

The 16th Sunday After Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: September 12, 2021

Proper 19: Mark 8:27-38: *Can You Deny Yourself?*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham+

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Let me ask you a question? Can you imagine reading your own obituary before your death? Would it cause you to re-evaluate your life a little bit?

Think about that question today as you hear the reading from Mark 8? Jesus says to us, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”*

In our culture, we have lost the understanding of dying to our self. That’s what the cross meant to the early Christians. It was a symbol that Jesus was willing to give up everything, his power, his authority, his rights, his safety and comfort, his very life; to do the will of God and to restore our relationship with God. Jesus chose to give up his own agenda, his own desires, his own comforts to show us how much God loves us. He chose death to give us eternal

life. And he challenges his followers, us, to follow his example? Would you like to have Jesus in your heart? No, I don't think most would not take on that responsibility, just saying. If we're being honest, that might be our response too. We like Jesus. His teachings are inspiring. His miracles are exciting. But do we really want Jesus to live in us? Do we really want the responsibility?

I wonder if it's even possible to speak to this culture, this generation, about self-denial. After all, we Baby Boomers grew up in the so-called ME generation. "I've got to find myself," we said. "I've got to do my own thing. I will buy only the finest, because after all, 'I'm worth it.'" We place so much emphasis on self: self-satisfaction, on self-actualization, on self-protection. 50's heart throb, Movie star, James Dean said this before his death in a car crash, "live fast, die young, and leave a good- looking corpse." How could Jesus ask us to die to our self? So, what's wrong about putting our self-first?

The influence of social media has made our desire for image and wealth and self-gratification even more difficult. There are now businesses that sell fake backdrops to make it appear on your social media site that you are living a luxurious and exciting lifestyle, even if you're living paycheck to paycheck. Of course, there is a sense in which many of us have learned to deny ourselves. We have seen that oftentimes self-denial is in our best interest. The self-help

books all tell us that. Self-denial is the path to success. If you delay gratification, if you work hard, if you put your money into savings, if you wait to have your needs met until a time when you can afford it, if you cut down on your cholesterol and get plenty of exercise, then you can be successful. We all recognize the wisdom of that advice. To gain control over our desires—to subjugate them to some greater and higher goal—this is the path that leads to fulfillment.

I love what boxer Muhammad Ali once said about his punishing training regimen. He said, “I hated every minute of the training, but I said, ‘Don’t quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.’” So, some people do gladly undergo at least some form of self-denial to reach their personal goals. This is what separates us from animals. Animals cannot abstain. Animals cannot deny themselves. You can train an animal to show a certain amount of discipline, but the animal cannot make that decision itself. It is a uniquely human ability to discipline and control desires and wants. And when we have a goal in mind, then self-denial doesn’t feel so much like sacrifice. It feels like an investment in a greater good.

Imagine that you are sitting home in your recliner eating Twinkies and a bottle of beer when your doorbell rings. On your porch stand the members of

the U.S. Olympics Committee. They tell you that they have a special computer algorithm that was designed to sort through the records of every person in America to find the next great competitor in the Olympic marathon. And after analyzing hundreds of data points, this computer algorithm has picked you! You are the most uniquely-qualified person in America to compete in the next Olympic marathon.

What would you do at this point? Would you kick the Olympic Committee out and go back to your Twinkies? Or would you throw away your Twinkies, and order a case of beer, and set up a new training regimen?

In an instant, your focus changes. You count every calorie and carb. You exercise for hours each day. You study runner's guides and watch training videos. Your old habits are a distant memory now. The discipline and self-denial that were once unthinkable for you have become your new normal.

This new goal has become your new identity. The world says that to be a real man or a real woman we must give in to pleasure, but that's absurd. Any creature can give in to natural impulses. It is the test of our manhood and womanhood that we can deny ourselves.

Even a self-centered generation knows that self-denial is the path to success. But listen. There is a catch. Self-denial will not bring us fulfillment if we live

only for ourselves. I am not doing this for my husband, we say. I'm not doing this for my children. I am doing it for me. Fine. That may help you stay on your diet. That may help you keep at your studies. But it will not bring you ultimate fulfillment. Ultimate fulfillment comes only when we say, "I'm doing this for God." There is only one path that leads to real success. That is when we deny ourselves to take up the cross of Jesus.

The key to truly successful living is to deny ourselves in order that God may fill us to overflowing with His presence and power. As St. Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" in Galatians 2. There is the path to real success. If we who are followers of Jesus would but learn that one truth, we could turn this world upside down.

Notice who Jesus said these words to: In Mark 8, Jesus has been performing miracles, like feeding 4,000 people and healing a man who has been blind from birth. His teachings and his miracles are drawing a crowd. So, in Mark 8:34 we read, "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" During Jesus' ministry plenty of people wanted to

follow him, so long as he didn't demand anything of them. So long as he kept feeding them and healing them and telling them of God's love. But Jesus makes it clear in this passage that his true followers are those who will follow him to the cross.

Unfortunately, a lot of us want to learn about Jesus, but we don't want to become him. We don't want to take that final step of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him. But when we look at the cross, we can't deny Jesus' unconditional love for us. And there is no true love without sacrifice. So, if we love him, what are we willing to sacrifice?

Alan Paton's novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* is set in South Africa in the days of apartheid. The headmaster of a local school finally stands up against the racist system of apartheid and quits his job. One of his friends warns him, "You know you will be wounded. Do you know that?" The headmaster points to heaven as he replies, "When I go up there . . . the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' If I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."

My sisters and brothers in Christ, here is our challenge week, when you come to the end of your life, don't you wonder if Jesus will ask, "Where are your wounds? Was there nothing worth dying for?" Father Mychal Judge, yes

indeed. Father Mychal Judge was a chaplain for the New York City Fire Department. He was known throughout the city for his ministries to the homeless population, to people with addictions, to AIDS patients. On September 11, 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, Father Mychal Judge showed up to aid the firefighters. He was praying over the injured workers and the firefighters when debris from the collapsing building struck him in the head and killed him. At his funeral, the Rev. Michael Duffy gave the following eulogy: “And the next few weeks, we’re going to have names added, name after name of people, who are being brought out of that rubble. And Mychal Judge is going to be on the other side of death to greet them . . . And he’s going to greet them with that big Irish smile. He’s going to take them by the arm and the hand and say, ‘Welcome, I want to take you to my Father.’ And so, he can continue doing in death what he couldn’t do in life.”

Father Mychal Judge denied himself, took up his cross and followed Jesus. And because he had already died to himself, he was willing to face death to bring the hope of God to others. Deny yourself. Take up the cross of Jesus. No other lifestyle is ultimately satisfying. No other lifestyle can permanently change the world in which we live. AMEN.