Scripture: Luke 9:23 (ESV)

Take Up Your Cross, Deny yourself and Follow Jesus

23 And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”
The Comfortable Cross

Good morning/evening, my name is Cherie Cobb and I am your guest speaker today and the Director of Discipleship here at FUMC. It is an honor to be here with all of you and it is my hope and prayer that you feel the power of the Holy Spirit as we worship.

We are in the fourth week of our sermon series; Not a Fan. I imagine that these few weeks have challenged you as they have challenged me as we all reflect on the depth of what it means to decide and to commit to follow Jesus for us personally. Zach kicked off the series by challenging us to be intentional and to define the relationship (DTR) that we have with Jesus. Zack reminded us of God’s amazing grace that we receive from Him even when we do not deserve it – it is our gift. Then Pastor Jeff outlined God’s desire to ‘know’ us and to be ‘known’ by us intimately last week.

There is a lot to digest as we reflect on our own journey with Christ. Jesus does not call us to be cheerleaders on the sidelines, nor does he want us to only visit him once a week in church. Jesus invites each of us to step closer and to touch him and he tells us to deny ourselves and take up our own individual crosses daily and to follow Him. Let’s Pray
As I reflect on my life I can personally recall many instances or seasons of uncomfortable transitions that I have experienced. Some of these things off the top of my head are memories around...

- Transitioning from Middle School to high School
- Graduating college and seeking a career
- Major events in life such as marriage, babies, divorce, death, employment or unemployment and so on...

Yet when I look back at these types of seasons within my life, there was purpose; these were times of growing and maturing. As a parent, I want my child to grow and to mature into man yet I will miss parts of who he was...like when he was six and climbed into my lap without me asking...yet it is part of life and our journey. As a Christian, I imagine our Father God also wants us to grow and to mature in our faith and love for Him and yet this too is a process; a journey that is different for each of us.

As I prepared for today’s message I was reminded of a childhood memory with my Dad. I am the oldest of three kids and I was very much a ‘tom-boy’ who liked to climb trees, fish and camp and I didn’t mind being...
dirty. My dad and I were close and we spent lots of father daughter time together. One of our favorite things to do was take our weekend motorcycle trips. Sometimes we would ride his big road motorcycle (900 Kawasaki) with the big windshield on the highway and other times we would go dirt biking on his Bulltaco 250 Trials bike. It did not matter to me which road we took or which motorcycle he drove. I was seven and I treasured our rides together. We would ride double and because I was so young, I would ride in front of my dad within his arms. My hands would hold on to the middle of the handlebars while my dad’s hands would be on the outside of mine. My legs would hug the gas tank tightly and I could feel my dad’s strong legs on the outside of mine, holding me in. As a little girl, I can still remember how safe I felt being in the front and having my dad’s whole body enclosed around my little body. It was exhilarating to be on the bike with my dad. As a responsible motorcycle rider I had to be prepared, I had to dress appropriately – wear jeans, long sleeve jacket, closed ended shoes and my white helmet. It was in the days where they only made half helmets, so it wasn’t too pretty! I looked forward to those trips…to just spend time with my dad. We would mostly drive through the mountains to a smoky bar to have hamburgers and fries and talk and then after some time we would drive back home. As a growing kid, I grew taller every year
and it was becoming a little more challenging for my dad to look over my head to see the road and or the back of my helmet would hit my dad in the chin as we rode on the dirt trails causing him to get bruises on this face. My dad started preparing me for the day that would come when I would be too tall to sit in front of him. Meaning that I would have to move to the back of the bike and sit behind him. This was a scary thought for me and one I just glossed over because honestly it was too much for me to think about. Then one summer, I grew seven inches and the time came for me to move from the front to the back of my dad’s bike.

This new position was uncomfortable. Now I am the one who had to embrace my dad, wrap my arms around his waist and grab around his sides and I was scared because I no longer had the comfort of being in front. My vision was now limited, it was colder in the back because I no longer could feel my dad’s body heat around me and I had the wind at my back. I felt unprotected and exposed; vulnerable and in some ways weak. I was afraid that I would fall off. I would hold on so tightly to my dad to where I could not relax. I was stiff and I was no longer able to enjoy the ride because of my fear. I did not want to be on the back of the bike! I outgrew my ability to be in front and I could not go back to the way it was…but I was uncomfortable!
Now for those who know how to ride motorcycles you’ll understand that in the mountains of Colorado we have some sharp turns when driving through the mountain ranges. When a motorcycle takes the corners they lean into the turn. It is essential for both people on the bike to work as a unit, to work as a team when riding and especially when going around turns. This was easy for me when I was sitting in the front because my dad’s body would naturally guide me to follow him. On one hand, I had more freedom sitting on the back and my dad had less control over me because I could sit the way I wanted to and stretch my legs a little easier. I remember our first turn and my natural instinct was to sit up straight and not lean with my dad as we came into the corner. It was so uncomfortable and counter-intuitive…so I did what felt the best for me. We took that first turn and I did not lean in with my dad and instantly I felt the bike sway a little bit as my dad had to readjust for my lack of compliance to his driving. At that moment, my uncomfortable feelings sky-rocketed into a deeper feeling of fear! My dad called out, “Cherie you must lean into the turn with me, follow my lead!”

