

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
February 25, 2018  
Mark 8:34-38

### *Bearing Your Cross*

All right, for all you science or physics majors out there what is Isaac Newton's First Law of Motion? Right, "An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force."  
([www.physicsclassroom.com](http://www.physicsclassroom.com))

So often in our lives it seems that we go through phases of great turbulence that upset our status quo. We coast along feeling good physically or emotionally or spiritually and then some events take place that upset our sense of safety, or stability, or peace. Often these "unbalanced forces" that Newton talked about are not very pleasant. Sometimes, though, they are.

Think of the times in your life when something really, really good happened to you or something really bad happened in your life. What were your feelings during that time? What changed about your life during that time? Did you feel a sense of great joy? Great dread? Great fear? Great uncertainty? Perhaps, great hope?

These unbalanced forces not only occur in personal lives, but also in the lives of organizations. I remember a group I once belonged to that went through a period of great turmoil and change. For literally decades, this organization proceeded through their work and life together fairly peacefully. They started out as a small group but through the years their numbers grew. They grew large enough and prosperous enough that they moved their meetings from a kind of ramshackle building into a brand new building that everyone soon came to love and cherish. Decades went by, and sure there were some bumps in the road. Usually, the bumps in the road had to do with someone or a group of some ones wanting to change something. Sometimes the changes proposed were little things like the color of the new carpet. Sometimes they were larger changes like who to let into their membership. Often, the changes were accepted by, or at least tolerated by the majority of the group. But, there was a small group of folks in the organization that it seemed whenever changes were proposed they

collectively didn't like they would begin to behave badly—making threats to leave, withholding financial support, even sometimes holding secret meetings to plot their strategy. Usually, these efforts by the small group would be successful in stifling the “new thing” that most of the people thought would be worth trying. Eventually, peace would be restored and the organization would continue on as they had always done.

We heard Jesus say in our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark this morning,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”  
(Mark 8:34-36)

We all know that the laws of physics are pretty much immutable, at least in this dimension of life as we know it. It would have been interesting to have been there with Jesus at the time he was telling his disciples and followers about “taking up their cross.”

Now back in Jesus' time, the cross was a symbol of scorn, of violent death at the hands of the Roman Empire. It was an instrument of execution foisted on people who threatened change in the empire. Can you imagine what those people around Jesus must have thought when he told them to “take up their cross?” Heaven forbid they would come anywhere near a cross! The cross, should they come near would not only change their life, but end it! And here Jesus was telling them to “take up their cross and follow him.” In essence, Jesus was telling people that if they were going to follow his “way,” if they were going to help bring about the kingdom of God or of heaven then living in the status quo wouldn't work. Not taking a risk wouldn't get the job done.

There are people we have known who challenged the status quo. People like Martin Luther King, Jr. People like Ghandi. People like the Buddha. People like Steve Jobs. People like the gay and lesbian community who wanted equal rights in this country. People like Jewish folks who resisted the Nazis. Ministers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who also resisted the Nazis. People like Jesus. It's true that many folks who advocate and fight for goodness, equality, fairness, and change meet with violent ends. But, there are also

people who work for and advocate for changing the world for the better that, yes, they certainly go through tough, sometimes harsh times, but who have help changed either their lives or their organizations, or even culture for the better. These are people who loved the world so much they had a dream and they followed it. When nobody else would step out and work for the change that was needed to make this world or their lives or their organizations healthier they loved their world so much they took the risk.

We people who follow the way of Jesus have turned a once scorned instrument of oppression and power into a symbol of love, a symbol of sacrifice for the common good, and, yes, a symbol of hope for a better world that is known as the kingdom of God.

My friends, we all know that real positive change takes hard work. It does not come easy. It does not come swiftly. For so many of us, in our own lives, it takes a crisis or a mountain to climb to be transformed. Just take our health. My own uncle had heart attacks in his early fifties. That crisis convinced him to change his lifestyle. He started exercising and eating right and eventually lived to be past 85 when all the other men in his family had usually died in their sixties. Real transformation takes courage, struggle, and working through the hard times.

For me, I'm a much bigger fan of incremental change at a livable pace. I believe solid, real change can occur by thinking things through before a crisis occurs, hopefully avoiding a crisis. Nevertheless, even when the pace of change is slower, more deliberate, there often is still a certain amount of bearing our own crosses that needs to occur in order to make the world a better place for everyone. That being said, like the founders of this church that advocated for the immediate abolition of slavery there are times of great injustice when the pace needs to happen sooner.

My friends, whether our crosses are heavy or light, let us not be afraid to bear them for the sake of the Good News of sharing God's love for neighbor. Amen.