

Sermon Lent 2a 2021: Taking Up Our Cross in the Way of Love

Introduction: Unconverted Christian Society

As we look around at American Christianity today;

We find ourselves living in a largely unconverted, uncommitted era of Christian living;

With a host of conflicting information about what it means to be a Christian;

That often sounds more like the way of the world than the Way of Love.

Take for example that a significant majority of Americans identify as Christian;

But only 40% claim to attend church on a regular basis because we have other commitments;

And please, I understand that attending church even electronically or digitally

Is not the end all for being a Christian.

But the truth is that it is very hard to keep up your Christianity on your own;

Coming to church, living connected to Christian community, even online;

Is one of the most effective ways to be renewed in our faith week by week

And to be an example for others seeking this life with God.

Too few Christians in the United States live in such a way that their faith

And their commitment to God and God's purposes would be recognized

Even by people who know them.

Many of us live one way at church and another way the other 167 hours in the week;

And some of us aren't always easily identified as Christians

When we are attending church some Sundays.

Years ago, I was in Memphis leading a church retreat and in the papers that week

Was an awful story about a fight that broke out during a church service;

Two members started yelling and swinging fists at one another during communion;

And a brawl broke out in the choir

As members of the two fighter's families started going at one another;

Probably not quite what the Prince of Peace has in mind for Christians at Church.

And while we may not see fistfights on Sundays at St. David's;

There are times when our behavior and our attitudes don't appear all that loving;

And someone new to St. David's may come and go on a Sunday or some zoom meeting

Without any of us welcoming them or opening a way

For them to become part of St. David's and God's mission here.

We are, as a people, only partially converted; only partially committed to God

And that's a problem for any of us who know something

About the power of commitment and the price that has to be paid

In terms of time and effort to succeed in anything.

Most of us understand that the price of success or effectiveness in any endeavor

Requires self-denial, hard work, long hours, deep thinking, and lots of practice;

Countless studies and sociologists like Malcolm Gladwell,

Tell us that persistence and commitment and effort;

Will win out over partially committed talent every time.

Spend 10,000 hours on any endeavor or subject or sport or musical instrument or job

Or relationship and amazing things will always happen;

Call it what you will – success, accomplishment, greatness, happiness, faithfulness;

Deny yourself and put forth effective effort over time

And you will rise to be the best you can be in whatever you choose to pursue and be about.

And what applies in the world around us is true in our lives with God, in this life of faith;

We have to deny ourselves and practice living by God's purposes first and foremost.

We have to practice the Christian faith diligently, effectively, purposefully;

But the good news about the Christian life and putting forth that kind of effort;

Is that our commitment and practice opens the way for God to enter into our lives;

And empower us to actually become Christians in the world.

Taking up The Cross and Following Jesus in the Way of Love

So what does this Christian commitment look like?

Well, Jesus has some insights for us in today's Gospel;

In this conversation with Peter, the disciples, the crowds, and with us;

Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me;

Commit your all and in this total commitment in God you will find life.

Jesus has been telling His followers again that he will undergo great suffering and be killed;

And that after three days He will rise again;

And Peter rebukes Jesus over Jesus' teaching and why wouldn't he?

Peter doesn't have the perspective on the cross and Easter Day that we have;

We've been told and many of us believe that Jesus was raised from the dead that first Easter;

But this must have sounded crazy to Peter;

And probably not what Peter had in mind for Jesus as the Messiah.

If Peter was like most Jewish people of Jesus' day;

He was expecting the Messiah to reign like a king, to wield worldly power;

To restore the fortunes of Israel, to drive out the Romans and lift up the nation;

And, by the way, Peter might have a cabinet post lining up.

Jesus hears Peter's rebuke, but he doesn't exactly address Peter alone;

Mark, who is a Gospel writer of very few words includes important details;

Mark writes that before saying anything, Jesus turns to look at the other disciples;

To make the rebuke of Peter a teachable moment for them as well;

And then He turns to the crowds around Him and to us;

To call us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow Him;

As the way to live this Christian life.

Denying ourselves is much more than giving up sweets or some bad behavior we're caught in;
It's really about setting aside our personal wants and desires for God's wants and desires;
It's about living our lives, not for worldly power or prestige or comfort;
But for God and for the good of others.

Taking up a cross, that sign of cruelty and punishment and death in Jesus' day;
Is not so much about pursuing our death;
But offering ourselves for the life of the world as Jesus did.

Jesus' cross is certainly about suffering and death;
But it is about much more than that.

Jesus' cross is also about undeserved grace for people like you and me;
Jesus' cross is about the infinite mercy of God;
Jesus' cross is about forgiveness so that we may start each day anew, restored;
Jesus' cross is about a saving love for all;
And with Jesus' death and resurrection,
Jesus' cross is about breaking the hold and power of death forever.

Jesus' cross and the cross Jesus calls us to take up is not about suffering for suffering's sake;
Oh, there will be hard moments, suffering comes in all of our lives, cross or no cross;
But Jesus' call on our lives and the crosses we are called to bear is about much more.

Thankfully, we do not have to bear the cross that takes away the sin of the world
Or to break the bonds of death because that was Jesus' cross;
But like Jesus, our crosses are about offering undeserved grace to people;
Our crosses are about being merciful as God is merciful;
Our crosses are about being persons of forgiveness;
Crosses of love for people just as they are.

And our crosses, like Jesus' cross, are unique to the persons God created each of us to be;
With the gifts and interests and capabilities that we have been given and can offer for others;
Our crosses are about being who we are and what we're about;
To bring more life and love to the world, through God working in us;
And to show the world what Christians really are about.

Some of you know I like a quote of St. Catherine of Sienna who once wrote;
"Become who you are created to be and you will set the world on fire";
Which we could rewrite as, "Take up your cross;
And you and I will know God in Jesus Christ and make Christ known to others."

The Cross we Carry

In this season of Lent when we are trying to take on rather than give up;
Since we have already given up so much over this past year;
You and I have an opportunity to live differently;
You and I have an opportunity to walk in the Way of Love;
By looking at who we are and what gifts God has given us;
And taking up that cross for our lives and for the life of the world.

Make grace and mercy and forgiveness and love your go-to behavior and practice;
Look at your life, your gifts, your capabilities and offer them to God;
You know what they are and if you don't, talk to someone who loves you;
Someone who can probably see your gifts and the blessing you are to others;
More clearly than you can see or that you're willing to admit.

Then invite God to help you commit yourself and to empower you to take up this cross;
And to walk each day, day in and day out, with these gifts and abilities;
As a sign of Christ's love for you and for the world.

It's not going to be easy at first and the truth is Jesus is calling us to a lifelong commitment
This denying our preferences in life and taking up God's preferences;
This offering of ourselves to others in our own, unique fashions.

But with daily commitment and practice and 10,000 hours and a lifetime;
And with the presence and power and love of God at work in our lives;
We will become and be known as Christians;
Who are following in the way of the Cross;
Who are walking in the Way of Love;
And we and the nation and the world will look much more;
Like the persons and community and world God is calling us to be..

Amen.