

“Yes, but it is not I”
Matthew 16:24-26
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Scene 1 – Being a disciple of Jesus is more than creeds, it is also sacrifice

Some of you may remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. Debbie and I heard his routine a few years ago. He said when he first came to the United States from Russia; he wasn't prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk: you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice: you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, what a country!" We Americans are like that. We want instant gratification. We want pleasure without sacrifice.

Sacrifice is not a word we use much these days, is it? When was the last time you used it or thought about it in terms of your own life? When was the last time you sacrificed something for someone? Come to think about it, there's only one sport as far as I know where the term is actually used. Do you know which sport that is? You can almost hear Harry Cary announcing it over the radio, "And there it goes, a long fly ball to left field; easy out, but the man on third tags up and trots home. Sacrifice fly."

What a great idea: you're out, but you helped someone else score a run. Baseball is one of the few sports where you lose but the team still gains. Do you remember the way comedian George Carlin spells it out in his routine about the contrast between football and baseball? He says: In football you Tackle! In baseball, you "catch flies..." In football you Punt! In baseball you "bunt..." Football is played in a stadium! Baseball is played in a "park..." In football you Score! In baseball you "go home..." In football you Kill! In baseball you "sacrifice." Except for famous home run hitters, there are few prima donnas in baseball. It is truly a team sport.

We Christians have developed a kind of selective participation in Christian discipleship, which allows us to be deeply and sincerely involved in worship and church activities, and yet almost totally disconnected in the day in, day out of our lives. How so, you might ask? We focus on ourselves. Our culture's mantra is, "Rugged individualism." And the subtext of this mantra is, "Me, myself, and I."

But Christians, like baseball players, are not called to be prima donnas. We are called to sacrifice.

Jesus did not say "Take up your cross and follow me to church on Sunday morning, then you can do whatever you like the rest of the week." Though Jesus would never condone abusive relationships, sacrifice, putting others first, that is, cross-bearing, is a day-to-day activity for those who would be Christian disciples.

At dawn on April 9, 1945, one month before Nazi Germany surrendered, a 39 year old Lutheran pastor was executed by hanging from a noose made of piano wire. His slow asphyxiation took 30 minutes. His crime? Preaching and conspiring against Adolf Hitler's treatment of the Jews. He was warned not to do this, but he did it anyway.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was frustrated with a religion which emphasizes personal experience. He felt when organized religion reduces the Bible to a mere textbook of metaphysics, it sanctions the deification of human culture. He felt that when organized religion emphasizes personal experience it becomes irrelevant. Listen to what this thirty something man has to say about the relationship between God's grace and discipleship:

“Cheap grace is forgiveness without repentance. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of which we will gladly go and sell all that we have. It is the pearl of great price for which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the rule of Jesus, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble. It is the call of Jesus at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.”

God's love, mercy, and forgiveness, that is, God's grace, is freely given. But God calls us to respond with discipleship. And discipleship means sacrifice, taking up our crosses. But there is an obstacle to taking up our crosses. Sometimes we do not know what our crosses are. And we cannot pick them up unless we know what they are.

Scene 2 – Though crucified by our flesh, God resurrects

The 4th century theologian and bishop, Augustine of Hippo in northern Africa, was accosted one day on the street by a former mistress, some time after he became a disciple of Christ. When he saw her he turned and walked the other way. Surprised, the woman called out, "Augustine, it is I". Augustine, as he kept going the other way, answered her, "Yes, but it is not I." An amusing story - one that drives home what German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer means as he writes, "When Christ calls a man to follow him, he calls him to die to himself."

