The Way of the Cross: Discipleship and Devotion

Luke 9:18-27 Kimby Young

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 March 12, 2017

For centuries in the Christian faith, Lent has been a time of additional intentional focus on the practice of discipleship – looking within ourselves to see what needs to change, trying to improve ourselves and deepen our relationship with God, studying to understand God’s Word and God’s will for our lives, actively serving to help others, and experimenting with various forms of prayer or spiritual discipline to inspire our daily walk. This year our worship team has decided to focus on the meaning of the cross. As you came in you were given a small wooden cross which you are encouraged to carry with you through these days of Lent in a pocket or a purse, or to place beside you on a desk or dashboard or somewhere else that you will see it frequently. The poem printed as an insert to your bulletin, can also be carried with you to encourage thought and devotion. It came to me from Dave Bowman who has been giving away small handmade crosses for years to help people in their faith walk. We are also asking you to bring in a cross from home for the season to add to our temporary display out in the narthex. Our hope is that these crosses will represent our individual walk within our gathered community of faith, and that they will remind you of God’s presence with you in a variety of ways.

Discipleship is primarily about learning to be like Jesus. It’s not about perfection; it’s about practice. The first disciples were those who followed Jesus as he traveled. They followed in order to learn. They listened to what Jesus said and they did what Jesus did. For us today, it is also not about perfection, but about growing in faithfulness. As we begin this Lenten series, I thought today I might treat this sermon like a lesson to help us learn as disciples. I want to ask a few questions and I hope to get a few answers. And perhaps you will continue to think about the questions and answers in the season ahead.

So, first question. When I refer to the cross, or say the word “cross,” when you see a cross or hold a cross in your hand as you are invited to do now – what comes to mind? What do you think? What does the cross mean to you? (Answers: Jesus Christ, Savior, salvation, grace, suffering, forgiveness, sin, love, redemption.)

All of those answers are correct. Whatever you thought is correct. The cross is a symbol with a rich and deep meaning. It has a very specific origin – in the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross in Jerusalem 2000 years ago – as an act of reconciliation and redemption to save the world and to save each one of us for all eternity. In addition to that original meaning, the cross has very specific personal meanings for each of us – and these may be widely varied. I wear a cross to remind myself and others of God’s love for me, to declare publicly that I follow this savior Jesus and call myself a Christian. And to remind myself to be a Christian – a compassionate caring witness to God’s grace in the world. All of this and more is what the cross means.

Next question – the sermon series is called “The Way of the Cross.” What does that mean to you? (Answers: the way of Jesus, doing things the way Jesus would, how you live your life, suffering and death, sacrificial love.)

Jesus said in the gospel of John – “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Jesus shows us how to live, how to love, how to serve God so that we can be the best we can be, so that we can honor God. If we follow Jesus, we will have a relationship with God. We will be with God now and for all eternity. Jesus shows us how to live now. And Jesus is the way to find God forever.

Here is where the lesson gets harder. In the scripture for today, Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

What does it mean “to take up your cross”?

I said it gets harder here. Wearing my cross is easy. Saying I’m Christian is easy. Having my personal relationship with Jesus – is comforting, is empowering, is encouraging – for me. But when Jesus took up the cross – literally – it was about suffering and death and loss and pain. Jesus was trying to teach the disciples a lesson. “Who do people say I am?” – oh, a prophet, a teacher, a healer, a leader… “Who do you say I am?” You are the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one. Peter’s answer is filled with excitement. We think you are the one who is going to reestablish God’s kingdom on Earth. We think you are going to overthrow Rome. We think you are going to lead a revolution. We think you are going to lead people back to Yahweh, to God. You are going to make everything right again. You are going to change to world so we can live better lives.

But Jesus says, if you follow me, you have to lose your life. You have to give up everything. You have to sacrifice. You have to let go of control. So the cross becomes a symbol of loss, complete utter loss. The cross is a symbol of suffering and death. When I wear my cross, when you take up your cross, are we willing to follow wherever it leads? Even if it leads to pain? Are we willing to give up everything to follow Jesus?

In America, today, we are not called to die literally for our faith. Although in some parts of the world Christians do face punishment and death for sharing their faith. But here, generally, we don’t have to be willing to die. Rather we are called to LIVE for our faith, to live for Jesus, to live as Christians every moment of every day. Sometimes that is challenging. But sometimes it is so easy, that we take our faith for granted. The call of Lent, the call of “the way of the cross,” the call of this season, is to not take the cross for granted, to not take our faith for granted, but to be intentional about living faithfully every single day, every single moment. The cross reminds us to think about Jesus and what Jesus would have us do today.

Remember the phrase from Jesus is “take up your cross DAILY.” It is wonderful to commit your life to Christ – to become a believer and to be a Christian. But the reminder of this passage is – commitment is not one and done. It reminds me of a wonderful answer I heard recently to the question – when were you saved? When were you saved? Well, I think this morning – yes, this morning was the most recent time I was saved. God saved us ultimately 2000 years ago in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God saves us again and again in countless and various ways throughout our lives. And each day we receive that grace again.

Take up your cross daily – reminds us that every single day, every single moment, we are invited to recommit our life to Christ, to decide again with every step that we will follow Jesus. To follow means you have to keep your eyes on Jesus. Sometimes for some of us who have been in the church a long time – sometimes Christianity becomes an old habit. Sometimes we take God’s love for granted. “Take up your cross daily” calls us to intentional Christianity. Yes, again today, I will follow Jesus. What would that mean at this moment?

That leads to the last question of this sermon, and perhaps a question I will ask you to ponder for the rest of the week. What does it mean for you, today, tomorrow, this week – for you personally – to take up your cross and follow Jesus? It may not be easy. It may not be simple. It may not be what you have planned. It might mean losing yourself. Taking up your cross and following Jesus is about making God a priority in your life – putting Christ first. I can’t spell out specifically what that will mean in your life this week – what choices you will have to make, what actions you will need to take, what you might have to give up. But I can tell you to look to the cross as your guide and inspiration. Look to the cross.

As you go out into the world this week, take up your cross and follow Jesus. Look for ways to be faithful. Look for ways to care for someone else. Look for ways to make a difference in the world. Look for ways to show God’s love. And maybe it will take a little bit out of you. Maybe you will have to give up something – lose yourself to be more like Christ. Remember the cross – the surprising sacrificial way God came into the world to show true love. Remember the cross and look for surprising sacrificial ways you can show true love – God’s love to the world around you. Every single day, find a way to share God’s love. Every single day – take up your cross, lift up your cross, remember the call of the cross – and follow Jesus into loving action.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.