

Sermon – August 29/30, 2020 (St. John's - YouTube Service & 6<sup>th</sup> Ave.)

Pastor Jeff Hesse

Text: Matt. 16:21-28, Rom. 12:9-21 & Jer. 15:15-21

Series/Season: Pentecost

Theme: **Take up Your Cross**

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Grace, mercy, and peace be unto each of you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit... Three-in-One. Amen!

Brothers and sisters in Christ... you heard the Holy Spirit speak to you in the readings from His Word in Jeremiah and in Romans... and from Jesus Himself in Matthew 16:

**<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?**

My wife (Christine) and two daughters (Carly and Emily) gave me a gift to celebrate my ordination into the Office of the Holy Ministry - as a pastor here at St. John's. Every time I robe up, **I Take up My Cross** and place it around my neck in preparation and reminder that God has called me to do His work... to bring God's Word, publicly to you. Whether people want to hear it... or not. Whether people are in worship... or not. As I have grown as a Christian and as a pastor, I have looked at this cross differently than I used to... it's not just a symbol of the past, but a call to service and action right now. And it's a call that isn't always fun or easy.

For many of you, you get dressed in the morning and you too **Take up Your Cross**. You place it as a necklace on your neck or earrings on your ear as you dress for the day. It sparkles in silver or gold and stands out for anyone who cares to look. Many of us have given away a cross necklace or earrings as gifts for birthdays, baptisms, confirmations, Christmas, weddings... or just as an act of love – perhaps to a spouse, or someone you are dating. After the gift, the receivers of these gifts can **Take up Their Cross** too... and wear it as they go about their day. I wonder if you understand what your gift really means for the person you are giving it to. It's God's call to follow Him... to the cross.

Some people have crosses tattooed on their bodies... a constant opportunity with profound meaning and reminder for them... to **Take up Their Cross** by wearing it – 24/7/365.

Some people use a cross necklace, earrings... or a cross tattoo as a prop... just another declaration of style and independence with no significance or religious meaning whatsoever. And for others, they **Take up Their Cross** to intentionally denigrate it - in public displays against what God says... even denying the very existence of God and His love.

**A cross necklace, earrings or tattoos are a strange thing when you really think about it. We Take up Our Cross and wear it... a torture device... used to murder our Lord Jesus. But it is sacred to followers of Jesus because it was through the cross that Jesus paid the price we could not pay and gives us eternal life!**

**Take up Your Cross** is a call that comes directly from Jesus Himself... with a response, an action taken by people... to follow. Following is either done with faith in Christ's gift and God's call, it's not done with contempt for what God says... or it's received with lukewarm cluelessness or apathy... with never-a-mind to what the cross really means for real, everyday living.

So...What does it mean to you... to **Take up Your Cross**?

## God Speaks Through Jeremiah

Jeremiah... the OT prophet 600 years before Jesus... was chosen by God to preach doom, gloom and warning for 40 years to the people and leaders of Judah (God's chosen people) so they would repent and turn back to God for forgiveness and life. Jeremiah had no wife or kids (by God's call). He was laughed at, imprisoned, thrown in stocks, beaten, thrown into a cistern/well and ultimately witnessed the destruction of the very people he loved and tried to save. Witnessing God's judgement come to pass through Babylon's destruction. Jeremiah was later exiled and killed (most likely in Egypt).

Even Jeremiah doubted... asking God if he was a "deceitful brook... with waters that fail". But God called Jeremiah to repentance and to trust in His promises and presence.

Jeremiah didn't get invited to many parties, he wasn't the guy that all the women wanted to date... yet, Jeremiah became known as the "Iron Prophet"... made strong by the LORD.

Jeremiah was called by God to **Take up His Cross**... and follow the LORD. He did it, it was really hard, many tears were shed... but now Jeremiah is enjoying God's presence for eternity!

***For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?***

What does it mean to you... to **Take up Your Cross**?

As we witness wildfires out west, hurricanes blasting into the Gulf of Mexico, racial tensions, abuse of authority and abuse by authority, violence and lawlessness with a call to de-fund the law keepers... as we experience the disconnections and fears of a virus and its impact on our relationships, economy and health...

*Are you the patient Jeremiah who trusts in God... willing to suffer all things as you follow God... or are you the impatient, hurting Jeremiah who wonders whether God is a “deceitful brook”... with baptismal “waters that fail”?*

*God calls you to repentance too... there is no deceit in God. God is the source of all Truth and Love!*

It wasn't until after Jeremiah's death and Judah's return from exile that Jeremiah's words would be most valued by God's people. The longest book of the Bible that was once ridiculed came to be treated as God's Holy Word as God's people were restored... just like God said they would. When Jesus came 600 years later, the people of Jerusalem and Galilee wondered if He wasn't a resurrected Jeremiah. For a man with no children... look at the faith legacy God worked out through Jeremiah. It was all God's plan... His perfect will!

