

Take Up Your Cross

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. J. Michael Solberg

Mark 8:27-38

The Union Church of Hinsdale

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You may have noticed through the years that I have a fairly modest view of pastoral authority. This has probably been pretty obvious during the pandemic, when we have loved our neighbors by not gathering in person, and moved our worship services online. Today, during Lent, we are leading the service in the sanctuary and I have on my clerical garb, but for the most part during these last few months, I have preached from my kitchen, not even wearing a tie. The truth is, I don't really see any great difference between the two settings, because whether I am here in the sanctuary or in my kitchen, my pastoral authority, my preaching authority, comes only from the message I offer, not from me personally. Neither ordination nor job title gives legitimacy to what I say: only the integrity and relevance of the message carries any real weight. Religious trappings aside, there is no point at which I get to say, like a toddler's frustrated parent, "Believe this, because I told you so."

But I do want to claim a little authority for my role: the authority of your expectations, the authority of your trust. That is, when it comes to preaching, you expect me, you trust me, to lay out for you the message of scripture, the message of our faith, as best I can figure it. The truth is that when I, or Grant or Robb or whoever, when we take on this role we inevitably stand between you and the message of scripture. And the tricky thing is, we have to try to be true to both parties – true to the message of scripture, and true to your lives. Everything we do as pastors, but especially preaching, only has authority if it is faithful to the message of scripture AND makes a connection to your life.

I am taking the time to reflect on this today, because that understanding of pastoral authority is particularly important when none of us really want to hear what the Bible is telling us. And today, you don't want to hear it. With today's passage it is probably clearer than ever that we have to hear the good news as bad news in order for it to become good news again. Today, the gospel is more clearly than ever shaped like an hourglass. This is good news. And this is good news. But there is no way to get from this side to this side, without going through this waist point. And we don't like this point.

In a different place Jesus says: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many go through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Between the

good news of scripture and the good news absorbed into your life, there is this narrow gate.

In the passage, Jesus carefully sets the tone as he tells us about this narrow gate. He's just had a very intense conversation with Peter – I mean, when you have to tell your lead follower that he sounds like Satan, no one enjoys that conversation. So after that, I think Jesus tries to reset the tone.

Now there are always people hanging around in the gospel of Mark, not just the disciples, but this bigger group of people who are some combination of miracle seekers, ambulance chasers, government informants, and the spiritually curious. So after his repudiation of Peter's agenda, I think Jesus takes a deep breath, and he says, "Hey everybody, come on in. Let's just be together for a minute." He wants to make sure everyone can feel the love he has for them. With that tone set, he calls them through the narrow gate. "If you want to follow me, disregard yourself, take up your cross, and join me."

There is so much in those few words. Maybe notice first that this is not a command, but an invitation. Jesus says, "If you want to follow me..." "If..." This is not a "Thou shalt..." This can't be a "Thou shalt..." because it's ultimately about your heart and soul, the love of your life, to borrow a phrase, and even Jesus can't command love. There are other ways to live in the world, other paths to follow, you can be a good person and probably know some joy in life, but if you want to follow him, if you see in him something worthwhile, if you trust that he comes from God and can lead you to God, then you gotta go through the narrow gate.

Disregard yourself. The more traditional translation is "deny yourself." But the MRSV, Mike's revised standard version, worries that "deny yourself" will sound somehow external to you – like deny yourself chocolate, deny yourself fish on Fridays. But this is internal. Your self is the thing being denied, disregarded. If you want to follow him, it is his will, his priorities, his way, that you follow, not your own. And, especially in America, and in this community of successful, self-made people, who wants to hear that? But the real kicker is what comes next.

Take up your cross. Wow, I wish I could erase from your mind nearly everything you think you know about the cross. Try to forget for a minute that the cross is a religious symbol at all. Try to forget that Jesus "died on a cross to forgive your sins." Try to forget any positive associations you have with crosses.

In 33 A.D. “cross” only had one connotation in the Roman empire: upon it dissidents were executed. They were hung up, publicly displayed, naked and shamed, and left to die. Some scholars think Jesus was actually borrowing a recruiting slogan from desperate and determined peasant insurgents, who were regularly crucified for their political opposition to Rome. In any case, “take up your cross” could have no other meaning except as an invitation to share the consequences facing those who dared challenge the [ruling power] of imperial Rome.¹

Accepting the consequences of resistance: that’s just what the phrase means. Of course, the next three words of Jesus are vital. Take up your cross, and...here are the next three...and join me. You see, taking up his cross is exactly what Jesus is going to be doing, he’s accepting the consequences that will come for those who dare challenge the ultimate hegemony of imperial Rome. So when you do that too, when we do that, we are not alone. We are joining him. We become part of his rag-tag crowd of rebels who challenge those who need to rely upon crosses to hold on to their power and the pervasive injustice and unfairness of their social order.

So that’s the invitation we get from Jesus, such as it is... “If you want to be my follower, disregard yourself, take up your cross, and join me.” Join the insurgency against everything that resists the way of God and oppresses people in this world, and share the consequences when the oppressors don’t like what you’re doing.

(Deep breath.) You expect integrity from me, right? That message comes with the authority of your expectations, with the authority of your trust that I am giving it to you as I see it. If we want to follow him, then his will, his goals, his priorities and his path have to come first – and he is out there crashing against those with power, because when you declare the reign of love, you are going to seriously mess up those who reign with the threat of nailing people to a cross.

