

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

These are probably some of the scariest words spoken by Jesus. Their meaning is so fundamental to the Christian message that they show up in all three synoptic gospels (Luke 9:23, Matt16:24) and indirectly in the gospel of John, (John 12:25) but they have been misused and sometimes they take us by unpleasant surprise.

If you were raised as a Christian, you would have grown up on stories of gentle Jesus, meek, and mild or some such thing, with pictures of Jesus cuddling lambs and small children. As a youth, Jesus would have been your buddy, a companion to walk beside you and keep you out of mischief. If you came to Jesus as an adult, you might have been in crisis, and Jesus was there to comfort and forgive you, and welcome you back into life. The disciples saw Jesus as a great teacher, a man deeply connected to God, perhaps even a political leader, the Messiah.

But it's different when the rubber meets the road, when we try to live our lives as Christians, to honor our baptismal covenant in the face of indifference, rejection, danger, and even death, sometimes from the ones we are supposed to love and who are supposed to love us in return. Then, we discover that it is not easy, and we wonder about the internal struggles in conforming our lives to Christ. How many times do I really have to forgive, how much money do I have to give to God, why should I turn the other cheek when I want to punch the other guy's lights out, do I really have to take his or her phone call, why is everyone such a snowflake, why can't I say what I want etc. and so forth. I am sure that you can fill in the rest of the blanks.

Furthermore, for women and minorities these are loaded words, words that have been used to encourage women to stay in an abusive marriage, to dedicate their lives to caring for an incapacitated spouse, child, or parent, to accept the loss of a loved one without begin given time to grieve. They have been said to slaves to encourage obedience to their masters, regardless of how abusive, to discourage those who have been denied rights of citizenship from demanding justice.

So how do we hear these words and get over our internal “oh no, I am not ready for this” or in discerning that there is a significant difference between a burden that has no redeeming value and a cross that leads us deeper into Christ?

Naturally we associate the cross with Jesus' death by crucifixion, a horrible, torturous, ignominious, death, and the sacrifice and suffering that went along with it. Jesus knew that he was going to his death, and he went anyway. He carried out his mission of preaching the word of God, of opening a new way for people to be in relationship with God through him. He demonstrated the truth of his words through miraculous healings, restoring sight to the blind, giving voice and ears to the mute and the deaf, casting out demons, raising the dead, and quelling the forces of nature.

Imagine for a moment what Jesus felt when he was pouring out God's power on those who came to him for help. Wouldn't there have been joy, and satisfaction, as well as humility in what he was able to do? Jesus made people whole, the woman with the hemorrhage, the blind man, the man and then the child afflicted by demons and countless others. What an incredible gift! He was human, and he had come to engage fully in our humanity, why wouldn't he delight in demonstrating his powers? Didn't he enjoy the company of

his friends, those folks who were supposed to rejoice while the bridegroom was with them? Didn't he enjoy eating and drinking, maybe even hanging out with those undesirable tax collectors, prostitutes, and other social outcasts? Wasn't there just a bit of satisfaction when he engaged the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes and bested them in religious debate?

Jesus' life wasn't all endless suffering, he was trying to share, to share what it meant to live into the Kingdom of God which was not going to be a place of endless suffering but one in which the goodness of God in creation would be revealed. Living in the Kingdom of God we would know that God knew, God understood, and God accepted our human frailties, and loved us any way, loved us enough to become one of us to save us from ourselves and that gives us a whole new perspective. Jesus was telling his listeners to set themselves free, free to depend on God and to love and to trust God, and to share God's love with others.

So yes, when Jesus took up his cross it was not like his whole life was just that moment of being nailed to the cross. Although he knew that he was going to his death there were compensations along the way as well as a trust in God that this was his purpose, this was what gave meaning to his life, and this was what it means to live into God's hope for us all, to love without holding back.

Therefore, when we reflect on the challenges in our own lives, and I look out among you and assume that everyone has at least one, pray, about whether it is a cross that you bear in fulfillment of God's mission for your life or is it a burden with little redeeming value. Only you can tell whether it is life-giving or life-draining. This is not to say that suffering and difficult situations are to be rejected in the face of life's challenges but if in dealing with them you are overcome with resentment, or overwhelmed with their burden, or losing touch with where God is in this for you, then this might not be a cross but rather a burden, a burden that should be shared, or shifted, or dropped altogether. No slave, no servant or no employee, no pupil, should stay with an abusive master or employer, teacher, or coach; no woman or man should stay in an abusive marriage.

Remember, Jesus' suffering and death were vindicated in his resurrection, the cross the symbol of his triumph over sin and death. Neither is suffering the end for us when we follow him, when we take up our cross to follow him – as long as we grab the cross that is truly ours to bear, a cross that demands sacrifices, and suffering and may lead to death, yes, but along the way there is joy, and fulfillment that we have found meaning for our life, and that in giving ourselves over to God, God is working through us. Sometimes that means our lives go in directions that we had never imagined and would not have chosen but if we can see God's hand in it, then it will be enough.

The words following Jesus' statement about the cross can provide comfort and reassurance as we discern God's will for our lives.

“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.” (Mark 8:35)

Amen