

**Pastor Madelynn Lindsey**

**September 16, 2018**

**Sermon**

**Take Up Your Cross**

Let us pray: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." Amen.

Show You Tube of Anastasia Folktale: Anansi Tries to Steal All the Wisdom in the World read by Nick Cannon.

People found the bits of wisdom scattered everywhere, and if they wanted to, they could take some home to their families and friends. That is why to this day, no one person has ALL the world's wisdom. People everywhere share small pieces of it whenever they exchange ideas.

You see, wisdom is not something we can possess. It's something we share. It's something that comes to us...passes through us. Isn't that lovely. Wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God. And then it moves on.

That's how I've always experienced wisdom...a breath...a flash...in a moment. The right word, at the right time, that cracks open your heart...changes your whole outlook. I find it interesting that wisdom is personified in the feminine. In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is a woman.

"The Lord created me at the beginning of his work," she says (Proverbs 8:22). She was there when he made the heaven, the sea, the earth. It was as if he needed a woman's imagination to help him make them, a woman's eye to tell him if he'd made them right, a woman's spirit to measure their beauty by.

For wisdom is "more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrated all things. For she is a breath of the power of God."

Jesus is certainly a primary source of wisdom and is the basis of our faith. At the age of twelve, Jesus was in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

Jesus has made quite a name for himself. He's been barnstorming the countryside on a streak of healings and exorcisms and other miracles; he's been saying a lot of things that are sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, and often insightful, and the crowds follow everything he says and does. And, of course, he's got a closer group of followers, the disciples.

Now the word "disciples" simply means "students." But Jesus' students are not doing too well in class. They've been following him all over; they've seen everything he's done and heard everything he's said, but they can't seem to master the course material.

This scene is about halfway through the Gospel of Mark, so I guess you could say this is the midterm exam. Jesus wants to know how much of all this they've been getting so far. "Who do you say that I am?" he asks.

Peter exhibited great wisdom when he confessed his understanding of who Jesus was, and, somehow, something clicks for Peter, and he actually comes up with the right answer. "You are the Messiah," he says simply, and he passes the test.

The disciple Peter gets all excited to profess that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, when Jesus asks him the question, "Who do you say that I am?" But the instant that Peter learns that this also means Jesus must undergo great suffering, deep rejection, and ultimately death, Peter backs away.

He critiques Jesus. He rebukes Jesus. The glamour of following Jesus is suddenly gone for Peter. It no longer seems like a life that he's sure he wants to undertake. But more than this, as far as we can tell, Jewish thinking had never before entertained the idea that the Messiah must suffer and die.

This was ludicrous, they believed. If anything, the Messiah was supposed to inflict suffering, not live with it as a personal reality. And what good would a dead Messiah be anyway? Just a few verses after he gave Jesus the correct answer, Peter is pulling Jesus aside to tell him *he* has the wrong person.

He begins to rebuke Jesus for saying all this stuff about the Messiah having to suffer and be rejected and killed. "What kind of Messiah is that?" Peter demands. But Jesus cuts him off: "Get behind me, Satan," he says.

Now Jesus isn't calling him Satan lightly; remember that Jesus began his ministry with Satan beside him, tempting him to see what kind of Messiah he really would be. It seems that here Jesus, too, has to take a midterm exam, facing that temptation again.

And he, too, passes the test. And then he calls the crowd and the disciples around them, and he gives them all the answer to the question of what kind of Messiah he really will be, what kind of Messiah they are following:

"If any want to become my followers," he says, "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 the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Following Jesus requires a lot more than clicking a button and keeping up with him, knowing what he says and does.

Usually, when people say something or someone is "my cross to bear," they mean suffering that is imposed on them, but which must nevertheless be accepted and endured without complaint. Suffering on the cross was not imposed on Jesus; he took it up himself willingly, intentionally, to redeem all of us.

To take up our cross and follow Jesus means we follow him in refusing to think only about ourselves, but to suffer for the redemption of others even if it risks us losing our lives. In Jesus' day, when anyone picked up a cross it meant only one thing – they were going off to die.

Condemned prisoners were compelled to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion. So, it involved a journey of death. That is not what the disciples expected. When Peter said, "You are the Christ," he assumed the next thing this Warrior Messiah would say is, "Take up your arms and let's put the enemy to death."

Instead He said, "Take up your cross and put yourself to death." Turning the ownership of your life over to Jesus may be a single decision of surrender. But it is accomplished by putting to death selfish desires. This is a journey of death.

In fact, when Luke tells this story in his Gospel he writes, "Take up your cross daily (Luke 9:23). Every day, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I try to put my selfishness to death.

I remember reading the biography of John Lewis, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the American civil rights struggle, and he talked about what redemptive suffering is really like. What do you do when somebody else is being violently attacked?

Do you just stand there keeping your hands clean and ask the attacker to stop instead of driving them away? That's hard to accept. Lewis gave a different answer. "If someone is being attacked and beaten," he said, "it is your responsibility to intervene to protect them."

But intervening does not mean returning violence with violence to drive the attacker away; intervening means stepping in and shielding your fellow marcher with your own body, accepting the blows yourself in order to save them, even at risk to your own life.

That is an option hard to accept. Because there isn't much question that he was talking powerfully about taking up the cross and following Jesus; "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel, will save it."

In other words, following Jesus is for losers; the question is what we are willing to lose.

For who would welcome the idea of suffering if there were other options available? Yet this is where we must suddenly get very honest about the Christian life. Christianity is not about solving problems and making life easier. If anything, following Jesus is going to complicate your life, and unmistakably so.

I have been told that at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were literally suffering and dying for justice and redemption there, Archbishop Desmond Tutu used to gather his staff around him in the mornings for prayer.

And often as he was closing, he would ask, "If being Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?" if there's not enough evidence to convict Desmond Tutu of being a Christian, God help us all! They were not simply leaders, leading an important social struggle for dignity and freedom;

they were followers, following Jesus Christ in insisting that God's reconciling love transcends anything that tries to resist it, which apartheid challenged in insisting that different races could not and should not live together. Without being followers, being leaders was not enough;

people had to be able to see and hear them following Christ in their lives and ministry for that leadership to really make sense in the first place. Maybe we need to have a Center for Christian Followership after all. As much as the church needs leadership development, that's not going to count for much if we're not developing our followership.

But the truth is, every congregation should be a center for Christian followership, a place where we help each other become losers, losers of anything that keeps us from following Jesus: our fears and anxieties, our pasts or our futures, our status or our schedules, our need to be in control of our lives and our faith, anything that keeps us from losing ourselves in the abundance of the grace that we receive, the love that we share, the ministry that we fulfill.

As it turns out, we have a lot to lose. So, let's get going. Take up the cross. If you choose living your life in Christ, be prepared for a wild ride. Yes, there will be some hard times and some enormous suffering, I imagine.

But you will also have an incredibly abundant life, complete not only with Christ, but with everything else thrown in.

*Let us pray.* Gracious and loving God in Jesus Christ who came to give us abundant life as followers on the way of faith, fill us with the strength to take up our cross and follow Jesus, that we might have the abundance of true life you intend for us and others may see your love and grace at work in us and follow with us as well. Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.