



Sunday February 25, 2024
Mark 8:31-38 (Second Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Have you ever taken the time to people watch when you're at the airport? Well, I have to confess, it's one of my favorite things to do when traveling – to try and guess where people are going, or where they've been. Sometimes you can figure it out pretty quickly by the clothes they're wearing – maybe it's a location or landmark t-shirt; perhaps the Mickey Mouse ears and Disney souvenir bags are the giveaway, or maybe it's the Hawaiian shirt or colorful leis hanging around their neck.

But if you're *not* fortunate enough to notice the subtle or not so subtle clues, I also think it's fun to catch a glimpse of what people have in their carry-on luggage when they're being shaken down at the security checkpoint. As their carry-on bags get rifled through and the contents removed, it sort of reminds me of being at a magic show as you sit there in suspense, waiting for whatever's going to appear next. And let me tell you, it's *really* interesting what people pack in their carry-on luggage.

A few weeks ago, I was coming back from doing some Youth Gathering planning in New Orleans, and as I was making my way through security, I happened to be standing next to someone whose neck was loaded with Mardi Gras beads – and one necklace in particular that was made up of large softball sized ornaments. One thing's for certain – there's *no way* this thing was fitting in her carry-on luggage.

Another time, I watched a man making his passionate plea to a TSA agent for why he should be allowed to carry on what the agent calmly but assertively referred to as, "*a 50lb. bag of rotten fish!*" I'm still shaking my head over that one. So...if *you* happen to be one of those people who packs strange things in *your* luggage keep this important thing in mind the next time you travel...others are watching, and if you're not careful you may just end up in someone's sermon. In today's gospel reading from Mark, we hear a challenging instruction from Jesus for anyone who wants to follow him about what's necessary to take with them on their journey through life. "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*"

What does this even mean? Because as Christians today I think we've become far too comfortable with the image of the cross. We have crosses hanging inside our sanctuaries and outside our church buildings, some people have them hanging on walls in their homes, others have them as bumper stickers or window decals on their cars, and to some they're nothing more than a fashion accessory worn as jewelry or tattooed on their bodies. In many ways, I think we've sanitized what the cross symbolizes because we're far slower to connect it to torture and suffering.

But that certainly wouldn't have been the case in Jesus' day. In fact, in the first-century Roman world, the whole idea of the cross was completely repulsive. The cross was the Roman Empire's most dreadful instrument of cruelty and execution. It represented humiliation and agony. Crucifixion was extreme and terrifying and everyone in the Roman empire would've known its meaning.

Someone carrying a cross was on their way to die. Condemned by the powers of this world as a threat too dangerous, too disruptive, too much of a nuisance to keep around. People condemned to death by the Empire were condemned because they wouldn't or couldn't conform.

So, for Jesus to tell his disciples to pick up a cross and follow him would have been as shocking as him telling people in our modern world to pick up their electric chairs and follow him.

Of all the images that Jesus could have used to describe a life of discipleship, why would he choose *this most horrific one*? After all, Noah got a rainbow. Moses got a burning bush. The Magi got a star. So why then, do Jesus' disciples get a cross?

Because if we're being honest then the truth is, we don't really like thinking about the cross. We don't like to think about its meaning because we want to call ourselves Christians, disciples, followers, or whatever, while avoiding all the ways our faith could potentially threaten our comfortable lives.

But as strange as it sounds, it all has to do with love. For God, the cross is so much more than a wretched form of execution. Instead, God uses the cross to turn our worldly understanding upside down and show us that God will stop at nothing to prove God's love for us. God uses the cross to bridge the divide of sin and death that separates us from God.



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And even when we doubt or disbelieve, God is intimately united with us. The cross is God's ultimate revelation of God's very nature. God is love, but not just any ordinary kind of love – infinite, perfect, and self-giving love. And it's here, on a device of torture and death that God's love for us is realized. Just let that sink in for a moment.

In some ways that's exactly what our journey through Lent is all about – realizing that we truly have no idea how God works, so we turn to Jesus on his journey to the cross in order to learn. Because being a follower of Jesus means letting go of our own ideas and doing this life of faith Jesus's way – lose in order to gain and realize that gaining doesn't always mean winning.

In his teaching in Mark, Jesus helps the disciples, and us, connect the meaning of the cross to the very foundations of discipleship. Jesus says, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."* The instructions Jesus gives are centered around the word "follow." And I think He does this to remind us that we're not stepping into something totally new, but instead that we're traveling with someone who has been there, who understands how hard it is, and who will be there with us every step of the way. But along the way, Jesus calls us to do some difficult things.

First, we're called to deny ourselves. And especially in Lent we hear about this. Denying ourselves, though, doesn't just mean giving up something trivial like chocolate or soda. It can also be about setting aside our selfish desires and taking seriously the part of the Lord's Prayer that says, *"THY will be done,"* and in doing so making **GOD** the center of our decisions. It's about focusing our attention – not on ourselves, but on God. But wait, Jesus isn't done yet.

The second step is to take up our crosses. Remember though, Jesus doesn't tell us to check the cross and pick it up at the end of the journey. He actually tells us to do the opposite – take it up. To keep it with us as something that's fundamental and important – *so important* that we wouldn't want to let it out of our sight.

But for some people and perhaps even some of us here today, the idea of *"take up your cross"* is painfully connected to a hardship in your life that you've been forced to endure. But I want to be completely clear about something, taking up our cross isn't about suffering. Jesus died on the cross so that we might have life, and not just life itself, but abundant life. Through the cross, God promises that suffering isn't the end result. Because from death on the cross comes a new life, an eternal life, made possible through Jesus' resurrection.

Reconciliation and wholeness is the endgame that God yearns for. So, to take up our cross means to live our lives in a way that seeks wholeness and reconciliation for all God's children – to be a people who reflect the God we worship. Carrying the cross marks us as God's own and reveals God's love for the world *through us*. We take up the cross when we speak words of compassion rather than words of hate. We take up the cross when we work to make sure no one goes hungry. We take up the cross when we stand against racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression. We take up the cross when we sit at the bedside of someone who's sick or dying. We take up the cross when we welcome the stranger. We take up the cross when we care for creation. We take up the cross when we extend forgiveness. We take up the cross when we pray for our loved ones, our community, and our world. And we take up the cross each time we come to this holy table for communion to experience the real and powerful presence of Jesus in our midst.

My friends, sometimes carrying the label of a Christian is easy and light; other times it can feel like dragging a heavy wooden cross through the mud. And yet, Jesus calls us to take it up, each and every day.

We *need the cross* with us on the journey to keep us grounded in our faith and rooted in what really matters. And as followers of Christ, we've been entrusted with the cross. But it's up to us to decide whether we'll put it in our checked bags or be brave enough to carry it with us wherever we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.