

The Way of the Cross

Step by step, Jesus draws nearer to Jerusalem, nearer to the cross. We have followed him across the hills of Galilee, by the shore of the Lake Gennesaret. We have walked with him as he turned his face toward Jerusalem and began to see the end of the road ahead. Now we see the city in the distance as we walk with him up the hill, going up to Jerusalem, singing songs of ascent as we go.

This isn't only Jesus' journey. It is our journey as well. In Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples three times that he will suffer and die and be raised. We heard about the first of those times this morning. Every time Jesus makes that prediction immediately after one of the disciples says something that shows us they don't want to hear it, or don't understand it. In today's reading, Peter "rebukes" Jesus – a nice word for yells at him, saying, "That will never happen!" The next time he says it, the disciples argue about which one of them is the greatest. The third time, James and John jockey for the first two important places when Jesus comes into his kingdom. The disciples are all about the power and the glory. Forget about the pain.

And who can blame them? No one wants to hear someone they love say they're going to die, and no one wants to suffer themselves. I mean, how many of you, when the nurse at the doctor's office says, "Now this is going to hurt a little" says, "Bring it on!" We try to look on the bright side. We love to hear that "they all lived happily every after".

But Jesus doesn't let us go there – at least not right away. He says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." There you are, right at the heart of what it means to be a follower of the Way. It is not the way to Cape May or the way to San Jose, as the good old popular songs go. This is no vacation trip. It is not an easy way. It is the way to the cross. We do not go alone on that way. Jesus doesn't tell us to go a way he doesn't go himself. It is in his footsteps that we follow.

We all know this line. We've heard it before. What does this call mean in terms of the actual way we live our lives and the choices we make in our living? What does it mean to deny yourself? What is the cross we are to carry?

"Deny yourself" is a tricky phrase. On the one hand, it is counter-cultural. In a world where commercials tell us to "indulge yourself – you're worth it!", where you are encouraged to do whatever feels good, where we try so hard to build our children up by affirming them as beautiful and smart and capable, the question comes up, "Why in the world would I ever want to deny myself? I should be out for whatever I can get!"

On the other hand, those "indulge yourselves, you're wonderful" messages come up at least in part because there are so many other messages that beat you down, that tell you that you're not good enough, that you're not worth anything, why should you try because you're only going to fail anyhow. So I want to be clear about what Jesus meant when he said, "Deny yourself". He didn't mean "deny yourself that self-indulgent ice cream". He also didn't mean "deny that you are worth anything." After all, each one of you is a beloved child of God. Instead, he was telling us to get our priorities in order. It's God's will first, your will second. John Calvin put it this way:

We are not our own; therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.

We are not our own; therefore let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be expedient according to the flesh.

We are not our own; therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours.

On the contrary, we are God's: to him, therefore, let us live and die.

We are God's; therefore let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions.

We are God's; towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed.

Is this easy? No. This putting God's will and the love of others first and ourselves second is exactly what Jesus himself struggled with in the garden of Gethsemane. But carrying this out doesn't mean we all have to be martyrs or monks either. In fact, I think it is more in the day to day practice of our lives that

we see this lived out: In the woman who chooses to work at a non-profit that makes an impact on the lives of the most vulnerable instead of in a high-paying corporate job; in the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady; in the young adult who makes a stand for justice for a classmate even though that might make them unpopular. This is what it means to deny yourself – to acknowledge that you are God's, and to put God's will for you first.

And what about that cross? In Jesus' day, it was easy to understand what it meant to take up your cross. There were people who did that literally. Some were criminals. More were people who took a stand against the Roman occupiers. They ended up being crucified where all could see them, a painful and shameful death. Around the world in our own time we are seeing a tragic increase in brothers and sisters who are being killed because they are Christian whether in a church bombing in Pakistan or by Isis in Syria or Iraq. They know in a life-and-death way what it is to stand for their faith, to deny themselves and take up their crosses. But we are not yet challenged in that way. For us in this country, we do not literally risk our lives by proclaiming we are Christian. So what cross does Jesus call us to bear?

Well, it's probably not your difficult spouse or the ordinary every-day aggravations of life, irritating as they are. It may be your chronic, painful illness if the way you deal with that illness makes your life a testimony to others. To figure it out, think about it this way: Jesus went to his cross so that through his suffering he would understand our suffering. Jesus went to his cross giving up himself for the sake of others. Jesus went to his cross letting go of his power so that God's glory might be seen. Where in your life can you go to understand your brother's suffering, to offer yourself for your sister's sake and let God's glory shine?

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." That's what Jesus calls us to. It is the challenge of a lifetime, but it's not easy. Why would anyone want to do that? Maybe because you enjoy a challenge, but there's more to it than that. Jesus goes on to say, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to

gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" In the end, that's what this is all about: giving up what you thought was your life and gaining instead a new life, filled with challenge and hope and meaning.

Will Willimon tells of a friend of his who hit bottom, spun out of control, and crossed the median heading the wrong way at 100 miles per hour: He fell from his prestigious perch as an attorney to the depths of alcoholism. He came home one day to find his family, his pastor, and three of his close friends all sitting in his living room. And it wasn't his birthday. Yet it was.

He is on his way back, thanks to his loving wife and children and the good work of AA. He was a private man, so he wouldn't tell Will all the details, but he did tell him this: "I had always gone to church, but always in the back of my mind, thought the Church was for losers, the weak. But you would be amazed at what I've learned about God."

"Like what?" Will asked him.

"That so many phrases I had heard all my life suddenly have become real to me," replied his friend.

"Like what?"

"Like 'Take up your cross' and 'You can only find your life by losing it.' Through hitting bottom, I've met God," said Will's friend.

"And who is the God you have met?"

"God is a tough, relentless, devastating friend."

That tough, relentless, devastating friend is the God whose Son died on the cross for us, sharing our suffering, reaching out to us in love. It is Jesus who denied himself who calls us to deny ourselves and follow him. And as we do so, we find life fulfilled, life with hope, life abundant. Let us go and follow the way of the cross. Amen.

