

“Cross-Bearing”
Psalm 105:1-6 and Matthew 16:21-28
Rev. Lindsey Odom

Have you ever had to deal with something that you would deem as unimaginable or unfathomable? Have you ever been alarmed by something that was about to occur? Have you tried to control something but realized you cannot control it?

In one of my favorite children’s books titled *Fletcher and the Falling Leaves* by Julie Ralinson, Fletcher the fox faces this kind of situation, as he watches his favorite tree change colors with the changing of the season from fall to winter. The leaves on it are changing colors, then turning brown, and falling off of the tree. Fletcher does not understand why its leaves are falling off and desperately tries to make one final leaf hang on to the tree, but it changes color and falls off as well, leaving the tree brown and dead looking. Fletcher becomes alarmed by this situation and does everything he can think of to help the tree keep its leaves, but of course in the fall season, there is no way to prevent the falling of leaves, leaving the situation out of his control. This is why Fletcher’s mom reassures him that all of this is natural, it is just what trees do, but Fletcher is worried, upset, and sad. Eventually, the first snow falls and covers the tree with glistening icicles and Fletcher sees the truth in what his mother says, and discovers that even in the new season, the tree is still beautiful and he is no longer sad that the tree has lost all of its leaves.

What this story shows us is that change can be really difficult to accept and embrace, especially change that is out of our control. In our gospel passage for today from the gospel of Matthew, I suspect this is exactly how Peter felt at the change that was to occur with Jesus’ declaration that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the cross. This is not easy news to receive nor process, but we must be reminded that this is not the end of the story.

Like Fletcher the fox, Peter is alarmed by what Jesus is saying about his death and is so adamant that it does not happen that we receive an unimaginable and harsh response from Jesus. But consider how would **you** feel if your fearless and *divine* leader, Jesus, declared that he must suffer and die? Would you not say or do anything to try to protect Jesus? This is one major reason why Peter responds the way that he does. I suspect Peter along with the rest of the disciples were terribly distressed.

But nonetheless, Jesus harshly rebukes him and tells Peter that he has his mind set on the wrong things. In doing so, Jesus’ reaction to Peter’s protest is extremely sharp as he says, “Get behind me, Satan.” This scripture passage today is full of so much and it is very challenging, one where we see Jesus responding differently than we would expect. There is a big contrast between Peter’s well-meaning intentions and Jesus’ harsh response.

For Peter refuses to accept that Jesus must suffer and die at the hands of the temple leadership. Because if this declaration is true that Jesus must suffer and die, Peter is probably thinking it can also be true for the disciples and Jesus’ followers if they stand firm in their faith

in Jesus Christ. It becomes clear that those who follow Jesus can also expect to share Jesus' fate. This is why many biblical scholars argue that "Peter's rebuke is not so much on the prospect of Jesus' suffering but that Peter himself and the disciples will share the same fate" and it creates fear and objection, protest, and even dissent. However, much like the disciples, I think if we put ourselves in their shoes for a moment or envision ourselves in their position within this story, we would be terrified, afraid, and not understand what is next or what the future holds. Not only are they being reminded that their teacher, master, and friend Jesus Christ has to suffer and die at the will of his Father to save God's people from their sins, but that their future and all of Jesus' followers' future will include suffering as well. And so we, like Peter and the other disciples, are being challenged here by Jesus' words.

For Jesus is confronting us with an uncomfortable truth that not only will he have to suffer and bear the cross as part of his Messianic mission, but that his disciples, which includes us, may face suffering. This is a frightening prospect as Jesus' death will mean a new and different reality for the disciples and for us, one that might include suffering.

Personally, I think this is one of the main reasons that Jesus has such a harsh answer in verse 23 in response to Peter when Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance[a] to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" so that Jesus can grab the disciples' attention and our attention. Because if you look to verse 24, Jesus begins anew and now speaks to all the disciples, not simply to Peter. In verse 24, Jesus tells his disciples, "If any one wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Just as Jesus did for us, so Jesus calls us to "take up our cross" and follow him. By Jesus conveying that we must deny ourselves and take up our cross, Jesus is warning the disciples that from now on, to be Christ's disciple is **not** going to be easy - ***in fact, the disciples will face opposition and suffering as they seek to live the way that Christ has taught them and shown them.***

- The reason for this is because Christ will no longer be with the disciples to guide them, teach them, and protect them as Christ has done in the past.
- And because the Roman empire saw Christ as a threat to their power, after Christ is gone, the whole world might even turn on the disciples. But this gives them a glimpse into what it means to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him, in that it might involve suffering and it is NOT going to be easy.

