

“Who Will Follow?”  
Matthew 16:21-28  
Sunday, August 28, 2011  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

This story from Brett Blair is about a little girl, “who, in the process of growing up, discovered that more than anything else she wanted to be able to mow the lawn. But each season she was told that she was too young. The great day came, however, when her parents decided that, at last, she was old enough to do the task.

“She did it with surprising skill and great delight, and having finished admiring her work, she began to cast long, envious glances across the fence at the neighbor's lawn, which also needed cutting.

“The neighbor, seeing her interest, said, ‘Sally, would you like to cut my lawn?’ And the little girl enthusiastically said ‘yes!’

“‘Well, let's see...how about \$3.00?’ said the neighbor.

“The little girl's face fell, and she turned away, shaking her head.

“‘What's the matter?’ asked the neighbor.

“‘I only have \$2.00,’ said the little girl.”

Don't we wish we all had that kind of enthusiasm for our work?

Last week we looked at a question Jesus asks his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter enthusiastically responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus blesses Peter and calls him “the Rock” on which he will build his church.

But in this week's reading we hear Jesus changing the subject. He begins to talk about the cross and suffering and death. He begins to talk about the difficult road ahead, and the sacrificial work he is called to do.

Peter is not at all enthusiastic about the cross. In fact, the scriptures tell us, Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him! Peter understands Jesus as a king. Peter does not understand his friend and teacher and Lord as a servant king who must suffer and die for the establishment of His kingdom. Peter denies the cross, shouting, "God forbid it, Lord!" In anguished love for his friend, he insists, "This must never happen to you."

Then Jesus, using some of the harshest language in the New Testament, cries out: "Get behind me, Satan!"

Johnny Dean, in his book, Life on the Roller Coaster, offers a helpful interpretation of Jesus' harshness. Dean suggests that what Jesus means is this: "Peter, your place is behind me, not in front of me. It's your job to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way YOU would like me to go."

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. His way is the way of the Cross. Who will follow Him? Who will stop trying to be in control and, instead, let Jesus lead?

To those who choose to follow Him, Jesus gives three commands: deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow.

### **I. Deny Yourself**

Self denial is a bit of a foreign concept in our culture. We are more into self-discovery and self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

These things are not bad in and of themselves. After all, we must have a Self if we are to have something to offer the kingdom. Another way to put this is to say that health requires a good balance between serving one's own needs and serving the needs of others.

On an airplane it is recommended that, in the event of an emergency, one should put on one's own oxygen mask before assisting children and others with theirs. The point being that if one passes out from lack of oxygen, one is of no use to anyone else. Likewise, if one suffers a breakdown from mental or spiritual or physical exhaustion, one is of no use to the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

We all continue to work at this issue of balance.

That being said, in today's scripture reading Jesus calls us to self-denial and self-sacrifice. On the topic of self-denial it has been said that, "One half our problems come from wanting our own way. The other half come from getting it!"

There are many aspects to self-denial. One aspect is that of humility, of being willing to be in the limelight or in the shadows – whatever God requires.

James S. Hewett writes about an Admirer, who, "once asked Leonard Bernstein, celebrated orchestra conductor, what was the hardest instrument to play. He replied without hesitation: 'Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm or second French horn or second flute, now that's a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.'"

Self-denial can be as simple as letting go of the need to be first, the need to be on top, the need to be seen and recognized and rewarded on society's terms.

According to the values of the world, the cross is folly. Self-denial is stupid and ridiculous, and just plain wrong. One gets nowhere by proclaiming allegiance to a crucified criminal who recommends the same for His followers.

Donald Deffner writes of C. S. Lewis, one of my favorite authors:

“One of the most dramatic and world-renowned shifts from ‘I’ to God is the conversion of C. S. Lewis. This little man, who held the chair of medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, sat in his study without typewriter or secretary and penned the great masterpieces, which made him perhaps the most broadly read Christian writer of our century. C. S. Lewis was an agnostic, but was Surprised by Joy -- the title of a book in which he tells about ‘The Shape of My Early Life’ as Christ replaced the ‘I’ in his life.

“C. S. Lewis describes the exchange between self-will and God's will in Beyond Personality (and his words are a challenge to you and to me): “Christ says, ‘Give me all. I don't want so much of your money and so much of your work -- I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self instead. In fact I will give you myself, my own will shall become yours.’””

This is the best description of self-denial: we deny all of ourselves, every aspect of who we are and what we do and what our lives are about – we deny all of it, to make room for Jesus to take its place. It's like spring cleaning, in a way. Only more drastic. Instead of cleaning out the garage of our hearts or the closet of our minds, we burn the whole place down and allow Jesus to rebuild us. After all, in order to become a temple holy and acceptable to God, in which

His Holy Spirit can reside, we have to get rid of the ugliness and the falsity and the ramshackle, rundown seediness of the abode we have made of ourselves.

