

A Belated “Duh!” on “Take Up [Your] Cross and Follow Me.”

Colleagues,

With burdens come gifts. If preaching most every Sunday is often a pain in the neck—it’s meant to be: see the stole, and the yoke it represents—it also rewards the preacher now and then with little bursts of unexpected insight into aspects of the Word of God that he or she hadn’t penetrated before. Call them “Aha!” moments, if you will; though every so often one does better to call it a “Duh!” moment. That’s when the thing so suddenly tumbled to appears in retrospect to have been so obvious that you can’t fathom why it took you so long to grab hold of it.

Today’s offering reports briefly on a “Duh!” moment that the undersigned both savored and suffered in a midnight hour of preparation for this year’s Second Sunday in Lent. The text was [Mark 8:31-38](#). The key line was the ever so familiar “Take up your cross and follow me.” For the content that spilled out, see below. In seeing, you’ll quickly grasp why the spillage occasioned a deep, enduring blush of embarrassment. Really, it took decades to spot this? “Duh!”

So why the blindness, and why so long? Again, see below for some incomplete mulling on this. It includes a suspicion that, where the plain meaning of this particular set of words is concerned, blindness is not an exception in the Church, but the norm. That will explain our chutzpah in passing this along to you, however thoughtful and canny we take you to be. Could be there’s a “Duh!” of your own that’s waiting to erupt. And if some younger readers are thereby spared the same long, silly delay in hearing what Christ is telling us here, then God be praised.

By the way, this Markan text is featured twice in Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary. Those of us who follow the RCL, whether as listeners or preachers, will encounter it again on the second Sunday of this coming September. That's another reason for thinking about it today.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

“Take Up [Your] Cross and Follow Me.” What Does This Mean?

I. Preamble

For a sneak peak at what it means, see the second-last paragraph of [Steven Kuhl's first lecture on discipleship](#) at the 2012 International Crossings Conference. Steve gets it. He lays it out in the precise, meticulous prose of a careful theologian. He presents it as the capstone of a precise, meticulous argument, the kind that careful theologians take pains to assemble so as to drive their readers to an inescapable conclusion. What Steve doesn't do in that paper is to show how the text itself—the very phrase, “Take up [your] cross”—allows for no interpretation other than the one he arrives at. I'll attend to that task here. It's a lighter chore, though also more painful. It means confessing a long-term failure in that most basic of skills, i.e. reading.

II. Notes on the Text

- a. My focus is squarely on the phrase “Take up [your] cross.” It appears once in Mark (8:34), twice in Matthew (10:38, 16:24), and once in Luke (9:23). Luke also offers a variant, “Carry [your] cross” (14:27), the latter appearing in Luke’s parallel to Matthew 10:38.
- b. Why the “your” in square brackets? Because the possessive pronoun in all five citations is in the third person masculine singular, i.e. “his” cross. 21st century English doesn’t like that usage when it’s apparent from the context that all persons, male and female alike, are embraced in whatever Jesus is saying here. Obeying that preference, NRSV renders “their cross” in three of the occurrences, and “the cross” in the other two. The latter qualifies as mistranslation, ignoring, as it does, the personal possessive pronoun that’s unmistakably there, and is essential to the point Jesus is making. (See below.)
- c. The five occurrences deliver two distinct though related sayings. First, “If anyone wishes to come behind me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mk. 8:34, unofficial Burce version (uBv); cf. Matt. 16:24, Lk. 9:23). Second, “The person who doesn’t take his cross and follow behind me isn’t worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38, uBv, par. Lk. 14:27, where “isn’t worthy of me” is replaced with “can’t be my disciple.”).
- d. The first saying occurs in connection with Jesus’ first passion prediction, itself following hard on Peter’s declaration about Jesus’ Messianic identity. In Mark and Matthew (though not Luke) the passion prediction elicits Peter’s protest, which leads in turn to Jesus’ rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan.” Here

the Greek preposition is “opisoh,” which pops up again, and almost immediately, when Jesus says, “If anyone wants to come or follow ‘opisoh’ me...”—though translators almost always render it at this point as “after me.” That’s too bad. It obscures what Greek-speaking hearers would catch in a heartbeat, i.e. that Jesus is ordering us all to stand precisely where Peter has just been sent to stand, i.e. behind him, dogging his heels.

