Take Up Your Cross

Matthew 10:132-39 Kimby Young

Matthew 16:24-28 March 17 2024

Luke 9:23-27

There are at least 6 times in scripture that Jesus says “Take up your cross and follow me.” Jesus tries and tries again to tell us how hard it is to follow in the way of love. As we move forward through Lent we take another look at the way of love and the way of the cross.

The cross means many things to us. It is a symbol of Christianity, a call to faithfulness, a reminder of Jesus and God’s love for us. But in Jesus day, there was only one reason for a cross. And it was death – suffering and death. Today we take the phrase as a metaphor for service. Take up your cross. Take up the challenge. Do your best. Offer your gifts. It won’t be easy, but you can do it. Take up this job or that mission project. But that’s not it completely. In the Bible, “Take up your cross and follow me” was not a metaphor when Jesus said it. “Take up your cross and follow me,” - Means suffering and death. Follow me into death. And as we now know, follow Jesus into life eternal. Be willing to die because of how much you love God.

Fortunately for us, we do not literally have to die. Jesus died for us so we don’t have to. But we do have to lose our life. We do have to give our life to God – completely. We must give control of our life to God. We must put our lives in God’s hands - as Jesus did when he accepted the way of the cross. Jesus knew what was coming and Jesus chose to submit to the suffering, the humiliation and the death. Jesus did this because he understood God’s plan. He understood God’s love and God’s purpose of saving humanity. Jesus understood that by putting the needs of others ahead of his own pain, he was fulfilling God’s plan that would lead to salvation for everyone. Jesus knew that in his suffering, because of his suffering, we would be healed and saved. Jesus was humble and obedient to God. And Jesus calls us to the same. Not to death, but to life in Christ.

Our question for this season of Lent is how are we to give our life to Jesus, to be obedient to God’s plan, to offer all that we have for God’s purpose. It’s all about trust. Unlike Jesus, we don’t know what is to come. We must trust God and follow Jesus. Each moment of every day, we must decide to trust God and follow Jesus – to do whatever God sets before us. For Jesus that meant laying down his life, suffering and death on a cross. For us that means laying down our life, our gifts, our desires, our hopes, our dreams at the foot of the cross. It means giving our lives to Jesus. It means doing what we believe God calls us to do – showing God’s love to others. It means trusting God to lead us where we need to go. It means trusting God that God has us in hand, whatever happens. Trusting that God’s plan is for the good – for us and for all.

There are lots of challenges for us in this plan – not the least of which is trusting God and moving forward. Believing God cares for us and will take care of us. The world is a scary place and we all know bad things happen to good people. Trusting God means even if those bad things happen, even when those horrible things happen, trusting that God loves us and will care for us. That we will make it thru and be ok in this world as long as we live, as well as eternally with God in heaven. Trusting God is simple but not always easy. But trusting God is life – trusting God allows us to live and to live as whole people.

Beyond this fundamental faithfulness, the hardest thing for me is knowing the right things to do, understanding the next steps, and making good choices. I do trust God. I do listen to God. But sometimes it is hard to hear. When there are two good options how do we choose? When there seem only bad options, again, how do we know where Jesus is leading? I have always said when you are making a choice, trust God and make your best guess. God will either lead your steps or save your missteps. God will redirect if we make mistakes, as long as we continue to trust God. And maybe even the mistakes are something God can reshape and use for the good. Now I know that assurance is not so great when you are trying to decide. Rather we hope God will guide our steps and keep us from making those mistakes in the first place. So we try to listen to God and we try to understand where God is leading.

Let’s go back to the scripture passage for guidance. The phrase Jesus says is “Take up you cross and follow me.” Not take up my cross. We are not to take on the burden of Jesus. It is not our death that would serve God’s purpose – it is our life given to God for God’s purpose. God’s purpose is love and letting everyone know-feel-experience and believe that love of God. God wants us to invite others into that presence and purpose of God. We do that by loving as Jesus loved – by caring, giving, helping, healing, teaching and touching as Jesus did. Take up your cross and follow Jesus - means accept your own path, look for your own path from God. Do what God makes you able to do as you live love in the world. We take up that which God has given us, whatever God sets before you in life. We take up any way we can show God’s love in the world, wherever the Spirit leads.

The cross for us, is not the way of death. Rather it is the way of life. The cross is salvation and redemption. It is the chance to start over when needed. It is the chance to renew our commitment and continue when we need to find strength. The cross is more than a symbol, it is a message. The cross is a message that God loves us so much Jesus will do anything to save us. Anything. Not only will Jesus die for us. God will send the Spirit to strengthen and inspire us, to give us courage and wisdom. When you take up your cross – you take up that message – that message of love from God. When you take up your cross and follow Jesus – you take up that message of love and you deliver it to the world. How can you deliver God’s message of love today? That is actually our challenge every single day. Notice in the reading from Luke, Jesus says – take up your cross daily. Every single day – deliver God’s message of love to the world. Take up your cross daily and receive the grace of God.

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.

As you go out into the world this week, take up your cross and follow Jesus. 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, receive the grace of the cross – and follow Jesus into loving action.

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