

**Devotion: August 26, 2020**

**Matthew 16:21-28**

<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

<sup>22</sup> Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. <sup>26</sup> What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

<sup>28</sup> “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

-----

What does “take up your cross and deny yourself” look like? Perhaps it’s following Jesus’ lead and, to the best of our ability, to make decisions and act in a way that reflects God’s love for us and all people, God’s acceptance of us and all people, God’s desire for abundant life for us and all people. “Deny yourself” is not the same, I think, as “forget all about yourself” and certainly is not “denigrate yourself.” I think, what denying yourself looks like is seeing that you and I are part of something larger, in recognizing that there is, in fact, no meaningful “you” or “I” apart from “us.”

Plus, we need to remember that the cross isn’t something we choose, but rather it is something that finds us. Sometimes what is good in our suffering is obvious – the sacrifices we make for our family members and friends, giving up individual “rights” during a pandemic for the sake of community health – and sometimes it’s hard to tell if there is anything good at all, in the suffering we see and experience. And yet Christ identifies with all of our suffering, took it all on himself in his suffering, and promises to meet us in ours.

Suffering doesn't need to be – and, quite honestly, *should not be* – spiritualized. And it should not be justified. And it should regularly be resisted, particularly as we are moved to resist the actions and systems that are involved that increase the suffering of others. But trust me, suffering – chosen and sacrificial or unwanted and at times even unholy – will find us. And Jesus will be there.

“Take up your cross” is a lot to take in. So perhaps it is enough to say to God that we are tired or hurting or fearful or insecure or anxious or in pain. To name these things honestly, in prayer, to go to scripture so that we can hear again God's promise that Christ will be there with us and to count more fully on Christ's presence and power to see us through. We literally cannot save our own lives, and our attempts to do so often take a toll on ourselves and others. But as we hear and trust God's promise, we discover that those things which seek to take our lives are no match for the crucified and resurrected Christ and we discover new life even in times of duress.

There is so much suffering going on just now. Whether related to COVID, racial injustice, economic hardship, emotional despair, or more. In all these things, not just Christ's cross is present, but Christ himself – holding us, grieving with us, encouraging us, and promising us the strength to endure and, having endured, to grow and, growing, to help others do the same.

*Great and loving God, we thank you for the teachings and life of Jesus Christ through whom we come to know you. We acknowledge that sometimes what we learn from him is difficult, Lord. We are not readily given to self-denial or cross-bearing, so we ask for faith and courage to follow in the ways of Jesus. Give us a bolder vision of who we can be in you. Grant us deeper compassion for others that our selfishness might not overwhelm us. Inspire us to love and give to others as a thankful response to your love and gifts for us. For the sake of Christ we pray. Amen.*