

## **Cross**

Jubilee Mennonite Church  
March 10, 2019

**Purpose:** to explore the way of the cross that redeems even that which seems unredeemable.

**Message:** As disciples, we are called to pick up the cross and follow Jesus, knowing that challenge can and will result, trusting the redeeming God to bring beauty and healing in it all.

**Scripture:** Matthew 16:21-28 [I will read]; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

**Synopsis:** There is power in the cross; so the song says. But also deep challenge. As Jesus comes into conversation with the final act of his life, the conflict with the powers of the priests and the scribes, he confronts the basic assumptions of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Peter voices the human assumption: that power is best realized by playing by the rules of the world where nothing bad can happen to those in power.

But Jesus has another way: in order to come after him, one must pick up the cross—the instrument of shame and execution—and trust God to redeem even that into the way of the kingdom. Jesus reminds us that the work of making the good belongs to God bringing about newness and hope from within even that which we would reject ourselves as the way of God. Following Christ with the cross is about the radical trust in God's faithfulness of a new way and being of people of God. As disciples, we are invited into the challenge of faithful following.

**Matthew 16:21-28**

<sup>21</sup> From that time on,  
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.

<sup>22</sup> And Peter took him aside  
and began to rebuke him, saying,

“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

<sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter,

“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.”

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples,  
“If any want to become my followers,  
let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.

<sup>25</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

<sup>26</sup> For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?  
Or what will they give in return for their life?

“For the Son of God is to come with angels  
in the glory of his Father,  
and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here  
who will not taste death  
before they see the Son of God coming in his kingdom.”

It is easy to forget the basics. The core meanings and identities of faith and living lives of faith, the basic realities and assertions of who we are and who God is. We don't go here partially because it is just the basic stuff—the assertions of faith that God speaks, invites us to be free, and embraces us as freed individuals—is what we either take for granted, being the givens of our way and being of the church, or the notions of the church and Sunday school that have been so much a part of the background noise of our lives, that it barely merits mention at this point in time. If you are like me, it is easy understand it as part of the basic Christian language with which my world has been absorbed in since day one, language which, admittedly, I don't readily claim as my own. Not for want of believing it as true, but simply it is not the gospel narrative to which I am drawn. I am much more likely to make declarations about being part of a kingdom of God, and a disciple of the risen Christ then to say all that much about that which I have to confess about my life. It is a stretch to go back to the personal basis of what it means to be in relationship with a calling and redeeming Lord, and to much more so to use that shared identity as lens through which to imagine the future of what God might be saying today. We do well do visit the foundational notions from time to time, to make some level of peace with them, and to regain them as the fundamental truths around which we gather each and every week, so often unspoken, and declare their truths about ourselves as a way of reorienting ourselves to some of these basics, and, more likely, work in what ever way we can to make our peace with the fundamental truths about us that these represent.

We have been sitting with these truths as our foundational memories—our stones of remembrance that garner questions about their meaning for our lives, our reality in the world; the baggage that we carry and the ways in which that comes into contact with our life of faith. Our theme for this week and today is no different—the cross. The pivotal turn on which the relationship between God and humanity changes, we have come to understand the cross, right wrong or other wise in a fairly particular way: mostly as a symbol which has a particular meaning about us and around us. When we think about the cross, I think we think about it a good deal like this.

This is my passport. It has all the information about who I am and where I am from, and contains a nice note in the front from the US secretary of State that I be extended due consideration in my movements around the globe, please and thank you. It establishes my rights and privileges in one way or another. Within in, there are the various stamps of goings and comings from various

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places (though, for what ever reason, I have only traveled to countries that start with C thus far). Deep within, there is a little stamp that gives me the right to stand here today as resident of Canada. Absent this, and the accompanying little card I carry in my wallet, I am not allowed to be here right now. This is my proof of process, what gives me permission to be who I need to be here. I musty admit, I have mixed feelings at times with the identity that this document ties me to, especially of late. I am not always all that keen with what people make out of the waving flags and screaming eagles and all the rest. There are times where I hesitate to bring it out to show people who I am because of where I come from, and what it all means to people.

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As such, I think it serves as a rather good metaphor for the cross. Most of the time, that is how we allow the cross to function—a representation of who we are in light of Christ and the saving work of God. Not that this is bad—not in the least. We are each one invited into that way of being in the way of Christ each and every way. But I am sometimes lery that we stop a bit too soon in allowing the symbolic nature of the cross to dominate the meaning and the movement of faith, valuing its imprint even more than its meaning.

