

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Called to Self-Denial"
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March 8, 2009
Second Sunday in Lent

Lent is a time of self-examination. We do this with our bodies to make sure we stay away from unusual bumps and discoloured growths, as well as a myriad of other suspicious symptoms. We also do so in our spiritual lives.

Jesus, in Mark chapter 8, doesn't mince words. He's already asked the key religious question, "Who do people say that I am?" I say this is the key question, because it is the most important question for determining where people are in relationship to the Christian faith. Because relationship to Jesus is the key to life. For if Jesus is just another religious teacher, then we are all doomed. If Jesus just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time to be tortured to death on a cross, then none of us have a chance.

There was a purpose for learning that Jesus is the way to God. There was a purpose in showing that Peter, although very close to Jesus, himself got it wrong when talking about the Lord dying. That purpose is to say that things don't often appear on the surface the way they actually are.

Once Jesus confirms that he is the Messiah, the promised fulfillment of the promises to King David, then he begins to tell his friends of a path he has to follow that they hadn't imagined. They had imagined all the glory of being the right hand men of the new king, with a new righteous government that doesn't have to spend anything on health care, because Jesus has the power to heal, and doesn't have to spend anything on social welfare, because Jesus has the power to multiply food. And they are imagining all kinds of amazing new things that will happen when Jesus kicks the colonial, military occupation government out of there and back to Rome.

But all of a sudden, Jesus reveals the plan of the suffering servant, the one disclosed in Isaiah 53. Here we find a person who has a short life, full of pain. Here we have a person who is not attractive, but sensitive. He was in no way a violent person, but suffers a violent and gruesome death. He is not the one the disciples thought he was going to be. Who do you say Jesus is?

And so he rebukes and corrects Peter, even after Peter tries to take him aside and tell him the obvious thing any friend would tell him, "Lord, this is going

to be terrible for your movement, if you die.” In fact, it is very similar reason to the logic the devil used in the desert to tell him to “give it up, boy.” So Jesus tells Peter to give up that line of thinking.

Now we can understand that Peter was probably thinking that the Soccer or Football coach had just told the team that the plan was to give up ten goals first, then really come on strong after that. Or worse. Or how about what Charlie Brown says, “Winning ain’t everything, but losing ain’t anything.” But neither of these comes close to the shock the disciples were feeling. If they were even able to hear their close friend tell them of his impending death, they would begin to go through the first of several stages of grieving, including denial. Peter had done so well in identifying who the Lord is, but had failed in trying to tell the Lord what his mission was on earth.

And then it gets quite intense. Jesus not only draws the disciples close to him for an important teaching, he also beckons the larger crowd around him at the time to come in closer to listen to some life changing stuff.

He sets up the criteria for membership as a follower of his:

- 1) Deny yourself
- 2) Take up your cross
- 3) Follow me
- 4) If you want to save your life, you’ll lose it
- 5) If you want to lose your life, you’ll save it
- 6) What would you give for your soul/your spiritual well being?
- 7) If you’re ashamed of me, I’ll be ashamed of you

These, at first glance, seem to be as radical and as harsh as could be imagined. One can see the surprise and puzzlement in the faces of the disciples and the crowd at hearing these words. He was asking no easy thing. He was not trying to lure us to greater comfort as all those drug commercials on TV try to do, except when they come to the small print and say paralysis and death may occur, please talk to your doctor.

What does it mean to deny yourself? I suppose it means making a shift in one’s heart and mind. Just as some people give their whole lives to their work, their time, their energy, their future, sacrificing relationships, sacrificing all to the company, so Jesus asks us to consider his cause and his kingdom first. We are to bow all our other pursuits, education, accomplishment, fame, money, resources, relationships, dreams, hopes,

health, our future, all of it, is to be placed in the hands of Jesus. We no longer live our lives for ourselves, but for the One who gave his life for us. Have you said this to the Lord? Today is a good day to say this.

And may I briefly suggest one benefit in your doing this. Many of us went through quite a process to decide who would be our spouse or our closest friends. We have a debt of gratitude to these which most of us find hard to put into words, even at birthdays, anniversaries and Valentine's Day. But one of the greatest gifts you can give to one another is the fact that you belong to the Lord who keeps you honest, who keeps you growing, who keeps you faithful, who keeps you full of grace and mercy. When your close friend or spouse knows you have made this commitment, then they know you are accountable and in a relationship of growth with the best therapist and truth teller in the world, Jesus. You are giving to the person closest to you a precious gift so that they know you have a higher authority to which you are accountable, and are not just captain of your own life, doing as you please. You are a person who seeks to grow, seeks to love, seeks to honour the God who is self-giving and they can know that. I hope I've made sense in trying to explain this benefit to others who are in relationship with you.

What does take up your cross mean? It means that we take seriously our commitment to Christ. He was willing to be tortured to death to achieve relationship with God for us all. We need to give ourselves over to what God calls us to do and to be. We are not the Lord. We are not facing our own torture and death as believers even though this happens in many parts of the world today, although we don't have any media coverage of this. But we are facing the choices to honour God at our work, in our homes, in our schools, in our recreation and in our relationships.

Following Jesus means trusting God for the strength to love, the courage to tell the truth, the grace to forgive, the power to believe in divine transformation, in individuals, in institutions, in cities and beyond. It means meditating on who Jesus was, and what he brought to every life situation. He often surprised his followers, such as on this occasion, when they were thinking about how cool everything was going to be, and he was preparing them for a hard life, but a good life. Following Jesus means talking to him, getting to know him, loving him more and more. I try to say this over and over to the children during Children's Time, because this is the faith and the life that undergirds the church life.

If you look to save your life, then you lose it, but if you look to lose your life, then you save it. This has to do more with counting the cost, thinking about the consequences if you don't want to conform to what Jesus has for you. He says think again. What kind of life do you want? Do you want to be known as the one who has it all, or would you rather be known by your giving?

Then he gives a challenge that has spawned a whole genre of literature. What would you give in exchange for your soul? And so Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe and other plays and shows that basically talk about giving your life to the devil, and some special power or ageless life on the earth or some such thing. What power or gift is worth losing the whole point of life, losing your very soul? The question is a rhetorical question which is meant simply to help us reflect on the fact that there is no power or gift or attribute worthy of our giving ourselves to it. The only one worthy is the Lord himself.

Finally, he warns us that we will be tempted to deny him when times get tough. Judas did this. Peter did this. Peter changed his mind and actions. Judas did not.

All of us have had interactions where someone might belittle the Lord or the Christian faith. We have to decide whether we will stay quiet, or whether we will appropriately respond. Are we ashamed of what we believe, or more pointedly, are we ashamed of the One we believe, in the name of Jesus? Each of us has to decide.

Each of us is given a precious gift, called self-denial, following Christ, choosing God's ways for us. Sometimes in Lent, this means not eating or drinking something, or not doing something. Sometimes this means doing extra acts of kindness. Whatever we choose, let us listen to what Jesus say to us, that we might know his ways in our daily lives.

Let us pray.