

“Bearing One Another’s Burdens” – Feb. 25, 2024
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“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Difficult words to hear, and perhaps even more difficult to live by.

Here we are, the Christian community, within a time in the church year called “Lent”, where we are challenged to deepen our spiritual journey, leading up to the time of Holy Week and the celebration of Easter.

I’m sure that each year many of us look at ways in which we can get closer to God, be it through traditional practices like Bible study, meditation, fasting on certain days, or through new ways of practicing Lent, like working towards ways to care for our Earth.

But today I’d like to offer yet another way to look at this idea of “denying yourself and taking up your cross”. Maybe you can relate to some of the stories I will now share with you, told to me by people in an online Bible study group which meets every week and which welcomes me.

One man, whose name is John, told the story of going into a Staples store. He found a nice office chair he liked – and he really needed a new one. But, there was a man who approached him and said he also liked that same chair. It didn't seem like there were any more in the store. John told the man he could buy that one if he liked, and the man did.

Hmm...Did John deny himself? Here he was at Staples, ready to purchase a chair that he really needed, but welcomed someone else to buy the last chair of that type available. John could have bought it

being the first there, but he denied himself. Don't you think that when we put others before ourselves, often that's an act of denial?

Then there was another story. A woman named Sandy talked about how she and her husband Steve and their two daughters, many years ago when the girls were in high school, were on a vacation in Arizona and were at a gas station. A couple who was in a car parked not far from them threw a bag filled with trash out their car window. Sandy said, despite the protests of her teenage daughters who didn't want her to make a scene and embarrass them, got out of her car and walked over to the trash and picked everything up and simply threw it away. She didn't say anything, or make any angry gestures -- just picked up the trash, threw it away and got back in her car.

So perhaps there are a lot of ways we can deny ourselves and put others ahead of ourselves -- making a meal, cleaning up afterwards, waiting in line in the grocery store calmly so others don't have to hear our complaints or feel our impatience. There are a lot of ways to do this, in addition to the huge ways of people like Martin Luther King Jr. or Alexei Navalny.

In addition, we can consider not being ashamed to do the right thing -- that is, doing something despite what others may think or say -- doing something that might not be so "cool." Another woman in the Bible study group, Lois, talked about how a few times a week she goes up and down her street pulling a wagon. She fills it with trash, or pop cans, etc. that people throw from their cars. She doesn't worry what others may think of her as she pulls this wagon filled with litter.

As well, some people say they don't want to dance or sing because "I'm a such a terrible dancer/singer." Even something like that we don't need to be ashamed of -- to be able to celebrate or enjoy ourselves with

others we have to take the risk and sing or dance or whatever. Jesus taught us "Don't worry."

So Jesus saying "pick up your cross" is related to all this too -- on the cross is our egotistic, selfish, angry, frightened ego -- whatever part of us prevents us from loving. Our soul longs to die to those things. So we have this time in the church year to reflect and to pray for change. Maybe it's just keeping our mouth shut so we don't put someone down or have the last word in an argument is the cross we pick up. We deny ourselves the satisfaction of a good gossip or a chance at a put-down.

Forget self – carry your cross. These words have the power to heal and transform. Yet, because of their power, they can actually be words of potential danger.

Let me explain. If misappropriated, these are the kind of words with the power to actually be harmful to someone already carrying burdens too heavy to bear. Here's an example:

Early in his career, a minister colleague of mine was serving a rural church and he remembers being asked to officiate at a funeral of someone he did not know. This particular funeral was for the mother in a farming family, who had basically worked until there was nothing left of her, and then she died.

The minister visited with her three adult children, but it was challenging for him to get them to tell him something about their mother which he could use in the eulogy. Occasionally someone would say what a good cook mom had been, or the pride she had in her vegetable garden, but the comments were separated by uncomfortable silences into which this minister would introduce probing, mostly unanswered questions. You can imagine how uncomfortable that must have been.