This is an unimaginable and frightening prospect for not only Jesus' disciples, but also for us. And so we, like the disciples, are being deeply challenged here by Jesus' teaching to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

Through this instruction that Jesus gives, Jesus provides us with a lesson about suffering in discipleship. Matthew's "sole concern is the disciples' and our Christ-likeness, which might cost *us and them* something."

- According to one biblical scholar by the name of Ulrich Luz who is also the Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Bern in Switzerland, he states that “the positive meaning of “bearing the cross” is orienting oneself to Jesus as the model for life and knowing the experience of being borne by the exalted Lord.”
- For we are to reflect Jesus’ lifestyle.

So, in Jesus teaching about suffering in discipleship, we must remember that we follow the One who endured the cross on our behalf to save us from our sins. This must set the foundation for what it means to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

Because even though discipleship is going to be a difficult, challenging, even sacrificial road for the disciples and for ourselves, we should have the deep joy of living out before the world, the great glory of what God has done in Jesus Christ and what God continues to do for us.

For Jesus came to this earth, in a manner of unconditional love, to save us even from ourselves. And it is this way of Jesus, this path of uncompromising obedience to God— no matter the cost – that Jesus is hoping to see in us, His disciples.

- This is why we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

But what exactly does this mean?

Well first, we know that Jesus lived a life of love.

Jesus’ ways, life and ministry exhibited radical, sacrificial love for all people - love for the lives of the poor, powerless, stranger and enemy, those whom we as a society would have most likely despised, rejected, or been indifferent to.

For we are all guilty of this as we tend to stick to people of our kind, people who look like us... - Recently, I was coming back from Atlanta on a Saturday evening to try to get back for church the next day and it was raining so hard that you could not see in front of you on 1-85. It was very scary. I got as far as I could before I just could not drive anymore because of how dangerous the storm was so I decided when I got to South Carolina, I would call a family from my former church, who I was very close with, to see if I could spend the night with them and drive the rest of the way early Sunday morning. They were overjoyed that I asked to stay with them instead of continuing to drive in the awful storm. They said that I was welcome anytime. The hospitality they showed me reminded me of stories in Scripture that show Jesus welcoming all people and Jesus’ teachings about welcoming strangers and even sinners.

I tell you this story because I will confess, it made me think about if this situation was reversed and if I was the one allowing someone to stay at my home to get out of the storm. Sure, I would openly welcome a friend or family member, but what about some I didn't know well? Someone that appeared to be different than me? A different race, a different sexuality, a different social class??

This now becomes **not** an easy or comfortable situation for probably most of us sitting here today. Maybe some of you would be okay with diverse groups of people staying in your home, but for the majority of us, we probably would **not** be, which is why these questions that I asked

should make us notice the indifference towards the humanity of others that lives somewhere inside all of us.

Because this does not align with Jesus or Jesus' ways and teachings. If we look to Jesus, we see that Jesus intentionally broke established traditions and customs of his time to welcome all. Jesus empowered those who were poor and powerless and welcomed all God's people to the table, no matter who they were, what they looked like, or what they had done. Jesus set the example and taught us to model his life, teachings, and behavior, so I?

Just like Jesus, we have the power to choose who we will let come into our home or sit at our table. We have the power to choose how we will respond to people we meet or encounter every single day. We can choose to remain indifferent and approach them with arrogance or hatred, or we can choose to walk in the ways of Jesus, which means welcoming them and walking with them in a spirit of love. For love is the Jesus way and the way that Jesus teaches us to live by.

And love is not always the easy option. It can mean we step out of our comfort zone, it can mean turning the other cheek when we do not want to, it can mean making really tough decisions, but love is the way that matches Jesus' instruction to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Love is the way we do that.

But this is easier said than done.

16th century theologian and founder of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin helps us understand why this is easier said than done.

