

March 22, 2020
Fourth Sunday in Lent

First Presbyterian Church
21 Church Street
Pittsford, NY 14534
www.pittsfordpres.org
(585) 586-5688

Rev. Stephen Michie

Being a Disciple of Jesus: Taking Up the Cross

Philippians 1:27-2:8 Luke 9:18-24

We are spending these Sunday mornings in Lent trying to discover as much as we can about what it means to be disciples of Jesus—to be “yoked” to him. We are being reminded that trying to follow Jesus is one of the most demanding things a person can ever do. But I hope that we are discovering something else as well: not only the strenuous thing Christian discipleship is, but the resources that are offered to all who seek to walk in the way of Jesus.

This is one of the unique things about the Gospel: its promise that we will be given the help we need, to become the people God wants us to be. Whoever “believes in me” Jesus promised the Twelve on the last evening of his life, “will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will (you) do, because I go to the Father.” We will need to keep that promise of Jesus in mind as today we consider the “discipline” of taking up the cross. Let me take a moment to put this morning’s Gospel reading in context.

The ministry of Jesus—brilliant, but brief—was heading toward its climax. A short while before, according to Luke, Jesus had sent his disciples out on their own “to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal...” Now they were back, and Jesus was curious as to what they had heard about him, while they were away.

“Who do people say that I am?” They answered that he was being identified with some of the more illustrious figures of the past: the recently slain John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. Then came the question that was really on Jesus’ mind: “But who do you say that I am?” Peter responded with that declaration of faith upon which the Church was to be founded, and on which it continues to be built: “You are the Christ of God,” he said.

That is when the first surprise occurred. The disciples were told to keep this to themselves. For even they didn’t understand the kind of Christ, the kind of Messiah Jesus would be. Jesus began to tell them about the suffering, the rejection, the death that he foresaw for himself—and not being the military conqueror of the Roman occupiers whom so many of his followers were expecting.

And he went on to describe the way of life that would be required of those who joined his movement: “If any one would follow me, let him (or her) deny himself, take up his (or her) cross daily, and follow me.” Do you understand how incredible it must have sounded to the first disciples to be told that they were to “take up” a cross? For us, the cross has become a

religious symbol, something which centuries ago was painted on battle shields by Emperor Augustine, when he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire; and then through all Christian history, displayed in churches, and even worn as a piece of jewelry.

In 1st Century Palestine, the cross was an instrument of death—first developed by the ancient Persians—one of the cruelest forms of execution ever devised by human beings. The disciples had witnessed the execution of over 2,000 rebels against Roman rule in Palestine, only a few years before. And here was the One whom they had just confessed to be “the Christ” saying that, if they chose to follow him, they would have to take up a cross—daily! It was almost as if Jesus meant to discourage followers and drive them away. “If any one would come after me, let her deny herself, and take up her cross daily...”

This is one of those biblical texts from which we are tempted to run away. It is hard to twist its meaning into the upbeat message we are told must be preached, if we are to have a “successful” church these days. Yet how can we ignore a saying that so directly addresses the question of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus? The answer is we can’t ignore it. “If anyone would come after me...” Nobody is required to follow Jesus: but for those of us who have made the decision to follow Christ, or are still thinking about it, there does have to be a recognition of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the cost of discipleship.”

As we heard earlier, from Paul writing to the Philippians, this is part of the package: “For God has graciously granted you the privilege, not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him, as well.” What does all this mean for us today? “If any one would come after me, let him (or her) deny himself.” It is easy to misread the intention of Jesus.

It used to be the practice in some churches, during Lent, to encourage the giving up of some self-indulgence, like going to movies, or eating fancy desserts. But that is not what Jesus means by “denying” ourselves. He doesn’t mean to deny our selves some particular thing. Nor is he calling for the kind of self-abasement that is sometimes associated with religion. What I hear in Jesus’ call to self-denial is a recognition of the temptation that comes to all of us: to put ourselves first, to make ourselves central, to act as if everything and everyone must serve our interests—that even God must do so.

Sometimes religion can be the most self-centered thing of all, if we look upon it as something that is supposed to serve us and make us comfortable. Jesus summons us to abandon the way of life that makes the “self” so supreme. To follow him is to have a different center and to find peace and quiet there, on a regular basis. It is to serve, rather than to be served. It is to recognize, with Jesus, that life is “more than food and the body more than clothing.” It is to pray with him, “Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.” The Christian disciple is one who surrenders control and submits willingly to a higher authority.

