

Date: March 21, 2021 (Lent 5)

1. Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ps. 51:1-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33.
2. Subject: Christian discipleship.
3. Topic: self-denial as a foundation for faith.
4. Aim: challenge.
5. Proposition: "Self-denial is God's pathway for Jesus' disciples."

DEATH TO SELF IS ETERNAL LIFE

Don't read too quickly. Allow your voice to communicate the seriousness of the texts. In public speaking/acting, it's called "gravitas". Not ponderous, serious.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me...¹

Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'²

[Jesus said,] 'Whoever loves father or mother more than [he loves] me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than [he loves] me is not worthy of me.'³

It is that season when Christians are confronted with some of the hard truths of the gospel. That makes it an unpopular and even incomprehensible season in our culture.

You see, contemporary culture—certainly in North America and Europe—seems to be obsessed with pride, power, and the self. Everyone is encouraged to take pride in one's self and to better one's self. One's own fulfillment is the measure by which education, career and even family life are measured. Marriages will crumble because one partner is not getting enough fulfillment for him- or herself. Pride Weeks of every hue are frequent. While they do battle

¹ John 12:24-26a.

² Luke 9:23.

³ Matthew 10:37.

oppression and prejudice, they are clear signs of the community's focus on the self.

So passages like the ones I've just quoted are nearly incomprehensible outside the Church—and, I suspect, some Christians inside the Church struggle with them. Did Jesus actually mean that we should hate our parents and siblings? Are we supposed to hate even our own lives? Is he counselling us to commit ritual suicide?

No: none of those things. But Jesus was arguing for a shift of focus, a change in our priorities.

Back then—as it is today—people were just trying to make a go of things. They were trying to hold life and limb together. Simon, Andrew, James and John weren't fishermen because of a career choice or because they had gone to a career college to learn a trade: fishing is what their families did to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. Matthew Levi was a tax collector because he could make a good living cheating people. Survival was the name of the game for most people. Only a few, well-educated people like Saul or Luke, could afford to spend time thinking about ministry and the new faith. Everyone else was trying to survive.

Jesus was arguing for a shift of purpose and outlook. He did so using extravagant, powerful language. He created a sense of urgency about the need to make this shift through vivid images and phrases. "Take up your cross..." "Hate your life in this world..." "Unless the grain dies, it cannot bear fruit..." Jesus frequently used exaggerated language to make his point, in the same way that an exasperated parent might say, "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. What? Do I have to talk until I'm blue in the face?"

Let's strip away the colourful language—while we maintain the urgency—and figure out what Jesus actually meant. Once we've understood it for ourselves, we may be more able to communicate it to the society around us.

Jesus was not saying, “Commit ritual suicide.” He did not mean, “Hate your family.” He did not mean that you have to die and go to heaven before you can do any good on earth.

He was saying that to follow him—to call Jesus “Lord and Master”—will mean that you have to imitate his life. That will include putting God first on your list of priorities. God takes top place, ahead of job or spouse or children. God comes first, as he did in Jesus’ life.

So, to every mother out there, Jesus says, “God comes before your children.” This even applies to those women who fervently insist that their children are everything to them.

To every working man, Jesus says, “God comes before your job and your career.”

To every expert in any field, Jesus says, “God comes before your passion and interest.”

To every middle-aged woman caring for someone with dementia, Jesus says, “God comes before your loved one.”

This is exactly how Jesus lived his life. You only have to remember the Garden of Gethsemane and the crucifixion on Golgotha to know this is true. We are to follow Jesus by adopting his priority. That priority is God.

We cannot know in advance what this will mean. We have to work it out day by day. That’s what Jesus meant when he said that we have to take up our cross daily. That’s what St. Paul meant when he wrote that we have to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.⁴ Each of us has to figure out *how* to put God first.

It may help some to have a hierarchy of priorities.

1. God.

Print on flip chart or
project on screen.

⁴ Philippians 2:12.

2. Spouse.
3. Children.
4. Extended family.
5. Job.
6. Community.

You see, if you've placed God first in your list, then it is easier to remember to place him first in your decisions.

"Oh, but what if God tells me I have to not care for my mother with dementia?" Please: even to ask such a question is to prove that you're wanting to not put God first. After all, what loving, all-knowing God is going to ask you to not care for someone? Our God will not insist that you sacrifice someone else's life or happiness or love. Jesus is asking that we put God first in our lives. He is not saying, "Don't love anyone else."

It makes a whole lot of sense to put God first. After all, only God is perfect. Only God is worthy of devotion and worship. Only God knows enough about everything to provide balanced and just input. To say, "My children are everything to me," is to put your children in God's position. That has to end badly when your children disappoint you or you disappoint them. And, what will happen to the man who puts his career first only to neglect God and his spouse? What happens when that career ends? Then, he suffers a lack of identity, worth and reason to continue. God is the only being who can fill that highest priority. Allowing him to do that puts everyone and everything else in their proper perspective. Putting God first works out all the rest. This is exactly what Jesus commanded when he said, "The first great commandment is to love God with all that you are. The second is to love your neighbour as yourself."

As you are aware, putting God as our highest priority and greatest good is not an easy thing. Each of us has to work it out on a daily basis. I suspect we'll only notice the struggle, when it comes down to choices which we think have an impact on our personal happiness and fulfillment. These are the decisions about our future: should I take this job? Should I retire in this place? How much money should I give to the Church? A generation ago it would have been questions like,

should I marry this person? Should we have children? Whose career should come first in our family?

With God as the top priority, it becomes easier to sort out what follows. Which choice will improve my relationship with God? Which person will detract from my relationship with God? God knows both how much money I make and how much money I need. So, figuring out how to spend what's left over should improve everyone's relationship with God.

All this is not easy. I think that's why Jesus used such dramatic language. He chose his words carefully to build up the urgency behind setting God as our top priority. He couldn't leave it as one option amongst many. He had to communicate that for his disciples putting God first was urgent and required.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.

Jesus used powerful language to say that his disciples will set God as their first priority. We are to follow him by imitating his choices inside our circumstances. Then our lives will bear the fruit God intends them to bear. Then we will find the fulfillment God intends us to find and for which all the world is looking.

AMEN.