

THE SIMPLE CONCEPT OF TAKING UP THE CROSS

Mark 8:27-38

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was preached to a handful of people under COVID-19 restrictions and livestreamed.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

**

The shortest and simplest gospel that introduces us to the Christian faith is the Gospel of Mark. In its center, Jesus predicts his suffering and death three times. Like clockwork, in Chapter 8, in Chapter 9, and in Chapter 10, he says:

...the Son of Man must undergo great *suffering*, and be *rejected* by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be *killed*, and after three days *rise again*.

Each time, the disciples *cannot believe* what he is saying.

- In Chapter 8, Peter rebukes him.
- In Chapter 9, the disciples do not understand and are reluctant to ask for a clarification.
- In Chapter 10, his statement leads to dissension among their ranks.

It is inconceivable to them that the Savior and Lord, for whom the whole people of Israel have been waiting for centuries, would, as Messiah, be *arrested, tried, convicted, mocked, humiliated, and executed* as an insurrectionist, in an official process instigated by the religious establishment, carried out by the government, choreographed to occur in the middle of the day in a public place.

And yet in Chapter 8, Christ responds to Peter's *rebuke* with a *clarification* and *call*:

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

This call has reverberated across the centuries in providing one major definition – perhaps *the* major definition – of what it means to be a Christian. So today, I want us to ask: *As individuals and as a church, what does it mean to “deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus”?*

I.

In the Adult Education hour at Westminster the past five weeks, Dr. Victoria Barnett has been leading us in a study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. She has focused on how the evil years before and during Nazi period helped formed the faith of the young theologian and pastor.

Like many Christian young people in the 1960s and 1970s, I read one of Bonhoeffer’s early and best-selling books, *The Cost of Discipleship* when I was in high school. It opens with these words, translated from German into the non-inclusive English of the day:

*When Christ calls a man [Bonhoeffer says], he bids him come and die.*¹

As many of you know, that is exactly what Bonhoeffer did. Active in the underground “Confessing Church,” he eventually participated in a resistance movement that sought to assassinate Hitler; and he was executed a few weeks before Hitler’s suicide as the war ended. Bonhoeffer was 39 years old. Single. Engaged to be married. No children.

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, Bonhoeffer’s life and death had an impact on me but did not fully persuade me. When I read his opening line – “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die*” – I admired it. I can still its print on the page of the green paperback in which I read it. I can see its placement on the page. But I questioned whether I *could* or *had to* take it literally, at least for myself.

- When we follow Jesus Christ, I thought, do we *have* to become a martyr?
- Do we *have* to seek situations out that put us in mortal danger?
- Do we *have* to die for our faith to be truly Christian?

Even in my early idealistic years, I knew my answer was “No.” I simply could not believe that God would require *everyone* to die for the faith; and since I was entering eligibility for the draft just as the lottery for the Vietnam War was ending and since I knew I would never become a missionary, I was relatively certain that I would not have to face dying for my *faith* or my *country* or *both*. Yet I still harbored doubts as to whether I was a genuine Christian if I couldn’t affirm, with Bonhoeffer, that “When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die.”

II.

If it was a book which sowed these seeds of doubt within me, it was a book that helped me come to terms with that doubt as well.

A couple of years into my seminary experience, I was introduced to the writings of a theologian at Yale Divinity School named Hans Frei. Frei was ethnically Jewish, baptized Lutheran in his native Germany, fled anti-Semitism in the 1930s, migrated to England and eventually America. Along the way he had a growing Christian faith and academic career and become a major theologian in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Scribner, 1963).

Frei wrote a book entitled *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.² It ended with a sermon in which he talked about Christ's death. He specifically quoted the Apostle Paul:

Christ, being *raised* from the dead,
Will *never* die again.
The death he died, he died to sin, *once for all*;
But the life he lives, he *lives to God*.
So you must also consider yourselves *dead to sin*
And *alive to God* in Christ Jesus.
Therefore, do not let *sin*
Exercise *dominion* in your mortal bodies.³

Instead of echoing Bonhoeffer's call to *take up our cross and follow Jesus*, Paul describes the Christian life as *dying with Christ to sin, being raised with Christ to newness of life*, and therefore *not allowing the power of sin to exercise dominion* over our mortal lives.

Inspired by Paul, over time, I came to believe that *taking up our cross and following Jesus* could take *more forms* other than literally losing our lives in his service, though I knew that such losing of life was genuine, real, and heroic.

III.

