

Sermon Year B Lent 2
March 12, 2006
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
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Take up your cross....

Take up your cross and follow me...

It is so easy to hear those words as a cliché.
To think of our cross as a burden,
as a heavy weight,
as the suffering we have been given by God to bear,
our sins, our mistakes,
everything wrong in our life,
In your life, in my life.

Pick it all up, throw that excruciatingly heavy weight on our back,
stumble along in pain and suffering and misery--
just like Jesus.

Except Jesus does not say
*Take up your cross and **be** me-- Jesus!*
Jesus says,
*For what will it profit you to gain the whole world
and forfeit **your** life?*

YOUR life.

Maybe Jesus is just saying,
I just want you to be YOU.
Follow me by being whom *God* calls you to be,
not whom the *world* calls you to be.
And trust me, it's not going to be an easy path.!

Because in the first century when and where Jesus lived
the cross really had only two meanings.

First, the cross was the sign of execution—sure death, no escape--
and second, the cross was a symbol of an oppressive empire.¹

The Roman government was the only one who executed
by crucifixion—
and even they did so for just one crime:
denial of imperial authority.

So when Jesus says take up your cross and follow me,
he is really saying, risk everything.
He is really saying, what I am asking you to do
is so against this world we live in,
it will truly be the end of you
in the eyes of the world.

I got an email this week from a friend,
from someone whom I really respect,
even though we are very different,
even though we don't always agree.

But I always try to pay attention to what he says,
because I have learned that his words often hold a truth
I need to hear.

He wrote in his e-mail this:

“Well, yesterday was National Get Over It Day, so I did.”

Maybe that is what Jesus is really telling Peter.
Get over it.
Get over it--things will not always turn out like you would plan, like you would do.
Get over it--that Jesus may not be the image you've always believed him to be.
Get over trying to force God into a box with your own dimensions.
Get over trying to force yourself into a box of other people's dimensions.
Get behind me, Satan.

The story in Mark's gospel today says
that Jesus knows what is coming down the pike.
Jesus knows that if he continues on the road to Jerusalem,
he continues on the road to his death.
But even though he may desire it to be otherwise,
Jesus moves forward,
Jesus follows his heart,
Jesus stays true to whom he really is.
Jesus moves not towards death,
but towards resurrection,
towards life.

What does it mean to follow Jesus?
What does it mean to take up our cross and follow?

I think it means getting out of our own way.
Getting our false selves out of the way.
Letting go of our preconceived plans,
giving up our cherished images
of the ways others have come to see us, to admire us.

Perhaps losing an image of ourselves that we have created and nurtured--
but is not really true to our heart or to God.
Taking up our cross to follow Jesus means risking total transformation.
Transformation of ourselves.

I have two very good friends,
a husband and wife,
both of them priests,
who just returned from Costa Rica.
They went there to meet with the bishop
about the possibility of coming to Costa Rica as missionaries.

These two are not “newbies” to the mission field.
They were both medical missionaries in Liberia.
Before seminary, they were missionaries in Bolivia.
They are amazing people, these dear friends of mine.
Since graduating together,
they have served as associates at a parish in their home diocese—
and they went there somewhat kicking and screaming.

Their whole purpose of going to seminary was to become ordained
and to return to overseas mission.

But their bishop said no,
you both have to work in a parish in your home diocese for at least two years.
And they have.

And in many ways they have loved it. That part has surprised them.
And in some ways they have been frustrated—
frustrated by the taken-for-granted affluence
of the people in their parish and their community.

For through their years of mission work, these two have seen
that much of the world lives
without even the basic needs-- food, shelter, clothing, good drinkable water.
Those things are luxuries in many parts of the world.

And in some ways,
I believe my friends have also been frustrated and a bit ashamed
by the current comforts they enjoy in their own lives.

So this invitation to come and interview in Costa Rica—
this was the answer to their prayers.
Only they returned on Friday and when I spoke with each of them by phone
their voices were both despondent.

They loved the bishop—he is young and vibrant--
43 years old and full of vision and ideas for the diocese there.

But there is a problem:
my friends just do not feel called to go there.
There were ready to feel called.
They were eager to feel called.
But it just was not there.

Now they struggle with: *Why not?*
Have they gotten soft?
Are they not really listening to God?
Does it seem too risky?
Do they need to just go anyway—
even though their hearts are not in it?

Throughout their visit there they kept trying to “think positive”
to make it what their hearts have been hoping.
But it was not there. Not for either of them.
Not for their young daughter.

They are so ready, so willing,
to take up any cross of physical discomfort or financial struggle
or cultural challenge,
to go anywhere in the world.

But that does not seem to be what God is calling them to do
at this moment in their lives.

It is very strange but to me it looks like God may be calling them
to a very well-paying
and somewhat prestigious position in our National Church.
In New York City.
And that is absolutely terrifying to them.
and they are wrestling and fighting it,
because it is not what they ever imagined for themselves.

Can this possibly be right?
Can God really be calling them to total transformation of their lives,
of their image of themselves?

Perhaps their “heart for mission” is about to be put into new wineskins
and used in a totally different way.

Tomorrow I will leave with 7 others from this parish
and go to Panama for the third mission trip from this parish.
We will be back in 10 days. But we will all be different in some way.

Not all of us are called into the international mission field,
long term or even short term.
But all of us struggle with decisions at various crossroads in our lives—
(There is a deeper reason perhaps that we call it a cross-roads!!!)
We come to a time when we are faced with choosing,
with facing the risk of transformation.

Perhaps in our personal life.
Perhaps in our business or work life, in our vocation
Perhaps in how we relate to power or money or our family
or in other relationships.

If we choose to go—or to stay—
where there is no life for us,
where our hearts do not sing,
then that is death.

That is when we need to say,
Get behind me, Satan.

The cross is not the way of suffering.
The cross is the way of transformation.
The cross is the path, the way,
the way leading towards resurrection
of everything in us
that is divine and holy,
everything in us that is abundantly alive.

Take up your cross and follow me...

Do we dare risk saying YES
to such a dangerous invitation?

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day by Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco: 2006), p. 28.