



Pick Up Your Cross

Matthew 16:21-28

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For a couple years, I served on the Board of Governors for Western Fairfax Christian Ministries, or WFCM. This non-profit serves the western region of Fairfax County, including Centreville and Chantilly, in much the same way that ALIVE! serves our community here in the City of Alexandria. Again, similar to ALIVE!, WFCM began as the collaborative work among a number of the local churches, who saw a growing need for food resources, clothing, utility assistance, and work training in the community. The collaborative effort made possible what no individual church had the capacity to do on its own.

I remember when serving as a Board member, the question was often asked, how is our non-profit distinct from other non-profits? What makes our work of caring for the needs of the lower-income community any different from other food banks, or pantries, or shelters?

Inevitably, the answer always came back to our founding as a collaborative effort among *Christian* churches. The name said it all. The organization held strong to its Christian roots even in its title: Western Fairfax *Christian Ministries*.

At the time, I didn't push back on this over-simplistic response. As we often changed the subject once a declarative statement was made, "We are different because we are Christian," the topic was not discussed much further. As a Board of all Christian believers, I found it to be assumed that we all shared a common understanding of how our Christian identity lay the foundational root of our work together. And yet, I often found myself with internal thoughts circling in the open vastness of my mind. I didn't know how to voice my questions, and wasn't sure, as the youngest member of the Board, if my questions were even welcomed.

Those questions continue to circle in my mind anytime I hear someone ask, "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

I'm curious if you've thought on this question yourself in recent months.

What does it mean for you – or for us collectively – to be called "Christian"?

When I think about the possible answers to this question, I can't help but acknowledge that the responses are broad in quantity and quality. It's rather easy to see the varying answers to this question by simply turning on your choice of public media outlet. Over the past couple of weeks, with the DNC and RNC being aired nightly, we've not only seen people claiming *their* Christian perspective, but we've also seen people denouncing the *other's* Christian perspective.

In one of our Conversations on Race this past week, it was named that you could have watched the two conventions over the past two weeks and have thought that what was being presented was two different nations. In much the same way, perhaps they were speaking of two different religions.

Admittedly, it's challenging to define the Christian life in any oversimplified way. The best attempt at such a definition is perhaps found in our creeds – like the Nicene Creed, or the Apostles Creed. And yet, written over 1500 years ago, I also know there is great criticism as to how well we fully understand the words of these creedal statements.

It's also challenging to define the Christian life in America, because Christianity itself began at the presentation of Jesus of Nazareth in a time, place, and culture that was very different than our own. We have no Biblical text that roots Christianity in a time of modernity. The Bible was written during a time of Roman occupation to a people who had largely been the pawns of the empires surrounding them for their entire existence. It was written to a people who had little, if any, political or economic power. To claim this Biblical text as redeeming of our own experience, is to go against the very truth of the Biblical text. We live in a nation that has been self-described as the global world leader from an economic and militaristic perspective. As such, we – as a collective whole – are more aligned with Rome than we are the early Christian church.

And yet, not everyone in our community – not everyone in our nation – has had the benefit of the political and economic power that our nation has flaunted. To understand the call of the Biblical text to a faith in Jesus Christ – to understand the call to Christianity in its rawest, and truest form – is to understand the Biblical text from the view of those in the community who are oppressed. To understand the call of God through the witness, teaching, death and resurrection of Christ, is to hear the voice of those on the margins crying out for life ... *and to stand with them.*

Our text in Matthew 16 lays this definition of Christianity out pretty plain, if we care to hear.

Up until this point in the gospel of Matthew, the story has traced Jesus from his birth to his ministry in the region of Galilee. He's called his disciples, who have been following him long enough to begin to understand his role as God's Son – his identity as the Messiah.

In fact, if we back up just a few verses, we find in Matthew 16:16 that Peter correctly names Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus praises him in verse 17, saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah," before continuing to name that Peter will have a very defined role in the formation of a new church. Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Jesus is using a word play to define Peter's role. Peter is literally the rock, for the name Peter comes from the Greek word "petros," which means stone, or rock.

So, having rightly defined Jesus as the Messiah, we move into today's text. This happens just moments later. Either thinking he needed to clarify for the disciples, or perhaps thinking the disciples have figured out his identity well enough, Jesus decides to lay bare the reality of his call as Messiah. What happens in verse 21 is the first of three prediction claims by Jesus in Matthew's gospel. It reads, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

In the course of Jesus' ministry, this is a pivotal shifting point from what has been, to what will be. Jesus will suffer, he will die, and he will be raised again.

Peter, the newly named rock of the church, pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Honestly, who can blame Peter for his concern regarding Jesus' predicted path? These men – each of these disciples – is a faithful Jew. They've been taught the stories of the law and the prophets. In their Biblical learning, they've heard about this Messiah who was to come and free them from the bounds of oppression. They've heard the stories of the prophets who promise a new creation with no pain or death. They have a relatively defined understanding of what the Messiah will look like. And now that the Messiah is before them, they have a very distinct opinion of what that Messiah should do.

For a people who have long been oppressed – for a people who have hardly had any regional power – for a people who have no global influence – the one to save them has finally arrived. "Security. Influence. Power. It is hard to resist their glorious lure."ⁱ It is quite likely that Peter "still holds an unconstructed hope for a powerful king or mighty warrior that will reign in triumph and put down Israel's armies."ⁱⁱ

But Jesus doesn't affirm Peter's hope of glory. On the contrary, Jesus turned and began to rebuke Peter. Though Peter had pulled Jesus aside, Jesus turns back to the others so that all can hear him as he laments, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The one who was the rock of foundation has quickly become the stumbling stone in Jesus' path.

