

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, September 3, 2023

We don't tend to like to think on them all that much, but any student of history will easily be able to rattle off a quick litany of truly destructive, oppressive, vulgar policies and norms that different nation-states or empires pressed upon the bodies and souls of at least some of its citizens. The Doctrine of Discovery, that licensed European explorers to rob land from indigenous people; the Atlantic slave trade that captured and sold Africans into slavery in North America and western Europe; Jim Crow that kept Black Americans impoverished and oppressed even after slavery was formally ended; concentration camps against Jews, Roma, and queer folk in Germany; concentration camps against Japanese Americans in America; the military-industrial complex that provides macro-economic incentives for American military imperialism... the list can, sadly, go on and on from there. I mean, I didn't – per last week's sermon – even touch on the social norms and mores that undergird the subjugation of women. Well, to this tragic list, I want to add crucifixions in Rome.

Because the cross has come to mean so much more than its origins as a tool for capital punishment, it is easy for Christians, especially, to lose track of – or maybe even never understand in the first place – what the role and function of the cross was for Rome. And that it is a Roman tool is the first important piece of data because as Jesus' passion narrative makes clear, the Jews of His time had no authority to exercise capital punishment, even if the Torah required them to exercise this authority for certain crimes against the Law. And that's because Rome had Israel under its thumb.

The cross was an exclusively Roman tool of meting out justice. But why the cross? The Romans had swords. Swords are a much quicker, easier, and – frankly – tidier form of execution. Why, then, did they choose the cross? It's because the cross was always more than just a tool; it was also a symbol that signaled the power of Rome to put to death, in a most gruesome manner, anyone who threatened the *Pax Romana*. Each hung body was a sort of billboard to every spectator that advertised their fate if they should step out of line.

Well, that's the saddest possible way to begin a sermon ever! We start here, though, because when Jesus offers an explanation of what it means to follow Him, He tells us to take up our crosses. Even more remarkably, Jesus gives this sort of guidance *before* He is crucified.

Now, just pause there and consider that. *BEFORE* Jesus is crucified, He has already looked upon this means of capital punishment and seen within it an explanation of what it means to follow Him. Does He do this because He knows He's going to die on a cross? Maybe. Our passage from today is the first of three proclamations of Jesus' death. That is, on three separate occasions – here, again in Matthew 17, and one last time in Matthew 20 – Jesus will foretell His own death. It isn't, however, until Matthew 20 that He names crucifixion as the means of that death. So maybe

Jesus knew He would die on a cross or maybe not. Regardless, He still refers to “take up your cross” as a way of describing Christian discipleship.

So, what really is going on here? How do we hear words like “take up your cross and follow me” as more than hollow, Christianese? Oh, you all know “Christianese,” right? It's the shorthand Christians use that makes no sense to anyone outside the church *and*, over time, even stops meaning anything significant for Christians. It's more a way of posturing to show that you know the insider language than it is an authentic expression of your life and faith in Christ. Christianese is doing no one any favors and I'm grateful that we have at least one person in our midst – Joyce Kepke – who will gladly call out anyone (and I do mean anyone! Pastors are not immune!) who uses language carelessly. Joyce lived rent free in my mind all week while working on this sermon and I couldn't be more grateful for it.

I suspect “take up your cross” begins its meaning as a rather bleak proclamation over our status quo. Jesus has, as His ultimate goal, the reconciliation of all things in God. That is to say, we believe that whatever divisions, enmity, and animosity exists within God's creation – either with God or amongst ourselves – it is not for forever. Hope for unity, harmony, peace, and joy is legitimate. *However*, the status quo in Jesus' time and in every time is *not* to move toward this beatific vision with God and one another, but rather to stay in a state of perpetual estrangement with violence always nibbling at the edges.

Thus, “take up your cross” begins as an acknowledgement of where we are. We are in a world of crosses that we're going to bear whether we like it or not, whether we choose it or not. Jesus, therefore, tells us to choose the cross – to take it up. Why? For this is a radical act of resistance – an act of resistance not terribly dissimilar to some of Jesus' other teachings like “turn the other cheek” and “go also the second mile.” The act of intentionality in taking up a cross is one that begins to rob the cross of some of its power, for the cross in Rome was always strongest when it was the subconscious fear that immobilized your body and soul. “Take up your cross” is synonymous with “fear not!”

