Through the written word and the spoken word, God help us to hear your Living Word, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

OOF, OUCH, OH NO, Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 16:21-28

Y’all, I pray that I never stop feeling convicted by scripture! It’s likely that if I stop having an “oof” reaction to scripture that I am not listening fully to the Word of God. And this passage from Matthew definitely makes me say “oof” “ouch” “oh no!”

Just prior to the passage we read today, Peter is praised by Jesus for knowing who he is, for knowing that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus calls Peter the rock on which the church will be built and gives Peter keys to the kingdom. Now, all still within Matthew’s 16th chapter, Peter is receiving a pretty serious rebuke from Jesus!

“Get behind me Satan!” Oof. Ouch. Oh no.

Let’s break this down for a second. Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah and is on board. But then when Jesus starts explaining the more costly parts of his life and ministry, Peter gets understandably concerned. Jesus makes clear to his disciples that he will go to Jerusalem and will suffer death at the hands of earthly powers. He also tells of the resurrection, but that doesn’t soften the blow for our dear Peter, who is **so** disturbed that he takes Jesus aside to say that this simply cannot be true!

I’m sympathetic to Peter who is afraid and probably a bit protective of his friend and teacher. But here is where the really convicting piece comes in. Jesus will not bend to Peter’s worry.

“You are only concerned with human and earthly things.” Oof. Ouch. Oh no.

Is that me??? I am sure I am not the only one here who has argued with God… I am sure I am not the only one who has experienced some sort of push in prayer, in community, in study that made me think, “God, that is just not gonna happen.” Whether because of fear or discomfort or simple unwillingness, I have certainly reacted to God in a way somewhat like Peter.

Then Jesus tells Peter and all the disciples to “Pick up your cross and follow me.” This is certainly convicting, but not totally elucidating. What’s that really mean? In general and for me specifically. What does it mean to pick up our cross, to let go of our human concerns?

In part Jesus convicts Peter toward a posture of loosening his grip on earthly human things. We are in turn given that directive. Most of us are very consumed by our earthly comforts and human priorities and assumptions. And Jesus calls us to let go. Letting go is not the end in itself though.

I like the simple yet helpful illustration using our literal grip on the world. When my hands are closed tightly around my assumptions about the world, my material comforts, and my privilege, they cannot be open to receive God. Jesus invites us to that posture and life of openness. We cannot pick up our cross and follow Jesus if our hands are already full.

Paul helps us to understand a next step. Jesus and Peter’s dialogue creates space for our faith to animate our lives. Paul’s instructions to the Romans give us the active engagement.

“Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.” And so on. On the surface this seems easy enough. I can do that. Maybe I am already doing it…maybe. Getting down to the concrete practice, these directives are a little harder…

Do I love others in a way that is genuine? Do I love without resentment? Do I share with my community even when it comes at cost to me? Often yes, but not always.

Do I genuinely hate evil? Do I abhor evil enough to resist it with my full self—my body, my resources, my mind?

Here Paul’s words remind me of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail. King writes to other faith leaders and he speaks of the white moderate.

“I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. […] the great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is […] the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom. […] Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.”

I hear King’s words and Paul’s words and I wonder—does my life communicate a hatred of evil? Or does my life communicate a moderate stance? Or even an indifferent stance?

Does the work of the Christian church communicate an indifference to evil?

My friends, scripture convicts. Thanks be to God, but also… Oof. Ouch. Oh no.

Often when we think or talk about strong engagement against the evils of the world, we will hear, “put your money where your mouth is.” I want to enhance that and connect it with Jesus’ active and activating instructions. What about “put your body where your heart is” or “put your hands and feet where your faith is”?

To hate evil, to abhor and detest evil so much that I work I actively against it necessitates some risk. It requires more than a moderate dislike of injustice. This means trusting the most impacted—listening to our siblings of color when they say they are harmed by the systemic realities of our country. Listening to refugees who tell of the horror they have fought to leave behind. Listening to our trans siblings who name their dire need for health care. It means putting our bodies on the line through demonstration and direct action. It means sharing our resources, our physical hours and ability, our buildings, our material goods through direct service.

In short, we likely have to get uncomfortable. Taking up our cross to follow Jesus and to care for God’s people and creation can be uncomfortable. Odds are that if we are sitting comfortably and ignoring the convictions we feel, we are not loving genuinely and hating what is evil.

Paul also reminds us to hold fast to what is good. Notice and hold onto God’s glory as it is revealed in human flourishing, in verdant creation, in acts of genuine love. Holding fast to goodness means celebrating these beautiful things AND perhaps more significantly, it means creating space for more of these glorious realities. Holding fast to what is good invites us to celebrate glimpses of God’s kin-dom AND to bring our reality closer and closer to the kin-dom of God.

This week, St. Columba’s released our updated Mission and Values to carry us through 2026. These are the things our community has decided to do to follow Jesus.

We pick up our cross as a community and as individuals to follow Jesus—St. Columba’s is committed to these five core priorities:

We will strengthen community by creating pathways to connection, facilitating opportunities for disciples of all ages, and sharing our physical space.

We will practice faith in worship and study, fellowship and rest.

We will work on becoming anti-racist through prayer, internal and communal reflection and repentance, and making reparations for past wrongs.

We will embrace our world through community connections, working to address family homelessness, building Beloved Community, and caring for creation.

We will build capacity by using our resources to follow the movement of the Spirit and make space for the kin-dom right here in this place.

Many more goals exist within these core priorities. Each of us has an active role to play. Each of us has a cross to bear.

We can go from oof, ouch, oh no to “Wow. Ok. Let’s Go!” We can be convicted and inspired by scripture and by this community, by fellowship and breaking bread, by faith stories. We can be bolstered by the values of our community and can ready ourselves to live God’s love anew each day.

Jesus says, “pick up your cross and follow me.”

And in time, we will say, “Wow. That’s hard but ok. Let’s Go.” Amen.