We can forget that we too are invited into the work of the Cross in ways that we are not always sure what to do with, or where to go with. “if Anyone would follow after me, let them deny them selves and take up their cross and follow me”. Yikes. It’s a heavy verse with heavy meaning. It is one of our baggage verses, one that we might be given to avoiding, precisely because it has been taken to mean so much about who we HAVE to be, and what it must mean to squash our personal feelings when we deny ourselves, then anything to do with the love of Christ and the coming of the kingdom. Let me do some unpacking here, and see what might be at work to allow us to see this a bit more fully.

First off, I think you cannot look at this verse without the discussion that directly proceeds it and the revelation of “who do you say that I am.” Peter nails it, notes that Jesus is the Messiah, but insists that the messiah can only be the messiah on his terms, and not ones that might end up getting everyone killed, Peter included. We do this a disservice to separate the comment of the cross from that of Peter insisting that it simply could not be so. Secondly, let’s just dispense of metaphor here for a minute. I am not convinced that Jesus was being figurative, at least not in this

moment. We forget that the cross was a common sight in the Judean countryside, and was Rome's go to method of execution and suppression of dissent. We forget that even in the most important crucifixion of them all, Jesus was not alone in enduring the penalty of overturning the status quo. Jesus is beginning to teach that in order to be in the way of the kingdom, he will run afoul of the powers that be with ultimate consequences. He is teaching that the way of God and the way of human power is intrinsically separate, and utterly broken, and that being the people of the way of God is by definition being people of the cross, people who might sacrifice much, if not all, for the identification that would put God as ultimate, and not Caesar. It was true then. It can be true today when we allow God to steer our lives in ways that he would lead us to.

This is a new teaching in light of Jesus' imminent death and in light of Peter's confession. If Jesus' disciples choose to continue following him, they must be willing to deny themselves (and not Jesus, as Peter will do in Matthew 26) and be able to envision the fate of the cross. They must be able to lay aside their visions for the way life should be, the way faith should work, and to do things the Jesus way. I think this is what is really going on here. Peter misses the mark because he lacks the imagination that Jesus would die rather than take up the power that is rightly his. Judas had it backwards; he thought he could pursue money and power and then follow in Jesus' steps. Judas didn't believe that Jesus would really lead them to the cross (Matthew 26:14-16, 47; 27:3-10). Jesus taught that "the one who wants to save his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it..." (Matthew 16:25-26). These words are reminiscent of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness from the beginning of his ministry: The devil dared Jesus to save his life (by turning stones into bread so that he could eat), lose his life (to cast himself down off the highest point of the Temple mount and God's angels would save him), and to gain the world while forfeiting his life (to acquire all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshiping the Satan). Before beginning his public ministry Jesus settled the question of his priorities; he sided with the poor who do not have the power to turn stones into bread; he refused to trivialize life and sided with those who are defenseless from the daily onslaught of violence; and he turned down ill-gotten material prosperity and power predicated on allegiances and partnerships with evil and oppressive forces.

Perhaps Jesus is also saying that if one thinks she has it all figured out (like Peter), she does not; that when we think our theology and faith is tight, right, and infallible, it just might be oppressive and death-dealing. Peter declares that his loyalty to Jesus will withstand the threat of death; that though the crowds forsake Jesus, he will not. We sometimes prefer to see Peter as weak, rather than as human. Perhaps Peter saw himself as superhuman. I don't think Jesus calls us to deny our humanity but to commit to following him while fully accepting how vulnerable our humanity will be if we choose to follow fully. Jesus was willing to be God's revolutionary Messiah knowing the violence that could be done to his body as a consequence of pursuing justice, love and peace instead of the privileges of empire. And what's more, he is doing so in the vision of the love and trust that there is nothing; Nothing that is beyond God's power to save, transform and make new; even death on the cross. Yes, Jesus is saying that there will be opposition for being Jesus followers in the fullest sense of the word. But there is no way that even the worst that can be done here can overcome God's power to redeem, rebuild, and give growth.

This is the badge that we are invited into: Not merely the passive citizenship of the church as one who has claimed and been claimed for the side of God. We are this, and there is nothing that will or can change that. But we cannot leave it as a mere declaration or a piece of paper. It has to mean something too, it has to have consequence as we take up our cross, whatever it might be (and thankfully for us today they are largely metaphorical), trusting the God who calls us friends sees us in the light of the cross, and will bring about fullness even where emptiness would seem to reign, that transforms failure into future hope into promise, come what may.

That is our identity. That is the cross we are invited into. That is the love our saviour now and always.

May we take up our crosses each one, not out of sacrificial guilt, but in hope for the world reborn as God makes all things new. Amen.