

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS
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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Proverbs 1:20-33

Lady Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple-minded?"

In other words, the way of wisdom is not some esoteric hidden thing. It is proclaimed over and over again. All we need do is listen.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus 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. For 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

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They had been disputing who Jesus was and wasn't when Peter suddenly proclaimed him the Messiah. Jesus would be popular. He would be successful. He would save the world. He would make the Jewish nation great again. He would end wars. He would abolish nuclear weapons (if there had been such at the time.) He would bring peace on earth. He would end famines and epidemics.

It's what Messiahs do, don't you know. He would not suffer. He would be above all that. No pain. Only gain.

To which Jesus said: Enough of that. Be quiet. If you want to join my school of love, stop talking so much. Take up your cross and follow me. Don't stand and watch me or worship me. Walk with me and I will walk with you.

Taking up your cross at that time was an act of political defiance. Taking up a cross said to the Roman Empire: *no matter how much you threaten me, I will continue to live the life of God faithfully*, which is to say, live the life of love boldly and bravely. I will feed the hungry. I will set prisoners free. I will forgive others. I will love my enemies to death.

Take up your cross. Do not fear death and you will live.

Take up your cross. Don't watch me while I carry mine. I'm not your substitute. I'm not dying for you. I'm not doing all the heavy lifting alone.

Take up your cross and follow. Walk with me. It's about participating in the redemption of yourself and the world. We are in this together. All are one. One is all. It's about becoming who you are through the death of your small phony self.

The cross at that time was an actual political instrument of terror, like public beheadings or lynching trees, to keep people in fear and in their place; but it is now a symbol. It's a symbol for the personal journey of faith, the inner journey of liberation through a kind of dying to one self that another may be raised. It is letting go of bloated egos, small selves, oppressive inferiority complexes, hectic overly important lives that require multiple devices; it's letting go of haunting fears and ancient grudges. We let go, we forget ourselves in order that we may become fully alive, fully alive in and for love.

Take up your cross and follow me is in the gospel lesson today, but I'm guessing there's an invitation like it in your life somewhere right now. Somewhere in your world now, or soon to come, is an invitation to take up a certain action or disposition toward someone that at the moment seems dreadful, frightening, maybe impossible.

It may not be dramatic. In fact, it may be so mundane, the person so innocuous that you can't see how it could matter. But it does. We take up our fear and take a step. It's how we are born again. Now. Here. This. Yes, this one.

Take up your cross and follow me. Walk with me and I will walk with you along the way of forgiving injuries, of healing hurts, of feeding the hunger, of touching lepers, of welcoming outcasts. And that doesn't mean on the other side of world—although it could be. It means following the Beloved into the depths of your own wounded, hungry and frightened self.

And yes, it also means tending to that troublesome or forgotten person in your world who needs the attention and compassion that you can offer if only you forget yourself and your fears, your reputation, your oh-so-important agenda for 10 minutes.

Get out of yourself. Forget yourself and live.

Take up your cross and follow me, says Jesus. It's not an invitation to martyrdom. It's an invitation to live fully without fear. It's an invitation to embrace the deep suffering in your world. It's an invitation to be transformed by love and grace.

This morning someone is calling your name. Breathe in wisdom and breathe out compassion and you may hear that voice this morning.

Now. Here. This.