

The cross. A decoration on your living room wall? The focal point of our sanctuary? The cross. Gold? Silver? Adorned with turquoise or rubies? The cross. The foremost symbol of our Christian faith. Beautiful. Holy. Precious. Glorious. The cross. A stake on which criminals were hanged. An instrument of execution. The cross. Rough-hewn wood. Splintered. Heavy, bulky, awkward to carry. The cross. The foremost symbol of our Christian faith. Heinous. Offensive. Scandalous. Shameful.

This morning, Jesus says to you, as he said to his disciples so long ago: “Take up your cross.” What, exactly, is he demanding of you? To put a silver cross around your neck? To prepare to die for him? What is the cross that Jesus calls you to “take up,” to follow him? Most frequently, when I hear people talk about “taking up the cross,” this is what I hear them saying... “Persevere. Hang in there, whatever difficulty you are experiencing. Don’t complain. Just bear it.” In this scenario, a person with depression foregoes treatment in a mistaken understanding that bearing the cross means they should suffer. A woman whose husband is abusing her emotionally stays with him, bearing a cross of domestic violence. A parent with a wayward child, a co-worker whose boss has an explosive temper, an adult children of an alcoholic, speaks of someone in their life as their “cross to bear.” Is that what Jesus means? That, when bad stuff happens, we should just buck up and bear it?

“If any want to become my disciple, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Well, do you? Do you want to become Jesus’ disciple? Do you want to follow him? Do you want to pattern your life after his? To these questions, you can answer “Yes,” or you can answer “No.” You have a choice.

“If you want to be my disciple,” says Jesus, “then you must deny yourself.” “Hmm,” you might say. “Deny myself? I can handle that. After all, we are in Lent. I can deny myself for forty days. No meat on Fridays. Check! No dessert except for Sundays (since Sundays, you might tell yourself, even during Lent, are “little Easters,” it’s ok if I have a piece of cake every Sunday). Check! No *Game of Thrones*. Now wait a minute.” Have you denied yourself of something during Lent? Smoking? Facebook (I mean Meta)? Is that what Jesus means when he calls his followers to deny themselves and take up his cross? Does he mean you should give up something for Lent? (Probably not, since, when Jesus was on earth, Lent hadn’t been invented yet!)

Of course fasting—whether from food or tobacco or electronics—is a tried-and-true Lenten discipline. As a child of God freed from sin by God’s gracious forgiveness, you are at liberty to choose a self-discipline of fasting. But you are not required to do so. Fasting doesn’t earn your forgiveness or buy you credit in the Bank of Heaven, but it may help you draw closer to God—or help you establish a healthy habit.

Denial of self, too, is a time-honored Christian practice; the church has long conferred sainthood on those who have practiced self-denial. Celibacy, for example. Many saints chose devotion to God or service to others over family life. Some denied needs for food or warmth or comfort or health or human companionship. Others, like Father Maximilian Kolbe, gave up their lives. When a fellow prisoner escaped from Auschwitz, the commandant chose ten prisoners to starve to death as a punishment. Father Kolbe stepped forward to take the place of one of the ten, saying, “He has a wife and children,” and he and nine others starved to death. We honor as saints Father Kolbe and others who have denied themselves food or warmth or family—or life itself.

But self-denial can be misused. In Martin Luther's life, it got out of hand. Luther fasted incessantly; he inflicted all sorts of penances upon himself as punishment for real and imaginary sins. He spent long hours in prayer; he confessed frequently; and he practiced self-flagellation (that is, he beat himself with a whip for his sins, real or imagined). He also made many pilgrimages, including a trip to Rome during which he climbed the 551 steps of St. Peter's Basilica on his knees, reciting the Lord's Prayer at each one. But none of this self-denial assuaged Luther's guilt. He experienced deep spiritual despair at his inability to reach God. Thankfully, despair was not the end of his story. Gradually, through his study of the Bible, Luther came to know that God's love, rather than being meted out according to his actions, was given freely, without his doing anything to earn it, as our Lenten Theme Scripture from Ephesians repeats, over and over again. In later years Luther articulated that self-denial could be practiced faithfully as a spiritual discipline unless its purpose was to induce God's favor.

And yet, some Christian disciples still practice harmful self-denial, hoping that God will bless them for their suffering. A high school student takes abuse from a significant other, mistakenly thinking that suffering is to be expected in love. A father denies himself a day off, thinking that he is sacrificing to provide for his family, when what he is really sacrificing is his family. A retired father gives up hobbies and friends to care for grandchildren, thinking his needs aren't important, later becoming exhausted and resentful.

