

Cross Walk:

4/5 in Series

Take Up Your Cross

Matthew 16:24-28

04 03 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Scripture: Matthew 16:24-28**Introduction**

Ruben Inaje has been crucified 24 times. The 49 year old man lives in Cutud, a village 50 miles north of Manila. Each year devout believers in the Philippines reenact the crucifixion. On Good Friday, dozens of people are nailed to crosses in remembrance of Jesus Christ's suffering and death.

Although church officials discourage the practice, the tradition has continued for five decades. The bloody ordeal is viewed as an act of deep faith. These believers take literally Christ's command to "*take up your cross.*"

Today we are continuing our Lenten worship series entitled ***Cross Walk***. The title contains twin meanings. First, *Cross Walk* reminds us of Jesus' journey to the crucifixion. During Lent, we focus upon Christ's final days. The story will seemingly end on Good Friday with Jesus of Nazareth who was "*crucified, dead, and buried.*"

Second, we are challenged to take our own *Cross Walk*. We hear anew Christ's command: "*Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.*" Christian discipleship calls us to follow in the footsteps of our Master. Last week we explored what it means to "*deny yourself.*" Today we respond to Christ's call to "***take up your cross.***"

The Cross

In the twenty-first century church, what does it mean to "*take up your cross?*" Few people would interpret Jesus' words literally. We dismiss the Ruben Inajes of the world as well-intentioned but misguided. However, their actions DO remind us of the hideous reality underlying Christ's words. Our Lord was not speaking a language of metaphor or simile; a cruel cross awaited him on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

Jesus bluntly told the disciples "*that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*" (Matthew 16:21)

The Romans crucified the very worst of criminals. **Crucifixion** typically took place in a public place for all to see. The barbaric form of capital punishment served not only as a form of execution but also as a deterrent to crime. Persons in good physical condition could last for days on a cross. Typically, a person died of suffocation because of the tortured body's inability to raise the diaphragm any longer.

The disciples were scandalized and terrified by Jesus' words. Living under the brutal rule of the Roman Empire, they were all too familiar with the horrific practice of crucifixion; and they wanted nothing to do with it! Simon Peter immediately took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him, "*Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!*"

Jesus harshly said to him, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of god, but the things of men.*” THEN Jesus said to the disciples, “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*”

This was exactly what Peter and the disciples feared. They were not only concerned about Jesus but also about themselves. If the Roman Empire crucified Jesus, then there would be more than enough crosses for his twelve followers, too.

Remember the disciples were right. Legend tells us that 11 of the 12 original apostles died violent deaths. They clearly understood where the demands of discipleship might lead. So they tried to steer Jesus onto a safer path of their own choosing.

Like the first disciples, we don’t like this talk about taking up a cross. So we tone down Jesus words and spiritualize their meaning. Oh, the cross is still the central symbol of the Christian faith. Over the centuries, however, the church has softened the graphic image to make it more acceptable to the senses.

Rough wood is sanded smooth of sharp edges and splinters. Stark metal is plated with silver and gold. Symbols are inscribed upon the crossbeams. The finished product adorns the altars in our sanctuaries and the necklaces around our necks. We forget or ignore the underlying significance of the cross.

Suppose next week, however, we exchanged the altar cross for a working model of an electric chair? Or replaced cross necklaces with a hangman's noose? Or put a hypodermic needle used for lethal injections on the church stationary?

Now as then the church is scandalized and terrified by Jesus' words. Take up your cross. Sit in your electric chair. Tighten up your noose. Give yourself a lethal injection. It is a reality that would-be disciples wish to avoid; but to echo Paul’s words, “*We preach Christ crucified!*” (1 Corinthians 1:23)

During Holy Week, we will stand at the foot of the cross and see that Jesus did not speak in abstractions. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his son.*” Jesus died a terrible death at Calvary. His followers are also called to take up their own crosses. Discipleship entails sacrifice, rejection, suffering, and even death.

My Cross to Bear

Those who follow Christ are called to take up their cross. However, this command can easily be misunderstood. We hear the words but misinterpret the meaning.

A couple tells the story about her child attending Sunday School on Palm/Passion Sunday. On the way home, her mother and father asked, “What did you learn in Sunday School today?” Their daughter brightly replied, “We sang a song about **Gladys the cross-eyed bear!**”

Her parents were not Biblical scholars, but they could not remember any visually-challenged, female bruins in Scripture! The next week they happened to run into the Sunday School teacher and shared what their child had reported.

The teacher smiled and said, “We didn’t sing about Gladys the cross-eyed bear. We sang Fanny Crosby’s hymn, *Keep Thou My Way*, which has the words “*gladly the cross I bear!*”

There are all times we prefer the little girls version. Gladys the cross-eyed bear sounds much more inviting than “gladly the cross I bear!”

Christ’s command to “*take up your cross*” is often misread. We sometimes use the phrase, “**That’s my cross to bear.**” Normally, we are referring to some burden, difficulty, or hardship in life. This phrase is typically accompanied by a sigh or a shrug of the shoulders. Folk refer to a physical ailment, wayward family member, annoying situation, or irksome neighbor, and say, “Well, that’s my cross to bear.”

Do we really think that Jesus’ call to Christian discipleship only addresses life with an aching back, crazy cousin, fuzzy TV reception, or neighbor who cuts his grass at 7:00 on Saturday morning? Such an understanding cheapens and trivializes Christ’s command. To take up our cross means so much more than this.

