

**What Does “Take Up Your Cross” Mean? | Matt. 16:21-28; Rom. 12:9-21
13th Sunday after Pentecost | August 30, 2020
St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN | Pastor Katherine Museus Dabay**

When a Bible reading is as familiar as today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, it’s good to slow down and really pay attention to those words we’ve heard a hundred times before.

So today, let’s focus in on: What does Jesus mean when he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Well, maybe we better start with an even more basic question: What is the cross? What does it mean?

We see the cross so often, not only in spaces built for worship, but *everywhere*: on necklaces, T-shirts, bumper stickers, key chains, coffee mugs, cakes, beach balls. You can get cross-shaped lollipops or candy necklaces in bulk. This morning I found a bowling game where you set up little crosses instead of bowling pins (which was very theologically confusing for me).

We see the cross so much that maybe we take it for granted, and it becomes detached from its meaning – especially the difficult meaning it has in this Gospel reading.

As the theologian James Cone has said:

Many Christians embrace the conviction that Jesus died on the cross to redeem humankind from sin. Taking our place...Jesus suffered on the cross and gave his life as a ransom for many. The cross is the great symbol of the Christian narrative of salvation.

But unfortunately, during the course of 2,000 years of Christian history the cross as a symbol of salvation has been detached from the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings. The crucified people of history.

The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks. Rather than reminding us of the cost of discipleship, it has become a form of cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it. It’s become an easy way to salvation that doesn’t force us to confront Christ’s message and mission.¹

I think that idea – that our culture has so watered down the meaning of the cross – is most clearly shown in how we use phrases like, “We’ve all got a cross to bear.” That phrase was definitely inspired by this Gospel passage, but it’s become a more everyday turn of phrase. In fact when you look it up in the dictionary, the entries barely even references discipleship or Christianity. Instead, they definite it as “a difficult responsibility or burden that someone most handle.”² Like this actual dictionary example: “Mowing that huge lawn once a week is Brad’s cross to bear.”³

When the disciples heard Jesus talk about the cross, they would not have been thinking about it so lightly. What did the cross mean to people back then? Well, here’s how one historian put it:

1 James H. Cone, “Wrestling with the Cross and the Lynching Tree,” (lecture), Saint Mark Presbyterian Church, Rockville, MD, 30 March 2017. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPM-AtBWHrI> Accessed 27 August 2020.
2 www.idioms.thefreedictionary.com
3 www.dictionary.com

*Crucifixion was a Roman form of public service announcement: Do not engage in sedition as this person has, or your fate will be similar. The point of the exercise was not the death of the offender as such, but getting the attention of those watching. Crucifixion first and foremost is addressed to an audience.*⁴

Crucifixion was a form of public torture and execution that was meant to remind people to stay in line. In that regard it was similar to the way public lynchings were used in the U. S. It was a symbol of terror and a reminder of who was in charge.

So Jesus is having this conversation with his disciples. And the disciples have just confessed out loud for the first time that they believe Jesus is the messiah. And Jesus has accepted the title. It must have been an exhilarating moment. *God has finally sent us the messiah! God is finally going to set this world right! And we get to be part of it!*

But right after that exciting, life-changing, hope-inspiring announcement, Jesus starts talking about suffering. And arrest. And execution. And the cross.

And when the disciples had heard Jesus say, “I am the messiah,” many of them would have imagined Jesus throwing off Rome and the other powers ruling Israel at the time...but when they heard “cross” they would have heard, “Rome winning. Again.” Or “Rome beating us down. Again.” They would have heard “Failure.” So these two announcements: “I am the messiah,” and “I’m going to die,” – they must have seemed like total opposites to the disciples. No wonder Peter took Jesus aside and tried to explain that all that couldn’t be part of God’s plan.

And that’s when Jesus doubles down. Not only would he suffer, but “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” It’s not just spiritual symbolism here. He’s telling his disciples to get ready for their own rejection and suffering. Get ready to be overpowered. Get ready to look like failures.

And maybe that’s sounds strange to us today, too. At least as a culture, we tend to see the cross and think not so much of the cost of discipleship, but more about the victory won through the cross. Which is a right and good thing to think about when we see the cross. We should “lift high the cross” and celebrate it.

