

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 16:24-28

Then Jesus told His disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me..."

Of all the symbols of Christianity, the cross is perhaps the simplest and the most obvious: The cross reminds us that Jesus died on a cross for our sins. The very emptiness of a cross, as opposed to a crucifix, reminds us that Jesus is risen for our hope.

There are all kinds of crosses. I'll bet we have several different kinds here in this sanctuary this morning.

I've got one here on my Bible cover, basket-stamped on saddle leather and outlined in silver studs. Polly has one on the key-ring that has the car keys on it, with "God loves you" in Spanish engraved upon it. I'm certain at least one of you sitting in the pews has a cross on a chain around your neck. One of you may have a cross tattooed somewhere on your body. Maybe someone has cross earrings. I bought Polly a pair of western boots to wear to the rodeo last March that has pink crosses inlaid in the tan leather, and it isn't unusual at a rodeo to see leather crosses or silver crosses on the bridles and saddles of the contestants.

I suspect that just about anything that can be decorated with a cross has been. And I wonder sometimes if the crosses I see as jewelry or tattoos are expressions of Christian faith, or mere ornamentation.

When Jesus told His disciples to take up their cross, He wasn't telling them to make it a symbol, a design, an ornament, a decoration. He was talking about a life-style. Denying oneself was the true sign and symbol of that life-style.

Now most of us, American Presbyterians of the 21st century, are not really good at self-denial. We enjoy our creature comforts. We enjoy our reclining chairs, our air conditioning, our big screen televisions, our luxurious automobiles, most of which have reclining seats and air conditioning, if not big screen televisions.

William Barclay defined self-denial in his commentary on this text, and I can't do better. He wrote:

*"Ordinarily we use the word self-denial in a restricted sense. We use it to mean doing without something, giving up something. For instance, a week of self-denial is a week when we do without certain pleasures or luxuries, usually in order to contribute to some good cause. But that is only a very small part of what Jesus meant by self-denial. To deny oneself means in every moment of life to say no to self and to say yes to God. To deny oneself means once, finally and for all to dethrone self and to enthrone God. To deny oneself means to obliterate self as the dominant principle in life, and to make God the ruling principle, more, the ruling passion, of life. The life of constant self-denial is the life of constant assent to God." *The Gospel of Matthew, volume 2, page 167.**

Barclay adds that this is just the first part.

The second part is taking up one's own cross, what he describes as taking up the burden of sacrifice.

"The Christian life is the life of sacrificial service. The Christian may have to abandon personal ambition to serve Christ; it may be that he (or she) will discover that the place where he can render the greatest service to Jesus Christ is somewhere where the reward will be small, and where the prestige will be non-existent. He will certainly have to sacrifice time and leisure and pleasure in order to serve God through the service of fellow-men...He may well have to sacrifice certain things he could well afford to possess in order to give away more. The Christian life is the sacrificial life." *Ibid.*

But I want to challenge Barclay a bit here, and remind him posthumously that Jesus said that He had come that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. The Christian life on the one hand is a life of sacrifice. But it is also a life of abundance, of abundant blessings.

One carries one's cross not as a symbol of our sacrifice for Christ, but of Christ's sacrifice for us. And He freely gives us all things, so that we enjoy grace upon grace and abundance upon abundance.

One of God's humblest servants was the Reverend J. J. Martin. Now J.J. Martin served the Arcadia church more years than I did, but his tenure was broken by ten years serving the First Presbyterian Church in Savannah. He came back to Arcadia after World War II, and stayed there until he retired, about the time that the Viet Nam war began.

Reverend Martin had always lived in a manse, and had never asked for a raise from the church. He worked as the chaplain at the state mental hospital to supplement his income, and when he retired from the church, he also had a pension from the state waiting on him.

His wife, as we used to say, "came from money". About the time Reverend Martin retired, these humble servants of the Lord, who had never owned a home, who had never owned a new car in his life, came into a large inheritance, from one of Mrs. Martin's relatives. They bought a nice home in the Hyde Park area of Tampa, and Mrs. Martin decided they needed a new car. So they went to a dealer, and Mrs. Martin said, "Now John, you can pick out any car you want." Reverend Martin looked the cars over, and said, "That little green one on the end, it reminds me of the cars we use to drive before the war, with the radiators out front. I like it." And that explains how the Reverend and Mrs. J.J. Martin rolled off into retirement in a brand new 1964 Mercedes Benz.

He was the same humble servant of the Lord, who served a small struggling church for less money than he made in Savannah, who wore threadbare suits, who spent his extra money on chewing gum and lifesavers to hand out to the patients at the mental hospital. He denied himself, took up his cross, and retired in a Mercedes Benz.

I know several of you who sit here every Sunday drive Mercedes Benz automobiles. It is just as easy to take up your cross and deny yourself in a Mercedes as it is in a Model T Ford, or in a Dodge pick-up truck. It is a life of service, a life of prayer, a life of blessing others because you've been blessed, that makes the difference.

In the last decade or so, the cult of prosperity has swept through American Christianity. You have preachers telling their people that God wants them to be rich. And they almost throw a

guilt trip on their parishioners who aren't wealthy. It is almost as though they are saying, if you aren't wealthy, you are doing something wrong.

Somewhere in between vows of poverty like monks and nuns and some orders of priests take and claims of wealth, we've lost sight of the truth: that the life of self-denial isn't about money, it isn't about material things, it isn't about how little or how much we have. It is about who is in charge. It is about who governs our lives. It is about who is in control of the things we do and the way we use the gifts that God has given us.

Self-denial is saying to God, "I surrender all to be used to your glory: all that I am, all that I have, all that I will ever be I belong to you, and I will use what you entrust to me and that which you have endowed me with in your service, so help me God."

So help me, God.

And to God be the glory. Amen.