

**What Was He Thinking?
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Matthew 16:21-28

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Jesus and the disciples are now in transition. They are moving toward Jerusalem and away from the Galilean ministry that has taken the front seat so far.

But it isn't just the geographical details that are changing. This is the point where the disciples are starting to understand that Jesus is more than teacher or a prophet. In fact, Peter has just said for the first time that he believes Jesus is the Messiah – the Son of God. Wow. What a wonderful, amazing revelation!

Unfortunately, Peter still doesn't quite get it. Because Jesus started talking about his death – about the cross and what would happen. This wasn't the Messiah Peter had in mind. Besides, he loves Jesus very much. So naturally, he starts denying that that could really happen.

I can imagine being in Peter's shoes. Being the optimistic person, saying, oh, come on, it's not going to be that bad. You're worrying over nothing. Besides, you're the Messiah so you surely won't let that happen.

Whoa Peter. That's the wrong way to look at who Jesus is. Jesus goes so far as call Peter "Satan." Why? Maybe because it was tempting to consider what Peter was saying. Maybe not going to the cross looked appealing to Jesus.

But Jesus hung in there, telling Peter to get behind him. Stop the temptation. This was his mission. The cross was his destiny.

So, what he says next is very interesting, isn't it? He said to them, his own disciples, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, he will have to deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life ... for my sake ... will find it.

I think that last phrase Jesus said is perhaps very significant – "for my sake." In fact, I've decided to preach a sermon next week on how that sentence is used so often in both the Old and New Testaments: "For my sake." Or "For My Names Sake."

But today we want to look at Jesus' words to his disciples. What was he thinking? Deny yourselves? Take up your cross? What does it that mean? Have you considered what your cross in life is? Is it a hardship? Or a struggle? Is it a sickness or a form of suffering? Is that what a cross is? Is that what Jesus is referring to when he says you must take up your cross and follow me? What was he thinking?

I guess it's really important to start from the beginning. I think the subject here is the cross, right? So, we must ask ourselves what the cross stands for.

We see crosses in many places, don't we? I wear my mother's gold cross quite often. We see many pieces of jewelry with crosses.

We have this lovely gold cross here in the sanctuary. And sometimes we use the wooden cross, especially for Lent.

But what is the cross Jesus is referring to? If we consider the cross Jesus was nailed to, that's a beginning. I think of the hymn – the Old Rugged Cross, that says it's the emblem of suffering and shame. Is that what the cross represents to you? Suffering and shame? Is that what Jesus is saying we should be doing? Suffering and being shamed? For what purpose? Is our cross to suffer and be shamed for no reason?

Sometimes people are sick and they say this is the cross I must bear. But is that really the cross Jesus is referring to? Or, if you have a financial hardship, is that your cross?

Is suffering for the sake of suffering, your cross in life? I think we sometimes get a little confused and mixed up about these things.

Don't forget Jesus clarified that whatever we do "for his sake" that could be our cross.

So what is an example of that? I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a German pastor during the Holocaust. He not only resisted the Nazi regime but he was very vocal about what he knew was happening to the Jews in Germany.

He was arrested and in prison for a year and a half and finally was charged with conspiracy to have Hitler killed. He was executed by hanging on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer wrote several books and articles but one of the classics is *The Cost of Discipleship*. He calls it "cheap grace" if we accept the grace God has given us through Christ but we aren't willing to speak out, and to follow the path Christ took.

Bonhoeffer wrote about today's lesson from Matthew, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself." The disciple must say to himself the same words Peter said of Christ when he denied him: "I know not this man." Self-denial is never just a series of isolated acts of mortification or asceticism. It is not suicide, for there is an element of self-will even in that. To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us. Once more, all that self denial can say is: "He leads the way, keep close to him." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

We know that there are many, many Christians who have been persecuted because of their faith and their determination to worship and read the bible, to talk about Christ even when they were forbidden to do so, or they would be arrested and possibly put to death.

