

My Cross to Bear
A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church,
Edmonton, Alberta
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Text: Mark 8:27-38, Psalm 22:27-31

Take up your cross and follow me. Those are some of the most famous words of Jesus. The newest Christian knows them, and yet the oldest Christian might not understand fully what it means to take up your cross and follow me. Today we are going to be exploring these words in the gospel of Mark, and what that means for us in our lives today.

The scripture that was read for us is actually a pivotal point in this gospel. Up to this point Jesus has been travelling around, healing, feeding and proclaiming the good news. He's been performing powerful miracles...he just fed the four thousand and healed a blind man at Bethsaida. But so far only the demons have recognized who Jesus is. Here for the first time, Peter says out loud that Jesus is the Messiah. And here Jesus reveals that he will suffer and die, and from this point in the gospel of Mark onwards, all the way to Jerusalem, Jesus continually reminds them that he will suffer and die. My sermon series till Easter will follow the gospel of Mark, highlighting stories on Jesus' road to Jerusalem. I invite you to read the gospel of Mark, to see how the little stories we are looking at fit into the larger picture Mark is painting.

This pivotal passage of scripture begins with the verse, "Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi..." Now if you are like me, you probably just skip over that place name because you don't really know where that is, and it probably doesn't exist anymore anyway. Jesus' words are timeless, right? So does it really matter where he said things?

I used to think that way. That's until I went to Israel a few years ago, and we visited Caesarea Philippi. It's an archeological site called Banias. It wasn't excavated and put on display because Jesus went there, but because it was a very important location in Israel's larger history.

I remember the beautiful great hills of the Golan Heights, with Mount Hermon dominating the landscape. The hills were all light brown because the country is semi-arid, and then there are these rugged red-brown cliffs. Caesarea Philippi is nestled in at the bottom of one of these cliffs at the foot of the hills; you notice it because it's a burst of dense green vegetation all around. There is a huge underground spring that gushes out of the ground here. This is the start of the Jordan River...the one major river in Israel.

Caesarea Philippi was a very important place of pilgrimage for thousands of years. The Canaanites worshipped Baal here, giving thanks for the water from the ground that brought life. They built a temple to Baal. "Baal, you are the great and powerful." Those words echoed off those rocks. Then the Greeks came, and they worshipped their gods here too, especially their god Pan. There is a temple to Pan (which is why the site is called Banias). "Pan you are the great and powerful." And when the Romans came, they weren't going to let a holy site be taken over by other gods. Herod the Great built a temple to Caesar Augustus here. And he renamed this place after him. "Caesar Augustus, you are the great and

powerful.” And in the time of Jesus all these temples co-existed. There is no shrine here to Jahweh, to Israel’s God...this is an entirely pagan place of worship.

I walked along the bottom of this cliff, and you could see the ruins of all these major temples, giant niches carved in the cliff face for statues that are long gone, huge columns fallen to the ground, staircases leading up and down. In Jesus’ day it was a bustling centre for pagan worship, a place of pilgrimage.

Mark chapter 8 tells us Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi... that is a long walk away from Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. He went here to this place where all the gods are worshipped. All along the road to Caesarea Philippi and certainly once they were there, they would have been surrounded by pilgrims coming to give sacrifices to the gods, and to Caesar Augustus. It is **here** in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asks the question, “Who do people say that I am?” Right in the geographical centre of a religious pilgrimage site, where so many gods, including Caesar, are being worshipped...that is where Peter says, “You are the Messiah.”

And once Peter says, “You are the Messiah”, it’s like something shifts in Jesus’ teaching, or at least in the gospel writer’s memory of what Jesus said. Jesus starts to instruct his disciples that he is going to suffer and die, he is going to be crucified. I wonder whether something became clear to Jesus when he was at Caesarea Philippi. Maybe it was here for the first that he understood in a deep and real way that he was going to walk through a dark valley, he was going to be killed. If he truly was he who he was, these powers, arrayed in all their pomp and popularity, these powers would kill him. These powers would not be able to tolerate someone as powerful as Jesus. All Jesus has to do is be true to who he is, the Son of God, and it is going to happen. From this point on, here at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus begins to be aware of the fact that he is carrying a cross.

Jesus tells the disciples that they must pick up their own cross. What does this mean in practical terms? It’s something the disciples tried to figure out, and we see some of their thoughts recorded in the New Testament. And it was something Christians and great theologians have tried to figure out for almost 2000 years. There are about a million ways you could talk about what it means for us to carry our cross. I am sure you have some ideas about what that means.

