

## “Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me”

- I. Introduction. In today’s Gospel Jesus said to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” This is the first of Jesus’ four predictions in Matthew about his upcoming passion and death. Peter was stunned and started to argue with Jesus, whose response to Peter was unequivocal and sharp: “Get behind me Satan.” Wow – just moments before this exchange Jesus had blessed Peter by telling him that he would be the rock upon which Christ would build his church. Jesus was equally emphatic with the other disciples. If they were intent on following him, the cross would be unavoidable. He essentially told them, just as I think he is telling us this morning, “You can either stand back and watch the Christian story unfold – be a part of the audience -- or you can join me and walk the way of the cross.” What they would later come to understand is that the way of the cross doesn’t only lead to suffering, it also leads to redemption, resurrection, and new life.
  
- II. The Way of the Cross. Does that mean that each one of us who chooses to become a disciple will be executed on a cross? To answer this question we must look at the text that follows. Then we see that Jesus also said “those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” Here the message of the cross broadens. In the fullness of this call to discipleship Jesus was saying that we must be willing to let our focus upon ourselves, upon our own security and self-interest die. Otherwise, we cannot focus upon loving others as Christ has called us to do.

Kent Nerburn has written a book about the importance of going beyond one’s own self-interest titled *Make Me An Instrument of Your Peace* (1999). In it he writes about the Prayer of St. Francis, which ends with: “For it is in giving that we receive, it is in forgiving that we are forgiven, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Nerburn writes: “if we expand our understanding of death to see it [not only as an end, but also] as a change in our lives, death can be a movement from darkness to light, as surely as from light to darkness. If we look for the deaths [of self importance and self-interest] that can free us for something new and better, we are less inclined to look upon death with fear and more inclined to embrace it with hope.” This applies not only to how we look at eternal life in Heaven, but how we look at letting our own egos, our own selves, our own needs, even our own opinions and our own rightness, die here in this life in order to express love to someone else. There is a very basic truth

here: it is hard to put our own selves off to the side in order to meet the needs of someone else. It's hard for you, and it's hard for me. It can involve sacrifice and suffering; it can lead to the Way of the Cross. But when we are able to die to self, we become free to help create a world that is based on Christ's love. Nerburn tells a story to illustrate the power of setting one's own needs aside (pages 122-125):

“Never did this [the St. Francis' Prayer] come home to me more clearly than several years ago when I was running a seminar on fatherhood for a group of teachers. On the last evening a Nigerian man was scheduled to come in and drum with us. I had not met him . . . His portion of the programming was insignificant to me, and I looked upon it as little more than a final evening's event . . . But the man was scheduled, so I acceded graciously and left the agenda open for him.

On the night of his presentation, he arrived about an hour early with an extensive collection of drums of all colors and shapes and sizes. He conscientiously tuned them and set them out for our use. One by one we shuffled in . . . and took our seats in the circle he had arranged. He had a smile of incredible warmth and a dignity of manner that made us all feel clumsy . . . But his gracious heart quickly took away all our self-consciousness, and soon we were all drumming together and working our way toward a common rhythm and expression. It was a wonderful experience – far more meaningful than any of us had expected. The man and his drums brought us a joy and camaraderie that had not existed up to the time of his arrival. The music became a metaphor for community, and to a person we were touched by what we had created.

As it neared nine-o'clock – the time scheduled for the ending of the event – a number of people asked the man to stay a bit longer . . . “I'm sorry,” he said, “I have to leave.” Because we had come to feel close to him in our short time together, we pressed him. “Just a bit longer.”

“I can't,” he explained. “I have to catch a plane. I'm going back to Lagos for my mother's funeral.” We were shocked. He had been totally giving to us, totally present, treating us like our activities were the most important event in the world to him. And through it all his heart had been carrying the burden of his mother's death. “Your mother's funeral?” we asked incredulously. “Yes,” he said. “It was scheduled for last week, and we don't dare put it off again.” “Why was it put off?” someone asked. “I had said I would come here and be with you, so I had it changed.” “You put off a funeral to be with us?” The man smiled that deep, warm, loving smile that he had graced us with all evening. “Oh yes,” he said. “Our funerals aren't like yours. There are many people that have to come.” “How many?” somebody asked. “About five thousand,” he said. “All of her village.” And we, the thirty of us, looked at him. “So you put that off for us?”

And he smiled again. "Yes. I had told you I would be here. I am honored that you shared the evening with me, and I thank you." With that, he left. We all sat in stunned silence, overwhelmed by the sense of dignity and grace that this man had brought to us. One by one we rose and made our way back to our rooms . . . Each of our hearts was filled with the indelible image of a gentle man who had changed the time of his mother's funeral a half a world way in order to spend a few hours of time with a group of thirty people he did not know, because he had given us his word. . . In our hearts, this man will never die."

- III. The Paradox of the Way of the Cross. In our culture we have done a good job in teaching our children to focus upon achieving goals and standing up for their rights. I'm not so sure that we done such a good job in teaching them about the paradox of walking the Way of the Cross: that as Christians we can be most alive when we are willing to put ourselves and our own needs in second place. Jesus could have backed away from his passion. He could have said, "You know, Peter, you're absolutely right! There must be another way. Perhaps we shouldn't go to Jerusalem, but instead hide out for a while." Christ was fully human; he could have done that. But if he had turned away from Jerusalem, there would have been no Resurrection and no Easter. Self-interest and fear would have won out over love. What a different world this would be if the Way of the Cross had been the Way Away From the Cross.
- IV. Conclusion. This morning we are blessing the new St. Francis window at the entrance to the narthex. This window has been graciously given in the memory of Mary Louise Harb, who died approximately one year ago. It is particularly fitting that St. Francis was selected for this window because Mary Louise has been described to as a woman of deep love for others, particularly those within her family. We thank God for parents and grandparents who have so often taught us how to put our own needs aside and reach out to others as Christ has loved us. At this time, I'd like to ask you to pray the Prayer attributed to St. Francis with me. It is found on page 833 of the Book of Common Prayer. As we pray this prayer, I'd ask each one of us to visualize a situation where today or this week we could set our own needs aside and become active ingredients of Christ's love and then to commit to taking specific steps to do so. Let us pray:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*