But also: that victory cannot be separated from its cost. And maybe that part is less natural for us to think about, when in our culture Christians are not only safe but powerful. When we hear “Church,” and think of a beautiful building like this one and the gorgeous music and art that have come from our tradition. When pollsters and politicians pay attention to groups of Christians as voting blocs. When being a Christian is a plus – or maybe even a necessity – for the person running for president. When our nation has a Christian chaplain for the Senate. Where our local legislature seriously debates naming the Bible as our state book.

So we are hearing “take up your cross,” in a situation that is vastly different from that of the disciples. For them, it was literal: if you want to follow me, you have to be prepared to be crucified yourself.

⁴ Paula Frederickson, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*, (New York: Vintage, 2000), pp. 233-234. Quoted in James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), p. 31.

And that literal meaning is not a message for us today. But still, Jesus says to us through this passage: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” So what message does the Holy Spirit have for us today when we hear those words?

Deny ourselves. Take up our crosses. Follow Jesus.

Today’s reading from Romans may be leading us in the right direction. It’s from Romans chapter 12, which begins by telling us to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice” – another way of reminding us that discipleship is about denying ourselves and offering ourselves to God’s will. Today’s passage describes what those grand exhortations look like not in moments of extreme trial or persecution, but “on the ground,” in every day life. So I’d like to give us all sometime to hear those words again and really think about what they have to say to us, individually.

I’ll read another translation of that passage, so maybe you can hear something differently:

Be sincere in your love for others. Hate everything that is evil and hold tight to everything that is good. Love each other as [siblings] and honor others more than you do yourself. (I like that the translation Beth read for us put it: “outdo one another in showing honor” – because if that were our way of living, how much would that change our world right now?)

Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord. Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying. Take care of God’s need people and welcome strangers into your home.

Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask [God] to bless them and not to curse them. When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. Be friendly with everyone. Don’t be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. Don’t mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best to live at peace with everyone.

Dear friends, don’t try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the Scriptures the Lord says, “I am the one to take revenge and pay them back.” The Scriptures also say, “If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads.”

Don’t let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.

These are beautiful ideas, right? But as we were listening to them, I bet we all realized that they are also hard to live out. Because living in that way is denying ourselves – denying ourselves being proud or defensive; denying ourselves revenge; denying ourselves from holing up in our own safe little bubbles.

But – sort of paradoxically – living in that way, as a “living and holy sacrifice,” denying ourselves – it’s also powerful. Because living in that kind of active and even rebellious love forces the way things usually go to stop dead in their tracks and re-think things. What would happen if our neighbors expected hate, but saw love instead? If they expected a fight, but received understanding? If they expected revenge, but instead received care?

Living that way is also dangerous. And that's where these teachings from Romans really do take us back to Jesus's saying to his disciples: "Deny yourselves. Take up your cross. Follow me."

Here's what I mean...

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that

The cross is neither misfortune nor harsh fate. Instead it is suffering which comes from our allegiance to Jesus Christ alone. The cross is not random suffering, but necessary suffering. The cross is not suffering that stems from natural existence; it is suffering that comes from being Christian. The essence of the cross is not suffering alone; it is suffering and being rejected. Strictly speaking, it is being rejected for the sake of Jesus Christ, not for the sake of any other.

Living by the teachings in the Romans passage – that could produce exactly the kind of suffering and rejection that Bonhoeffer is talking about. Suffering and rejection for the sake of Jesus Christ. Because those teachings are based on Jesus's own teachings, the way of living he gave us in the Sermon on the Mount. And living by his teachings is one huge way that we follow Jesus and live for his sake.

And what living according to Jesus's teachings does is turn us toward our neighbor, as Romans says. It's hating, rejecting, fighting against what is evil and clinging for dear life to all that is good.

And all of that can lead us into what John Lewis called "good trouble." To believing in principles or causes that might make other people reject us. To loving our enemies, which might make others call us weak. To bringing goodness and compassion and understanding to places where our politicians and their followers don't want it to be. Love is a beautiful word that we all want to lift up – but when we actually live love – God's love – it scares this world, and it lashes back at us.

But it is through exactly that kind of love – the love that leads to self-denial and rejection, the love that can look like weakness or failure, the love that was shown on the cross – it is through that kind of love that God is victorious. It is through that kind of love that God saves people.

So, dear Church, let's pick up our crosses, even lift them high, and proclaim the love of Christ to all the world. Amen.