

A Different Take on Jesus' Words: "Deny Yourself!"

Mark 8:27-38

I am wondering today about this question of denial.

Jesus says to his disciples “*Deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me.*”

Denial can mean many things!

Denial can mean different things—to different people.

For example, it is common these days to talk about being “**in denial**” about something—meaning—we refuse to see something that is quite clear to others.

One can be in denial about a certain health condition!

Or a physical or mental ability that is no longer there!

Denial is a defense mechanism used to avoid confronting a personal problem or reality by **denying** the existence of the problem or the reality.

Not a healthy form of “denial”, is it?

Another harmful form of denial has to do with denying who we really are—

Putting on some kind of mask that hides our true identity!

Even hiding from ourselves should we be unable to summon the courage to be who we really are.

Out of fear, a person can learn to deny even their deepest experiences in living.

That's not a healthy kind of denial either, is it?

Then there is the self denial that is associated with giving something up.

Lent comes to mind.

Here—I can see some hopeful possibilities.

Although Lent traditionally involves self denial of some physical thing like a certain food, you might decide to deny yourself a habit.

For instance, you might deny yourself feeding of your fears!

Or you might deny yourself a habit of worry!

Or you decide to deny yourself an experience of despair by doing whatever you can to fight off that painful mood!

Instead you might learn to pray, “My despair, into Your hands, God. You can handle it. I can't.”

Or you might pledge to yourself: “I am going to give up beating myself up.”

Or some other Lenten like self denial.

There is promise in that kind of denial, isn't there?

Still, I want to explore with you a different kind of denial today.

The denial implied in Jesus' words: “*Deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me.*”

These are very challenging words, aren't they

We know they got under Peter's skin because Peter was so disturbed to hear Jesus say this that he actually “rebuked” Jesus for saying them.

Whereupon Jesus fired back: *“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

Wow! What was that all about?

Here’s what I think.

Peter represents the kind of person who believes correctly that a certain situation is unjust!

He or she recognizes that a certain decision is unfair!

Or that a certain policy is harmful to many people—or to the earth.

And this person not only believes this to be true.

This person even occasionally act justly to change it!

And yet—and yet!

Does not grasp the commitment that is necessary—to sustain the struggle—to its conclusion.

They don’t understand the devotion, sheer doggedness and determined sacrifice that is needed to create space for the Kingdom of God in this world.

Whereas Jesus—also believed correctly that the situations he and his people were facing were unjust!

Unfair!

Painful!

(Nevertheless, Jesus understood that the struggle to create the Kingdom of God cannot be sustained without cross carrying—without sacrifice!—Denying!— in some form—one’s very own, self driven aspirations.

C.S. Lewis famously referred to the world as *“Enemy Occupied Territory”*:

And said it must be reclaimed hour by hour, inch by inch, and always by some self denying sacrifice.

And so Peter was getting on Jesus last nerve! When he implied that just knowing what was wrong and realizing what needed to be done was sufficient.

“Get behind me, Satan.” He exclaimed.

Which meant, “You’re going to leave the situation in enemy hands.”

Anyone who has ever tried to rescue a person or an animal or even a group of people, or animal—knows what “Deny yourself!” means.

Someone else may recognize the hard truth of the situation, and even act occasionally to alleviate it—yet this still essentially leaves the status quo in place—because they can’t commit to sustain the rescue work .

Whereas you, at some point, have to, struggle within yourself and sacrifice your own temporary purposes and ambitions in order to actually rescue the horse, the cat, the dog, the friend, the family member, the forest, the river, —the person you encounter while living as a Jesus follower.

As someone once said, *“Goodness requires morale as much as morals.”*

But maybe that isn’t all that Jesus was getting at.

Maybe Jesus was suggesting yet another kind of denial.

What if Jesus is inviting us to deny absorption with self by belonging!

What if Jesus is inviting us to deny focus on self with being in relationship!

Paying attention to the other!

Being in community with humanity!

Being in community with the animal families!

The tree families!

The flower families!

The rock and river families!

Realizing that we don't survive on our own—

—And that choosing intimacy is the highest form of self denial.

“Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.”

A final possible thread in this thought of our Lord's.

I was looking at one of the works of art in the “Expressions” exhibit that is here through November—

Thanks to the Whole Person and the Westport Center for the Arts.

The sculpture in the center of the chapel is entitled *“The Lord Turned On the Light”*

It's a sublime work of art, well worth spending a minute or two with.

And it's another vibrant illustration of a sentence spoken by the great Vassily Kandinsky, the pioneer of modern art, “The spirit creates art.”

The self—the ego—the me—doesn't create art. The spirit does the creating!

The spirit creates a work of art like that sculpture.

And that's true of life as well.

The self—the ego—the me!—that doesn't create your life.

It may organize your life and provide you with the power of reason to solve life's problems and predicaments, make rational decisions and so on.

Still, it is your deeper self that gives you life.

Your deep soul—the vast soul—rolling like a river soul—your moving—flying soul—is what gives you life.

Brings love into your life!

And joy!

And relationship with the Great God Almighty of the Universe.

And to find your soul?—to return to your soul?—even for an hour!—

How often it is absolutely necessary that you—

“Deny yourself!”

“Deny what I think I want! Deny what you think you want!

Deny that self! Lay it down! Set it aside! Put it behind you!

Take up your cross!

And follow Jesus!

Amen.

Rev Scott Myers, Westport Presbyterian Church Sept 16, 2018