

COMPELLED TO CARRY THE CROSS
Sermon Series: "Faces at the Cross"
March 12, 2017 Matthew 27: 27-37 & Matthew 16: 24-26
The Church of the Covenant

"Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone, and there's a cross for me." This is the old timey hymn, "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" and it was the favorite hymn of a long time member of a former church of mine, a woman by the name of Jane. She was into her 90's when we spoke. She had been in the hospital and I was now visiting her at home and she was telling me about what she wanted at her funeral. She noted this was her favorite hymn and then launched into a 20 minute sermon on the topic, using our Bible verse for today as her text. Although it was 20 years ago, I remember it vividly as if it were just yesterday. So today is Jane's sermon that has been sitting in my sermon notebook for 20 years and it is high time to preach it!

The text for today is Jesus' familiar words on what it really means to be a disciple following the Lord Jesus with their life. Jesus says: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."* (Matthew 16: 24) We may say we BELIEVE in Jesus, but the real question is do we actually FOLLOW HIM. This separates the baby Christian from the mature Christian. Because disciple-making is the great task of the church. Many, many people may believe in Jesus. But not many people, say, are in church today actually FOLLOWING HIM. Thank you, Jane, for driving that point home to me as a young pastor! So consider the story we also just read of Simon of Cyrene. The Gospel writer Matthew notes, *"As (the soldiers) were marching out they came upon a man of Cyrene, Simon by name, this man they compelled to carry his cross."* (Matthew 27: 32) So the soldiers have just brutalized Jesus with beatings and scourgings and mockery. In a way I suppose, it is a kindness—a severe mercy—because in Jesus' weakened state, almost already at the point of death, he both cannot carry His own cross, and will die on the cross in a relatively short period of time—three hours, not three days. So the soldiers "compel" Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross.

Now imagine this for a moment. Simon hears about all this tumult related to some prophet who entered into Jerusalem the week before to much acclaim on Palm Sunday. Jesus is the rock star of Palm Sunday. We like gossip. On some level we like a train wreck. So he is curious. People want to stop and see something interesting. Crowds show up at accidents; we all slow down and rubber neck at a car that is broken down by the side of the road. Simon has just shown up to gawk and to see what's happening. And suddenly he is COMPELLED TO CARRY HIS CROSS. He is minding his own business, skipping down the path of life, and suddenly, without warning there is a cross, HIS CROSS, Jesus' Cross, and Simon is compelled to carry it. Please note, it says HIS cross. The Greek wording is obscure here; does it mean Simon is compelled to carry Jesus' cross? Or does it mean Simon is compelled to carry HIS OWN Cross? It is not clear. It could mean either thing. Maybe in its obscurity is its meaning? Maybe it is both/and? Maybe Simon is both compelled to carry Jesus' cross and also his own cross? He is minding his own business and SHAZAM, suddenly and inexplicably there is the CROSS!!!! The cross comes out of nowhere and looms large right before him. Isn't that the way it is in life?

One moment we are skipping down the garden path and everything seems just fine. We are clueless with what is about to happen. And then SHAZAM! Something happens unexpectedly. Someone passes away. A doctor gives us a bad report. We lose our job. Something troubling happens to a loved one. We face surgery. You understand—everyone understands when the cross looms large in their life. Everyone understands when they are COMPELLED to carry the CROSS!

Now I remember Jane, the 90 year old member of my former church, sermon to me. She told me that whatever happens to us in our life is most definitely NOT THE CROSS. Our sickness, our heartache, the

diseases we face, the physical decline, the difficulties in life, the strained relationships, the brokenness, all of this is NOT THE CROSS. Do not have our problems equal Christ's cross. No, no, what we face in life is just what life throws at us. With what Jesus faced at Calvary, there is no comparison. Whatever pain we face in life, HE faced greater pain. Whatever heartache HE faced; His was far greater than ours will ever be. If people are uttering all manner of falsehood against you, Jesus faced far worse gossip than we will ever face. He bore it all at Calvary for us, because He loves us; He bore it all on the cross for us and our salvation. Do not equivocate nor compare His cross as our cross. It is not so. Thank you, Jane, for your sermon to me 20 years ago. But she said more...

She said, "No, the cross we are compelled to carry is a cross of obedience in the midst of our troubles in life." The cross is not our pain or our sadness or our brokenness or our disappointment. I once had a woman say to me: "You know, my husband is the cross I bear in my life." Well, he might be difficult and annoying sometime, but sister, he most definitely is not the same as Jesus' cross at Calvary! Our cross is choosing to trust in Jesus in the midst of the pain in life. Our cross is the cross of obedience in the midst of the trials of life. Our cross is choosing to pick up the cross and follow Jesus Christ to the foot of Calvary and be a face looking up into His marvelous, luminous, radiant face. We pick up HIS cross and follow HIM to Calvary. We are like Simon of Cyrene. We are obedient to HIS will in HIS way. As Jesus was obedient to pick up the cross and go to Calvary, so too are we to be obedient and pick up His Cross and follow Him. This is the mark of discipleship; this is the mark of the mature Christian. –To follow Jesus in obedience on the hardest day in life. To be sometimes COMPELLED to Carry the Cross. Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone...

As I end, I want to do a little study of Jesus' great words asking us to pick up the cross and follow Him. Because He says first –"If any man would come after me..." He is saying if anyone says that they are my disciple then expect some day to have the cross suddenly loom large in your life. Expect to be Simon of Cyrene. This is for anyone and for everyone. Don't be shocked by it. Says Jesus, there is a cross for everyone. Then He says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself..." He is saying the first step of obedience in picking up the cross is the denial of self, it is "Not my will but THY will be done", it is I don't get all the time what I want when I want it and how I want it now. When we are compelled to CARRY or NOT carry the cross of Obedience the first step is to deny self, set aside what we want, and then to ask the Lord "What do you want, Lord?" Then Jesus says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross..." Taking up our cross is the willing act of picking up the cross rather than running from it. It is that internal compulsion to trust in Jesus above all else. Our outward circumstances suggest we should flee; but the love of Jesus compels us to stay and pick up that cross of obedience to HIM. And then Jesus ends by saying: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross...and follow me..." (Matthew 16: 24)* To be a Christian is to follow Jesus. To be a disciple is to pick up our cross and follow Him. Where did He wind up? How did His life end? Where did He go? He went to Calvary. He went to the cross. In obedience to His heavenly Father He picked up His cross and went to Calvary, right? His cross is our cross. And our cross is His cross. Right? When we follow Jesus as His chosen disciple we follow Him to Calvary and we follow Him to His cross. When we are His disciple someday we wind up at the foot of the cross, staring into the face of our Lord who loves us. Some day we are compelled by life's circumstances to pick up his cross and follow Him to Calvary. That's the truth, isn't it? That's the old, old story of Jesus and His love. He was compelled by the love in His heart and the obedience to His heavenly Father in His soul to pick up His cross and go to Calvary for us. Can we do anything less for HIM? And thank you, Lord, for a discussion 20 years ago with my friend Jane. Because I know that hers is a face at the foot of the cross...Amen and Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*