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Ipswich Methodist Circuit
Sermon: 31st August, 2020
Series: living outside the box
Scripture: Matthew 16:21-28



bearing the load



<Read Matthew 16:21-28>

21 From 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. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But 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."

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 6 For 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?"

27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."



Jesus gives us an instruction in our scripture today. But it is a strange one. *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Peter responds by saying something that we might paraphrase as: *"Don't joke around, and don't say that. It's not true. You're the Messiah who is going to overthrow the Romans. This kind of suffering can't happen. You are going to get yourself killed and you can't save us all from 6 foot under."* And Jesus responds by calling Peter a stumbling block.

Peter gets a bad rap here, but if we are honest it is probably the response we would have had too. His objection seems like sound communal care for his minister. Peter typifies the disciples both then and now. No one wants their friends to suffer. Our instinct is to embrace Jesus' ethics, but to shut out the cross and any suffering. **Jesus**



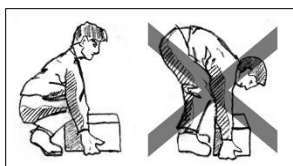
is suddenly going off script; he's got out of the box again! And it doesn't sound very safe.

Perhaps Jesus has some sort of flashback to his time of testing in the wilderness and Peter's words sound just like the tempting thoughts that Jesus has been having. In any case Jesus concludes that Peter's thinking is how the world thinks, it is not how God thinks, and Jesus calls him out for it, and rebukes him.

We too are often confident with our claims on God, and with our claims on God's behalf. These claims may even come from the same deep love that drives Peter's dispute. But maybe they are not always right. **We get stuck in our boxes while Jesus is living outside of the box.**



So Jesus tells the disciples to take up their crosses and to lose their lives in order to gain them. **So what's it mean to pick up our crosses? What load are we being asked to bear?**



When I think about physically carrying a load, there is a right and a wrong way to proceed. We can hurt ourselves if we carry things awkwardly.



And yet when we bear the load right, we can carry large weights. When I visited Africa, I couldn't even lift a filled water container more than 3" off the ground and yet African women daily carry water on their heads.

So what is Jesus asking us to carry? It is hard to think that Jesus is asking us to suffer. The cross is an instrument of pain and humiliation. What does it mean to deny ourselves and take up the cross?



There is some self-denial and suffering that I have come to understand is **not Okay**.¹

Oppression by others is not an okay cross to carry / load to bear. It is NOT okay to tell a woman (or a man) in a situation of domestic abuse that the abuse is their cross to carry. It was NOT okay that preachers used to tell slaves that slavery was their cross to carry.

Describing everyday nuisances as crosses to bear is also inappropriate. Your commute to work is not your cross to bear. Your digging up weeds is not a cross to bear for having a garden. This trivializes Jesus' teaching.

¹ Alice McKenzie, "Jesus' Passion and Ours: Reflections on Matthew 16:21-28" in *Patheos Progressive Christian: Edgy Exegesis*, August 21, 2011. <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Jesus-Passion-and-Ours-Alyce-McKenzie-08-22-2011>

Another misunderstanding of self-denial is that it means automatically subordinating our needs and dreams to those of others. Women especially, can find themselves feeling guilty about setting boundaries that allow them time and energy to be good stewards of their own mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health. Instead we allow the demands of others to consistently cross the line with the result that we are diminished as children of God, and our contributions to God's kingdom are truncated. Jesus asked us to deny ourselves but Jesus also taught us to love ourselves as we love others. As always a balance is needed.



So if these are not the loads we are asked to bear, **then what load is Jesus asking us to carry?** There's an explanation I read by Lutheran Pastor Edward Mark.² He was talking about a book by C.M. Clowe called *The Cross in Christian Experience*. In the book, Clowe distinguishes between 3 types of suffering: **burdens, thorns and crosses.**

Clowe describes our burdens as the regular things in life that we all have to go through. The pain of childbirth, raising a toddler through the terrible twos, teenage angst, caring for elderly parents, sickness, accidents, exams, taxes and so on.

And then there are the thorns in our lives. Thorns are those basic handicaps and limitations of life, sometimes that we are born with, or that we develop in early or later life. Paul described himself as having a thorn in his side. We're not sure what it was, maybe epilepsy. Many people have a thorn of some sort. Perhaps it is diabetes, or a hearing loss, or a heart problem.

Nobody chooses their burdens and nobody chooses their thorns. It is just the way it is. These things just happen to you. A person learns to live in dignity with those burdens and those thorns.

And then there are crosses. Unlike burdens and thorns which you do not choose. Crosses are what you choose to pick up. Clowe says that **to pick up the cross is to choose to pick up the thorns and burdens of other people's lives.**

When other people are in need, due to their burdens and disasters, picking up the cross means loving them and helping them with their lives. And that may be a sacrifice on your part. You may have to give something up for the sake of something that is of a higher value. It is a choice that could be avoided, and is one that we are under no compulsion to take up except for the love of Christ living inside of us.

² http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_peter_the_stumbling_block.htm

And sometimes when we choose to pick up that cross following Christ will mean putting ourselves at risk and doing what is uncomfortable and unpopular. We may be lonely, disapproved of, frightened, and threatened.



To come back to our box analogy, it means getting out of our safe boxes and carrying them rather than sitting inside of them.



All of us struggle with finding the right balance *and* surrendering our selfishness to God, *and* being prepared to suffer as we bear others burdens and thorns. And yet, time and again, as we live into this calling, we find a satisfaction that fills us in ways that other things do not. Like helping others through outreach projects at our churches such as Trinity Felixstowe providing a free bag of shopping to those in need on Tuesday of each week this summer. When we choose to make sacrifices, whether it is of

time, vacation, or money to go and help those whose lives have been turned upside-down we find that we are the ones who are enriched.

Another example. Jesus calls us to seek justice and ways of non-violence to change the status quo. Our Methodist connexion talked a lot about racism and diversity acknowledging failings not just within society but within the church too, and pledging to do better. That's why I am leading a group on Thursdays with some challenging discussion. There is much work to do – a heavy load to bear. And as recent examples from the US demonstrate, it can be dangerous work.



When we do bear the load, we might even be surprised at how much we can carry and at how much satisfaction it brings us. Given the right support and tools such as a moving dolly, it is amazing how much we can carry! *Metaphorically, we can carry heavy suitcases, and even beds, produce, and people.*



Jesus says: "If you want to become my follower, then deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. **Are you ready to experience life outside of the box?**

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Series Description

We try to box God in, but God is always breaking out of the box and shattering our understandings of life in God's kingdom.