

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - A - Proper 7 (2026)

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalms 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

‘Jesus said to the twelve disciples.....’and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me, Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’”

Before I tackle some extremely challenging teachings of Jesus, such as “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven,”or, “Do not think I have come to bring peace on the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,”and, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it,” let’s understand the context.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus had done some teaching with the disciples before sending them out on their mission of preaching and healing. In part, he spoke and warned them about the challenges of living as his disciples, that people would misunderstand, while others would be outright hostile to the message. Clearly, throughout Scripture, Jesus teaches his followers not to be afraid, so he’s not trying to frighten them with these warnings, but to remind them that they will also experience some of the same welcome and rejection that he did. Welcome to the life of the prophets and of their master.

Warnings aside, Jesus encourages the disciples that, in the same way that God provides for the life of a small bird, a sparrow, and the fact that he knows even the number of hairs on their heads, God will provide what is

needed to sustain and empower their work despite the rejection that is to come. This rejection will come from not only folks they don't know among the wider community, but could come from within their most intimate of relationships: their own families. To follow Christ requires the intentional prioritizing of their relationship with him, even against other important aspects of their lives, up to and including their parents, siblings, and children; one's earthly support structure. To be clear, Jesus is not speaking ill or downplaying one's love of family. Rather, he's instructing that divine love, through the reordering of one's life, must come first.

Now back to taking up one's cross, of being worthy or not, and losing or gaining one's life. As I mentioned, Jesus has taught the hard lesson: that to be a follower of his is a full-time commitment, a commitment that comes with unimaginable, glorious, and eternal rewards but with the potential for real, albeit temporary, and harrowing challenges and trials. Jesus is talking, quite directly, about the cost of discipleship, of arranging one's ideas and values such that they align with God's ideas and values, and not those of the world; of letting go of self-rule to that of willingly following Godly rule. To be a 'worthy' disciple is not about being morally superior to others. Instead, it is a genuine readiness to fully commit one's life to following Christ, above and beyond all else.

I am no psychologist, but life has taught me that surrendering self-rule is not in our human nature. From the time we start to learn something about our very essence as children, we tend to gravitate toward an attitude of self-indulgence and being our own boss. We kind of like being the center of our own little universe, and if we can become the dominant figure in someone else's, fine. I've learned through my own experience that even when I think I've been virtuous, in retrospect, more times than not, I've realized that my motivations weren't exactly genuine, but laced with self-interest.

This is what Jesus meant then and means today: to pick up one's cross is an act of self-denial and obedience. People of Jesus' day painfully understood what it meant to carry one's cross: it was a public and humiliating way of death. Again, let me be clear: picking up one's cross is NOT a metaphor for burden-bearing. It IS a dying to the self-importance of our own self-determination, of us being the 'boss of ourselves.' This dying to self sheds us of our selfish desires, ambitions, and worldly attachments. Dying to self establishes a new and healthy way to understand what it means to love God and neighbor. Dying to self rids us of whatever it is that keeps us from fully embracing our relationship with God. Dying to self is a voluntary action that reflects an intentional decision made day after day, after day. Dying to self is the antithesis of self-rule, the ultimate temptation. Remember, temptations are attempts to get us to do something wrong, so self-rule can only lead to sin. Self-rule puts one in the place of God, the ultimate sin.

When we surrender this need of self-centeredness, the 'losing' of one's life, and allow the divine to forge our path, we begin to understand what and how life is supposed to be: one filled with purpose, fulfillment, contentment, peace; one expressed by acts of generosity, compassion, and self-giving love. The exchange of self-rule for godly rule is the 'finding' of one's true life.

I suspect all of us here today have a pretty good understanding of 'cross-bearing,' self-denying, and at least an appreciation for the physical, emotional, and spiritual costs associated with being a disciple of Christ. I have rarely had to defend my faith at the risk of being ostracized, or worse. To the extent I've had issues, it's been with people 'within' the church, not those outside the walls. If you're like me, you've probably got a pretty good sense of what Jesus wants and why he demands our allegiance and loyalty. The issue is really one of 'how.' How do we reorient our priorities and keep them in proper alignment when life throws so much at us, when our circumstances demand our immediate attention, or when we simply want to give up?

In no particular order, I offer the following: Re-evaluate your existing priorities and don't be afraid to 'see' the results. If God is not at the top, start there. Hold the people, things, desires, hopes, needs, and other worldly connections very loosely. Don't place undue reliance or trust in them. This is not denying their importance, but a reminder to keep and understand them in their proper perspective, secondary to our relationship with God. Spend continual time with God through prayer, study, worship, fellowship, and service.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew writes, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (the things you need) will be added to you." What a great encouragement that when we seek the righteous ways of God, when God is at the top of our priority list and his ways the path of our feet, all the other things we hold dear will come into proper view, with the divine promise that whatever is needed will be provided. When times get tough, pray to remain steadfast in the faith, willing to face whatever the issue with confidence and trust in the providence and protection of God. The cost of discipleship is great. The rewards in the here and now of abundant life are real, and the vindication in the age to come empowers our actions in the present. There is no time like the present to put first things first. Amen.