

## Pop Star Madonna And The Cross

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

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### Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” <sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

<sup>15</sup> God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

### Romans 4:13-25 (NIV)

<sup>13</sup> It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. <sup>14</sup> For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, <sup>15</sup> because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed — the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. <sup>18</sup> Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” <sup>19</sup> Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead. <sup>20</sup> Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup> The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, <sup>24</sup> but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. <sup>25</sup> He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

### Mark 8:31-38 (NIV)

<sup>31</sup> [Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. <sup>33</sup> But when Jesus

turned and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

<sup>34</sup> Then [Jesus] called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup> What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

### Pop Star Madonna And The Cross

Several years ago during an edition of the ABC network television program, “Good Morning, America,” back when rock star Madonna was really hot, co-host Charles Gibson interviewed a jewelry designer. This woman was marketing a new line of crosses designed by Madonna. The crosses were labeled “The Madonna Cross.” Among the things this designer said in the interview was that “Madonna has brought a new dimension to the cross. Never has wearing the cross been more popular than today.”

Gibson challenged that statement by saying he understood the cross to be a Christian symbol. “Not anymore,” his guest responded. “It is a fashion statement today. No one wears the cross for religious reasons anymore.”

Gibson continued to challenge her, but she insisted that the cross was “the trend of the day.” What a depressing thought! For many people today, the cross is only decorative. That’s sad. In spite of our culture’s shift with regard to the cross, let us take a few moments to examine the meaning of another cross — the cross of Christ.

The story takes place just outside of Caesarea Philippi, a village 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had gathered His disciples around Him. They could tell by the sadness on His face that this was not easy. He started to tell them that He must suffer at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and must die — but after three days He would rise again. Peter was furious. He took Jesus off to the side and began to rebuke Him. It was then that Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Peter, I am sure, looked stunned. Jesus had never spoken to him like this before. Peter simply didn’t realize how difficult this was for Jesus. Then Jesus called the crowd to Him along with His disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

Then Jesus seemed to look each of them individually in the eye as He said, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

Powerful words from the Master. What was He saying to them? What does it mean to deny yourself and take up a cross?

LET’S BEGIN BY ACKNOWLEDGING WHAT IT DOES NOT MEAN.

It does not mean in times of adversity saying in a whiny voice, “Well, I guess this is just my cross to bear.” This is probably the most abused phrase on the planet.

People can’t get their nails to grow right. “Well, I guess this is just my cross to bear.” They can’t get their children to behave. “It’s my cross to bear.” Likewise, when they can’t get their husband to quit snoring: “Well, it’s just my cross to bear.”

Robert C. Morgan tells about a woman who had a rattle in the dashboard of her new BMW. She took it to an auto mechanic. He said, regardless of how hard he tried, he could not repair it. “Oh well,” she said, “this is just my cross, and I will have to bear it!”

Friends. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with uncooperative nails, unruly children, a snoring husband or a rattle in your new BMW.

Denying ourselves and taking up a cross is a choice we make — not something that is forced upon us. It has to do with discipline and hard work! It has to do with unselfishness and committing ourselves to the finest of which we are capable! It has to do with forgetting ourselves and concentrating on the needs of others! It has to do with a commitment to excellence in all things! In short, in these few words Jesus has summed up all the most helpful advice of all the self-help books ever written.

#### PEOPLE WHO SUCCEED IN ALMOST ANYTHING IN LIFE DENY THEMSELVES.

It is true. You don’t get to be the best in life by staying in your comfort zone. You do it by working till you sweat blood. You sit at your computer or your designing board or your blueprints or your lesson plan or whatever, long after everybody else has gone home. That’s what it means in a secular sense to deny yourself. And it works!

Some of you who are baseball fans remember a man named Cal Ripken, Jr. Ripken entered the sports history books when he played a record 2,632 consecutive baseball games. That’s a major feat. Most players miss a game here or there because of injuries or a need to rest their bodies. Ripken didn’t get injured less than any other player, and he doesn’t need less rest. But Ripken earned national respect because he played on in spite of injuries or exhaustion. As he once said, “I want to be remembered as an iron man, a player who went out there and put it on the line every day. I want people to say, ‘They couldn’t keep him out of the lineup.’”

It’s true in every field of endeavor. One of the most promising areas in medicine today is gene therapy. In one of his books Robert Schuller tells the story of Dr. W. French Anderson. Dr. Anderson is known as the father of gene therapy. Dr. Anderson has been talking about gene therapy since he was a senior in college. It was a radical idea when he first got excited about it. He notes that in his senior year at Harvard he was attending a graduate seminar of doctors and senior graduate students. There was a session on protein hemoglobin, the pigment in blood. At the time, he was doing research work putting genes from one bacterium into another, changing its properties. So he raised his hand and asked, “Why can’t you do that in a human being? Why couldn’t you treat sickle-cell anemia by using a gene to create normal hemoglobin?”

