

Second Sunday in Lent February 28 2021

Mark 8:31-38

A mother working two jobs so she can provide a place to live, food to eat, and clothes for her children. No social life, eating less herself, focusing wholly on her children's welfare.

A wife of 60 plus years taking care of her husband, ravaged by Alzheimer's, Cleaning him, moving him, making sure he doesn't accidentally harm himself. Twenty-four/seven.

Doctors and nurses who lived apart from their families for months at the beginning of the pandemic so they could care for patients and not risk bringing the virus home. Protecting their families while they served others.

These are examples we recognize and even admire as someone who we might say is denying themselves. Seeking the good of others before themselves.

This text from Mark is one many of us have heard before and might even be an inspiration for this trope in our society. Because of that, we might believe we know what this text means. But perhaps we can hear it together with new ears today, discover a wider meaning for our lives.

What does Jesus mean, deny ourselves?

Some have interpreted this text along with the following one about taking up your cross and made of them an idol of deliberate martyrdom. Their understanding is that God is- in effect- calling us to suffering and pain and that doing so ensures that we are doing God's will. If It is difficult and causes me personal pain, sacrifice, discomfort, then it must be what God wants for me. Some have, I'm

sorry to say, used that idea to encourage women to remain in abusive relationships. Or to encourage people to remain in other situations that could harm them physically or mentally. Some even used it to encourage enslaved people to remain with their masters.

What if that's not what Jesus meant?

As one of my colleagues asked this past week, which self are we to deny- to literally make a stranger to ourselves? Well, to find an answer it would make sense to look at the one who we follow behind, Jesus, to see what he might mean. Contrary to what we might think and what our society lifts up as the gold standard, Jesus does engage in moments of self-care. He goes away by himself for a time to rest and eat and pray. Heck, when things get too crazy, he leaves the territory to try and get some rest. Jesus creates some boundaries for himself. So, giving ourselves away until that moment we shrivel up because we have poured so much of ourselves out is probably not what Jesus is after here. After all, Jesus came to give us life, not take it away.

Jesus' focus is on helping others. The leper, the man with the unclean spirit, Simon's mother-in-law, Jairus' daughter, the five thousand who hungered, all these found themselves cared for by the Son of God.

The denial of self Jesus calls us to is not just for the sake of denial or some sort of spiritual exercise to prove we are true followers of Jesus. Rather denial of self is done for the sake of...Jesus and his gospel. It is done for our neighbor. Jesus himself reminds us that, "the son of man came not to be served, but to serve" (Mk 10:45)

We follow this path of denying ourselves because, as Paul reminds us in Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” And this is the path Christ took. Service to others.

However, as we have seen following the example of Jesus, denial of self is not about neglecting to take care of yourself. Rather, it is about placing the larger good ahead of yourself and your desires. It is about looking to the good of others before yourself. It is about selflessness, just as Jesus lived in this world.

Now, sometimes, we are called to sacrifice ourselves for others. To fully place them before ourselves. But, the burnout that comes from doing that is only because the system is imbalanced.

Here is the amazing thing. If we all- together- denied ourselves in this way. If we all looked first to the good of our neighbor, sacrificed for them, made sure they have what they need for life, then that means (at least in Ely) we would have 2200 people looking out for us. 2200 people making sure we got the rest, the help, the support, the fellowship, the basics of life that we needed. If we all did this, then no one would NEED to get burnt out because there would be multiple people helping others. Because we would have so many people caring for us we couldn't get burnt out. What a world that would be to live in!

I wonder also if part of denying yourself is allowing yourself to receive care. To acknowledge your own human need, that you are not perfect, that you don't have it all together. To acknowledge that in this moment I need help makes us vulnerable. It is a blow to our ego. Isn't it amazing how even helping others can be an act more of our own ego than it is one of love of neighbor?

So, in receiving care from others, we deny ourself, the self that needs to be in control, to feel powerful, and we acknowledge that sometimes we need help, and give to our neighbors the joy of helping their fellow human beings.

Perhaps this is what Paul means when he says that we have been freed in Christ and made a new creation. Everything about our old selves was about us, even when we helped others. Now, this new creation, is focused on others, including letting them help us.

What does it mean to “take up your cross”?

How many of you have heard the term, “It’s my cross to bear”? That expression originated in the 16th century and does indeed stem from the story of Jesus carrying his own cross to his crucifixion.

You hear that phrase used to talk about a calamity that has befallen us, moments of deep grief or loss, chronic illness, or pain. This is my cross to bear.

But is that what Jesus is talking about here? While these things are heavy burdens, they are unfortunate realities of life, they are not a cross. Taking up a cross is not enduring stoically what happens to us. This can be a great virtue, but our faith is about more than that.

Note, Jesus talks about raising up, lifting up, picking up the cross. Taking up the cross is a deliberate choice of something that could be evaded. To take up the cross is to pick up something that we are under no compulsion to take, except for the love of God in Jesus Christ. As Paul says in Galatians, we are free in Christ to serve our neighbor.

Taking up our cross means taking on us the burdens of others' lives. It is the lived expression of denying ourselves, of putting others before ourselves, without reservation, in the service of Christ, in the reign of God.

To deny ourselves and take up our cross means to take seriously the identity we talked about last week, the one given to us in baptism as beloved child of God.

In doing this, we come to the most freeing thing of all. The realization that there is nothing we can give in return for our life. Our lives are not our own, we cannot buy another minute, day or hour. Bill Gates, for all his billions, will die one day- just like the guy living under the bridge in Cedar Rapids. There is nothing we can give, no purchase price we can pay for our lives.

But God can and has in Jesus Christ. Our lives belong to God, who gave them to us in the first place. They rest in the hands of God through the grace of God come to us in Jesus Christ. The visible sign of God's self-giving love for us.

The worth of our lives is measured in God's love, not how many toys we have, or how much power, or the size of our bank accounts.

In our baptism into Christ, we are freed from having to justify ourselves not only to God but to our fellow human beings. We are freed to live in love. From God and to others.

Denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus is not a burden to bear- it is an acknowledgment of our freedom. Freedom from all the crap that this world tries to place on us. Denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus is not about our suffering and pain- that may come as we serve

others. Especially if their hearts are still in bondage, if they cannot see who Jesus really is, if their minds are still on earthly things.

Reaching out to others in love risks getting hurt. But the rewards for those whom we love are much greater. To have even one person experience freedom in Christ because the Holy Spirit has acted through our acts of love and mercy to them. To embody Christ for them in that way- is one of the most awesome and humbling things to experience.

It is one of the privileges of my office as pastor to baptize- and from my first baptism of Imani Lashay – born prematurely and who died within a day after that baptism to my baptism of Kim and Brooklyn last week- I still am in awe of what I get to participate in. The rebirth of someone into the body of Christ.

As we continue our Lenten Journey with Jesus- may we turn again to our baptism, the moment when God freed us. May we come to this table today and be fed with the body and blood of that same Jesus who came to this earth so that we might live and know how to live. And then let us go into this world that so desperately needs the good news of God in Jesus Christ and deny our selfishness and love in deed and in truth all those whom we meet. And let them know by that love that we are followers of Jesus.