Title: *Take Up Your Cross and Follow* Homecrest PC

Scripture: *Mark 8:27-38 and James 3:1-12* 9/16/18

In the Gospel lesson that we just read, we find Jesus and his disciples were once again going around the region from village to village proclaiming God’s word, performing miracles of healing, casting out demons, and reaching out to the poor and the needy. Everywhere they went, a crowd would follow. However, as popular as he might seem, Jesus often demonstrated a more private side. He would retreat by himself or with only a few of his closest disciples and pray.

In one of these occasions, Jesus managed to pull his disciples aside and asked them a poignant question, which kind of took them by surprise. So…never mind what everyone else thinks or says, ***“who do YOU say that I am?”*** At first, the disciples weren’t quite sure what Jesus was looking for as a response. What if they gave a wrong response?

 The disciples paused for a little and some responded saying, *“Well, some say that you’re John the Baptist, some say you are Elijah, and others say you’re one of the.”* Well, these weren’t necessarily wrong answers, but Jesus was looking for more. It’s time for them to dig a little deeper with their faith instead of just scratching the surface, looking for the trivial “Sunday School” responses. Jesus then asked them again, ***“Well, nevermind what other people say, who do you say that I am?”*** Then there was this even longer silence…then suddenly Peter - the impulsive one called out saying

**“*You are the Messiah*!”**

 The term “Messiah”, which means the “Anointed One” is referred to the promised deliverer among the Jews, as prophesied in the Hebrew Bible for many century. He would be the one who would come and save them. What Peter said was not only revealing but revolutionary!!! How many years have they been following him? Almost 3 years? Finally somebody did get it, and was not intimated to speak up and declare it. Perhaps, other disciples also knew but were intimated by Peter, because he was always acting as their out-spoken leader amongst the disciples.

Jesus didn’t want people to believe in him simply because after seeing the miracles and the healings that he performed. What he did was was not a performance or a show. God’s hope and salvation was proclaimed through the saving grace of his father. And Jesus challenged his followers to **pick up their individual crosses and follow him.**

Now obviously Jesus wasn’t searching for his own identity or additional qualification credentials. He knew who he was and what his earthly mission was all about. **He wasn’t having an existential moment about who he was, but instead the time was right to reveal his true identity and his mission…for the salvation of ALL humankind.**

 When Jesus extended the invitation to his disciples to ***“Come, follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men”[[1]](#footnote-1),*** many dropped everything, including their families and followed Him without any doubts or hesitations. This was quite a bold move by the disciples who felt God’s calling in their lives. **Jesus wanted us to explore and investigate our faith and to experience Him first-hand throughout the happenings of our lives.**

 Furthermore, Jesus wanted us to focus our minds on what is above and not on earth below. Jesus warned us of the danger of **setting our minds on human things rather than on the divine things**.[[2]](#footnote-2) We try to measure up our “successes” and “accomplishments” using our human benchmarks rather than allowing God to work and inspire our faith…even through our failures, setbacks, trails, and challenges.

 Jesus said, ***“If anyone wants 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”[[3]](#footnote-3)***

 To deny ourselves is to relinquish our personal conviction, privileges, and super-ego and lay aside our own personal agenda and even all that we have accomplished in life.  **Are we willing to accept less of who we are, for the sake of fulfilling God’s greater plan for humanity?** That’s what it means for us when Jesus asked us to “*Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me*!”. We may no longer in control of our own destiny, when we lay our lives upon God’s mercy and to let God take full control of our lives, including our own actions and our thoughts.

 In the *New Living Translation,* the phrase “denying ourselves” was translated as “***putting aside our selfish ambition*.**” I think I like that translation better. What personal “selfish ambition” are we occupying within our lives today? How may we “let go” of these selfish ambitions and let God fulfill God’s will in our lives? Just as Jesus taught us to pray, *“thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven….”* We come to acknowledge that God is ultimately in control of our lives, especially when we are being tested through our trials and challenges in life.