But now we are only right here. (Hourglass.) We are only at the narrow gate. Hopefully I’ve managed some integrity, some faithfulness to Jesus’ own message. But what about the relevance? What about the connection to our lives? I mean, I don’t just have to bring the message to you, I have to bring you to the message.

So, here’s the situation: This gets super complicated, because we live in America. We live in a country that thinks of itself as being founded in order to avoid all the garbage that came with other regimes like the Roman empire. We are a democracy, not a dictatorship. We enjoy the rule of law, not the threat of crosses. We have life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, not terror, control and the pursuit of whatever the

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 246.

emperor happens to want today. So, being part of this grand experiment called America is supposed to be a good thing, even a Christian thing. Because we are who we are, shaped by the American story, we see being part of the system, being part of the power structure, being, might we even say, part of the empire, as good, because it's a good empire. Our parents teach us right from wrong, we work hard in school so we can grow up and be useful to our families or in the world, we contribute to the economy, a rising tide raises all boats, and everybody wins: God wins, good wins, the poor win, we win. Those who challenge the system are the ones who mess things up. Theirs are the actions we call civil unrest. Those who challenge the system, theirs are the demands we call radical. Theirs are the voices we tune out, while we get on with the work of supporting the great American project - for which they actually ought to be grateful.

But do you see what we have done? In this land of the free and home of the brave, we, followers of Jesus, have inverted the message of Jesus. By telling ourselves the story of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, of a rising tide raising all boats, we turned the bad guys into the good guys. We turned the oppressive rulers into the honored defenders of the status quo, and ultimately we turned the cross into a harmless spiritual symbol, a free pass out of this world into the fluffy clouds of heaven. That's why even today, when the U.S. cannot rightly be seen as a Christian nation, we still see little difference between being a nice person and being a follower of Jesus, between being a good American and being one who takes up their cross to join Jesus.

So how do we understand our lives as Christians in the power called America, in the light of Jesus' invitation to take up our cross and join his movement of resistance to everything that resists the way of God and oppresses people in this world?

I think most important of all is simply but profoundly to change this narrative: to think of ourselves not as defenders of the status quo, but to see ourselves as a community of resistance today. Grounded in, and guided by, the one who made a fool of the Romans and defeated death itself in one fell swoop, we are a people of resistance to everything that works against human flourishing – not American flourishing, human flourishing. If it works against human flourishing, it doesn't matter which leader, or which party, or which industry or interest group supports it, we have to support the necessary change. We begin every worship service with the same words, the same story. The Lord be with you. Because we are gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, this beloved community called church comes first. So if something doesn't sound like Jesus, if it doesn't make the world more like Jesus wants it to be, then we are committed to seeing it get the Jesus treatment. That is, it's gotta die and come back to life, transformed.

Now this isn't a sermon about specifics, and for sure, the specifics of complex issues require great deliberation and wisdom to address, but obviously there are all sorts of issues around race, criminal justice, the environment, the power of money in our political system, rising inequality, educational fairness, and so much more, where we just need to take seriously the fact that Jesus, the resistance leader, the cross carrier, is our ground and our guide. And this isn't just about big social issues. The resistance lives in more subtle, personal, ways too: like by being people of real generosity, showing real hospitality, refusing to be motivated by fear, caring for others, truth-telling, having a little humility.

An uncomfortable result of all this is that our natural friends are those who call for our society to work better for everyone, especially those the Bible calls the poor. Those are the voices that get the presumption of truth among us, those are the people that get the benefit of the doubt from us. When they make noise we've been taught to call it civil unrest, but as followers of Jesus we need to flip the script and say that those who are protecting their power in the face of injustice are the ones showing civil unrest against the reign of God. We need to talk more about violence in our communities, but the worst violence of all comes from poverty, and discrimination, and hopelessness used as tool of social control. People who raise such issues, those are our friends, because those are ones who sound like Jesus.

But let's remember why Jesus of Nazareth was such a compelling figure 2000 years ago, and why he remains so relevant today. It's because he showed that all of this take up your cross / resistance stuff is ultimately personal. Our non-violent, cross bearing, love spreading resistance leader said if you want to be my follower, take up your cross, and join me. Those are singular pronouns – you, your. Whoever wants to be my follower, let that one take up his or her cross, and join me. Being part of the resistance forever remains an individual invitation – it's ultimately about your heart and soul, the love of your life, and even Jesus can't command love. The resistance movement is called church. Church is called the body of Christ. And the body of Christ is made up of many individuals, each one of whom has said, yes, I want to be part of the resistance, I am willing to take up my cross, and be part of his body in the world.

There is one final step to take here though, and Jesus makes it plain. His death and resurrection make it plain. The whole of the Christian faith makes it plain. The bad news of disregarding yourself, of taking up the cross of resistance to everything that works against human flourishing, this bad news ultimately transforms into the best news of all. Disregarding yourself and bearing the cross of resistance is what reveals true life. "But if you disregard your life to join with me and the good message," says Jesus, "you will save your life."

It's such a crazy, wondrous, beautiful, divine thing. When you disregard your self and accept the consequences of resisting those who hang people on crosses, and resisting everything that works against God's will and human flourishing, when you pass through that narrow gate – life. Life. Life.

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