

Cross My Heart

Rev. Marisol Ferrer Malloy

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Exodus 3:1-15 (keep reading the whole story); Matthew 16: 21-28; NURC (website)

I will be preaching from both the Old and New Testament readings, paying particular attention to the words in Matthew, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

I want to begin today by talking a little bit about relationships. I figured everyone could use a little help on how to communicate in a relationship, right? So I'm going to teach you a technique I learned as a counselor. People stop communicating with each other when words and actions become accusatory. A married couple bickers because of finances. "You spend money on frivolous things." Children argue with parents, "You never let me do anything."

Families differ on how to raise grandchildren, how to take care of aging parents, and how to get along with the in-laws, just to name a few. There is a counseling technique called "I-messages" that therapists use to diffuse interpersonal conflicts. The way to do this is by using statements about yourself and your feelings (called "I-messages" because they start with "I feel" or "I want"), instead of "you-messages," which start with an accusation, such as, "You did this (bad thing)," or, "You are (another bad thing)."

So, for example, if you say "I feel let down" instead of saying, "you broke your promise", you convey the same information without the other person feeling accused and ready to go on the defensive.

When we are in conflict there is a very strong tendency to blame many of our problems to the other side. But, in using "I-messages" we increase the likelihood that a solution can be found. Now, I want you to

remember this, not just for personal success on your relationships and your families. I tell you this to enlighten you on the situation going on in the story of Moses and the burning bush. This is not just a cute story to tell the children about how God appeared in a bush of fire that spoke to Moses. Let's look a little more closely at the relationship between God and Moses and maybe it will tell us a little bit about our own relationship with God.

God and Moses are having a conversation. Moses was tending his sheep as usual and became curious about a fire burning in one concentrated area. He went to take a look and no sooner he got up there at that mountain, he heard the voice of God calling him. This was the beginning of a conversation using "I-messages". This conversation goes well beyond our reading today and I will also go beyond the reading, but I'm sure you've heard most of this story.

God begins this conversation by calling his name, "Moses" to which he replies, "here I am." Now pay close attention to God's first speech, "I am the God of your father; I have observed the misery of my people; I have heard their cry; I know their sufferings; I have come down to deliver them; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh." Now, notice he did not say, "You are going to march right up to pharaoh."

God was really good at sending I-messages. He said, "I will send you."

At this point, Moses wanted out. He wanted no part of this deal so he presented five objections, five excuses to get out of this one. This conversation, remember, is like any relationship between two people. Except, God and Moses are being real nice and cordial to each other and the conversation is not accusatory or escalating in any

way. Moses, using “I-messages,” gives his five objections which we will look at now:

First objection: Notice when God said, I will send you, Moses did not reply, “you ain’t the boss o’ me.” Instead, (I-message), “Who am I?” I’m just a farm hand, a sheep herder, he says. And God’s reply was: “I will be with you.”

Moses had to think fast because the first excuse didn’t work. Second objection: Moses asked, “If I come (I-message), and I say you sent me and they ask your name, what do I say?” And God’s reply: “Tell them I AM sent me.” This meant he was the God who was, is and will be.

OK, plan b didn’t work so Moses went on to plan c, the third objection, which is beyond our reading today but important to this conversation. Third objection: “Suppose they don’t believe me.” And God’s reply was in signs. God took Moses’ staff and turned it into a serpent and took his hand and made it leprous, just to show him the power of God. God showed his assurance by saying: “so that they believe, God has appeared to you.”

Alright, alright Moses still had a few more excuses up his sleeve. Fourth objection: “Ah, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. (Notice still the I-messages). And God’s reply was: “I am the one who gives speech to mortals. I will be your mouth.”

But this was not enough for Moses, because you see, he still wanted out. Tending sheep was much easier than facing a powerfully despicable person and then leading people out of trouble. I know there is a fifth objection missing. The fifth objection no longer sounded like an “I-message”. It was more like a “You-message”. In the fifth and final objection, Moses said, “please send someone else.” You, Lord, you send someone else.

