

Suffering and Asking for Help

Mark 8:31-38

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on February 28, 2021

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take-up their cross and follow me.” Jesus saying such a thing to us at a time like this feels a little, shall we say, tone-deaf. Read the room, Jesus. Deny ourselves? What more can be taken from us? We have literally gone without the ability to hug our extended family, to eat dinner with friends, to participate in any form of embodied relationship with anyone outside our own house for almost a whole year now. And if that wasn't enough, then we lost power, heat, and water. We lost regular church, then we lost outdoor church, and then we couldn't even access zoom church. Take up our cross? Haven't we suffered enough in the last year? Half a million Americans dead from a virus—more than the American lives lost in WWI, WW2, and Vietnam combined—and millions more dead from all the other more “normal” causes and not one of them have been rightfully mourned or given the funerals they deserve, not to mention all the increased psycho-emotional strain we're all carrying with us—all of us struggling to remain hopeful in continued isolation, trying to stay afloat swimming against currents of depression, anxiety, and fear. I don't know about you, but I have been denied enough lately; I have had enough of taking up my cross, thank you very much, Jesus.

Still, Jesus' words stare back at us with the stubbornness of an immovable mountain. Like the rude classmate who is not listening to what you're saying but instead you can tell is just counting down the seconds until you stop talking because they already know what they're going to say. Jesus repeats: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take-up their cross and follow me.” What are we to do with difficult words such as these?

There's two things I suggest we can take away from such words in a moment like this. The first one is a hard truth we must work to accept; the second is, I hope, a source of comfort.

So first—remember this is the hard one—suffering is an unavoidable aspect of the Christian experience. It just is. Plain and simple, to follow Jesus is to suffer. It is to bear burdens. This is true in at least two senses, one general and one specific. First—the specific—following Jesus will inevitably have consequences on the shape of your life that make you less likable to society at large. The more you follow Jesus, the more you will, for example, begin to speak up on behalf of those that most of society has tried to push to the edges of their minds by pushing them into the edges of their cities. You will, for example, insist on the reality of transcendence in a world that has tried its hardest to flatten everything to two dimensions. You will insist on peace and nonviolence in a world of coercion and war. You will insist on justice for those wronged and forgiveness for those who did the wrong in the first place. Believe me, you will suffer for these things. The Roman-occupied world of Jesus may appear to be a lot different than the world of 21st century America that we live in, but at least in these respects, the world has not changed nearly as much as many people think. To follow Jesus is to have one's life changed in ways that before long are viewed as a threat to the prevailing order of things. To follow Jesus is to be mocked as he was mocked and sometimes even killed as he was killed. If we never find ourselves being a thorn in the side of society, we should probably ask ourselves if we are really following Jesus after all.

But to be a follower of Jesus means to suffer not just in this specific sense, but in a general sense too. What I mean is, actually, suffering seems to me to be an unavoidable aspect of not just the Christian experience, but of the human experience. Who makes it through this life without suffering? Sure, it is not evenly distributed. But as Mother Mary said last week, nobody wins in a contest of competitive suffering. I have yet to meet someone who truly “had it easy” despite many profess to have had it precisely so. In the words of revered legends of American rock R.E.M.: Everybody hurts. So, sometimes Christians suffer because they are Christians, sometimes they just suffer because they’re human.

But the essential difference when it comes to suffering between Christians and the world that Jesus’ words help us realize is that is that Christians are not surprised by suffering when it arrives. Or they ought not to be. And furthermore, because Christians expect suffering, they do not live their lives trying to avoid it at all costs. Or at least they shouldn’t. This is what Jesus is trying to say.

It is, of course, the most natural thing in the world to avoid suffering at all costs. Most of the world lives this way. Most of us live this way. Who likes being uncomfortable? Who likes being mocked? But when Christians come against suffering, avoiding it is simply not their top priority. Being a follower of Jesus is their top priority. Being a witness to the Gospel. And occasionally buying the ticket out of suffering would require one to sacrifice one’s witness to Jesus. And when those come in conflict, one simply chooses to keep following Jesus and to stay in the suffering. If they can avoid suffering and still be a follower of Jesus, all the better. Jesus isn’t telling people to throw themselves on the funeral pyre. If you are cold and someone is offering you a warm place to stay, take them up on it.