And, at least initially, this might be all that “take up your cross” meant. But then, in due time, Jesus also died on a cross. And since crosses always existed, at least in part, as a symbol, the meaning of “take up your cross” took on an additional symbolic meaning. For in being raised from the dead after being crucified, Jesus robbed the cross once and for all of its power.

Oh, to be sure, others still died on crosses, but death means considerably less when resurrection is now on the menu. This is why, at least as Christian history reports it, at the end of his life, the Apostle Peter walked boldly into his own crucifixion, even choosing to be crucified upside down as a humble gesture to his own unfitnes to

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die the same way His Lord did. I mean, you gotta *really believe* in the resurrection to look at a Centurion with a hammer and a fist full of nails and say, “Why don’t you just plant me head down, you little wimp?”

In fact, this is a good place to pause and ask an obvious, but typically unuttered question: Why did the Church choose the Cross as its central symbol? After all, it is the empty tomb that really signals resurrection. Why didn’t, for example, an empty circle become the symbol of Christ’s people? You could imagine that painted onto cave walls or etched into wood that hung over Christian meeting spaces. Why do we tattoo cross on our bodies and not empty tombs?

I think it was and remains our way of signaling that we have faith bigger than the fear of death. Yes, the empty tomb better represents the resurrection, but if you want to signal how meaningless the threat of death now is in your life, hang a cross around your neck or ink one onto your bicep. Understood thusly, the cross takes on an even richer meaning of victory in the face of evil, of hope in the face of the despair evil seeks to sow in our hearts. “Take up your cross,” then, is a way of saying “take up your confidence; take up your faith.”

Maybe it is a form of gallows humor, but a part of me is convinced that the Cross is the Church’s inside joke that the powers and principalities that reject God and hate Christ will never understand. I mean, is there anything more delicious in life than standing up to a bully and then finding the bully speechless? I know such visions make this little nerd’s heart sing songs of glory to God! Well, it is that spirit that underlies the meaning and purpose of the cross we are to take up. We take it up to reassert our agency over powers that would rather keep us as docile slaves. We take it up as a non-violent taunt to those who lead only by violence and fear.

And once we understand the Cross as ethical choice and resistance, a bunch of other meanings behind “take up your cross” begin to emerge. For instance, I think the litany Paul gives us from our Romans reading are all unique, distinct expressions of what it means to “take up your cross.”

Expressing genuine love? That’s taking up your cross.

Hating evil and holding fast to the good? That’s taking up your cross.

Patient in suffering? Sure you are! Death has no more power, which makes suffering that much less. That’s also the power of the crosses we bear.

Not avenging ourselves? With what tools? Death, we are convinced, is conquered, so vengeance is no longer possible. Not avenging is also taking up our cross.

Giving food and drink to your enemies? Why not?!? You’re already carrying a cross. What more can an enemy really do?

Now, I don’t want you to think me crass or obtuse to pain, suffering, and death. Mourning still

has its place – after all, “weep with those who weep” is also part of taking up our crosses – but these experiences of pain, suffering, and death are secondary to the experience of being found in the risen Christ. But if I’ve come across as crass to these realities, it’s meant to be in service to instilling a greater sense of confidence in each of us – confidence that all the evil in the world cannot undo what God has achieved for us in Christ Jesus. I’m hoping that “take up your cross” becomes a sort of rallying cry of resistance. Like MLK’s “I have a dream” or protest chants of “no justice, no peace!” or cries of “not in our name,” “take up your cross” is the swagger of looking evil in its eyes, knowing it’s already defeated, and waiting for it to figure that truth out. And it is doing all this without even having to lift a finger against evil, for we don’t fight fire with fire; we let the Cross do our talking for us.

This is who you are. Whatever your age. Whatever your self-perception. Whatever your personal level of confidence or swagger might be this morning, you belong to the One who bore the Cross, died on the Cross, and then overcame the Cross, thereby giving you the authority to stare down evil while you do good to and for your neighbors. Take up your cross? That’s just saying, “Put a little swagger in your step!”

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