



Proper 17, The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
August 30, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's been a few weeks since we started the sermon with cartoons that try to find some humor in the midst of all the stress we're experiencing, so here's a few to brighten your Sunday.



"I'm reading an amazing novel that really captures this moment."



"You get the wine."



"Can I just say I love that your restaurant hasn't taken the necessary steps to keep this place safe and sanitary."

Today's story from the Gospel is striking for several reasons: Jesus' prediction of his impending death, his rebuke of Peter, and his call to us who are his disciples, that we should take up our crosses and follow him – these are all powerful and striking images.

What does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus? What would that look like in our world today? I'll offer two suggestions:

First of all, it means that we try to have confidence that God can use our suffering to bless us. God doesn't cause our suffering, and our suffering is not a curse from God to punish us for our sins, but God does allow suffering to come into our lives in many forms. To take up your cross, as Jesus took up his, means to acknowledge that suffering will come and to recognize that sometimes the only way to escape suffering is to live through it. Sometimes you can't run from it, you can't hide from it, and you can't go around it. Sometimes you can only live through it.

When we see that Jesus could not run from the cross or go around it, but had to through it, and that by his cross all of humanity and the whole creation was blessed, then we have an idea of what it looks like to have confidence that God can use our suffering to bless us – and not only us, but others we know and love.

St. Paul gives us some clues as to what this looks like in practical terms. In our Romans reading he says “be patient in suffering and persevere in prayer; weep with those who weep; never avenge yourselves when you are wronged.” Patience, persistent prayer, supporting others as they grieve, and letting go of your own grievances – these are all practical ways to take up your cross and follow Jesus.

Secondly, taking up our crosses means allowing the love of God to flow through us into the lives of others. Again, St. Paul gives us very practical advice: “love one another with mutual affection; extend hospitality to strangers; bless those who persecute you and live in harmony with one another.” These are remarkably simple, yet sometimes very difficult, ways to take up your cross and follow Jesus. Each of these commands represents, in itself, a kind of crucifixion of our selfishness so that our resurrection as more Christ-like people can take place.

Let me offer one more way, particular to our own time and place: wearing a mask in public. Masks are hot, they’re uncomfortable, they look weird, and they burden our breath and our speech. Yet, in every place in the world where the pandemic has been brought under control the wearing of masks has been an essential part of that achievement. One of the reasons that the pandemic is not under control here in the United States, and our economy and communal life continues to suffer, is because we have not yet embraced the important individual responsibilities, such as mask wearing, that will slow the spread of the disease.

To not wear a mask is pure selfishness. And to the extent that some of our leaders attack the wearing of masks and mock it, they are encouraging us to be selfish and to behave in a way that is contrary to what our ultimate leader – Jesus Christ – would have us do. Wearing a mask is, in a very tiny way, the taking up of a cross. Wearing a mask is a way of suffering for others as Jesus did and a way of answering Jesus’ calling to follow him.

Think about it in this way. If COVID-19 is not actually a serious problem and the wearing of masks is not necessary – as some of our leaders have argued in recent months – then your wearing of a mask is a Christ-like way for you to show love to those who do think it is important. In that scenario, you wear the mask not because you believe you need to but because others believe you need to and, like Jesus, you love other people

and are willing to sacrifice your own desires to show love and concern to them. You are willing to set aside your own needs for the needs of others.

If, on the other hand, the doctors, scientists, and medical professionals all over the world who urge mask wearing know more about the pandemic than the reality TV stars, mediocre politicians, and self-appointed Facebook experts, who say it's all a hoax, then your mask wearing is a profound act of Christian love. Your wearing of a mask can save lives and it is a cross that is well worth bearing.

But either way – hoax or actual pandemic – the wearing of a mask is a way to take up your cross and let the love of Christ flow through you into the lives of others. And that is one of many reasons that we will be requiring masks when we begin outdoor worship this coming Sunday.

In all of these things we've discussed this morning – weeping with those who weep, showing hospitality to strangers, wearing masks – there is some suffering on our part. But in all of these things there is also a great blessing from God: a blessing on us and a blessing on those with whom we share this world. May the gracious love of God, demonstrated through Christ, and shared with us by the Holy Spirit, give us the grace to embrace every opportunity we are given to take up our crosses and follow Jesus.

Amen.