“If any one would come after me, let her deny herself and take up her cross....” What can that possibly mean for 21st Century disciples? Here too, it is important to try to understand what is not being said. For one thing, this is not a call to accept meekly a kind of suffering which ought rather to be avoided, or overcome. An example: Suppose that you are married and your spouse is a chronic gambler, because of which there is never enough money to pay the bills. Even worse, when your spouse is on a gambling binge, you are abused—if not physically, then emotionally or psychologically. And suppose that your spouse refuses to seek treatment for this major problem, despite your encouragement, and your pleas, so that your life and your marriage are a living hell.

That is a kind of suffering nobody should accept. It is not at all what Jesus means when he calls us to “take up our crosses and follow him.” Many people think that is what Jesus means, but it isn't. Jesus transformed the cross into something that has redemptive value. There is nothing redemptive about putting up with what ought to be changed. Some of us endure the suffering that we might better try to resolve, or even eradicate.

Again, by “taking up the cross,” Jesus isn't thinking about the kind of involuntary suffering and sorrow each of us experiences, at one time or another, in one way or another: a disability, an unfortunate accident, a lingering bereavement, some limitation of health or personality, or an enslavement to some addiction. Many people think of these things as “crosses” they have to bear—but they aren't what Jesus means by a “cross.” They are experiences of suffering and sorrow that simply are part of being human. They come to us, and we have to bear them—and we may even be drawn closer to God because of them. But these are not what Jesus means.

I believe he is referring to something which one takes on voluntarily: a burden picked up without the requirement to do so; somebody else's suffering which you choose to share; a new responsibility you assume for which you cannot be conscripted; an engagement with some form of injustice that you could ignore—if you wanted to. It may be that you and I never are called upon to “take up the cross” in a literal way, though who can tell? I doubt that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, growing up in a highly civilized, educated, and outwardly-Christian nation ever suspected he would have such a “martyrdom choice” to make—because he was executed by the Nazis near the end of W.W. II. But even if we are spared some dramatic, life-or-death confrontation with an unjust power or system, the summons to “take up the cross” is there. And Jesus says it is there—for any who would follow him.

When all is said and done, it is to Jesus on his own cross that we must look—to see what “taking up our crosses” might mean. For me, two words are key to what Jesus did on the cross. One word is absorption, and the other is identification. Looking at Jesus on the cross on Calvary, I see one who absorbed the hatred, fear, and violence of the people who put him there, taking it all on himself and transforming it. He did not have to, but he did. Perhaps you are in a situation where you can do that: absorb someone else's bitterness, take upon yourself another's fear, listen to another's doubt or remorse.

Fred Buechner writes, “We have it in us to be ‘Christ's’ to one another...” We have it in us to bless with some measure of Christ's blessing, and to heal with something like his healing, and maybe even to grieve with some measure of his grief at another's pain. It isn't something you have to do, but it is something you can do. And if you do it, perhaps who Christ is, and what Christ does, will come alive for others. In some tiny fraction of a way, because of you, they can see and learn to trust the love with which God-in-Christ loves the world. But in addition to absorption, I see identification when I look to Jesus on his cross. I see One who identifies with our suffering, our sin, our death. Even at the end, Jesus could have avoided the cross if he had said the right thing to Pilate... who might have let Jesus go.

But Jesus himself went willingly to the cross. Each of us, in our own way, can do something of the same. We can identify with the victims of the Coronavirus pandemic in many places, or nearly genocidal suffering and killing in Yemen and Syria. We can find ways of helping the homeless, or the hungry living near us, if we haven't already. We can do something about the poorest children in our communities, those without adequate healthcare, those who are always at greater risk for being lost to a life of drugs, crime, and poverty. We can reach out to support even one single parent, or the shut-ins within our congregation. If nothing else, we

can use the vehicle our One Great Hour of Sharing offering provides to take on some of the burdens of others.

Mother Teresa, whose own faithfulness as a cross-bearer is not in question, reminds us: "To show great love for God, and for our neighbors, we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering something beautiful for God."

"If any one would follow me, let them ... take up their cross daily..." If you are anything like me, you wonder sometimes if you can do it. Can anybody do it? In response, let me tell you: we cannot do it on our own. But we are not on our own! To those who would answer his call to discipleship, Christ gives his strength, his mercy, his love, and his joy. As the Book of Hebrews reminds us, the most important thing is to keep our eyes on Jesus, "who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the same, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

In other words, it is none other than Christ, who was himself raised from the dead, who promises: "Whoever would save his (or her) life will lose it; and whoever loses her life for my sake... will save it."