

March 21st, 2021

John 12:20-33 “The Troubled Soul”

Easter draws near! Next week is Palm Sunday and the following week is Resurrection Day. Even though we're far from being “back to normal,” we're at least moving out of our caves a little and making more long-range plans. I got a note from Chico Area Recreation Department the other day saying we're able to make reservations now for Pentecost in the Park! We're getting there folks. I know a lot of families who are planning vacations, social events and other things that were denied before the vaccine. Yet here we are in Lenten season where it seems like denial or more specifically self-denial is emphasized. And it sure doesn't help that Jesus has a few things to say about the virtue of self-denial. Sometimes it even seems like he's taking things to a ridiculous extreme, especially in today's passage where he says, “Those who love their own life will lose it; those who hate their own life in this world will keep it for life eternal.” So it's really easy to hear his words through a negative filter, especially after spending 369 days in imposed denial. Plus it's Lent, which seems like a whole season where we focus on self-denial and what we need to “give up.” Some of you may even be thinking, “Jesse, did you not say that we weren't going to be all gloomy this Lenten Season, especially after the year we've had? Didn't you say we were going to focus on, ‘How can we do this human life better?’ ‘How can we move forward creatively?’ ‘How do we reconcile ourselves to God and one another even in the seasons where we feel more like heaps of ash than human beings?’” And yes, I did say that. Verbatim in fact.

It can seem as though the church's message turns pretty bleak during this season of Lent. There is even more emphasis than usual on rooting out the sin in our lives and giving up things in order to try to discipline our bodies and minds. Sometimes we can fall into the trap of beginning to think that this is what Christianity is all about – Self-denial as a necessary means to an end. Sometimes we can forget that “fullness of life” is what Jesus promises and that anything he says about self-denial and giving up your life can only be understood as a part of that bigger

picture. So let's explore what self-denial means even though we've lived through an entire year of denials.

Perhaps the most helpful image Jesus gives us to enable us to better understand all this is the one also contained in today's gospel reading. Today's gospel reading gives us a great illustration to help us understand what Jesus means when he talks about self-denial. As he often does, Jesus goes to the grain field to help us understand what he's trying to say. "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." Jesus is trying to help us understand the link between releasing our grip on life as we know it, and receiving the gift of life in all its fullness. Jesus is saying sometimes something has to die in order for something to live. That sounds kind of morbid, though, so let's look at it from a different perspective. Let's say, "In order to pick something up, you've got to set something down." I use this illustration because it's one that we learn early on in childhood. Have you ever seen a toddler struggle with what toy they want to play with? They're standing there with a toy in each hand staring at another toy that they want to play with. But they can't because they only have two hands. But they really want that third toy! So they have to make a decision. "Can I put one of these toys down so I can pick this other toy up?" Something must be relinquished if something else is to be gained. When a toddler can't figure this out, sometimes they just stand there and scream. Sometimes as adults we want to scream when we can't decide what we need to set aside in order to pick up something else.

I think this might be what Jesus is trying to tell us here when he says that something has to die in order for something to live. It's not possible to *have* everything or *be* everything at the same time. You can't be a pacifist and a warrior at the same time. You have to choose. You can't spend eighty hours a week at the office and have a healthy relationship with your children. You have to choose. You can't grow into the person you really want to be and refuse to change at the same time. You have to choose.

I think everyone has a vision of what kind of person they want to be. And I think at some level we know that it will require hard work and discipline. You don't have to hate yourself or the way you are to get to where you want to be though. Maybe you just want to learn to appreciate the little things in life more. Or maybe you want to be less driven by what other people think. Maybe you want to live a simpler life or be more at peace with the world. We all have some sort of vision of the sort of person we'd like to be. But what we don't often ask ourselves is "What price am I willing to pay to see that vision turn into reality?"

God has a vision of the sort of person God wants us to be. It makes sense because God knows *what* we were created to be. God knows what we are capable of becoming even though we often fall short of that vision. But God is eager to see us growing into that vision and becoming the people we were created to be. What God *will not* do is impose things on us. God will not force us to become something we are not willing to become. I know I've made enough Marvel fans here in the church to know that some of you watched the Disney+ TV series "WandaVision." The easiest way to describe this show is that it's about a woman with an enormous amount of power that imposes her will over an entire town in order to cope with a lifetime of loss and grief. The townspeople had no choice, and in the end, they resented and hated her for using them as "tools" to cope with her grief.

God does not impose God's will over us. God calls us and pleads with us to follow. God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ to show us what the vision looks like - to show us what it looks like when love and freedom and grace and peace reach the fullness of their potential in a human being. And in Jesus, God also shows us what it can cost to become that and live that way. And in the end the choice is ours.

If we agree, God will do much of the work within us. We are not left completely to our own devices to try to work it all out by ourselves. Given permission, the Holy Spirit will get to work within us and begin

reconstructing us and transfiguring us into the fullness of the potential that was always within us. But the Spirit will *not* fight us. Any areas of our life where we are *unwilling* to relinquish our grip will remain off limits as far as God's Spirit is concerned. The more parts of your life you declare off-limits, consciously or unconsciously, the less God will have to work with to bring that vision to fulfilment.

If a grain of wheat drops into the ground and dies, then it produces much fruit. If a grain of wheat refuses to give up its present state of existence it will remain just a grain of wheat and will produce nothing. Over the years, I've been trying to find a simple description of what baptism means. People will ask me, "Why should I get baptized?" I think the working definition I have now is, "When we are baptized, we go through a ritual where we bury our old self in the water and come up as a new person made in the image of Christ. When we are baptized we say, 'I am ready to let go of the life I have and place it in God's hands so that God will be free to work in me and through me so that I can grow into what God only knows I'm capable of being.'" To put it even more concisely, "I got baptized because I needed to give up." If I didn't, I'd be like that grain of wheat who refused to die. I'd be locked into my own limitations of what I believe life can be, thus preventing me from ever being anything more.

God offers us everything, but forces on us nothing. What price are you willing to pay to become the person you want to be and the person God makes it possible for you to be? It's not just a question of how much do you want to change. Some of us desperately want to change, but we're unwilling to let go of what we presently are. We've learned to live with our hurts, habits, hang-ups and failings. We've even learned how to make them work for us in a kind of messed up way because the possibility of real change is actually a terrifying step into the unknown. We continue to want it all —the security of our broken yet familiar present *and* the wholeness we hope for.

The message of most of today's consumer marketing is that you can have it all! You don't have to choose between things because you can just have everything. That's a lie of course. Some things exclude other things because there's only a limited availability of space for everything we want. You can't commit your life to acquiring things and possessing things and controlling things and expect to grow in love and grace and in your capacity to appreciate the simple things in life.

If your hands are full, if your life is full, you're going to have to put some things down before you can receive the fullness of life God promises to give you. God will give you everything if you'll create the space. But as we know only too well, creating the space can be a hard road and an unpopular choice. In a "you can have it all" kind of world, it's no surprise that people think that following Jesus is all about denying yourself and turning your back on all the good things in life. But when we take the time to actually read what Jesus is saying, we realize that he's all about living the good life and living it abundantly.