



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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JEREMIAH 15:15-21; PSALM 26:1-8; 1 ROMANS 12:9-21; MATTHEW 16:21-28

“FOLLOW ME”



Matthew 16:21-28 *[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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ 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.’ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘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. 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 Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’]*

My great-aunt Marge was born in 1914 in Wheatland, Iowa, a small town about 30 miles west of the Illinois border. Her parents and many

relatives in the area were farmers, growing wheat, corn, and oats. Their family was a blend of Irish Catholic and German Lutheran, a

somewhat combustible mix of opposite personalities. But the one thing they all agreed on was the importance of family, ideally big families with lots of boys. Farming required many hands, and Marge's cousins came from families of 6-8 children, most of whom left school as teenagers to join their parents on the farm.

Marge's family was unique among their relatives – she was one of only 2 children, both girls, and their parents insisted they finish high school. After graduation, Marge worked in Chicago as a secretary, married her bus-driver husband Ole, and gave birth to her daughter Mary in 1942.

Mary was also unique – she had Down syndrome. Their relatives recommended that her parents put her in an institution and move on to other children, but Marge and Ole decided that Mary would be their only child. And Marge went back to work so they could afford the medical care and specialized schools Mary needed.

In 1940, the life expectancy for a person with Down syndrome was twelve years. Mary lived to be 69, thanks to the care of her parents. She was a tremendous Chicago Cubs fan and the best housekeeper I ever met.

I visited Marge from the time I was a child to when my own children were young. Whenever I was with her, her delight in Mary and in her own life was strong and palpable.

I sometimes heard my cousins speak of Marge's family situation, though, as "her cross to bear." They questioned her devotion to a child with cognitive disabilities. And they were puzzled by her joy in life – she loved to laugh with a distinctive cackle that made others smile whether they got the joke or not. She offered generous, easy hospitality. In Marge's kitchen, I learned to make chocolate cream pie and to play poker.

The gospel today is a pivot point in Matthew. Jesus tells his disciples, "If you want to follow me, deny yourself and take up your cross." This is the second time in Matthew's gospel where Jesus says that the way of true and fulsome life is "the way of the cross."

This is a foundational Christian idea, so how we understand it is critical for our journey of faith. One guide I trust in interpreting scripture is the question, "Does it magnify Jesus' commandment to love God and love one's neighbor?" If it does, then it's worth pursuing. If it does not, we are likely headed in the wrong direction. So, let's look at Jesus' teaching.

When we speak of our own or another's challenges and disappointments as "crosses to bear," we are suggesting that to practice Christianity means to embrace the struggles and suffering of life. When these struggles are unavoidable, like grief over the loss of a loved one or a life-threatening illness, the spiritual life can

help us hold what we can't control in the light of God's love and mercy. This is true.

But it's a tricky thing, because calling someone's suffering "their cross to bear" has often been a way to silence and ignore those who suffer needlessly. "Don't complain. Just bear it and give it to God."

I'm certain that is not what Jesus would say to people who are trapped in abusive relationships or who lack the power to throw off oppression. None of that shows love of God or neighbor.

So, we need to know the context of the fuller gospel story. As we heard last week, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responds, "You are the one we have been waiting for, the Son of the living God." Jesus blesses Peter and commissions him as the bedrock of their community; someone who has authority to teach and lead.

Maybe Peter has a couple moments of imagining this awesome position and what it would be like to have more power than his peers. Maybe his ego gets a bit revved up. Because, as we heard today, when Jesus explains that the path ahead includes his suffering, death, and resurrection, Peter rejects it. "God forbid it!" he says. This does not match his narrative of how things should go. He wants Jesus to take it back.

But Jesus doubles down and tells them, "*If you want to become my followers, deny yourselves,*

take up your cross and come. Only those who lose their life in this way will save it."

Remember the cross wasn't just a burden in 1st C Palestine. It was a tool of the Roman empire to threaten those who challenged its social and economic control and spoke truth to power, those who could not be intimidated into silence or compliance. That's exactly who Jesus is and he knows it. He can be no other.

I wonder if Jesus is telling Peter and the rest of the disciples that to follow him, to love God and love neighbor, means to face reality. To fully acknowledge the facts of one's life and culture, the brokenness and meanness that exist alongside rich opportunities for love and joy.

If so, then "to deny oneself" is not about self-deprivation, but about letting go of our self-focused narratives so that we can center our connections to and responsibilities for each other. And to lose our life – the one of anxiety over a future we cannot see or imagine allows for fuller lives today in cooperation with God's justice and mercy.

As we turn toward fall, we need to acknowledge the ways reality came knocking this summer. Extreme heat, fires, smoke, and flooding connected to climate change. Violent racism that continues to end Black lives. So many efforts to marginalize and deny the dignity of LGBTQ people. Neglect of the needs of migrants and

refugees at the US border and in the Mediterranean. Increasing wealth inequality in Seattle and record lines at food banks. Growing numbers of people who are unsheltered, so that Seattle has the third largest homeless population even though it's the 18th largest city.

It's a sobering and painful list, I know. Even as I speak this, I feel the urge to keep it short lest it's overwhelming. Because, if we have the choice, there are so many ways to avoid facing the realities of others' lives. We can turn away, stay safe in our bubbles, and embrace distractions. Look for ways to numb the unease.

But ignoring or numbing the truth of suffering means also ignoring and numbing the truth of love and joy. If we won't let our hearts be broken by the injustice and meanness of humanity, we can't experience the healing power of love, beauty, and joy.

Jesus knew both the brokenness and the fullness, and he tells us to take up our cross and follow him.

Next Saturday, all are invited to help set the course for Saint Mark's efforts in restorative justice. This community is committed to being in relationship with others while we seek to repair what is ruptured and return what is lost. This work is deep, spiritual work, fed by our trust in God's love and mercy, and allowing for the possibility of transformation for those we serve and ourselves. Come be a part of the conversation.

At her 85th birthday party, Marge toasted Mary as the greatest gift God had given her. Through her life, she showed that the way of the cross is not a call to solitary stoicism in the face of challenge or pain. It is a call to open our hearts to the fullness of reality, to grieve what we must, change what we can, and love it all without limit.

Amen.



Marge dancing with Mary at her 85th birthday party