



**MYERS PARK
BAPTIST
CHURCH**

**A faith community
on a journey seeking
a welcoming, loving,
and just world.**

**“LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE”
Delivered by Dr Reverend Tim Moore
Matthew 16:21-28, August 2, 2026
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

We’ve come full circle in this series of sermons on being a 21st century liberal church. Three weeks ago, we began with the story of Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” To which Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Now, we are back to the second half of that story. Where Jesus tells them what it means for him to be the Christ, the Jewish Messiah. In this story, he tells them it means for him to suffer and die. Peter immediately rebukes Jesus and tells him that’s not what the Messiah is supposed to do. Whereupon Jesus tells him, “Get behind me, Satan! . . . You are setting your mind on human things, not on divine things.”

After this dramatic exchange between them, Jesus turns to the rest of the group and says, “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 will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

The phrase “take up their cross” was symbolic. The cross was used by the Roman Empire to execute people. Jesus did not mean for his disciples to be actually executed. When Luke told this story, he reported that Jesus said, “Take up your cross, daily”—which is literally, impossible. You can’t actually die every day. Dying is a one-time deal.

This metaphor—to take up your cross, or to carry your cross—is important to the Christian faith. And I should add that it’s a metaphor that’s often been harmful. So, it’s really important to talk about it in helpful, not harmful, ways.

Sixty years ago, while the pastor at this church, Carlyle Marney wrote a short book about Jesus’ death on the cross titled, *He Became Like Us*, in which Marney took the seven phrases Jesus said from the cross and discussed how they showed the way in which God in Jesus identified with us as human beings.

Rereading it now, I can see that Marney, ahead of his time, was struggling on how to make the cross relevant for the liberal Church of his day. Though he can’t quite break free from the basic tenets of Substitutionary Theory of Atonement—that Jesus died on the cross for our sins—there’s little talk of sin, or guilt, or shame in the book. Rather, Marney spends nearly the whole book talking about the miracle of incarnation—that God in Jesus became like us—and that in identifying

with humanity, Jesus' life, including his death, somehow connected God with humanity in a way that was healing for both.

Liberal Christianity in the 21st century is moving away from the idea that Jesus had to die—or more crudely put, that God had to kill Jesus—because of our sins as the meaning of the cross. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, in their book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, strike at one of the core problems of the traditional way to think about the cross. “The idea of Jesus dying to save me [from my sins] made little sense,” Brock said. “I did not believe I was so bad as to need saving.” [Brock, 64]. This was always the problem for this tradition meaning of the cross, which is why evangelical Christianity pushes people so hard to feel guilty and sinful. Maybe if you feel bad enough about yourself, you'll decide to get saved and join their church. For many, the idea the God loves them and forgives them made the cross a meaningful metaphor. But for too many others, it pushed them away from God, because it first made them feel worthless

In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone speaks to the way that Jesus' death on the cross identifies God with the suffering of Blacks in this country under slavery and segregation. “God saw what whites did to innocent and helpless blacks and claimed their suffering as God's own. . . Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus. The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.” This is where the cross can be helpful today; that God joins us in our struggles and identifies with our suffering. Cone quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote while imprisoned by the Nazis, “The Bible directs [us] to God's powerlessness and suffering. Only a suffering God can help” [Cone, 157-58].

Where liberal Christianity will land in articulating a new meaning for the cross in the 21st century remains to be seen. In the book, *Taking on the Cross: Reimagining the Meaning of Jesus' Life and Death*, I compiled the writings of 24 Baptist pastors, professors, thinkers, and activists to share the diverse ways in which people are talking about the meaning of the cross today. In the conclusion I confessed that while there's no single answer to this quest, the writers were trying “to scatter different crumbs from the communion table” [Moore, 267].

For me personally, the cross only makes sense in the idea of incarnation—the idea that God became human in Jesus. An idea that Marney was reaching for sixty years ago. The early Christians used to say, “Jesus became like us, so that we could become like Christ.”

Evangelical Christianity has sold his soul in the desire for political power. It may be enjoying some political strength in this corrupt administration, but ultimately the good people in evangelical churches will rue the day they sold their birthright for a pot of porridge. Liberal Christianity cannot make the same mistake. There's no place for limousine liberal Christians in the 21st century. By that, I mean, we must live what we believe, or no one will care what we believe.

Limousine liberals was a phrase used somewhat frequently twenty or so years ago for political liberals who pushed ideas or regulations or taxes that would be placed on other people, but not so much on them. The liberal church in the 21st century can't be like that. People have been leaving the Church for decades because they didn't think the Church's actions matched its words. They looked around at the problems in our society and saw a Church that was either complicit or silent.

Today, they are fed up with religion that talks about justice and love, but when those words cost something suddenly the talking stops.

Young people are looking for authenticity when they turn to God and the Church. People are hungry for a faith that is real, where people live what they believe. If liberal churches can't talk about real things and take some risks, if they can't be involved in things that matter and only choose the safe or not controversial route, they will deservedly lose their relevance. Jesus said it plainly, "For those who want to save their life will lose it." We must live what we believe, which in some ways will cost us something. Are we willing to carry a cross? Is this church willing to carry the cross God has for it for the living of these days?

To carry your cross, or to take up your cross, is about facing and addressing the difficulties and injustices of life. It's about risking yourself, sometimes for your own sake, sometimes for the sake of others, in order that justice and love and joy can be realized.

The fourth word in our church's current tagline is community. Real community can only be built upon authenticity, when promises made become promises kept. In a few minutes we will be participating in the Lord's Supper, sharing a symbolic meal of radical hospitality. All will be invited to share in this feast, and who respond will be fed, because all are made in the image of God and loved by God. And as a part of communion, we will read our church covenant—a promise we make to God and to one another. May God find us faithful in keeping our promises. AMEN.