Today I want to share some of my thoughts about this, but not in a general way. I want to talk about this in a very specific way. I want to think about this in the context of family life. In the context of living and eating and sleeping with the same people year in and year out. Parents, siblings, spouses, children, extended family, whatever. The people you live with. What does it mean to be a Christian and take up your cross as a member of a family?

You don’t think very much about taking up your cross when everything is going well in family life. When you are in harmony with the people around you and people are getting along, and there’s no hardship, we don’t think about or examine the cross. Happy times aren’t good soil for cross examinations, I have found. I have never preached, or heard, for that matter, a wedding sermon on this text.

And yet, I have found that there are dark valleys in family life which are invitations to think deeply about what it means to bear my cross. Let me give you an example. When my kids were little, I can remember how overwhelmed I was with caregiving. I loved my children dearly, passionately, deeply and yet...and yet...particularly as they grew I found that I could become passionately and deeply angry with them. I was startled and shocked by how angry I was. I can remember lots of examples that I hate to remember,

but one time in particular comes to mind. They were about 7 and 5. They were playing outside in the snow, and I was watching them from an upstairs window. And I saw my darling sweet beautiful daughter Katie, pick up a big metal shovel and smash her little brother squarely on the head with it.

Rationally, it doesn't make sense to lose your temper to prove to someone that they should not lose their temper, but the rational side of me did not have the upper hand that day. Let's just say that all the windows were closed and my kids had no trouble hearing my reaction to what I saw through the window. It's a funny story now, sort of, but not really. What does it mean to be a Christian when you are a parent and you lose it with your kids? I have talked to enough parents to know that I am not the only parent that has struggled with this.

Take up your cross. What is the cross in this situation? Were my kids my cross to bear? Is my cross to bear these unruly children who interrupt my sleep, and make incessant demands, and act out in violent ways? I couldn't believe that. I could remember holding little new-born Katie in my arms, and then later Alex, and knowing without a doubt, that these children were little miracles. Little god-given miracles that I had the honour and responsibility of raising. Having them was one of the greatest gifts in my life. Even in my hardest times of parenting I couldn't think of my child as my cross to bear.

I had to think about Jesus...what was his cross to bear? Was Judas his cross to bear? Was Peter? He certainly has some harsh words for Peter here. Or maybe the Pharisees and the scribes were his cross? Yet never does Jesus turn on anyone and say, "You are my cross to bear."

For Jesus, I think bearing the cross meant that Jesus just had to be who he was. A loving person. Being a loving person, and doing what God asked him to do meant that he would come in conflict with the powers that rule. And they would kill him. From the moment he set foot in Caesarea Philippi, it became clear to him that he would die. Yet he bore his identity, and thus his suffering.

And that's the answer I came to too. My children or difficult people in general are not a cross to bear. For me, bearing the cross is about identity. It means remembering who I am. I am a follower of Jesus, and I want to be filled with love.

Having that identity, as a loving person, is difficult, and it leads to suffering. I think of someone I know who has a son who has been terrible to her. Over the years as a young adult he has been so difficult...temper tantrums, stealing things, damaging the house, even physically assaulting his mother. What does it mean to bear a cross in this situation? Is that son a cross to bear? Christian people talk to this mother as if her son is a cross to bear...she must shoulder this suffering and be a good mother. But that mother doesn't think of her child as a cross to bear. That mother can still, somewhere inside her, still remember that he was a beautiful baby, a gift from God. For her taking up the cross means trying to nurture and maintain that motherly love without getting any reciprocal love back. Bearing a cross doesn't mean that she's a doormat. It doesn't mean that she lets her son live with her and abuse her. Loving him means setting boundaries, "You aren't allowed in the house anymore." She says to him, "I will meet you in a neutral public place, I love you, but we know that the home is not a safe context for either of us." Setting boundaries is part of taking up her cross.

That's just one example of how complicated it can be to try and figure out what your cross is...what it means to be filled with love as part of a family.

I know that in my own life, when I try to be loving, suffering happens. Now sure, sometimes loving is easy, we love doing things for the people we love. But sometimes not so much. Sometimes it is excruciatingly hard to love people. It's hard because I want my own way. I want things to be comfortable for me. I want people to be nice to me, to cater to me. I want to have everyone around me do what I want. That's sort of my hard-wired identity. I want to be Queen of the Castle, I carry the torch for Queen Carol. And so...when I try to rewire that hardwiring, sparks fly. There is a great deal of conflict inside me. For me, that is often where the suffering has come in family life.

