

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

In the name of the God who gives us life: Amen.

Let me say right upfront: This gospel has been used to hurt a lot of us here at St John's. When the Christian homophobes of the world come calling, this saying of Jesus is one of their favorites. When I hear someone say "Take up your cross", more often than not, they're looking right at me and the people like me, and they're holding a bucket of nails. And when I hear someone say "Deny yourself", more often than not, what they mean is, "Lie."

Frankly, that's one of the biggest reasons I'm glad to be here preaching this morning. Because I've heard a lot of people say all those things, but I never have heard Jesus say them. And maybe, God willing, what we'll hear this morning are Jesus' own words, heard afresh, heard like he meant them. Many of the earliest Christians built their lives around these words of Jesus, and what they found in them was power and life. I hope I can find some trace of that for us, too, today. Because when Jesus speaks, even when it hurts, it's still good news.

So. For Jesus and Matthew's first audiences, "take up your cross" was not a metaphor. The life of Jesus led to a cross. So did the lives of all his apostles, and the lives of many in the early Christian communities.

In America today, most of us don't live in fear that the government will raid our churches and kill our leaders. We have no reason to. So when we hear this word of Jesus, I think it's easy to get its meaning backwards. We hear "deny yourself" first, and we think we know what that means; so we assume "take up your cross" must mean basically the same thing, that "deny yourself" explains "take up your cross". But in fact, Jesus' disciples and Matthew's audience would have heard it the other way around. They knew exactly what it meant to take up your cross. They knew they might end up, themselves, as martyrs. And it was in that light they considered the question of self-denial.

So what made a martyr? There are two factors I want to focus on this morning. The first is that a martyr really does take up her cross. It's never forced upon her. And the second is that a martyr's death isn't just about her death. It is her life story, her spiritual autobiography, told in miniature.

Jesus didn't go through his earthly life and ministry looking to get himself killed. There are several places in the Gospels where Jesus hears there's a plot to kill him, so he gets the heck out of town. My favorite is the first time he gets up to preach in his home synagogue, and gets everybody so worked up they're about to throw him off a cliff: Luke tells us that they got to the cliff, and then he just . . . walked through the crowd and went on his way. I don't know what that must have looked like. It's a very strange description. But the point is: It wasn't his time.

Jesus did not go to his cross until it was his time. According to the gospels, he knew his death was coming. And he wasn't happy about it! He begged, in the garden, for this cup to be taken away. But, when the time came, he went quietly. He stopped the disciples when they tried to save him. He didn't plead his own case. He went on his own terms, in a way; when he was good and ready.

When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross, he doesn't mean to just put up with whatever is put in front of us. If someone's born poor, that's probably not their cross to bear. If someone's born a woman in a patriarchal world, that's probably not her cross to bear. I've heard people use that phrase to describe other people's everyday struggles-- you know, "Well, that's your cross to bear!" Notice how they never use that about themselves?

But if all Jesus meant by "take up your cross" was "put up with a broken world", then his own death wouldn't make any sense. He'd just be another good man killed too young. As it is, his message is clear that we weren't made to live in a broken world. His life and death and resurrection tell a different story. They tell us that God is making all things new.

Every martyrdom, in turn, tells the same story. The word "martyr" comes from the Greek word for one who bears witness. The lives and deaths of the martyrs are all modeled on Jesus' life and death. And yet, at the same time, every single one is different. There are as many ways to tell the story of God's life-giving love in Christ as there are Christians to tell that story. In the life and death of every martyr is a moment, or moments, where that story is made visible; but that looks different for each one.

Sometimes, like Paul, we get to see what that means long before we die. I think that martyrdom moment for Paul, the moment where he really took up his cross, was the story he tells in 2 Corinthians, where he learned that God's power is made perfect in weakness. Or think of Dr King. At the end of his life, he could say he didn't need to live much longer, because he'd been to the mountaintop and seen the promised land. We call him a martyr, not because he was killed by the state for his faith, but because the shape of his life and death, as revealed in those words, tell the gospel story.

I think that's where the payoff is for us today. All of us have a chance to be martyrs, by letting our lives and deaths tell that same gospel story. God wants us to become fully the people we were made to be-- to become fully ourselves. And as we do, as we become more and more spiritually mature, we also become more like Christ. Our stories come to tell his story. Our lives give life to others, and our deaths are swallowed up in victory. And that can be true no matter how or why we die. The point is what story we've told.

We do not live forever. So all of us find, one day, that our story is no longer entirely our own. To recognize that takes a real, and scary, kind of self-denial. But as Christians, we get to see, and to tell the whole world, that the rest of the story-- the part that's not our own-- is God's. That's great news. And we all have a chance to tell it.

Alleluia! Amen.