

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost 13

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Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. We can all agree that the hardwood of the cross is heavy. The cross is heavy. Its weight will succumb anyone to crawl on the ground. Its weight will make you scream for help. Literally carrying the cross by yourself may be impossible. Jesus himself could not carry his cross and so Simon of Cyrene had to be compelled to carry the cross to Calvary. The weight of the cross is such that the evening after my father was buried, I saw an older brother walking by himself and wailing. He had pretended to be strong all day, but I guess the cover of darkness was all he wanted so he could scream the weight of his pain away.

The weight of the cross is such that you don't have to pretend to be strong to carry it. Because the cross is light. The cross Jesus was referencing doesn't carry any weight at all. You don't have to be as strong; you don't have to be like Floyd Mayweather or Connor McGregor to carry the cross. Weak or strong, young or old, we can all carry this cross because carrying the cross is not about pretense, nor is it only about the desire to empty oneself, it is also about finding delight in God, the kind of delight that makes us want to follow Him. And because of the joy of our delight, we are willing to follow wherever He leads bearing our cross as a symbol of self-surrender.

The point is, you cannot follow and be your own master. You cannot follow and be your own teacher. The cross is only heavy when we make it about us. The cross is only heavy when we put our personal interest first. The cross is only heavy when we come to trust in ourselves and not the Savior who calls us and gifts us with his cross. Take up your cross and follow me, the Savior said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." But the burden is only light when we follow the one who first invited us to carry the cross.

The prophet Jeremiah followed God's command and he spoke. But his speeches to a people hardened by their resolve to disregard God's word brought him nothing but suffering. He calls on God to act on his behalf. But even as laments over his condition, Jeremiah talks about finding God's word. "Your words were found, and I ate them." He says.

Jeremiah found so much delight in God's word that he ate them, he imbibed them and he embodied the word of God. Delight in the word of God turned the prophet into a mouthpiece of God. And he was to speak that which was precious and not worthless. The delight the prophet found in God's word could not match his distaste over the reaction of the people to his message. The prophet thought God to be deceitful because of the resistance, anger and bitterness from those whom he thought would also find great delight in God's word. Jeremiah lamented not because of the weight of the task or the words of his mouth, but because of the reaction of the people. He thought that it was about him. He thought that the people were supposed to listen to him and to act on what he said. But they would not.

Peter and his friends found something special about Jesus, and so were willing to follow him as he walked the length and breath of the towns and villages of Galilee, Nazareth, Samaria, Sidon and Tyre, and finally as he made his way towards Jerusalem. Even though he knew the disaster that awaited him, he did not refuse to go. He was eager to make this journey. Like Jeremiah, Jesus spoke truth to power. Like Jeremiah, Jesus irked both the political and religious establishment. Like Jeremiah, Jesus spoke about relationship with God and what it meant. Like Jeremiah, Jesus painted a picture of an alternative reality-the reality of God's kingdom. At this most critical point of his life, Jesus has his eyes set on Jerusalem. Jesus is keenly aware of the potential violence that awaited him in Jerusalem. He doesn't mince words about what the final outcome will be. He embraces a dire future over which he has but little control. But Jesus was able to do that because he trusted in God, and was so anchored and rooted in God that nothing could possess him, nothing could make him want to have, nothing could make him desire to have power or be counted as important.

The prophet Jeremiah lamented over the reaction of the people to whom he was sent. If the prophet Jeremiah thought all will be easy, Jesus was aware that death awaited him. And he embraced it. When he presented the obvious to his friends, Peter became incensed. This will not happen to you, he said. The same Peter whom Jesus referred to as the rock upon which he will build his assembly, is not being referred to as Satan, the age-old adversary. Jesus refers to Peter as Satan because Peter had not as yet, reached the point where he could empty himself of himself, just so he could simply trust and follow.

The point is, you cannot follow and be your own master. You cannot follow and be your own teacher. Carrying your cross is about denying yourself the task of being your own adversary, or being an adversary to the purposes which is deemed necessary for human salvation. Carrying our cross is not about pretense. Often times it is only when disaster strikes that we negate all pretenses and act like real human beings. The floods in Houston have been devastating and people are suffering. But I do not see any pretense, at least not on TV. Those who can help are helping simply because it is the right and honorable thing to do. Carrying your cross is akin to possessing of all things in Christ, while being possessed by none. It is the ability to enjoy and delight in God's beautiful creation without being trapped by it. It is the discovery of our true identity, that we live our lives, through and with Christ in the life of God. For that reason alone, Jesus can appeal to Peter, even in his distrust, to set his mind on divine things and not on human things.

To set the mind on divine things is to set the mind on the cross. Paul draws the contrast between a mind set on divine things and one set on human things in his letter to the Romans. Among others, he argues that the mind that is set on divine things hates what is evil, blesses and does not curse, it rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep, it lives in harmony with one another and overcomes evil with good.

In my view, Peter wasn't being unreasonable as he pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him for suggesting that he must undergo great suffering and death. If you will remember, Peter and his friends had left family and work to follow Jesus. So the question was, if the movement is heading towards its finality, with a death and resurrection-which neither Peter nor his friends understood what it meant, what then was the point in leaving family and work? What at all was the reason for wasting two-three years of their time? Was that all for naught? Peter wondered.

No, it was not for naught. Peggy March in her song *I Will Follow Him* writes:

I must follow him (follow him), ever since he touched my hand I knew
That near him I always must be
And nothing can keep him from me
He is my destiny (destiny)

The reality is, unless we experience the Messiah and his teaching as attractive, unless we consider the Messiah and his teaching as the answer to our deepest desires, we shall never wholeheartedly follow Him. Our attachment to Christ inevitably generates detachment from the self.

The self is only free when it totally surrenders to God. The self is wholly free when it can look beyond itself and be Christ-conscious rather than self-conscious. When the self ultimately becomes Christ-conscious, it carries its cross seeking the house where the glory of the Lord abides. And for that Peggy writes:

I will follow him, follow him wherever he may go

There isn't an ocean too deep

A mountain so high it can keep me away

With no pretense but humility and trust, I also will follow him. Amen.