Take Up Your Cross and Follow

In the series “Come to the Cross”

# Scripture: Matthew 16:21-27

# Key Thought: Jesus calls us to follow him, and to continue to follow even though there will be crosses.

# Intro:

What an amazing day in the history of our church, a day when 14 people have chosen to reaffirm their faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ and publicly identify with Christ’s local church. Today they are leading the way for us by their example. In the moments that remain, let us briefly review together Jesus’ call to discipleship in the NT and our response to his voice.

# Jesus said, “Follow Me” (Mk 2:14; John 1:43)

## A simple invitation – “Follow me.”

At the very beginning of his ministry, when he first began to preach in Galilee, and in Judea, Jesus invitation to future disciples was a very simple one –two words—“Follow me.” I would suggest to you that is still the essence of our discipleship. We are simply following Jesus.

### Born Again

Now many other words are used in the Bible for what happens in our lives when God’s Spirit finds us, and we listen to God’s voice and respond. For example, Jesus also coined the metaphor “born again” to describe the radical new start and new life that is ours in Jesus when we repent and belief the Gospel.

### Saved

The Philippians jailer as he sought to come to Jesus said simply, “What must I do to be saved?” and the term has stuck with us ever since. Somehow, when we respond to God, we are rescued, we are snatched from ruin, we are saved from harm. It was a natural term as it was the verb form of the word “salvation.” The Psalmist had described God as “our salvation.”

### Receive

John used the hospitality metaphor of “receiving” Jesus and spoke of us opening the door of our hearts to Jesus when he knocked (John 1:12; Rev. 3:20).

### Invitation to an apprenticeship

But the simplest form of the spiritual transaction that happens when we turn to God is still found in the words of Jesus to the first disciples, “Follow me.” To be clear, Jesus’ invitation was more than one person asking another to walk behind him on a hike. It was the invitation of a Rabbi, a Jewish teacher to a student to become a follower, a learner at the feet of the master teacher. And to be even clearer, this was not an acceptance to classroom training. It was the beginning of an apprenticeship, an OJT. Jesus’ disciples were to learn by literally following him around in his itinerant ministry in Palestine and learning to do what he was doing.

## Our call to follow

We still sense the call to follow Jesus today. It comes in all kinds of ways. If you ask the fourteen who confessed faith this morning to tell you how they first came to be a follower of Jesus, they will all have different stories to tell. Jesus works with each of us individually. But what does it mean to follow Jesus today? We can no longer follow Jesus physically around in Palestine and observe as the disciples did.

### Decision

Today we follow him first by a commitment of our heart to be followers. There is an intentional decision to make. The disciples of Jesus’ day often made theirs by leaving their situation and going with Jesus. Peter, James and John left the fishing boats. Matthew left the tax collecting job. But for us, it is usually an inner decision to become a Christ-follower.

### Disciplines

Today we follow him through the disciplines of faith—repentance, Bible reading, prayer, studying together, worship, meditation, reading the thoughts of others, engaging in ministries of service on his behalf, learning faith, giving financially to the church and to help the poor through other charities, receiving sacraments —these are ways we learn and follow Jesus today. Especially remember to practice ministry – Jesus sent the disciples out 2 by 2 to practice ministry. Serving others is an essential part of discipleship. The church today tends to enjoy discipleship as long as it involves listening but stops short when it involves giving and going. Such a limitation would be following only part of Jesus’ example; that’s like taking only part of his curriculum!

# He implied, “Follow Me together”

The second thing I want us to note is that the call to follow which Jesus gave was always a call to follow together – as a part of a group of disciples. This is not stated, it was just part of how Jesus operated. He had twelve designated disciples. He had an inner circle of three—Peter, James and John. He sent the disciples out for ministry in teams of two. He called his group of followers his “church” (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). The Greek word, “ekkleesia” which is translated “church” is only used of groups that are gathered together in a meeting. In the Upper Room at Pentecost, 120 were gathered. Being a Christ-follower was never intended to be a “lone-ranger” project.

Today at Copper Hill, these 14 have recognized Jesus’ intent in forming a group of people who follow him together and they have officially identified themselves with Christ’s church in its local expression here at Copper Hill. By their act today they testify that they understand that following Jesus is to be a corporate act. Just think of the Scripture metaphors that help us get this point.

* The church is described as Christ’s body because it is one yet has many members.
* The church is the family of God because we are children of God.

May this action of these 14 new members today be a reminder to all of us that we follow Jesus together. We encourage one another. We hold each other accountable. We work together to serve God and serve others. We worship together, sing together and pray together. We weep with those who weep, and we rejoice with those who rejoice.

# Later Jesus said, “Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me!” (Matt. 16:24)

Lastly, when we think of following Jesus, and we remember this is Holy Week, we cannot help but remember what Jesus said,

 “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” Matt 16:24-25

This reminds us that following Jesus will not always be easy. We live in a broken world were there are many challenges. The church itself is not immune to the brokenness. But as a church we witness and work for holiness, and wholeness, for justice and mercy, for peace. But at the same time, we acknowledge that there is much in us and in our world that defends privilege, that caters to carnal influences, and is at least apathetic to the plight of the poor. We acknowledge conflicts in ourselves as we battle our own “besetting sins.” And we know that our sins and the sins of others add to the suffering. There is real suffering to be healed.

The work of the Gospel is challenging. There is much to be done and there are too few laborers. The Bible describes the enemy of our souls as the “prince and power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). Often, we can sense his real opposition.

But Jesus knew that we lived in this kind of situation. He knew it would be a challenge to follow him. It would bring out the best in us. And we would need to take courage.

So, as a consummate leader, He both led the way and he challenged us up front to “Take up our cross and follow me.” Accept the challenges. Keep going when it is not easy just as He did. Don’t give in when the wrong decision seems easier. Decisively put off the old ways and put on the new ways, the ways Jesus taught. Go the extra mile even though it costs something. Show love even when it hurts. Just keep following Jesus! As He said, “Take up your cross and follow me”

And when we do so, and the way seems dark; when it seems like the pall of Good Friday hangs in the sky; we need to especially remember. Good Friday does not have the last word! Easter is coming. God is at work. The Victory is His. And because of that, the power of the resurrection will yet become evident even in our circumstances!