- e. The second saying is, in Matthew, a piece of Jesus’ instruction for his apostolic interns, and, in Luke, a piece of his extended warning to the eager beavers who want to tag along with him on the long, meandering trek to Jerusalem.
- f. In two of the occurrences—Mark 8 and Luke 14—Jesus says what he says not only to his disciples, but also to the crowds. In other words, they too—the uncommitted, the merely curious—are included when Jesus speaks of “[your] cross” as a thing to be taken up. Of the contextual data that bear on the interpretation of the phrase, this item is the most important—and the most commonly ignored in readings that go awry, as the great majority of them keep doing.

III. So What does it Mean?

- a. For sure it doesn’t mean what I always thought it might have meant, or what today’s commentators, scholarly and popular alike, keep thinking that it means.
- b. For what those commentators are thinking, try a Google search on “take up your cross.” Here are the two main ideas that will tumble immediately from the first page of results: i) It means embracing the prospect, if nothing else, that following Jesus

might entail some serious suffering down the road. (There are bad guys out there. They don't like the Jesus crowd. Their name is Legion.) ii) It means gritting your teeth and settling down already now to some suffering in the form of self-abnegation, undertaken for Jesus' sake as a means either of developing one's personal faith muscles, or of extending his costly service to others, or both. (Evangelical sites have a penchant for the muscle-building angle, old mainline ones for the costly service approach.)

- c. Be it said that these ideas aren't of themselves illegitimate. The New Testament supports them (see, e.g., [1 Cor. 9:23-27](#), [1 Peter 5:8-9](#)). They also continue to be illustrated vividly in the ongoing experience of many Christian people.
- d. What can't be done, legitimately, is to extract these ideas from "Take up [your] cross." I know. I've tried to do that in my own preaching past. It has never quite worked. Something in the effort has always rung false, whether false to the text, or false to the people I've been talking to about the text, the aim of that talking being to deliver a word that's been tailored by the Lord precisely for them.
- e. So, for example, it doesn't ring true to suggest that Jesus is talking to us about the *possibility* of something we may or may not stumble into as the future unfolds—persecution-driven suffering, say. The problem here is one of implied tense, as in grammatical tense. If you ask me to pick something up, you're assuming the thing is there for me to grab hold of. "Take up [your] cross" can only mean that said cross is a "now" thing, a grim and bitter

feature of the moment I presently occupy.

- f. Nor does it ring true to blather on about suffering to people who tumbled out of bed this morning feeling hale, hearty, and happy, and thanking God for God's manifold gifts, among which is the extreme unlikelihood, at least in Western countries, of ever being persecuted for being Christian.
- g. So suppose I notice that. Suppose then that I feel impelled to invest the text with some kind of meaningful substance for hearers to grab hold of. Suppose still further that I try, as so many others do, to locate this substance in new disciplines of one kind or another—another one percent in the offering plate, another hour or two of weekly prayer or service at the food pantry. Will I not be heard equating such things with the agony of crucifixion? I may as well invite the hearers to go home despising their preacher for having been a fool that morning, or worse, a charlatan. And still worse—much worse: the more astute of them will sit around their dinner tables observing that whatever they heard in church an hour or two ago didn't qualify as good news. Not even close.
- h. So what's a preacher to do? Answer: read the text. Engage the words that stare at you from the page. Resist the impulse to dance around their plain meaning. Then serve as Jesus' mouth today and tell it like is.
- i. Take the big essential word: "cross." It's here that most every interpretation I've run across immediately jumps the rails. That includes the notions I've fumbled with in my own prior thinking, if you can call it that. The mistake is to read "cross" as a metaphor for suffering, and only

suffering, nothing else. But that's dancing around the word. It's refusing to grab hold of the plain meaning of the thing.

