

Take Up Your Cross
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As we are considering the commands of Christ this Lenten season, few if any of the commands are as central and as challenging as this one:

If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.

Those words came following Jesus' words to the disciples that his death was coming. Peter rebuked him and said, "God forbid, Lord. This must not happen to you!" Then Jesus layed out the words: Deny self, take up your cross and follow me. They meant potential death for disciples, and they have meant death to many followers of Jesus since. I think of three: Dietrich Bonheoffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. What can it mean for us today?

We pick up this command today, Palm Sunday. The gathering throng sang Hosannas, but few could have comprehended he was riding to his death. On the coming Thursday Jesus would pray that the cross be avoided.

Abba, Father all things are possible with you.

Remove this cup from me;

yet not what I will but what Thou wilt.

I

We cannot speak of the cross, Christ's or ours, glibly. Paul spoke of the *scandal*, the stumbling block of the cross. It is wonderingly strange that we would have as the central emblem of our faith a gallows, and executioner's chair, an instrument of officially sanctioned capital punishment.

Of course, it is an empty cross, signifying for Christians that God raised the Crucified Messiah to be the Living Lord of our lives. But it is still an Instrument of torture and death.

It is difficult for us to fathom the horror of crucifixion. It was reserved for the worst of offenders: revolutionaries against the State; terrorists we might call them today. Roman citizens could only be crucified for high treason. Slaves and foreigners were the ones nailed on crosses.

Justin Martyr, second century Christian philosopher, wrote:

They say that our *madness* consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in the second place after the eternal and unchanging God.

A piece of graffiti has been discovered on a Roman palace wall near the Circus Maximus, dated around 200, C.E. It mocks a Christian named Alexamenos. The drawing is of a man on a cross except instead of a man's head is drawn the head of a donkey. Underneath in large letters is inscribed the words

ALEXAMENOS WORSHIPS GOD.

So was the shock and scandal of a religion based on a crucified man.

So when we talk of taking up one's cross we do not do so glibly, but with seriousness and reverence.

II

Jesus' command has two inter-locking parts: Deny self and Take Up Your Cross.

In a society which makes the "self" an object of worship, to deny "self" has a scandalous, counter-cultural quality. To be sure self-denial can be preached to a destructive extreme. But there is a denial of self, dying to self that is a crucial part of Jesus' teaching.

What can it mean? We should first recognize that the thing we call the self is a creation of our minds shaped by the world around us, a fiction which may or may not correspond to the reality of who we are.

So I find most helpful the distinction made by the famous monk Thomas Merton between the “false self” and the “true self”. The “false self” is shaped by the world around us and our experiences in the world. The “true self” is the self created by God in God’s own image. Picture the true self as the inner circle surrounded by many concentric layers of false self. Our salvation consists of discovering beneath all those layers our true self created for communion with God and true communion with others. Jesus leads us there. We are on an archeological excavation mission with Jesus to the true self.

So the denial of self is a letting go of the false self with all its false messages about who you are, with its fears, animosities, compulsions, its addictions and defenses. Can you locate the times when you are acting out of your false self? However beneath all these layers of false self is the true self in all its created beauty.

The false self is preoccupied with its own survival. It is always trying to defend itself, justify itself, prove itself. It is always about *self-expansion*, or inflation, for it believes its survival depends on it.

But Jesus turns all of this kind of thinking on its head. “Whoever wants to save one’s life”—and the word for life is *psuche*, from which we get the word *psyche*, and which can be translated life, self or soul. “Whoever wants to say one’s

life (self, soul, psyche) will lose it, and whoever loses one's life (self, soul, psyche) for my sake and the gospel's will save it." In the mystery of the gospel finding comes in losing. Then he adds, "For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his or her own life (self, soul, psyche)?"

