

WHAT'S THE PRICE?

Psalm 22:27-31 and Mark 8:34-38

One of my all-time favorite cartoons comes from the *New Yorker Magazine*. It shows two businessmen sitting in a bar, one clearly despondent. The unhappy one says to his companion: "I was on the cutting edge. I pushed the envelope. I did the heavy lifting. I was the rainmaker. Then suddenly it all crashed when I ran out of metaphors."

Metaphors. They play a significant role in our lives. Not just as linguistic tools--but as much more. Metaphors shape our thinking, convey philosophy, and even express theological concepts. Of course, metaphors, whether pithy and catchy or deep and extensive, are not simply a modern communication phenomenon. In fact, they are probably as old as human language. For example, we know that our master teacher, Jesus, taught in parables--sort of extended metaphors--beautiful symbolic stories that provoked contemplation and challenged the status quo. Symbolic language was prevalent in Jesus' teachings. "I am the vine, you are the branches." "I am the light of the world." "I am the bread of life." Jesus tells us about the pearl of great price, the wheat and the tares, and the house built on shifting sand. Unlike our businessman in the *New Yorker* cartoon, Jesus never seemed to run out of metaphors.

So not surprisingly, across the centuries there has arisen dispute about metaphoric language in the Bible. Is it really justifiable to take the language of the Bible metaphorically, or does reverence for the texts require us to understand them as literally as possible? It's a controversy of real importance, I think, because what is conveyed in the Biblical language is so significant to us all. We don't want to miss a shred of the meaning intended for us.

So how would you understand today's text? Metaphorically? Literally? "If any want to become my followers," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Steve Garnaas-Holmes has said, "the cross in Jesus' day was not a logo or a metaphor [or something to be worn around your neck]...The cross was an instrument of pain, shame, absolute loss and [agonizing] death. It was a real weapon: the only way to, 'take it up,' was to become its real victim."

When Jesus picked up his cross, it was to set himself against the Roman Empire and the Temple authorities, against the ideology of the world that oppressed and shackled God's people, and against everything that hindered the in-breaking of God's kingdom to come. He picked up his cross to challenge everything that was contrary to God's will – even when that which was contrary to God's will was the government under which he lived. He picked up the cross to go to his death – at the hands of earthly rulers - literally.

But when the writer of Mark's Gospel related Jesus' teachings on the matter, we see that something new was slipping into the meaning and implication of cross-bearing, because as Jesus told it, every one of his followers must bear a cross. Is the implication that every one of Jesus' followers will face his same cruel and tragic death?

When Mark's wrote, the threat of crucifixion was still there. As he wrote his Gospel some forty or so years after Jesus' death, conflict was everywhere. Social, political and religious instability were inescapable. Rome was appointing a new Caesar after Nero had died. The temple in Jerusalem was under siege and soon to be destroyed, while Jews were divided over supporting Rome or rising up against it. And the fledgling band of Jesus' followers were caught in the middle. Their beliefs neither persuaded them to fight Rome nor encouraged them to support it. Neighborhoods were divided; families were divided. It was a difficult, desperate, and dangerous time.

This text from Mark's Gospel about "taking up your cross" reminded Christ's band of followers of the cross' very literal potential to take life. Depending on the choices they made, they might literally find themselves on a cross. But, also, these words, spoken by Jesus, would have reminded them of the prospect the cross offered to help them gain everything.

I heard a story recently told by a pastor whose grandfather knew a lot about crosses, literally. As he tells it, back in the 1950's his grandfather was a Grand Wizard of the KKK. On more than one occasion, his grandfather had led other men in erecting and burning crosses on public property and on private lawns. What motivated the use of these crosses for this purpose? Hatred, animosity, hostility, bitterness, ignorance, evil-all these were driving forces in the life of his grandfather. The implementation of the cross in expressing his hatred scarred many innocent people for life.

The pastor relating the story said his family doesn't speak much about this horrific period in their family's past, but a few years after his grandfather died, his grandmother told his "the rest of the story". She said, "Your grandfather went through a conversion experience in mid-life and the cross began to play a very different role for him. It had been for him an emblem by which he spewed hatred. But one day, as the scripture was being read in his church, he heard the line about taking up his cross. He realized then that every cross he had picked up, he had grossly misused. He knelt right there in the church and prayed for forgiveness and guidance and God showed him what to do with his cross. My grandmother said he nailed his rage upon that cross and let it die there. And with that death something new came to life within him."

Taking up our cross will mean something different for each of us, but Jesus' words before and after "take up your cross" give guidance to some things that must be part of our cross-bearing. To truly be a follower of Jesus one must "deny themselves". In a society which places such high value on accumulating more and more for self; a society which encourages getting all we can without concern for the reality that that will mean less for others; a society which promotes "live the good life and don't deny yourself anything" (except maybe chocolate or soda in Lent – unless you really want it). Into our lives Jesus speaks the words, "deny self" and because those words come before "take up their cross", I believe that we cannot really "take up our cross" and be a follower of Jesus unless we are first willing to "deny self".

The price of "denying self" may be to acknowledge and confess that we are too selfish and greedy – and that we need to work diligently to change our perception of our needs and our wants. The price of "denying self" may be to learn to sacrifice in order that others might receive the food or shelter or education or safety they desperately need. The price of "denying self" may

be to enter into relationship with our community neighbors who need to tell their story and need someone to listen and be a loyal friend. The price of “denying self” may take many forms – but it must precede the taking up of our cross because merely taking up our cross because Jesus commanded us to do so, or with an attitude of “look how much I am suffering” belittles and makes a mockery of the cross-bearing and suffering of Jesus.

