



## It's Not All About Bliss

*TEXT*  
*Mark 8:31-9:1*

May 6, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

“Whoever follows me must deny themselves and take up their own cross.” Barbara Brown Taylor once noted that talking like this, Jesus would not have been a very effective local church pastor.<sup>1</sup> Nobody wants to deny themselves. No church puts on their church sign, “We are a church of self-denial. Everyone welcome.”

No, we are more into self-fulfillment. Isn't that why you worship?

The truth is, I have experienced a lot of self-fulfillment because of my faith. I think of my high school church choir. I learned a little theory and vocal method and the first things I really learned about God. I remember a dim library carrel at Union Seminary, studying scripture and knowing God was there. I can talk of being humbled by the courage of Maria Blandon, as she welcomed me in grace in a backwoods Nicaraguan village, or of sharing Communion in a displaced persons camp on the edges of Khartoum. The bread and wine served at that table was the only thing those folks would eat that day.

I could talk about a Session meeting in 2005, where I saw the leaders of this church choose to trust the gospel. I could talk about desperate prayers in hospital rooms or wordless prayers by gravesides. I could talk about a worship service at Antioch last June, when we started something completely new, and God was there to remind us we are defined not by our past, but by God's future. I could talk about listening to our high school seniors lead the Gathering last Sunday. God was in the room.

My Christian faith is the most meaningful part of my life. No doubt you have stories you could tell as well.

I have experienced meaning and self-fulfillment in my Christian discipleship. That's good. I hope that you find this church to be a place of fulfillment. But when you do, you would do well to remember that self-fulfillment is not the goal, but rather a byproduct of the faith. It's not all about bliss. That is what Jesus tells his somewhat shocked disciples in this passage.

“If you want to follow me, you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” If that sounds difficult to you, you are not alone. The apostle Peter thought it was crazy. “No, this

could never happen,” he says. Jesus speaks harshly to Peter in this moment, but it may be because Jesus is concerned too. Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, we learn that Jesus has the same response. “Let this cup pass from me. I do not want what you want, God. I am afraid of this sacrifice.”

But then Jesus prays. “Not what I want, but what you want.” It took courage — tremendous courage.

Here's the truth. As we curate our heart, learning to want what God wants, there will be seasons of deep gratitude. There will be moments of personal fulfillment, even bliss. There will be times of profound inspiration. But sooner or later, this faith will call you to sacrifice. Sooner or later, this faith will require courage and will lead you to self-denial. You will have to give yourself to something bigger than yourself.

Are you courageous? I would like to be, but I fear I'm not very courageous.

In May 2002, Emory University gave Hugh Thompson an honorary doctorate. I have heard that it was the only time the student body was quiet during the entire graduation ceremony. Students being students,

they chatted through the whole ceremony. That is until the degree was bestowed upon Hugh Thompson.

Hugh Thompson flew a helicopter in Vietnam. On March 16, 1968, he flew over the village of My Lai. As he did, he witnessed the horrible massacre of civilians in this village at the hands of U.S. soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Charlie Company had been at work for four hours, and even though not a single shot was fired at the American soldiers, over 300 civilians (some say 500) were dead — mostly women and children, old men.<sup>3</sup>

Hugh Thompson set his helicopter down between the civilians and the advancing soldiers. He trained his gun on his brothers. Some called it insubordination, some treason. Thompson said it seemed like the only responsible thing to do.

When Emory granted him an honorary doctorate, the student body — none of whom were alive in 1968 — sat in silence. I wonder if they realized that they were hearing a story of courage and hoped that they could be courageous someday.

It takes courage to stand up for right. But most of all it takes courage to imagine that tomorrow can be different; that the kingdom of God is real and worth living toward.

Jesus says, “Take up your own cross.” The cross was the common Roman practice to make a mockery of those who stood against the Roman way. Challenge the Roman culture, challenge the nation, and you will suffer.