What did Jesus say? **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.<sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”**

### **God Speaks Through Paul**

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome. **He wrote about what it means follow Jesus.** Listen to what God tells us through Paul:

- **Let love be genuine, abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**
- **Love one another with brotherly affection.**
- **Outdo one another in showing honor.**
- **Do not be slothful... be fervent in spirit.**
- **Serve the Lord... rejoice in hope.**
- **Be patient in tribulation.... be constant in prayer.**

- Contribute to the needs of the saints, seek to show hospitality.
- Bless those who persecute you...do not curse them.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.
- Never be wise in your own sight.
- Repay no one evil for evil...do what is honorable in the sight of all.
- If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
- Never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God.
- To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**You know who these actions describe? Jesus... this is what Jesus did and this is what Jesus still does through you! You tell me... how beautiful would the world be if everyone would Take up His Cross... and follow Jesus!**

So... I'm asking again... in your life right now, what does it mean to you... to **Take up Your Cross?**

- Maybe you are caring for your parent or a spouse who is struggling with bad health... all your free time is used up caring for others. And perhaps you've lost a sense of your own identity and happiness.
- Maybe you want to worship more frequently... lead your family in faith, but your spouse or your kids roll their eyes and resist you... criticize you.
- Maybe you are a mom who has scrubbed the floor and washed dishes for your family about 85 times this week... with no end in sight!
- Maybe you are struggling in how to navigate the cultural expectations of dating, relationships, sex and living together before marriage. To follow Jesus means that opportunities to find that someone special with similar values seem to be like finding a needle in a haystack.

- Maybe you have friends who are really nice to hang out with – they are the “popular” people, but peer pressure is forcing you to make a decision that is either going to be unpopular with God or with your friends.
- Maybe have an addiction... that denial of self is a daily struggle and God is the only One who can get you through it.
- Maybe you struggle with your own arrogance... and you are reminded over and over again by God that you don't know it all... you are not in control... and dependence on God is a good thing.
- Maybe you hate being told to wear a mask, because you are free... only to be confronted with God's call to love your neighbor.
- Maybe you've realized that love is better than hate... that indeed good does overcome evil. But you also realize that evil still exists in the world and it seems that evil is having its way right now. And that the only way evil is overcome is by Jesus... because Jesus is the only One who is good!

In the pain and frustration of taking up your cross... remember what Jesus said: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.<sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

### God Speaks to Peter

When did Jesus say this? Jesus said this... right after he called Peter “Satan”. Why did Jesus say this to the man that just a short time before had confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God? **Because Jesus didn't want Peter to have the things of men in mind.** The hearts and actions of fallen mankind stand in direct contradiction to the will of God.

The scary thing is that if Jesus can say this to Peter... He can say it to you and me. God is the One with the power and the plan... God's plans give you hope and a future! You know who said this? God... through Jeremiah!

**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.**  
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Jesus had different plans than Peter.. Jesus had different plans FOR Peter! He wanted Peter to join Him in following the will of the Father which is life and love and peace and protection... eternally! Jesus was heading to the cross – and no one, not even Peter’s “good intentions” would be able to stop Him. Peter would join Jesus... eventually. Peter would deny Jesus first... but then would repent and be restored by Jesus.

**Then, true to Christ's call... Peter would lose his life –**  
crucified/martyred - by the Roman leader Nero. Peter would lose his life for Christ's sake, only to find it again in heaven with Jesus! And in the process God would speak His Word through Peter.

The same for Jeremiah... the same for Paul. And brothers and sisters... the same for you! Peter had struggles, Jeremiah had struggles... Paul had struggles. You and I have struggles. The struggle is real... because the battle against sin and the curse is real. But that battle was won by Jesus when He took up His cross. Follow Him... follow Jesus. Trust the journey with Christ! The curse will be lifted by Jesus when He comes back... wait for Him, long for Him... pray to Him... speak His Word!

The next time you put on that cross necklace, you put on those cross earrings, give that cross away as a gift, or look at the tattoo that is on your body... remember what it REALLY MEANS. Life! Life in Jesus! Sacrifice... the sacrifice by Jesus. It's not to look good to the world, but to be good... forgiven in the blood of Christ!

You will see that cross in a new way (like me, every time I put it on as a pastor). In some ways it is still a bit of a torture device... because following Jesus and not the world means that you won't be the most

popular person. Jesus, Jeremiah, Paul and Peter did not come to win a popularity contest. Jesus came here to die – for you! And Jesus calls you to sacrifice – and to trust Him when making these sacrifices. Jesus calls on you... right now... to **Take Up Your Cross!**

Put that necklace on. Wear that necklace proudly... wear that tattoo proudly in your heart 24/7/365. It's infinitely better than gold or silver... because following Jesus is the only way to experience the life God wants for you... for eternity. Amen!