

“Take Up the Cross”  
 September 3, 2017  
 Text: Matthew 16:21-28

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ  
 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*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.*

*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."*

Religions have symbols. For us, our symbol is the cross. What do you see when you look at the cross? When you consider what it means, what comes to mind?

#### Peter Gets It Wrong

Sometimes Peter gets things wrong. Really wrong. When your rabbi, your teacher, your leader is Jesus, you know you have gotten off track just a bit when he calls you Satan. It's hard to blame Peter, though. He only wants to shake Jesus from this crazy idea he keeps repeating about going to Jerusalem to be tortured and crucified.

*"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."* If the leader of a movement is killed, the movement will be finished. This is what has a hold on Peter. He has seen what Jesus can do. He has witnessed the healings, he has watched Jesus perform miracles with food supplies and miracles over the elements of nature. He has heard him preach and watched him perform exorcisms. And he has seen the crowds grow larger

every day as word spreads about Jesus. Why should this end? This is why he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him saying, *"This must never happen to you."* Peter is holding on to a good thing, a powerful thing, something extraordinary, like nothing he has ever been involved with.

We never want to let go of something we believe is good, even when there is a better thing coming in its place. It's hard to believe life goes through death and emerges on the other side; that victory will be found in surrender, and in weakness, true power will be found. No, in the realm of human things, amassing power and resources gives us the measure of security and success we are conditioned to believe as the reality and truth of life. You can hardly blame Peter for getting it wrong.

### The Scandal of the Cross

And why the cross? To die on the cross is a terrible ending. It's a shameful, demeaning death, in which you are mocked and ridiculed. It's a long and painful death. And once dead, you're cut down and fed to the wild dogs. This is how you are erased from life and removed from history. This is the scandal of the cross. This is the destination of Jesus's ministry, and now, it's is our symbol.

And this is what Jesus calls us to???

*"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

It's a shame he does not say, *"Climb aboard, it's all smooth sailing from here"* I wish he would say, *"If you want to follow me, get on your horse and fly like the wind!"* But no. We follow him on the Via Dolorosa (The Way of Sorrows). This is the name of the road that leads out from the gates of Jerusalem to Golgotha. It's the way of Jesus. We're called to that way. And you can't walk that way without carrying something.

### The Tricks of Satan

But there is a trickster. The "Father of Lies," as he is called, who dresses up and sells the idea of self-preservation. He's the devil who convinces us that life is about looking out for number one. It's the same snake that ruins the Garden of Eden. It's the same scheming devil who puts Jesus to the test in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry.

Appealing to his hunger, he tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread. It's a trick. Appealing to human pride, he tempts Jesus to jump off a building to prove God's power. Jesus knows it's a trick. Appealing to human ambition, he tests Jesus with the empty promise of having the entire world if only he takes a moment to worship him, the devil. It's a moment when all could be lost. But Jesus is on to the tricks of Satan, and resists him.

And now, just when the ministry of Jesus is reaching its history-changing destiny, the trickster has found a voice in Peter. *"God forbid, Lord, this must never happen to you."*

*"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."*

This battle with the trickster never ends. It rages on in the world and it rages on

inside of us. But Jesus is clear: “*What’s best for me?*” must become, “*What’s best for another.*” Self-preservation undergirds our existence; and our culture of consumerism is built on self-preservation. Taking up the cross is the opposite of this, and denying of self is not what we are accustomed to. We’re inclined to take care of ourselves, and to *hell* with everyone else! How do we deny ourselves for the sake of others? We bristle, but this is what Jesus is calling us to do.

Even the church can be a consumeristic center of self-preservation. We are so fearful of suffering, declining and even dying as a church. We are still thinking of human things and not divine things. How do we as a church, as the body of Christ, deny ourselves? This is what Jesus calls us to do.

Even in our close relationships we encounter the same issue. We craft our relationships to bring comfort and pleasure to us. How will we deny ourselves and see another human being as more important? This is what Jesus is calling us to do.

Defeating the trickster happens by allowing the death of self. Death of self in service to others. Death of self in connecting to the divine. Allowing death so that true life can emerge is what Jesus is calling us to.

### Take Up the Cross

It could have ended differently. Imagine had things gone another way with Jesus; if Jesus had listened to Peter and avoided the cross. What if Jesus had put an end to Roman crucifixions? What if he destroyed the religious establishment and eliminated the elders, the chief priests and the scribes? We might have a different symbol for our faith: a smashed cross, perhaps, or the foot of Jesus crushing the head of Caesar, or the hand of God squashing the structures of religious hypocrisy.

But no, it could not happen this way. Jesus would not use that kind of power. It would be the opposite. He would deny himself, take up his cross, and lay down his life. And our enduring symbol of faith *would* be the cross; the implement of capital punishment known for its particularly humiliating and tortuous way of causing death. What kind of symbol is this? What kind of faith movement is this?

To take up the cross is to embrace life with all its suffering. Suffering will not be avoided, but how we live through suffering for the sake of others matters. I have known a person who gave up a kidney so someone else could live longer. I have seen a person push someone out of the way of an oncoming car even knowing they would be hit. I have seen people stand up for the rights of the marginalized putting their own careers and lives on the line. I have seen loving parents surrender their dreams so their children could achieve their own. Even now, many unseen angels are giving up the comforts of home and family as they pack up supplies and head south to Texas and Louisiana in the dark of night for the sake of others.

A life in Christ will not be triumphalism in human terms. Triumph will be measured in divine self-sacrificing terms.

From A Simple Meal to a Heavenly Banquet  
Which brings us to this. Holy Communion. Broken bread, a shared cup. Broken

body, spilled blood. This is the result of the cross. This, so we can remember what we are called to. This, to be one with Christ and one with each other in ministry to the world.

When things happen on earth as they are in heaven it will be because we are as one; united with God and with one another.

What began in shame, a death on a cross, what has been through the depths of hell, has now risen to the heights of heaven. The good news is that through death comes life. Through despair comes hope. Because through the absolute worst act of humanity came the perfected divine love of God.

He could have had the whole world; it was offered to him. But he would not take it. Instead, he denied himself, and took up the cross, and now has redeemed the whole world, but in God's way, the Creator's way, the way of sacrificial love. This is our model, and this is our meal of remembrance in which the grace of God has been made available and continues to flow each time we gather at the Table.

Self-preservation has been replaced with something better:

*"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."*

Amen.