

“Lent—Time to Take Up Your Cross”
Mark 8:31-38

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The Lord brought two of his disciples to a road. He gave each one a cross of the same weight and asked them to carry it up to the end of the road, where he would wait for them. After this, the Lord disappeared.

The first disciple carried the cross with ease, while the second disciple lagged behind, obviously having a hard time. After carrying the cross for a day, the first disciple reached the end of the road and handed the cross to his Master.

"Well done, my daughter," the Lord told her.

The second disciple reached the end of the road in the evening of the second day. When he got there, he threw the cross at the Lord's feet.

"It's not fair!" he complained. "You gave me a much heavier cross than the first disciple, which is why it took me longer to get here!"

The Lord looked at his second disciple with sadness. "Son," the Lord said to the disciple, "both crosses are of the same weight."

"But how come I carried mine with much difficulty while she carried hers with ease?"

"Do not put the blame on the cross," the Lord told him. "It is because you were complaining all the way as you carried your cross. Every complaint added to the weight of the cross. The first disciple carried her cross with ease because every loving thought diminished its weight."

We come to the gospel for this day and we read the words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (vv. 34-35). We hear those words, and we wonder, "Am I willing to accept those conditions to be a disciple of Jesus?" What would ever motivate us to follow through with what Jesus demands? "Take up my cross and follow you? I am already following you, Jesus! Sort of. And then, denying myself? I am not sure I like the sound of that! I have enough trouble denying myself that hot fudge ice cream cake at the end of a buffet meal at Shoney's."

Many folks believe that they are already bearing a cross. I am sure you have heard people use the phrase: "This is my cross to bear"? They'll say, "I've got a terribly demanding boss; it's my cross to bear." Or, "My kids are disobedient; it's my cross to bear." Or, "My arthritis is acting up again; it's my cross to bear." A tombstone in a cemetery in Scotland contains the following epitaph: "The children of Israel wanted bread, and the Lord sent them manna. Old clerk Wallace wanted a wife, and the devil sent him Anna." I guess Mr. Wallace thought his late wife was his cross to bear. But, that's not what Jesus meant. He's not talking about a specific circumstance; he's talking about a change of attitude; a new way of living in Christ.

We all have an emptiness that needs to be filled. If we set aside our self-centeredness, we are forced to admit that somehow the ways in which we have prioritized our lives—earning a good paycheck, setting up an extended network of colleagues and associates, depending on friends and family to fulfill all of our needs—haven't always worked out for us. At some point in our lives, we will discover that we can't define ourselves by what we do, for what we do may not be there tomorrow, but who we are will always be there. We can't always be confident that family and friends will be able to provide us with the strength and encouragement that we need to move forward. We all have a need to believe in something bigger and beyond ourselves, and God is more than willing to fill that void. Jesus invites us to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. He is telling us that something is lacking in our lives and in our hearts.

The young man was at the end of his rope. Seeing no way out, he dropped to his knees in prayer. "Lord, I can't go on," he said.
"I have too heavy a cross to bear."

The Lord replied, "My son, if you can't bear its weight, just place your cross inside this room. Then open another door and pick any cross you wish."

The man was filled with relief. "Thank you, Lord," he sighed, and did as he was told. As he looked around the room he saw many different crosses; some so large the tops were not visible. Then he spotted a tiny cross leaning against a far wall. "I'd like that one, Lord," he whispered. And the Lord replied, "My son, that's the cross you brought in."

Jesus knows our imperfections. He accepts our weakness. He knows that it is difficult for us to deny ourselves. He also knows that we sometimes unable to bear the weight of our cross alone. Therefore, Jesus lightens our load by taking our burdens and imperfections with him to the cross. He takes those burdens that lead to loneliness and a lack of fulfillment. Jesus helps us carry our own crosses. He puts them all to death as he dies for us. He does all of this for our benefit. He does all of this—then he invites us to follow him.

We are certainly aware, if we have knowledge of the early history of Christianity, that for some to "take up their cross" meant to literally die for their faith. Perhaps something else is also meant here for us in these words of Jesus—a different kind of death. Jesus is asking us to be willing to sacrifice the lives we have known by taking up the cross of discipleship and serving the world through his mercy and strength. Our crosses may be the difficult tasks we choose to take on, which, at one time, we would rather avoid. Our crosses might be responsibilities, ministries which we know will cost us dearly – but, for the sake of serving Christ, we take them on willingly.

There was a man who lived in the inner city of a large metropolis. His name was "Brother Love." In that city there were many homeless and hungry people. This man saw this great cross laying in his city, with no one willing to bare it. So, he picked it up and placed it on his back. He started a mission downtown. Everyday he would be there feeding them, finding them places to sleep, helping them get jobs, calling the parents of the runaways he took in, and witnessing to them. In a few short years this mission had ministered to thousands of persons. Others were well aware of all of the sacrifices he had made. He gave his time—and a lot of his money. He

cooked. He cleaned up. He was called at all hours of the day and night. He took upon himself the burdens and problems of those needy persons.

In many ways it was a heavy cross for him. It took much out of him. But you would never know that from talking to him. There were few Christians fuller of joy than Brother Love. And he'd be the first to tell you that he'd do it all over again. The sacrifices didn't bother him. He told a reporter, "It's been worth it all. "No one made him do it. It wasn't forced on him. It was a cross no one else saw or cared to see. He saw it! And he took it up!

All of us have a cross. In fact, most of us have more than one. There is some work, some ministry Christ wants you to take up for him, to do in his name. It's a cross, a work that you freely choose and that demands much of you. Will you take it up?

AMEN