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 Redwoods Presbyterian Church
 Larkspur, California
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 Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
 "You Must Be Kidding"

Like last week, there's a lot one can bounce off in the gospel passage today. I will focus on one verse and draw from the rest of the passage and from Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

"Jesus tells his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" (Verse 24).

"You must be kidding." I deny myself (deny what?), take up my cross (suffer voluntarily?) and follow Jesus (Die for my faith?).

"You must be kidding." I enjoy my safe, secure life. Apart from some stiffness and aches in my body I'm not suffering and I don't intend to suffer.

However, I am a follower of Jesus so is something missing in my reasoning? Peter in the preceding verses provides a clue to what may be missing in my "you must be kidding" response. In effect, he says the same thing to Jesus when Jesus announces what will come of his life.

The passage begins: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him and says: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Jesus responds: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Peter who just verses before was the rock on which the church would be built now becomes a stumbling stone. His response is indeed all too human because also in the preceding verses Jesus is strongly affirmed as Messiah and Peter's understanding of Messiah was not a suffering Messiah, a suffering servant as Isaiah points out, but one who would more triumphantly save his people.

Suffer and die! You must be kidding. As a consequence of his mission and ministry, Jesus knows he will die at the hands of the religious and civil authorities. Jesus' self identity as one with God was a death sentence with the religious authorities and his realm of God theology, which included justice and compassion, condemned him in the eyes of the civil authorities who felt threatened by his rule.

Analogies to Jesus in this context can be found in people like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the assassinated human rights advocate in the US; Oscar Romero, the

assassinated Bishop of El Salvador and Sister Dorothy Stang, the assassinated advocate for indigenous workers in the Amazon. These are people I often recall at times like this. There are many others.

Jesus embraces his risky path for the sake of God's love which Peter does not understand. It's fine that Jesus could take up his cross but what about us? Jesus still says: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

People tend to confuse our crosses with Jesus' cross typified in a statement by well known Scottish New Testament scholar, William Barclay, who says: "Love always involves responsibility, and love always involves sacrifice. And we do not really love Christ unless we are prepared to face His task and to take up His Cross."

We're not taking up Jesus' cross. Some crosses like those of King, Romero and Stang are like the cross of Jesus. These are not our crosses although they could be in similar fashion. Jesus does not ask us to take up his cross or King's cross. He explicitly states: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up *their* cross and follow me."

We all have crosses and the intent of this passage is that Jesus does not want us to be in denial of these crosses. He wants us to deny the self in us that wants to deny the crosses and to take up our cross or crosses and follow him. We also take up crosses voluntarily. Some of our crosses are small and some are big. Jesus, King, Romero and Stang's crosses are big.

Whatever our cross we take it up and in doing so we become more whole as human beings. So what is our cross? I cannot speak for others and others cannot speak for me. I cannot take up Jesus' cross nor can I take up your cross although I can support and encourage you in the carrying of your cross as we do when members in the church are struggling, grieving or in pain.

The Holy Spirit helps us to discern what in fact this cross is although it could be argued that any painful experience is a cross.

If I stubbed my toe in a tennis match and suffered in agony for two days that might not be taking up my cross and following Jesus. However, if I decided to forego on a movie one afternoon in order to sit with a depressed friend that gets closer to taking up one's cross and following Jesus.

If I come down with an illness that is not taking up my cross although it is a cross and often it's very difficult to bear. It's a given. Taking up one's cross tends to be a voluntary act for the sake of God's world.

Clues to taking up one's cross are found in the Pauline passage read today.

Paul writes: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." I read an interesting expression of genuine love this week which is a kind of taking up one's cross, at least acknowledging it for growth. It's communicated in a book called, *Listening Is an Act of Love*, stories from the StoryCorps Project.

A woman asks her husband, a former heroin addict and the product of a troubled family of origin, if their marriage helped him. He replies: "Yes. Absolutely. Tremendously. I found my life partner. I found my soul mate. I knew that you were good for me when you said one day that we were just two tortured mutts. That was the day I knew that I wanted to marry you." His wife says: "That's so sad." He replies: "But that's exactly how I felt at that time. I felt like a tortured mutt, so I knew if you were a tortured mutt and I was a tortured mutt, then we would probably give each other love – and that's exactly what has happened."

A whole lot of crosses are embedded in the final statement by Paul: "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

When last did we extend hospitality to a stranger? This might be a conversation with a one-legged man in a wheelchair holding a plastic cup for donations outside a drug store as I saw in the Mission District of San Francisco this summer. This man deserves a conversation and a donation. However, I have a hard time giving money to healthy-looking men in the streets. I read Meister Eckhart this summer who writes, "Give to everyone who asks of you." How is this taking up one's cross and following Jesus?

When last did we bless those who persecuted us; bless and not curse them? My ego tendency is to fight fire with fire. To deny myself and take up my cross would be to bless the one who persecutes me. This goes along with not repaying anyone evil for evil, or not avenging oneself, or feeding your enemies, or overcoming evil with good.

When last were we conscious of living in harmony with others; we were not haughty but associated with the lowly however "lowliness" is defined. In the same StoryCorps book a retired Memphis, Tennessee sanitation worker speaks of Martin Luther King Jr. coming to his city to support their worker strike. King was assassinated the next day.

Speaking of King's death he says: "It was kind of like you lost a part of your family. You just really can't describe it. To put aside everything to come here to see about people on the bottom of the ladder – I think I will always have that in my heart."

Jesus is not kidding when he says deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him. He says it to help us acknowledge the crosses that are already in our lives which we often avoid and to voluntarily take on a cross and in the taking we make this world a better place.

That's the story of Jesus. He took up his cross and died and rose again which means that any cross we take up in following Jesus is a way of light and life. When I said: "You must be kidding" I was kidding myself. Amen.