

23 May 2021

## On Becoming Yourself

Luke 9:18-25

Like a Buddhist master, Jesus often taught his disciples by giving them puzzles to work out. Perhaps the central puzzle of the Christian life is the paradox found in this passage from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 9, verses 18-25:

*<sup>18</sup>Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' <sup>19</sup>They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.' <sup>20</sup>He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.'*

*<sup>21</sup>He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, <sup>22</sup>saying, 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'*

*<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. <sup>25</sup>What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?*

As you read this passage, you can't help feeling that there's a climax in verse 20, where Peter makes the declaration, "You are the Messiah!" At last, they've figured it out! But then the narrative takes an unexpected turn. Jesus tells them to keep that information secret and starts telling them that *this* Messiah is going to suffer and ultimately die at the hands of the religious leaders. Whatever mental image the disciples had for "Messiah," that was emphatically not it. In the parallel accounts of Mark and Matthew, Peter even tries to argue with Jesus. "No, Master! That's not what a Messiah does!" It's unnerving how quickly the narrative goes from the Big Reveal to a Dark Foreshadowing. But then it gets darker. Not only is Jesus, the Messiah, going to suffer, but his followers should expect to as well. "If you want to follow me, take up a cross – as I'm about to – and deny your Self." That is, forget about your own preferences, your own dreams, your own comforts, your own plans. Then comes the paradox. If you set out trying to save your life, you will lose it. Even if you gain everything you dream of, you will still lose your Self. But, Jesus says, if you deny your Self, you will find your Self.

That's not really how we think is it – denying ourselves? We are a nation of individualists, honoring those who take care of themselves. We get the famous adage, "The Lord helps those who help themselves" from Ben Franklin, not the Bible, but as far as Americans go, that's scripture. And we definitely set out to help ourselves. In American bookstores (Remember bookstores? Those were great, weren't they?), the largest section was always "Self-Help." It was even bigger than Teenage Vampire. It's just part of our cultural creed that we can do or become whatever we set our minds on, if we just read the books, watch the YouTube instructional videos, and above all work hard. We are told to follow our dreams, and with own grit and stick-to-it-iveness we can become anything. One part of Self-Help is Self-Discovery. We talk a lot about that, too: about getting comfortable in our own skin, learning to love ourselves, going on a voyage of self-discovery, so that we can become truly ourselves. We sing songs about finding and fulfilling ourselves: "I Did It My Way" and "I've Gotta Be Me." A lot of songs about

Being Me, but when we looked for hymns to go with today's theme of self-denial, I found none written after 1845 and zero contemporary praise songs about denying yourself anything. We're not interested; we're not into self-denial. Even the word sounds vaguely un-American.

But Jesus said to deny ourselves. What do we do with that? Was he just wrong? Maybe that's how we should approach this; let's see if he was right. He seems to say that when we set out to find ourselves, we only lose ourselves. Is that true? If I set out on a conscious quest to become a true individual, will I succeed? Will I find that unique self who is me and no one else? Not as far as I can see. Think about the ways that we go about declaring our individuality. Think about teenagers. At a certain age, they declare that they need to be *themselves* so they stop dressing the way their parents dressed them and start dressing like . . . every other teenager in school. There's individuality for you. But, while adolescents are especially obvious, you could say the same thing about all of us. We too declare our individuality mostly by style: clothing, hair, jewelry, tattoos, preferred music, vehicles and so on. As with teens, the things that we do to declare our uniqueness usually only show our affiliation – which group we identify with. Thus in seeking to express ourselves, we usually only make ourselves like others.

Here's another way to look at the question. In another place, Jesus quotes from the Book of Leviticus saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Now I have heard for decades – most recently from a clergy coach on a Zoom call last Tuesday night – that what that means is that before we can love others, we first have to love ourselves. So let's think about that. Does *that* work? Do people who set out to love themselves first end up being the ones who love others most? Or at all? In a word, no. The modern version of that teaching, "First love yourself; then love others" – which is *not* what Jesus said – falls apart at the point where we ask, "And when will we have loved ourselves enough to be able to switch gears and start loving others?" Because, you see, there's always another way that we could love and care for and pamper and indulge our Selves. No, I've known people who have started on Step 1; I've never known anyone who then successfully transitioned to Step 2. Again, seeking ourselves seems like a dead end.

