

TAKE UP THE CROSS

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 7, 2017
based on Mark 8:34-36***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “the Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

What do you want in life? Many people today would say they want to be happy. And the way to be happy, people think, is to be successful, to have an abundance of good things, to enjoy lots of fun experiences, to have good friends, and to have good health and a long life. That’s not asking too much. Today, of course, people have all these things to a much greater degree than people did in ages past—we have much more advanced technology, greater possessions, far greater opportunities, and in general better health and longer life—we should be the happiest people in human history. Yet humanity does not seem to have progressed as far as happiness is concerned. There is a lot of misery, dissatisfaction, dysfunction, and emptiness in the world, even in the midst of great abundance. For humanity in general, real joy remains elusive.

The problem, Jesus says, is in what we are seeking. We think that if we can grasp more of what we imagine are good things—success, possessions, fun experiences, and so forth—we will be happy. But as Jesus said, “What does it profit if you gain the whole world and lose your life?” (Mark 8:36) On one level, Jesus is certainly pointing out the futility of endless grasping in the face of the reality of death, since no matter what we heap up, we finally lose it all. But I believe Jesus is referring not only to the eventual loss of your physical life; he is referring also to the loss of your spiritual life. You can grasp the whole world but miss the essence of life. This certainly is what is happening when people grasp after all sorts of things but never find real happiness.

Jesus calls for precisely the opposite approach, as he says, “Those who wish to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. For those who seek to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life, for my sake and the gospel’s, will find it.” (Mark 8:34-35)

In calling us to deny ourselves, Jesus is telling us to forget about grasping after things and to not worry about our own happiness at all. Instead, he calls us to “take up our cross.” We can understand what that means by looking at what Jesus does on the cross, which is what we have been doing throughout this sermon series.

We have seen that on the cross Jesus identifies himself with us; he connects with us in our trouble and weakness and pain. So to take up the cross means for us that we connect with others in their need. We have seen further that Jesus on the cross makes a sacrifice for us, taking upon himself the punishment for our sin. So to take up the cross means that we give of ourselves for the sake of others; we follow Jesus in that way of self-sacrifice. We have seen as well that Jesus on the cross offers his life up to God, as a perfect

offering for all humanity. So to take up the cross means for us that we offer our lives above all to God. And we have seen that in all this Jesus' action on the cross is a revelation of the great love of God. So for us, to take up the cross means that we seek to make our lives a revelation of God's love for others. Initially, Jesus' cross appeared to be all negative; it seemed to be a defeat. But in the end the cross is victory. Likewise, Jesus says, when we take up the cross, we find genuine life.

But of course, Jesus' teaching goes completely against the grain of our human nature. If you look at our contemporary culture, you see that the great emphasis is on self-gratification, not self-sacrifice. When people follow their natural inclinations, they will avoid the cross. This is why Jesus says that you must "take up" the cross. A decision is required, in which we choose to follow Jesus in the way of the cross.

It is precisely such a choice that our Confirmation Class is making this morning. In the service of Confirmation, they make a commitment to follow Jesus as disciples. As a sign of that commitment, our confirmands receive a cross. The particular cross they receive is hand made by Dave Kurtz, a member of our church. The cross is made out of nails, a plain reminder of the nails of the crucifixion, and around the nails there is wire that is wrapped, intended as a reminder of the thorny branches were wrapped around into the crown of thorns pressed upon Jesus, and the cross is hung on a leather strap, a reminder of the leather whip used on Jesus. This cross is thus a clear symbol of Jesus' suffering and self-sacrifice on our behalf; it moves us to consider that if we are going to follow Jesus, it means that we join in his kind of self-giving for the world. But interestingly enough, as Dave fashions these nails and other elements into a cross, he does so in such a way that the resulting pendant is beautiful. So when we follow Jesus in loving service, the result is a life of genuine beauty.

The cross changes how we approach life. Without the cross, life is an endless quest to try to make myself happy, continually frustrated by all the things that go wrong. But when we take up the cross, we direct our life toward God and God's purpose. When disappointments and troubles and pains come, we are not undone, because along with Jesus our life is focused beyond ourselves, and we find real meaning, and deep and lasting joy, as we share in the movement of God's Spirit and the outpouring of God's love for all humanity; and finally our lives can make a real difference in the world.

More than a century ago, Albert Schweitzer, who had a very successful academic and church career and a very comfortable life in Europe, heard a call from God to renounce his comfortable life and all the success he had in Europe and to enter the mission field as a medical missionary. He went back to school to earn a doctorate in medicine, then set off for the mission field in what was then French west Africa, where he established a hospital at a remote location that could only be reached by means of a fourteen day raft trip upriver. It was a very difficult setting, and he spent most of the rest of his life there, working among the people in the region. His life ultimately was an inspiration for many.

He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, but missed the awards ceremony that year; he was busy in Africa. Reflecting on it all, he said, "The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

"Take up your cross," Jesus said. Deny yourself, and follow Christ, and you will find real life.