

TAKING UP A CROSS

Many commentators refer to this part of Matthew's Gospel as a turning point. Up to this point it has been clear that the disciples have committed their lives to following Jesus—they left their nets and boats and even their families and threw their lot in with this itinerant preacher. And a few verses before our reading this morning, when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" it is clear from the response of Peter, their unofficial spokesman, that they understand that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. But from this point on—as Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem—what it means to be Messiah, and what it means to *follow* this Messiah begin to take on a new meaning.

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."

Matthew 16: 21-25

You have heard me say numerous times that if I had to summarize what the Christian faith was all about—not just what doctrines Christians are called to *believe*, not just the historical traditions of the Christian church, but how we are called to practice our faith, to live out in ordinary, day-to-day living what we say we believe—if you hold my feet to the fire, I would probably refer to these verses Matthew, or to one of the parallel passages in Mark and Luke. And for my money, two sentences in these verses contain the epitome of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to live out our Christian faith:

"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."

I know this sounds counter-intuitive. Especially in these days of anxiety and stress, we want our faith to protect us from suffering, not call us to suffering. We want a faith that enhances our sense of security, not one that calls us to risk everything we have.

So it may be even more difficult to understand and embrace the paradox that we have noted many times: that to find your own life, your authentic life, you have to lose it, to secure your life you have to take risks, to save your life you have to give it away.

This has been the core of the Christian faith from the very beginning and has remained central through centuries of change in the development of the Christian church. It is really just a reiteration of the ancient call of Abraham and Sarah—the necessity of leaving something behind in order to move into something new and life-giving. But each generation has to discover for itself what it means in our own time and place and context to take up the cross and follow the way of Christ, the way of suffering love.

It seems more and more clear that, particularly for white Christians, the cross we are called to take up in our time is the unhealed wound of a racism in the structures of American culture. And that means to look beyond individual acts of bias or isolated statements of prejudice. We have to confront the structural and systemic racism that has been deeply embedded in our culture from the very beginning, from the genocide of native peoples by colonizers to the enslavement of

Africans, from overt Jim Crow segregation laws to the invisible, institutionalized racism that pervades the structures of our society to this day. We're talking about things like:

- housing discrimination that limits where people of color can live and steers them to rental markets rather than home ownership;
- laws and policies that deny people of color access to quality education and employment;
- what is sometimes called food apartheid—communities and neighborhoods deliberately devoid of quality, affordable fresh food;
- mass incarceration and criminal justice systems that disproportionately target people of color with lengthier sentences, racial profiling, and “stop-and-frisk” laws;
- environmental racism—that includes the dumping of hazardous waste, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of access to clean water that results in a range of serious health problems in communities of color.

And as we have been seeing in the past few months, many of these long-standing conditions are compounded by the lack of access to adequate health care, which has made the effects of this pandemic much more severe in communities and neighborhoods that are predominantly Black.

For this kind of structural racism to persist it has to be institutionalized and empowered in ways that many of us don't see or are not aware of. And for this kind of systemic racism to be dismantled it has to be dis-empowered and de-institutionalized. And that is where the words of Jesus in Matthew 16 become relevant to us.

It is not enough for Christians to declare that Jesus is Lord, or Jesus is the Christ. It is not enough to recite the historical creeds and affirm that Jesus died for the sins of the world and was raised from death to life on the third day. It is not enough to know, to believe, to proclaim anything about Christ unless we are also willing to follow Christ by denying self-interest and taking up the cross. And in our time, that calls for us to reassess our own participation in systems that protect white interests and privilege and power to the detriment of our sisters and brothers of color.

Now, this sermon is not intended to be a thorough analysis of how deeply embedded racism is in our culture. And a single sermon is not capable of laying out some kind of blueprint for dismantling structural racism.

But these are conversations we need to have, among ourselves and in dialogue with our community and our culture. It calls us to ask some difficult questions about how and where even well-meaning people who do not hold overtly racist attitudes may be complicit in systems and structures in our society that perpetuate white privilege. And maybe we make a start down this difficult but necessary path by acknowledging our need to deny ourselves, take up the cross, and follow the way of Jesus.

May it be so.