

Sunday, June 25, 2023
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Jeremiah 20.7-13; Matthew 10.24-39

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2517611685061923>

(Sermon begins at about 18:50)

“Take Up the Cross”

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Okay??? And my incentive to follow you would be . . . ?

Jesus has just finished assembling the twelve apostles and has commissioned them to go out to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out demons. He goes on to deliver a discourse on ministry. Specifically, what those who do ministry with him, those who do ministry in his name, can expect. And it is not all sunshine and roses.

Given the tone of his comments to his disciples, it’s a wonder that any of them chose to stick around. I can almost hear the disciples talking among themselves: “If this job means strife and tension between me and my family, having to choose between my family and Jesus, and even threats to my life, I don’t know if I want any part of Jesus and his ministry.” It’s a wonder the Jesus movement even got off the ground, let alone survived for two thousand years and counting.

Just as Jesus’ whole life centered around the cross—his crucifixion being the pivotal event leading to his ultimate purpose—so too, is the cross the defining image for those who choose to follow him. Not just in terms of what Jesus’ crucifixion means for us—the defeat of the bonds of sin and death, with the opening the way for forgiveness and eternal life. But the very act of choosing to follow him, by definition, means being willing to take up the cross. This image of taking up one’s cross is key to this passage, as well as key to what it means to be a Christian.

Particularly in our own time, the real meaning behind the image of taking up the cross has been softened, even trivialized. In a time when crucifixion is no longer practiced, we tend to take

Jesus' injunction to take up our cross to refer to little burdens or inconveniences in our life. When something does not go as one would like, how often we hear it downplayed, if not outright dismissed, as "we all have our cross to bear."

That is not at all what Jesus was talking about—then or now. Jesus' invoking the image of the cross would have had a far more significant meaning for his followers. For those who lived under the threat of crucifixion as a potential punishment for crimes, real or trumped up. To the people of Jesus' time, the image of the cross "denotes the shame, pain, social rejection, violence, humiliation, and marginalization of crucifixion."¹

Crucifixion was a form of punishment reserved for those whom the Romans viewed as a significant threat to their control over society—namely, insurrectionists, traitors, and violent criminals. Although this form of execution only applied to non-citizens. Roman citizens daring to commit such crimes against the empire were treated far more humanely—they were beheaded. Therefore, the prevailing understanding of the cross, of what it meant to take up the cross, was to identify with those who were a threat to the empire.

This is what Jesus was calling for among his followers. That those who take up the cross and follow him are to commit to being a threat to the empire. Or more broadly, that they were to commit to being a threat to whatever runs counter to the Gospel and to the ways of the Kingdom of God. As one commentator notes, Jesus uses taking up the cross "as a metaphor for the difficult work of embracing an unconventional life of intense, generous commitment to God's mission—a willingness, as Jesus sums it up, to 'lose their life' in order to 'find it' (Matthew 10:39). According to this ideal picture, following Jesus means making God's mission of love and justice the first priority in our lives, even above family and livelihood (Matthew 10:35-37; 10:9-10). It means being willing to confront and conflict with death-dealing powers."² That same call to commit to being a threat to empire, to unwavering devotion to the Gospel, applies as much today as it did two thousand years ago.

Certainly, in Jesus' time, to take up the cross, while meaning the willingness to embrace this radical commitment to the Gospel, carried the additional meaning, the additional threat, of potentially having to literally take up the cross. Of facing crucifixion for one's commitment to and acting upon Jesus' message. As obviously happened to Jesus himself. And throughout history, there have been those who willingly took up the cross of the Gospel and, as a result, faced the specter of the cross—of punishment, even death, for their beliefs and their actions. Even in modern times, that has continued. Dietrich Bonhoeffer being executed in 1945 for daring to speak out against the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Archbishop Oscar Romero being assassinated in 1980, while presiding at the altar, because he dared to speak out against the human rights violations by the El Salvadoran government. And such atrocities even happen in our own country: Martin Luther King, Jr. being assassinated in Memphis in 1968 for daring to proclaim the truth of the Gospel that all are equal in God's eyes, regardless of race.

Bonhoeffer, Romero, King, and so many others, known and unknown, all answered the call to take up their cross and follow Jesus. Although, at the time, none of them would have thought, none probably never even imagined, that they would be called to literally take up their cross. That they would actually die for the sake of the Gospel.

Thankfully, these are extreme situations—of taking up the cross taken to the extreme. Thankfully, at least in our own country, very few are called to face this extreme, to be martyred for the faith. And yet, these are examples nonetheless that being a Christian is not for the faint of heart. That following Christ is serious business. That becoming a Christian is a serious commitment. That being a Christian means being willing to live the Gospel, no matter what it takes. Even if it means tension or conflict with our loved ones. Even if it means having to occasionally venture into unknown and uncomfortable territory. Even if it means denying our own desires so as to do what Christ is calling us to do.

Before I started my sermon, I briefly entertained the idea of having the ushers lock the doors and not let anyone out—for fear that some of you might be tempted to go running for the hills. But then again, given the state of our society and the continued decline in church membership, the continued decline in those who even identify as Christian, those of you who are here are here precisely because you are committed to the Gospel. You are here precisely because you have answered Christ’s call to take up the cross—whatever that means for you—and to follow him. Which could raise the question, why?

I think the answer to that can be found in our Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah. In this passage, Jeremiah uses an image that is among my favorite, when he writes, “there is something like a burning fire shut in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” By way of context, Jeremiah has prophesied the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Because of this, he has been imprisoned by the high priest. In today’s passage, we hear Jeremiah’s response about how, regardless of what he wants, he feels compelled by God to speak God’s truth. Even when it is painful to do so. Even when such utterances bring risk to himself. Because being a child of God is such an integral part of who he is. Because he recognizes that God is within him. And the desire to serve him is like a burning fire in his bones. A desire that must be acted upon, no matter what.

Or as the Apostle Paul proclaims to the people of Athens regarding God: “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28). That God is the source of our life and wellbeing. That God is the one who sustains us. That God is the one who energizes and motivates us. And in response, we willingly give ourselves to God. In response, we willingly give ourselves to Jesus Christ. In response, we willingly give our all to him and for him. In response, we willingly take up our cross and follow him.

There are many who think this irrational. But two thousand years of the Jesus movement, including substantial periods of persecution, and billions upon billions of followers, demonstrate that there is indeed something to what Jesus offers. Which is how Jesus ends today’s Gospel passage: with a promise. “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” In him, we find a greater purpose beyond ourselves. In him, we find meaning to our lives and to what we do. In him, we receive forgiveness for our sins. In him, we are assured eternal life. Not a bad benefits package.

So, take up your cross and follow him. Yes, as Jesus himself admits, following him is not without potential danger. But then again, he has also proven through taking up his own cross for our sake that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1765.

² "'What Troubles You?' SALT's Commentary for Fourth Sunday after Pentecost," SALT, June 19, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/6/17/what-troubles-you-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost>.