That is self-denial. Makin' room for Jesus!

## **II. Take Up Your Cross**

Next, Jesus says, "take up your cross."

James W. Moore tells a truly flabbergasting story about allegiance to the cross in his book, Choosing the Way to the Cross. He writes:

"...it's a story that may well represent the 'cater-culture-give-'em-what-they-want world' in which we now live. A church wanted to improve attendance at their major worship services, so they hired a powerful advertising agency to come in, study their situation, and make recommendations.

"The ad agency did their research... and then suggested to the church that they should get rid of all the crosses in the church... because the crosses might send a negative message to prospective young worshippers!

"Now, I'm sure that in its history, that advertising agency has come up with some brilliant ideas... but, in my opinion, that was not one of them! We can't get rid of the cross! We don't want to get rid of the cross. The cross is the dramatic symbol of our faith, hope, love, and forgiveness. The cross is the powerful reminder of God's sacrificial and redemptive love for us. And the cross is the constant signal to us of how God wants us to live and love today... as sacrificial servants. We are not called to be prima donnas... We are called to be servants. We are called to take up the mission of Christ... and to emulate the servant spirit of our Lord."

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow.

But what cross are we to carry? The simple answer is that Jesus calls us to die to Self each day, and to be ready to die an actual, physical death for His kingdom if needed.

Luckily, we have the community of the Church, where we have the support of other Christians as we try to figure out the details of our cross-carrying. We are not alone on our journey.

The history of the church is filled with people who have been willing to die for their faith.

Cyprian, for example, is a Christian martyr from the third-century. He writes:

“This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden under the shadows of my vines. But if I were to ascend some high mountain and look over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the sea, armies fighting, cities burning; in the amphitheaters men murdered to please the applauding crowds; selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians -- and I am one of them.”

For Cyprian, the quiet holiness -- the soul mastery -- that Christians have attained is overcoming the selfishness, cruelty, misery and despair of an incredibly bad world. Cyprian later dies as a martyr for Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer took up the ultimate cross of death when he chose to oppose Hitler during WWII. Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian, was hanged by the Nazis for his faith, and for his active work to bring Hitler down. Bonhoeffer, in his much-read book, The Cost of Discipleship, writes with authority earned through suffering on the topic of cheap grace vs. costly grace. His words could convict us all:

“Cheap grace,” he writes, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price, to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: ‘ye were bought at a price,’ and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

According to Bonhoeffer, it is not at all easy to live this life of the cross. “Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.” In other words, we can know from scripture that we are to take up our cross and follow. But we do not want to go there. We do not want the suffering and self-denial that comes with following Jesus. And so we must knock at the door, ask for the gift, seek again and again after the grace to follow, the grace that can only come from Jesus Christ, through His Father, in the power of His Holy Spirit. “Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.” Jesus is a trustworthy leader.

## **Closing.**

Jesus says, "Follow me."

To follow Jesus requires action. "Follow" is an action verb. We need to get up off our couches, we need to get up from our comfortable seats in the pew, we need to get up from our familiar places among family and friends and co-workers, and we need to follow Jesus. Out into unfamiliar territory. This is our cross to bear as a church. This is the cost to us, if we choose to follow. Lucky for us, we are called to follow Jesus. Lucky for us, Jesus is a trustworthy leader.

I close with this story about Chuck Swindoll as it appears in Our Daily Bread, February 12, 1997:

"When Charles Swindoll was a young boy, he was greatly influenced by this remark from an old Texan: 'The problem with the Christian life is that it's so daily.'

"It's true. Following Jesus is a lifestyle that builds on past lessons and decisions, but it also depends on our dedication day by day. We cannot live off yesterday's successes, last week's prayers, or the Bible stories we heard when we were children.

"Each new day is both a challenge and an opportunity. Our faith will be challenged, and we can use that challenge as an opportunity to grow in our relationship with God. Jesus Himself said that those who wanted to be His disciples were expected to be in a continual attitude of self-denial and obedience to Him...

"As each day unfolds, we must pause and remind ourselves that this is a day dedicated to God, that it is to be used for His glory, and that it is best lived with a continual recollection of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Starting today, let's look at life that way. It's a daily commitment.

"The Christian life is more than just

“A prayer of faith made in the past;

“It's dedicating every day

“To live for Christ and what will last.

“Dedication to Christ is not just a one-time choice, it's a daily challenge.”

May you wake up each day to ask expectantly, “What can I do for You today, Jesus?  
What can I do to serve Your kingdom today? What is the cross I am called to carry for You  
today?”

Amen.