

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Deny YourSELF

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”¹ I want to make one thing clear from the get-go in this sermon. Jesus is not talking about life in the way that most of us might think he is in this verse. And thank goodness for that! We are all too prone to using verses like this as cudgels against one another – using verses like these to judge the faith of others. As if sacrifice and service were a competition!

But that's not what's going on here! Jesus is not telling his followers to seek opportunities for martyrdom or self-sacrifice. No, instead, Jesus is inviting us to get rid of the things that come between us and God. How do I know this? Context and language study!

The literary context is vitally important here. These verses occur in the center of Mark's Gospel, and they mark an important turning point in Jesus' ministry. The chapter begins with Jesus feeding the crowds and arguing with the Pharisees. Then Jesus heals a blind man and heads to Caesarea Philippi. On the way there he asks an innocuous-seeming question, “Who do people say that I am?”² He follows that up with the farm-more-pointed question, “But who do you say that I am?”³

This talk of saving and losing your life occurs as a result of both experiences and conversation that has to do with identity. Primarily Jesus' identity. But when we eventually land on verse 35 we will discover that Jesus is also talking about our identities too.

Jesus' identity is the Messiah, as Peter correctly names. The Anointed One, the promised king of David's lineage. The One prophesied about who will restore justice and bring peace and blessings to the nations.⁴ But this identity is inscrutable to Peter

¹ Mark 8:35 (NRSVUE)

² Mark 8:27c

³ Mark 8:29b

⁴ e.g. 2 Samuel 7; Micah 4:3; Psalm 89; Isaiah 52:13–53:12, 65:25; Zechariah 12:10

and the others. They do not understand what it means. And Peter, rock-headed Peter (Jesus must have named him rock for many different reasons), rebukes Jesus for not having the identity Peter wants him to have. Jesus returns the rebuke then launches into the teaching I started with about losing one's life.

So the literary context makes it clear that this teaching has to do with identity. Both Jesus' identity and ours too, as followers of Christ's Way. But then there's the language being used! This is a fascinating bit! The word translated in our bibles as "life" here in verse 35 is the Greek word, *psuché* (ψυχήν), which comes from the root word *psyxé* which is where we get the English prefix, psych-; as in psychology, psychiatry, psychobiology, and plenty of others. Now, with that in mind, we can glean a bit more insight into that root word that eventually we read as "life" in this important verse.

Without this background and context we often hear verse 35 talking about our mortal life, our flesh and blood. But when we go a bit deeper, we find that it has more to do with our thinking and behaving, our internal motivations and frameworks. Jesus is talking about where and how we ground our identities, and what that might mean for how we think, speak, and act. Are we willing to give up our psyches for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel? Or, more simply, can we let go of our egos and ground ourselves, our identities, first and foremost in God?

That's the invitation that Christ is extending here. Let go of the masks we wear. Let go of the walls and barriers that we have erected around ourselves. Let go of our misconceptions about God and our neighbors. Let go of our judgements and hurts that make it hard to love others as we are called to. Let go of perspectives and ideologies that get between us and our neighbors, and between us and the divine. Let go of priorities and concerns that are not grounded in the values and priorities of the Kingdom, or rather, the Kin-dom of God.

This is hard work...in many ways perhaps even harder than simply giving up our bodies! This invitation to gaining our lives involves putting to death the things in our hearts, minds, and souls that interfere with connection and community. It involves a lot of mirror-work, looking internally to explore our conscious and unconscious motivations and biases. It involves stepping outside of our comfort zones and being vulnerable with one another. It means de-centering ourselves...our egos, and centering the Way of Christ instead. It means giving up dreams of power and wealth, giving up influence over others and an easy, comfortable life.

I'm often surprised that anyone takes Jesus up on this invitation. It is such hard work. And it means giving up a lot of what the world tells us we should cling most closely

to. But Jesus, God's Word made flesh, came to us to make this invitation. It must be an important one!

Thomas Merton places a great deal of weight this verse, giving up of life for the sake of God and the Gospel. And he beautifully describes what it can look like when we can put our selves, our egos, to death...if even for a moment:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being [hu]man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now [that] I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. . . . Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time.

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.”⁵

If only we could see one another as we really are, as God sees us! That's the invitation Jesus is making to his followers, to us. The invitation to let go of all the things that separate us...that blind us from seeing the truth: there is no one we can meet whom God does not love and value. There is a connection that all life shares, and that connection is the divine spark in us. Look around you my siblings in Christ and see the glory of God shining in the hearts of everyone here. You need only to

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday: 1966), 140-142.

give up the blinders of ego that keep you from this sight. You need only deny your SELF in order to find your SELF in God. Amen.