In the spiritual life there is a letting go of false self in order to find one's true self. We do it day by day: "Lord, help me to let go of a little more of my false self today." Thomas Merton once wrote:

...if you want to identify me
 ask me not where I live,
 or what I like to eat,
 or how I comb my hair,
 but ask me what I am living for,
 in detail,
 and ask me what I think
 is keeping me from living fully
 for the things I live for. ¹

To deny self means to let go of the false self and to release what it is that is keeping us from living fully for what we want to live for.

So there is a *letting go* in Jesus' command, and there is a *taking up*, the *taking up* of one's cross. What can it mean for us to take up our cross? Not *Jesus'* cross. That's been done. Once and for all. Once and for *all!* But *our* cross. I think it means at least these two things.

First, it means to carry one's own suffering with faith, hope and love, to take it up in such a way that it becomes part of our calling as a "wounded healer." We all have our own personal kinds of suffering. The question is, how will we live with it?

When you take up one's personal suffering as a taking up of one's cross, you refuse the role of victim, with its learned helplessness, its bitterness, its despair. You pray, "O God, forge from the fires of my suffering a calling, a ministry to others. Help me not waste this pain. Help my suffering deepen my soul, enlarge my sympathies, increase my understanding, extend my arms and move me into some meaningful action on behalf of other. We're talking about the stewardship of pain.

We do not choose the suffering which comes our way. We are *acted upon* by others, by forces and circumstances beyond our control. But we choose what we do with our suffering. Take it up as a cross. Let God help you bear it: "Cast thy

burdens upon the Lord, and He will sustain Thee” (Psalm 55:22) And then let it shape your life as a life for others.

IV

Which leads to the second meaning of taking up one’s cross: the voluntary taking up of the sufferings of *others*. You willingly take on others’ sufferings as a cause. You become advocates and defenders of others. You are no longer a self-curved-in-on itself, and Martin Luther called it, but a self-for-others as Jesus was a self-for-others.

There was a terrible night in Germany, November 9, 1938, when Hitler’s program of violence against the Jewish holy places, homes and businesses. Synagogues were sacked, holy books burned, people injured and killed. It is called *Krystallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass.

That night Dietrich Bonhoeffer opened his Bible and read Psalm 74:

O God, why hast thou cast us off forever...?

Thy foes have roared in the midst of thy holy place.

They have set their emblems there...

They burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Bonhoeffer read the Psalm and wrote in the margin of his Bible: *How long shall I be a bystander?*

To take up one's cross means *no longer being a bystander*. For Bonhoeffer it meant helping Jews escape from Germany, then to increased opposition to Hitler. He was arrested for his role in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler and hanged. His cross. Arch bishop Oscar Romero took up the cause of the poor against the repressive regime in El Salvador and was shot to death at the altar performing mass. His cross.

I think of ways I see you altering your lives to help others. I see it every week, the ways you take up your cross by taking up the suffering of others.

Arthur McGill was a brilliant young theologian at Harvard Divinity School who died way too soon. His teachings and writing inspired many. He wrote:

In all his teaching and deeds Jesus stands forth as an advocate for love. It is important to recognize, however, that the love which concerns him has a particular character: it is essentially an activity of self-expenditure for another's need. ²

That's it: Love as a self-expenditure for another's need. It comes in big and small ways.

The great preacher Fred Craddock said in a sermon:

We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—“Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.” But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Usually our giving to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.³

So we befriend the homeless, collect books for prison, send supplies to Puerto Rico, go on marches to protest gun violence, work politically for the most vulnerable in our society, and pray, for prayer is a self-expenditure for others.

Taking up your cross 25 cents at a time. You may think some days it’s too little, but it all adds up. Mother Teresa, who gave her life for the poor in Calcutta put it this way: “Do small things with great love.”

It’s the way we deny self, take up our cross and follow Jesus.

1. Cited in Jim Forrest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*. (Mary Knoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), dedication page.

2. Arthur D. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological method* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press). P. 51.
3. As cited in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. viii (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 629.