The scientific name of our modern human species is *homo sapiens sapiens*. Both fossil records and mitochondrial DNA studies show us that God created *homo sapiens sapiens* about 200,000 years ago. Anthropologists tell us that after our creation, we were naturally selected for the instinct of self-preservation to aid the survival of our species, for adrenalin to aid our fight and flight, and for sex hormones to promote our procreation. This natural selection occurred while we were still in our birth continent, the continent of Africa. Because 200,000 years ago there were only a relative handful of human beings competing with all the other animal species. Then, 40,000 years ago, presumably because of competition for food and because of predators, *homo sapiens sapiens* migrated into

southern Europe, and from there into Asia, the Americas, and Australia. But there was a problem. When our ancestors migrated out of Africa into southern Europe 40,000 years ago, they migrated from the frying pan into the fire. Because Europe was already inhabited by what scientists call *homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, who we call Neanderthal man. You see, despite what most of us think, we are not descendents of the Neanderthal man. Instead, our species were forced to compete with Neanderthals in Europe. So, once upon a time, it was important for the survival of our species for us to have a strong primitive instinct for self-preservation, and for both our minds and bodies to be controlled by adrenalin and sex hormones. That is, narcissism, fight or flight, and addiction to sex, were once necessary for the preservation of our species.

But in today's scripture, Jesus tells us narcissism, fight or flight, and addiction to sex, are not always helpful, and in many cases are now unnecessary baggage. Baggage which creates brokenness in our relationships with others and with God. Baggage which we can take out of our backpacks, to lighten our load. In today's scripture Jesus says to live the life abundant, counterintuitively and paradoxically, we can choose to turn from our selfish ways, and deny the sometimes destructive influence of our hormonal baggage.

Actor Woody Allen says our minds cannot control our hearts, that is, our hormones. And so our narcissism, our hormones, and our competitive instincts crucify us. But into this competition, between our minds and our hormones for control over our bodies, comes Jesus. Jesus tells us we do not have to be a slave to our hormones. He liberates us from their control. Jesus frees us from "me, myself, and I" into life in community. You see, I believe Jesus did not come to save us from our minds or our hearts. On the contrary, he shows us how to harness our straying minds and hearts and put them back on God's path. Jesus shows us the locus for control of our bodies can indeed reside not in minds or in our hormones, but in God. For God, wrapped in human flesh, comes to us in Jesus, and pushes human flesh to the limits. By what he says and what he does, Jesus shows us that with God's help, we too can transcend our hormones and narcissism. And Jesus' sacrifice shows that with God's help, we can even, if necessary, transcend our strongest primordial drive, that of self preservation.

In today's scripture, Jesus teaches us that the abundant life is neither about rugged individualism, nor about "me, myself, and I." Jesus tells us in today's scripture, that it is only by intentionally dying to ourselves that we can be transformed by God, into a new life abundant in the community of Christ. We are crucified by our flesh, and are resurrected into new life by God.

But besides our biological baggage, there is also cultural baggage.

Scene 3 – Though crucified by our culture, God resurrects

Yes, our stumbling blocks are more than just genetic and hormonal influences. We are also influenced by our culture. We want to keep up with the Jones. So instead of controlling our possessions, our possessions control us. And we are pummeled every day by TV, Hollywood, secular music, newspapers, politicians, our friends, our neighbors,

and yes, sometimes even our parents. We are pummeled with catch phrases like “might is right,” “no margin, no mission,” “money talks, everything else walks,” and “he who works eats.” We are pummeled by the ethics in Ayn Rand novels like “Atlas Shrugged,” and by the ethics of Wall Street. We are crucified by our culture.

But Jesus enters into *our* culture, a culture driven by profit margins and forfeitures, and he asks, “Of what profit is it if you gain the whole world, but lose your focus?” If you are so focused on your profit and loss statement that you ignore your Gospel-centered mission statement? If you forfeit that which animates you? If you lose your soul?

God comes to us in Jesus, wrapped in human flesh, into an oppressive Roman culture, and shows transcendence over both flesh and culture. In submitting himself to unjust crucifixion at the hands of his oppressors, and in his resurrection by God, he turns the tables on his oppressors. He shows us the injustice and futility of our oppressive culture. In teaching transcendence over genetic and cultural oppression, God, in Jesus, destroys the power which destroys.

Conclusion

When Jesus says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me," he essentially says to us, "Get on this new thrill ride with me. There will be many dangerous twists and turns in the tracks, but I promise you it will never be dull. It will mean putting someone other than yourself first, being concerned not so much with what *you* want, but with what **God** wants for *you*. It won't be easy and sometimes it won't be much fun, but it will never be boring."

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...