And we see this pattern throughout our Self-helping, Self-discovering, Self-seeking society. Everything that we do for the sake of our Selves, ends up turning rotten and stinking. I read a book last summer – which you'll probably hear more about sometime in a sermon series – called *Strange Rites*. The author, Tara Isabella Burton, poses an interesting question. Given that people are abandoning traditional religions, where are they seeking religious fulfillment now? Humans are instinctively religious creatures, so where do the Nones look for religious meaning after they've left their churches or synagogues? Who, or what, do they worship now? And the answer, for the most part, is themselves. Oh, it's not always that obvious, but again and again Burton strips back the façade and shows that the core of the modern religious landscape is the idolatry of the Self. And everyone's miserable. So, back to our original question. No, seeking fulfillment by seeking the Self does not have a great track record. So far, Jesus' strange words – "those who seek their own life will lose it" – appear supported by evidence.

What about the implied flip side of Jesus' teaching, that if we *deny* ourselves, we will discover ourselves? Well, let's see if that works. For the past six weeks in my sermons, I have presented to you what I have called Guides for the Journey, and we've done a historical tour of Christians who did deny themselves and give everything for the sake of following Christ: Hildegard and Brother Lawrence and Thomas Merton in their monasteries, Julian in her anchorhold, Susanna Wesley from her crowded home, and the Quaker John Woolman, giving up

everything in his crusade against slavery and the greed that he saw as its root cause. All these people denied themselves . . . and every one is a stunning, unique individual. There is no one like any of them.

Then we turn to the Bible and look there for those who gave themselves wholly to God, who truly denied themselves. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Mary, John the Baptist. Every one of them unique. And of course, there's Jesus himself – whom Paul described as the one who “emptied himself,” the one who denied himself all the way to the cross (“Not my will, but thine”). Once again, an absolute and incomparable individual. So yes, it would appear that there is practical, visual, scriptural, historical evidence to support the peculiar thesis that if we deny ourselves, we will find ourselves.

Let me suggest a way to visualize this paradoxical truth. It's as if we have two different things that we call our “Selves.” First, there is the Self that we want to see ourselves as and to project. This is the self that we want others to think that we are, and because it is largely about what others can see, this self is fairly superficial. This is an external self, made up of appearances. The second Self is deeper within, and it consists of what remains of the Image of God that was created in us. Each of us was made in God's own image, and yet also was made a unique child of that Creator. This Self is the self that God knows and that others – including us – only catch glimpses of, because the outer Self is in the way. Given all this, how we are to live is, at heart, the question of which Self we are going to feed. If we feed the outer self by focusing on *our* desires, *our* plans and dreams, *our* appearances, and our *rights*, then that self grows thick and strong, and it becomes harder and harder to see that unique Image of God inside. And here's the weird thing: the more we feed this external Self, the more ordinary we become – the more like everyone else. Self-centered people are boringly like all other self-centered people. This is one reason that “Love yourself first, so that you can love others later” falls apart. The more we love ourselves first, the less interesting, likable, and lovable we are to others and more we end up loathing ourselves. Some people feed this outer Self for so long and so lavishly that they appear to have smothered the Image of God completely, but I believe God can still see it in everyone. That's how much faith I have in God.

On the other hand, if we feed the interior, eternal Self by *denying* the outer Self and putting others' needs before our own and God's honor before anything – the way that our Guides for the Journey and, say, Jesus did – then that outer Self shrivels and cracks, and gleams of the person we were made to be are able to show through. And the more that inner Self is strengthened, the more truly individual we become, because that's the Self that was made by God, and God's imagination is greater than ours.

So, let me read Jesus' words again: *Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny their selves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who give up their life for my sake will find it. What good is it to you if you gain the whole world, but lose your Self?*

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Final word: I had already written a draft of this sermon before I attended that Tuesday night Zoom meeting with the clergy coach I mentioned earlier, the one that left me frothing at the

mouth. The coach's exact words were, "Jesus taught that Self-love is primary." There's a sense in which that's not exactly true – that being the fact that Jesus taught *the exact blinking opposite*. Look, don't do that. Don't set out to love yourself first; those who do only make themselves unlovable. Care for others first. Love them. In that way, you become like Christ, and the closer you get to Christ the more you become the fascinating, lovable person God created you to be – your Self.