

August 31, 2008
Matt. 16:21-28

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

A couple of years ago I was riding in a car full of women on the way to a Walk to Emmaus Event. If you don't know what that is, just start asking around, there are a lot of people in this church who have been to one. Basically it is a 4 day total immersion retreat for Christians. It's not an evangelism event, its more of a renewal event for Christians.

So, all of us in the car—it was a big SUV—were committed Christians and one of my very good friends was telling a story about staying with someone before a previous Emmaus event and how her hostess had very graciously made a point of opening a package of brand new bed sheets and putting them on the bed for her. My friend was explaining how she had tried to express her appreciation for the gesture even though she had spent a miserable night on those scratchy, never-been washed brand new sheets. So, the rest of us, not feeling too sympathetic, and being more than a little judgmental about her ingratitude started making fun of her – saying: “Well good for you, you just took up your cross didn't you.”

I don't think that is exactly what Jesus was talking about. On the other hand, we may not have been as far off the mark as it may seem.

This admonition is similar to another one a little further down the road toward Jerusalem when a rich young ruler came and asked Jesus what he needed to do to follow him. Jesus said obey the commandments and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor. That is a passage we don't like to think about too much because it's just too hard, but it has a lot in common with this one. The main distinction lies less in the substance of the message than it does in the assumptions about the recipients of the message.

In the rich young ruler story, Jesus is talking to the seekers. Those who are just exploring what it means to be a disciple. Now, let me tell you that if you are a seeker, don't let that story scare you off. Just look around and you'll realize that we don't understand him to be saying that a vow of poverty is prerequisite of faith in Jesus Christ and membership in his church. But, clearly Jesus was warning those who want to follow him that it is not all going to be easy.

In our story today, Jesus is talking specifically to his disciples. He assumes that they already have faith—that is, an understanding of who he is. As we discussed last week, which I know you all remember in every detail, Jesus has celebrated the disciples' understanding of who he is and he has joyously proclaimed them as the foundation of his church.

Now, right on the heels of that high-point in his relationship with the disciples, they fall short again. He has gone a step further and started to give them some warning about what is going to happen to him in Jerusalem. And of course they are horrified by the idea that he will be killed like some common criminal. They have just experienced the greatest “A-HA” moment of their lives in realizing that Jesus is nothing less than the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the great I Am.

But they don't even hear that part about being raised. They only hear the being killed part and it just doesn't fit with this astounding revelation they've just had.

So, Jesus has to go back to the basics and explain to them what it is means to be one of his followers. And this is a place where there are some fine-lines in the various translations. But he is saying in effect

If you want to be included in my community of my disciples—you MUST take up your cross and follow me.

Now, I'm pretty sure that most of you already have an understanding of what Jesus is talking about here. Those of us who are in his community of followers are here because that is what we want to be and we know that it doesn't mean that all our problems will be solved and that we are going to be rich and happy every minute of our lives.

There is a popular movement that suggests otherwise. There are mega churches where people hear something that has been labeled the Prosperity Gospel. It is, frankly, a perversion of the Good News of Jesus Christ because it claims that being a Christian will make you rich and happy. This is not the claim of all the mega churches by any means. But many of those that are being classified as great successes of evangelism got to where they are by hiding this truth from people—The truth that following Jesus means taking up your cross.

But what does that mean?

I read something recently about the old cliché “there are no atheists in a fox-hole.” The expression became popular after World War II and it has been said that the hell experienced by so many young men in that war had a lot to do with the revival of piety and church growth that occurred in this country in the fifties.

We used the expression a lot when I was working as a chaplain intern at the hospital. There are very few atheists in the emergency room or the ICU.

And sometimes when we are faced with a life-crisis, like a cancer diagnosis or a tree falling on our house in a storm, it helps us to remember that Jesus gave us this warning. That we will have crosses to bear in this life. It's helpful because we know that as followers of Christ, we are not alone.

He tells us at the end of Matthew that he is with us until the end of the age. And so, if we are among those who have joined in his community of followers, we have a certain assurance, a certain certainty that in him there is comfort and grace and hope, even in the face of life's worst events.

We have that certain certainty because of that complicated, mysterious and scandalous event of the cross. Remember that we who claim the privilege of being part of his community understand that even as he was fully human, he also is fully divine. He is the Word of God made flesh. Co-equal with the Father and the Spirit who therefore went willingly to the cross, to suffer physical brutality and humiliation for our sake. He was not alone on the cross, he was there with the Father and the Spirit and they were there with him and that Divine, perfect community of three in one overcame the unspeakable evil that a fallen world tried to inflict.

Maybe some of you watched our 2 nominees for President interviewed by Rick Warren at Saddleback. I was amazed to watch both of those politicians give thoughtful, straight forward answers to the probing questions. There seemed to be very little in the way of sound bite talk and a lot of effort at sincerity and reflection.

But there was one question to McCain that I wished he had answered a little differently. Now I might be talking about too fine a point symantically, but I get to do that because I'm the preacher. The question was "Is there evil in the world, and if so, do we ignore it, defend ourselves from it, or defeat it." (Are there actually people out there who do not think there is evil in the world?)

McCain didn't hesitate to say we defeat it and he went on to describe the efforts he would make to find and punish Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin

Laden. That part is probably something that most of us want to hear and wonder why it didn't happen a long time ago.

But I would have answered the question a little differently. I would not say it is our job to defeat evil. I would say it is our job to overcome it.

Only God's saving grace in living, dying and rising again is powerful enough to defeat evil. We are fortified by that saving grace and only because of that grace do we have the power to overcome evil that has existed in this world from the time the first human beings exercised their own power of free will and chose to defy God's authority.

It's interesting that the poor snake is the creature that so often is the symbol of evil not just in our culture but all around the world. Poor old snakes are usually quite harmless and really do a lot of good as long as they don't encounter people. But do you know about the rattlesnake round up in Pelham Georgia? Every year, for as long as I can remember and that is a long time, they have a rattlesnake roundup. They do it in January or February when the weather is cold and the snakes are likely to be dormant. Every year they have prizes for who catches the biggest rattlesnake and who catches the most. Every year, these crazy people (mostly men of course) go out into the woods and fields and try to clean out all the rattlesnakes. And guess what, there is never a shortage. No matter how many they pull out of hiding places, never to return again, there are always more the next year to take their place.

And if someday Al-Qaeda is abolished and Bin Laden is brought to justice, there still will be evil in the world. We human beings have the power by grace to overcome evil, but it will not be entirely defeated until the final day when Christ returns in glory.

So, when Jesus tells us that if we want to follow him we have to take up our cross, it's not just a warning that there will be times when life is hard and in those times we will find assurance in knowing that we share the struggle with him. He is also saying you've got to go out there and pick it up yourself, voluntarily like he did. The cross is there for you to carry even when it's not thrust upon you by powers beyond your control.

We who are in the fold, members of the inner circle by virtue of commitment to follow Christ, are called by him to take on the power of evil even in times when we don't have to. It means getting out of our comfortable place and looking for evil to confront. That might mean searching the mountains in Afghanistan or it might mean volunteering to mentor a child from the South side of town whose only adult role models are violent, angry people consumed by the powers of drugs and alcohol.

I don't think you need me to recite a list of evil and injustice that is all around us. Nor can we let it consume us to the point that we don't live lives to glorify and enjoy God. But we also have to make sure that we are not consumed by our personal pursuit of happiness to the point that we forget to take up our own cross and follow Him.