

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Mark 14:32-42; Mark 8:34

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Communion Devotion

This night was unlike any other Jesus had experienced. It was filled anxiety, stress, danger and decisions.

When Jesus and the disciples completed the Passover meal in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, Jesus led the disciples to a nearby olive grove, commonly referred to as the Garden of Gethsemane. He went there with a heavy heart in need of both divine and human support.

He instructed the disciples to sit and pray somewhere near the entrance and then asked Peter, James and John to accompany him further into the garden. Deeply disturbed and distressed, Jesus told these three disciples to pray and watch as he went even further into this sacred place to be alone and pray.

Jesus probably did not go much farther when he fell to the ground and began crying out to God for mercy. “Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36)

Scholars are convinced the ‘cup’ Jesus mentioned in this prayer was the cup of suffering he was facing that evening and the next day. It was a reference to his impending arrest, torture, humiliation and crucifixion.

By this time, Jesus could see the handwriting on the wall. His prophetic voice had irritated the religious and secular leaders as he called them out for being self-indulgent and

corrupt. He exposed their hypocrisy and flagrant self-interests, along with their insensitivity to those who were struggling to survive and needed their help.

His voice had to be silenced and his ministry based upon the ethic of love needed to be terminated. He had to be publically shamed and treated like a criminal so that all his disciples would clearly see that they would be treated the same way if they continued to speak and act like him.

Jesus was aware of the danger he was in that evening. He knew he would be shown no justice or mercy by his accusers. This is why his heart was so heavy and burdened.

Three times Jesus returned to check on his disciples while in the Garden. All three times they were asleep, completely unaware of what was getting ready to happen in the next few moments.

Jesus awakened the disciples when he heard the large contingent of soldiers and Temple police approaching the Garden. Instead of hiding or running out of the Garden in the opposite direction, Jesus met Judas and those with him at the entrance.

Judas stepped out and went directly to Jesus, calling him Rabbi and kissing him on the cheek. This was Judas' way of identifying Jesus so the authorities could apprehend him, which they did.

This began Jesus' night of horror. It was probably everything he imagined it would be and more. You understand now why he went to the Garden of Gethsemane that night in search of divine and human support.

For several weeks, my sermons have been a response to our theme this year, "FBC263 A Call to Discipleship."

"The call to follow Jesus is a call to..." is the statement we have focused upon each Sunday. So far, we have said the call to follow Jesus is a call to trust, to learn, to pray, to forgive, to serve, to encourage, to love and today we add the word sacrifice.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to sacrifice.

There is something unique to us and to our faith about this sacrifice, though. We choose to do the difficult out of faithfulness to God and in service to others in Jesus' name.

There is a difference between this sacrifice, where we "deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus," (Mark 8:34) and a calamity.

A calamity is something negative thrust upon us, often beyond our control or even brought on by mistakes we have made or bad habits we have pursued—an illness, an accident, a loss, a rejection, a failure. These certainly bring us stress and anxiety and disrupt our lives. They can even shatter our dreams and leave us devastated.

God understands and stands ready to help us in these times of need. God is eager to walk with us to provide comfort, strength, courage and guidance.

The cross we take up to follow Jesus is a sacrifice we choose to accept on behalf of Jesus in service to others. It always requires the best of us and the most from us.

It demands that we interrupt our schedules and agendas and reallocate our resources. It urges us to become advocates for those who have no place at the table where decisions are made.

The cross we take up to follow Jesus may take us places we have never been or thought we would ever go, as it did Jesus. It compels us to expose injustice and to be an agent of change.

We can choose not to take up this cross. We can say no when it comes our way. We can walk away from it instead of into it. We can ignore it and let it pass.

However, because of our love for God and desire to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, we say yes and take up this cross. We choose to be the presence of Christ in a broken world by sharing our time, talents, resources, energy and influence with those who are hurting and crying out for help.

We do this because a call to follow Jesus is a call to sacrifice, as Jesus frequently modeled. This man who continually emptied and humbled himself, as Paul described in

Philippians 2:5-8, taking upon himself the form of a servant, redefined the meaning of the word sacrifice.

This man who submitted to the will of God after asking God to take away this 'cup' redefined the meaning of the word sacrifice.

This man who met his accusers at the entrance to Gethsemane and secured the disciples' release while being arrested redefined the meaning of the word sacrifice.

So did Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He understood this concept of sacrifice and felt the weight of the cross.

Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian known for his staunch resistance to Hitler and his vocal opposition of Hitler's euthanasia program and genocidal persecution of the Jews. He is also known for penning the book, The Cost of Discipleship, which has become a must-read classic for all Christians.

Bonhoeffer was arrested in April, 1943, and imprisoned until his death two years later. He was executed by hanging on April 9, 1945, as the Nazi regime was collapsing.

What made Bonhoeffer's death more poignant was a decision he made near the beginning of WWII. In 1939, he came to the United States to teach at the invitation of Union Theological Seminary in New York. This move provided Bonhoeffer a safe place to continue his work until the war ended.

Amid much inner turmoil, he soon regretted his decision and announced his intention to return to Germany despite strong pressures from his friends to stay in the United States. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr: "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

Continuing his thoughts on the war, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian

civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice from security."

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany on the last scheduled steamer to cross the Atlantic, and this decision cost him his life.

Bonhoeffer knew his return to Germany during the war was risky, but he made the choice to take up his cross and to follow Jesus. He believed he could do nothing less and be a faithful disciple.

The night Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, he also knew the high price he would pay to be faithful to his calling. This is why he was conflicted and so disturbed.

It is obvious Jesus did not want to be arrested, tortured, shamed, humiliated and crucified that evening and the next day. Who would?

It is the reason he begged God to take this cup of suffering away. I would not even be surprised had he entertained the idea of hiding or running away, as the authorities carrying lanterns, torches and clubs expected him to do.

He knew, though, if he did, it would have undermined all he had taught and all he tried to accomplish in his pursuit of justice and peace. More importantly, it would have disillusioned the untold numbers of struggling people who placed their hopes, dreams and confidence in him.

In the end, Jesus could not disappoint God and disillusion those looking to him to be their advocate. He chose, instead, to confront his accusers and to remain faithful to his call and mission. He chose to accept this cross, this sacrifice, on our behalf in spite of the fact his disciples, on repeated occasions, tried to talk him out of it.

What a great role model Jesus was for his disciples that evening in the Garden. They knew he put God's will and their well-being ahead of his own self-interests.

After that night, the disciples had a much better understanding of what it meant to "take up their cross and follow him." I hope and pray we do, too.

What do you need to choose to do this week out of love for God and in service to others in Jesus' name? What do you need to say yes to that would make you a better person, strengthen your marriage, improve your family life and make you a more helpful neighbor and friend?

What opportunities to make life better for those around you do you need to embrace? How could your time, talents, resources, energy and influence be used by God to make hope visible?

Let me encourage you to think and to pray about this as the bread and cup are passed in a few moments.

Let me also encourage you to ask God to empower you to move in that direction by taking the first step.