

Bear Your Cross

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

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Mark 8:31-38

There's something I've heard people say now and then. I think it's a coping mechanism, a pressure relief valve. From some, I hear it pretty often. I'm sure you have, too. It's something like a sigh, a lighthearted resignation to the reality of some particularly persistent challenge.

It goes like this: "I guess it's my cross to bear."

That's right. "My cross to bear." Taking as its subject matter

difficult neighbors,
or bad drivers,
or annoying co-workers,

the plaintive "oh, well" about these mundane challenges and first-world problems lifts them to the level of spiritual heroism, a cross-shaped humble brag:

"I deal with all these crazies on the road in my long commute. But I guess that's my cross to bear."

"My neighbor is always stopping by at the worst times. She's a bit of a pest, but she's so lonely. It's my cross to bear."

Well, I hate to burst anyone's bubble. But I am quite certain that when Jesus spoke of taking up one's cross, he didn't have any of these in mind.



What did he have in mind, if not that?

Here's what happened:

Jesus had been doing some amazing things. Just a few days before, with his disciples watching, he had fed a large crowd of people, using only the provisions they had on hand, seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. And only the day before he had healed a man of his blindness.

This was all very amazing, and the disciples knew that Jesus must be the one God had promised to send in order to save them. Peter ... it was Peter who said to Jesus what was in all their hearts: "You are the Messiah."

But then things got a little weird. Actually, if you had asked the disciples at that time, they probably would have said that *Jesus* got a little weird. He started saying strange things, disturbing things, crazy talk that made them question whether they really had been right about Jesus after all, and whether Jesus really understood what being a Messiah meant.

Poor thing. He must be a little confused. Bless his heart.

Here's what he said:

“The Son of Man” (that would be him) “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.”

Well, that doesn't sound like Messiah-talk. That doesn't match up with what the disciples just *knew* God's promised deliverer should be.

From the Messiah they expected power and strength.

They expected success.

They expected victory.

But then Jesus goes babbling on about suffering and rejection and death.

Poor thing. He's obviously feeling stressed. Bless his heart.

So Peter goes up to Jesus for a head to head, or maybe a heart to heart. He takes him aside. And he scolds him.

“Jesus, Jesus. What is this? You shouldn't be saying these things. I believe you're the Messiah. So act like it! Man up!”

Let's just say that that didn't go so well.

Here's what came next:

Jesus answers Peter's scolding by returning it, scold for scold, rebuke for rebuke. He really lets him have it! In front of the whole group, so that they can all hear, he makes clear that Peter's got completely the wrong idea about who Jesus is supposed to be and how he's supposed to act, entirely the wrong idea about what being the Messiah means.

“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Well, that's a bit harsh!

But as Jesus saw it, this was serious stuff. Peter seriously misunderstood what Jesus was about. Peter, Christ's greatest supporter, his strongest disciple, he seriously showed that he didn't really have a clue what his master's mission really was.

For his own good, and that of the other disciples as well, Peter had to be told. So Jesus told him.

In telling him, he speaks to everyone within earshot, to the disciples and the crowd of people with them; he gathers them around for a little Sunday School lesson.

Here's what he taught them:

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

There's the cross-bearing. There it is! And, you know something? It has nothing to do with petty inconveniences.

It's not about the common burdens of life.

It's not about the annoying neighbor.

It's not about the overbearing relative.

It's not about busy traffic.

It's not about lines at Wegmans.

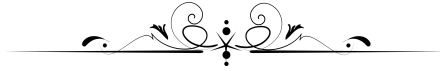
What the cross-bearing is about is following Jesus. It's about discipleship. It's about being really and sincerely one who identifies with Jesus,

with who he is,

with what he does,

with his mission,
his passion,
his desire.

To bear your cross means to affirm Jesus, and to deny yourself.



That's right: deny yourself. Jesus says to the crowd, he says to *us*, "If *you* want to be a follower of *me*, then deny yourself and take up your cross and *really follow me*." The denying of your self and the bearing of your cross are one and the same, and together they are the marks of following Jesus.

What this tells me is that the self-denial Jesus names is not what many think it is.

This self-denial is not about diet and exercise.

It's not about reducing consumption so that we can become even better people in an even better world.

It's not about forsaking

chocolate
or caffeine
or sex
or alcohol
or gossip

either for a time or for always.

It *is* about saying "No", but "No" to things that go very deep:

"No" to our hunger for control.

"No" to our idolatrous expectations of comfort.

"No" to our love of violence and of the tools of violence.

"No" to our dreams of vengeance.

"No" to our tribalism, our suspicion and even hatred of those who look different, think different, speak different, vote different, are different.

"No" to our tendency to reduce Christ-following to a self-improvement plan.

"No" to our hope that being a Christian might really be the very same thing (please oh please) as being a successful person.

"No" to our embarrassment about this Jesus who suffered.

"No" to our fear of his demand that we share in his suffering.

That is the self-denial. That is the cross-bearing. To be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ, will mean that you identify with and are connected to *Christ*, who suffered for us. And since you are connected to him who suffered, so are you connected to his suffering.

And because of that identification with him, you *follow* him:

to where suffering happens,
to the painful places of life,

follow him as he suffers for those who are in desperation and despair.

You follow him:

to the lonely,
to the sick,
to the imprisoned,
to those who lie and cheat and sleep around,
to those who are in misery
and to those who are simply miserable.

You follow him, and in following him you may, you might, oh you most certainly *will* experience suffering. For in following him to those whom he loves, you will find that you grow to love them, too, with a love that brings pain and an aching heart for them, and for all for whom Christ died.

Bearing your cross is not an act of your own virtue. It's no deed of solitary spiritual bravery. It is just your response to the love of Jesus with the love you find he has stirred up in your heart,

your little "yes" to his majestic "Yes,"
your obedience to his command,
your praise to his summons,
your answer to his call,
your following to his leading.

Yes, following, to his leading. Because Jesus invites you to follow.

You.

He invites you to follow.

Yes, you!

He invites you to follow.

Where he leads, where he goes.

He invites you to follow.

Will you?

Will you bear your cross, and follow him?