

Pentecost +13 2020

Take Up Your Cross

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Jeremiah 15:15–21, Psalm 26, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:21–27

Jesus tells his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

Earlier in Matthew 10, he says a similar thing, “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

Paul speaks of the cross in relation to the believer all through his writings. For instance, “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Romans 6:6)

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

“I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! (1 Corinthians 15:31)

Or in today’s reading from Romans 12:1, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Growing up in the Evangelical world, I heard these Scriptures and sermons about these texts all the time. Jesus calls us to “take up our cross.” At the same, “we were crucified with Christ.” And we die daily. We are living sacrifices unto the Lord.

It can seem a bit confusing between past tense (we were crucified), present tense (we die daily), and future tense (we will take up our cross and follow Him). I used the language of the cross regularly in my prayers and my conversation. I read books on the way of the cross, the Calvary road, the cross-shaped life.

Our discipleship to Christ is bound up with the language of the cross, and yet it can seem confusing or at least a little ambiguous at times. For some people in my college class, the language of discipleship as embracing the cross came to mean a martyr complex. “I’m suffering for the Lord.” In turn, this became a humorous statement. “I have to go to the beach on this mission trip. I’m suffering for the Lord!”

I think part of the possible confusion at least for me was that Scripture uses the same word to tease out a variety of nuanced ideas. For example, in the Gospel story today, the disciples have yet to make a clear connection between Jesus and his death on the cross. They would hear Jesus using the horrific image of Roman torture as an image of the life of discipleship.

When Paul uses the language of the cross, he takes the image of fear and shame and embraces it as an image of salvation and identity. He combines suffering and glory in the cross in a way that would seem puzzling at best and subversive to Roman authority at worst.

In “Tale of Two Cities” Charles Dickens captures the oddity of the cross as a sign of life by reflecting on the role of the Guillotine in the French Revolution. He writes, “Above all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world—the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine. It was the popular theme for jests; it was the best cure for headache, it infallibly prevented the hair from turning grey, it imparted a peculiar delicacy to the complexion, it was the National Razor which shaved close: who kissed La Guillotine, looked through the little window and sneezed into the sack. It was the sign of the regeneration of the human race. It superseded the Cross. Models of it were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied.”¹

That helps me to think of the oddity of the cross as an image of hope and discipleship in the time of the Roman Empire. We are called to take up the cross and follow Jesus even as he is going to the cross. My goal this morning is not to offer a series of answers so that we can go back home with more knowledge. If anything, I want to invite us into a deeper meditation upon the call of Christ in our own lives and why it might look different in each of us as we follow the call.

Over the last 20 years, Michael Gorman has written a series of books exploring how the cross shapes Paul’s understanding of God as well as his own calling and how the work of the cross takes shape in the believer. He is helpful to clarify the work of Christ in the cross from the call of the believer in the way of the cross. In some ways, we follow Christ in the cross and in other ways, His work is a distinctive one-time historical event.² Here are some of Gorman’s key points on Christ distinctive work in the cross:

1. Grace – For Paul, Christ’s death is an act of unmerited generosity on the part of both Christ and God.
2. Sacrifice – Christ death for the sins of the world is an initiative of God the Father and Christ the Son.
3. Altruism/Substitution – Christ not only dies for sin, he dies for people.
4. Reconciliation – In Christ’s death, the power of God works to reconcile sinners to Himself.
5. Exchange – In Christ’s death, believers experience an interchange of His life for our sin-stained life.
6. Apocalyptic – Christ’s death brings judgment to certain hostile powers and prepares the way for the kingdom to be fully unveiled.
7. Resurrection – Christ’s death is the prelude to resurrection.

There are other aspects of Christ’s death and work on the cross that we participate in as followers of Christ.

¹ Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities* (p. 171). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition.

² The following summary comes from *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, William B Eardmanns Publishing Company (2001).

1. Obedience – Christ’s death is an act of obedience to the Father. In our obedience to the Scripture and the call of Christ, we follow Christ the way of the cross.
2. Love – Christ’s self-emptying death reveals the love of the Father for the world. As obey Christ and follow in the way of the Spirit, we reveal His love even as we pour out our lives on behalf of one another and the world. This is our Romans 12 reading today. We are living sacrifices who humble ourselves before the Lord and pour out our life in service to one another.
3. Life – Even as we lay down our lives, we discover the God’s strength is revealed in our weakness.
4. Hope – In the death of Christ and in the pattern of self-denial, we afresh the hope of resurrection. Thus, the cross life often takes the shape of joy.

All believers in Christ are bound to Christ in his death and resurrection. But we are also given unique gifts that take shape in each of our lives and our communities. Thus, the cross of Christ can have a universal aspect but it can still look very different in different lives.

This is incomplete but it gives us a sense of how obeying the call of Christ will require various forms of self-denial depending on the person and the calling. Jesus turns to Peter in John, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (John 22:18). Peter looks at John and “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” (John 22:21-22)

The cross of Christ did not look the same for Peter as it did for John or Paul or other disciples. For some people, the call of the cross will look like persecution and death, but for others it will look differently. It’s not important that I tell people when or how I am being called into the way of self-sacrifice. For each of us, this is mostly a hidden discipline. What people see instead is Romans 12. The pouring out our lives in love for those around us.

This homily is less about explaining what the cross means for each of us and more about inviting each of us into a greater meditation upon a life shaped by the cross. One of the ways, I began to answer my questions about a life shaped in the way of the cross is through Christian biography. The lives of the saints can inspire us as we read about various people who are faithful to the call of Christ in a variety of difficult and challenging circumstances.

I think of Jan Amos Comenius. He was a scholar and a priest serving in the Bohemia or the Czech lands in the early 1600s. Comenius served in the Bohemian Brethren or United Brethren Church, an offshoot of the Hussite movement. In 1619, the Protestant King Matthias died. The Hasburg Emperor, Ferdinand II, sent armies to prevent another Protestant from ruling Bohemia. The battle of White Mountain was fought in 1620 and the Protestants were driven into exile.

Because Comenius had supported the Protestant army, he became a fugitive and had to send his wife and children back home to live with her mother. His church was sacked, and his house was burned down. Two years later his wife and children died of the plague. Comenius ended leading a small group of United Brethren into refuge outside of Bohemia. He would never return.

Over the next thirteen years, Comenius lived in the town of Lezno, pastoring his flock and leading a school. He began writing his educational theories down in the book “The Great Didactic.” This book was influential in his day and continues to be studied today. John Winthrop read it and asked Comenius to come to America and be the first President of Harvard College. Though he didn’t come to America, he did travel to England where he helped set up a college and introduce his ideas on education. During this time, he traveled to different places in Europe staying one step ahead of the 30-year War that was ravaging Europe. He worked for unity between Calvinists and Luther, which unfortunately did not work out like he had hoped.

The Polish army invaded Lezno in 1664 and for a second time, his house and library were burned to the ground. In the midst of all the difficulties he faced throughout life, Comenius continued to write for a future generation, continued to teach, and continued to pastor. His writing played a key role in the Moravian community exiled on Count Zinzendorf’s property a century later. It also played a key role in shaping ideas about modern education. Though he is rarely remembered, his life played a role in creating the future. In many ways, each of us are richer because of his life.

In addition to reading Christian biography, I also encourage us all to take time this week and meditate on how the cross takes shape in the literature, art, and the world around us. Even as we follow God’s call in our own lives.