

Date: August 30, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28

Title: TAKE UP JESUS' HEART

In Ephesians 2, Paul wrote that we are to be dead to sin and alive to Christ. Think about that for a minute. Dead to sin, alive to Christ. Jesus is calling us to begin a new life, by giving ourselves to, a whole new way of living, a life of discipleship.

Jesus and his disciples are at Caesarea Philippi. Their ministry to this point, has been a stunning success. Crowds are pressing in on them everywhere they go. People eagerly reach out, to touch this attractive young teacher from Nazareth. The disciples themselves, are caught up in the excitement. Then, at Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks them a serious question, "Who do you say I am?" It's one of the most dramatic moments in all the scriptures and it's Simon Peter who answers enthusiastically, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

Then, Jesus changes the subject. He begins to tell them that the crowds will soon turn against him, he will be crucified, on the third day he will be raised from the dead. The disciples don't know what to make of all this. Simon Peter takes Jesus aside and says: "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus' response to Simon Peter is as harsh, as any words in the New Testament. One translator quotes him like this: "Get behind me Satan! You are not on the side of God, but of man."

Then Jesus speaks some of the best known and most challenging words of his ministry, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me."

What does that mean for our lives? I believe Jesus is telling us, how to begin a new life, by becoming one of his disciples. The keys to that new life, are found in these words, that we have heard so many times before. Jesus says to his disciples and to us: "Whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me." What is it, that Christ is asking us to do?

Well, the first step to a new life, according Jesus, is to deny one's self. The word Jesus uses for "deny one's self" can also mean "to forget one's self." That's hard!

Have you ever heard anyone described, as self-involved? Self-involved people, are wrapped up in themselves, or their own thoughts. They hardly give a thought to what other people are experiencing. The truth is, that all of us, to one extent or another, are self-involved. Forgetting one's self is difficult.

But what if we could forget ourselves entirely? What if our thoughts weren't focused on ourselves, and our need to achieve, to belong, to be happy or significant? What if we could change our mind's focus, from ourselves and our needs, to God and God's plan for the world? What if we could surrender everything we have, and everything we are, to God and God's will for our life? Would that mean, we were becoming a new person?

Cody Garbrandt is a Mixed Martial Arts fighter. Cody says he was raised in a family of fighters. Cody gave an interview recently that was quite fascinating. It was

about surrendering. Here's what he had to say, "Surrender is a foreign word, to many fighters. It was a foreign word to me, in my life."

Cody says, that in the early years of his career, he focused all his energy on being the toughest fighter in the ring. Outside the ring, he spent his time partying, including and using, recreational drugs. But, he realized something was missing from his life, and no achievement, or drug, could fill that hole.

One night, Cody got tired of living in constant conflict, due to his inner emptiness. He was so desperate, he tried to hang himself. Fortunately, his brother found him, and literally saved his life.

After that near tragedy, Cody and his brother began going to church together. And in his time at church, Cody discovered, that the true purpose of his life, was not found in fighting, or in partying. Cody discovered that the true purpose of his life, was found in surrendering his life, to God. He discovered that his achievements in the ring, had no real meaning; his partying didn't bring him any lasting joy or pleasure. He had to lay down all the things he thought defined him, or gave him worth, in order to find his real purpose, in a relationship with God.

This former MMA fighter, has now found a new life in Christ. As he explains it, "I'm . . . thankful that I'm able to surrender to the Lord and I'm not fighting anymore."

Denying one's self, or forgetting one's self, is a difficult thing to do. We like to be in control. But surrendering, one's self to God, is the first step, in an authentic new life. Does God rule your life, or are you, faking it?

Now, the second step, to a new life, is even more challenging. Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves and **take up their cross** . . ." We've heard that command, all our lives, but what, does it mean "take up your cross"?

One thing it will mean for many of us, is that we will have to give up our addiction, to a life of comfort. There's nothing comfortable about a cross.

What does it mean, to take up Christ's cross? I suspect, it has something to do with our addiction to comfort. Some people, never want to leave their comfort zone. They never want to do anything that requires sacrifice. They never want to do anything, that will cause them, the least bit of stress. Forget about asking them, to lead a third grade Sunday school class. Forget about asking them, to do something simple, like inviting a neighbor to church. "Oh, pastor, I couldn't do that. They might be offended." Yes, and on the other hand, they may have their entire life completely turned around.

