

“Take Up Your Cross”

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Psalm 32

Matthew 4:1-11

People wear crosses for many reasons. Some people wear a cross simply to let others know they are Christian. Others wear a cross as a good luck charm, and keep it on at all times, hoping for God’s protection. And for some it’s just a fashion accessory. Macy’s advertises **“Discover the beauty of a diamond *cross necklace*, for every member of the family.”** Crosses come in all sizes and types, ranging in price from cheap plastic for less than a dollar, to thousands of dollars for fancy crosses decorated with diamonds.

When my daughter Talitha first got an internship as a hospital chaplain, she thought it would be appropriate to wear a cross to identify herself. But she found that after she started wearing a cross, some of the patients were viewing her with suspicion. She was working in a hospital in San Francisco, with many Jewish and Buddhist patients, as well as people who had rejected Christianity, or had no religious upbringing at all. Some of them saw the cross and thought maybe she would judge them or try to convert them. So she ended up taking it off. She said that for those who cared she was a Christian, her word was enough assurance for them. But for those who were not Christian, the cross brought stereotypes to mind and was an obstacle to overcome. It made it harder for her to minister to them.

Do you ever wear a cross? And what does it mean to you?

At the time of Jesus, the cross was a tool of Roman oppression and terror. When Herod died in 4 BC and there were outbreaks of revolt throughout Judea, the Romans crucified 2,000 of the rebels. These crucifixions were public. Imagine bodies hanging on crosses, and lined up along the roadside or facing the city. It often took days of agonizing torture before the victims would die. What a terrible warning: this is what happens to trouble makers. During the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD the Romans crucified hundreds of people every day, for days on end, so that they ran out of wood to make the crosses, and there was no space left to erect them. The message was: if you resist Rome, the cost will be enormous.

But Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24) Jesus was not talking about wearing a piece of jewelry. He was warning those who would follow him that they were risking their lives. It’s not that he believed they would all be crucified. But given the way the Romans dominated the area, it was something they had to think about. Jesus didn’t want people coming along for entertainment. He wanted them to know what they were getting themselves into.

Jesus had spent time himself figuring that out. Ginny read from the gospel of Matthew this morning, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. This was right after he was baptized, at the

beginning of his ministry, when he was becoming conscious of the choices ahead of him. What would it mean for him to proclaim God's Kingdom on earth? Would he simply focus on physical needs, turning stones into bread? Feeding the hungry is part of God's will. But people do not live by bread alone. We also need the Word of God, words of truth. Jesus had to do and be more than one who feeds himself, or provides food to the hungry, and gives people what they want.

Would Jesus try for political power? If he ruled the world, he could usher in God's kingdom by decree. Just get in power, make the laws, and punish those who break them. And Jesus would do it without self-interest and corruption, a kind of benevolent dictator. It would be great. But God's kingdom doesn't come through power or domination. It comes from the love of God, from truth, love, justice and mercy. Jesus was to worship and serve God alone.

Jesus would also be tempted to jump off the top of the temple, and see if God's angels would catch him. What was that about? It was partly a temptation to use miracles to draw attention to himself. But later Jesus would also be tempted to avoid the cross. Before he was arrested, he wrestled with what he knew was coming and prayed fervently to God... "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me..." (Matt. 20:39). And when he was crucified, it says people passed by and taunted him saying, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." And the chief priests and scribes and elders mocked him saying, "Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to..." (Matt. 27:40-43). But Jesus was not to call on miracles to save himself. He would deny himself and do what he had to do, to seek God's Kingdom.

What does it mean to deny yourself, and take up your cross today? Some people think it's about giving up things for Lent. But just depriving yourself doesn't make you a Christian.* It's about turning our hearts to God. Denying yourself is not the same as hating yourself either. If you hate yourself, you're still focusing on yourself. What we want is to get beyond ourselves, and re-orient our lives to God. We don't forget who we are. But we see ourselves, with everyone else, in the light of God. We focus on God, and how we might serve God.

Some people think that to deny yourself means to let others abuse you. But self-sacrifice is only a virtue if it furthers God's will. That's why we work with Shelter Our Sisters, to help victims of domestic violence move out of abusive situations. It's not God's will for people to hurt each other.

To "take up our cross" also means to identify with the lowest of the low in society. A Roman citizen would never be crucified. But Jesus suffered along with criminals. He ate with sinners and outcasts. He spoke to foreigners and cared about the downtrodden and the poor. And if we are walking in his way, we also will stand with the outcasts of society and have compassion on prisoners, on the undocumented, and all whom others exploit or reject.

To “take up our cross” also means to accept death. That doesn’t mean we have to be a martyr, although that was the case for many of the early Christians. It does mean that our main motivation is not to protect ourselves. It is to live as children of God and walk in God’s ways. If we embrace death as inevitable, then no one can use the fear of death to intimidate or control us. If the worst thing that can happen is we die, and we have already accepted that we will die, then we are truly free.

The Romans used the cross to intimidate their subjects. But if you pick up the cross yourself, and you’re not afraid of death, the Empire has no power over you. Jesus didn’t set out to undermine the Roman Empire or the religious leaders of his day. But they felt threatened by him because he lived according to a different reality. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey with people hailing him as a king, and mocked the royal Roman processions with chariots, horses and soldiers. He ate with sinners and tax collectors and pointed out the hypocrisy of those who thought themselves righteous. And he protested exploitation and corruption in the Temple.

When we pick up our cross, we also stand against hypocrisy and injustice. But beware of becoming self-righteous and mean-spirited in the process. If you do that, you’re still focusing on yourself. Jesus spoke truth to power. But his goal was not to wipe out the bad guys or even to take power away from them. He simply exposed the truth, and then let go. God does not control, manipulate or impose his will on anyone. To deny ourselves and follow God’s way is to forget about who is winning and losing, remove any desire to keep score, retaliate or get attention, try to see God’s light and find what is truly good for all.

Jesus said, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.” Are you willing? Can you do it? It’s not a question of whether or not we are good or pious enough. And God doesn’t care whether we were born and raised Christian, or this is the first time we have stepped into a church, ever. Are you brave enough, passionate enough, crazy enough to deny yourself, pick up your cross and walk with Jesus?

Michael Sofia has purchased wooden crosses and they are here on the communion table today, waiting to be picked up and taken home as a reminder during the season of Lent of Christ’s call to us. We may not be able to achieve perfect self-denial or manage to carry the full weight of our cross. I’ve said this many times before, and I’ll say it again, Jesus has no perfect followers. Just us. But we can declare our desire and intention, by picking up one of these small crosses, and pray for God’s grace to help us live up to all it means.

So, during the next hymn, or anytime during the rest of the service, you are invited to come forward and pick up a cross. And may God grant us the passion and courage to walk in the way of Christ. Amen.

* credit to Brian Stoffregen, “Matthew 16:21-28” at CrossMarks Christian Resources, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt16x21.htm>.