

Sow the Seeds Sermon  
February 28, 2021  
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Jesus said, “if any, want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Uff! For whatever reason, these words, although familiar, seemed to hit me a bit differently as I read them this time around. For many of us, these words are well known. Even if we don’t necessarily connect them to scripture, it is likely we have either heard or spoken them in response to the many challenges and difficulties we have faced in life – courageously diminishing and dismissing them – “it’s just my cross to bear.” And while donning that statement prods a willing acceptance of such struggles and possibly serves as a badge of bravery and strength in submitting to them, I have to admit that this time around, the thought of resigning myself to bear this cross is a bit more than I can handle.

We are now more than a year into this global pandemic and although hope remains on the horizon, the day-to-day reality of it all has more than maxed out our ability to cope. We are exhausted. And the number of losses we have experienced has left us in a chronic state of grief. Currently around 485,000 people have died<sup>1</sup> from Covid-19. We have experienced job losses, mourned canceled plans, missed important milestones, and long for the good old days when we could gather in groups and give each other hugs. Nothing feels normal. For many of us, we are struggling. We are already carrying more than we can bear.

And, as if that weren’t enough, our nation is devastatingly divided. Fear has imprisoned us, and we have become shackled by hatred and distrust. Instead of merely ribbing one another over which “team” we are rooting for, we have lost the ability to honor our differences and have let those differences diminish our capacity to offer one another respect. Now, instead, we have fallen prey to the allure of labels, boxing one another into either this or that, right or wrong, true or false, for or against, good or bad. And with every line that is drawn, our hope of healing the hurt, bridging the gap, and mending what’s been broken continues to fade. Everything seems to be crumbling and the thought of moving forward feels impossible. For many of us, we are struggling. We are already carrying more than we can bear.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.google.com/search?q=how+many+people+have+died+from+covid+in+the+us+today&og=how+many+people+have+died+from+covid+in+the+us+today&ags=chrome..69i57j0i390l3.11417j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

And now we hear that Jesus is asking us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow. Ugh! Seriously? Haven't we already been denied enough? I don't know about you, but I am already beyond depleted, carrying the constant weight of worry and bearing the burden of so much as it is. Just how much more does Jesus think I can endure? I will be honest, that was my initial gut reaction to reading today's text. I really had no interest in delving into a quest that would unearth the good news of bearing the cross or losing my life or joining Jesus in even more rejection, suffering, and death. No thank you. But then, [breathe] I took a deep breath, asked for the Spirit's guidance, and read the text again. And, while I'm not any more comforted by the thought of bearing the cross or confident in my ability to rise to the occasion, there were a couple of helpful and hopeful glimmers of grace that caught my attention. I am praying that, for now, that will be enough.

The first glimmer came in the exchange between Jesus and Peter. You see, Peter, just prior to today's text, had uttered a powerful profession of faith – having been one of the first to name Jesus as Savior. In response to the question, “Who do people say that I am?”, Peter boldly and faithfully revealed Jesus' identity. “You are the Messiah.” Having heard Jesus not only speak with great authority about the truth of who God is, but also witnessing him testify to God's promise and purpose to love all people in his ministry of healing and feeding and tending to the needs of all he met, it was clear to Peter, that this Gospel-preaching, scripture-teaching, miracle-working Jesus, had come to be the savior, they had long been waiting for. But then, almost immediately, as we find in today's text, Peter's revelation goes off the rails. As soon as Jesus begins to describe the journey ahead – a journey of suffering and rejection – a journey that would eventually lead to Jesus' death on the cross and, as we know, the real promise of the gospel – the empty tomb and the resurrection, Peter gets hung up in his own, initial gut-reaction, to what Jesus was saying. It's almost as if he hears the words, “suffering” and “killed” and all of a sudden alarm bells start clanging in his brain and that is the only thing he can hear. And so Peter, this bold, naive, spirited and faith-filled disciple, begins to rebuke Jesus. “Seriously? How could you say these things? You are the one we've been looking for! I am sure of it. You have come to be the savior – not to die. NO! This is more than I can bear.”

In response, Jesus offers his own rebuke. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” And here is the sparkle of good news that caught my attention. In Peter's mind's eye – the Messiah was not supposed to come and die –

but to come and conquer the current authorities, to set the people free from their political captivity. He had a clear vision for what he expected that to look like and couldn't wrap his mind around anything different. But, as we hear Jesus say, that was his human point of view. For indeed, Jesus did come to conquer and set people free – but the battle he would win was that over death and the freedom he would offer was a freedom from sin – a freedom from anything that might get in the way of our coming to know and accept God's love. Recognizing the difference between Peter's limited, human understanding and Jesus' divinely ordained mission to make God's love known for all the world caused me to pause and wonder what my own expectations were of Jesus and how I too might be stuck in my own human point of view. Perhaps, you, too, can relate?

In all honesty, for me, it is way too easy to get trapped in my own thoughts about and visions of how I think life ought to be. I am great at making plans and setting an agenda and developing great expectations centered on what I think is best and how I think life should be. And, all too often, I foolishly take the clarity of my mind's eye to be the gospel truth when in all actuality, not once did I stop to consider what God might actually have in mind instead. And then, when things don't work out quite right, or unforeseen challenges arise, or heaven forbid I make a mistake or realize that I was actually wrong from the start, and my carefully crafted plans begin to unravel, I find that, even as I struggle, I dig myself in even deeper, trying to accomplish it all on my own and even though I might be able to carry the burden for a while, it never fails, that there comes a point in the struggle when I realize that I cannot bear the load any longer. Then and only then, I remember that Jesus beckons for us to cast our burdens on him – and that it was never God's plan for us to bear our burdens alone in the first place, which brings me to my second glimmer of the gospel in today's text.

What if, in asking us to deny ourselves, Jesus isn't asking for us to give up what little joy we have left, but might instead be simply prodding us to let go of our focus on human things, making room for God's presence and promise to come into greater view? What if, in calling for us to take up the cross, Jesus isn't intending to pile on even more of a burden, but is encouraging us to cling to the knowledge and certainty that we are not alone? In Matthew 11 we hear these words:

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

For many of us, the cross is a symbol of our faith. We hang them on our walls, wear them around our necks, and are water-marked with them at our baptism – as a constant reminder that we have been named and claimed as God’s beloved children forever. It is a sign and symbol of God’s desire to come to us and to love us – even to the point of death so that we can be certain that there is no burden that God has not carried, and no struggle that God has not endured. When we look at it from this, divine, point of view, the cross brings us comfort. If nothing else, perhaps bearing the cross, as Jesus has asked us to, will enable us to remember that indeed, nothing will ever separate us from God’s love – that even your best effort to cling to your human point of view cannot and will not derail God’s grace, mercy and love! And perhaps, on your toughest of days, when you feel most burdened and overwhelmed, you will take up the cross and remember that Christ calls you, not to suffer in silence, but to trust that he is yoked, right beside you, to help carry the load. “If any, want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.” Clinging to God’s promise and mercy, and love, may it be so. Amen!