Earlier this week, I scheduled a Zoom call with Vicki Barnett to ask her questions I still have about Bonhoeffer. During the conversation she shared with me an article she had written and delivered just before the COVID shutdown that speaks to a sense I have developed, over time, of what the simple concept of taking up the cross means to me.⁴

In her article, she traces how Bonhoeffer's upbringing in a strong, educated, diverse, cultured German family instilled within him a *genuine sense of public service*. She writes:

Quality. Character. Nobility. Modesty. Moderation.... Even as a small child Bonhoeffer was instilled with an awareness of who he was in a larger sense, in his relationship to family, friends, colleagues – and out of that emerged an unusually strong sense of *responsibility to family, church, society, nation, culture* – and, I would argue, to *history itself*.

She continues:

Bonhoeffer's wartime writings...come out of this understanding: that as parents, as teachers, as clergy, in whatever area of life we find our vocations, those vocations come with responsibilities and expectations...to *the greater good*.

For the later Bonhoeffer, taking up the cross lead to martyrdom, but that martyrdom came out of his larger sense, inherited from his family, of using the gifts of his upbringing for the *greater good* of humanity.

² Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

³ Romans 6:9-12.

⁴ Victoria Barnett, "Bonhoeffer's Challenge to Nation and Culture," Lecture, Perkins School of Theology, February 13, 2020. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOKW_hOUet0.

IV.

Late Thursday afternoon, amid three or four fast moving things I was balancing, I received notification that I could schedule my COVID vaccination. I stopped everything. Within a few minutes I was able to schedule my shot and yesterday morning went to George Washington Middle School arm outstretched.

As I had heard, it was an efficient and friendly operation. There were several hundred people there, many of them public health workers, many more people lined up to receive their vaccines. It was moving to see couples, individuals helping an elderly parent or younger adult in a wheelchair, people quietly and happily masked, standing in line, for the sake of their own health, for the sake of the health of their families and colleagues, for the sake of public health. It was moving to see the simple patriotism of people standing in line for the common purpose of healing. Beneath my bulky mask, I was moved to tears.

Later in the day I saw an email with photographs taken yesterday of a team of friends and medical professionals helping Pastor Whitney visit, for the first time, the accessible apartment that has been rented since November but which she had never seen until yesterday. The visit was scheduled so that her physical and occupational therapists could see what she needs to learn to move in by what has emerged as a mid-April target date. This is real progress.

Thinking about Bonhoeffer's words of serving the public good, seeing all the warm and dedicated people vaccinating or presenting themselves for vaccination, seeing Whitney smile sitting at her computer and health care professionals smile as they measured the height of countertops and width of doors – all these made me think of the self-denial and cross-bearing – secular or religious – that is going on every day in our country and around our world: Countless hours and effort that scientists and lab technicians and corporate planners and Members of Congress and civil servants and political appointees and logistics engineers and delivery drivers and school janitors and nurses and physicians have put in to get us to the point, within a year of outbreak, of having a vaccine and seeing its distribution in school gyms converted overnight to public health clinics.

**

Whether we are secular or religious, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, it is all a form of *denying self, living for others, living for the common good*. For us as Christians, it is *taking up our cross and following Christ*.

Sometimes we get to *choose* the crosses we bear. At other times, our crosses choose us. But either way, we'd best bend down, take our cross up into our arms, place it over our shoulders, and begin our walk with it, because in God's infinite wisdom, God has designed it to fit us, like a tailor designs a suit or dress and hangs it in our closet, awaiting our donning of it.

V.

Taking up our cross and following is not just a calling or task for *individuals*. *Societies, nations, churches, communities* have their crosses to bear as well.

None of us in this sanctuary or joining through livestream was involved in crafting the ways our society originally held back on embodying the ideals of our founding document: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." None of us was involved in developing the system of slave trade and the slave economy so significant in our nation from its origins. None of us was an original perpetrator or an original victim.

But we all live in a system in which perpetration and victimization remain entrenched in many of our structures, our norms, our laws, our customs, our symbols, our traditions, our schools, our religious

institutions, our politics, our economics. The arc of history bends toward justice, but the incompleteness of its bending is a cross our country still bears and we its citizens must carry.

Our generation *must* take up this cross and carry it on behalf of generations *still suffering* and generations *yet to be born*. Bearing the cross of Christ into even the nooks and crannies of American life means working very hard to disallow the sin of racism to rule our mortal bodies as *individuals* or our mortal body as a nation.

- It is a task we are *beginning* as a church through our Therefore Project, in which many of you have participated in small group sharing this past month.
- It is a task we are *about* as individuals.
- It is a task we are *about* as a nation.

And for those of us who are Christian, this task is part of the simple concept of taking up our cross and following Jesus Christ.

Therefore it is a cross we take up and bear as individuals, as a church, as a nation, with determination, with joy and with hope. It is a cross we choose because it has chosen us.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA