



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Carried”

Part V of the Sermon Series “Lift High the Cross”

Matthew 16:21-26

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²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

When I began to tell people or people heard that I was going to seminary, I received some mixed responses:

Wow, that’s great! I knew you would end up in ministry!

Ever since you were in middle school I could see something in you. The church is lucky!

I knew it! It was only a matter of time!



Very cool.

Hmm. I can see that.

Seminary. Like, a pastor? Ok.

And one of my favorites: You sure?

And there was a group text that I was in with some friends that would meet about once or twice a year for various events, put on fundraisers, etc. And the group was formed by friends coming together in Nashville on a friend's farm year after year. The group is called the FarmFam. Well, I think it was just before I left for Austin Texas to attend Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (I completed my first year of seminary there before transferring to Union in Richmond) or it was right when I moved there, but one person from the group texted out, "Ben starts seminary soon, send some love!" Then I received replies like: Congrats, Ben!; Blessings to you brother!; Prayers for the journey before you!; and then this one... RIP Ben, saying goodbye to the one we knew.

That one took me by surprise. It hit me in the gut, and it actually kind of hurt at first. Like, I am still going to be your friend. At least I want to still be friends. I thought to myself, Nothing is going to change. I will be the same person I am now after I graduate. See you next year on the Farm!

Our passage causes me to have the same reaction.

It hits me in the gut, as it should all of us, and it kind of hurts. Just prior to this exchange, Jesus asked the disciples who people say that the Son of Man is? And then asks the same about the disciples. Pointing to himself as the Son of Man, connecting his two questions, Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus praises Peter and his confession, declaring him blessed and a recipient of divine revelation.

Yet in our passage for today, Peter is the one who is likened to Satan!

Such was the "rock" of faith and discipleship just 6 verses earlier is now a "rock" that causes people to fall and stumble.

Peter, like me, was very sure of himself in professing his faith. But it is one thing to talk the talk, it is another thing to walk the walk. And for Peter, and sadly for myself as well, the walk of faith, the path of discipleship, never included a cross-bearing death. For Jesus Christ the Messiah, or for Peter, or for me.

Following Peter's rebuke and Jesus' startling rejoinder, the moment shifts back to the disciples as a group. Jesus no longer teaches about faith in word alone, neither does he simply



explain his divine mission; rather he teaches through illustration, demonstration, and action.¹ This whole section shows a shift from talking the talk, to walking the walk: “From that time on Jesus began to *show* his disciples” that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly.

Jesus illustrates that as disciples it is time to walk the walk. And the walk they are now called to is a walk with their own cross upon their back.

If you are my disciples, deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow me.

The call of discipleship is a personal one. Do **you** want to be Christ’s disciple? Deny **yourself**. Take up **your** cross. Lose **your** life in order to save **your** life.

Carrying your cross is the act of putting to death those things that stand in the way of full discipleship, those things that serve you and only you, those habits of over-indulgence and consumption.

To carry your cross is to put to death what is not God-pleasing, to remove the temptations in your life that draw you away from God.

We have this understanding that Christ died for me, that Christ took my sin to the cross. The question then turns into, If Christ died for me, then I should be willing to die for Christ?

So, I have this cross to carry. It is my cross to bear, and it is mine alone.

Too often, however, this individualistic understanding of cross-carrying, becomes ego-centric, even if we preach self-denial. Denying the self is part of it, but if it ends there, then we have only become escapists, pre-occupied with the external without dealing with the internal.

We push our thoughts and feelings to the side and turn our focus outward and upward, to Christ and his salvific love. Some say this is the call, to deeply and truly, with all our mind, body, soul and strength, focus on the salvation Christ brings... for me at least.

The cross we are called to carry, is our own, but not to the end of personal salvation and our individual heavenly reward. The cross we carry is the cross of Christ, whom God sent because of God’s love for *the world*. The cross we carry is the cross of Christ, whom God sent in love for *all of creation*.

I read a story once about a man who is talking with Jesus as one of the disciples in our passage. Convicted, he takes up his cross to carry. But then, he asks Jesus if there is a different cross for him—this one is just too big and too heavy he thought. So, Jesus invites him into a room or cave (I can’t remember exactly) that is filled with crosses. The man walks through it as if he is shopping for a new pair of shoes. He passes by some big ones, well, they were not his size; then he

¹ From the Theological Essay written by Charles Hambrick-Stowe in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 4*.



picks some up to get a closer look and to test their weight. After a bit of “shopping” he spots one in the back. “Oh, I want that one!” Jesus said, “That is the cross you carried in here.”

Everyone has a cross to carry; each person has their own burdens, their own evils they are dealing with, spoken and unspoken, known and unknown. And if we remain our own hero in our suffering, then we lose the universal call to “weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.”

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr speaks to the universal longing of humanity of which we each participate in. And when we understand this and make such a shift, “it softens the space around our overly defended hearts.” Rohr says, “Mystics go so far to say that individual suffering does not really exist—and that there is only one suffering, it is all the same, and it is all the suffering of God... A crucified God is the dramatic symbol of *the one suffering* that God fully enters into *with us*—much more than just *for us*... [because] The lone individual is far too small and insecure to carry either the ‘weight of glory’ or the ‘burden of sin’ on his or her own.”

Jesus says, If you are to be my disciple, then take up your cross and follow me.

Take up your cross—the pain and hurt and burden that weigh upon your shoulders—and follow Jesus; follow Jesus to the place of universal pain and hurt and burden, where we find a community of wounded healers, one of which is God in Christ.

Before every baptism we read a passage from Ephesians that says it all. You are called into the same Body, into the same Spirit, into the one hope, a hope in and of God, who is the God of all, who rules over all things, who works through all things, and who is present in all things (Eph 4:4-6).

If we can understand that all suffering and crucifixion is of the “one body,” then we are open to the crosses others carry, and it is then that we may join in the reconciling work of Christ’s cross for all. It is then that we realize that my salvation is a part of your salvation. It is then we realize that my liberation is bound up in the liberation of the other. It is then we realize that my reconciliation, is the reconciliation of all creation, through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.

In carrying your cross, you join the fight of compassion and empathy for others in a world so consumed with the ego; you join the fight of resisting evil systems of the world, the systemic empires of oppression, inequality, prejudice, racism, and hatred; you join the fight in standing up against politics of division.



And if suffering and crucifixion is of the “one body,” then that body—the one body we participate in and fully experience together with Jesus Christ—then that body is too the “one body” of resurrection!

Amen.

