

8-23-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 16: 21- 28 Take Up Your Cross and Follow

Crosses come in all styles and sizes. This big one looks like rough hewn wood but it's really plaster. Remember when we piled rocks around this cross each Sunday during Lent one year? I received this cross at my ordination. It's real wood with shiny jewels and holds 2 candles when opened. This one has a white lacy look; I bought it for a wedding renewal service at Judson Park when 5 older couples renewed their vows to one another. I still smile remembering that one wife who had dementia had trouble repeating the short vow after me, so I paused and asked, "Susie, (not her real name) do you still love this guy?" she yelled "I sure do!" And I'm wearing a lovely wood cross necklace I received at the Women's Conference last year. Crosses mean something to us Christians; they remind us of God's love and make us feel good.

Which makes Jesus' words in today's scripture reading disconcerting. We prefer to hear Jesus say comforting words like, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Especially in a pandemic that is already disconcerting. But crosses in Jesus' day were not comforting symbols of love and good memories; they were instruments of deep suffering and death that were carried by people condemned to die as traitors or criminals; no one ever survived being nailed or roped to a cross. What did Jesus mean, "Deny yourself and take up your cross?"

We all know people who have made the words, "deny yourselves" their life motto. They avoid comfort, denying themselves even the small pleasures of life. I went to a Christian conference in Chicago with a group from my church in Dubuque IA and at lunchtime, boxed lunches were provided. Everyone in our group but one man wanted to enjoy eating out while we were in Chicago instead of eating the free boxed lunches. The man came with us but refused to come inside the restaurant and ate his boxed lunch outside, accused us of being ungrateful for the food God already provided, tried to shame us. It wasn't that he didn't have the money, he felt that kind of pleasure was dishonoring to God. Is that what Jesus meant in this story?

Some people use the idea of carrying a cross to mean carrying a burden in life they are stuck with. They say things like, "I guess it's just my cross to bear," usually accompanied by a huge sigh and no joy. Is that what Jesus meant?

This whole conversation happened because Peter was asking similar questions. Right before today's story, Jesus had asked his disciples who they thought he really was and Peter gave the right answer, "You are the Christ, the Son

of the living God.” And Jesus called him a rock and said he would use that profession of faith to build his church. I imagine Peter standing a bit taller: “Look at me, Jesus called me his rock.”

But then Jesus began to explain to his disciples what was coming, how he would be arrested in Jerusalem, would suffer, even be killed, but would raise from the dead on the third day. And Peter exploded, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” What he really meant was “I forbid this to happen, Lord! I won’t allow it!” He couldn’t imagine that Jesus dying could be of any value. Why go to Jerusalem and take a risk you do not have to take?

Some people today dare to take such risks- the man who runs into a burning building to rescue people until the fire trucks arrive. Young men and women who enlist in the military when they could go to college with their friends. The young man at a recent protest in Portland who stopped to help a woman being beaten and robbed, and ended up being beaten unconscious himself while she escaped. Or John Lewis walking across Pettus Bridge knowing the police were waiting for them and got beaten and placed in jail again. We admire people like this, and yet there is this small part of us that listens to makes us want to protest, “God forbid!” Especially if they are our children. “Isn’t there a safer way to do what you need to do? What if you get hurt or die?”

Peter says out loud what the rest of the disciples were thinking. “God forbid, Lord!” And then it was Jesus’ turn to explode. “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.*” And suddenly, Peter went from being Jesus’ rock to being a stumbling block trying to trip Jesus on God’s path.

As far as Jesus was concerned, it was Satan talking. Satan had already tried to tempt Jesus off God’s path in the wilderness temptation at the beginning of his ministry by offering safer alternatives to doing God’s will. Offering him power and fame instead. In Peter’s mind, all Jesus had to do was skip the trip to Jerusalem, and find a safer way to save the world. But Jesus knew living a safe life was not what God was calling him to. Playing it safe wouldn’t save anyone.

You may be asking yourself, “Is Jesus saying that when we pray for ourselves or someone else to be protected from suffering and death, we are not on God’s side? To be on God’s side, should we get ourselves killed like ISIS suicide bombers? Doesn’t God give us our lives as gifts? So what **does** Jesus mean that we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him?”

Jesus is saying that there is more to life than keeping our hearts and lungs working. God cares about the quality of our lives - the depth and scope of life, the purpose of life. The key to Jesus' hard words is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of real life. The fear of death leads to a stingy, cautious way of living that is not really living at all. That the way to an abundant life is not to save it, but to spend it, to give it away.

Peter loved Jesus and wanted to protect Jesus from losing his life; he didn't want Jesus' life to be spilled or wasted, much less end painfully. He wanted to save and preserve it, to find a safer more comfortable way for Jesus to be Lord. He had forgotten that Jesus' life was never-ending, that the more he gave, the more he received, that his life was like a geyser of living water sent to drench a dry, thirsty world. Or like the bread and fish the disciples passed out to feed the crowd, that just kept appearing and appearing in their baskets with plenty to spare.

It appears that Peter missed Jesus' final statement about what was going to happen. Did we miss it too? There in verse 21, after the suffering, and the death. *"And on the third day he would be raised."* Peter got stuck on the suffering and death part and missed that afterwards, there is life again, abundant life that can never be cut short. We never get that far either if we let ourselves get stuck on the suffering and death part. We begin to fear sticking our neck out and taking the risks of faith that make life worth living. We can try to save our lives, being very careful about what we say and do, who we let into our lives, being afraid to say what we believe, afraid to try something new because we could die of embarrassment if we fail. When the truth is no one ever died of embarrassment.

Fear of loss can make us fight the very changes that God says will bring the abundant life we were created for. Fear keeps us and fear keeps churches sitting on the bench when Jesus is calling us out onto the playing field. We can live that way- sitting on the bench, comfortable on the bench, staying safe, unbruised and unhurt, with no scars, with no one taking advantage of us, but we won't accomplish much, and we shouldn't be surprised when our faith stays weak because we never put it to the test. Jesus says, "Whoever would save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

Taking up our cross and following Jesus is not about being cocky daredevils; it is about living a life that matters- a life for Christ's sake, not our own- refusing to put comfort and safety first, refusing to listen to old tapes in our heads that say, "Don't do that or say that, you could get in trouble or lose everything" or "God can't use a person like you." It means living a cross-filled life that pours itself out

for others, denying or putting aside anything that distracts us off the path, a life that accepts that we will be opposed and lives and speaks Jesus' way anyway, and finds that we're never more alive than when we risk suffering and even death for Christ's sake, knowing that there is always more life where our real life comes from. And even when our earthly lives end, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "God has more life in store for us because our God never runs out of life."¹

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." What are we letting fear keep us from doing? Personally? As a church? Deny fear that kind of power, tell fear, "Get behind me, Satan!" Then take up your cross and keep following. No one will find life another way.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, pg. 80.