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CHOOSE SACRIFICE

What does the cross mean to you?

- Because before you can make sense of JESUS' statement, "*Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow ME cannot be MY disciple,*" you have to figure that out.
  - For that matter, when was the last time you even asked yourself that question?
    - The last time you heard this passage? Longer?
    - How has your answer changed over time?

What does the cross mean to you?

- Is your answer one of the usual churchy answers:
  - "forgiveness; salvation, grace, freedom?"
- And how does your answer then help you to think about JESUS' statement: "*Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow ME cannot be MY disciple?*"

For JESUS, the cross meant suffering and forgiving others.

- But what about us?
  - Does this mean we are to pick up and carry the burdens of those whom JESUS releases from burdens?
  - Does it mean carrying forward the ministry of JESUS by seeing those whom the world overlooks?
  - Does it mean favoring and standing up for the marginalized even when that action might lead to your own oppression?

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That's what Paul risked with his letter to Philemon, a portion of which we also heard this morning.

- Onesimus was a run-away slave who had left his master, Philemon—a crime that was punishable by death.
  - He found Paul who knew Philemon and apparently had led Philemon to faith.
- During his time with Paul, Onesimus himself became a believer.
  - Now Paul sends Onesimus back to his master with this letter that defies Roman law and risks Paul's relationship with Philemon,
    - because it encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus back,
      - not as a slave, much less a run-away one, but as a Christian brother.
- In Onesimus, Paul found another cross that he could carry.

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What does the cross mean to you?

If the cross is only a means for your salvation, then you've missed JESUS' point,

- especially when you realize that at the point where JESUS is saying these things to HIS disciples, the cross hasn't happened yet.
- When JESUS says this to HIS followers, they, and I believe we, have to hear it in the context of what has come before in their lives—
  - not understood solely based on what would happen in the future.

We know the rest of the story on this side of the cross.

- We know of JESUS' suffering, death, and the resurrection.
  - So, it's easy for us to consider JESUS' words exclusively in light of those events.
  - Yet, carrying your cross cannot *only* be understood in JESUS' suffering and sacrifice when these things haven't happened yet.
    - Rather we must seek to understand them through the filter of what has happened previously in JESUS' life and the life of the disciples.

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Most Bibles title this gospel passage, “the cost of discipleship” or something similar.

- But is it really a cost? Or is it rather a choice?
- What does Deuteronomy 30:19 mean for us as GOD says, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

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When it’s all about cost, it’s all about what you’re giving up.

- What you’re sacrificing. What you’re surrendering.

When faith is cast as cost, we begin to ignore the fact that life itself is costly—not just faith.

- Life is full of choices, of counting costs, weighing sacrifices.

The cross is not unique to one moment in the life of JESUS, but rather it is representative of what all life is, HIS and ours.

- To carry your cross is to carry the choices, and burdens, and realities of a life that has made a certain commitment—
  - a commitment to a way of life that is dedicated to bringing about the Kingdom of GOD here and now.
  - That’s certainly what it was for JESUS.

But it’s important to recognize that choosing to work for the Kingdom of GOD is choosing *sacrifice*.

- Now, there are sacrifices, and then there are sacrifices.

Again, we tend to associate JESUS’ words about the cross with the sacrifice of hardship, or pain, or even death.

- And our culture has led us to think more often than not of sacrifice generally as a bad thing.
- But it is more complex than that.

Don’t we admire those who make sacrifices:

- Olympic athletes, fire fighters, our women and men serving in the military, and so on.
  - Still, most of us have been induced to think that there is no reason that we ourselves should have to sacrifice.

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And yet we all make sacrifices.

- Parents sacrifice to give their children a good life.
- Countless people sacrifice to finish their schooling or in order to be in a relationship, or to accomplish something in their career.
- Many sacrifice “discretionary” purchases to save for a down payment on a house, or a car, or a special trip somewhere.
  - And not only do we make these sacrifices, but we often do so with a sense of joy and purpose.

Why do we do this?

- Because there are sacrifices, and then there are sacrifices.
  - Some that lead to greater life and some that don’t.
    - Which, just to be clear, doesn’t mean that life-giving sacrifices are easy, or fun, or comfortable.
  - Still, we make them because they lead to a greater sense of purpose, life, and joy,
    - whereas other sacrifices lead to less life, and sometimes death.

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So, JESUS isn’t inviting HIS followers into meaningless sacrifice.

- HE isn’t inviting doormat discipleship or whiney Christianity:
  - [Sigh] “That’s just my cross to bear.”

Rather, HE’S inviting us into a full-bodied Christian faith that stands over and against all those things that are often presented to us as life by the world around us.

- JESUS invites us to the kind of abundant life that is discovered only as you give yourself away.
  - The Kingdom of GOD that JESUS works for and proclaims is about life and love.
    - And just as love is one thing that grows only when it is given away, so also is genuine and abundant life.
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Again, we need to look at what JESUS' life and HIS life with the disciples has been about up to the time HE speaks these words.

- I think the word that best describes HIS life to this point in Luke's gospel is the word "with". The prophet Isaiah foretold what the angel confirmed to Joseph before JESUS' birth; that HE would be called "IMMANUEL".
- "IMMANUEL" means "GOD with us," and that's truly what the life and ministry of JESUS was all about.

Over and over, JESUS chose to be with those who the world said to avoid.

- Most of the healings that JESUS performed were not done from a distance, but rather in the presence of and often with hands touching the ones to be healed:
    - ones who society said not to even go near.
  - JESUS chose the cross of being with those who had no one—the sick, the possessed, the immoral, the illegal, the unrighteous, the unclean.
    - In doing so, JESUS proclaimed the Kingdom of GOD.
      - And by following HIM in this, HIS followers found life.
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So, carrying your cross is a choice, and, ironically, it is a choice for life and not death.

- And certainly, we are correct in saying that choosing the cross is a choice for life because it leads to the resurrection.
- But if that's all it is, it has no bearing on your life in the present.
  - The choice to which JESUS calls us by inviting us to carry the cross is a call to be regularly choosing sacrifice.

The voices of our world call out saying that life is found in success, and accumulation, and security.

- But JESUS teaches that true life is found in choosing sacrifice for the Kingdom of GOD.
  - It is more than choosing the sacrifice of coming to church, or of giving money for the sake of mission
    - It is choosing the sacrifice giving yourself, of being with.
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My daughter, Lydia, years ago shared an observation with me:

- Pirates follow a map to find a treasure.
    - But they miss the fact that the real treasure is the relationships they form with each other while following the map.
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Real life is found in choosing the cross of sacrifice.

- And not just life for you, but for those with whom you choose to be with.
- *"Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow ME cannot be MY disciple,"*
  - This is the cross of sacrifice JESUS carried.
  - It is the cross that JESUS calls us to choose.
  - But it is the cross that leads to real, meaningful, joyful, purposeful, genuine life—
    - which is really what JESUS wants for all of us.

Choose the Kingdom of GOD. Choose life with JESUS.

Choose sacrifice.