

JESUS – DENIAL

TEXT: Mark 8:27-38

In one of the Charlie Brown comic strips, Linus and Charlie Brown are talking together. Linus says, “I don’t like to face problems head on. I think the best way to solve problems is to avoid them. In fact, this is a distinct philosophy of mine. No problem is so big or complicated that it can’t be run away from!”

I think this philosophy is a pretty good definition of denial. If we can avoid problems; if we can just run away from them, we have pretty well found the way to deny them. But I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to his disciples in today’s reading.

We hear these words so often, I wonder if we really listen to what Jesus says: “If any man (or woman) would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”. Most of us have spent our adult lives trying to be followers of Jesus, but for many of us it doesn’t feel like we’ve denied ourselves very much.

So, what does it mean to deny ourselves? What is it that Jesus means by self-denial? Surely he does not mean self-hatred. Just a few chapters after this lesson (actually in the Gospel of Mathew) somebody is going to ask Jesus what the greatest commandment is and Jesus is going to say that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Then he is going to say that the second greatest commandment is just like that one - to love your neighbor as yourself. If we don’t love ourselves, we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves.

As a matter of fact, if you are my neighbor and you hate yourself, I would just as soon not have you love me as you love yourself. Much of the world’s intolerance is due to us hating in others what we cannot come to love in ourselves. Much of our spiritual journey is to learn who we really are so that we can love our true selves.

Self denial doesn’t mean self-hatred. Self-denial is often thought of as sacrifice. Once a year, United Methodist Women throughout the world celebrate a week of prayer

and self-denial in which they give up something and make a special offering to other people in need. During Lent we often deny ourselves something in order to identify at least a little bit with the suffering of Christ.

But this sort of thing, which is a temporary act in our life, is not what Jesus meant about denying ourselves. We are not meant to live in Lent year-around. One of my favorite verses of scripture is John 10:10 where Jesus says: “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly”. We are not meant to live as though it were Lent all of the time.

There is a wonderful story of a little girl who went to spend a week-end with her Methodist grandmother who was a very, very strict old-time Methodist. After church on Sunday, the little girl came home and went to turn on the TV. Her grandmother came over, turned the TV off, and said: “Methodists don’t watch television on Sunday”. So she got out some cards and began playing solitaire. Her grandmother came over and took the cards away and said: “Methodists don’t play cards on Sunday” So she got out a comic book and started to read it and her grandmother came over and took the comic book away and said: “Methodists don’t read comic books on Sunday”. So she went outside and sat on the back steps of the house. The neighbors pet wandered over, a basset hound, and sat down next to her. She turned and looked into the basset hound’s droopy, big sad eyes and said: “Oh, I see you’re Methodist too”.

We do not deny ourselves for the sake of self-denial. We take up a cross that claims us and we follow Jesus. We take up a commitment for which we decide that we will live and die. We give ourselves to something else, but it doesn’t feel like we’ve given up something. It feels as though we have finally found ourselves. We have found life and found it to be more abundant and not self-denied.

Well, as I was thinking about this passage, it occurred to me that this invitation and commandment of Jesus doesn’t make sense unless we include the “ands”. Jesus said, “If you want to become my followers, deny yourself *and* take up your cross *and* follow me.”

Taking up the cross means taking on suffering. In our story Jesus has called together the whole crowd and here's what he says: if you want to follow me, you have to suffer. What? Seriously? Surely he did not say that. Peter's response was like "Sorry, Jesus, but nobody, *nobody* wants suffering to be part of the spirituality package."

But suffering is part of life. Suffering just is. We can't avoid it. It comes to all of us in different forms. If we try to deny its existence for us or to someone else, if we say "it's not that bad", or "you'll get over it soon", or "just have faith", we are not honoring the depth of painful experience, we're not paying attention to our own inner selves. We are closing ourselves off to God, rather than allowing ourselves and others to cry out to God from the depth of experience.

Yes, the crosses that we bear weigh us down. But Jesus invites us to follow him in his cross-bearing. Follow him toward the future. Away from denial, into the path where cross-bearing is acknowledged, maybe even welcomed, and the pain is lessened by all the company we have behind us.

The "theology of the cross" or "to deny oneself" does not mean a contrived kind of humility. We do not follow Jesus by demeaning ourselves. We are called upon to do the very best we can with the talents and abilities God has given us. Self-denying and cross-bearing are not about being less happy, but about discovering the real and abundant life – a kind of life the culture can hardly imagine that comes in and through sacrificial love in service to another. To "deny myself" means to keep one's priorities in harmony with what Jesus told us in the two "great commandments" – love God and love your neighbor.

There are four crosses in this world. For me, there are four things worthy of us giving our lives to and for. The four things are love, truth, justice, and beauty. When we take up one of these crosses and follow Jesus, we deny ourselves on behalf of love, on behalf of the pursuit of truth, on behalf of the making of justice, on behalf of the creation of beauty. We deny ourselves and devote ourselves to these things.

Today's story stands at the very center of Mark's story of Jesus and marks the turn from Jesus' teaching and preaching throughout Galilee. In this sense, it is the pivot point of the gospel. At the same time, Jesus' message was and is absolutely and totally counter-cultural simply because we live in east of Eden in a world of quid pro quo and scarcity where there is never enough and the only thing you can count on are the things you own. And Jesus challenges all of that by telling us that the only things we can hold onto are the things we give away, like love and mercy and kindness and compassion.

There was, to be sure, a ray of hope in what Jesus said that day, although the disciples may not have heard it. Jesus will be killed, *but he will also rise again*. Furthermore, those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. But at this time the disciples would not have known how those promises would come true.

Jesus gives us this hope for the future, but in this text we are called upon to follow him not just for this future, but in this life. To follow him now means a life "more abundant". As one pastor has said, "we follow Jesus not just to be saved or to go to heaven; we follow Jesus because it's worth it".

We do not deny ourselves for the sake of self-denial. We take up the cross, and we follow Jesus, and we lose ourselves. And we find ourselves. Amen