

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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Sermon: “*The Scandal of the Cross*”

Jeremiah 15:15-21	(God will deliver from evil those who love Him)
Psalms 26:1-8	(The Psalmist trusts the Lord, loves His house, and shuns evildoers)
Romans 12:9-21	(St. Paul's guidance for Christian living: love, bless, rejoice, live in peace)
St. Matthew 16:21-28	(Jesus: Any who wish to follow Me must take up your cross)

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us spend our entire lives trying to avoid suffering. We buy insurance, we install security systems, we look for stable jobs, we invest our money wisely, take our vitamins, get our vaccinations, and keep first-aid kits in our cars. We do these things because human nature is hardwired for self-preservation. We want comfort. We want safety. We want success.

There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to be safe. But today, our Gospel passage hits us like a bucket of ice water. It forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: following Jesus is not a self-preservation strategy. In fact, Jesus suggests that if self-preservation is your highest goal, you might just lose everything that actually matters to you.

To understand the sheer shock of today's Gospel lesson, we have to look at what happened exactly one verse before it. Last week, we heard the famous story of Peter's great confession. Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter, bold and inspired, declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”

It was a triumphant moment. Jesus praised Peter, calling him the rock upon which the Church would be built, and handing him the keys to the Kingdom. Peter must have felt on top of the world. He had finally figured it out. He was on the winning team! Then, listen to the very next sentence in today's reading: “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering ... and be killed.” Imagine the whiplash the disciples felt. They expected a Messiah who would ride into Jerusalem on a warhorse, overthrow the brutal Roman occupiers, and restore Israel's military and political glory. They expected power. Instead, Jesus starts talking about suffering and execution.

Peter, acting out of deep love and utter confusion, takes Jesus aside. The Greek text implies that he ‘pulled Jesus by the sleeve,’ trying to protect Him from His own words. Peter rebukes Jesus, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” His disciple is not trying to be unkind. He's trying to be a good friend who wants to protect his leader. Peter *thinks* he is speaking from common sense, from human logic, and from a desire to keep the person he loves safe.

All the more reason Jesus' response seems terrifyingly harsh. Turning to Peter—the very man Christ had just called the “rock” of the Church—He cries out, “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.”

Why such a severe reaction? Why does He call Peter the Devil? Because Peter is offering Jesus the exact same temptation that Satan offered Him in the wilderness at the beginning of St. Matthew's Gospel: *Take the crown without the cross. Choose power without suffering. Save yourself.*

In the Greek text, Jesus calls Peter a *skandalon*—a stumbling block, a trap. It's the root of our word “scandal,” and for Jesus to save Himself without going to the Cross *would be* a scandal! The danger of Peter's words is that they make perfect *human* sense. Peter is thinking according to the standards of this world: success means survival, and losing means failure.

However, Jesus reveals that God's value system is entirely different. In God's Kingdom, victory does not come through inflicting violence, but through patiently enduring it. Success is not measured by how much power you wield over others, but by how much you give of yourself to others. Next, Jesus turns to the rest of the crowd and raises the stakes even higher. He doesn't only say that *He* has to suffer. He says *we* must, too: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

As Christians, we have heard this phrase so many times, it has lost its edge. We use it today to describe minor inconveniences. We say, “That irritating neighbor is just my cross to bear,” or “Dealing with my in-laws is simply my cross to bear.”

But to those first-century people standing on that hillside listening to Jesus, the word “cross” was not a metaphor, and it certainly did not mean a pretty piece of jewelry worn around one’s neck. To a Roman subject, the cross represented state-sponsored terror. It was a horrific, public, humiliating instrument of death meant to crush rebellion. When someone took up a cross in the Roman Empire, they were walking a one-way street to their own execution. They were public enemies, entirely detached from the values and protection of their society.

When Jesus says, “Take up your cross,” our Lord is asking for something far deeper than enduring a difficult circumstance or an annoying person. He is calling for an active, daily choice to die to our own egos, our own demands for comfort, and our own need to control our future. So, what does it look like to take up our cross in daily life? It does not mean we actively look for misery or seek martyrdom. It means making choices where Christlike love actually *costs us* something.

