

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

When I worked at Geisinger Medical Center as a summer chaplain in order to complete my clinical requirement for seminary graduation I had no idea the impact it would have on my life and ministry skill set when I walked in the door the first day. I remember sitting in class and wondering what in the world have I gotten myself into? Me in a hospital? No way. But as we were assigned to different wings of the hospital where we would concentrate our time and visitation during the summer and I was assigned to the women and children's unit I felt like God was reassuring me everything was going to be alright. Even with that reassurance there was no way I was prepared for what would happen to me that summer.

As I spent time sitting with families whose small children got diagnosed with cancer my heart ached. As I played cards and colored coloring books with four and five year olds in between chemo treatments I was filled with joy. When I raced up and down the hallways with eight year olds with medicine polls and only patches of hair on their heads and yet in spite of all that was going on with them, they let out shrieks of joy my heart was full. As I sat with women who lost babies and baptized fetuses and stillborns my heart was grieved. As I held the body of an eighteen month old who had been shaken until he was brain dead and who had no family left to take care of him I was filled with rage. As I grasped to hold onto mothers and fathers whose children had died I was shaken to my core. It was a life changing experience, the kind that you never ever forget.

When I look back on that time in my life I see all the faces of the people I was privileged to know and love and walk alongside. I think about conversations I had with them, and all the reassurances of God's presence and a promise in a good future I offered to them on God's behalf.

In the midst of those conversations there was a common thing that happened, a common comment that surfaced in many of those situations. “I guess this is just my cross to bear,” they’d say. Those words were uttered over and over again by family after family in room after room on my floors of the hospital. In the midst of the moment I nodded my head, knowing I too had my own issues, my own cross. After all that was the summer my best friend from my growing up years died suddenly and unexpectedly. But as I reflect back on my experiences with a decade of pastoral ministry under my belt, as I spend more time studying God’s word and in group studies with other pastors, as I sit with you and minister to you, I look back on those situations and times in my life and I know for sure that I got it all wrong. Those instances in our lives when we are overcome with grief and sadness and hardship, they are valleys. They are dark. But they are not our crosses to bear.

You see if we turn to Jesus, which I hope and pray we always will, the cross that he bore for the sake of the world was a choice. That cross didn’t happen to him like pediatric cancer or miscarriages. He was the son of God he could have overcome the adversity he could have stopped Judas or Peter or the Roman soldiers, but he didn’t. He chose the cross. He chose to be crucified for our sake, for the sake of the world, for the sake of our brokenness and sin. We hear his desperation, we hear his plea “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; but not my will but yours be done.” Jesus didn’t want to die. He didn’t want to be beaten. He didn’t want to hang on a cross and be mocked and suffocate. But he chose that cross for the sake of the world.

So many times in our lives we talk about our struggles as our crosses. We talk about drug or alcohol addiction of our family or friends. We mention car accidents or sudden illnesses. We talk about the death of our loved ones. We talk about being born with mental illness or deformities. And we say these, these are our crosses to bear, but they aren’t. Our God doesn’t

look down from heaven and point lasers at peoples and give them brokenness. That's not how he operates, he loves us too much. And remember we just talked last week about the bow that God hung in the sky with Noah's covenant, the promise of no more destruction. That includes God giving us things he expects us to bear.

But when Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me" he wasn't talking about bad things that were going to happen to them. No, Jesus was talking about the cost of discipleship. You see following Jesus is costly. It's not something that you do once and done. Following Jesus is a choice that you have to make every single day. It's answering the question, "Will I get out of bed this morning and go to church instead of sleeping in?" It's choosing to spend time in prayer instead of watching another show on Netflix. It's getting out and serving food to help feed the homeless or spend time working at Wittel Farm to help feed those right here in our community who are hungry. It's choosing to love people who are really, truly very difficult to love. It's making sure that God is a priority for you and for your family. Discipleship is expensive, very expensive. Just as Jesus shows us. He lost his life on a cross for the sake of the world.

Today I invite you to ask yourself what crosses are you choosing to bear? What things are you actively choosing to do to follow Jesus in your life? If you have a long list, that's great. If you have any to list, good. If you have no list, let's get to work.

Now, I know what you may be thinking. Those of you who came to Wednesday night last week might be wondering if we were truly saved by grace alone, and it's totally a gift, why are you now telling me that following Jesus is expensive, that there's something I should be doing. Hear me say that grace is a gift and requires nothing, not one thing. However, because Jesus loves you enough to die on the cross for your sake, therefore you should want to live a life of

following his example. And Jesus, he did some pretty amazing things. When he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, one of the last things he said to his disciples was that they were going to do even greater works than Jesus. See, Jesus has faith in us. He has faith in our choices and today he asks us to choose him, to choose to bear the cross.

So what are we waiting for? Let's start working together to find ways we can choose to follow Jesus. Let us pray for guidance and be open to the whispering of the Spirit. Let us be looking for signs along our paths that might show us new and exciting ministries and service opportunities. Let us be dedicated in our study of God's work, consistent in our prayer, and faithful in our fellowship practices. But above us let us make a choice to follow the Rabbi that we know and love so dearly. Amen.