

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 12, 2021 – Take It Up
Psalm 19:1-10 and Mark 8:27-32a, 34**

For 2,000 years, pastors have navigated the fraught waters of sharing difficult messages with the congregations we love. Each week, we remind followers of Jesus Christ that they are forgiven, while at the same time challenging them to give of themselves in service of God's purposes. Yet, far too often, well-intentioned ministers have delivered messages that overflow with guilt, while being woefully light on the subject of forgiveness.

You know the type. Shouting from the pulpit. Frantically waving the Bible. Proclaiming that the lives of the faithful are so devoid of goodness that they should expect a miry pit of judgment to open up at any moment and swallow them whole. Friends, these are the images that scar the psyche. That damage our perception of what it means to be human. That claw away at our sense of self-worth.

From my perspective, few of us require such frequent reminders of our own short-comings. For more than anyone else, we already know when and where we fall short. Intimately acquainted with our struggles and temptations, we are acutely aware of our daily need for forgiveness.

Therefore, as a minister of Jesus Christ, I see little benefit in perpetually rubbing salt in the wounds of others. Instead, I believe in walking with. In affirming our shared humanity. In calling us to rise up and to be the best that we can be. For it is from this place of deep and abiding respect that I encourage you to place your trust in the Lord of life who frees you from fear and calls you to live in the light of God's salvation.

In pursuit of this holy calling, we remember those whom we admire on account of their courage, their leadership, and their devotion to the causes of Jesus Christ. These great saints and martyrs of our faith have shown us a more excellent way. In taking up the cause of love, they have willingly chosen to carry their crosses, and to become servants of all. They have spread God's message in word and in deed. They have lived among the destitute. And they have led movements against injustice in every form wherever it is found to the ends of the earth.

Oftentimes, these scions of faithfulness have been mocked, scorned, imprisoned, beaten, or killed for professing visions of equality, and for insisting that all are created in the image of God. I offer this not as a guilt trip for those of us who believe, but as a reminder that the reign of Jesus has not yet been fully realized. So while we are, indeed, vindicated as the people of God through our faith in Jesus

Christ, it is also true that we have not glimpsed the fullness of God's glory on this earth.

We are still waiting. Each of us. Expectantly. Hopefully. Prayerfully. We have our eyes fixed on the horizon, not in order to dismiss the multitude of problems that are within our reach right now, but rather to keep from getting disillusioned by the volume and voracity of the weeds that we encounter at every turn.

For in the midst of every Christian journey, there comes a moment when we pause to wonder why we have chosen to carry this cross. At times, we question if we are progressing as we ought. We ask why others appear to be working against us, and we inquire as to why the world is still so broken. These are not signs of our waywardness. No. These are signs of our desire to see our hearts transformed, and to witness our neighbors living in the light of God's promises.

And so we gather, wary of struggling through a global pandemic with no immediate end in sight. Wary of the threats of terrorism which have consumed our economic treasure and intellectual capabilities. Wary of national conflict which has extinguishing the lives of civilians and service members alike. Wary of injustices, both at home and abroad, which perpetuate poverty and further highlight the

differences between us. Wary of others who do not lead with kindness, but, instead, always seem to have a complaint or criticism to lodge against everyone around them.

And yet, while we may be wary, we are also here. Together. United. One in Christ. One in purpose. One in our common calling as the people of God. One in our acceptance at the font of baptism and the Table of forgiveness. One in our desire to grow in faith, hope, and love.

Wary as we are, we have come to this place to dedicate our lives to something that matters. To take up our crosses. To give of ourselves. To celebrate the height and depth of God's love for us, and to profess the goodness and mercy of God. For this is the firm foundation upon which we stand.

Remarkably, today marks the return of our volunteer choir for the first time in more than a year. The return of our Sunday school children to their classrooms here at Westminster for the first time in over a year following one year of remote learning. And today marks the first time in over a year that our congregation will sit at table together and celebrate a church wide fellowship event in Wright-Herberich Hall.

Friends, we are wary, but we are here. Guided by the Spirit. Enveloped in love. We have chosen this fellowship to mold us in the ways of Christ. So may God be with us at the start of this new program year, as we discern what it means to take up our crosses once again.