

## Messiah, Disciples, Cross

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Proverbs 1:20-28; James 3:1-5a; Mark 8:27-38

“He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’” -- Mark 8:34

One of the consistent themes of the preaching you've heard from me over these past few years is that Christianity isn't complicated, it's just hard. I have preached that message to you over and over again not on the basis of one or two isolated verses, but on the basis of the entire story of Jesus that I read in the gospels, as well as the extended prologue to that story that I find in the First Testament and the rather briefer commentary I find on that story in the Second Testament following the gospels.

And although I believe that the message of Christianity's hard simplicity pervades the Bible, it has, at the same time, a scriptural anchor that is crystal clear and makes all the other, less direct statements of the theme more apparent. That anchor is this morning's text from the Gospel of Mark: “He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

That's the thirty-fourth verse of Mark's eighth chapter, and as we begin our examination of it this morning, I would urge particular care, for although Christianity is simple, it's easily misunderstood, and this central message of self-renunciation and the taking up of one's cross to follow Jesus is one of the most misunderstood. Here's what I mean.

When Jesus tells us that we must, if we wish to be his follower, deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him, he is not saying that any burden that life gives you is your cross to bear. We hear that frequently, and it's not just a figure of speech.

Lots of Christians actually believe that their bad marriage is their cross to bear, and enduring that miserable relationship is following Jesus.

A difficult relative is someone else's cross to bear, and if they don't throw the old sour-puss out into the snow at Thanksgiving dinner, they're following Jesus.

A wayward child is yet someone else's cross to bear, and following Jesus means not disowning the addicted, self-destructive, and embarrassing ne're-do-well.

And so on. Whatever is difficult, painful, burdensome, embarrassing, and unavoidable is our cross to bear. Or so we say.

I'm not so sure. I'm not at all sure that Jesus meant that putting up with a difficult character at holidays or quietly enduring a painful medical condition is taking up your cross and following him. In fact, I'm pretty sure that he didn't have such things in mind when he said those words, and the reason I think that is because Jesus understood that life is difficult and that it has its burdens for everyone. That which is difficult, painful, burdensome, embarrassing, and unavoidable is a given with life. Buddhism says that life is suffering, and Ecclesiastes says that “[A]ll things are wearisome, more than one can express” (1.8).

Life, as we know it in this world, is ultimately not satisfying, and as Frank Sinatra used to sing, "That's Life." There's no news in people having to bear burdens, to put up with frustrations and set-backs, to manage under less than ideal circumstances. History is simply another name for living under less than ideal circumstances. We are forced into this world – literally forced by the painful contractions of our mother's wombs into this world – and we emerge into it in tears, and at the other end of life's journey we are truly fortunate if death doesn't bring to an end days, weeks, months, or even years of suffering.

That's life. And Jesus knew this fact about life as much as anyone and more than most. Each day has its share of troubles, and he urged us to acknowledge that fact and not to exaggerate it: "'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today'" (Mt. 6.34).

Now I know, of course, that the church – the big church – has interpreted Jesus' words about taking up one's cross quite differently from the way I would suggest to you this morning. Over the centuries the tiny church became a big church and the big church has always wanted to stay a big church and so it needs to attract lots and lots of people to it and you don't do that with a message of sacrificing oneself for the sake of Jesus and his message.

What you do instead is take the ordinary stuff of life and you baptize it. You make ordinary suffering religious. You make ordinary decency Christianity. You stretch the definition of following Jesus so far that pretty soon just making it from one day to the next is the expression of your Christian faith, and when you do this, although you call yourself a Christian, you look pretty much indistinguishable from the thoroughly decent Jew, Muslim, Hindu, humanist, or atheist next door.

That's not Christianity. Christianity is nice, but nice isn't Christianity. Nice is nice. Christianity is at least nice, but it's never just nice. Don't get me wrong. I like nice. I like nice people. I like nice weather. I like nice church services. I like it when people play nicely together. As Mammy Yokum used to say, Good is better than evil because good's nicer.

So all of us Christians, let's all be nice, and I can guarantee you that if all 2.1 billion of us who call ourselves Christian were simply and consistently nice, the world would be a whole lot nicer.

But let's not mistake being nice for Christianity. And let's not mistake getting through life reasonably intact as Christianity.

Christianity is Christianity. Christianity has a specific content and you've heard it twice already this morning and here it is again, for the third time: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Following Jesus means following in a particular way, a particular path, toward a particular goal, and that goal is not simply being nice to people you don't like or bearing up under life's burdens with a stiff upper lip. The goal of Jesus' way is God's realm, God's way of life that God wills for this world. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross and the empty tomb, and their message is not nice. The cross is horrible and the resurrection is mystery, but neither of them is nice. Neither of them is ordinary. Neither of them is natural. And while the former is business-as-usual, the latter most certainly is not. God's realm is so different from this world we hardly recognize it, and that realm, that way of being in this world, is the goal of the Christian faith.

I'm sure that many of us are following, with varying degrees of interest and attention, the current debate about health-care reform. The other night I was listening to a group of journalists discussing one of the major flash-points in the debate, which is whether the so-called "public option" would be available to illegal immigrants. Lots and

lots of Americans are adamant that they don't want their tax dollars providing health care for illegal immigrants.

Well, okay, but I found myself wondering why those Americans aren't equally adamant about their fellow citizens who illegally employ those illegal immigrants for slave wages, which is the major incentive for illegals to struggle through our borders in the first place. We seem to have no trouble turning a blind eye to the thousands upon thousands of large and small businesses that employ illegal immigrants, but when it comes to providing basic health care for the people whose labor we've exploited, then we take to the high ground and start shaking our fists and pitch-forks at town meetings.

I don't call such behavior patriotic; I call it hypocritical. If we wish to provide health care only for citizens, then we should employ only citizens, and if we did that, the pipeline of exploitative jobs for illegal immigrants would dry up, and with it, much of our illegal immigration problem.

But that's a cross we're not willing to take up. Justice – real justice, justice for everyone and not just for a few, and justice that would cut into the profits of the wealthy, which is all of us, whether we think we're wealthy or not – that kind of justice we're loathe to embrace, and so we continue to argue about a branch of the problem without recognizing that the tree itself is in need of healing.

Jesus' way – God's way, the way of the cross and the empty tomb – that is a way that inevitably leads to transformation if people actually choose it. That's what the Christian message is all about – transformation. Personal transformation, social transformation, and even natural transformation. We deny – dump, lose, get rid of, crucify, bury with Christ, leave behind, whatever expression you wish to use – we deny our business-as-usual selves so that God can, through us, transform our business-as-usual world into the realm of God's will. That's what it means to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus Christ.

And what it waiting on the other side of that denial – that crucifixion, that dying-and-rising with Christ, that following Jesus in his way, God's way – is not nothing, but rather everything. And that's the part of the Christian faith you simply have to trust. There is no proof, there is no irrefutable evidence, there is no clear and convincing sign that the way of Jesus Christ is ultimately true. You simply have to trust that it is. That's what makes a Christian a Christian. I do, and I hope and pray that you do, as well. For in that trustful living lies new, abundant, and eternal life. Thanks be to God.