

Take Up Your Cross

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Proper 17, Year A, BCP

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

“From 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!”

Here we find ourselves a little more than halfway through the Gospel of Matthew today, when Jesus foretells for the first time the shocking news of his coming death and resurrection. We can imagine the incomprehensibility of this news to his disciples; we can identify with Peter’s response, can’t we. Even with the benefit of two thousand years of history behind me, even with the understanding we have of the meaning and reason for his death and resurrection, it still never fails to stun me when I ponder the fact that our Lord *chose* to do this for us. On this day in our Gospel, our Lord knows that his great suffering and death are coming soon, and will be at the hands of his learned colleagues, the chief elders and priests. He knows he is soon to die, and be raised again. He even knows the manner in which he would die: he points forward to the day when he would be required to lift that awful cross-beam of his *stowros*, his cross, and be crucified. He knows all of what is to come, and he not only allows it; he makes sure that it is accomplished; he makes sure that it is finished. Jesus knows also that he must begin to prepare his disciples for what is to come, and for how they are to live in his absence. And so he explains to them, and to us, in our lesson today what we are to do to be his people:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

It isn’t often that we get such clear directives in our scripture: Jesus says we are to deny ourselves, we are to take up our cross, and we are to follow him. Let’s sort these out.

What does it mean to deny ourselves? Some would say to deny ourselves is to say no to every pleasure; to turn away from all joy; to live a life of strict asceticism. I would offer a different possibility: that to deny ourselves could mean to deny ourselves the advantage of being our own number one concern. To *deny ourselves* is to *allow another* that position of being most important; to deny ourselves is to allow another’s needs or hopes to be not just tolerated but cherished. We deny our egos the attention they prefer, and take pleasure in another’s happiness. Putting the other first is a rare thing; it’s almost not natural; our primordial brain would have us constantly scrambling to survive, to make it to the top first. But Jesus teaches us to deny ourselves, and allow the other; in his teaching today with his followers, it would be only a short time before he would deny completely *his* own self-preservation, and offer himself completely, for our sakes.

Julian of Norwich, one of our beloved late fourteenth century Christian mystics, coined a term that I love: she taught that to deny ourselves is to “naught” ourselves: to bring ourselves to zero, to naught; to reign our egos into our control, rather than the other way around. This “self-naughting” is the same discipline we find in all great religious traditions which teach us to deny ourselves that privilege of first place, first priority; to instead put the other person first. Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us today to do exactly this: *aparnayomahee*: literally, to forget ourselves.

He says “take up your cross.” How often have we heard a variation of this expression: “That’s just the cross I must bear...?” I would suggest that we look at what we mean by the cross. For Jesus, his cross was literally that horrific horizontal beam that he knew he would have to lift and carry all the way to Golgotha. He knew he would have to be nailed to it, and lifted high upon the *stowros* that he talked about today, that awful instrument of Roman torture reserved for only the most abased criminals. He willingly gave himself to this unimaginable task, knowing this was the cross *he* must bear. Unthinkable; impossible; this is what Peter railed against when he said “*God forbid it! This must never happen!!*” But Jesus turned to him and said, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me!*” Jesus knew that to let anything get in the way of his self-offering would block his entire mission, and the whole reason for his incarnation. In that awful cross, almost too heavy to bear and certainly too horrific to endure, was the greatest blessing ever given to humanity. Jesus’ cross was his promise, his commitment; Jesus declared his cross to be nonnegotiable. It was what he knew he must bear.

What is our cross? What in our lives is our promise, our commitment? And what in our lives must we bear, and carry with us? Some of us have pasts that are hard to bear, traumas that we can barely carry. But we can’t undo our pasts, or pretend that we never suffered – wouldn’t it be nice if we could just set down our troubles under a tree and walk away! But we are the sum of our experiences, and Jesus teaches us today to not let this heavy stuff make us stumble, or make us stop. We are to lift them up and carry them with us; we are to lift up our crosses, and follow him. In fact, I suggest that the traumas and trouble that we have experienced are exactly the source of our greatest blessings: our ability to empathize with others, to be their companion along the way. Think of what an extraordinary blessing Jesus’ cross was for the whole world, for you and for me, for all those we love, and all those we’ll never know. Our beloved Lord, out of his radical and extravagant love for us, willingly took on the weight of the world in that cross as his welcome burden, to ensure that there was no suffering in which he could not accompany us, and to forgive and welcome all into eternal life with him.

Our Lord tells us today:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

So let us hear his words today. Let us ponder in our hearts how his directive applies to us: what is my cross? Am I lifting it up, or am I letting it block me from following him, from offering my whole self to God? And in taking up my cross, how can I offer it up in a way that is a blessing to others?

Years ago, one of my beloved bishops of Maryland climbed up into the pulpit and said something in his sermon that intrigued me. He said: “Beware of preachers; they always preach what they themselves most need to hear.” I thought of him this week when I needed literally to practice what I’m preaching. I had the great honor on Friday to preside over the graveside burial service of a woman beloved by her family and friends. Formerly from Stamford, and a devout Episcopalian, she lived her adult life in New Mexico, where she died with the wish that she be returned here for her burial. As I invited the family to share during the service some of their dearest memories of her, I found myself beginning to get caught on my own “stuff,” beginning to let the weight of my own cross get in the way of serving this family. I was aware that stumbling over my own painful memories would only make me absent and unavailable to them in their need. With my half-finished sermon on my mind, I realized *I* needed to deny myself, to “naught” the re-experiencing of my own pain around the burial of a beloved mother, and put this family first.

Remembering Jesus’ clear directive helped me right then and there: standing in my cassock and surplice in that cemetery, I remembered his words, and I heard what I needed to hear: deny myself; lift up that cross; follow him. Clearly, the pain that wells up for all of us in the quiet of a cemetery, at the sight of a grave with its dreaded green tent, is part of the weight of the cross that we bear, but it is exactly that pain that is the deep source of our empathy and understanding for each other. It is what we can offer and put to good use in counsel and comfort, like on this burial day with this family. These are blessings hard earned, that we would not be equipped to offer otherwise.

Our Lord Jesus Christ brought himself to naught, denied himself, to fulfill his mission on the cross, granting all the ultimate blessing: forgiveness and eternal life with him. Let us give thanks with our whole lives, stretching to welcome others into relationship with him. Whenever we find ourselves “thinking small,” stumbling over the hurts and obstacles of life, let’s remember to lift up those blocks, and check them against the reality of Christ’s death on the cross. His cross, his *stowros*, is my baseline, my checkpoint; I keep his cross in front of me; I wear his cross around me. When I find myself thinking too small, or when I bump up against a perspective that is unnecessarily limited, I ask myself, “Is this what my Lord died for?” It’s the most direct way I know of to keep myself accountable, to help me get out of my own way and adjust my perspective.

Jesus said, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

Let’s try it. Let’s practice denying ourselves, putting the welfare of someone else ahead of ours. Let’s practice taking up our crosses, rather than letting them stop us in our tracks. And let’s follow him. Let’s share the story, and be living examples of what it is to be his people. Let’s be the ones who *understand* and *remember* what he did for us, and let’s with love keep each other accountable for opening our minds and our lives to the biggest possible picture: God’s Kingdom, come. Amen.

