

“Setting Aside and Taking Up”
February 28, 2021

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Mark 8:31-37

In these days of Lent as we prepare to celebrate the joy of Easter, I am inviting you to take a look at those things you have been carrying that you once needed but that now has turned your heart to stone, or left you frozen, indifferent, or paralyzed. What are you holding onto that makes you unable to receive those things that will protect and help you in different ways through the changing days and months ahead?

Look with compassion on yourself as you do this. That is to say, look upon yourself as God looks upon you and upon all people—not with condemnation but with a deep love and abundant mercy. And as you look, you can let go of all that is weighing you down, you can let go of those things that are no longer useful. Then with open hands and open hearts you can receive the gifts of God that you need now so that you might move forward.

I’m using these sermons during Lent to explore what we need to receive, what we need to take up so that our Easter celebrations will be more real, more joyful, more empowering. And I’m trying to do this in ways that help us live into the compassion of God.

But then, as he often does, Jesus comes along speaking words that challenge us, words that disturb us, words that seem anything but compassionate: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

It would be easier, of course, if Jesus had said something like “Read your Bible and support your church,” or “Be a good person and do good things,” or “Vote Democratic—or Republican.”

But he didn’t.

He said: Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow.

You want to give up something? Give up yourself.

You want to receive something? Here—take up your cross.

This, of course, is the ongoing problem. Jesus often doesn’t say what we want him to say.

Peter listens as Jesus talks about rejection, suffering, and death. Then he takes Jesus aside and suggests maybe that isn’t really going to draw the crowds.

We can understand why Peter rebukes Jesus.

Rejection. Suffering. Resurrection.

It was all so preposterous to those who first heard it.

It is still hard to accept.

Jesus says to Peter—and somehow the words strike home as we overhear them, don't they?—"You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He's right, of course. Far from divine, we are human beings—finite, fallible, fearful.

God's ways are not our ways. God brings life out of death. God overcomes sin by forgiving it. Or as one person put it: "God simply dropped the whole business of guilt. God came not to judge but to save."ⁱ

If—at least for a few minutes—we can put our minds on divine things—the forgiving and empowering love of God shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus—maybe we can better understand those demanding words about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following.

Perhaps we can recognize that as disturbing as these words are, there is a bracing honesty in them as well. The terms of following—the cost of discipleship—are stated up front. We know what we're getting into from the beginning.

Maybe we can find the good news in those words if we start at the end—with following.

In a large part, "following Jesus" is a matter of giving over more of life to God. We give over our fear. We set aside our reluctance and move ahead. We trust in the goodness of God that we have seen in Jesus even if that goodness is not readily apparent in our own lives.

So let us always keep in mind that we are followers of Jesus, not his imitators. And our crosses will be different than his.

Yes, for those who originally heard it, the demand to take up your cross could literally have meant their death. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said that when Christ calls us, he bids us to come and die. Many have learned this painful truth.

The call to discipleship in the United States of the 21st century rarely brings a death sentence with it. We live lives that are vastly different from the lives of the early followers of Jesus. Still the cross shapes our lives today.

A cross offers a choice: you can take it up or leave it. A cross is not the result of genetics or aging or the mistakes we all keep making or even the tragedies that fill every life. It is not what people usually mean when they speak of a "cross to bear."

A cross is taken up voluntarily. And, yes, it might involve us with suffering—but that is not the point.

Seen in the light of Christ, a cross is that which makes us who we are—most fully ourselves. In Jesus taking up his cross we see him as he really is: the revelation of God's complete self-giving love, shown in suffering, a love that means forgiveness and life.

Understood in this way, the cross is about courage in following the crucified and risen Christ. It is about courage in living the demanding faith that is Christianity.

Our crosses will show us to be people freely forgiven by the love of God and—by God's grace—able to show that same love in the often challenging and difficult situations in which we find ourselves. Taking up the cross is about accepting those challenges and both the threat and the potential they contain.

Somewhere I heard that at the end of the day, the question for us is: “In all of our effort, have we become the people we *swore* we *never* wanted to be?” Taking up our cross means being faithful to all that God created us to be, faithful to all we want to be.

And so we come to the beginning: “Deny yourself.”

We hear those words and start twisting ourselves up in knots, looking for some way to merit God's love by our actions. We hear “Deny yourself” and, our hearing being poor, we think that Jesus said “Be a doormat” or “Obliterate yourself.” In recent decades we have heard many voices telling us just how damaging these words can be.

The Greek word for *deny* suggests saying “no” to something. Jesus encourages us to say “No” to whatever it is that keeps holding out for terms other than God's complete and unconditional love. The ways of self-righteousness, self-justification, self-improvement lead to death. That's the bad news.

What we need to deny is the self that says: “Thanks anyway, God, but I'll do it on my own.” What we need to deny is the self that sets impossibly high standards or ridiculously low standards or any standards whatsoever for our worthiness before God. What we need to deny is the self that is hung up on “self” improvement, on getting better and better—because it's not going to happen.

To deny yourself is to say “yes” to the God who created you and calls you. That's the good news.

“Deny yourself,” Jesus says. Forget about all those schemes that you come up with to get in good with the Almighty. Instead, open yourself to the new life that God makes possible in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Denying the self that would deny God's forgiving love.

Taking up the cross that is unique to each one of us.

As we find the courage for such actions, we discover that we are indeed following after Jesus. We learn how to live the Christian life by following, by watching the one who lived completely towards God.

This, then, might be just what we need to let go of and what we need to take up in these days: the self that is not real, the cross that makes us our most authentic.

We're moving through a time when the road ahead is not clear, sometimes it seems as if the road isn't even there.

We are becoming something different. We are being called to new ways of living. What the future will look like, no one knows.

This is a time to listen carefully, for God is still calling us. This is a time to look closely for God is still working in our lives and in the world, opening up new opportunities and challenges.

Take up your cross—and follow.

ⁱ R.F Capon, *The Mystery of Christ . . . & Why We Don't Get It*, 1993, pg. 115 ff.