

The Way of the Cross

Matthew 16:21-28

September 3, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are many stories about Simon Peter in the Bible. There are ninety-three references to Peter in the New Testament and he is referred to much more than any of the other disciples. As we read the numerous stories about Peter, we realize that he is a flawed disciple. His imperfections run right down to the core of his personality. Most of us like the stories about Simon Peter because he seems to make such a fool of himself. Peter often says the wrong thing at the right time. Peter seems to have “foot in mouth” disease. He seems to get himself in trouble quite often because of his mouth. He denies Jesus; he doesn’t follow through; he pretends that he is going to be a hotshot disciple and he then flops. We all take comfort in Peter because he can be used as a bad example so often.

In the gospel lesson for today, we heard the second half of an important story about Peter. Last Sunday, we heard the first half of the story and today we hear the second half of the story. But it is not a story that can be easily separated. So today I need to tell you the whole story. The whole story ties together so nicely. Jesus and his disciples had gone up north to Caesarea Philippi. At Caesarea Philippi, there was a temple that was dedicated to the god, Pan, from which we get the word, pantheism. Jesus was alone with his disciples. Jesus asked his disciples, “What are other people saying about me? How am I being rated? What do other people think of me?” “Who do they say that I am?” His disciple answered, “Some people think that you are John the Baptist raised from the dead. Other people say that you are Elijah, the prophet. Many think that Elijah is to return before the Messiah comes, and many people think that you are Elijah.” “And still other people say that you are a great prophet like Jeremiah or Ezekiel or Amos.”

Jesus then asked a pointed question: “Well, then, who do YOU say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus said, “Good answer. Good response. I will call you, The Rock, and on this rock I will build my church. Peter, I will give you the keys of the kingdom, and the gates of hell will not prevail against the church which is built on The Rock. Great answer, Peter.

The story then continues in the very next scene with these words, “From that time forward, Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of man must suffer many things, must be rejected and killed and on the third day, rise from the dead.” Peter responded, “O no Jesus. Nobody is going to lay a hand on you. You are not going to suffer. Not at all.” Jesus said to Simon, “Get behind me Satan. You are not on the side of God but of men.” One minute ago, Peter was The Rock. One minute ago, Peter had the keys of the kingdom. But one minute later, Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan. You are not on the side of God but of man.” Peter had been a hero and then in a moment, he was a hindrance. Peter had been a rock and then in a flash he was a stumbling block. He had been a super disciple and then in the blink of an eye he was Satan. Jesus continued, “Whoever would be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. Whoever will save his life will lose it. Whoever will lose his life for my sake will find it. What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul.” Simon Peter had the right answers but he didn’t understand. He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” but he did not understand about the way of the cross. Peter had the right theological answer; that is, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God, but he didn’t understand what the cross meant for his life.

You see, Simon Peter had half of the story right. Part of being a Christian is to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But there is another half of the story, and that is to experience the cross. There are two parts of Christianity. The first part is to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the second part of Christianity is to experience the cross. To experience the cross is to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Christ. It is to lose your life for Christ's sake. That is what we want to talk about today. We want to talk about this experience of the cross. The question is: What does it mean for us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow Christ? What does that mean?

A contemporary author, C. M. Clowe makes the distinction between burdens, thorns and crosses. He wrote a book entitled, *THE CROSS IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE*, which will help us better understand today's text. **Burdens, thorns, and crosses.** All human beings have **burdens**. You cannot be born and not go through all the burdens in life. Life begins in pain. Every person here went through the pain of childbirth. It was also painful for your mother. Life began in pain. You go through all the painful experiences of childhood. All the diapers and all the diseases. You grow up and become a teenager and you go through all the trauma of the teen years. Time goes by and you get a job, but now you have to pay all your taxes. Time goes by and you find yourself caring for aging parents. Times go by and your own body starts to fall apart. You have accidents that hurt your body and cripple you up. You have these illnesses that you were not expecting and didn't want. Life begins and ends in pain. Pain is the very essence of life. You cannot escape it. When you are a human being, you carry the plain old **burdens** of life.

