

Lent 2 Year B Mark 8:31-38

Jesus said:

“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.”

Our foundress Mother Harriet wrote:

“Let your great thought be to bring your will into conformity with the will of God in everything...The will must be yielded, if we are to be true Religious, and it is sad to walk at a lower level than the soul might attain, just because it wants to keep that stupid self-will, which is after all but a dogged, animal thing. If the soul rises up to a life of faith, surely these things over which the will struggles, which for the most part have their root in self, must be yielded.”

I imagine that Mother Harriet and other 19th century women must have had an easier time understanding Jesus’ message of self-denial than we do in the 21st century. Mother Harriet’s writing is laced with words like “meekness, humility, and lowliness.” It sounds so dated. This is the age of self-fulfillment and self-care. Many people in this country, especially women, are trying to find our lives, not lose them. Jesus’ idea of losing oneself can reinforce cultural pressure to subordinate oneself to others in a way that is not self-affirming. Up to a point, I believe finding our lives is necessary. If we don’t know who we are, how can we lose whatever-it-is?

First of all, by “deny oneself” I don’t think Jesus meant self-flagellation or any extreme form of self-punishment, which actually can be self-centered. There are at least two ways of being self-centered. The first is the familiar way of trying to acquire or hold on for oneself material goods, money, time, status, power, and so on. A less obvious way to be self-centered is to be self-denying in the sense the anorexic is self-denying or the depressed person is self-denying. I don’t think the anorexic denial the depressed denial, or any unhealthy denial is what Jesus was talking about.

I believe that what Jesus asks of us is that we say “no” to our natural love of ease and comfort. He asks that we say “no” to every course of action which is based on self-seeking and self-will. It means being able to say as Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, “it is no longer he who lives but Christ who lives in him.” To deny oneself means to subordinate one’s appetites and desires to God’s will for us as made known in Jesus.

It is striking to me that what we tend to think of as “freedom” to do “our own thing” is often actually slavery. For example, if we decide on our own not to obey some aspect of our Rule, it is coming from ego, which is a form of bondage.

In Luke’s version of this same passage, he adds “take up their cross daily.” His addition emphasizes the fact that it is not the great sacrifices that count so much as the constant daily and hourly awareness of the demands of God and needs of others. As Jason once said to us in a sermon, “Take up the cross of the ordinary. It is the little annoyances of everyday life that you don’t even get credit for that are the cross.”

What is the self we are supposed to deny? In Jung and in Eastern thought, there are two selves: Self and self. Most of us, most of the time, think of ourselves as “small s” self. This self has physical dimensions and characteristics and mental and emotional states. It has attachments and aversions. It is unduly affected by outside influences. If others praise it, it is puffed up with conceit. If others criticize it, it is angry and defensive. It believes itself to be less than it actually is.

The Self is the real being. When we Christians say we are made in the image of God, we are talking about Self. When we say we are a daughter or son of God, we are talking about Self. When Buddhists talk about the Buddha nature, they refer to Self. According to the Dalai Lama, the Buddha Nature is the fundamental inborn mind of clear light which is free of counterproductive emotions like lust, hatred, jealousy, and anger. This Self must never be denied, but must be affirmed again and again. Here is a story from the Hindu tradition of how the Self asserted itself:

A young monk was traveling. When he got tired, he lay down under a tree. Having no pillow, he got a few bricks and rested his head on them. Some women were going along the road to fetch water from the river. When they saw the monk lying there, they said to each other, “Look—that young man has become a monk, and yet he can’t do without the idea of a pillow. He has to have bricks instead.” They went on their way and the monk said to himself, “They were quite right to criticize me.” So he threw the bricks away and lay down again with his head on the earth. Presently the women returned and saw that the bricks were gone; and they exclaimed contemptuously, “That’s a fine sort of monk! He feels insulted because we said he had a pillow. Now, look—he has thrown his pillow away!” Then the monk thought, “If I have a pillow, people criticize me; if I don’t

have a pillow, that doesn't suit them either. You can't please them; let me try to please God alone." That Self that tries to please God alone is the capital S Self. That Self which seeks always to be in contact with the presence of God is the capital S Self. Following Jesus ultimately means being subordinate only to God.

Denying oneself means spending life rather than hoarding it, burning out rather than rusting out. The whole gamut of the world's values gets reversed. To deny oneself means asking not "How much can I get?" but "How much can I give?" It means asking not "What is the safe thing to do?" but "What is the right thing to do?" It means asking not "What is the minimum work I can get away with?" but "What is the maximum?" Our Bishop Mark Beckwith told us at the Diocesan convention "Our value is determined by what we share rather than by what we accumulate." John F. Kennedy said famously, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Similarly with the church: Ask not what the church can do for you. Ask what you can do for the church. Ask not what the convent or monastery can do for you. Ask what you can do for the convent or monastery. I know that we aren't likely to ask what we can give unless we realize that God has given all for us. For some of us, it is a spiritual practice to remember what God has given us. When we realize what God has given, the only possible gift to Christ is the whole of life.