In the past couple of weeks, we have been studying the letter of James reminding us (and the early church) of the relationship between our faith and our actions. How they must go hand-in-hand and reflective of one another. **It is not enough to say that we believe in Christ but we also need to live it. Live out our faith in accordance to God’s plan. Our actions speak louder than our words!!!**

 As James pointed it out to us earlier, we need to **be vigilant of our tongues and be careful of what we say,** as our tongues may serve as an instrument of praise to God on one hand, but on the other hand as weapons of insult and curse to God and to others. Verse 5 describes our tongue as a “***restless evil, full of deadly poison.***” It acts like a ***fire that set the forest ablaze***, if we are not careful, our tongues could go wild, uncontrolled and untamed. Verse 9 tells us that ***“with [our tongue] we bless the Lord and with it we curse those who are [also] made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”[[4]](#footnote-4)***

 Come to think of it, we confess that we at times make poor judgements and decisions that may harm others. We have all said things that have hurt someone and then regret shamefully later on. We are human after all, but we do need to own up to our mistakes and apologize with those who have been hurt or insulted. But apology is more than from our tongues, it’s from our hearts.

By grace God continues to demonstrate that **God is still in control** and God may test our fidelity through our relationship with others. Even those who have said the nastiest and most hurtful things in our faces, we need to exercise our self-control and tamper our tongues and our actions.

A couple of weeks ago, I found myself in a situation when I had to restrain myself when someone said something to me that totally crossed the line. In fact, it was insulting and humiliating. I didn’t like this person’s attitude and manner. I could’ve easily said something back to him in rebuttal and challenged him back but I decided it was not worth wasting my time…and I simply chose to ignore him and walked away. This passage is James reminded us to **live our lives abundantly and use our tongues wisely with gentleness, compassion and love towards others.** **These are the individual crosses that we must bear and live with day-by-day.**

This week, our nation paused to commemorate the 17th anniversary of 9/11. It was not an easy day for many of those who have lost their loved ones through this tragic event. But on this day, we honored and paid our tribute to those who picked up their crosses and laid down their lives for others.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit the 9/11 Museum at Ground Zero where many of the artifacts, videos, audios, and images of that fateful day were on exhibit. Of all the exhibits that were on display at the museum, the one that stood out the most for me was the cross that was formed by two standing steel beams amidst the rubbles. The steel beam cross that stood firm and survived the fallen towers. It served as a powerful symbol of hope and courage for many of the rescuers days and months after the fateful date. This sure was some divine heavenly sign that out of the most hopeless and desperate situation, out of the pile of ashes, burning flames and smoke, and mountain of rubbles and smells of burnt human remains, God stood firm in our midst and offered us this anchor of hope and courage, so that we may triumph over our adversities and challenges in life.

In the same way, Christ prompted us to pick up our individual crosses and continue to run this race that Christ has started for us. Through the power of the cross, we are able to transpire and radiate God’s hope and love in this world that is in desperate need of a Messiah. ***How many of us are living our everyday lives proclaiming Christ as our Messiah?*** Nevermind what other people say, who do YOU say that I am? **What individual cross is God asking us to bear today?**

In closing, I would like to share with you **Psalm 46**, which many draw upon in order to find peace and solace in the midst of hardship and remembrance of the recent loss of loved ones. Some of our friends and relatives may be experiencing devastation of destruction down South or over in Asia after the powerful storms that came ashore the other day. We pray that our omnipotent God will shed his mercy upon all those who are in the path. Comfort and bring peace upon those who are feeling lost and in dire need for rescue and hope.

***God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.***

***2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;***

***3 though its waters roar and foam,***

***though the mountains tremble with its tumult.***

***4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,***

***the holy habitation of the Most High.***

***5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;***

***God will help it when the morning dawns.***

***6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;***

***he utters his voice, the earth melts.***

***7 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.***

***8 Come, behold the works of the LORD;***

***see what desolations he has brought on the earth.***

***9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.***

***10 "Be still, and know that I am God!***

***I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."***

***11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.***

1. *Matthew 4:19* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mark 8:33* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mark 8:34-36* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *James 3:9-10* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)