

"Taking Up the Cross"

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³¹Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."
(Mark 8: 31-38)

It is one of the most familiar sayings of Jesus: "'If any would become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) include this utterance of the Messiah. We hear it a lot. And, as is often the case for scriptures that we hear a lot and become very familiar to our ears, these words can lose a bit of their power and meaning over time. When we hear the call to "take up our own crosses," what does that mean? What does it mean for us to take up the cross in our own time and place?

The first thing we can say is that **taking up the cross is not a trivial thing**. It has become commonplace in our culture to describe a difficult or painful situation, generically speaking, as one's "cross to bear." In many cases, the linkage is valid and justified. As a family struggles to care for an aging loved one who is suffering from Alzheimer's, that heavy burden could certainly be described as that family's cross to bear. If someone struggles from crippling depression, and each day is a fight to stay positive and keep moving ahead, that can certainly be a cross to bear. All too often, however, we toss this figure of speech around in embarrassingly trivial ways. If 10-year old William is required to roll the garbage can out to the street on Monday nights, that is not his cross to bear. It's just his job. It is what he should do, without complaining about it. The original cross was a cold, stark instrument of death. The suffering of a cross can never be a trivial thing.

A second thing we can say about taking up the cross comes to us from Henri Nouwen, who knows a lot about what it means to bear suffering in Christ's name. Nouwen, who was an internationally renowned priest, author, professor, and Christian mystic, had many crosses to bear in his own life. He struggled with depression for years. He endured periods of crippling self-doubt and dark nights of the soul that many believe shortened his life.¹ Despite these challenges, he still wrote no less than thirty-nine books on Christian spirituality, and they continue to inspire and guide millions of Christians around the world, because they were all built on the conviction that the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Nouwen

most universal things in life are the personal things. In his writing, he always shared his most personal thoughts, fears, and discoveries, and he shared this about what it means to bear a cross:

"[Christ] does not say: 'Make a cross' or 'Look for a cross.' Each of us has a cross to carry. There is no need to make one or look for one. The cross we have is hard enough for us! But are we willing to take it up, to accept it as our cross?

*Maybe we can't study, maybe we are handicapped, maybe we suffer from depression, maybe we experience conflict in our families, maybe we are victims of violence or abuse. We didn't choose any of it, but these things are our crosses. We can ignore them, reject them, refuse them or hate them. But we can also take up these crosses and follow Jesus with them.*²

What Nouwen seems to be saying here is that **the cross that Christ has given to you is probably already in your life**. It is not something you have to go looking for. It is something that has already found you, or will soon find you.

Your cross may be an illness or disease, a broken relationship, a problem in the family. It might be a sudden economic crisis that has found you without warning. As Nouwen says, these are things that we do not choose. No one goes looking for a cancer diagnosis. No one seeks out a divorce. No one wants to have to start over at age 50 or look for a new job at 60.

We might also have our crosses handed to us simply by being faithful to God. The cross of Christ is a perfect example. Christ suffered the cross because his witness to God, his obedience to God's law, and his total commitment to God's righteousness put him on a collision course with Herod and the Roman Empire. In this respect, Christ did not choose the cross. He didn't make his cross or go looking for his cross. His cross was the inevitable result of his faithfulness. Because God's way chooses love over revenge, because God's way chooses faith over violence, because God's way hopes for the best even when facing the worst, Christ chose to be obedient even unto death, even death on a cross.

As disciples, we are presented with a similar choice. Second Timothy 3:12 says that "*all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Jesus himself told his followers that faithfulness to God will often lead to suffering.

*"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*³

The prophets suffered greatly because they were bold enough to proclaim the Word of the Lord to kings and powerful people who didn't want to hear it, people who had the power to harm them, even kill them, for pushing too far. We are called to remain faithful to God in the same way. Sometimes, staying true to what God says will put us in direct conflict with power. But if we really believe the things we read in this holy book, if we really intend to follow the path of Christ, then we have to be willing to take the consequences of our professions of faith. That kind of faith is literally our cross to bear. We just have to decide whether we are brave enough, strong enough, and faithful enough to pick it up.

A third observation we can make about taking up the cross is that it is always linked with the cross of Christ. Note that Jesus didn't just say, "Christian, take up your cross." He said, "*If any want to become my followers, let them ... take up their cross **and follow me.***" It is the following that leads us into the mystical power of cross bearing, because this is how we move forward in faith with our burden. We are not called to sit in stoic endurance with our suffering. We are called to follow Christ

² <http://henrinouwen.org/meditation/taking-up-our-crosses/>, accessed February 22, 2018.

³ Matthew 5:9-12.

with it. Something mystical and amazing happens when our own suffering becomes linked with the suffering of Christ, when our cross becomes one with His cross.

In my first year here, I shared with you some of the details of our trip to seminary. But there is one aspect of that journey that I do not think I have shared with you yet. I know I've talked about the anxieties and fears I had about quitting my job and going back to school with a wife and two young children in tow. All of those anxieties and fears reached a fever pitch on our drive up I-95 to Richmond. We had just packed up everything we owned. Stephanie was in the passenger seat; Molly and Kate were in the back in their car seats. Molly was 3, and Kate was just three months old. Neither of them had a clue about where we were going or what we were doing. And in that particular moment, I didn't either. Through the rear view mirror I looked back at my two little girls who, just yesterday, had a daddy who was a lawyer. Now they had a daddy who was an unemployed seminary student. And then I looked over at my wife, who had not married a seminary student or a preacher, who had been perfectly happy with the life we had built in Wilmington, NC -- a woman who knew very well what we were giving up to go on this crazy adventure. And in that moment the consequences of my decision to follow Christ into the ministry came crashing down upon me. It seemed, in that moment, that what I had done was foolish.

It was at that moment -- that *exact* moment -- that I happened to spot through misty eyes something up ahead on the side of the road. As I got nearer, I realized that it was a man walking. And as I got even closer, I saw that it was a man carrying something on his back. And as I got even closer, I realized that it was a man... who was walking north... and on his shoulder... was a cross. He was walking along the side of the highway carrying a wooden cross that was ten feet high, painted white, with little wheels fixed to the bottom so that the base of the cross would not just drag along the ground.

Now, I don't know if you are one who looks for signs. But let's just say that, if I had been looking for a sign, I can't imagine one clearer than this one. Just as I was wondering whether the calling of discipleship was worth the cost, I came across a man who was literally taking up his cross. I could have tried to dismiss what he was doing as a stunt, or as an overly literal interpretation of what Jesus was talking about. But what I really think this guy was doing was trying to find a way to link his own path with the path of Christ. He was trying to merge his own journey with the journey of Jesus.

It is the same move that Henri Nouwen realized can make all the difference in our attempt to take up our own crosses to follow Jesus. The secret, he realized, is to find a way join our pain with Jesus' pain. Somehow, our experience of the cross has to be connected with Jesus and his cross -- through prayer, through commitment, through conviction, and through faith. *"Lord, let me bring into your presence my whole being,"* Nouwen prayed, *"with all my anger and pain, and let my cross merge with yours. My burden will be your burden, and your burden will fill me with new life and new hope."* *"That is real prayer,"* Nouwen said. *"Let us bring our whole life into connection with the one who has already suffered it all and lifted it up in his risen body. In this connection, something new is being born... we are finding our way home."*⁴

"If you want to find me," Jesus says, "take up your cross. But do more than just suffer through the pain. Follow me with it. Walk with it. Find ways to connect your suffering with mine. Let your burden be taken up into mine. If you do, you will find rest for your souls, for my burden is easy, and my yoke is light."

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Homecoming: the Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series* (_____: Upper Room, 2012).