

Psalm 19 ~ Mark 8:27-38

*More than Self: The Way of Jesus*

Rally Sunday ~ Bible Presentation ~ Sunday School Teacher Dedication

September 12, 2021 ~ 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Patriot Day 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Weekend

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction:*

Remember the last time you had to tell a difficult truth to someone you love? It was something you knew they needed to know. But just playing the conversation in your mind, made your gut churn, your temples pound. You knew that what you had to tell them would upset them, maybe it would even turn their world upside down or split it apart. You waited until it couldn't be put off any longer. Yes: It's hard to start a difficult conversation.

I think that's what's going on in our gospel text today as Jesus and his disciples head to Caesarea Philippi. This story is a hinge narrative in the broader arc of Mark's gospel. From this point on, Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, on his way to being crucified. But no one knows that yet, except Jesus. He knew he couldn't put it off any longer: it was time to start teaching them about what lay ahead of them, about the endgame. Yes, even while they were feeling so flush with success after the amazing multiplying of loaves and fish, and the miraculous healings of all kinds. Talk about a buzz kill.

But Jesus knew it was time. He chose to start this hard conversation about a difficult truth, by asking them a question. It starts out like he was taking a poll: Who is saying what about me? Then he quickly pivots to a pop quiz: What do you say about me? Peter says the right A+ answer, "You are the Messiah," but then became not only confused but angered by Jesus' attempted reset on what kind of Messiah that Jesus would turn out to be. Nothing like they had ever seen before. Not a Messiah like the political hot shot King David or Cyrus the Great of Persia. Surely what Peter was picturing when he said "Messiah." But Messiah Jesus would take a much different path. A path that would mean great suffering, rejection, and torturous death.

We know, this side of the cross, that this is actually good news. But it didn't seem like that to anyone that day. Far from it. Wise Rabbi Jesus, took the opportunity of his flash point with Peter and turned it into a teachable moment. As we now listen to this story, may God renew in each of us a tender, teachable heart.

*Sermon:*

I have a confession to make. And it's not quite like Peter's when he confesses Christ as the Messiah. Here's my confession: Last Thursday, when the Personnel Committee and I were interviewing candidates in the parlor for the Executive Assistant position (formerly known as Administrative Secretary and held by Meranda Lelonek), Dan Burk, the committee chair, began the interview by asking me to share with this candidate what the mission of our church is. His question surprised me, and I felt like a deer in the headlights (not a great metaphor especially here in Wisconsin close to hunting season). My mind felt like the little circle that goes round and round on our computer while they are thinking, processing, but not coming up with anything. Had I forgotten what our FPC mission was?

You would think your pastor would have a ready to go “elevator speech” about the mission of our church, but in that moment I had a brain freeze. While my little brain circle was spinning, first I was wishing I had our mission statement memorized. That would have been a good answer. Then I thought of saying “We love God and love neighbor” but that seemed too broad, too generic. Next my mind leaped to this morning’s gospel text: “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Christ.” But I was sure that would scare this person right out the door. They had come in the door thinking they were just interviewing for a part time administrative position.

What is our mission? Today, September 12, 2021, one day after the twenty-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks against our nation, the memory of that horrific day is in the air, and heavy in our hearts. And with it the slogan: “Never forget.” As we ponder Jesus’ words to Peter and the crowd, in the context of today: Rally Day, Bible Presentation, Sunday School Teacher Dedication, and “Patriot Day,” here’s what we need to always remember: The soul of our nation, for which courageous men and women have sacrificed their lives in the line of duty; *and* the salvation of our individual souls depend upon *our* response to Jesus’ clear command in Mark 8:34. Here it is again: “If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Imagine if we really did that. Imagine if we really decentered ourselves as individuals, as a church, as a religion, as a nation, even as a species, acknowledging we humans are but one species in all of God’s great universe.

