

## Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

**Ash Wednesday**

**Matthew 16**

**March 1, 2017**

“Boy, that is going to leave a mark.” Have you ever said that to someone? Maybe after they fell or cut themselves? I heard those words after an outdoor service I once held with my colleagues. A group of us were cleaning up and my friend Kate was carrying the four foot wooden cross we had used on the communion table to the van. Unfortunately, she didn't realize that the cross piece was not permanently attached. So, when she lifted it up that piece of wood came off and crashed into her head right above the eye. She fell to the ground holding her head. And someone in the group remarked casually, “boy that is going to leave a mark.”

And it did. Every time I see Kate I notice her mark. And so tonight I ask - How have we let the cross mark us with a faith that is a deep, heartfelt expression of our love of God that is visible in the lives we live? How have we taken up our cross and followed?

For this is what we see in the lives of the disciples. For three years they have journeyed with Jesus. Along the way they had great times in listening to his teaching, witnessing his miracles, laughing with their friend. But it has also been a journey of tears as they watched him beaten and crucified. And I'm sure that on more than one day they remembered how Jesus had said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In other words, let this cross mark you and shape you and mold you into servants and vessels to carry the good news of hope, of compassion, of faith and forgiveness to the world.

For we need to pick up our cross and be marked this day as a follower of Christ. Knowing that this is never easy. We know that to stand up for peace, to stand up for life, to stand up for justice, to stand up for the powerless and marginalized is a hard thing. How many of us watch the news wondering if we are even leaving a mark on this world. But despite our fear, our failings, our doubts we are called to move forward, because we can touch people in small and large ways.

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So, let me tell you this story about a young man from his perspective. His story begins this way: when I was a very young 18 I was living alone in a large city attending university. I had an unhappy childhood and I was argumentative, defensive and abrasive as a consequence. There was at the university a group of Christians who would set up a table in the Student Union Building and do what they called witnessing for Christ. I loved to go to that table and make life hard for them. I sort of believed in God - the way so many people do nowadays. But I also sort of believed in astrology, and I played around with telling fortunes using the Tarot Cards as well. One thing is certain, I did not believe in Christ as my Lord. I did not know what he stood for, nor what had happened to him, and I certainly had never gone to church. These crazy Christians sat at their table and tried to tell me about the resurrection and about salvation through Jesus, and I told them they were foolish to believe in it, and I asked them why innocent people suffered and why God allowed war and all those other things that are so difficult to answer. I gave them a hard time. A strange thing happened though - even though I tormented them with my questions and made fun of their answers, they invited me to their homes and apartments, they bought me the life blood of all students - coffee, and they fed me meals when I had no money, and they even, as I found out later, they even prayed for me when my I went through a really hard time. They treated me as a friend even while I treated them as people out of touch with reality.

Since those days I have thought about that a lot. I was a stranger. They didn't need me, they didn't know me. And yet they wanted something good for me. And they were patient with me, they were kind to me, they helped me, they forgave me, they answered my questions, and they made me feel welcome when no-one else did. In short they showed me something that I had never seen before - they showed me Christian love.

I never had a problem believing in the resurrection after that because I saw the marks of Christ in his body - in the people who claimed his name and who walked in his light and who carried his cross.

On this Ash Wednesday as we come forward to receive our mark of the cross we are reminded once again that from dust we have come and to dust we will return. In other words, our lives have a beginning and an ending. But what are we

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doing with the time we have been given in this life? What will we give away to make room for a right spirit in our hearts?

Are we growing toward God or away? Is our cross hidden or held high? Are we bearing our cross as we share our faith with those who are hurting, those in need of fairness and justice, those in the midst of war, those who have given up on life, given up on hope, given up in believing that a God of love is reaching out to them and needs to see in us what difference our faith makes in our life.

Are we bearing our crosses and leaving out marks on this world – marks of hope – marks of love – marks of joy – marks of peace in how we live out our faith in word and deed. For this time of lent is about all about renewal, about letting go of the things that pull us down and pick up the things that bring us life. This is what Jesus means when he calls us take up our crosses and follow.

I invite and urge all of us to pick up our crosses as we let go of worry and anxiety, and pick up trusting God. Let go of complaining, and pick up appreciation. Let go of negatives, and pick up affirmatives. Let go of unrelenting pressures, and pick up unceasing prayer. Let go of hostility, and pick up tenderness. Let go of bitterness, and pick forgiveness. Let go of self-concern, and pick up compassion for others. Let go of the shadows of sorrow, and pick up the sunlight of serenity. Let go of idle gossip, and pick up purposeful silence. Let go of judging others, and pick up seeing Christ within them. Let go of emphasizing differences, and pick up the unity of life. Let go of words that pollute, and pick up phrases that purify. Let go of negativity, and pick up optimism. Let go of discouragement, and pick up hope. Let go of thoughts that weaken, and pick up promises that inspire. Let go of problems that overwhelm, and pick up the prayer that helps get us through.

Realizing that in all of this we can't do it alone, we need help. And that is what tonight is all about. The ashen cross we receive reminds us we are not alone or abandoned in this world, without help or hope. It lasts only until we get home to wash it off. But hopefully, we are marked by the cross in how we live our lives as disciples and servants of a greater love.

For tonight we affirm that we have a cross to bear, a faith to live out, a purpose and a life that goes far beyond just us. Where we remember what is really important in life. That our purpose flows not from anything we could ever possess but from the cross and the crucified Christ we confess. He suffered and died that



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our lives might possess not worldly status, but rather eternal significance and purpose. He rose from the grave so that God's love might live in and through us. And so this night let us hear the words and follow in faith as we respond – as we lift high the cross and follow where God leads. Amen