

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 15, 2024, The 17th Sunday After Pentecost/The 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-38

“WHAT WE HOLD IN OUR HANDS”

Think for a minute about the things you hold in your hands daily.

We hold our phones, our children, the faces of our loved ones, our wallets, our TV remotes, our golf clubs, our backpacks, our basketballs and baseballs, our music, our games, our texts and tweets, our Bibles and devotional books, our schoolbooks, our to-do lists, the hands of our loved ones, our pets, our work and hobby tools, we hold our groceries, our toothbrushes, our medications, our credit and debit cards, and our tablets and Kindles and good old-fashioned books.

We hold the basic tools of our lives,
we hold the people we love,
we hold many things that show who we are:
what is important to us,
what we love,
and how we like to spend our time.

And then we come to this morning's story in Mark's gospel
and Jesus asks us to hold onto something very different.
Jesus asks us to follow him, deny ourselves, and pick up our cross.

“Pick up your cross” is a phrase that Christians have used through the centuries, but when Jesus said this to his disciples the first time, they would have been shocked.

We are so far removed from what the cross was in Jesus' time. Today, crosses decorate our churches, our homes, our Bibles, our necklaces. Here at First Presbyterian, we have a cross on the Communion Table and here on the wall in the chancel area, outside in our garden, and on some of our stained-glass windows. Our children make crosses in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. It is a symbol now of Jesus' love for us.

But when Jesus stood with his disciples in the town of Caesarea Philippi and told them that the Messiah that they had been following,
the Messiah that they had longed for,
the Messiah who was their teacher and friend,
was going to suffer,
they would have been shocked.
When Jesus told them that not only was he going to suffer,
but the religious teachers and leaders of his day would reject him,
and he was going to be killed on the cross
and in three days rise from death
they would have been horrified.

The cross was not the symbol it is for us today. It was a horrible instrument of the Roman government's torture and death. It was a shameful way to die, reserved for criminals and those who opposed Rome. The cross was a painful, terrifying way to die; it was a long and tortuous way to die. It was the way of shame. It would be like if we wore necklaces with electric chairs on them, or put electric chairs on our communion table. That's how the disciples would have heard Jesus' words.

It would have been so confusing, because the Jews had been longing for a Messiah who would conquer Rome and all who opposed Israel. They had believed that the Messiah would bring new life and power to Israel. The Messiah was to be a conquering hero.

But now Jesus, who they believed to be the Messiah, was telling them that he was the Messiah who would suffer for his people, he was the Messiah whose message of love and inclusion and care for the poor would bring his death, he was not a conquering hero in any traditional sense.

No wonder Peter began to yell at him and tell him to stop this nonsense. Jesus was not talking about the kind of Messiah they expected at all.

But Jesus comes right back at Peter and says "you are tempting me like satan by focusing on human ways of thinking, and I am telling you God's ways of thinking and God's plan."

Jesus the Messiah doesn't fit within traditional expectations.

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to the disciples saying:

"If any want 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 lose their life?"

These words weren't easy to hear then, and they are not easy to hear now. To follow Jesus means denying ourselves and picking up the cross.

This was not the kind of Messiah that his first followers wanted, and if we're honest, is this the kind of Messiah we want?

Jesus asks a lot of us; he wasn't predictable then and he isn't predictable now.

They wanted a politically and militarily powerful Messiah, and they got a Messiah who went the way of suffering.

They wanted a Messiah within their religious tradition and they got a Messiah who broke with the religious traditions that hurt people, even if it meant the religious leaders turned away from him.

They wanted a Messiah who was more predictable and they got a Messiah who ate with tax collectors, and pardoned sinners, and talked to the outcasts and women and children, and broke long-held rules to show love and acceptance and inclusion in the family of God.

Our Messiah hasn't changed.

He stills goes the way of suffering,

He breaks with religious traditions that hurt people.

He welcomes those on the fringes, those we turn from, those we don't think belong, to show love and acceptance and inclusion in the family of God.

