

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, September 15, 2024.

Jesus says in our Gospel, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow me."

What does it mean to take up the cross?

It is knowing that no matter what happens in life, the successes or failures, the joys or sorrows, the ups and downs, we have a God who journeys with us through it all.

Some of us wear a cross or have a cross tattooed on our bodies. For most who wear a cross either as jewelry or on our bodies, it is more than decorative. It is a creed of sorts. It says, I am a believer in Jesus. It can open conversation or give an opportunity to witness. Does wearing the cross mean we are always perfect? Absolutely not. far from it. It means we live as forgiven sinners under the love and grace of Jesus on the cross.

Our baptismal identity is very much tied to the cross. Paul says in Romans 6\_3-5, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death. Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life." If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. In our baptismal liturgy we trace the cross on the forehead of the baptized saying, you marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever. I like to imagine that cross marked on our head in baptism as a permanent tattoo. Luther wrote the phrase "I am baptized" in chalk on his desk to remind him that whenever his was tempted by Satan or having a bad day, he would yell out. I am baptized. It reminded him that we can't undo what Jesus did for us on the cross.

For me, being baptized means every day is a new day. The hurts and disappointments of yesterday are washed daily in the blood of the lamb.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus asked his disciples an identity question, “Who do people say that I am?” They answered John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter blurted out, “You are the Messiah.” which means anointed one. Or in the original Greek, you are the Christ. Christ therefore is not Jesus’ last name. It means Messiah. Jesus the Christ means Jesus the Messiah.

Peter got it right. Partially. Jesus quieted Peter down telling him not to say anything. Sue Englebert in Bible study this week said, “What the hay?” Shouldn't he tell everyone. But Jesus true identity as Messiah will involve a cross. In fact, the kind of Messiah Jesus will be is not the typical image of a Messiah everyone expected, including Peter. Jesus will be like the suffering servant in our Isaiah lesson. Emerson B. Powery in working preacher blog clarifies: “For Peter and most Jews, ‘Messiah’ (Christos) refers to a militaristic, political figure who would overthrow Rome’s power and establish a new Davidic kingdom, which itself would inaugurate the kingdom of God.”

Instead, Jesus predicts his passion saying, “The Son of Man will suffer, be rejected by the religious leaders of his time, and be killed. But in three days he will rise again.” Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. All this talk of suffering and death was too hard to handle. But Jesus countered saying, “Get behind me Satan! Your setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

What is with all this talk of suffering and death? Can you blame Peter for wanting to steer the conversation another way? But to Jesus, following him will go the way of the cross. He says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me.”

First, what does that look like to deny yourself? It means to say no to oneself. And that’s hard. It is to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness. To admit your self-centeredness. Following Jesus very likely will mean leaving some things behind, the old life that may be

destructive or selfish. In doing so, Jesus says you will gain your whole life.

Second to take up the cross. The cross involved suffering and shame. It was a very public instrument of humiliation and death. Taking up the cross means that the Christian life won't be easy. You will have many cross moments. You may suffer for standing up for others. You will be rejected by others. But as we look at the cross with our post-resurrection lenses, we can now see that God doesn't abandon us in our own pain, suffering, or loss, but is deeply present with us. God isn't only with us when things go well. So, taking up the cross means that Jesus will be with us always no matter what. Jesus himself went through all we humans could ever go through. And in the end there is resurrection and hope.

And the promise is that when we deny ourselves, take up the cruciform life, and follow Jesus, we will find life that really is life. Amen!

Supplemental material not in the sermon that moved me this week.

Speaking of hope. I was moved this week when I heard about actor Matthew McConahey and his wife Camila's Just Keep Livin foundation. **The just keep livin Foundation is dedicated to empower high school students by providing them with the tools to lead active lives and make healthy choices for a better future.** after-school fitness programs in 45 inner city high schools/sites. In our programs, we encourage students to make positive life choices that improve their physical and mental health through exercise, teamwork, gratitude, nutrition, and community service.