Calvin makes the case that if we are to follow Jesus' instruction to deny ourselves and take up our cross, it MUST begin with eliminating our blind self love from our human hearts. He argues that what distorts our lives more than anything else is our blind self-love.

In defining what constitutes our self love, Calvin states that "our self-love provides the driving engine behind our pride, ambition and arrogance, whereby we seek the meaning of our lives in power, privilege, honor, status, and wealth, so that we may despise those we consider to be inferior to us."

For we all desire something more in our lives, especially honor, power, privilege, wealth, status, etc. but that is not what the Christian life is about. The Christian life is NOT about letting our power, privilege, wealth, honor, or self love make us think we are good to go on our own, without God and without neighbor, to the point where we neglect those we consider to be inferior to us. No, this is the opposite of what the Christian life is about.

The Christian life is about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus wholeheartedly and in doing so, we cannot become so blind by our love for ourselves or our love for our own lives that we fail to notice, welcome, and love our neighbors who might look different than us or who need our help.

For Calvin concludes his writing by saying this:

“By Jesus calling upon us to deny ourselves, bear our cross and hope for eternal life, even as we thank God for the blessings of this life, it calls us to abandon once for all the image of ourselves we have created through our blind self-love, in order to be conformed to the image of selfless and self-giving love that is revealed in Jesus.

This quote helps us understand that our blind self-love is the primary reason that our lives do not express the image and likeness of God. In order to take up our cross and follow Jesus, our lives must conform to the selfless and self-giving love that is revealed in Jesus Christ. And the most evident example of the selfless and self-giving love of Jesus Christ is revealed through the cross.

For Jesus bore humiliation, rejection, pain, and suffering on the cross. Jesus loves us so much that he is willing to die upon a cross to redeem us, to restore us to Himself, and to rescue us for all of eternity. Thus, Jesus' death on the cross for you, for me, and for all God's people is the greatest act of love the world will ever know.

In considering what Jesus did for us, how will your decisions, words, and actions begin to express unconditional love for God and unconditional love for all God's people? How will you drop your “blind self-love” that Calvin talks about and transform your heart and mind to become comfortable enough to open the doors of your home to allow someone to stay with you when they need a place to stay, no matter who they are or what they look like?

For we must remember that we do these things such as opening up our home and providing a place to stay with the help of God, not completely on our own.

God is always at work in our world and provides us with the gift of the Holy Spirit to discern what God is up to and how we can join along. So, with the help of God and the Holy Spirit, how will you open yourself up to what God is doing in our world today and to the ways that the Spirit is moving within our communities? car?

For we must remember that we are called into mindfulness and radical care and compassion for others. Jesus' life, ministry, and sacrifice on the cross confirms this. Perhaps each of us need to begin by proactively loving the person that we come into contact with next, who is in need, in need of food, in need of shelter, or in need of friendship and care— whoever that might be and then, take the next step. For this might require us to take the next step into an unknown and costly future, like the disciples were going to face after Jesus' death on the cross, but this is the life Jesus calls us to engage in. This is the life that Jesus lived and the life Jesus shared with us, so may we all live and love in every moment of our lives, remembering that in every interaction there is an opportunity to share the love of Christ and an opportunity to receive the love of Christ.

Additionally friends, we know that Christ' death is not the end of the story. Jesus told his disciples and us that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, but then, in verse 21, he reminds us that “*on the third day, he will be raised.*” This points to the resurrection, the promise of renewal, and the

miraculous victory of Christ that arises from seemingly nowhere. In the midst of death, Christ brings life - new life, fullness of life, resurrected and transformed life through his resurrection to all God's people.

Therefore, in following Christ's instructions to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, may we work to bring about the fullness of life for all God's people to experience. Let us remember that each of us has the power to choose how we will respond to every living thing, especially every single person that we meet or come into contact with – to choose whether to approach them in hatred, violence, or a manner of indifference or to choose the Jesus way, which is to walk with them in love, welcome them in love, and see and treat them out of the same love with which Jesus has first loved us. For Love is the Jesus way and what led Jesus to the cross out of his great love for you, for me, and for all God's people. So, as you go forth this week, may God give us “eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts filled with compassion (Matthew 11:15, Colossians 3:12-13)” as we take up our cross and follow Jesus. Amen.