

Take Up Your Cross

Mark 8:31-38

When I first shared this message, the shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, was the news of the day. Since then, there have been 208 school shootings, the most recent in Georgia where 4 people were killed by a 14-year-old boy. 2020 had the lowest count with 10 recorded shooting incidents, likely due to the COVID shutdown. A high of 51 shootings was recorded in 2022. In all 134 people have been killed, 358 injured, and thousands traumatized by what they have seen, heard, or experienced in their communities as a result of these heinous acts. Following each of these incidents, we have heard stories of teachers and students being hailed as heroes for their efforts to aid those caught in the crosshairs of a mass shooter.

Each of these stories focuses on people who have chosen to take up a cross. In the story of the staff and students at the various affected schools we see everyday people who decided in an instant to take up the cross of self-sacrifice in the face of almost certain death. The stories of the police, EMTs, and crisis counselors show us people who have taken up the cross, again of self-sacrifice, and chosen to put aside jobs and families to offer aid, comfort, and counsel to those in extreme pain.

Also in the news six years ago was the story of Billy Graham, who passed away at the age of 99, a man who took up the cross of Jesus and made it his life's work. As an evangelist, Billy Graham often spoke about the Cross of Jesus. Here is one of his quotes:

To take up your cross means to associate yourself with Christ and to share His rejection. It means you take a stand for Christ even though people make fun of you, persecute you – or even kill you.

This is the same message Jesus was trying to convey to His disciples. In the passage from Mark, He plainly tells His disciples that He himself will be killed because of the message He has brought. Peter acts as the spokesperson for the group and essentially says, “Say it ain’t so!” Peter had just declared that Jesus is the Messiah. Up to this point they had seen Jesus heal the afflicted, feed large crowds with just scraps of food, and walk on water. This caring, miracle working Messiah is one they could get behind. But a meek Messiah that would be led to the cross was not what the disciples had in mind. Even though Jesus said He would rise again in three days, the predicted great suffering, rejection, and death, were just too much for the disciples to stomach.

With 2000+ years of hindsight, I think it can be easy for us to scoff at Peter. The Gospels tell us he was a bit of a hot-headed, shoot from the hip kind of guy. We can write off his rapid turnaround from “you are

the Messiah” to “now you’re just talking crazy”, because we know the outcome. It’s easy for us to jump from “you are the Messiah” to the glory of Easter morning and ignore or minimize what transpired in between. We look back at the compassionate, caring, healing Jesus, and then look forward to the triumphant returning Jesus, and don’t see the beaten and broken Jesus hanging on a cross. A cross meant to humiliate and defeat. But that same cross is the crux of the gospel message.

Peter’s rebuke of Jesus comes from thinking what we perceive God should be, instead of what God is. The great reformer, Martin Luther, wrote about this contrast in what he called the “theology of glory” versus the “theology of the cross”. The theology of glory is based on what our assumptions are about how a god is expected to act in the world. The theology of the cross, however, is about God’s self-revelation in the weakness of suffering and death. The theology of glory confirms what people want in a god; the theology of the cross contradicts what people imagine God should be.

The truth about God contradicts our expectations. People think that God is distant, unwavering, never given to changing His mind. That is something we generally expect in a god, but we have learned that the ability to change His mind is a valuable asset. The examples we have from the Bible confirm this: Moses pleading for God to show mercy on

the complaining company in the desert, Abraham pleading the case of his nephew, Lot, and Lot asking to flee to somewhere other than where God had chosen for him. We are fortunate that God does not live up to our expectations because His mercy is given to sinners, not just the righteous; because His strength is exposed in weakness, not power; because His wisdom is hidden in parables and paradox, not self-help maxims; and His life is shown to us in death.

That is why Jesus says that those who want to save their life, those who believe in the theology of glory, will lose it, while those who are willing to lose their life for the sake of the gospel, those who believe in the theology of the cross, will save it. God is not conformed to our understanding of who and what He is. God is found in uncertainty, danger and suffering, exactly where our human wisdom sees Him as being absent.

Understanding the theology of the cross can be difficult when the dominant expressions of Christian faith in North American society prize success, personal fulfillment, and deliverance from pain for those who profess to be believers. This cultural Christianity is antithetical to the theology of the cross. But this is not something new to our society. This passage from the Gospel of John shows that even the disciples of Jesus struggled with the theology of the cross:

John 6:53-66 (NIV2011)

⁵³ Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.

⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.

⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ...⁶⁰ On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”

⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you?

⁶² Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!

⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.

⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had

known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him.

⁶⁵ He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.”

⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Thankfully, not all the disciples left him. Many stayed through the crucifixion and were rewarded with the Good News of Easter Sunday. In between these events, many likely asked, “where is God?”

How often do people even now struggle with the question, “Where is God?” in the midst of tragedy? He is present, although we cannot see Him, we can see His Spirit move in the first responders, doctors and nurses caring for the injured, the friends and family who move in closely to support those affected by these acts, He will never ask us to carry a cross that he is not willing to bear with us.

The words from Psalm 22 speak to the God that is with us in our suffering. These words follow the description of Jesus on the cross:

Psalm 22:12-18 (NIV2011)

¹² Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

¹³ Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.

¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.

¹⁵ My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet.

¹⁷ All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.

¹⁸ They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

Although we know that following the way of the cross may lead to suffering in our own lives, though most of us will not be called on to lay down our lives as Jesus and his disciples did, we also know that the eternal God is ever present with us. We can give him praise for what he has done, what he is doing, and what he will do in the future. We can “proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!”

And what has he done? In Jesus, who took up his cross, God has cancelled our sin and redeemed us to himself. Even with our flawed theologies, God has made us his children, forgiven and changed. How

can we not now take up our cross and proclaim His good name? Jesus warned that some may choose to do so when he said:

Mark 8:38 (NIV2011)

³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.”

Let us not be found among those who would be ashamed of Jesus and deny his name. Especially now when so many things are happening in the world that cause people to question if God is still alive and if he still cares. Take up your cross, shine a light in a dark world, have a ready word for those who would ask, “Who do you say Jesus is?”

As a postscript, I began this message with the statistics about school shootings in America. The Church of the Brethren as one of the historic peace churches is calling for an end to gun violence. Next Saturday, September 21, you are all invited to join us for a peace vigil here at the church. May our light shine in the darkness and draw others to the truth of the cross. AMEN

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