

“A Cross to Bear”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 3, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 16:21-28

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”



Sermon: “A Cross to Bear”

Remember what it felt like in school when the teacher would ask a question of the class and you knew the right answer? Remember that rush of pride when you raised your hand and the teacher called on you and you gave that answer and the teacher praised you for it? Felt good, right?

That’s Peter in the first reading this morning. Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter raises his hand and says, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”

“YES! YES!” Jesus seems to say. “That’s the right answer! Good for you Peter! Hey everybody, Peter gave the right answer. That’s the kind of belief I’m looking for. That was brilliant! That kind of faith and dedication will be what the church is built on. Everybody, go and be like Peter.”

But did you ever give the wrong answer? Did you ever say something so wrong that it made your teacher shake her head and question why she ever got into teaching in the first place?

That was the second passage we read this morning. Jesus is explaining what He has to do and what will happen to Him when He goes to Jerusalem. But Peter doesn't understand. What Jesus is describing: persecution, suffering, and death, do not gibe with Peter's understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah, and he says so. The student is bold enough to correct the master. But he's wrong.

"No", Jesus seems to say. There might even have been a face-palm and a heavy sigh. "No. No. No. No. That's wrong. Haven't you been listening?!? Peter... wh... how... no. Just no! That's the kind of attitude that's going to hold me back from doing what I need to do. Hey everybody, don't be like Peter okay?"

In the first passage, we have Peter the building block, but in the second he has become Peter the stumbling block. The interesting thing about these two passages is that the one immediately follows the other. Jesus' praise of Peter and His rebuke, both take place within the space of just seven verses. How could Peter have changed so much so fast? How could he be so right and then almost immediately so wrong?

Peter is not really changing his mind or being inconsistent. When Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, he is acknowledging who Jesus *is*. But when he takes Jesus aside and chastises Him for saying he will suffer and die, he is denying what Jesus *does*.

You see, like the other disciples, Peter has grown-up learning the traditions and beliefs of Judaism. He knows that God has promised a Messiah to Israel and he truly believes that Jesus is that Messiah. But he has also been taught a very different notion of what it means to be a Messiah than what Jesus is describing here. For Peter, Messiah means victory; it means Kingship. It means God throwing off the repressive yoke of Roman authority and returning Israel to its former position of power and privilege.

But for Jesus, Messiah means serving, loving, and molding the world into what God originally intended it to be. He knew that would entail sacrifice, and hardship. And He knew that for the disciples who were signing-on to help Him there would be challenges and struggles too, until God's Kingdom was finally complete.

Peter speaks to the confusion a lot of people felt then, that the Chosen One of Israel was supposed to be like David and Solomon: powerful, and charismatic, and larger than life. And to follow this Messiah was to ride-in on the privileged coattails of a true King.

While Peter is right about who Jesus is, he is wrong about what Jesus does, which means he's *very* wrong about what a disciple does. So, Jesus corrects his misunderstanding. After Jesus rebukes Peter for giving the wrong answer, he lays out exactly what it means to be his disciples. And it doesn't mean privilege. It means to take up a cross and follow Him.

Now it is an oft used cliché that we all have our crosses to bear. To the point where it has lost most of its meaning. Dictionary.com defines the phrase "A Cross to Bear" as "*A burden or trial one must put up with...*"¹.

You'll hear people use that phrase sometimes to describe the difficulties and inconveniences of life: "Ugh! I have to sit through three hours of meetings today. Well, I guess we all have our cross to bear" or "My in-

¹ "cross to bear". *The American Heritage® Dictionary of Idioms by Christine Ammer*. Houghton Mifflin Company. 5 Sep. 2017. <Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/cross-to-bear>>.

laws insist on helping me clean and now I don't know where anything is. I guess that's just my cross to bear."

Except that's not at all what Jesus meant when he invited the disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. He wasn't talking about some kind of burden or inconvenience. He was talking about your mission; your vocation; your purpose.

You see, when Jesus was arrested and sentenced to die, He was forced to carry His own cross. But that cross was a result of the teaching and preaching He was doing about the Kingdom of God. The Jewish authorities saw that teaching as a threat and so did the Romans, albeit for very different reasons. The cross was a result of Jesus' "blasphemy" and "treason." It was the cruel result of Jesus giving His life solely to the purposes of God. He labored under the weight of that cross all the way to Calvary, bent and twisted beneath it. And in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God acted decisively to forgive the sins of the world and reconcile all humanity back into right relationship with God.

So, the cross was not merely an inconvenience or a burden on Jesus. The cross was His vocation, His purpose, His ministry. To teach, to heal, to redeem. These are the things Jesus was called to do. This was the cross that Jesus bore. And with that cross came sacrifice and hardship and ultimately, death.

But when Jesus invites the disciples to take up a cross, He isn't calling them to go out and find something painful and cruel and that will cause them great suffering and possibly death. He is calling them to get busy doing that to which they have been called, regardless of whether it causes them personal pain and suffering... *but with the understanding that it just might.*

You see, there's a fine distinction here. Sacrifice, hardship - in and of itself - is not the goal. But in doing the work to which we are called, we may have to endure sacrifice and hardship.

If you watched any college football this weekend you saw that concept in action. Those guys on the field sacrifice, they commit their lives to the game, and in those hot August two-a-day practices and those long hours in the weight room, they suffer. But the sacrifice and hardship are not the point. The game is the point, and that game is so important to them, they are willing to sacrifice and endure hardship for it.

I had a student once who was a brilliant engineer. He loved the math and the challenges of working out complex problems. But he was also a person of deep faith and he was struggling to discern what he was being called to do with his life: be an engineer or a pastor. When we sat in my office to talk about it, he told me that he really loved engineering, and the thought of being a minister filled him with dread and unhappiness. "So," he decided, "that means I'm supposed to be a minister."

