

Take Up

Mark 8:31-38

Sunday, February 25, 2024

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Taking up our crosses involves letting go of our perceptions of perfection and salvation by performance in order to discover the wholeness of life lived by following Jesus.

A preacher friend warned me about using hot-air balloons as an anchor image for a sermon series. He suggested I might be setting myself up for all sorts of wise cracks about preachers and large amounts of hot air.

There's something intriguing about balloons rising on the horizon. They are compelling, attracting our attention as they gracefully lift up into the sky. This makes them a compelling, if unconventional image, for Lent. They symbolize the ways God lifts us to new heights in Lent, and evoke the image of soaring above the uneven terrain of our lives. Buoyed by the warm air of the Spirit, we are lifted to new heights, and gain new perspectives. We see the world differently, bringing new meaning to the question, "What are you up to?" What is God up to? What is our church up to? Lifted above the ground, we are guided by the Spirit's impulse.

But piloting balloons can be unpredictable, too. Seasoned balloon pilots are quick to point out that the most important members of their team are the chasers. Chasers are the ground crews who not only make sure the balloon launches goes smoothly, they also track the balloon's flight, searching for safe places to land.

As soon as the balloon leaves the ground, the chaser crew get into cars to begin following its path. Their eyes track the balloon's movement, no matter which direction it goes. As one balloon chaser puts it:

This often includes many obstacles and other people, as everyone is trying to chase their balloon at the same time. Once you get close to your balloon, and the pilot starts to let the balloon sink, we park the car and all rush out to take pictures, before grabbing the balloon, and guiding it to a place that will be optimal for both landing, and the process of putting everything back into the trailer.¹

¹ See <https://www.hercampus.com/school/utah/day-life-balloon-chaser/>

It's easy to see that if Jesus was the pilot master of the balloon, then the disciples were the chasers: the ground crew empowered and entrusted with helping Jesus' mission to soar. The entire crew is focused on this mission, but as a good chaser will tell you, "You never really know how long you're going to be in the sky, where you are going to end up, and what might happen along the way." That was true for the disciples, and it remains true thousands of years later. Jesus never promised that the journey would be easy.

Yet this is the lesson of faith which often escapes us. It certainly escaped Peter. Peter was an ambitious leader who acted impetuously and led from his gut. He became the rock upon which the church was built, but Mark's portrait of Peter is hardly flattering.

Mark keeps our eyes on Jesus, a reminder that he alone offers the grace that faith changes our perspective.

A friend who had spent years piloting hot air balloons told me what it is like to launch a balloon. The process begins with unfolding the balloon, then letting it fill with cold air. As it takes shape, the pilot turns on the gas, flooding the balloon with warm air. To raise the balloon must release ballast – heavy stabilizing weights that keep the balloon tethered to the ground. As the ballast is tossed over the basket, the balloon climbs to its cruising altitude of somewhere between 1,000 and 3,000 feet. On a clear day that changes your entire perspective, he said. You might be able to see up to 300 miles in every direction, and even begin detecting the slightest hints of the earth's curvature.

This is the perspective Jesus provides. It is the perspective love shared freely. It is the perspective of a world balanced by grace and justice, not fear and retribution. We gain a glimpse of this perspective in these gifts he has given us. As we eat this bread and drink this cup, we take on Jesus' perspective of loving and giving, of remembering he offered himself to all people.

That is the opposite of what we see every day. "We can get so consumed with the minutiae of life," says Marcia McFee, that "we forget to wonder at the whole—to get a wider perspective and marvel at our small place in the world."

Like Peter, we are convinced that success does not come from taking up our crosses, but from smashing our opponents. We become enamored with success and perfection, unable to comprehend that Jesus' authority emerged after he was subjected to the punishment the world offers.

Instead of claiming victory, he tells Peter to pick up a cross.

Read that verse carefully, because I believe it is one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible. We talk about “taking up our cross” in terms of suffering. If we have a cross to bear, it is arthritis, or knees that crack when we get out of bed, or ears that do not work the way they once did. A cross becomes a burden placed upon us. We say, “my mother in law is my cross to bear.” It leads us to a steady diet of negative messages about ourselves. But notice what Jesus says: the cross is not his cross, or even the cross. It is our cross. Bearing one’s cross is not a passive experience. It is a decision to follow Christ. To take up one’s cross is to bear witness faithfully and purposefully to what Jesus is doing.

The cross was an ugly symbol. It was never an object of beauty or an adornment. The early church would have viewed it with the same sort of shocking repulsion that we would view a gas chamber or an electric chair.

But that place of brokenness, that place of dereliction, becomes our hope. Our only hope.

And notice this: Jesus knows the disciples are imperfect. He knows they do not understand what is happening. It tries his patience. Repeatedly he cries out, “Do you *still* not understand?” No, they do not. But as they take up their cross, they know that it is not perfection which brings salvation, but grace.

That is what changes our perspective. That is what proclaims the Lord’s death until he comes again. William Placher, a great American Presbyterian theologian (and a good friend of our own Mark Strothman) once wrote that “Those who lose their lives for his sake and for the sake of the gospel, Jesus says, will save their lives. “Save” (*sōzein*), like *shalom* in Hebrew, means to have wholeness, health, integrity. It is not an external reward, whether present or future, but the good life one experiences in the very following of Jesus, like the joy of being in love.²

I stumbled across this cross at a flea market in Oklahoma some years ago. A ministry that was dedicated to working with juvenile offenders was selling items made by their clients. They had beautiful pieces of metal sculpture, a variety of crosses and craft items. I saw this cross and picked it up. The case manager from the agency told me its story. One of his clients made it from scrap pieces of metal he found around the floor of

² William C. Placher, [Mark](#), ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 118.

the shop. The boy said, “This cross represents my life in Christ. He picked up the pieces, and made me whole.”

Parker Palmer tells a story of hiking in the Grand Canyon. He noticed groups of children who would break away from their parents and run to the canyon’s edge. Terrified by what he was seeing, Palmer found a park ranger. “I told him I was baffled by the parental neglect.” The ranger shook his head and said,

I’m not sure it’s outright neglect. A surprising number of folks think of the Canyon as a theme park, a fantasy land that may look dangerous but isn’t, where hidden nets will save you from injury or death. Every day I have to remind some people that the Canyon is real, and so are the consequences of a fall of hundreds of feet. I guess some people prefer illusions to reality — even though illusions can kill you.

Such is the power of illusions. They become ballast which keeps us from seeing the new perspective God is offering. Jesus calls out to Peter to drop the ballast which keeps him from seeing what God is up to. And he calls to us as well—to pick up our crosses, to climb into the balloon, and to be lifted up on the wings of eagles. Amen.