

Follow Me

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark 8:1

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When I was in seminary, a professor once challenged us wannabe priests with the following question: If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Now, that is a provocative and somewhat humbling question, isn't it?

After posing the question, the professor then asked us to participate in a little exercise. Close your eyes, she invited us, and review your own life's story as if it were a silent film. Just play back your life in your own mind's eye: your childhood and adolescence, your college years, the relationships you formed, the people you've loved and been loved by, the work you've done and now do, your family life, your contributions to your community, all of your day-to-day actions and interactions with the people around you, the legacy you will leave behind. How would your life look to an outside and independent observer, to an imaginary audience watching your life unfold? Would it be obvious that you are a follower of Christ? Would this life of yours look like a distinctively *Christian* life?

If you're like me, this little exercise makes you feel more than a little uncomfortable. Indeed, I feel convicted by it. Truth be told, my actions and relationships often don't measure up to Christ-like standards.

The point of the exercise is not to depress us, but rather to remind us that the Christian faith is far more than just having the right beliefs and showing up at church on Sunday. Christianity is as much a way of life as it is a set of creeds or worshipping practices. Indeed, if you read the gospels closely, you'll notice that Jesus never asks the disciples to *believe* this or that; rather, what Jesus asks is that they *follow* him.

This is a hard message and one to which the Church, quite frankly, has not always paid heed. As the great American preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick used to joke, so-called Christians have for thousands of years been trying to get rid of Jesus. First, they crucified him. And when that didn't work, they started

worshipping him. Worship can be just another form of crucifixion because we often use it to get ourselves off the hook of answering the real question Jesus poses. For the truth of the matter is that Jesus doesn't ask to be worshipped, any more than he asked to be crucified. What he asks is to be followed.

The great Lutheran theologian Soren Kierkegaard once put it this way: There is a great difference between being a follower of Christ and simply an admirer. "A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached, at a safe distance from what he admires. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and thus he fails to be or strive to be what he admires. . . .The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. Though in words, phrases, songs, he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. By contrast, the follower aspires with all his might to be what he admires."

So, how then are we to follow Jesus? What Jesus tells the crowd in today's lesson is that following him requires two things: to deny oneself, and to take up a cross. Let's talk a little about each.

First, what does it mean to deny oneself? We oftentimes mark Lent with spiritual practices of denying ourselves this or that satisfaction, whether it be certain kinds of food, spending time on Facebook, or whatever. And these can be small steps towards the type of self-denial that Jesus speaks of today. But ultimately the denial of self that Jesus embodies, and invites us into, is something much more radical.

To deny one's self involves, at bottom, an act of trust: trust that we don't have to fret about our own needs or desires because we will be cared for by God, come what may, and that we can therefore turn our attention outward rather than inward. In this act of faith, we are freed from the idolatry of the self, and all the worries that come with self-absorption, so that we can instead live in freedom *for others*. As Martin Luther put it, in faith, we are freed from the tyranny of ourselves so that we might, through love, become slaves to one another.

But there is more to discipleship than denying one's self. Jesus tells us that we also must take up our cross. This is the first time in the gospel of Mark that the word 'cross' appears, and while we have become so familiar with the symbol that we take it for granted, you can only imagine the shock of Jesus' hearers when he invites them to take up a cross.

The cross, as we know, was an instrument of torture and death used by the Romans to punish those who dared oppose their power. The Jewish historian Josephus tells of thousands of crucifixions in the area of Jerusalem during Jesus' day. It was primarily a political punishment, inflicted above all on the lower classes, slaves, violent criminals, people the Roman government perceived as dangerous if they got out of control. Death by crucifixion was a long and painful ordeal, done quite publicly, so as to terrify all who saw it.

We will, of course, vicariously re-live the ghastly drama of Jesus' own crucifixion when we get to Holy Week and Good Friday, for his own experience of the Cross, his Passion, is at the center of our faith. But the question today's lesson poses is what does it mean for us, here and now, to take up *our* cross, when persecution and martyrdom by the Roman Empire are no longer dangers?

Jesus is not, I think, inviting us to manufacture suffering in our lives for the purpose of establishing our own Christian credentials, as if being Christian were a contest to see who has the most courage or endurance. Mel Gibson to the contrary notwithstanding, imitating Christ does not require us to become superheroes who inflict pain upon ourselves in a vain effort to prove our merit. This is the way of narcissistic martyrdom.

Nor, I think, is Jesus asking us to suffer for suffering's sake. A lot of harmful nonsense has been said across the generations about "redemptive suffering" by people in power who seek to retain their privilege by persuading those who don't have power that they should look for the blessing in their lot. Whites have done it to people of color, men to women, "upper classes" to "lower classes." Jesus' invitation to take up our cross is not this. Indeed, if anything, it is the inverse of this: As his life and ministry abundantly demonstrate, taking up the cross is about suffering *for and on behalf of others*, in an entirely selfless way, when such suffering is required to oppose injustice, to protect the vulnerable, to defend the innocent, to heal the sick, or just to share in the pain of another as an act of mercy.

So, for us, I submit, to take up the cross means to identify and accept all those opportunities in our lives to stand in solidarity with those who are without. Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to this as "the view from below": assuming the perspective of those at the wrong end of power, not to avenge their plight, but rather out of a desire to restore their humanity when they are at most risk of losing it.

What does this look like for you and for me? It can be anything and everything from devoting your vocational life to a cause aligned with the gospel, to caring for a child with disabilities, to volunteering regularly at a soup kitchen, to visiting the aged and infirm who have no one else with whom to share their last days on this earth, to refusing to engage in social patterns of exploitation, abuse or neglect of others. But in whatever form it may assume in your life, taking up the cross, by its very nature, requires stepping out of the safety and security of privilege and stepping into the messy chaos of human pain and suffering. Not for the sake of suffering, not for the sake of our own egos, but for love's sake.

The wise Episcopal priest and teacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, talks about 'taking up one's cross' in these terms: Crucifixion was used by the Romans, Taylor says, to "reinforce the idea that death is the most awful thing in the world and that people with any sense should do anything in their power to avoid it. By telling his disciples to pick up their crosses, Jesus defied that idea. He suggested that there are things worse than death in the world, and that living in fear is near the top of the list."

If we let fear run our lives, Taylor explains, then fear becomes our god. And if fear becomes our god, all our days are consumed by anxiety and worry, such that when our anxious days finally come to an end – for death cannot be avoided forever – we come to discover that we have really never lived at all. This is, I think, what Jesus means when he says that those who are preoccupied with saving their lives will lose them.

Let us not give in to fear, much less worship it. Let us instead offer up our selves, our souls, and our bodies to Christ and to His world; let us take up our cross, whatever it may be; let us be willing to give up our lives so that we might save each other; let us follow Jesus.

Amen.