

**CHRIST CHURCH**  
**Montpelier, Vermont**  
**Sermon, Year A, 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 3 September 2017**  
**By Rev. Stephen A. Reynes, Deacon©**

*“Take up [your] cross and follow me”<sup>1</sup>*

**In the Name and praise of God, Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Good morning.**

If I’m the preacher, I’m glad to see a Gospel reading where Jesus calls out religious leaders who hold themselves out as “holier than thou” because of their supposed adherence to many rules, while ignoring the two great commandments of the law, to *love* God and to *love your neighbor as yourself*. I’m glad to see one of the stories in Scripture where Jesus reaches out to someone in need, never mind if he or she is looked down upon or belongs to a group that is disfavored, such as the Samaritan woman at the well who had had five husbands.<sup>2</sup> Or, of course, I’m glad to see the parable of the Good Samaritan, at a time when Jews and Samaritans kept apart, where the priest and the Levite pass by the man who had been stripped, robbed, beaten and left half-dead, it is the Samaritan who helps the stranger, and Jesus points to the Samaritan as best illustrating loving your neighbor.

The gospel we just heard doesn’t feel like that. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Yikes.

It is instructive to observe that today’s Gospel from Matthew immediately follows the passage from last week’s, in which Jesus asks his disciples, “But who do *you* say I am?”<sup>3</sup> In both passages, Jesus is talking to each of us as individuals, as opposed to being a story or a

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 3:1-15; Ps. 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45c (v.4, “Search for the Lord and his strength; continually seek his face); Romans 12:9-21; Matt. 16:13-20.

<sup>2</sup> John 4: 4-44.

<sup>3</sup> Matt: 16:13-20, v.15.

parable about someone “out there.” These two passages are personal: Who do *you* say I am? Pick up *your* cross.

*And yet, it is not a different Gospel or teaching, it's part of the same teaching of Jesus.* Instead of just listening to a good-feeling story or parable with values with which we may comfortably identify, such as being against the hypocrites or for helping the stranger, Jesus puts the spotlight back on us as individuals. If *you* want to follow me, take up *your* cross. I see that as having two interwoven meanings:

- First, in looking externally, take up your cross means to walk the walk of Jesus’ teaching to help others, instead of just nodding or lip service to those values, and
- Second, in looking to the challenges of our individual lives, you know, health, financial, relationships, addictions, wounds, disappointments, take up your cross means to be guided by Jesus’ way in our personal lives.

First, looking externally: The havoc, loss, hurt and destruction of catastrophic storm Harvey is still unfolding. Private boats and crews were needed to help with the rescues and evacuations. That’s what the so-called “Cajun Navy” has done and is doing. Many people from Texas, Louisiana and other areas set aside whatever they were doing and went to the Houston area with their small boats to save people who were living on the brink of destruction.

Consider what is there for these many tens of thousands of people to go home to? The needs will continue for a long time. When donating money to help, there is the question of will it really help or just go to some other purpose, or just sit? One possibility where you can be assured that the money is not going down the drain is through Episcopal Relief and

Development, designated for Hurricane Harvey relief. You can find information on that in the back of today's service sheets.

Close to home, there is only one homeless shelter in central Vermont, the Good Samaritan Haven in Barre. They are having their major fundraiser this year with a fun evening at Vermont College of Fine Arts here in Montpelier on September 15<sup>th</sup>. You can also find further information on that in the service sheets and there is a colorful poster on the bulletin board just before the big room.

There is no shortage of good organizations and causes that need volunteer help. Is there a cause or need that calls to you? I said about not just mouthing support, but that is not to discount the value of your voice and advocacy for a particular cause, say for veterans or suicide prevention, or teens in trouble, or people who are shackled by addiction. We have the advantage in Vermont that our people in government are accessible and corruption is rare.

Okay, what about taking up our cross in the challenges of our individual lives? Life can be wonderful at times, with joy, love, and laughter. But if one lives awhile, each person will experience pain, loss, grief, injury and sickness, and mortal death. Some may have a strategy of minimizing what is unpleasant and seeking to exclude those who might intrude into our Fort Pleasant. Yet, it is evident that great power and great wealth is no guarantee of happiness.

Jesus offers another way of living, that is not self-centered, and illustrated by the stories I mentioned at the beginning. The woman who met Jesus at the well and he knew all she had done and told her about the living water: she could have just gone back to her old life, but instead she told others in her village and encouraged them to go to Jesus and many of them came to believe in Jesus. There would be no parable of the Good Samaritan if that potential helper just walked by like the others.

Yes, but what if I am the one in need? Is there anyone here who has not been in great need of help from somewhere, from someone? [*pause*]. At times it may feel that there is no one to help us. Even Jesus felt that at one point on the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

I’ve told this personal story once many years ago, so a few of you may have heard it. It was a very dark night in my heart in the 1980’s. I dropped to my knees amidst flowing tears and emotional pain, with no idea what to pray for. The radio was playing softly in the background and the haunting song by Foreigner came to my ears:

*I want to know what love is, I know you can show me.*

*I want to feel what love is, I know you can show me.*

I cried more in recognition of the lyrics, and then its words transformed into my prayer, “I want to know what love is, I know you can show me.” Some months later, my prayer was answered. While I was re-visiting those minutes as I wrote this, my Mom called, and told me she loved me.

Jesus taught that this present life is not the end of the story. I believe that, and it gives hope and light. I believe we are surrounded by saints in the making, including those who may not have faith right now, even as they came, even as they come, one by one, to help others like the Cajun navy.

I want to mention something practical I have learned from mountaineering that just might be helpful to you in time of personal crisis. Bear with me just a minute, even though it may take a leap of faith. This maybe the first time that getting over a crevasse has ever been included in a sermon on this gospel!

**OK, if you are on a glacier, you will come to situations where one needs to jump across an opening in the glacier called a crevasse. You do not want to fall into a crevasse, even though you are connected by rope to at least one other climber. They can be very deep and cold. A guide on Mt. Rainier taught me early on that instead of concentrating on the deep chasm and the bad about falling into it, look to exactly where you want your boot to land and which boot. *OK, I want my right boot to land on that bit of dirty crystals where there is a boot print already.* If you do that, focus on where you want to land instead of the chasm, you will get there. If you look into the crevasse while you're going over it, you're likely to plunge in. I was reminded of this when reading the *American Alpine Journal* I received a few days ago, and there was an essay by a noted mountaineer saying just that.<sup>4</sup> This tip has never failed me, it works.**

**You may find it helpful to keep that in mind in some life situation, either for yourself or someone else, focusing on where you want to get to, instead of on the fear of falling. And if you or another person are already in the chasm or the gutter, keep focus on where you want to get to, remembering that God is very good at bringing light to dark places. Believe that we do not walk alone. Amidst the pain, the burdens and the risks of carrying our cross, focus on where we wish to go, in faith, in hope, and in love. Amen.**

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Lowe, in the 2017 edition of *The American Alpine Journal* at pp. 74-75.