My relationship with my dad was changing as we had to find a new way to be one again on the bike…He was still my dad and I was his daughter but as I was growing physically our relationship was transitioning
and maturing...to a deeper love and of trusting, surrendering. Yet, I resisted...and I was making my dad's task of driving more difficult. I was making it harder for my dad to protect me by resisting his lead. I had a choice and it was up to me to respond.

1. I could stop riding with my dad because it was too hard
2. Or I could be okay with being uncomfortable for the greater good to continue to be with my dad.

Eventually my fears evaporated as I trusted my dad and followed his lead and once again riding the motorcycle became exhilarating and treasured memories for today.


And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

I will be picking up the cross and carrying it to the other side of the sanctuary.

SLIDE: Scripture Luke 9:23 from the Message

Then he told them what they could expect for themselves: “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You’re not in the driver’s seat – I am. Don’t run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me
and I’ll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. **Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self.**

**SLIDE:** Choose to follow Jesus over your comfort

All relationships require a two way tension between giving and a receiving, a leader and a follower and it is not always easy from my own experience. I have left relationships in the past because it was too hard and uncomfortable...but now I know it was more about my immaturity. Yet there is purpose when we sit still with our feelings and take the time to grow and work through and on one hand this is how we grow and mature into who we are. It is the same with Jesus.

We are a society of comfort seekers and Jesus is calling us out of our comfort zones. Jesus calls me to grow and mature in my faith… by continually following and trusting in who He is… and by believing in who I am in Him. He is asking for our full embrace, he wants my whole heart regardless of how comfortable I feel or don’t feel.

**SLIDE:** Why the Cross?

1. The cross was a symbol of humiliation
2. The cross was a symbol of suffering
3. The cross was a symbol of death
The Comfortable Cross

The cross is probably one of the most recognized symbols in the world, the symbol for Christianity. People recognize the cross worldwide regardless of what they believe about God. But the image of the cross historically was seen as weakness and an instrument of torture. Why did God choose this symbol to represent followers of Jesus?

1. The cross was a symbol of humiliation
2. The cross was a symbol of suffering
3. The cross was a symbol of death

Do we in the 21st century look to the cross in this same way? What do comfort-craving fans do with something like the cross? I mean it is pretty hard to avoid the cross when you’re a Christian right? What do we do with the phrase, ‘deny yourself and take up your cross’? Many fans have created a comfortable idea of the cross. Many times the cross gets pushed to the back of sermon/messages and our Bible studies and even though the cross is in our churches and on our t-shirts and around our necks, we end up with a comfortable cross.

SLIDE: Why the Cross? Why not a different image?

- A dove - It represents peace.
- A shepherd’s staff - it’s a symbol of protection
- A rainbow - it represents hope and promise
The Comfortable Cross

It seems like God had many other options to choose from as an image to represent Christians and our salvation.

- Why not a dove? It represents peace.
- What about a shepherd’s staff? It’s a symbol of protection.
- Or a rainbow; it represents hope and promise.
- Why choose two bloody beams nailed together? Not the most appealing symbol to attract followers.

Why would God use a symbol of torture, of death, of weakness to save the world and to represent Christians? The cross is a tough sell!

**SLIDE:**   **The Cross is the intersection between fans and followers**

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1 Paul talks about how the world sees the cross – in verse 18 he writes, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”

So Scripture tells us why the cross… God takes what from a human perspective is foolish. God chooses what has no glory and carries no honor. He finds the least likely symbol for love and life and says. “I’ll use that.” God takes what the world says is foolish, demeaning, and shameful, and says “watch this’ and turns it into the power of salvation. The cross is the intersection between Fans of Jesus vs Followers of Jesus. Fans turn away at the invitation to deny themselves and take up their own cross.
This is where the commitment to follow is our choice. Remember accepting Jesus is different than following Jesus. I am not talking about our salvation but Christ’s invitation to follow.


23 And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

So I ask myself – am I following Jesus? Am I really carrying a cross if there is no suffering and sacrifice? Has following Jesus cost me anything? If there is no sacrifice involved and you’re not at least a little uncomfortable, then there is a good chance that you aren’t carrying a cross. Jesus invites us to die he says, “Come and Die” if you want to follow. So we have the symbol of the cross as our logo for Christians and the slogan of Come and Die…

**SLIDE: The Cross is a Tough Sell**

It does not matter how you carry the cross it is not comfortable.