It means *forgiveness*. Forgiving someone who has deeply wronged you, who has not apologized, and who doesn’t deserve it. It’s the death of your right to get even, the death of your pride.

It means *solidarity*. Standing up for someone who is marginalized, maligned, or mistreated at your workplace or in your community—even when doing so puts your own reputation, social standing, job security, or relationships at risk.

It means *generosity*. Choosing to surrender your time, your energy, and your financial resources to meet the needs of another or lift up someone else, leaving yourself with less so that others may have enough. Every time we choose the path of vulnerable, self-sacrificial love over the path of self-protection, self-insulation, and self-gratification, we are carrying our cross along with Jesus.

Christ sums up this entire radical ideal with a brilliant paradox: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Think about the people you know—or know of—who are entirely consumed with saving their own lives. People who spend every ounce of energy protecting their image, accumulation of wealth, status, and comfort. They build high walls around their hearts and homes. What happens to them? Tragically, they often end up incredibly lonely, fearful, and hollowed out. By trying to protect themselves from the risks of living and loving, they lose the very essence of what makes life worth living. They lose their very soul.

Conversely, think about people who live with open hearts and open hands; those who are constantly pouring themselves out for their families, their neighborhoods, and the vulnerable. They risk heartbreak. They get tired. They suffer losses. Yet, when you look into their eyes, you see a deep, vibrant, indestructible joy. They have lost their lives to the world’s standards, but they have found a better one that is truly alive—alive in Christ Jesus.

Think about a simple acorn. If you keep that seed safe in a velvet-lined jewelry box on your shelf, it will stay perfectly safe. It won’t rot. It won’t get eaten by bugs. It will be preserved. But it will also remain a hard, dead nut. That seed only fulfills its purpose when it is dropped into the dark, cold dirt. It has to crack open. It has to completely fall apart and “die” to its identity as a seed. Only by losing itself in the dirt can it become a massive oak tree that provides shade and life for others. If you try to save your life, you will remain a lonely seed. If you let it go and allow yourself be “cracked open” by the Holy Spirit, God will turn your life into something beautiful—not only for you, but for others, as well.

Jesus ends today’s lesson by asking both His disciples—and us—the ultimate accountability question: “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?” You can win every argument, achieve every career milestone, build the perfect retirement nest egg, and gain the acclaim of every person in your social circle. But if you arrive at the end of your life having never risked radical, self-sacrificial love that *costs you something*, you will only have gained a kingdom of dust.

Jesus' message is a hard one to hear, and a hard one to preach. For it exposes our deep-seated anxieties. It challenges our desire for a comfortable, convenient religion that fits neatly into our weekend plans without disrupting our lifestyles.

But notice carefully how Jesus ends His prediction of suffering in verse 21. He says He must go to Jerusalem, suffer and be killed, *and on the third day be raised*. The Cross is never the final destination. Suffering is not the end of the story. Jesus calls us to the cross because He knows that death—to sin and self, above all else—is the only pathway to the empty tomb. Resurrection cannot happen unless something dies first. New life cannot spring forth until the old, self-centered life is buried in the ground.

Today, Jesus calls each and every one of us to stop setting our minds on purely human standards of safety, comfort, or success. Let us find the courage, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, to walk behind Jesus and take up our crosses, and follow Him into the world. Let us lose our lives for His sake, so that we might finally, truly find them.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we come before You today, seeking to be true disciples of Your Son. Your Word tells us that whoever wants to follow Jesus must deny self, take up the cross daily, and follow Him. Lord, we confess that our personal comfort, pride, laziness, and selfish desires often get in the way of self-sacrificial love and service. Give us grace to die to our own ways so that Christ may truly live through us, and that our lives may always reflect Your love, truth, and light. This we pray in the strong Name of Jesus. *Amen.*