First, deny self, then “take up your cross”, then, Jesus says, “follow me”. And that following of Jesus may bring about drastic changes in your life. Are we ready for that? Are we ready to pay the price of following Jesus – when that price may, will involve a deeper dedication to a life of compassion and kindness and love – for all?

The pastor who was telling the story about his grandfather went on to say that that decision had made all the difference in his grandfather's life, which was clear from what happened years later. The pastor said, "I had been invited to play the golf course located in my grandfather's hometown years later. A van from the golf club picked me up at the airport along with several friends. The driver of the van introduced himself as Carlton. Driving through my grandfather's hometown in that van, I told my friends about my family history there--not the KKK part, of course--the rest of the story. I even pointed out the downtown block where my grandfather had owned a loan company for many years."

“When we arrived at the golf club, Carlton, the driver, walked around to the back of the van and began to unload bags. One by one, each of my golfing friends walked away until I was the only one left with Carlton. He looked at me and said, ‘I knew your grandfather. In fact, after your grandfather's conversion, he was a changed man. If it weren't for him, many of my people would have gone hungry. He was always willing to give you money if you needed it...loaned it to you sometimes for no interest if you were really hard up. He was a good Christian man, and you should be proud.’”

From a Grand Wizard to a humble Christian with the heart of a servant. From one who lived to hate to one who denied self, took up his cross and followed Jesus. The power of the cross.

Think of the hundreds and thousands of Christians who have trusted in the cross's power to change things, whether in their own hearts and souls, or working for a change of a social condition, a political injustice, or a national disgrace. Such cross-bearers often carry a heavy, heavy load, as they take their crosses up to follow Jesus. But many have done it time and again with the sure and certain conviction that the potential and the power of the cross that burst into the world when Jesus first shouldered it is now accessible to every Christian. The cross is now our means to grasp and enlist the transformative power which is capable of making God's kingdom more fully present among us.

Perhaps one of the most stirring examples of cross-bearing comes from the story of William Wilberforce. We may not know his name, but we all see the result of his walk with Jesus and the cross. It all began in 1787 in London. London was prosperous in those days, but decadent. The Industrial Revolution was swinging into full gear, and tired children worked excruciating eighteen-hour work days. A significant portion of the economy was run by British ship captains

who serviced the British plantation industry in the West Indies. Their cargo? Human beings. Human beings who were captured in Africa and auctioned into slavery.

In these tumultuous times when exploitation and unrest were rampant, few gave a second glance to the tragedy of black African slavery. However, Wilberforce felt the weight of his Christian convictions and could not deny them. The young politician, only 29 years old, introduced the first bill into Parliament in 1788 proposing to abolish slave trade. It was soundly defeated. So Wilberforce began a campaign with other Christian abolitionists. They distributed pamphlets, they spoke at public meetings, they circulated petitions, they wrote songs, they organized boycotts of slave-grown sugar--but public sentiment was not easily changed. Wilberforce was mocked in the press, humiliated in the halls of government, even challenged to a duel by one self-righteous plantation owner who felt he'd been unfairly maligned by Wilberforce's campaign to change public opinion on slavery. And yet, Wilberforce carried on unremittingly – deny self and taking up his cross for the benefit of others. Year after year after year bills were proposed. Year after year after year, those bills proposed to abolish slavery were defeated.

Finally, after many arduous years, Wilberforce saw the change he dreamed of. An abolition bill was again introduced to Parliament in the House of Lords and in the House of Commons. And just before the vote was called, one member rose to give a stirring tribute to William Wilberforce and his unwavering conviction to end an evil. Then the vote was taken: 16 nay and 283 yea. At last--the motion carried overwhelmingly, and Wilberforce sat quietly, head bowed, tears flowing down his wrinkled face.

What an impressive story. One man, one man who breathed like us, walked like us, thought and spoke and talked like us, accomplished the extraordinary because he was willing to deny self and take up his cross – and follow Jesus. And while Wilberforce metaphorically shouldered his cross, all the while, he hung upon it the shame of slavery until it died there. Through his cross-bearing freedom literally came to life.

Crosses. Jesus carried one, literally. And his followers have been asked to shoulder them ever since. Does the cross play a role in your existence? To be quite honest, I don't expect many of us feel its crushing weight or bear its splinters in our hands. But if we are Christ's people, it should be something more than a vague memory and an empty metaphor. The cross, all it means, all the power it holds, all the transformation it enables, ought to stand central to our lives.

Here are lyrics to a song by Ray Boltz entitled “Take Up Your Cross”:

**I said I know sometimes
That the road is long
And I know sometimes
You feel like you can't go on
But you just...
Take up your cross
And follow Jesus
Take up your cross**

**Every day
Don't be ashamed
To say that you know Him
Count the cost
Then take up your cross
And follow Him.**

Auguste Rodin was a wonderful French sculptor who one day found an enormous, carefully carved wooden crucifix beside a road. Rodin bought that cross he so admired and had it carted to his home. But when it arrived he found that the cross was too big to fit inside his house. So what did he do? He knocked down the walls, raised the roof, and rebuilt his home around that cross.

A powerful metaphor. What if the cross was central to our lives, to our homes, to our very being? What if we lived under its shadow every day? What if it stood so near that we could pick it up whenever its power was needed? What if we were poised to hang every evil on it, every injustice on it, every hardship and pain on it, to let the cross do its work as it has for millions of people for thousands of years?

Then, it would be more than an empty metaphor; it would still be doing its work. And what's more, we who are the agents who employ that cross, would be God's agents of transformation. We would be, metaphorically, the cutting edge, pushing the envelope, doing the heavy lifting, the rainmakers.

"Deny self, take up your cross and follow me," Jesus says. What greater call could we ever accept than that?

Let's pray.... God of compassion, mercy and love, your Son willingly bore the cross. Give us the courage to deny self, take up our cross and follow you. Amen.