- j. What is a cross? A device for killing people. It kills them, to be sure, in an especially brutal and agonizing way, but even so, the fact that heaps of suffering is involved is secondary to the item's main objective, i.e. that the person nailed to it should wind up dead, some other person—bigger, badder, bristling with legal authority—having decreed that he or she ought to be dead, and has got to be dead.
- k. So “cross” as a metaphor doesn't point in the first place to suffering, but rather to an act of condemning judgment. “Cross” equals “death sentence,” and this as a fait accompli, no wriggling around it. For me to have a cross means, in the essence of the thing, that Burce is dead meat. Why? Because Somebody Else, swinging the gavel, has announced that Burce must die. Now the only thing left is to make that happen.
- l. Turn now to the singular pronoun that Jesus uses to modify the main noun. Whichever you opt for in your own reading—“his,” “her,” “your,” take your pick—it makes the death sentence personal. Ah, but personal to which persons? Here the context piles in, especially at Mark 8:34, with its inescapable answer: “[Jesus] called the *crowd with* his disciples, and said to them [all]....” In other words, not a one of them is exempt from what he's about to say. Nor is any other individual example of the humanity-in-general they represent.
- m. And what does Jesus say? “*Take up* [your] cross.” This takes it for granted that I *have* a cross (see

above, III.e.). It means that Jesus is speaking to the denizens of Death Road, so to speak. That's all of us. No exceptions.

- n. But try telling that to the crowds we share the road with today. They'll hoot. They'll laugh. At some point they'll rage. And even in the Church, where people ought to know better, you'll hear passionate, angry cries, echoing Peter's (Mk. 8:32b), that this cannot be so. Still, one might as well cry that the sky can't be blue. Sinners, of course, have a problem with denial. They always have. They always will. And there is nothing they'll deny with greater ferocity than God's right to condemn them.
- o. This brings us at last to the phrase a whole. "Take up [your] cross...." Is there a one of us who hasn't heard this described, over and over, as "a call to discipleship"? Have we not talked about it ourselves in precisely those terms? Suddenly I wonder if there has ever been a slap-on label that skews interpretation more badly than this one keeps doing, century upon century?
- p. The key point, the midnight "Duh": "Take up [your] cross" is *not* a call to discipleship. It's rather a call to say uncle; to quit the pretense; to face the facts. "You've got a cross. It's at your feet. You've been weighed in the balance already, and the verdict is in: 'Found wanting.' What you now call life is nothing more than the shamble of dead meat walking. Your fate is fixed." Why ever would you follow behind me, Jesus asks, if you *haven't* faced up to that?
- q. One might say, then, that taking up [your] cross is at most a prelude to discipleship, a necessary precondition to tagging along with Jesus if that

tagging along is to make any sense at all. Why “follow behind,” sticking to him like glue? Because Jesus is the Christ, the only one out there who’s able to make an Easter for crucified corpses. Key to that, of course, will be his exclusive role in shaping God’s judgment on sinners. He’ll do this not by overthrowing the judgment that already stands, whisking my cross away with a flick of some sort of magic wand. (We’d like him to do that, of course, a silly and faithless sentiment that connects us to Luke’s criminal on the left, cf. 23:39: “If you are the Real Deal, save yourself, and us!”) Instead he’ll lay the groundwork for a second and subsequent verdict. Resurrection. New creation. Eternal life for those who were dead. Gifts impossible, inexplicable, and yet so certain that we can talk about them in the same present tense that we use for the current death-march.

- r. No wonder Jesus chews Peter out for pushing a lesser agenda (Mark 8:33). No wonder he barks at him to “Get behind me!” No wonder he invites all the other Death Road denizens to tag along (“Follow behind me”), having first pointed them to the one and only sufficient reason for doing that (“Quit kidding yourself! Quit ignoring your cross! Grab hold of it! “Take it up!”).
- s. Need I observe that the above will preach to anybody and everybody—rich/poor, old/young, happy/bitter, respectable/despicable? All have fallen short of the glory of God, and every sinner dies. If one reads the text for what it says, there’s no longer any need to wrap oneself in knots trying to make it applicable.
- t. Come to think of it, the knotty, contorted arguments

that characterize the standard “cross-as-suffering” readings are a sure sign that they’re off the mark.

- u. By contrast, the “cross-as-verdict” reading throws open the door for telling the excellent and exciting news of Christ crucified for us, and in that telling, to invite some robust faith in him. And when the preaching is done and folks are home, they’ll be able to sit around the dinner table thanking God for good news heard that day, on Christ’s account. Isn’t that the surest sign of a reading that’s on the mark?

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