This is the time when relationships get testy. I told you. God's reply was not an easy pill to swallow. God's reply in verse 4:14 begins with "Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, 'I'll send your brother Aaron. I'll put the words in your mouth and you give them to Aaron. I will teach you what you shall do.'"

God solves problems quickly when we are looking for answers. Maybe not the answers we want. But, you see in this flow of conversation that God tried to explain to Moses his call. This was not a matter of "will you do this for me?" This was a matter of Moses listening to God. And God entertained all his questions, but the bottom line was that Moses was going to lead the people out of Egypt whether he liked it or not.

This same God, the great I AM is the same God that operates in the same way with us today. You want to have a conversation with God, be prepared to be entertained, to question and to receive answers that you may not like. In the end, God has prepared a path for each and every one of you to follow, a gift for each and every one of you to use and a call for each and every one of you to accept. Some people call this *carrying* or *bearing your cross*. This phrase tends to have a negative connotation in protestant churches.

You ever made a promise as a kid by saying the words, Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye? I mean, what's that about? The phrase *cross my heart, hope to die* was and still is uttered by children after making a promise to indicate the sincerity of the promise. It most likely originated from more religious days when crossing one's self was common. By making the sign of the cross over your heart you would be swearing on your heart that what you said was true and that you follow

through on what you said. I see it as roughly parallel to the current custom of swearing on a Bible....although that's going out of style too.

The second part Stick a Needle in my eye, was some action part that they agreed to offer self-inflicted pain and a death wish as proof of their seriousness.

How awful to think that way? But, today many Christians see the Cross as pain and a death wish. Many people interpret “cross” as some burden they must carry in their lives: a strained relationship, a thankless job, a physical illness.

With self-pitying pride, they say, “That’s my cross I have to carry.” Such an interpretation is not what Jesus meant when He said, “Take up your cross and follow Me.” It means to *“be ready in season and out of season”* (2 Timothy 4:2)

When Jesus carried His cross to be crucified, no one was thinking of the cross as symbolic of a burden to carry. To a person in the first-century, the cross meant one thing and one thing only: death by the most painful and humiliating means human beings could develop. Over two thousand years later, Christians view the cross as a cherished symbol of atonement, forgiveness, grace, and love. But in Jesus’ day, the cross represented nothing but torturous death.

Because the Romans forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion, bearing a cross meant carrying their own execution device while facing ridicule along the way to death.

Therefore, “Take up your cross and follow Me” means being willing to die in order to follow Jesus. This is called dying to self. It’s a call to absolute surrender. Although the call is tough, and Moses knew this, the

reward is matchless. Moses eventually led the people out of Egypt and caught a glimpse of the Promised Land. Following Jesus is easy when life runs smoothly but, our true commitment to Him is revealed during trials.

Jesus assured us that trials will come to His followers.

Discipleship demands sacrifice, and Jesus never hid that from anyone. He never lied and said it would be easy.

Jesus tells us today the same thing, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me.”

Are ready to take up YOUR cross? Consider these questions:

- Do you want to follow Jesus if it means losing some of your closest friends?
- Do you want to follow Jesus if it means alienation from your family?
- Do you want to follow Jesus if it means standing up for justice?
- Do you want to follow Jesus if it means losing your job?
- Do you want to follow Jesus if it means losing your life?

In some places in the world, these consequences are reality. But notice the questions are phrased, “*Do you want?*” Following Jesus doesn’t necessarily mean all these things will happen to you, but do you want to take up your cross? If there comes a point in your life where you are faced with a choice—Jesus or the comforts of this life—which will you choose? When you have to make that decision and you want to object to God’s commands, remember that conversation with Moses and God on the mountain.

Remember, it doesn’t work when we want to tell God what to do. God only hears “You-messages” when we complain, and that’s reasonable. God can take it. What’s important to remember though is God’s responses every time Moses wanted to back out. They are the same for us today.

God replied, “*I will be with you. Tell them I AM sent me. I have appeared to you. I will be your mouth.*”

I will teach you what you shall do.” For those who lose their life for Christ’s sake will find it. So, pick up your cross and follow Jesus. The reward will be great!