You simply can't serve Christ, and always remain in your comfort zone. There are people all around us, who are facing some tremendous challenges, loneliness, addiction, depression. Some of them are like Cody Garbrandt, so desperate they're on the verge of taking their own life. Do we care?

Some cynic has said, "When the going gets tough, everyone leaves." That happened to Jesus. As the way got harder, the numbers of those who followed, dwindled, until he died alone on Calvary. Yet, if Jesus had been **unwilling** to lay down his life, the world would never have known the love of the Almighty God.

And, on the other hand, if those early disciples, had not, picked up Jesus' cross, and followed after Jesus, we still wouldn't know about that love . . .

Over the ages, since those early disciples gave their lives, to broadcast the news of God's love, a host of other people have given up everything, to ensure that the Gospel message has endured.

But here's the truth of the situation: if you and, I do not pick up the cross, in our time, make those hard choices, and assume those difficult responsibilities, that are required to ensure that the church of Jesus Christ accomplishes its mission, our children's children, will not know the old, old story, of Jesus and his love.

It's sad but true, many of us, don't want to do anything, that requires us to sacrifice, some of our time and resources. There a song, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? The answer is, No, there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me." But some of us are just faking it.

There's a story told, of a worker in an inner-city mission, who had given many years, to a most discouraging ministry. A friend came to him one day and said, "Why don't you leave this job, before you're broken by its inhuman burden? Why don't you, run away from all of it?"

The man replied, "There are times, when I would very much like to leave it all. But, there's a man on a cross, with love in his eyes, who won't let me."

Jesus said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves, and take up their cross . . . Then he adds three more words: "**and follow me.**" What does it mean to follow Jesus? You know what it means. **Following Jesus, means living a life, of loving service, just as Jesus did.**

Let me tell you about a young man named Mike Cohen, who was diagnosed with leukemia when he was 18 years old, but intense chemo and radiation treatment eliminated the leukemia, and Mike returned to the active lifestyle of a healthy young man. He became an avid hiker and biker, taking cross-country trips, on his bicycle, to honor the cancer doctors, who had saved his life.

What he didn't realize, was that the aggressive treatments for his leukemia, had damaged his heart muscle. By the age of 33, Mike's heart was failing. In February 2018, Mike laid in a hospital, in San Diego, with a life-threatening blood clot, strangling his already weakened heart.

There was another young man named James Mazzuchelli. James was a Navy flight surgeon, known for his dedication to his country, his courage and his selflessness. In February 2018, James was killed in a helicopter training mission at Camp Pendleton, in San Diego. And so, that night, James's strong heart was transplanted into Mike Cohen, saving his life.

James's mother, Christine Cheers, was overwhelmed with grief after her son's death. The tiny sliver of hope, that kept her going, was the knowledge that James was still helping people, that he was still living inside each of the donor recipients. She wrote letters to each of the four recipients of her son's organs.

She only heard back from two of the recipients. Mike Cohen sounded sincerely grateful, and he and Christine stayed in touch. They exchanged letters and kept in touch over social media. And one year after Mike's heart transplant, he planned a cross-country bicycle trip from San Diego to Jacksonville, Florida to visit the grave site of the

man whose heart gave him new life. Christine Cheers and her husband followed Mike's cross-country bike trip on social media.

On November 20, 2019, Mike and his friends arrived at the cemetery where James Mazzuchelli was buried. He and Christine hugged each other and wept. And then Mike knelt at James' grave, and thanked him for the gift of life. A friend traveling with Mike brought out a stethoscope, so Christine could hear her son's heart beating in Mike's chest. As Mike Cohen said, "As cliché as it sounds, I wanted them to know that James's heart was in a safe place. That I was going to do everything I could, to protect it."

When you take up Jesus' cross, you're taking up Jesus' heart, Jesus' priorities, Jesus' values, Jesus' love, which now live in you. And your journey through life, becomes a journey to honor Jesus' sacrifice and protect Jesus' heart. You're taking up the very purpose, and driving ambition, of Jesus' life: to share God's love with the world. That's your cross. And Jesus' challenge to you, is simple: whatever you have to sacrifice, whatever you have to lay down, in order to pick up his cross, then do it. Then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you will truly discover a new life. So, let's be disciples of Jesus Christ, picking up our cross Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.