What does it mean to deny yourself? Does it mean harming yourself for the sake of others? Sublimating your own needs to care for someone else? Walking around smugly, keeping count of all that you have sacrificed and noting how worthy you are? When Jesus commanded his disciples to "deny themselves," he wasn't expecting them to ignore their own welfare. He wasn't directing them to stay in abusive relationships. He wasn't suggesting that they care for others to their self-detriment. Nor was he proposing that they take pride in self-denial. Rather, he was inviting them to let go of self, to relinquish their attempts to earn God's love, to empty themselves so that they might be more open to God's working in and among them.

"If you want to be my disciple," says Jesus, "then you must deny yourself and take up your cross." "Well," you might be thinking, "I've borne many crosses in my life: a bully in fourth grade, a parent's death, a broken leg, a burglary, a miscarriage, unrequited love, depression." Is that what it means to take up the cross? To take what life throws your way with quiet resignation?

Father Robert Sullivan, a priest who works in central-city Detroit, points out that stuff like illness or unemployment or death doesn't count as "taking up the cross," because that kind of suffering just happens to people. "For suffering to be a cross to take up," he says, "you have to be able to put it down." "For suffering to be a cross to take up, you have to be able to put it down."

Taking up the cross isn't swallowing all the painful circumstances you encounter in life without complaint. Instead, it's making proactive, conscious choices about how to live as you encounter joy or pain or fear or danger or hope or distress. It's being thoughtful about the consequences, which may include suffering, when you are making choices. Taking up the cross is recognizing and confronting evil in the world in the name of Jesus—and seeking to live faithfully anyway.

"If you want to be my disciple," says Jesus, "then you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me." "Well," you might say, "I am a disciple of Jesus. I'm willing to deny myself now and then, and I'm already taking up the cross with that mother of mine, but following Jesus? A little too scary. Too

lonely. Too dangerous. Too hard.” But following Jesus is what discipleship is all about. A disciple follows a master, learns from them, walks with them, and seeks to follow in their footsteps. A Christian disciple follows Jesus, learns from Jesus, walks with Jesus, and seeks to follow in his footsteps. To follow Jesus, to take up the cross, to deny yourself means to live every day, while not seeking gratuitous suffering, to be aware that you may suffer, you may be rejected, you may even die, as you follow Jesus.

Disciples of Jesus take up the cross in different places, in different times, in different ways, as they seek to follow him. St. Peter takes up the cross as he receives Jesus’ rebuke and turns to follow him. Your neighbor across the street or your co-worker in the next cubicle or the student in the desk next to yours follows Jesus, maybe in public, dramatic ways, or maybe in the quiet service. Some followers take up the cross with great deliberation, and others spontaneously, in a split second.

Oscar Romero took up the cross in El Salvador. A Roman Catholic archbishop, he decided to continue speaking against the government on behalf of his people even after he had repeatedly been warned to be quiet. On March 24, 1980, he was shot to death at the altar while saying mass, because he spoke up. For Archbishop Romero, following Jesus led him to take up a cross of solidarity with his people, one sermon at a time, regardless of the consequences.

Rika Sato took up the cross in the Philippines. A graduate of the Japan Lutheran Theological Seminary and College in Tokyo, where I began my seminary studies, she decided to put her social work degree to work in a Filipino city slum. One day in 1984, she died trying to save a stranger from drowning. Following Jesus led Rika to take up a cross of living among the poor and then risking—and losing—her life to save someone else’s.

Jesus promised his followers, “Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will find it.” Surely Maximilian Kolbe (at Auschwitz) and Oscar Romero (at the altar) and Rika Sato (at the ocean), who took up their cross for others, who freely chose to pour out themselves for others, who literally lost their lives, will find life. But what about the rest of us? If you don’t give up your life, will you ever find it?

Of course there are many ways that followers of Jesus take up the cross and find life. While most Christians don’t give up their lives for the sake of the gospel, you may give up something that’s precious to you for the sake of others. A business executive carves time into her busy schedule to support an innocent employee through a criminal trial. A retired teacher makes a commitment to tutor a child whose parent is in prison. A widow risks revisiting her own pain when she reaches out to a friend who has recently lost a spouse. Neighbors give up family time or tv time to band together to make their streets safer. An employee makes a commitment to counter racist remarks at work. Each of these disciples takes up their cross consciously, willingly, and joyfully. They decide to live, not for self, but for others. They willingly accept the risk of suffering because of their witness. And they follow Jesus joyfully, wherever the path leads.

What about you, dear friend? What do you think Jesus is saying, to you? What do his words mean, to you? Will you be Jesus’ disciple? Will you deny yourself? Will you take up the cross? Consciously? Willingly? Joyfully? Will you follow Jesus? AMEN