

**Sermon September 3, 2023**

**Proper 17A Track 2**

[https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA\\_RCL/Pentecost/AProp17\\_RCL.html](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp17_RCL.html)

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Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. *Amen.*

### **Romans 12:9-21**

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### **Matthew 16:21-28**

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Then Jesus told his disciples, "**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.** For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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“Alas”, my friend Kerri likes to say, sadly shaking her head somewhat in earnest AND somewhat in jest “the church would be such a beautiful thing if it weren’t for the people.” And I KNOW you know how she means. Not all the time, of course. But SOMETIMES, at the very least.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus has hard words for his followers: He says:  
**“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

These are hard words. They are hard to understand. They are harder still to heed. And most of us can think of numerous circumstances in which these words of Jesus have been MIS-understood or MIS-applied in ways that are utterly inconsistent with the loving, liberating, life-giving purposes of God.

But despite their difficulty and danger, these words of Jesus just keep popping up in our lectionary cycle, and we keep having to wrestle with them time and again.

Alas, the Church would be such a beautiful thing if it weren’t for the People.  
Alas, the Gospel would be such a beautiful thing if it weren’t for the Cross.

**Jesus says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

You may have heard it said that the shape of the Cross serves to remind us of two essential, indivisible dimensions of the Christian life—the vertical beam of the cross reminds us of the vertical dimension of our faith, our relationship with the divine. The horizontal beam of the cross reminds us of the horizontal dimension of our faith, our relationship with others.

**Jesus says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

Despite the familiar Good Friday image we might have in our minds, the image of Jesus walking that long road, dragging the Cross behind him, the image we see depicted in so much religious art, in the Stations of the Cross, even in our own Palm Sunday Passion Play, Jesus probably didn’t carry the WHOLE cross on his back, up the hill to Golgotha. Rather, it was customary in the Roman Empire for the vertical beam of a cross to remain set up, in place, while the horizontal beam of the cross was laid upon the back of the condemned for them to carry to the site of their crucifixion.

**Jesus says “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

Perhaps it is actually, specifically this horizontal beam, this weighty crossbeam of life in community, that Jesus bids **us** to take up and carry if we want to follow him.

To be sure, faithfully tending our relationship with the Divine is not EASY. But a rupture in relationship with GOD is very rarely the reason people leave the Church or falter in following Jesus. No, 99 times out of 100 it is a rupture in horizontal relationships, it is the exasperating imperfection of other people, it is the exhausting challenge of living life in community that cause people to leave the Church or falter in following Jesus.

The Gospel would be such a beautiful thing if it weren't for the Cross.  
The Church would be such a beautiful thing if it weren't for the People.

**Jesus says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**

Okay. Yes, Jesus, we heard you. But what does that mean? What does that LOOK LIKE? I suspect that Paul, in the excerpt we read today from his letter to the Romans, is showing us the church exactly what carrying the cross might look like. Paul offers us some incredibly helpful, specific, concrete instructions about HOW we might carry the crossbeam of community, as heavy as it is at times. In today's Epistle, Paul offers no fewer than 2 dozen imperatives for members of the Christian community, each of which we might see as a concrete illustration of what it might look like to "deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ."

We don't have time in one sermon to unpack Paul's 2 dozen imperatives—that could easily take us at least 2 dozen weeks. But I'd like to make some space for all of us to really hear and reflect on Paul's words. I want to see if in today's epistle there might be one or two phrases that help make it clear what Jesus' invitation to YOU to "deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him" might look like in YOUR actual life and relationships TODAY.

If you'll pull out the insert in your Order of Worship.... you'll find a "Litany of Love" .... I invite you to join me in reading this litany—and take it home for reflection throughout the coming week...

**Litany of Love (South Side BOLD w/Sylvia; North Side PLAIN w/Christopher; Turn in towards the center aisle...as a call towards each other, listening for the words or phrases that ring a bell in your heart...)**

I wonder what phrases jumped out at you? (Shout 'em out)  
I wonder which concrete practices of love will be required for you to bear the crossbeam of community today? (Take 2 minutes to share or journal)

**Jesus says: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**

The Gospel would be a much easier thing if it weren't for the Cross.  
But without the Cross there would be no Gospel.

The Church would be a much easier thing if it weren't for the People.  
But without the People, there would be no Church.

This is the Good News:  
In each moment of life in community  
In each moment of conflict and challenge and change  
Jesus meets us, with love,  
And He issues His Call:  
Will you deny yourself?  
Will you take up your cross?  
Will you follow me?

**A Litany of Love: How to Carry the Crossbeam of Life in Community**

by Sylvia Miller-Mutia (inspired Romans 12 & Matthew 16)

**If you want to become my follower:** Hold fast to what is good;  
**deny yourself and take up your cross:** love one another with mutual affection;  
**outdo one another in showing honor** and follow me.

If you want to become my follower: **Do not lag in zeal,**  
deny yourself and take up your cross: **be ardent in spirit,**  
serve the Lord and **follow me.**

**If you want to become my follower:** Rejoice in hope,  
**deny yourself and take up your cross:** be patient in suffering,  
**persevere in prayer.** and follow me.

If you want to become my follower: **Contribute to the needs of the saints;**  
deny yourself and take up your cross: **extend hospitality to strangers**  
and follow me.

**If you want to become my follower:** Bless those who persecute you;  
(bless and do not curse them)  
**deny yourself and take up your cross:** Rejoice with those who rejoice,  
**weep with those who weep** and follow me.

If you want to become my follower: **Live in harmony with one another;**  
deny yourself and take up your cross: **do not be haughty, associate with the lowly;**

do not claim to be wiser than you are **and follow me.**

**If you want to become my follower:** Do not repay anyone evil for evil,  
**deny yourself and take up your cross:** take thought for what is noble in the sight of  
all.

(so far as it depends on you) live peaceably with all,  
**never avenge yourselves: if your enemies are hungry, feed them;**  
**if they are thirsty, give them something to drink** and follow me.

If you want to become my follower: **Do not be overcome by evil,**  
deny yourself and take up your cross: **overcome evil with good** and follow me.

*Hold fast to what is good;  
love one another with mutual affection;  
outdo one another in showing honor.*

Do not lag in zeal,  
be ardent in spirit,  
serve the Lord.

*Rejoice in hope,  
be patient in suffering,  
persevere in prayer.*

**If any want to become my followers,  
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**

Contribute to the needs of the saints;  
extend hospitality to strangers.

*Bless those who persecute you;  
(bless and do not curse them)*

Rejoice with those who rejoice,  
weep with those who weep.

*Live in harmony with one another;  
do not be haughty,  
associate with the lowly;*

*do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

Do not repay anyone evil for evil,  
take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.  
(so far as it depends on you) live peaceably with all  
never avenge yourselves

if your enemies are hungry, feed them;  
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink;

*Do not be overcome by evil,  
overcome evil with good.*