Dr. Anderson says, “The scorn and ridicule in the room was obvious. ‘This is a serious scientific meeting,’ someone said. ‘Don’t be silly, don’t bring up science fiction.’” So Anderson hid off in a

corner, and when the meeting was over he was going to sneak out so that nobody saw him. But one professor, John T. Edsall, one of the great names in science, came up to him, patted him on the shoulder, and said, "Interesting idea." That's all he said. And Anderson thought, "If Professor Edsall thinks this is an interesting idea, I'm going to do it."

On September 14, 1990, Dr. French Anderson saw the first fruits of his efforts. His four-year-old patient, Ashanthi DiSilva, received the first treatment using gene therapy. This young girl had a defective gene causing her to suffer from what has been called "bubble boy syndrome." Through his breakthrough treatment, Dr. Anderson was able to give her a normal life. Today there are many patients who have been helped through his work. Gene therapy has great promise and is predicted to help many thousands of patients, but it is still in the experimental stage.

Dr. Anderson hasn't made the contributions he's made to human well-being through half-hearted effort. He could have walked away when his early critics termed his efforts as science fiction. Taking up a cross has to do with being so dedicated to a cause that you are willing to endure criticism, willing to endure persecution, willing to devote long hours in pursuit of a higher calling. People who succeed in life in almost anything deny themselves.

When Christ talked about His followers denying themselves and taking up a cross, He was talking about people who are willing to make more than a token sacrifice.

JESUS WAS TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO GIVE THEIR ALL IN FOLLOWING HIM.

Believe it or not we still have people around who are willing to give their all. There are many who have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the common good.

We don't have to look far to find such heroes. One example of such people that we all can relate to are the firefighters who rushed into the collapsing twin towers on 9/11 with no regard for their own safety in order to save people who were trapped. Many of us will never forget the feelings that swept over us as we watched the twin towers fall. Folk singer Tom Paxton wrote a song about it which he called, *The Bravest*. Some of you may remember it. The first couple of verses go like this:

"The first plane hit the other tower, right after I came in. It left a fiery, gaping hole where offices had been. We stood and watched in horror, as we saw the first ones fall, Then someone yelled "Get out, get out! They're trying to kill us all!"

"I grabbed the pictures from my desk and joined the flight for life. With every step I called the names of my children and my wife, And then we heard them coming up, from several floors below, A crowd of firefighters with their heavy gear in tow.

And then Paxson sings that haunting chorus: "Now every time I try to sleep, I'm haunted by the sound Of firemen pounding up the stairs, while we were running down." That says it all, doesn't it? They were pounding up while we were running down. There are still people today who are willing to give their all.

JESUS, OF COURSE, WAS ADDRESSING A VERY SPECIAL PEOPLE.

He was addressing those who would be His followers. And it's important to understand that Jesus wasn't just talking about people like Billy Graham who passed away this last week or just the clergy of the church. Jesus was addressing all of us who claim to believe in Him. He was saying there can be nothing casual about following Him.

I worry that we ask so little out of the average Christian nowadays. Come to church when you feel like it. Drop in a small offering when the collection plate passes by you. Serve on a church committee, if it doesn't interfere with a favorite hobby or television show. Is this what it means to deny yourself, take up a cross and follow Jesus? I don't think so. What has happened to us?

Not too long ago a news story came out of Pakistan about a young Pakistani girl named Saleema. Saleema is a Christian who was arrested for inviting a friend to know Jesus. Her friend converted to Christianity. After that friend started following Jesus, she was killed by her own family because of her conversion.

Unbelievably, because Saleema had shared her faith with that friend, she was also charged with the death of her friend.

Saleema is now 18 years old and has been passed from court to court — going higher each time in the Pakistani judicial system. She has been in a healthcare facility for some time, and a recent report said she is in great pain. Saleema has been unable to attend court because of health problems due to being beaten and tortured by the police. She is unable to stand and walk. Her back, hip and ankles are sore and full of pain. All because she is seeking to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple,” said Jesus, “must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

You will have to evaluate your own life, as will I. Are you a person who is focused on saving your life, and in the process losing it? Or are you a person focused on losing your life for Christ's sake and actually saving it? Maybe we need to trade our Madonna cross — a mere decoration, for a Jesus cross — the cross of sacrifice and service.

The choice is ours. Jesus summed up the entire matter like this: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

It's not enough just to believe that Jesus is the Christ. It's about being committed to Him and actually following Him every day. But let me also say that if there are some here who have not yet made a decision to follow Jesus, you need to do make that decision to become a follower of Him before it's too late. If you haven't already done that or if you would like to know more about what that means, please talk to me right after the service so I can help you with your walk of faith. God bless and amen.

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