From the disciples and the Apostle Paul to the early Christians who were severely persecuted – those were followers who gave up everything they loved, including their own lives – for the sake of the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of course, that means – telling and teaching others about Jesus own sacrifice of his life – his death on the horrific cross – his blood poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of the world; for the salvation of all who would believe in him; of life everlasting with God in God’s glory.

But I think there is more to the cross of Jesus than what we are looking at. We think so much about his dying there but do we really think through all that happened at the cross?

Healing old wounds – emotional, devastating. Words we didn’t mean. Actions that hurt and wounded.

Reconciliation is a major theme of the cross, isn’t it? And it isn’t just reconciling with one another but it is especially reconciling with God. At the cross, God provided a way for us to be forgiven and reconciled to him.

If you think about it, that’s what a major part of our cross involves – reconciliation. When we look at the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and consider those laws given so long ago to Moses, we can see it in the cross then:

We see the first 5 commandments are about God, about our relationship, our covenant with God. We are to worship only the one true God. These are referring to our relationship to God. So we look at it as vertical. From us here on earth, looking up to God.

The last 5 are about how we treat others. It’s about our relationship to our neighbors. We don’t murder, we don’t steal, we don’t lie and cheat. So we look at that as horizontal. And together we see a cross. Vertical and horizontal.

Of course, Jesus narrowed them down to two important commandments – Love God with everything you have, with all of your self. And love others the way you love your self.

Both of those might very well mean denying your own human desires in order to follow these commandments.

Could this be our cross to carry? To not put ourselves above others? To love God with all of ourselves? To love others more than we love our own human desires and wants?

We know that around the world people suffer. Not just for the sake of suffering but for the sake of the gospel – the good news which is the faith we have in Jesus as our Savior who died on the cross for our salvation – that we might be saved from death and sin and reconciled to him.

We might not ever know the kind of suffering the disciples went through, or the pain and torture some early Christians – and even some today – have to endure.

It seems to me that if we are to be Jesus disciples – his followers – we must first follow the horizontal slant of the cross that is about our relationship with the almighty, sovereign God. To put it simply – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.

And that we might pick up the cross we carry, bearing the weight of it as we love and care for our neighbors around the world. That we would deny ourselves some of the pleasures in life, in order to show mercy and compassion and generosity to those around the world who desperately need to hear about the word of God. Or to put that part simply – to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Right now, thousands are homeless, devastated by Hurricane Harvey and Irma. We also see so much division in our country – racism, hatred. What are we doing? What can we do to make a difference?

I think this could very well be our cross. The cross of reconciliation between God and us humans through God's Son. As we do our best to deny the me in our relationships and focus on the YOU or US.

This seems like a very personal part of the teachings of Jesus and the bible, but when we look closely, it seems to be all about being the Body of Christ. The Church is established by Christ; called into being by Christ, that we might keep his ministry and mission alive.

I like what the Presbyterian Book of Order says about the church's calling:

“The Church is called to undertake its mission in the world – of healing and reconciling and binding up wounds; of ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely and the powerless; engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice; giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer, sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world, -

The church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.”

And so, I don't think this is just a personal call to discipleship, do you? It is that for sure. Each of us has to decide what our cross is to pick up and carry for the sake of the good news of salvation; for the sake of Christ himself. What will we deny ourselves? What are we willing to die for in order to follow and serve our Savior?

But as a part of the Body of Christ – the Church he has called into being – this call to discipleship; this call to self-denial and to cross-carrying service reaches out to the entire church universal, of which we are a part.

I think this is where we must consider our part in the over all picture of being the Church. We get wrapped up in our own little world right here at Holly Presbyterian Church. We worry about the logistics of things – who will teach, what programs should we do? Are we gaining members or losing? There are many important things we look at and we can be either on top of the world if things are looking good, or we can be at rock bottom and discouraged if they are not going good – according to our estimates.

But really, the most important thing for us as individual disciples and as a church is to consider how we are promoting the gospel; how we are helping others, denying ourselves, dying to our own desires and giving to others even at the risk of dying – of losing our lives. That is what a disciple is, it seems. That is what our call as a church of Jesus Christ is.

That seems to be what Jesus was thinking. What do you think?

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