It is hard to bear your cross, to maintain your identity on the home front. Sometimes I think the great challenge is not "Love your neighbour as yourself", but actually, "Love your family as yourself." Often, we put our best effort to be kind when we have an audience in the wide world. But then we let our guard down and act unlovingly in private. Sometimes we can be people who are model Christians at church and at work, where everyone can see our loving and selfless actions, but when we get home, we act like tyrants. That's the kind of hypocrisy that Jesus denounced...being one thing in public, and another thing in private. We need to be scrupulous, to be very careful about being consistently loving, outwardly in the world, and inwardly towards those to whom we are intimately related.

But there's more to it than that. The family is often the crucible where we show our true colours. Since I became an adult, I have never screamed at anyone, because I'm not that type of person. People have done bad things to me, I've been very angry at them, but I never scream at the rude attendant at the grocery store, or at the person who cut me off on the road, the colleague who was mean to me, or even the dear friend who betrayed me. I am not the type of person to scream at people. That's my identity. But I have screamed at the top of my lungs at my children. My defenceless beautiful gift of God children. When I look back, I realize that the screaming times as far as I remember, never happened in front of other adults, even my husband. I only truly lost it when I was alone with them, when I felt I was the one in power, and I didn't think anyone important could see me. Being with defenceless, vulnerable people, whether they are old or young, that's when our true colours come out. And in the family context, we meet each other at our most vulnerable, our most defenceless. When we have the upper hand and we know it, and there are no witnesses except the vulnerable people, how do we act?

I have a hunch that the family context is our Caesarea Philippi. The home is the place where we come face to face with the many gods we live with. Sometimes it's each of us as our own god, each of us trying to get our own way. Each of us saying, "I am the great and powerful".

Or sometimes it's more complex. When someone is continually overpowering and always wants to be the great and powerful, we can let them have their way, we let them be the great and powerful. But at the cost of our own self-respect, or even at the cost of love, which falls by the wayside. Like the mother who loved her son, how do we set boundaries, how do we be ourselves, how do we retain our identity? How do we do that without trying to be the great and powerful one that everyone must follow?

Our relationships with our intimate family members are the deepest and most complex and hardest to understand. That scripture passage from Mark tells us "And Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi..." Jesus comes to the family we are in and it's there that he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Is Jesus our Messiah, the Lord of our life? If he is, then we must take up our cross. We must take up our identity as people filled with love, in private and in public.

This week, you are being called to take up your cross. I don't know you well enough to know what that will mean for you. When will the challenge come?

Maybe at 4 a.m. when you haven't had two hours of sleep in a row for days, and you have one baby crying and one baby puking.

Or when your sister totally lets you down, when she promised to do something for you.

Maybe it will be when your dad won't listen to what you are trying to tell him.

Or maybe it will be the moment when your teenager says something totally insensitive to you, after you've spent the past two months trying to be very sensitive to them.

Or it could be when an aging parent makes demands on you that are unreasonable...one too many phone calls in a day.

Or maybe your cross will be waiting there for you at the next family gathering when your nieces or nephews or grandchildren make life choices that are destructive and against everything you believe in.

What does it mean to be filled with love? Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Can we do this?

Suffering comes as we agonizingly choose different ways of action in the dark valleys that we face. We take the deep breath before we blurt out a harsh word. Suffering comes as we decide to count to ten, as we give ourselves a time out to cool down. Suffering comes as we close our eyes and try to visualize the teenager in front of us as they were as little baby. Suffering comes as we learn the discipline of practices that help us give up our own way...humming a hymn, saying a prayer, reciting a scripture verse....anything we can think of to help us remember our identity as Jesus' loving followers.

And suffering comes as we let our defences fall. We admit to each other in this caring community that we are not perfect, that we are broken, that we need each other's help. Help not just in the public pretty parts of our lives, but in the dark and private corners too. We need to talk about these things, because Jesus doesn't address this command to take up our cross to just one person. Just John or just Peter. He says this to all his disciples. Together they will figure out what it means to bear their cross. Our church community is the place where we can find a way to do this.

This week, I will be praying for you as you walk through what might turn out to be a dark valley in your own home. Or as you work through memories of dark valleys. I hope you will pray for me, for my dark valleys too. We can all draw strength from Jesus, who walked this road before us, the road to Jerusalem.