According to this author, there is a second experience in life that we call **thorns**. The Apostle Paul said that he had a **thorn** in his flesh that he had to learn to live with. Some students of the Bible believe that Paul's thorn in the flesh was epilepsy, and Paul had to learn to live with epilepsy, epileptic seizures, epileptic spasms. Many people have **thorns**. Some people have had polio and have learned to live with it. Some people get diabetes and become blind and they have to live with blindness. John Milton, the famous poet, was blind, and he had to live with his blindness when he wrote the classic poem, *Paradise Lost*. Others went to Afghanistan or Iraq and came back as a quadriplegic. Yes, many people in this life have **thorns**. Thorns are the basic handicaps and limitations of life. For some, it's a heart disease. For others, it is a backache or spinal deformity, or maybe an arthritic knee. For still others, it may be a problem that they had developed in childhood.

Nobody chooses their burdens and nobody chooses their thorns. You don't chose thorns. You do not choose burdens. That is just the way it is. These things just happen to you. A person learns to live in dignity with those burdens and thorns of life.

There are burdens in life. There are thorns in life. And then there are crosses. You don't choose to have burdens, they just come. You don't choose to have thorns because they just come. But when it comes to crosses, it's different. You choose to pick up the cross. Picking up the cross is quite different than picking up burdens or living with thorns. Picking up the cross is something that you **CHOOSE** to do. This author says that to pick up the cross is to choose to pick up the thorns and burdens of other people's lives. When other people are in need, due to their burdens and disasters, you chose to go and love them and help them with their lives. To pick up the cross is to choose to serve the needs of others and thereby to serve God. It is to join in the struggle against evil.

A man by the name of Harold Luccock, a pastor and theologian, wrote the following words about this passage. I found his words illuminating. "Taking up the cross of Christ is a deliberate choice of something that could be evaded. To take up a burden that we are under no compulsion to take up except for the love of Christ living inside of us. It makes the choice of taking upon ourselves the

burdens of other people's lives. Of putting ourselves, without reservation, at the service of Christ and the world. Of putting ourselves into locked struggle with evil, whatever the cost." So these two authors were very clear. To pick up the cross of Christ is to pick up the burdens, thorns and pain of other people. Peter's problem was this: Peter believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of the Living God, but he didn't understand the way of the cross. Peter heard that the "Son of man must suffer, die and be rejected," but he did not understand what it meant for his own life. Peter did not understand when Jesus said, "If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself, pick up the cross and follow me. For whoever will find his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will find it."

What does it mean to pick up the cross? To pick up the cross does not simply mean to carry one's own burdens or to live with one's own thorns. You know, many people believed in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but they do not understand the way of the cross. For example, for many people today, religion is a middle class club. People getting together to go and do nice things together, but the way of the cross has been lost. For many people, the way of the cross is thinking positively. For example, take Dr. Robert Schuller of the Hour of Power. He was a powerful preacher and televangelist. For many years he broadcast a weekly program from his headquarters at the "Chrystal Cathedral". Many people watched his program faithfully. For Dr. Schuller, the way of the cross is to think positively. For example, during Lent, which focuses on the cross, the crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, Dr. Schuller preached a sermon about Lent. For Dr. Schuller, Lent was an acronym L.E.N.T which meant, "Let's eliminate negative thinking." That's what the cross means to him: let's eliminate negative thinking.

The way of the cross is not simply to be a positive person. The way of the cross means to pick up the burdens and cares of people around you.

Jesus said, "If any one would be my disciple, let that person deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." What does it mean to deny one's self? Jesus says that you are to deny yourself. By that, Jesus is saying that we are to die to selfishness. We are to surrender our selfishness to God. We are to surrender our selfishness to Jesus Christ. Rather than serving our selfish needs, we are to serve God and other people. It is to surrender our selfishness to God. The great religious geniuses of the world have understood that. St. Francis of Assisi wrote: "For it is in giving that we receive, and it is in dying to self, that we are born again to a living hope." The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "Present your whole self as a living sacrifice to God." Not just your money. You offer your whole self to God: your eyes, your ears, your legs, your feelings, your thoughts. You offer everything to God. You surrender your whole self to God as a living sacrifice. An author by the name of Gerhardt Frost, a professor from long ago, wrote the following words: "It is in living by loving and dying by giving that we finally find happiness."

All of us struggle with surrendering our selfishness to God. It's not something we can ever do completely because self-centeredness is always at the center of our being. It is only because Jesus took up his cross that we can ever begin to follow him. That's why he reacted so strongly to Peter's attempt to dissuade him from taking his appointed course to the cross. He had to take up the burden of our sin and our guilt and our selfishness so that we could be created anew to take up our cross and lift the burden for others.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.