

Take Up Your Cross And Follow Me
Matthew 16:24-26

Lent is the season where we pause from focusing on the warm fuzzy Jesus that is taught in Sunday school. It is during these next forty days we view Jesus as a rebel with a purpose to change the world. As children, we need to know that Jesus loves us. As adults, there is more to Jesus than simply believing Jesus loves me. We, also, need to know what happened that took this loving, story book, Jesus to the cross. Therefore, this Lent, we will take a closer look at Michael Slaughter's description of Jesus as the rebel who knew his actions would eventually lead him to his death. In addition, we will also be challenged to hear Jesus calling you to, "Take up your cross, and follow me." Jesus is more than a story book tale. Jesus calls us to actively engage with the world as Christ's disciples.

As we begin this journey, know there will be difficult things to hear, invitations to think from a different perspective, and the expectation that a response will be required. Jesus came into this world to lead God's people out of the church building and back into active duty as a Disciple, a servant of God. We may think our world is different than Jesus', but there are more similarities than you might think. In Jesus' world, the Jewish faith that brought sacrifices to the temple and lived obedient to its customs was beginning to decline. It was too difficult to follow all the laws and

interpretations of the laws. Today, Christianity in America is declining for similar reasons. People of all ages are leaving the church because it feels like it is frozen in time. The Christian image modeled outside the church walls is often viewed as judgmental and hypocritical because what is taught in church about loving your neighbor is not visually practiced outside the church walls.

Michael Slaughter, in his book Renegade Gospel: the Rebel Jesus, raises the awareness that Islamic faith is becoming more popular in the United states. Rev. Slaughter addresses the question of what is it about Christianity that has people running to different faiths or no faith at all? I believe Rev. Slaughter has a good grasp of what Christianity looks like today from the outside world. He writes, “Our churches consist of members who have little to do with following Jesus. We have turned church into a noun, a stationary building that we visit once a week, (or once a month for many of us), instead of a living, functioning, working community of Jesus-following believers.” I believe he is right on many levels. If the church is a stationary building, then are we waiting for people to walk through our doors wanting to know more about Jesus Christ? People come when they are curious and want to see what’s happening. People flock to activity not silent buildings. Jesus’ time on earth was spent creating a movement to

change how the world thought and spoke about God; inviting everyone to join him.

The movement was a revolution that would lead God's people back to communicating directly with God. When you read the Gospels, the majority of Jesus' ministry is teaching the Disciples where to go and what to say, and what to do with God's people. So, what does he teach; re-organization of earthly and heavenly matters. Jesus calls the people to rethink what is important in their lives. What am I willing to do let go of to help this Jesus movement? What am I willing to grab hold of and pass on to others regarding who Jesus was and who Jesus is for them today? A phrase we use today is, "What cross am I willing to die on for God?" The real question is, "What am I willing to do to redefine my church as a verb rather than a noun to my community?" World history is full of examples where Christians have taken a stance to proclaim their faith, trust, and belief in God.

One of America's great leaders is Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who lived what he believed about God. He understood Jesus to teach that we all equal in the eyes of God. He called Christians to live what Jesus taught them about loving their neighbor as themselves, but there were churches (followers of Christ) who rebelled. Whether you were for or against anti segregation isn't the issue today. What is important is how

Christians demonstrated what they had learned from Christ about the great commandment. Michael Slaughter writes, “We claim that all you have to do is believe in Jesus and you will be saved. But even the demons believed!” As members of the household of God, the church, the place where we connect with people outside the doors of the building is vital for teaching about Jesus’ love for all God’s people. If I were not worthy to socialize with outside the church walls, why would I want to go inside the church walls?

It’s not about our belief but rather about our obedience to what Jesus has called us to do, “Take up your cross and follow me.” Jesus healed the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda and then he said, “Get up, pick up your mat and walk!” (John 5:8) To the lepers in Luke 17:14 Jesus says, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” I believe the key to Jesus call to action is that since you believe in me, take a risk, and show me how much you trust me. Taking up a cross and following Jesus is taking a stance that Jesus has become more important. It would be like going off the grid from you social media or your coffee groups for the next forty days, telling everyone you will be spend time reading the Gospels, praying, and listening to God’s voice. Could you do it? Would you do it?

Saying, “I believe” isn’t enough, even Satan believes in Jesus’. Jesus is calling us to move from words to action and we are resisting. Think for a

moment on how well are you prepared to defend Christ in your daily life. What I, and many other clergy, struggle with is hearing responses like, “I’d like to know more about the bible but....” or “that time doesn’t work for me” or even, “that doesn’t interest me at all”. How does the church move from being a stationary building to a living body of Christ when it isn’t interested in knowing Jesus?

I realize you are not hearing the warm fuzzy sermon that tells you how much God loves you and that you are a good Christian. Please hear that in this time of preparation for Christ’s death and resurrection, God is surrounding you with love to help you grow in your faith so you are prepared to take up your cross and follow Jesus. Jesus never said being my disciple would be easy. In fact, not everyone was willing to follow. Remember the rich young ruler? Jesus said, “Go sell all your possession and come follow me.” The rich young ruler left and never returned; is that the kind of Christian you want to be? I agree with Rev. Slaughter that re-organizing and reprioritizing what is important in our life can make us better parents, students, friends, and employees, because our focus is not on this world but on what God has waiting for us in eternal life.

Our invitation this Lenten season is to explore with God what cross you are willing to carry for God in this world. If we expect to have a place in

heaven, shouldn't we first show God that we want a place in heaven?

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Christianity has always insisted that the cross we bear precedes the crown we wear." Jesus was a man of action who came to restore the relationship between God and God's people. Jesus also left the Disciples with the task to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit for the transformation of the world. You are a Disciples of Christ called to transform your world. What cross will you carry as you take the church into God's world? Amen.