



Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17, 2021
Sermon Series: Daily Discipleship

Taking Up Our Cross Daily
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Luke 9:23-24, 51-62 NRSV

²³ Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"^[f] ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then^[g] they went on to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹ To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ But Jesus^[h] said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

My first congregation was in the small town of Herington, Kansas. I used to visit an elderly woman named Ida. Ida was in her early 90s. She'd gone through a lot of suffering in her life. She'd lost three of her six children to heart attacks – her three boys. Ida was homebound, so she was always glad for a visit. Every time I stopped, she shared a long litany of woes, including a painful struggle with rheumatoid arthritis that was making life very difficult. I listened with as much empathy as I could. Eventually Ida would start a familiar refrain: "If Jesus carried his cross for me, then I can carry my cross for him." During every visit Ida shared that refrain with me – two, three, four times. *If Jesus carried his cross for me, then I can carry my cross for him.*

So, what do you think? Is that what Jesus meant when he said to the crowds: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me"? All due respect to Ida – she had endured great suffering – but in calling us to take up our cross, I'm not sure Jesus had in mind the pain of rheumatoid arthritis or even the loss of loved ones.

Granted, we use that kind of language from time to time. We refer to our struggles as "the crosses we must bear." Still, I think Jesus was taking us a step further. Of all the gospels, Luke alone includes the modifier *daily* in describing it. "Take up your cross *daily*," Jesus says to us. At this point, Jesus is beginning the journey to Jerusalem. Any talk of cross bearing will need to be filtered through the lens of Jesus' own cross.

Just a reminder: a cross was a cruel instrument of torture and execution used by the Romans. Crosses were common enough that Jesus' listeners would have immediately understood the image he was using, even if they didn't fully understand its implications. By speaking of *daily* cross bearing, Jesus was shifting the emphasis away from martyrdom to sacrificial living. It was a life voluntarily chosen. It meant denial of self in service to God. Who know where that might lead? Perhaps meeting human needs, taking a courageous stand, suffering on behalf of others. And there was almost always a price to pay. We're not talking about a death wish, mind you, but obedience to the reign of God. If you want to know what that reign looks like, look no further than the ministry of Jesus on the journey to the cross.

We get glimpses of that journey in our gospel reading for tonight. Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He's determined to keep pressing forward. Every day there are choices to make, often hard choices. Jesus and the disciples stop in a village of Samaria. The village won't accept them. James and John ask if they should rain down fire from heaven as punishment. Jesus stops them. He has demonstrated time and again that he has room for Jews, and Gentiles, and Samaritans, too.

Along the way, a number of would-be disciples approach Jesus. Evidently, they want to join the group. Soon enough they find out about the cost. “*Follow me,*” Jesus says. A person responds, “I’ll follow you wherever you go.” Jesus challenges him, “Just so you know, we won’t be staying in plush hotels.” Another one approaches. “*Follow me,*” Jesus says. The person replies, “First I need to tend to my father’s burial.” Jesus’ response sounds harsh, even cruel. He implies that loyalty to him sometimes takes precedent over family obligations. Still another comes forward. “*Follow me,*” Jesus says. The person answers, “I will follow you, but first let me say goodbye to those at home.” Jesus again is insistent, “When you’re doing kingdom work, you can’t be looking back, only forward.”

Clearly, Jesus has no bargains to offer. His invitation is radical. He wants priority in our lives, and not simply in our worst situations but in our best. We need to be careful, though. If we take Jesus’ words literally, we can end up looking heartless and negligent in our basic human obligations.

Please keep this in mind: Jesus was on a one-of-a-kind journey to Jerusalem. He was describing what cross bearing might look like in that time and place. Like today, it often meant self-denial. Like today, it often involved gut-wrenching choices. And truth be told, it was often anything but easy to figure out how to follow Jesus along the way. But it was so very important, because that’s what a disciple does.

Our theme for the season of Lent is *Daily Discipleship*. Thankfully Jesus has already gone to the cross. Ida got that right – Jesus carried his cross for her—and for us. Yet his invitation still stretches us: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me.” Unlike Ida’s point of view, our cross bearing is less about enduring personal hardships and more about living sacrificially. Who knows where that might take us? I mean, people might catch a glimpse of the reign of God in the daily choices we make, especially the choices we make on behalf of others.

To help us navigate our journey to the cross this Lent, we have some marks of discipleship on which we’ll be focusing: *practicing prayer, giving generously, welcoming others, trying not to judge, and loving our enemies*. These might sound simple enough, but don’t be fooled. All of them come with a cost. “Follow me,” Jesus calls to us again and again. “Follow me. Take up your cross *daily*. And I will lead the way.” Amen.