

Sermon for Sunday 4 September 2022

University Lutheran Church, Harvard Square

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Now, large crowds were traveling with Jesus in Galilee, because summer was over and students were back on campus and it was almost time for the block party. So Jesus turned and began his “welcome back to church” sermon by saying: “Whoever comes to me and does not **hate** father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not **carry the cross** and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Amen?

Amen! I think that message probably went over just as well when Jesus preached it, too! This was one heckuva sermon to deliver, especially after a dinner party during which Jesus proclaimed “all are welcome!” Now that all of us sinners, outcasts, and other folk have heard his message and showed up to dinner, Jesus says “hate your family” and “carry the cross or you can’t be my disciple?” Way to read the room, Jesus...

Jesus’ words to the crowds that day weren’t easy to hear, and aren’t any easier to hear today. But they remain essential for us who desire to walk in his footsteps. I imagine Jesus looking out at the crowd assembled that day thinking: Do the people really understand what they’re signing up for? Do they realize this is an “all or nothing” proposition? Do they know where this path leads? Some folks had one foot on the path but one foot back at home. A few were keeping one eye on the door in case someone more important or interesting showed up. Others appeared to be listening to his sermon, but were in fact mentally making a shopping list for later in the day (go ahead and nod if you’ve ever been there. And don’t worry – I’ve actually written sermons in my head while listening to other preachers’ sermons! In the name of + Christ, we are all forgiven! Amen?)

It may not be a crowd-pleaser, but this passage from the 14th chapter of Luke embodies a central contradiction for those who identify as Christian: All are welcome, God’s grace is for everyone, salvation is through faith apart from works...but following Jesus, choosing discipleship, is costly. This was literally a “come to Jesus” talk for the crowds that day! Jesus says to all who are

considering discipleship: “No one comes any further on this journey with me until you know what you’re getting into and where we are going. I need disciples who are all in: Both feet forward, eyes on the prize, and, most importantly, hands free so you can carry the cross with me.”

Jesus calls us to practice “hands-free discipleship”. In other words, he asks us to relinquish all that stuff we love to hold so tightly—our over-packed schedules, our control over everyone and everything, our comforts and privileges, our strongly held beliefs, and anything else we possess, or which possesses us—so that our hands will be free to carry what really matters. And what really matters, according to Jesus, is loving God and loving our neighbor.

One day I was called to preach this same text at a nursing home. The worshipers rolled up in wheelchairs and pushing walkers and everyone arrived 45 minutes early, while I was still getting things set up for worship. During the sermon, I asked this tiny crowd what crosses they must bear (I was thinking they might mention physical challenges or facing our shared mortality) but one resident crossed his arms and huffed: “Being cheerful to my roommate is the cross I must bear!”

What does it mean to take up the cross and follow? Some days, carrying the cross feels like just putting one foot in front of the other in spite of what life throws at you. Through pandemic years and academic years, through doctor appointments and lawyer appointments, day by day, we are all just trying to see him more clearly, to love him more dearly, and to follow him more nearly. (nod if you just started humming the music of Godspell just now...)

Today, when people use the phrase “the cross I must bear” they are usually talking about this—the struggles and sufferings that life throws upon us.

But in Jesus’ time, the people who carried the cross were criminals. Carrying a cross meant only one thing: a death sentence. The only people you saw with a cross on their backs were trudging through the city to their execution. This was not a lifestyle choice. Carrying a cross didn’t make you a better person, or build character, or help you win elections, or give you better arm muscles. *It just made you dead.*

So for Jesus to say to the large crowd rallying around him “Listen, you can’t be my disciple unless you carry the cross and follow me” was shocking. How many do you suppose turned around and went home? How many do you suppose

turned to each other to ask, “What did he just say? Carry the what? Where are we going?”

For those who stayed for the whole sermon, the point was made clear: discipleship is serious business. It’s time to get real about what it’s like to follow Jesus, and to trust in God, when the dinner party’s over. It’s time to contemplate just where Jesus is leading us in this cross-carrying itinerary—because it sure looks like we’re all headed to Calvary.

One day I was called to the bedside of a church member named Bill, who was 89 years old. Bill had been a dentist for more than 45 years. He was very near the end of his life, and the family was making funeral preparations. I mentioned to Bill’s wife that I had been contemplating a good “theme verse” for Bill’s funeral sermon, but there just aren’t many Bible passages about dentists or teeth! But Bill’s wife, Lois, said she had been thinking for several days about the hand blessing we had just done at church for Labor Day. She was deeply moved by this liturgy, in which each person had the opportunity to come forward and have their hands anointed with oil and blessed for the labor they do in the world. “I wish Bill could have been there” Lois said. “He cared for so many people, so many teeth, and so many smiles with his hands.”

And then Lois went on to tell me how when she was called to the nursing home the night before, as Bill’s health started to quickly deteriorate, she walked in and saw a crowd of people working on him. Nurses, doctors, hospice workers, the chaplain—all gathered around her dear husband. All were using their hands to do God’s work of loving, comforting, and healing. All were accompanying Bill and his family on his final journey. “All their hands are blessed hands, too” Lois said to me.

Dear siblings in Christ, on this Labor Day weekend, I can think of no better example of what it means to carry the cross and follow. While we all have personal crosses to bear, discipleship is not chiefly about enduring our own daily struggles. Carrying the cross of Christ is a voluntary choice to lighten the load for others. It means letting go of what possesses us, thereby keeping our hands free to join in God’s work, which is the labor of love. Carrying the cross is walking with one another, shouldering each other’s burdens, for as long as it takes—just as Jesus loved us all the way to the cross.

Friends, fellow disciples, on this Labor Day weekend, I give thanks for the many ways that you love God and your neighbor—and I would like to offer a blessing and a prayer for your hands. I invite you to open your hands to receive this blessing and to join me in prayer.

Almighty God, Creator of the world, we give you thanks for the gift of stewardship and work. Bless our hands and the work that they do. Deliver us, in our various occupations, from the service of self alone, that we may do our work in truth and beauty and for the common good.

God of justice, we pray for all workers, that they would receive fair compensation and treatment in their labors.

For those who seek work, provide jobs — both citizen and immigrant alike. For those who cannot work, provide sustenance. Make those who lead the industries and commerce of this country responsive to the needs of all. Build up in the leaders of our country a respect for all labors. Deliver us, Lord Jesus, from the evils of greed, sloth, and gluttony that we may lead lives of holiness in service to you and our neighbor.

We ask all these things for our good and your glory. Amen.