convey their shame or strain. Holding space lets someone know you

care. It lets them see you there. It gives you something real to bear. Holding space is very generous, but it also is life-giving; for both the sharer and the receiver.

Psalm 116:1-2 says, "I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live."

My fieldwork takes me outside the church to nursing homes, assisted living centers and hospice care sites. It is not always the people I go to see that are the ones who need space to be heard. I had stopped at the nursing home for a 90th birthday celebration for one of my regular parishioners. It was not a day that I normally worked, but I was in town and thought a piece of cake would taste good. I took a call and walked outside the activity room. It was my candidacy relator. He called to tell me I had been approved for candidacy. I had an interview earlier that morning. As I was talking to him, I was distracted by the despair of an elderly gentleman talking to a hospice nurse. I heard the name of the woman they were talking about and knew she was in the end stages of her life. I also knew that this must be her husband. I finished up the call and went directly over to him and introduced myself. He told me he had heard me preaching on the radio and read my newsletters, but had not been able to get to church. I told him I had seen his wife on my regular visits, but she had not been responsive. He told me how he took the bus to see her twice a week since she had been moved out of their assisted living unit into hospice care. He told me how he met her and the double dates they used to have with their best friends. He shared how they had raised three boys and served on every board and committee at church over the 60 years of their marriage. His shoulders and head were bent over in pain. He had just come from her room and she was not able to communicate with him or even acknowledge his presence. I told him I would go sit with her a bit and I would see him next time I was at his facility. I didn't get a chance to pray with him, because the bus arrived. He shuffled off, waving and thanking me. I went to his wife's room. I sat by her and started talking to her about all the things her husband had shared. Amazingly she grasped my hand and smiled. I told her how her husband told me he was a teacher and she whispered: "I was too". I smiled and laughed. This woman who had never acknowledged me before and had just slept through her husband's visit was coherent and responsive. I asked her if I could practice my sermon on her and she said: "if you want to". She faded in and out and eventually fell back asleep. I prayed with her and thanked God for the gift I felt I had just been given. Two weeks later, the man's wife died. When his son got him out of the car at the funeral home, I greeted him and he gave me a big hug saying, "I was hoping you would be here".

People throw statements around about everyone having a cross to bear. But do we all carry it as Simon did? Jesus says in Matthew 16, "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." The cross symbolizes our burdens, our weaknesses, and our pain, but the cross has the power to give our lives meaning and purpose and allow us to become a new creation in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that God's power is made perfect in our weaknesses, and further that "when I am weak, then I am strong." In Luke 14:27 Jesus says anyone who won't carry the cross cannot be his disciple.

What will you let be impressed upon you? Will you take honor in the task and go the extra mile? God did not create anything bad, for Paul says in Romans 8:28, "in all things God works for the good of those that love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Lent is a time of reflection and lamentation. We mourn the gruesome death of Jesus but know it was necessary to give us eternal life, for his death conquers sin and allows us to be righteous in his sight. No matter how heavy and ugly that cross is, it is a blessing for us to be able to carry the cross and hold space for our neighbor.