

## “Taking Up Your Cross”

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Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

... *Jesus told his disciples,*

*“If any [one] would come after me, let [them] deny [themselves]  
and take up [their] cross and follow me.*

*Matthew 16:24[RSV]*

Let us pray... O God,

Guide and help each of us to accept the challenges of life,

to take up the cross we have been given and remember that you  
have born the cross so none of us have to go it alone.

Amen

What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Christ?

Perhaps we should first ask,

“What is the cross of *Christ* about?” What does it mean?

Our tradition tells us that Jesus Christ died on a cross –

was crucified on a cross, for our sins, and because of this one-time act  
of self-sacrifice, we are forgiven of our sins.

We are forgiven, that is, if we choose to believe in Christ  
and accept that forgiveness;

By so doing, we are saved and receive eternal life in Heaven...

Amen! Amen! It's true! I believe it!

But I don't believe this interpretation goes far enough for what Jesus intended...

It seems to have been helpful enough for those conquerors who

called themselves ‘Christian’, to convince the people they colonized  
that the only way to Heaven was by becoming Christian.

The ‘unforgivable sin’, though, is a hardened heart –

like the hearts of those conquerors, whose own conversion  
didn't go deep enough – and it is not enough

unless it reaches to the heart to teach someone to love.

Those first disciples had their hearts broken when they witnessed

the injustice against Jesus of Nazareth, unfairly condemned and crucified.

They recognized his innocence – even as he was killed before them;

Their hearts were broken, just as Jesus' body was broken.

However, they became people who would offer their own lives in turn –  
for the salvation of the world.

Willard, p.2

Something else happened – something else must have happened,  
because there have been good people who have died before,  
who were just as tragically betrayed and cruelly treated.

Our tradition tells us that it was the Resurrection of Christ –  
and that was what happened to turn the disciples' despair into joy  
when they realized Jesus was connected with the power  
that was greater than those on Earth – including death.

Jesus was God scaled down to human form and through Christ,  
they realized how this statement is true:

*'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'*

Romans 12:21[RSV]

So, the disciples became apostles who willingly faced dangers  
because they believed in what they were doing and  
in whom they were doing it for.

Like any of us, they were not happy all the time,

but don't we find joy even in the most difficult circumstances?

There is joy that especially comes from serving a purpose greater than yourself  
it is a joy that comes from taking up your own cross...

This week, there was a report on National Public Radio  
about the Ebola epidemic in Liberia of west Africa.

Ebola is a terrible disease that is highly contagious and usually fatal and  
fighting it in rural communities is complicated by superstition and  
even suspicion of the very people who are trying to help;

It is believed that 20,000 people will die as a result in Africa.

This report followed a team of workers who were charged with removing  
the bodies of those who had died from this disease.

These were local people being paid the equivalent of \$1,000 –  
big money there, but for very dangerous work.

The team would have to put on a body suit that covered them from head to toe  
and five of them would enter a house to retrieve a body,  
carefully place it in a bag, then bring it to a truck to be taken away –  
with no more funeral for them than the cries of the villagers who loved them.

The most dangerous part of the work was in taking off their suit,  
goggles, boots, and gloves, without touching the *outside* of them.

One man – named Sorie Fofana, said he prayed in the mornings  
that God would give him strength and focus.

These workers are often shunned by their families,  
who have begged them not to do this work.

Fofana, said, for him – like his co-workers, it went from being a job to a calling.  
Knowing the risks, he saw that someone's got to do this work, and said,  
*"I'm going to save my country. If I die, I die for my country."*

Willard, p.3

This reminds me of those volunteers in Japan,  
who risked their lives to clean up the Fukushima nuclear reactor  
after the radiation disaster there.

They are called the “Fukushima 50”,  
but they have remained anonymous out of fear of being stigmatized  
and not for themselves but that it  
might lead to the bullying of their children and grandchildren –  
though corporate embarrassment and pressure  
may have something to do with that anonymity, too.

These people of Liberia and Fukushima certainly answered the call to self-sacrifice  
for the sake of the common good in circumstances that describe  
what Jesus meant by taking up your cross.

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/10/japans-nuclear-disaster>

Another example closer to home is the AIDS epidemic in this country  
which began in the mid 1970s and continues as a threat to this day.