I have been guilty of making discipleship comfortable for people in this church. My intentions were good… I want to make Christianity appealing, attractive for others. Right we are supposed to go out and make
disciples. Our church is a growing church…that is a good thing right, is that how we measure our success by the numbers of people in the pews and in programs? Am I doing the will of God when I increase the number of small groups and programs each year? Or should I be teaching the basics of what it means to be a disciple by helping people become transformed? As the Director of Discipleship I have not always taught the whole story story of the cross (of the gospel).

SLIDE: (use picture of Jesus carrying his cross – bullet points

- Salvation but what about Surrendering?
- Forgiveness but what about Repentance?
- Focus on living as Jesus lived but what about dying to self?

I have wanted to attract people to Christ, I have wanted others to know him and to experience Him but if I only focus on the comfortable parts of Christianity I have robbed the gospel of its power… and I have robbed the people of the life God has for them!

- We teach about salvation but not about surrendering.
- We teach about forgiveness but not always about repentance.
- We tend to focus on living as Jesus lived but not about dying to ourselves - daily
LOOK at the Cross...have you made the cross personal for you? Is the cross a reminder of who you are as a Christ follower? OR have you kept the cross at a distance and not embraced it personally in your life, in your walk, in your relationships? When we fully embrace the cross into our lives, something happens within us, within our hearts and we respond differently to Jesus’ call to follow. Choosing Jesus is a daily choice, a choice to deny ourselves and live for him. I must die to me every day so I can follow Him! There is nothing comfortable about taking up my cross daily to follow – some days I chose to be comfortable instead of embracing the uncomfortable love of the cross.

About a year ago – a lady found our church from the website and she called me. She had some challenging questions around being a Christian. I could tell she had Bible knowledge and I invited her to join one of my small groups that I was leading and she did. She met new faces and came every week for about three months…then stopped coming. I called to make sure she was doing okay. She shared that she was uncomfortable being in my small group and that is why she wanted to quit. She talked more about her feelings and as I listened she was getting more and more
worked up. She was getting angry. Before she hung on me…she blurted out the honest truth of her discomfort…she said, “I am sick and tired of praying for God’s will for my life, what about me, what about my will!” I called her back a couple of days later just to let her know that she is welcomed here!

I want to be more of a follower of Jesus every day but I still have many days where I am only a fan. When Pastor Jeff asked if I was available on Spring break to preach the message, I was excited and said yes. My family did not have any plans so I was eager to be here with all of you. Then my dad called about a week after I committed to preaching this weekend and he asked if we wanted to join him and my step mom in Mexico for Spring break! At that exact moment, I did not want to honor my commitment to Pastor Jeff and I wanted to go to Mexico. I told my dad that I would check my schedule and call him back but I already knew my schedule…it was a moment when I wanted to be a fan. It is a daily choice for each of us.

As I wrap up this message, this is the point that I want to leave with you today and I hope you take this message into your heart and into your journey with Christ, daily. The cross was been a stumbling block
historically to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles… for the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.

- Who else but God could take the cross that represented defeat –
  - And turn it into a symbol of victory?
- Who else but God could take a cross that represented guilt –
  - And turn it into the symbol for grace?
- Who else but God could take a cross that represented condemnation
  - And turn it into a symbol of freedom?
- Who else but God could take a cross that represented pain and suffering –
  - And turn it into symbol of healing and hope?
- Who else but God could take a cross that represented death –
  - And turn it into a symbol of life?

No one else could, but He can. What seems like the ultimate moment of God’s weakness was in reality the ultimate moment of God’s strength.

Here is why this matters! Here’s my point for us today…

**SLIDE: What God Did For the Cross, He Can Do for You**

What God did for the Cross, He can do for you. When you are the weakest - you are exactly where you need to be for God to be the strongest. The upside down truth of the cross is that when you are weak – you are strong. Look at 1 Cor 1:27 again…”But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the
strong.” It’s not that God used the cross in spite of its weakness – he chose the cross because of its weakness.

Apostle Paul says that God chooses the weak things. We can look in Scripture for ourselves and see how God continually chose the weak over the strong for His purpose and for His glory.

- Abraham was old – Jacob was insecure
- Leah was unattractive – Joseph was humiliated
- Moses stuttered – Gideon was poor
- Samson was proud – Rahab was immoral
- David had an affair - Elijah was suicidal
- Jeremiah was depressed - Jonah was disobedient
- Naomi was a widow - John the Baptist was eccentric
- Peter was impulsive and hot tempered - Martha worried a lot
- The Samaritan woman had several failed marriages
- Zacchaeus was unpopular - Thomas had doubts

Each of these people were called by God to step out of their comfort zones, to embrace their own weaknesses and to trust God and they all discovered when they surrendered themselves within their weakness as their response to God’s invitation then they discovered God’s strength. God invites us to follow…

So, God, do for us what you did for the cross.
Let’s Pray.