In Portland, Oregon one day on an eastbound MAX train, three men did exactly as Jesus commanded to defend two teenage girls who appeared to be Muslim, when another passenger began “ranting and raving” and shouting anti-Muslim hate speech at them. According to witnesses, a white male passenger began yelling what “would best be characterized as hate speech toward a variety of ethnicities and religions.” The slurs were directed at these two female passengers, one of whom was wearing a hijab, according to police. Two of the men died from stab wounds and the third was seriously injured in their attempt to de-escalate and stand against this man’s hate rant. The battle against hate continues. This battle is won every time we do not forget to act the way Jesus has taught us to in Mark 8.

Most of us are not called to take up a cross that causes our literal physical death. cross. Jesus’ command to deny yourself and to take up *your* cross means something different for each of us. Since 2001, in addition to our service men and women, so-called “every day heroes” have risen up as storms and fires have accelerated in their frequency and ferocity due to twenty years of climate change. Since March of 2020, the COVID pandemic has called forth selfless service from those who show up every day to provide essential services on which we all depend. For all of these folks we are deeply grateful.

What is Jesus calling us to do? What is our mission at FPC? Next Sunday you will see and hear more about it in skits and songs—by you! You will also hear about it from Tracy Olson when she delivers a “Minute for Mission” during this service. From this pulpit today, I want to challenge each of us to wake up every day and remind ourselves, “do not forget, today is not

about me, it's about Christ." If we want to be a Christian: We have to be about "more than self." We have to try to look at others as Christ does. We have to intentionally reset our minds from "human things" to "divine things." Whether we like it or not.

Historically this text has been disfigured, shaming the name of Christ and his teaching. It has been used to justify the abuse of women and to sanction chattel slavery. Therefore I need to say this: "Take up your cross" is *never* something that is forced upon us. It is something that we choose to take up. If someone else is forcing something upon us that we do not feel called to do, that is *not* what Jesus meant. As Flora Slosson Wuellner, author, spiritual director, and United Church of Christ pastor has articulated so helpfully, "*Our cross is our free choice to lift the burden of suffering from another person.*"<sup>i</sup> Here are some ways she gives to help us recognize if the commitment you are in, or are facing, is really "your cross" or not: *If it is "your cross"*

- You will be set free to choose your cross or refuse it
- You will feel a deep, authentic calling to this cross.
- Though the pain and sacrifice are real, you will also experience a definite divinely sent joy, strength, and renewal at your center.
- You will find your ability to love will deepen.
- You will observe signs of fruitfulness, some positive results and response, at least at times.
- An "angel" will be sent to comfort and strengthen you, even as one was sent to Jesus in Gethsemane. The angel usually comes in unexpected ways: a person, a book, an experience of beauty, a lifting of the heart, and so on. But this "angel" always brings comfort.
- Finally: a "Simon of Cyrene" will also be sent to help lift your cross, your commitment, our chosen task of love, in very practical ways, even as Simon carried the cross beam for Jesus.

If these signs are not present, you may have taken a cross—committed yourself to a task—that was meant for someone else.<sup>ii</sup>

The final point I want to make about Jesus' invitation to "take up your cross" and follow him is this: because Jesus' cross confronted systemic evil, in a very public way, to follow the way of Christ, to be true to the cross of Christ, Jesus is calling us to take an active role in civic or public life. To "take up our cross," by definition, is not only about our personal salvation and relationships, but is also a clear call to political engagement. Like Peter, we may recoil at this. But if Christ is the Messiah we confess, the One who went to the cross to save and reconcile the world; if we want to follow Christ, we don't have the choice. We cannot retreat behind the comfort of our church culture, or be content to simply babble within the bubble of people who think like we do.

Is there a new cross that you are being called to take up? Perhaps you are bearing or holding on to a commitment that is not your cross, one that you need to let go of. Let these points help clarify which way you need to go. And never forget: the way of Christ is the way to real, lasting, life-giving freedom. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Enter by the Gate: Jesus' 7 Guidelines When Making Hard Choices* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2004) p. 74.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, pp.74-75.