And what we hear from Jesus our Messiah this morning is that he is calling us to that same path. But sometimes, I think we believe it's too overwhelming to "pick up our cross and follow" because choosing the way of the cross sounds so big and overwhelming.

So, it helps to have wise teachers to show us how to do this. I read a wonderful story this week about a 6-year-old child named Blake who chose the unexpected way. We have so much to learn from children and sometimes their simple examples speak more clearly than adult choices.

Blake was looking forward to the first day of first grade. His mother who owns a custom personalization business told him that she would make him any T-shirt he wanted. A football or a basketball-themed shirt, his two favorite sports. He could pick anything.

She writes that "He thought a while and said, 'will you please make me a shirt that says "I will be your friend" for all the kids who need a friend to know that I am here for them?'

So that was what it said on the orange shirt with the bright green writing he wore to the first day of school. His mom wrote about it on Facebook and soon had many orders for the "I will be your friend" t-shirt with the added words: "#Blakesfriends."

We can see where Blake learned to be the person he is, as his mother donated part of the profits from those T-shirts to an agency in town that helps adults and children in need.

When Blake heard that people were buying shirts just like his, he was excited that they wanted to be twins with him and he said: "'Oh good! Now more and more people are going to have more and more friends!'"

<https://www.upworthy.com/6-year-old-designed-a-custom-t-shirt-for-his-first-day-of-school-rp>

Jesus says to us: "If you want to be my followers deny yourself and pick up your cross."

But we have all these things in our hands, how can we reach for the cross?

We hold the basic tools of our lives,
we hold the people we love,
we hold many things that show who we are,
what is important to us,
what we love,
and how we like to spend our time.

Does denying ourselves mean setting down the things that are most important to us, and letting them go?

Who are we if we aren't holding onto the people and things that define who we are?

What happens if our hands are empty and we are reaching out for the cross, for the way of the suffering servant, so we can be followers of Jesus?

That's the difficulty with our Messiah Jesus, he asks so much of us.
He asks us to be like him.

He asks us to choose the way of serving others,
of reaching out to those in need,
of welcoming those no one else welcomes,

of speaking love when the world speaks hate,
 of choosing justice when the world chooses power,
 of seeing each other with God's eyes, and God's heart.

Jesus calls us to choose the way of the cross, the sacrificial way of love
 before we pick up all the others things that fill our hands and hearts and lives.

I believe it will change how we hold onto the other people and things in our lives when we choose to pick up the cross first. With our hands holding the love Jesus showed us and gave to us in the cross, we can reach out to the people and things in our lives with the heart and love of Jesus as our first priority.

Because we are being asked to pick up our crosses by the one who went to the cross for us. It is the voice of love that is calling us to follow the way of love.

It is our Messiah's voice of love that is asking us to make his way our priority.

It is our Messiah who lovingly holds our lives in his hands,
 who asks us to look at what we hold in our hands,
 and then pick up his way first and follow him.

I'd like to conclude by asking you to listen to these words from St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century mystic in Avila, Spain. I invite you to look at your good hands as I read these words to you:

Christ has no body now but yours;

No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world;

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good;

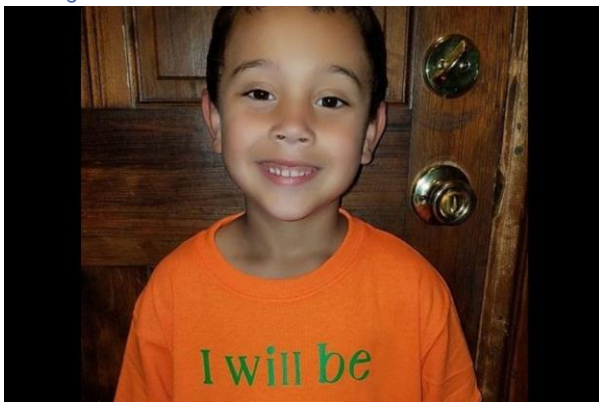
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, Yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, You are His body.

Christ has no body now but yours.

---St. Teresa of Avila

[Unfading adornments](#)



BLAKE RAJAHN