But the reason Christians are able to make the insane choice to occasionally remain in their suffering is that the life of Jesus has taught them to expect the suffering of the cross to lead to resurrection. Suffering, though not to be sought out for its own sake, can be a source of renewal. We as Christians actually *expect* it do lead to new life. This does not make suffering any easier, of course. Suffering is still suffering. But it alters our orientation toward it. Suffering is not, then, to be seen a temporary interruption to one’s life of discipleship. It is the its primary context.

This has been an extraordinarily difficult year and yes, we do hope and I firmly believe that things will return to some kind of normal sometime later this year. But I also know that even in that “back to normal” we will continue to suffer. Don’t be surprised by it. And don’t now just wait for it to be over. But instead consider the cross you are bearing and be so bold as to expect resurrection. Look at what is bad and be so bold as to expect something beautiful to emerge from it. That is the upside-down shape of Christianity.

Now onto the second thing. This is the hopeful one. The second thing only came to me as I was reflecting on our artwork that we now have hanging in the nave. I have been particularly struck by Rouault’s image of the assistant carrying the cross. Remember, as Jesus’ journeyed from his sentencing outside the city gates to the hilltop of his execution, he struggled to keep his cross aloft. Eventually, he needed help. A man named Simon from Cyrene helped Jesus carry the cross.

So here’s the second thing then: You don’t have to carry your cross alone. And I mean that not in the usual “Jesus is always with you; Jesus can help you” kind of way. In this case, it is actually Jesus who needed the help. This moment unlocks for us a very important theological insight. Jesus, the Son of God, fully human and

fully God, who lived perfectly without sin, asked for help. Now think about that for a moment. Jesus was perfect. But Jesus was too weak to continue. Jesus needed help. Meaning, Jesus' weakness—indeed, Jesus' asking for help—is not evidence of his imperfection but precisely the opposite. Weakness is not the opposite of perfection. Independence is not a feature of sinlessness. Actually, it turns out that needing others is itself part of being truly and perfectly human.

We are not made to be alone. God saw it was good for one human to dwell alone in the Garden of Eden. Jesus traveled and spread the Gospel not alone but with 12 companions. And those disciples after Jesus' death were sent out not alone but two by two. And those paired-up disciples traveled the ancient world not saving individual souls but establishing communities of interdependent disciples called churches. We are not made to be alone. And more importantly, we are not meant to bear our burdens alone. We need help carrying our crosses. We're meant to have help. We are more fully human, more perfect, when we are living into the mutual interdependence of the body of Christ.

If Jesus can ask for help, so can you. What I said to you in my sermon two weeks ago remains heavy on my heart—everyone I know is hurting right now. Jesus is saying two things to you today. On the one hand, he can't promise that the suffering you are enduring is going to go away. But on the other, he can promise you that you don't have to continue to suffer alone. Let me say this to you as your pastor: Don't be afraid to ask for help.

It is not easy to ask for help, I know. But one of the gifts of a worldwide crisis is that it has never been more socially acceptable to be struggling. Your struggles are not a surprise. So find people. I know many of our accustomed avenues of relationship are cut off right now, but there still is lots we can do. Reach out to us, your pastors. You can come sit in our front yards or visit with us over the phone. Let us pray for and with you. Find a therapist. One of the bedrock beliefs of my life is that every single person should be in therapy. I am in therapy. Reach out to friends; be so bold as to reconnect with old ones. Many of you have been doing this already. Jim Clark has his own once-a-week driveway breakfast club. Many of you are walking the streets of Barton Hills and beyond together in the early mornings and early evenings. Just this last week the Men's Group organized their own rotation of folks to go and sit socially distanced with our brother Rex White to keep him company. Many of you did this last week during the storm. We asked for help and we were shuttled by one friend with 4WD to the Bushman's who literally gave us food and shelter. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but of strength. It is what Jesus did. Don't be afraid.

Our Bishop, Bishop Doyle, often uses a particular benediction when he visits congregations across our Diocese that feels particularly appropriate today. So I'll leave you with this: *Do not pray for easy lives...But pray instead to be stronger people for the living of life. Do not pray for tasks that are equal to your gifts, and talents, and treasure...But instead pray for the gifts, and talents, and treasure to meet the tasks that are in front of you. For in that way when anything is finished, any mission undertaken, any ministry accomplished... It will not be the miracle...but instead YOU will be the miracle. And every day you shall wonder at the mercy, love, grace, and power that has come from God through you into the world. And the blessing of God Almighty: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen.*