“The Comfortable Cross”
Guest Speaker: Cherie Cobb
Theme: Not a Fan
Scripture: Luke 9:23
Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:
Meditation Moments for Monday, March 31

MORNING QUOTE:
“On this trail called life, all of us are following someone’s directions. None of us are really blazing our own trail. We all follow a path that’s been laid out for us by someone claiming to know the way. The question is: whose directions are you following? What path are you on?” –Kyle, NAF Study

MORNING SUGGESTION:
Try this... Draw a winding path, and on it a stick figure that represents you. Then draw a large sign post. On the sign, name the path you are on. It might be called “Dad’s Trail” if you have basically been following in your father’s footsteps. Or it might be “Easy Lane” in view of the fact that you do whatever seems easiest. It could be “Wall Street” because for you is has been all about money. Or it might be “Service Street” as you are truly striving to put others first. In any case, be honest. Name the road you are on. In three sentences try to describe why you have chosen this path.

EVENING REFLECTION:
Every moment is a fork in the road. You can stay on the current path or turn to a new way. Would it be a good idea to stay on your morning road or take a new way? If it is a new way, what will it be named? If you stay with the path you are currently on, where will it lead in 10 years?

Tuesday, April 1

MORNING SUGGESTION:
Focus on your mental image of Jesus. Meditate on His glory, beauty, and kindness. Imagine Him coming to you saying, “I see you. I know you. I love you. I will never leave you.” After meditating in this way, see if you can’t sing this old hymn:
I’d rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.
I’d rather have Jesus than men’s applause;
I’d rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I’d rather have Jesus than worldwide fame;
I’d rather be true to His holy name.

EVENING REFLECTION:
Bring to mind your improved mental picture of Jesus. Weigh this question in your mind. Would you rather be homeless with Jesus or have a beautiful home without Jesus?

Wednesday, April 2

MORNING QUOTE:
“And I don’t care how you position it, carrying a cross just isn’t comfortable.” –Kyle, NAF Study

Following Christ does not mean denying that the journey is hard. Can you accept that your Christian walk will often be narrow, uphill, rocky and sometimes dangerous?

NOON REMINDER:
Bring to mind your mental impression of Jesus. If not already present, add to the image nail scars. What effect does that addition have on your heart?

EVENING REFLECTION:
Bring to Jesus in prayer any complaints you have regarding how hard it is to follow Him. What kind of response to your complaints do you think you would receive from Him?

END OF DAY FOCUS:
Bring to mind your mental image of Jesus again. If your image is not already filled with compassion, fill your representation of Jesus with as much compassion as there is in the universe. Then imagine bringing your complaints, along with your grief and troubles of the day, to Him. What is it like?
Thursday, April 3
MORNING QUOTE:
“Jesus has many who love the kingdom of God, but few who bare a cross. He has many who desire His comfort, but few who desire His suffering. All want to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for Him. He writes; there are many who admire his miracles, but there are few who follow in the humiliation of the cross.” - Thomas a’ Kempis
Which of these words best describe your internal reaction to today’s reading? __shame, __anxiety, __hope, __excitement, __joy, __pride, __guilt, __determination, __boredom, __frustration, __fear Why do you think this is your reaction?
END OF DAY FOCUS:
What has been your primary emotion this morning? Dwell on the emotion you believe Jesus primarily wants in you when it comes to His call on your life. Imagine yourself filled with this emotion as you go to sleep.

Friday, April 4
MORNING QUOTE:
“Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me.’ But the man replied, ‘Lord, first let me go bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’” (Luke 9:59-60)
MORNING SUGGESTION:
Lord, I will follow you, but first let me......
END OF DAY THOUGHT:
“We treat our relationship with Jesus like a diet we keep meaning to start. I’m going to start eating right... as soon as I finish off this chicken chimichanga.” - Kyle, NAF Study
What are you putting off that Jesus is asking you to do today? What does putting this off do FOR you? What does it do TO you?

Saturday, April 5
MORNING QUOTE:
“Jesus calls us to take up a cross and die. Not someday when we take our last physical breath, but to die to ourselves today... The Bible says. ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts’ (Hebrews 3:15). Today is the day of salvation. Don’t say tomorrow. The word is ‘today.’” - Kyle, NAF Study
What will you do? What will you be today?
EVENING REFLECTION:
What do you wish you had done or been or said today?
END OF DAY FOCUS:
Today is over, never to return. But God is not stuck in today. “His compassions never fail. They are new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22-23). Go to sleep looking forward to meeting Jesus’ compassion in the morning.