

Matthew 16: 21-28

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. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³But 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.'

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For 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?

27 '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. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

I have had this cross pendant for a few years now. I got it when my husband, Matt, and I were on our honeymoon in Alaska. Each of us had something particular we wanted to bring back—and mine was a cross made locally in Alaska. It took me all week to find this...many of the crosses were made in Taiwan or other places, and we found some that were absolutely stunning – they were Faberge and cost over \$15,000!

Finally, on our last day of the trip, we found a jeweler who made this cross. The price was right and so I bought it. There really isn't anything spectacular about this cross, except I have good memories of how I got it, people often comment on it, and I enjoy sharing the story with people.

But you know...I'm having second thoughts about this cross...about my reasons for purchasing it...especially after hearing the story in our gospel lesson in Matthew today.

Do I, or we, really know what it means to “take up the cross?” I don't think Jesus meant that taking up a cross is to purchase one as a token of a trip, and wear it to serve as a memento.

Do we really know what it means to take up a cross? In Jesus' time, execution by the cross was common practice...it's how criminals were put to death. A prisoner would carry part of his own cross to the place of execution...it was literally that people would “take up their cross” and walk to the execution site. And on the way, people would spit, make fun of the condemned person, and throw insults. There was nothing pretty or sentimental about a cross and what it meant to carry it.

What Jesus tells his disciples and crowds is not pretty or sentimental, either. “Take up your cross” is a downright confrontation, a challenge to those gathered there. Peter and others did not yet get it about why Jesus had come.

They were looking at Jesus only as the Messiah, as one who was a powerful king...and were willing to follow Jesus with the expectation that they would also receive glory.

They were willing to follow Jesus in all his power and prominence. The disciples didn't get the other half of the equation, though. They didn't understand that Jesus also came to serve, he came to heal and comfort the afflicted, he came to bring news of God's mercy and love, and ultimately, he came to be put to death at the hands of sinners.

And so when Jesus says, “take up your cross”, it's a challenging and frightening statement for his disciples to hear. Taking up a cross and carrying it meant tedious and physically exhausting work, it meant experiencing rejection

and standing out from a crowd, it meant exactly the opposite of being kingly...it required fame and reputation and good social status to be stripped away.

Taking up a cross means to carry an extra responsibility, to carry something that requires more time and energy and commitment than usual. But no matter how we interpret the phrase, "take up your cross," there is an underlying meaning that it isn't the trouble-free and uncomplicated way of life.

The cross pendant I purchased symbolizes so much more than simply being a nice piece of jewelry and serving as a pretty memento of a trip, and Jesus' call to "take up the cross" really serves as a sharp reminder of that.

And thinking of all that the cross represents, do I or we, really WANT to wear it, or display it? Do we really WANT to hang it around our neck, or display it on a wall, or have it sitting out on our coffee tables? If it means that we need to take on more responsibility, if it means that our lives are not going to be all fun and games and easy, if it means that we may have to stand out from a crowd.

I ask these questions also because of the second part of what Jesus says: "take up your cross and FOLLOW ME." So not only are we being told to take up a cross, we're being told to follow someone who led his disciples into the world of suffering, into the world of sadness and fear, and into a broken society.

Jesus didn't lead his followers into a kingly and cushy way of life that was disconnected from the world...he led them directly into the heart of it. In our hymn of the day today, called "Will You Come and Follow Me" listen to what Jesus asks of his followers, "Will you go where you don't know...will you care for cruel and kind...will you leave yourself behind...will you kiss the lepers clean, set the prisoners free, risk the hostile stare..."

So do I really WANT to wear the cross? It's a pretty lofty calling to commitment, isn't it? Do we want to have it hanging in our rearview mirror or display it on our car bumpers?

The cross is not a symbol of pride...one that gives us a smug feeling that we have it right and where we can disconnect from the world and all its realities and sit comfortably idle. If the cross means anything, it is that we can't display it or wear it or look at it without following in the way of Jesus. We are missing something—missing a whole lot of something—if the cross is comfortable and something pretty to look at, or in my case, "a nice memento of a trip."

And so maybe I don't want to wear it...maybe I don't want to become what the cross means: to take on responsibility, to follow where Jesus leads—which means that I can't be in charge, I can't be the one to lead.

Jesus later tells the crowds that if we follow Jesus and the cross we must lose our lives...we must lose our lives. This doesn't mean die in the literal sense, even though many martyrs have done that. We must lose our lives by allowing Jesus to lead us. We lose our self-determination and will to "do it our way" and save ourselves.

We must lose our lives by allowing Jesus to lead us...which is always to places where God's grace needs to be shared the most. And sometimes the places Jesus leads us isn't very far- may even be in your own home or neighborhood- or even to the person sitting next to you in your pew.

But to follow in the way of the cross means to live for someone or something other than ourselves, to recognize that the world need to both hear of God's grace, and EXPERIENCE it through our actions.

A few years ago my husband and I attended a funeral for a man who was 34-years old. His name was Carl and he died after battling cancer. He had a wife and two very young children. At the wake the evening before the funeral, people streamed in to console the family.

Carl was cared for at a hospital about two hours away from where the funeral home was. About 20 minutes before the wake was over, three nurses came in, frantic that they had missed the wake. It turns out that these nurses were the ones who cared for Carl and his family during his many stays at the hospital, and they wanted to be there to give their support to the family.

They could only stay for a few minutes because they had to be back for their evening shift. They paid their respects to Carl, hugged and gave flowers to his wife, hugged the children, and left for their two-hour drive back to the hospital.

That, my friends, is carrying the cross...to live outside of ourselves and to GET UP AND FOLLOW...sometimes it means to actually make our feet get up and move...to care for, love and GO to our brothers and sisters...whether they be two feet, two hours, or two continents away. Jesus doesn't promise it will be easy, or fun, or convenient.

But remember that Jesus goes to the cross before we do, he takes up the cross for each of us, then dies on the cross, and then rises from the dead so that the cross does not become a symbol of death, but a symbol of life.

And maybe, even though I may not WANT all that the cross is about, maybe I really need to wear my pendant. Maybe I need to let it make me uncomfortable...to challenge me to always look at whom I am following...and to remind me that the one who died on the cross...who died not for himself, but for OUR selves...is now summoning me.

And Jesus now summons you, too, to follow...to follow in the path of the cross, to follow in the path of living for the sake of others, to follow in the path that ultimately leads to abundant life and grace and forgiveness.

In a moment we will sing the hymn of the day. As we journey together as a congregation, may those words of the song, and they are beautiful words, may those words be a prayer, may they renew you, may they summon you to take up your cross and follow. Amen.