

Sacrifice, Discovery, and Love

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Julia Stankova, The Crucifixion

Preaching on:

Mark 8:31–38

“If any wish to follow me, 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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” This is one of the quintessential teachings of Lent and—although it makes us uncomfortable—it’s one of the quintessential teachings of Jesus—period—one we must come to terms to with.

What does it mean to deny myself? What benefit could it possibly have for me or for anyone else? Is this just some sort of weird spiritual masochism? Or some insidious attempt by our religious overlords

to undermine our feelings of self-worth in order to manipulate and control us? I mean, wasn't Jesus all about love? Doesn't Jesus want me to love myself? How can denying myself—negging myself—be compatible with loving myself?

Let's be real. We can all think of a narcissist or two who this teaching would be perfect for, but the rest of us? Come on! We're not a bunch of oblivious egomaniacs here who don't know how to practice any kind of restraint. That's not us. We care about other people. We care about people who have less than us. We care about justice and fairness and equity. But we also understand that in order to make a difference in the world, I need to put myself out there. I need to assert myself. I need to fight for myself and to understand my value. And that's hard work, isn't it? So, after I've done that all week, I need to practice some good selfcare. I might even need to treat myself every once in a while—I deserve it and I *need* it. To be a success, I need a healthy ego that is strong and ready to fight to be seen and heard, to do what is right, and to get what is deserved. How could denying myself possibly fit into a healthy and productive life?

The trouble with this cultural worldview of ours is so, so tricky. It assumes—very incorrectly and sometimes disastrously—that I know at all times exactly what it is that I truly want, exactly what my purpose in life is, exactly what values as a human being are important to me at all times.

Now if I were always perfectly aware of exactly what is right for myself, then there would be no problem, friends, with charging straight ahead. But the reality of life is that our consciousness, our ego, is limited. We get so caught up in our work and goals that we lose touch with who we truly are, with what we really want, with what we actually think is important. The most common way that people in our world lose themselves is not through practicing self-denial. It's by charging straight ahead into life, into commitments, into responsibilities, into work, and (although it's everything we think we want), we find ourselves overwhelmed by burnout, depression, anxiety. We start acting out—substance abuse, gambling, an affair—risking everything that we've worked so hard for, everything we keep telling ourselves we've ever really wanted.

This is the problem with a strong ego. Your ego's job is to go out there and kick butt, to get things done, to put its nose to the grindstone, to change the world! Your ego is often far less adept at actually knowing what it is that you want. It's far less adept at turning inward and paying attention to what might be changing. It's like a racehorse charging down the road, pulling the carriage of your life along, and suddenly you realize it's the wrong road or maybe that you're headed towards a cliff! It's not the horse's fault. His job is to pull the carriage. Somebody else is supposed to be at the reins. Who's that?

The ability to pull on those reins, to say "WOAH," to slow down, to take the lay of the land, perhaps even to turn the carriage around is an ability grounded totally in the strength of self-denial. "WOAH, boy! Woah!" If you're charging towards a cliff, self-denial is a key component of self-preservation—of saving your life! Self-denial is not the goal itself. Self-denial is a way of slowing down, paying attention,

and redirecting—it's a way of discovering who you really are.

And this is the promise of a season like Lent: If I reduce myself, if I deny myself, if I sacrifice, I will come out of it not weaker but stronger—with a stronger sense of identity and a clearer sense of vision. When I reduce myself or declutter myself, I come to a place from which I'm able to connect to that which is bigger than me—to God, or to my true self, my true values, my true desires. The question for Lent is not "How can I make myself miserable?" or "How can I really impress God by beating myself up?" it's "Who am I really? What do I really believe? What am I becoming?" That's the point. That's why we pray and fast and meditate. That's why we slow down. That's what we're reflecting on. That's what we're asking for.

Now everything I've just said about an individual can also be true of an organization, or a church even. In fact, organizations can sustain a charge in the wrong direction far longer than any individual person can. It's very hard for organizations to slow down, to reduce, to let things go, to deny themselves in order to rethink themselves. It's easier to just keep going than to reorganize. But organizations are so much longer-lived than people that they have to reinvent themselves at lot—at least every generation, and nowadays, in this changing world, maybe something like every decade or so requires pulling over on the highway of the world and to really check in on our identity and our direction. If we don't, then the organization could have a little bit of its own kind of midlife crisis—burnout, anxiety, disconnection.

Immediately after the worship service this morning is our annual congregational meeting. And you will quickly see that there is lots of incredible good news for our congregation from 2023 and a lot to look forward to in 2024. We're not in a transitional crisis as a church. But many of our key leaders are realizing that we do need to take some time to really reflect on our true mission and vision in order for us to build 21st century ministries that reflect our identity here in 2024 and our goals over the next five to ten years. We see this a deeply spiritual and Christian process—in a very real sense we see it as a taking up the cross, of sacrificing for Jesus' sake and the for the sake of the Gospel—a sacrifice the end goal of which is not depletion, but rejuvenation, resurrection, right? When Jesus says take up your cross and follow me, he's instructing us in a kind of self-sacrifice, yes, but one that leads beyond the cross into something bigger, into resurrection. As Christians this doesn't need to be anxiety producing, in fact, if we're going to be effective in a changing world, it should be and it will be a regular part of our practice of spiritual direction.

When we deny ourselves and take up our crosses to follow Jesus' way, we're temporarily slowing down, reducing ourselves, sacrificing, in order to come to a larger vision of who we truly are, what we truly want and need, and who we are becoming. Without a consistent practice of self-denial or sacrifice in some form, we tend to charge ahead on whatever path we're on, striving to reach the top of the mountain, heedless of whether it's the right path, or even the right mountain, or maybe we actually prefer the ocean to the mountains!

Sacrifice raises our unconscious struggles and desires to consciousness where they can be worked

out and integrated into our self. Self-denial and cross-carrying is a process of reduction in order to give up our ego illusion of total control. Our egos, though they are very good at getting things done, are not in control of everything. They don't know everything, so who put them in charge? When we slow down and sacrifice and reduce ourselves, we make room for God to enter in and we discover more deeply who we really are. Sacrifice is a statement of holistic value—I am not here in this world merely to succeed. I am here in this world to become who God made me to be. You can hate yourself and still be accounted by history as a successful person in this world for your accomplishments. But you can only become the person who God made you to be, if you love yourself completely. And that is why the path of self-denial and sacrifice, as the way to your greatest self, is Jesus' way of love.