

Take Up Your Cross

Series: *The Meaning of Jesus*; Mark 8: 31-38

Jesus said, according to *The Message* translation, "Anyone who intends to come with me, has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? "What could you ever trade your soul for?"

"Don't get depressing, not too heavy. Keep it upbeat and happy. That's what we hear. That's what we say.

Jesus says, to become disciples, followers, learners, take up your cross and follow me. Do you want to save your life? You'll lose it. Are you willing to lose your life? You'll save it. Will you gain whole world and forfeit your life? What's your life worth to you? These are among the hardest, and likely authentic, of Jesus' words. They are difficult to hear and to accept. I often wonder, what do they really mean?

This is the second sermon in a Lenten series called *The Meaning of Jesus*. What is the meaning of Jesus"? What do we know for sure about Jesus? What is echoed by historians outside the Bible is this: Jesus lived. He was a man. He lived approximately between 4BCE and 30CE. He died on a Roman cross. The movement formed in his name has grown to over two billion people today who call themselves Christian.

There remain lots of questions about Jesus. What did his life mean? What did his death mean? Why was he crucified? Did he die for our sins? What about the resurrection?

Over the course of this series, I will give my best thinking and understanding to these questions. Today, we start with these hard sayings: "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow". One of the first things Jesus did in the gospels was call followers, disciples. One of the last things Jesus did in the gospels was call followers. Today, he still calls followers, learners. He calls us to "deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow...." In the process of responding to the particular call of the Spirit for your life, however personal and specific that call is, if it is genuine, it will include the need to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

What does this instruction mean? Traditionally, it has been interpreted as the need to diminish the self, as though the self is not good. Such an approach reflects and contributes to a "worm theology" of a worthless humanity that is of no value. This is a humanity that depends on being rescued from its miserable state by a judging, and sometimes angry, God. This view equates a strong sense of self with selfishness and self-effacing with Christian meekness, though the New Testament never portrays Jesus as anyone's doormat.

This traditional interpretation has managed to work in the church because so many Christians have valued commitment above all. They have been committed to the church almost regardless of what they got out of it. They have been willing to support the institutional church because they believed it was the right thing to do. Many even

thought that church shouldn't be so entertaining or even relevant. If church became too interesting, some became suspicious that it was not holy enough.

The newer generations of church goers and tended to feel differently. For many baby boomers and busters, Gen. Xers and others, church needs to be compelling. More and more, people are attracted by the promise of abundant life and deep meaning. They ask, "What's in it for me?"

There are some problems with this approach. It leads to a consumer mentality that can reduce discipleship to product shopping and a search for self-actualization that becomes little more than sacred therapy. We see examples of *church lite* around us. If that's all there is, it's not enough. The call to deny self, take up your cross, and follow is fundamental to finding and living the abundant life Jesus promised

What does it mean to "take up your cross"? For Jesus, it meant living out his own understanding of what God called Israel to be: a source of blessing to all nations. He did this by challenging the temple leadership and the Pharisees' interpretation of the covenant. He tried to show people the way to return to covenant relationship with God. The cross he took up turned into an actual cross, the instrument of his death.

What would it mean for you to "take up your cross and follow" Jesus? It would mean that you own your own wounds. To think that being fully human and perfectly normal means having no wounds and no brokenness is just misguided. To think so really means to deny your wounds and your brokenness, to deny the journey you have traveled.

To be fully human is to own your own wounds.

Stand still with your wounds and your damage and all the baggage of your life. Flawed as you are, you stand on holy ground.... This is the ground that God has cleared for you.... This is the blessed space the space ... the creator hollows out for you, the place where God's word is spoken and heard, a space which neither darkness nor chaos can finally overwhelm. God meets you here and nowhere else. (Angela Tilby, *Let There Be Light*)

To follow Jesus is to stand before God and the world as a whole person, complete with wounds, damage, faults, and failings.

Take up your cross and follow also means to be open and vulnerable, able to learn, able to grow, and able to change. It means to have what Bible calls a *soft heart*, not hardened; good soil not hard, impenetrable, or full of thorns. Be porous.

Take up your cross and follow also means to be creative in the work of transforming brokenness and baggage into blessing. Be assertive in your creativity and the Spirit will work with you to bring genuine transformation. The nation of Colombia has been ravaged by violence for many years. It is in a state of national brokenness. Within capital city Bogotá, a group of musicians are on alert. Whenever violence occurs – bombing or assassination, they go immediately to sight and begin to play. They offer an alternative. They bring healing. In the process of this work, there came a new idea: to transform instruments of violence into instruments of music. Working with a local craftsman, a maker of fine guitars, they had him build guitar out of an old shotgun, then

later out of a disabled AK-47 assault rifle. Now, the police and Army regularly supply this group with confiscated weapons to be turned into musical instruments. These are in great demand around the world. This is an example of taking up a cross and creatively transforming brokenness into blessing. How can you do that? How can we do that? We are called to find a way.

Take up your cross and follow. This is the invitation of Jesus now as then.

Can you hear it down the ages
like a mighty trumpet sound,
a call to leave the night and
step into the morning?
It's a call to joy and gladness
in a world of war and pain,
and yet it sounds a note
of danger and of warning.
It's a call to leave your treasures
and your trinkets on the road,
a call to join the weeping, and
to bear the sufferer's load.
It's a call to live like fools
by another set of rules,
a call to take your cross in hand
and follow.
It's a call to love the stranger,
it's a call to live as friends,
in a world that says good fences
make good neighbors;
it's a call to face the makers
of destruction and of war
and to plead that we put down
those guns and sabers.
it's a call to death and dying,
it's a call to life and birth,
and it's a call to plant
the seeds of love
on barren planet Earth
it's a call to be the lowly,
and it's a call to be the least,
It's a call to join the fasting
that shall lead to a final feast
It's a call to live like fools
by another set of rules,
a call to take your cross in hand

and follow.
I hear that music, and it's calling me,
come and be all that you were
born to be, if anybody would
come after me, take up your cross
and follow!

(Ken Medema, *The Call*)

Even so, Lord Jesus, we follow, walking with you as whole persons. We are your disciples with our wounds, our baggage, and our brokenness engaging the baggage and brokenness of the world to transform it as your partners, through your Spirit.

We worship you God. We follow you and discover that you are free. If we will find you, it will be roaming, wandering, and singing. I want to be free like you. Many of us seek that freedom. We say "Yes" to your invitation to walk with you, to dance with you, because you created us to dance and to love. Amen

(based on *I Hear a Seed Growing* by Edwina Gately)