Peter is rebuked as Satan – for his invitation of Christ is the same as Satan's invitation in the wilderness, to find an easier path than that which carries the shame of the cross.ⁱⁱⁱ

In his normal way of teaching, after the rebuke, Jesus educates: "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 will find it."

In responding, Jesus not only says, "not only will I not take up this mantle of power that you desire for me to take, but *you* must not either." If you want to be my follower – if you want to

be in my church – if you want the promise of God that is made possible in the Messiah – you must pick up your cross and follow me.

I'm reminded in this text of one of our recent conversations, in which theologian James Cone offered a distinct challenge for us not to domesticate the cross. Cone offers, "The cross, as a symbol of salvation, has been detached from the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings. ... The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament Christians wear around their necks. Rather than reminded us of the cost of discipleship, it has become a form of cheap grace."^{iv}

The Romans did not crucify just any criminal. It was not their only form of capital punishment. Crucifixion was reserved for those the Romans wanted to make an example out of. It was their way of saying to the community, "this could be you if you go against the empire."

When there was to be a crucifixion, the one to be crucified was forced to carry the cross beam of their cross through town to the site of their death. It was a way to humiliate them in front of the public – to put them on shameful display throughout the community – to ensure that anyone who might sympathize knew that such an end was forthcoming. "The condemned who carried the horizontal bar of the cross to the site of crucifixion would have been subjected to taunts, humiliation, rejection, and shame before finally enduring an agonizing death."^v

This, Jesus says, *this* is the way to follow me. Pick up your cross – be willing to endure the humiliation that comes from speaking out against the empire – be willing to be shamed by the empire in the face of the community – be willing to be rejected by the masses – be ready to follow my lead.

And to be sure – just to clarify, because it wouldn't be the first time this invitation was abused in our nation's history by those who have privilege – the invitation of Christ, the path of following Jesus, is not about intentional self-effacement. Jesus is not inviting the follower to intentional acts of self-harm or oppression. Sadly, too many self-proclaimed Christians in the history of America have tried to keep the oppressed under oppression by saying that they, the powerful, are helping the oppressed to live out Christ's call to carry the cross. Yes, many a Christian have even tried to say that slavery was God's desire, because it affirmed salvation through suffering. "The notion of sacrificial suffering as redemptive comes with a history of abusive practices and risky trajectory of ill-conceived self-abandonment."^{vi} ... **That's not how this works.** No person of honest faith can look at the oppressed and say, "well done for maintaining *your* faithfulness," without also joining in the liberating work of ending their oppression.

The call of picking up the cross is to see your will – your desires – your affirmation as submissive to that of God. What good is your wealth, if your neighbor is starved from hunger? What good is your power, if your neighbor is suffering from oppression? What good is your comfort, if your neighbor sleeps outside in the bitter cold of the winter?

Jesus says, “What good is having all that the earth can provide, if it means losing your life?”

So, I return to the question, What does it mean to be called a “Christian”? What does our work, our life, our church look like if we are to be defined as ones following Christ?

Christ says, plain and clear, if you want to be my followers, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

To be a Christian means that we have to see that God’s way is not the way of the world. It is, as Peter found, a radical deviation from the powers of empires.

It means, when others might declare a person’s life as unworthy because of the color of their skin, we make what has become a shameful declaration by the empire, **Black Lives Matter**, because by God’s own doing, we are all one creation.

It means that, when others are unwilling to make a proclamation that defines God’s humble and life-giving way as right and just, we pick up our cross and acknowledge that God’s way is seen as humiliating among the empires of the world. Seeking peace over war, and gifting love over begrudging hate, are the ways of God, but not the ways of the empire.

It means that we demand justice, even if it means humiliation and disgrace in the public realm, for yet another black man has been shot because of the color of his skin. And while Jacob Blake, who had committed no crime that night, lies paralyzed in a hospital room, a white teenager who shot and killed two men in the same community sleeps comfortably in his own bed.

It means that, no matter if it requires the naming of our own complicity in the pain and injustices this nation has caused, a path toward righteousness means picking up our cross and naming our sin. It means walking that path of humiliation and declaring that even I, Thomas James, have benefited from the injustices of racism, and that I have, and continue to exhibit the ignorance of racism. In these ways, and many others I am still learning of, I am a racist. That’s part of my cross to bear.

The call to pick up one’s cross is not about glorifying the reality of such oppression. It is a call to acknowledge that in America, with the power and privilege of our nation on the global scale, we have too often confused Christianity with American exceptionalism. We have been like Peter – hoping that the Redeemer would somehow bless us over any other. We’ve yearned for a savior-like figure to sit in the Oval Office to ensure our national glory over the glory of any other nation.

And yet, Jesus says, if you want to follow me – if you want to call yourself a “Christian” – pick up your cross. Be willing to see that the ways of God are not the ways of the world. The invitation of Christ is not one to empirical glory. Jesus didn’t come so you could deny that you have benefitted from the oppression of others. Jesus came to declare that only in our naming the sin

of the world can we truly find redemption. Only in professing the Truth, the Light, and the Way, can the world really be redeemed.

So may we live in to our claim to be “Christian,” that we might be willing to take the unpopular walk, that we might not disassociate ourselves with the oppression that is laid on our shoulders as we bear the burden of the cross, for there is a way toward true life. It is the way of Christ. The way of love. The way of liberation. The way of redemption. It is the way of salvation.

May God grant us the strength and endurance to pick up the weight of the work, that we might carry our cross and follow the Lord in faithfulness. Amen.

ⁱ Audrey West. <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved August 26, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Anna Case-Winters. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Case-Winters.

^{iv} James Cone. *Fred D Grey Plenary Lecture in Human and Civil Rights*. Lipscomb University. Delivered August 30, 2017.

^v Mitchell G. Reddish. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching on the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

^{vi} Dale P. Andrews. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching on the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.