Eventually he asked if they could think of a few words to help him understand their Mom a bit better. At this, the middle son in the family, who had spent most of our time looking downward in silence, finally looked up and offered one word: “doormat.” Neither of his siblings challenged the assessment, and then this minister heard the heartbreaking tale of a woman who had been told by her husband and her community and her society, and eventually by her own diminished self-image, that her job was to expect nothing and just do what she was told.

This minister and the woman’s adult children then worked together to find less blame-filled words to describe their mother, and they were able to acknowledge that much of her life was just surviving a bad situation. But one could tell how much the quiet desperation of their growing-up years had shaped their approach to life, as they searched for their own meaning in adulthood.

As my colleague searched his soul to prepare for that funeral service, and as his young eyes started to see more of the difficult unfolding of many people’s lives, he says he realized how easy it is for words and concepts like these ones from Jesus – forget yourself, deny yourself, carry your cross – to become *life-diminishing* words rather than *life-giving* ones.

These words can so easily be used harmful ways. Co-opted by the powerful, or by those so harmed and hope-less that no escape route seems possible, these words have been used to add layers of seemingly God-endorsed guilt to the limited opportunities already experienced: by many women, and people of colour, and people with chronic challenges, and minimum-wage earners. These words – originally intended to *challenge* arrogance, these words are summarily brushed aside by the arrogant, and instead taken deeply to heart by those who are *already* carrying crosses and denying their own hopes and needs.

As we hear Jesus' words about selfless service, we can still discern that it is not the will of God to add burdens to those already burdened. The way that Jesus calls us to is difficult, but it's difficult because it proclaims a *newly shared, lived reality of justice*. In these words of carrying our crosses, Jesus declares a world of fairness, and community, and love – a way of life that will demand more of those previously disengaged from life's struggles, and will offer support, advocacy and hope for those who are already all-too-well-acquainted with carrying their cross.

Author Melissa Bane Sevier engages this difficult scripture. "Maybe this is the very hardest of Jesus' teachings" she writes. "Not because it is difficult to understand what he's saying, but because it's impossible to understand *why* he's saying it. 'Taking up the cross' means taking on suffering. But why? Who on earth would want to do that? Well, certainly not Peter. He surely doesn't want Jesus to do it. 'Come on, Lord. You're upsetting the crowds. Nobody wants to join up with a rabbi who's going to suffer and die. They want peace. They're looking for happiness, security. They're looking for God, for heaven's sake. Not suffering. And certainly not death.'"

Right at the point of his ministry when the disciples hoped things would get easier, Jesus spoke not of victory or growth or success, but of putting all that on the line, to initiate a world of fairness and promise for all. In Melissa's words, "Jesus stands with the suffering in the most significant of ways. Not to make them feel better – but to make them not feel alone. *And we stand with each other*. We are better at this once our own hearts have been broken. Not that we have the answer after that, but we tread a little differently afterwards. We see a little differently. Our own hurt, if we let it, eventually can allow us to open our hearts to the hurts of others."

So as I reflect on what this author says, perhaps carrying one's cross is to step away from how one's advantages or privileges in life makes one's living easier at the expense of another. To walk the path of Christ is that which speaks authentic hope into suffering – hope that recognizes suffering, and those who suffer. Carrying one's cross is to really believe the good news enough to give oneself to the task of justice, and to really hear the heartbreak of those who have been carrying their crosses for a very, very long time.

Perhaps by bearing one another's burdens in this way we are living into the kind of healthy self-denial that builds up a better world for all. Our faith tells us that we can always look upon Jesus, who told us “my burden is light”. May each of us find ways, especially during this Lenten season, to be open to the voice of God's spirit and to find ways to ease the burdens of others. Amen.

Sources: from Rev. George Manukas, Feb. 21 2024, in an email to me following Dunbar United Church of Christ Bible study group in Hamden, CT. Also from: Sermon of 28 February 2021, Lent II – Mark 8: 31-38, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – by Rev Greg Wooley.