Take Up Your Cross

Remember the context of this Scripture verse. Jesus had asked the disciples what people were saying about him. His followers reported the various rumors: John the Baptist raised from the dead, Jeremiah, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. Then Jesus asked, “*But what about you? Who do YOU say that I am?*” And Simon Peter responded, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*”

From that point on, Jesus began to teach them about his coming death. There’s a critical question that needs an answer in order to truly understand Jesus’ words. **Why did Jesus go to the cross?** He endured the shame and suffering of the crucifixion out of love for you and me. The Suffering Servant took upon himself the sins of the world, and by his stripes we are healed. He died with our names upon his lips.

The **cross IS central** to the Christian faith. It testifies to the height, width, and depth of God’s grace. Romans 5:8 declares: “*But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Hear Isaac Watts’ magnificent words from the hymn, *Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed*:

*Was it for crimes that I have done, he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace Unknown! And love beyond degree!
At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away;
It was there by faith I received my sight
And now I am happy all the day.*

My Cross

We are commanded to take up our own cross and follow the example of our Lord. However, we often balk at the cost involved.

Several years ago a man came through Cartersville, literally carrying a cross on his back and shoulders. He stood on the corner of Highway 41 as a visual witness to those who drove by. I do not question the man’s sincerity or faith. However, there was

something about the scene that struck my admittedly bizarre sense of humor. At the bottom of the cross, the man had attached two wheels to make it easier to carry.

A good preacher knows a sermon illustration when s/he sees it! It occurred to me that all of us would prefer a **cross with training wheels**. Something that is not overly burdensome and easy to carry.

However, the Spirit calls us to live a **sacrificial life of love**. Jesus told his disciples that the world would recognize us by our love. Throughout the pages of the New Testament, we hear this refrain in a variety of different ways, *“Love one another as I have loved you.”*

Maybe the time has come to retire the word **“love”** from the English language. After years of abuse and misuse, the overworked word is worn out. These four letters cannot handle the ever increasing work load required of them.

Consider all the different emotions and relationships love must describe. We love our family and friends. We love God and country. We love ribeye steak and lemon pie. We love football and baseball. We love music and TV.

Love has so many meanings that it has lost its meaning. Surely there is a difference between saying, “I love my wife” and “I love the Atlanta Braves.” Yet the same word describes both relationships. Love is as overloaded as a half ton truck carrying a full ton load.

The New Testament was written in Greek which was the universal language of the time. Ancient Greek had a number of different words to define various types of **love**. Three terms appear prominently in the New Testament:

- Eros: Describes passionate, romantic love. It is the root word for the English word “erotic.”
- Philia: Refers to the love of family and friendship. The name of Philadelphia literally means “The City of Brotherly Love.”
- Agape: In the New Testament, agape is a unconditional, self-giving, self-sacrificial love of others. It describes God’s love for us and our love for others.

Each of these types of love is appropriate in the Christian life. However, Jesus went to the cross out of an *agape* sense of love for us. Bearing Christ’s cross means that we do the same for others. In a culture of narcissistic self-gratification and disposable relationships, Christ reminds us of love’s true nature.

Love is not love until it costs something. True love costs a lot. Real love demands costly action. More than a *“sentimental journey,”* Christian love is an active, selfless, and sacrificial willingness to seek out the best for others. Jesus taught his disciples that true love means the willingness to *“lay down one’s life for his friends.”*

Godly love is not ultimately based upon feeling but willing. Deep love is not an emotion of the heart but a discipline of the soul. Warm, fuzzy feelings will only carry us so far. Christian love is much deeper and sterner stuff. We love because God first loved us. With such confidence, we can risk loving others.

While most of us will never be martyred for the faith, we can lay down our lives in daily service to others. Simple, every day acts of kindness and thoughtfulness are the

most common expressions of love. Hardly the stuff of newspaper headlines, but practical acts of love can transform us and others. Examples:

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|--------------|----------------------------|
| ❖ Friendship | ❖ Caring for aging parents |
| ❖ Marriage | ❖ Church |
| ❖ Parenthood | ❖ Service to others |

At times, we carry these crosses willingly and eagerly. Other times, however, Christ calls us to pick up a cross that we do not want to bear. In fact, we may find ourselves coveting someone else's cross!

Bearing our cross means that we also willfully and knowingly enter into sometimes hellish situations out of love to serve. Sacrifice is certainly demanded. Love is costly, but it is a price worth paying. And when you sacrifice self out of love for others, you don't count the cost.

Conclusion

For years, Don Shelby served as the senior minister at Santa Monica United Methodist Church in southern California. One evening he entered the church and heard someone sobbing in the sanctuary. The pastor slipped through the back door and saw a teenage girl kneeling before the altar table. Her body shook as she wept and cried. Then he watched as she reached forward and grasped the base of the altar cross.

The Reverend Shelby waited until she walked out and then asked if he could help her. Through her tears, she said, "My parents are getting divorced, and I feel like my life is falling apart. I needed someplace to go and pray. While I was kneeling here, something told me to grasp the cross. I thought it would make me feel better, and it already has."

(Story shared by Dr. Phil Schroeder, Associate Director of Connectional Ministries in the North Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.)

Today we are invited to the foot of the cross. There we will find forgiveness, salvation, purpose, joy, life, abundant life, and everlasting life. Come to the cross today. Grasp it, and do not let it go. Then take up your cross and follow Jesus.