You see, he thought that, as a person of faith, he was supposed to sacrifice and endure hardship. That's what bearing a cross means, right? Well, it might. For Jesus and for many others since, it certainly did. But it's not a prerequisite for being a disciple.

A willingness to serve, is. Committing to loving God and one another, is. Sacrifice and hardship are not the goals. Serving God, is. But make no mistake, serving God is going to be hard and it's going to take work. Crosses aren't soft, plushy things you carry in your pocket. They're big, and heavy, and cumbersome, and sometimes they have splinters and you have to carry them on your shoulders.

The church has always struggled with the same confusion that bedeviled Peter. We like the privilege of being connected to Christ. We like the cross because it represents salvation, peace, and God's love. But when we focus solely on those aspects of the cross we can lose sight of the fact that He invited His disciples to carry one, too.

Not that Jesus was calling His followers to suffer for the sake of suffering. No, Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." Jesus wanted His followers to be happy and to know abundant life. But He also said, "You will know them by their fruits." Disciples of Jesus Christ will do Jesus things. And that will likely put them at odds with people who don't share God's desire for justice and compassion and it will force them to choose between competing priorities. And when that happens, the disciple will be at a point of crisis, a point of decision: what is more important, our Kingdom work or our personal comfort?

We saw a lot of people doing "Jesus things" in and around Houston this week. There's a fair chance that many of them would not call themselves Christians or even religious, but God was clearly working in and through them.

There were hotels and mosques and yes, even furniture stores open to take in those who had been flooded out of their homes. "Mattress Mack" was one of those furniture store owners who opened his showroom for people fleeing the storm. Even though it meant potential damage to his merchandise and his store. He invited strangers to sleep on his beds and camp among his living room sets.²

Other people came from miles away, on their own dime, taking their own vacation days to drive their boats around picking people up from their rooftops, and forming human chains to rescue them from swamped cars and process the donations coming in by the truckload and to start the clean up and just being there to help people who had lost *everything*. We saw in Houston this week the very self-sacrifice and commitment to justice and compassion that Jesus was talking about. We saw people taking up their crosses.

They didn't go there to suffer or to sacrifice, but for many of them, the journey brought them to a place and a time where suffering and sacrifice would be necessary.

Take up your cross and follow me. That's what Jesus said. Well, what's your cross going to be? What is our cross?

This congregation serves a hot meal at the YWCA Shelter once a month. That's a great ministry. But it's one meal, once a month. How important is that ministry? Can we do more? Could expanding that ministry be our cross to bear?

We know that fresh food is vitally important to health and wellness, but there are thousands of people in our city who can't get access to it because they don't live close enough to an actual grocery store or they do, but they can't afford it.³ The CRC gives out truckloads of fresh vegetables every summer. We as a

² Moghe, Sonia, and Kelly Smoot. "When a Furniture Showroom Becomes a Storm Shelter." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 30 Aug. 2017, www.cnn.com/2017/08/30/us/gallery-furniture-store-houston-shelter/index.html.

³ "Food Deserts in Columbus." *ColumbusUnderground.com*, ColumbusUnderground.com, 15 Aug. 2011, www.columbusunderground.com/food-deserts-in-columbus.

church own a farm that doesn't farm anything. It would take a lot of work. It wouldn't be easy. But could that farm be our cross to bear?

I read in the paper about a Lutheran Church here in Columbus that runs a ministry that builds beds for folks that can't afford to buy them.⁴ Calvary Baptist Church, located across the street from Bryant-Denny Stadium in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, runs a home repair ministry that helps people who can't afford contractors by repairing their homes and building additions like wheel-chair ramps for free.⁵ All those ministries take is time, money, and people willing to learn a skill and use that skill for the Kingdom. We have time and money and people... what skills could we learn? What skills are already present in the congregation? Could we start something like our Christian brothers and sisters are doing? Could that be our cross to bear?

And what of the immigrant community here in Columbus? We have been collecting the things they would need to start a household in their new country. We have been supporting the agencies that help and advocate for immigrants and refugees, but can we do more? Can we provide mentors to help our newest neighbors acclimate to their new homes? Could we provide English language partners to practice with them as they learn the language? Could that be our cross to bear?

What about inviting people to be a part of the church? What about sharing your faith or at least not hiding it from the people you interact with every day? Of all the things I just mentioned that might be the most challenging, right? But with the church getting a bad rap from people who associate Christianity with intolerance, maybe being a good example of what Jesus called us to be could be our cross to bear.

You see, there's no doubt we love who Jesus is. Messiah, savior, son of God - the church has always had an easy time saying those words, singing those praises; but taking up that cross, accepting the challenge to follow in Jesus' footsteps? Well that's a whole different story.

Jesus never said this "being a disciple" was going to be easy. In fact, He says it will be hard; carrying-a-cross hard. But if we love who Jesus is, then we have to accept what Jesus does. And we have to do it, too.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁴ Gordon, Ken. "Bed-Supplying 'Brigade' Grows to Fill Widespread Need." *The Columbus Dispatch*, The Columbus Dispatch, 28 Aug. 2017, www.dispatch.com/entertainmentlife/20170829/bed-supplying-brigade-grows-to-fill-widespread-need.

⁵ Pow, Chris. "Habitat for Humanity Teams up with UA Students, Calvary Baptist to Get Jackie Home for Christmas (Photos)." *AL.com*, Alabama Media Group, 21 Dec. 2012, blog.al.com/tuscaloosa/2012/12/habitat_for_humanity_teams_up.html.