

Pentecost 12, Proper 17, Year A, 083114
All Saints Episcopal Church

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

(Raising arm to forehead) "That's all right. He's just my cross to bear," she said in her most victim-like voice. How many times have we heard something like that? A person is troubled by someone or something that is difficult, that causes suffering in some way or another, and it is claimed as a trial to undergo because Jesus said somewhere along the way, "...let them deny themselves and take up their cross."

Is that what his statement is all about? Really?

Unfortunately, many people have adopted this theology as a way of life, that is, that the call to 'take up your cross' becomes a justification for suffering, and that our suffering is equivalent to the death of Jesus on the cross.

Yes, it is one way as Christians to approach our response to Jesus. But I reject it. In my way of thinking, the life of Jesus means more than his death. Now, if the cross is a symbol for non-cooperation with empire, or if it represents an absolute faith in the incarnation; if it is a model for refusal to go along with the status quo or a mirror of the human tendency to ignore and get rid of voices that call for justice, for mercy, for compassion and for love, then I'm very willing to take up that cross. That is what I think we are called to be all about.

What cross are you willing to take up? What cross are you not willing to choose? I think it is something important to think about, to know about for oneself. For me, taking up your cross is not about how much each of us individually demonstrates our willingness to sacrifice ourselves or to deny ourselves of something. But taking it up does have everything to do with community. Remember that Jesus said 'take your cross and follow me.' To follow means that somebody else has to be in front.

'Follow me,' Jesus says. Does that mean following him to the cross or following the things that he preached and taught? Does that mean following only parts of Jesus' ministry? How do we pick and choose?

One way we can decide is by looking to St. Paul in his letter to the Romans. At first glance, the reading for today seems to have come out of nowhere, so we should go back to last week's reading, which was the first 8 verses of this chapter. Paul begins with an appeal to us to present our bodies as 'a living sacrifice' - perhaps the first clue that following Jesus to the literal cross is not what is expected of us. And he tells us to not be conformed to this world, but that, by renewing our minds we will be transformed.

He tells us, also, as he does in some of his other letters, that we are all one body in Christ - members one of another. This is indeed a confirmation of our mission as community. And then we move to this week's lesson, which, I think, can be read as a sort of new Ten Commandments list of how we are to treat each other... examples of what a renewed mind will do in its transformation.

Let's look at the passage in a different translation because I think hearing words we aren't used to hearing (if they are an accurate translation, not a paraphrase) helps to open our minds. This translation is from *The Message*:

Romans 12:9-21

9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

11-13 Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help the needy saints; be inventive in hospitality.

14-16 Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

17-19 Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do.

"I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

20-21 Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

As you can hear from both translations, love is the overarching standard for the whole passage. Paul follows Jesus' call to love God and to love our neighbors as

ourselves. But here he emphasizes the need for the love to be genuine. "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it." And here's what genuine, un-faked love looks like: be good friends who love deeply, don't quit in hard times, be inventive in hospitality, share in both good times and bad, get along with each other (he says that twice so it is very important), don't judge, don't be vindictive. Participate in the needs of others by giving of yourself and your own resources. In other words, get the best of evil by doing good.

Now I think that when we hear these kinds of commandments, as it were, about how to love -- whether they come from Jesus or Paul or from some other religious figure, we probably most often imagine ourselves dealing with people outside the Christian community. I know that is true for me. So I must remind myself -- and I am now going to remind all of us here that these apply not just to how we behave with those who are 'others' to us, but with each other as well.

In our current times, when the reigning atmosphere in this country seems to be one of mistrust, blaming others, racial tensions, political tensions, intolerance and the desire for revenge, we can go a long way to make things either worse or better by how we act toward each other. Things will be worse, of course, if we join in the way others are mistreating each other, or if we just ignore all of it. But we will not make things better just by being 'polite'.

Good friends help each other out, listen to what others need to say. They love deeply. If we are indeed the body of Christ - the family of God - the community of God - we must remember that presenting ourselves as living sacrifices and renewing our minds happens when we initiate the good both within the family and without. Getting along with one another. Offering hospitality. Not quitting in hard times. Being generous with who you are and what you have.

Doing all these things within the community enables us as the community to do them when we meet those we do not know, showing God's love and mercy and justice to all. This is what it means to take up the cross of Jesus - and to follow him.