

I Have Decided to Follow Jesus Sermon Series
“The Cross Before Me”
Luke 9:18-27
Rev. Joy W. Laughridge
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The verse from the hymn that we just sang makes reference to the words of Jesus from our Scripture reading this morning. The disciples didn't know it yet, but Jesus knew that the course he was on was leading him to a destination that would be painful. He would experience suffering, and rejection, and would even be crucified on a cross – a symbol of shame, and rejection, and condemnation. Even though Jesus knew that the cross was looming, he persevered in his mission. He continued to model a way of life characterized by love for God and love for others. He continued to point out the ways in which people had strayed away from God's purposes and pointed them back to God. He continued to serve and care for people – people who couldn't pay him back; people who weren't always grateful; people who didn't get what he was all about and weren't interested in trying out his teachings; even people who would betray him and cause his suffering. Natural human reasoning would lead most to say he was crazy to keep doing what he was doing when he knew where it was going to take him. When you find yourself telling your friends, “I'm going to undergo great suffering, and rejection, and I'm going to be killed,” that's when you might want to reconsider your life and your decisions, but Jesus didn't, and not only did Jesus keep doing what he was doing but he told his friends that if they were going to be his followers that they would need to be prepared to endure crosses of their own.

Church tradition says that several of Jesus's disciples did bear and die on actual crosses like he did. Thankfully, we live in a different time and place and will likely never literally bear a cross, but of course Jesus's words still have meaning for any who would follow him. When we follow him, there will inevitably be some cost involved, and one of the places where we may most commonly have opportunities for cross bearing is when we follow Jesus in practicing selfless service to others.

There are times when service to others feels life-giving and gives us joy. For example, I feel real joy in this canned pasta drive that we're doing for UCOM. Generosity *is* fun, and when we know we're helping others that can feel really good, but there can be times when service to others isn't as easy or doesn't feel as good. Think about a time you went out of your way to help someone, and they didn't say thank you, or maybe they even complained. Think about a time when serving someone else meant you would have to give up some precious hours of sleep, or your day off, or a little bit of the money that you were saving to do something nice for yourself.

Think about a time when the person you like the least was the one who needed your help the most. Jesus's call to love and serve our neighbors is constant – even in times like the ones I've mentioned – and that's when service to others can become an opportunity to take up our crosses.

The good news is that we always have Jesus's example, and we can always know that he has already loved and served us first in the same way that he calls us to love and serve others. When we complain or act ungrateful; when we take his generosity for granted; when we aren't acting like very nice or likable people; when it cost him his very life - he loved and served us still. Romans 5:8 tells us that God proved God's love in this way. *While* we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Sharing what we have received is easier than sharing or doing something that we know nothing about. We still need help sometimes, though, and Jesus gives that to us through the Spirit. His Spirit is an endless source of power that we can rely on as we endeavor to give of ourselves and serve others selflessly and sacrificially, which is good because when we look around we often seem to be surrounded by endless need- members of our own families, members of our church family, members of our community, and people on the other side of the world have needs. There are always opportunities to serve and care for others.

This past week, our youth in this church were presented with the opportunity to follow Jesus and practice bearing the cross that sometimes comes with service on their at-home mission week, and they are going to share with us a little more about that in just a minute. On Monday morning we took a few minutes, and we remembered what Jesus said about taking up our crosses. We talked about the example that Jesus set for us when he served us and talked about how they were going to practice serving others during the week. There were times when I observed them serving eagerly and with smiles on their faces like the morning I got here and asked them to carry all those cans of pasta out to the van to take with them to UCOM. There were other times during the week that I think they felt some of the pain that can come with service – when maybe they felt tired or tired of each other at times. They did it though, and as we listen to them this morning, give thanks to God – for these youth and the ways that they are learning to be like Jesus as they serve and care for others. And be encouraged - to keep following Jesus by giving of yourself, and your time, and your resources in service to others.