

**Take Up Your Cross
Matthew 16: 21-28
Jon Frost**

You can imagine his nerves and excitement. Everything was just right. All of the candles were lit, spelling “Marry me?” and the flowers, balloons and champagne were in place. All that was left was to go pick up his girlfriend and surprise her with the perfect proposal. Actually, they were both surprised when they returned because instead of finding everything as he had left it, they saw his entire apartment ablaze and heard the distant noise of approaching fire engines.

It was a pretty quick and dramatic turnaround which is kind of the experience we have hearing today’s passage from Matthew in light of the text Pastor Ann preached on last week. Jesus had asked the disciples, “who do you say that I am” and Peter had confidently pronounced, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus lavished him with praise. He was feeling pretty good about himself right about then.

But Jesus goes on to say in verse 21 that he would have to go to Jerusalem. Well, that checks out - I mean if he’s the Messiah, it would make sense to go to Jerusalem because they will have to supplant the kings and rulers presently in charge. Perhaps that is why Jesus had said not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. For their revolution to be successful, they would need the element of secrecy and surprise. But as Jesus continues, he talks about going to Jerusalem not in order to conquer the authorities but rather to suffer and die by their hands.

Peter, who maybe thought he was on a hot streak by calling the whole Messiah thing will have none of this. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, saying, “God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you.” Cue the apartment going up in flames. Jesus looks at Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.” Peter, the rock upon which Jesus will build the Church is at this moment a stumbling block.

I like to imagine a wounded Peter sometime later, sitting around with the guys and he timidly asks, “Hey, uh, has Jesus ever called you guys Satan? No? No one. Yeah, me either.” Because Jesus hadn’t called any of them Satan. The last person he had called Satan was, well, Satan - back in chapter 4 after the last temptation in the wilderness. And this is no accident because what Peter is doing here is really no different - trying to dissuade Jesus from the path he is on and convince him that there’s got to be an easier and safer way. It was easy to make a bold statement about Jesus from the safety of Caesarea Philippi, but what Jesus is describing is not what they signed up for.

We'll notice Jesus didn't lay all this out ahead of time when he said "Follow me" back in chapter 4. To be a disciple of Jesus is to learn as you walk. More specifically, "If any would be my followers," Jesus says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This is the program. It sounds simple enough. Actually, no that sounds hard. Deny myself? Take up my cross? Is that the only option?

In his classic "Mere Christianity," C.S. Lewis wrestles with this tension. "The terrible thing," he writes, "the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self...to Christ." But he suggests it's far easier than what most of us attempt to do. "For what we are trying to do," he writes, "is to remain what we call 'ourselves', to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be 'good.'" He goes on, "Christ says, 'Give me All. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down.'"

"Take up your cross and follow me," Jesus says. Know that there is a cost. If you try to save your life, you'll lose it in the end. But if you lose it for my sake, you will find it.

This is how theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about the costly grace of discipleship. "Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ." It is costly because it costs us our life but it is grace because it gives us the only true life in the end.

We don't always think of grace in this way but it reminds me of the final verse of the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" - *O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. Let that grace now like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee.* Admittedly, these are kind of interesting metaphors; being a debtor to grace and being bound with fetters of grace but the point is that grace is not a blanket license to live our life however we want to. The gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ is an invitation to follow him and to be made new.

These verses are a rallying cry, a summons, a call to action. "Take up your cross!" Get moving! For the victory God will win through the death and resurrection of Jesus is right around the corner and it is no time to be sitting around.

This past week our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, had planned a week of action, the purpose of which was to provide a public witness that facilitates education, visibility, and action that reinforces our denominational statements and policy around eradicating racism and acknowledging that God loves all black lives. These plans became all the more timely and relevant in light of the shooting of Jacob Blake at the hands of a police officer and the protests that have followed.

Perhaps like you, I feel overwhelmed. Emotions are running so high as the familiar lines in the sand are drawn and we lob our conversational grenades back and forth. It's hard enough navigating this time in personal life, harder still to speak to it in the context of a sermon when I can't see you or hear your perspective.

None of us, with full and perfect understanding, can pretend to accurately and comprehensively assess the fallout from events like this and their impact upon real communities, citizens and law enforcement officers alike. Our perspectives are too limited.

But in these times I am grateful for the leadership of our denomination, steadily and unwaveringly holding the cross before us in its call to love and justice in the fight to dismantle systemic racism, even and especially when it is uncomfortable and when we'd rather turn the other way - when we'd rather move the conversation on to something else. We have to do the work. Truth be told, I am more often than not a stumbling block to this work because I want a safer, less threatening way forward that won't interrupt my status quo.

Towards the very end of his crucial book "The Cross and the Lynching Tree," theologian James Cone talks about how if we are ever to experience racial healing in this country, we have to remember and retell our story of racial injustice with honesty and integrity. In other words we need to reckon with our past. The hatred and indifference that perpetuated violence and oppression for black Americans didn't just magically go away after the Civil War or after the Civil rights movement. It is the pernicious evil that will not go away until we continually face it and deal with it in meaningful and holistic ways. However, he goes on to say that "all the hatred we have expressed toward one another cannot destroy the profound mutual love and solidarity that flow deeply between us."

Jesus invites us to a life of discipleship and in this cultural moment dismantling structural racism is a discipleship issue. We have Peter to thank for marking the extreme edges of the territory because like him we will be both rock and stumbling block - at times getting it right and at times not getting it whatsoever.

But as we weigh the cost of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus, may we recognize that ignoring Jesus' invitation costs so much more - it costs the very abundant life Jesus promises in the kingdom he is building for all God's people. Amen.

Resources

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. SCM Press, 2015.

Cone, James H.A. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Orbis Books, 2019.

Sheffield Man 'Never Imagined' Proposal Would Set Flat on Fire. *BBC News*, BBC, 6 Aug. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-53678828.

Lewis C. S. *Mere Christianity*. Simon and Schuster, 1996.