

To Be Crucified
By Rev. Michael Blackwood
United Church of Broomfield
March 15, 2020

Mark 8:31-38 Common English Bible (CEB)

³¹ Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.” ³² He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. ³³ Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

³⁴ After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. ³⁵ All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. ³⁶ Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? ³⁷ What will people give in exchange for their lives? ³⁸ Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Suffice it to say, my sermon today is not exactly as I had planned it.

From our current devotional study, “Lent in Plain Sight,” the symbol this week is the Cross. I was ready to preach on that, and I still will. But instead of just proceeding with what I had already prepared, in light of current events, I have had to re-think my original message.

In our scripture today, Jesus tells his disciples then and to us now ...

- Deny yourself
- Take up your cross
- Follow me

This is the THE WAY according to Jesus. In order to experience LIFE; a flourishing, rich and robust life that is more than anything this world has to offer, follow these simple instructions.

Well...they may sound simple, but we know that when we try to put these words into action, it’s much harder.

First, we deny ourselves. We must sacrifice our comforts, our pleasures and even our lives. Do we do this?

Look at the current predicament with COVID-19.

Everything it seems has been “touched” by the fear of COVID-19, a.k.a. the Coronavirus.

As of today...well, I should say, as of this minute, because the situation is changing constantly ... there are cases of COVID-19 in 49 of the 50 states. The number of infected is over 1500 and rising exponentially. Attitudes and reactions to this outbreak vary greatly; from “it’s just the flu, everyone is over-reacting,” to “this is the end of the world.” Life is drastically changing in response to this outbreak – that’s why you’re watching worship on a computer screen today. We’re not sure what may happen, but being cautious, being educated and acting rationally is why we are choosing to not take a chance with your health and safety.

People are reacting by depleting stores of toilet paper, paper towels, bleach and a myriad of cleaning products. We’re seeing news reports of people waiting in lines for hours to buy as much of these items as they can get...not just enough for themselves or their families, but enough to last a year and enough to take care of dozens of people. On the internet, hand sanitizer and toilet paper are being sold at prices 300 to 500 times their regular prices.

Is this exemplary of Jesus’ instruction for us to deny ourselves? No. It’s embarrassing and disgusting.

But thankfully, there are glimmers of goodness and self-denial.

In Scotland, a Muslim couple, Jawad and Asiyah Javed who own a small corner store sacrificed their profits, assembling kits of hand-sanitizer, soap and masks and giving them to elderly patrons for free. When asked why, they said, “If you save one life, it is as if you saved all of humanity.”¹

In Chicago, a man named Dakota lives in an apartment complex. He took a handwritten note and posted it the front door of the building for all of his neighbors to see. It said, “I live in 3W. In the current state of things, it is important that those of us who can help, do. If you are immuno-compromised or elderly and have fears of [going out, I will run your errands for you].”² He is sacrificing his time and his own health, to care for the vulnerable in his community.

There there is us. Worshipping virtually is denial. I believe that even virtually we can experience love and happiness with and from each other through the Spirit. But we are

¹ <https://www.masala.com/coronavirus-in-scotland-this-muslim-couple-is-distributing-free-kits-to-people-322972.html>

² <https://wgntv.com/news/coronavirus/please-do-not-hesitate-to-come-up-and-knock-man-offers-to-help-neighbors-with-heartwarming-note-2/>

denying ourselves of the joy and comfort of physically being together. I'm denying myself of seeing your smiling faces...of shaking your hands and hugging many of you, which brings me great joy. In denying myself of face-to-face worship, I am putting your health, your safety and your life above my joys.

Second, we must take up our cross. What is your cross? We all have one, ...that's what Jesus says. He didn't say, "IF you have a cross" or "SHOULD you have a cross"...no, he said, "take up your cross." So, what is your cross? Do you know?

"One's cross to bear" has become a cliché when someone describes difficult issues in their lives, but Christians share the cross of which Jesus speaks. It is to commit to being a true disciple of Christ by giving up **our** plans, **our** ideas and **our** terms and live **only** for God and not for ourselves. Jesus says that our cross is to lose our lives for him – it's not just a physical death, but a death to living for **this world**.

Third, we must follow him. Following Jesus is not something new that we've never heard before. THE WAY of Jesus is something we talk about every week. AND YET, we still need to be reminded that we **must** do it and how.

In 1527, the reformer Martin Luther faced an outbreak of the plague in his community. In response he wrote a letter called, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," in which he said these words:

I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God. If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbor close at hand. Go to him and serve him, and. You will surely find Christ in him.

In this season of Lent; a time of darkness, suffering and sacrificial introspection, is it ironic that we are being plunged into the unknown all because of a virus? What is in plain sight, is indeed the cross. Once a symbol of death, it became a symbol of life for Jesus and those of us who follow him. In the cross we see Jesus' life, memorize it and desperately try to emulate it, repeatedly after each failure.

"Simon of Cryene ... embodies the power of God to use any of us all of us despite our ignorance, fear and reluctance. Some days our faith compels us to follow Jesus wherever he leads. Many

days we run away and deny we ever knew Jesus. God's Salvation story unfolds every day. Our acts of compassion cannot be unwound from our complicity with sin and sinful systems. God uses them anyway. Our complicity with oppressors and oppression is not devoid of God's grace and mercy. Simon reminds us that the cross of Christ will be borne and the world redeemed by the one we try to follow, too often deny and always seek to worship.”³

We must deny ourselves, bear our cross and follow Jesus by caring for everyone during this uncertain time.

The fear of this disease and even the daunting reality of isolation and social distancing seem overwhelming for many of us. While we may be temporarily separated from one another, we will still email, text, call and pray with and for one another, because while some see death when they look at the cross, we see cross of hope. A cross of love. A cross of compassion. And a cross of life.

In the face of COVID-19, instead of seeing panic and feeling fear, we see opportunities to care for others, to offer our services, to re-connect in new ways and to love extravagantly. We will lift high our cross and do it joyfully.

AMEN.

³ Duffield, Jill J. Lent in Plain Sight. Pg. 59-60.