Though it is a disease that is more likely to infect heterosexual people,  
the gay community was especially hard hit in the early years  
of identifying and detecting it.

There were hospitals that refused to accept people infected with HIV/AIDS  
and it was up to the courageous efforts of many in the gay community –  
who bore the cross for our society then,  
to bring attention and urgency in responding to this crisis.

Thanks to what those doctors, nurses, social workers, and activists did  
in a time of superstition and suspicion in this country,  
there are now more people living than dying with AIDS.

Taking up ‘your cross’ may not be as dramatic on the world scale,  
but no less important to you when challenges arise in your life.

It could involve just getting along in your own household or  
concerns for family members such as addictions or an unwanted pregnancy,  
financial loss or a business dispute;  
the decision to move to assisted living, the decision to stop driving,  
some social or political concern,  
the limitations brought on by a health crisis for a loved one or yourself –  
and even the eventual challenge of death.

Embrace your life – both friends and enemies, and  
deal with the cards you have been dealt.

The Apostle Paul gives us a clue for how to keep our balance:

Willard, p.4

*'Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.'* [Rom. 12:9]

A little girl at one of the churches I visited where I told stories liked  
the idea that Jesus could get mad, but also have a sense of humor.

At another church, I told the people there that Jesus got angry,  
because he expected us to do what is right – 'original sin' notwithstanding.

So... *Love each other like the members of your family.* [Rom. 12:10]

Fellowship is the great strength of Christian community.

Honor each other; Be enthusiastic; Be on fire in the Spirit;

Be happy and hopeful; Stand your ground when you have to; and pray.

Contribute to the community; Welcome strangers into your home;

Bless those who harass you and don't curse them.

Be happy with those who are happy; Cry with those who are crying –

in short, be emotionally and spiritually balanced like Jesus –

a true human being who is involved in each moment

to choose what is good, true, and loving.

So, take up your cross and choose the joy that comes with

being a 'living sacrifice' as the Apostle Paul said –

the 'living sacrifice' of serving God.

It is a joy that comes not from things you own or by having your own way,

but in the midst of your circumstances – and even despite them.

I once drew a picture of Christ for a contest called "Jesus at 2000" –

and my first thought was of him crucified on the world.

Then, I thought,

'Y2K bugs, The Apocalypse, The End of the World?

No! I need to see Jesus dancing!

Joyful, fearless, defiant of evil for justice & peace!'

"...It's hard to dance with the world on your back;

They buried my body and they thought I'd gone;

But I am the Dance and I still go on!

Dance then, wherever you may be;

'I am the Lord of the Dance', said he.

'And I'll lead you all wherever you may be;

And I'll lead you all in the Dance', said he."

Amen

*Our lesson from Romans 12:9-21 describes a code of conduct for early Christians that could still apply for Christians these days – if only all Christians would give it a try...*

- [9] Love should be shown without pretending.  
Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.
- [10] Love each other like the members of your family.  
Be the best at showing honor to each other.
- [11] Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—  
be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!
- [12] Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble,  
and devote yourselves to prayer.
- [13] Contribute to the needs of God's people,  
and welcome strangers into your home.
- [14] Bless people who harass you—  
bless and don't curse them.
- [15] Be happy with those who are happy,  
and cry with those who are crying.
- [16] Consider everyone as equal,  
and don't think that you're better than anyone else.  
Instead, associate with people who have no status.  
Don't think that you're so smart.
- [17] Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions,  
but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.
- [18] If possible, to the best of your ability,  
live at peace with all people.
- [19] Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends,  
but leave room for God's wrath.  
It is written,  
Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.
- [20] Instead, If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him a drink.  
By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.
- [21] Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words.*

Matthew 16:21-28

- [21] From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.
- [22] And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you."
- [23] But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men."
- [24] Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any [one] would come after me, let [them] deny [themselves] and take up [their] cross and follow me.
- [25] For whoever would save [their] life will lose it, and whoever loses [their] life for my sake will find it.
- [26] For what will it profit [someone], if [they gain] the whole world and [forfeit their] life? Or what shall [someone] give in return for [their] life?
- [27] For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every [one] for what [they have] done.
- [28] Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."