

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Redeemer Amen. A year into the pandemic, I read some fascinating and amusing research into what people were giving up for Lent that year, 2021. The researchers did their study on the platform X, or Twitter as it was at the time. Uh, that fact should maybe undermine our absolute confidence in the scientific accuracy of the results. But in the week beginning February the 14th, 2021, over 24,000 people tweeted what they were giving up. 818 said they were giving up giving things up 154 were giving up religion. Uh, I'm not sure they really understood the point of Lent really. 116 were giving up COVID. 40 were giving up carbs, meaning all they were gonna eat was fat and protein. Uh, is that even possible? And 99 were giving up life. Intriguingly, men and boys were both listed in the top 100 things people were giving up, but neither women nor girls were. Make of that what you will But according to Twitter, the number one item people giving up for Lent a year into the pandemic was, with 911 tweets, Twitter. Uh, that's 911 people who were also giving up telling the truth or who had begun Lent with a refreshing sense of humor Of those 24,000, it's the 99 I'm interested in. The 99 who said they were giving up life. I expect that most of them, maybe 98 of them, were messing with the researchers, enjoying a bit of COVID gallows humor. But maybe one, one out of 99, one out of 24,000 really meant it. I mean, in a profound and somber way. Maybe this one had read their Bible. Maybe they had stumbled upon this passage we just read from Matthew. Maybe this one in 24,000 had chewed on Jesus' words and chosen to live accordingly. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, 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? Giving up your life. Because Jesus promises if you do, you'll get it back. Not just the same old life, but a renewed, refocused, restored, upgraded model with added features like peace with God and with other people, a

clear conscience, rest for your searching heart, an assurance that your life has meaning, that you have a glorious purpose in the vast mind of God As the playwright Sidney Howard put it, "One half of knowing what you want is knowing what you must give up before you get it." One of the early fathers of the Christian Church by the name of Tertullian was visited by a silversmith who s- uh, had spent his life making idols for people to worship. The silversmith became a Christian and came to the painful realization that his newfound faith in Christ was in conflict with his career. "Tertullian," he cried, "if I stop making idols, I'll starve. I have to live." And Tertullian answered, "Do you?" Has anyone uttered three more troubling sentences than those proclaimed by Jesus? If we were to dream up three statements that would cause people shock and anxiety, we could not outdo the three we just heard. If you want to keep your life, you've got to give it up. If you want true happiness, then you have to make the health of your soul your top priority. If you truly want to be a follower of Christ, then you must die. Not your physical death, of course, but m- we must die to our old ways of thinking and talking and living. That hollow, shallow life that the world tells us is our birthright and our purpose. Dying to selfishness and rising to a new life with new priorities. C.S. Lewis put it, "Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time or money or work. I want you.' No half-measures are good enough. Hand over the whole self, all the desires which you think innocent, as well as the theories you think wicked. The whole outfit, and I will give you a new self instead." The 1957 Oscars were dominated by the movie The Bridge Over the River Kwai, the story of British prisoners of war required by their captors to work on the Burma-Siam death railway. The film was based on the memoirs of Ernest Gordon, a soldier in the Argyll regiment, whose experiences at the work cap- camp turned him from being an atheist into a Christian. He was later ordained in the Church of Scotland, and after that became the Dean of Princeton. His most shocking experience, and the one that transformed the camp and ultimately led Gordon to

Christ, was this. And it is about as good an illustration of taking up your cross that I've ever read. It was the end of a hard day's work, and as was standard procedure, the Japanese guards lined up the prisoners to count the tools before returning to camp. During the count, a Japanese guard discovered that one shovel was missing. To the captors, a missing tool meant an im- impending escape attempt. The guard flew into a violent rage, screaming in broken English and demanding that the thief step forward. When no one moved, the guard's fury escalated. He yelled, "All die. All die." He cocked his rifle, put it to his shoulder, and aimed it directly at the first prisoner in the rank, fully prepared to shoot his way down the entire line of men. Realizing that the guard was about to massacre the entire squad, an Argyll Highlander stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention, and calmly said, "I did it." The guard unleashed his fury on the soldier, but rather than shooting him, he and his comrades beat him selfless with the butts of their rifles. The soldier endured the brutal assault silently until his skull was crushed and he breathed his last. When the beating was op- over, the traumatized prisoners were ordered to pick up their tools and carry the body of the Argyll soldier back to camp. At the final tool checkpoint, the guards counted the shovels once more and found that no shovel was missing. The guard had simply miscounted

If we're following Christ, then we will choose to do things that we'd rather not do, like loving and forgiving and serving, and we will say things we find hard to say, the gracious thing, the compassionate thing, the peacemaking thing. So what should our response be to the challenging words of Jesus? Well, how about this? Am I experiencing any discomfort or hardship as a result of following Christ? And if not, why not? Because you don't have to look too hard for ways to carry the cross. Just choose love, truth, purity, integrity, justice, and suffering will find you. No one ever got into bed at night and thought, "Today I walked the way of Christ, and everyone loved me for it. Today I took a stand for what was right, and everyone thanked me. Today I denied my selfish instincts, and the world cheered in admiration." No, the chances are that when

we do walk the way of Christ, make a stand for truth, justice, and compassion, the world will either not notice or it will despise us for it. But this all seems so extreme, doesn't it? Uh, you know, this might be fine for really keen Christians, but we are Episcopalians. You know, we do things differently. We don't get too excited, uh, by our faith. We mustn't get carried away, but remain balanced, find a middle way between enthusiasm and apathy. Episcopalians have many weaknesses, but enthusiasm is not one of them. Deny yourself. Let me add the Surgeon General's health warning to that phrase, because failure to understand this properly has led many Christians to beat themselves up in a way that is not honoring to God. A rather impressive example of this is a fifth century saint called Simon Stylites, who sat on a pillar in the desert for 30 years, eating only lettuce and drinking only water. Well, it's not my place to say that Saint Simon misheard God, but I do feel fairly confident in telling you that God is not calling you to sit on a pillar in the desert for 30 years and eat only lettuce. We all know about Saint Francis of Assisi, uh, his love for God's creation and his desire for peace. But he also whipped himself regularly and wore hair shirts because he thought that enduring physical pain would make him more like Jesus. Other Christians have taken a very harsh attitude towards all kinds of physical pleasure. And no entertainment, no tasty food, not enough sleep. But this is not what Jesus had in mind when he called his followers to self-denial. God is not honored when we inflict physical pain on ourselves. God does actually want us to enjoy life, so he wants us to take care of ourselves in body, mind, and spirit. He has given us a lavish abundance of good things to enjoy, and we should appreciate them with thanksgiving. So self-denial is not self-hatred. Instead, it's a call to get our priorities straight. If the good things God has given us get all uppity, become too big for their boots, forget they are mere creatures, and if they begin to sidle up to God's throne thinking you're not looking, and slither their way onto it, then we should decisively tear those good things from God's rightful place and put them somewhere else where

we can enjoy them without idolizing them. The suffering we must endure for Christ is not the kind that comes from whipping ourselves. It's the suffering that comes from saying no to our selfish impulses and yes to the way of love and service. Take up your cross. It's tempting to want a small, tame, domestic cross. A decorative, sparkling gold or silver cross. A cross that can fit neatly into our lives without too much inconvenience. Big enough to notice and to show off to the neighbors, but not too big. I don't want it to get in the way of me doing my own thing. This morning, let's explode the walls, and then rebuild our lives around the huge, rugged, inconvenient, painful cross. Because if any want to become his followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. Give up your life. They are no fools who give up what they cannot keep to gain what they cannot lose. Amen.