If I understand the text, Jesus is teaching us that sometimes we will need to stand against our own culture to bear witness to the ways of God. To understand this, we need to remember that Jesus talked about life in the kingdom of God, the promised day of God. The kingdom of God is when we all want what God wants for ourselves and for all. The kingdom of God is our real home. We are not home yet.

I love Jhumpa Lahiri’s book *The Namesake*. It’s the coming-of-age story of a young man named Gogol Ganguli. His parents Ashoke and Ashima have traveled from Bengali. Ashoke teaches at Harvard, if I remember that detail correctly. Throughout the novel, all of them, in different ways, must navigate the challenge of living in two worlds — for there is much of the old country in them, but they are also being defined by their new home.

Ashima describes it this way: *Being a foreigner ... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy — a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding.*<sup>4</sup>

To be a follower of Jesus is a bit like that: caught between two worlds ... the world in which we live and the promised day of God, toward which we are living ... our ultimate home. It is a perpetual wait, a burden, an ongoing responsibility. And

sometimes we have to stand up for that new life. It requires courage.

The courage is not just the courage to stand up to wrong and call for the right. It requires courage to trust that the kingdom of God is real, and to imagine that tomorrow can be a new day. To know that while we will not be pure, and we will not be free from fear, we will never be free from prejudice and our sin will always be before us ... there is still hope that with some cross-bearing, tomorrow can be better.

My friend and mentor, KC Ptomey, knew a woman named Alice who showed such courage. She lived near a university, and she rented rooms to students who came to study. She had a young man who lived with her; this was 1980. For those of you old enough to remember, it was in the middle of the Iranian hostage crisis. Alice had a student living with her who was from Iran. You can imagine the response of her neighbors. Why didn’t she kick him out? Iran was our enemy.

She said, “Well this student isn’t. He’s a student studying biology.”

“Don’t you love your country?”

She said, “Yes.”

“Then why don’t you kick him out?”

She would tell them, “I don’t think Jesus would kick him out, and I am trying to follow Jesus.”

Jesus said, “Deny yourself and take up your own cross.” I wish Jesus didn’t say this, but he did. He had to — because we are

not home yet. And follow him long enough, and there will be moments that demand courage and a willingness to sacrifice. I don't know what that moment will be for you.

But we are living in days that demand courage. I say that because there has never been a time that didn't require courage. Our days are not unique; they just happen to be our days.

We live in times when truth is ignored; when the institutions that hold national life together are under careless attack. But Jesus is the truth. It will require courage to be people of integrity — people who value the truth.

We live in times when violence is justified on so many levels. Violence is harming families and dividing cities and threatening nations. But we must remember that Jesus didn't crucify; he was the crucified.

We live in times when poverty is acceptable. But Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, so we have to be about the ministry not just of caring for the poor, but of understanding what makes them poor to begin with.

I want to want what God wants, which means things need to be different — because we are foreigners, immigrants in this culture, for the kingdom of God is our true home. It is the destination toward which we live.

You may think, "I don't have courage like that." I get that. Jesus does as well — because there in the garden, he was afraid. He didn't want what God wants. But then somehow, by God's grace, his spirit grew,

and he prayed, "Not what I want, but what you want, O God." His heart aligned with God's heart. And the world was saved.

So, when it comes to you, and it will, remember his story. And maybe, just maybe, God's grace will align your heart with the heart of Christ. It has happened before. It can happen again.

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (1997), p. 46

<sup>2</sup>Michael Bilton, *Four Hours at My Lai* (Penguin: 1992)

<sup>3</sup>Just one description of how a soldier expressed the pain follows.

Greg Olsen: *I was in the village. I remember seeing people butted in the head with rifles. But you start losing your sense of what's normal. You don't give up your morals, but you become a lot more tolerant. We believed this behavior was pretty commonplace. I didn't think we were doing anything different from any other unit. You really do lose your sense ... not of right or wrong, but your degree of wrong changes.* Bilton, p. 79

<sup>4</sup>Lahiri, *The Namesake* (2003), p. 49

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.