Deny Yourself, Affirm Christ

Based on Mark 8:27-38

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Lent 2

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We are in the season of Lent, of self-denial and sorrow over our sin and the death that comes on account of it. All of our readings today have lenten themes of suffering in the faith, of waiting on the promised Christ in hope, in the death of Jesus that brings reconciles us to God, and the life blood of Jesus that saves us.

The purpose of lent is to get us to take our sin, and our death seriously, especially in a world where we seem to take seriously everything but. I never quite understood how people could get so into watching sports either in person or on TV; though I have my own leisure activities. Maybe you’ve seen the viral video on YouTube showing a Hockey Dad who’s so disturbed about what’s happening on the ice he ends up breaking the glass. It’s just a game, right? It’s amazing how seriously we can take a game, when there’s a very real battle for souls going on in the world. How can we spend countless hours on hobbies and recreation in this life while Satan prowls around us like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour? How can we get wrapped up in the things of this world, when we could forfeit our souls in the very process?

Lent is a wakeup call to deny yourself, to remember that all your plans and goals and career aspirations. Your healthy family of 2.1 children and money in the bank; your vacation time and your wanting to work extra hours to afford that much needed renovation in the house, it’s all nothing…nothing when you consider that it will all pass away. This life is under a death sentence, and the only preparations that will survive death, are those that have to do with your soul.

A little story…A young boy enters a barber shop and the barber whispers to his customer, "**This is the dumbest kid in the world. Watch while I prove it to you**."

The barber puts a dollar bill in one hand and two quarters in the other, then calls the boy over and asks, "**Which do you want, son?"** The boy takes the quarters and leaves.

"**What did I tell you?**" said the barber. "**That kid never learns!**"

Later, when the customer leaves, he sees the same young boy coming out of the ice cream store.

"**Hey, son! May I ask you a question? Why did you take the quarters instead of the dollar bill**?"

The boy licked his cone and replied,

"**Because the day I take the dollar, the game is over!**"

I thought we'd start with a little levity today, because our topic of death and self-denial is heavy. Because you see the world is like a game, and we want to keep the game going. But the game will end someday, despite all our preparations. Game over. And the issue Jesus raises today is that, for his disciples, then and now, the game is over the very moment they heed his call. Friends, when Jesus calls you to follow him, he is calling you to do nothing other than die.

The topic is death, and I don't just mean when your heart and your breath stop and they put you in the ground. I mean the death of what scripture calls "the old self." Romans 6:3,6 reads,

**3**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **...6**We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. **7**For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Friends when Jesus calls you to be baptized, he is calling you to die. So he says in our Gospel lesson today, "**For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it"** (Mark 8:35). Serious words. Heavy words. You see, the old sinful self wants his ice cream, and so he has to keep the game going, and the last thing he wants to do is kill the golden goose. But Jesus says in the gospel of Luke 12:15, "**Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions.**"

Friends, God our Father gives us an abundance of possessions. **He gives us our food at the proper time. He opens his hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing (Psalm 145:15-16)**; **He causes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike (Matthew 5:25)**. And he does so purely out of Fatherly divine, goodness and mercy, so we know that he loves us, and that we can be drawn even closer to him.

And yet our sinful self would have us to get fat on the riches God so daily provides; use his beneficence to stake out a claim on our little corner of this earth, and to live our lives as we please and not think about death so we are entirely unprepared when it comes. And it seems like quite a bargain doesn't it? Because God gives us earthly blessings whether we acknowledge Him or not. And to the old self this is quite a bargain. A free lunch. Something for nothing! But it only appears that way. Romans 2:4 says, "**Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance."**

Seems like quite a bargain to the old self, the old Adam, our sinful nature. Hear God's Word and obey Him and you get His blessings; Ignore his word and chase after your own ambitions, you *still* get his earthly blessings. More return for less work. You get the same paycheque whether you do what the boss says or not. Seems like a no brainer...except for this little point that Jesus makes in our Gospel today. "**What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?"** The one thing that the old self leaves out of the equation, "the catch" behind the bargain too good to be true is this. Your soul was lost, forfeit until Christ died on the cross and claimed you as his own in baptism. By sending his own son to die for you, God redeemed your soul, bought you back from your captivity to sin and made you his child. And yet in this life, you can forfeit your Baptism. You can forfeit your soul.

How do you forfeit your soul? By receiving your reward now. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells the story of a Rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. **20**And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, **21**who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. **22**The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, **23**and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. **24**And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ **25**But Abraham said, ‘**Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.**

Jesus, when giving his Sermon on the Mount, he addresses what we in the church call the three Lenten Disciplines. He addresses almsgiving (giving to the poor), Prayer, and fasting. He says, **2**“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full… **5**“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full… **16**“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

And so Jesus ends his preaching on almsgiving, fasting, and prayer with this message, **19**“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. **20**But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21**For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This Lent it is good to ask yourself, “**Where is my reward**?” There is this awful teaching in some corners of Christendom that teaches that once you are in God’s Grace, once you are “Saved” you are guaranteed to be in heaven. And so we Baptize ourselves and children and think, “Oh, now there going to heaven, check that off the bucket list. Now let’s work on affirming their self-esteem, so that they can be whatever they want to be, and get whatever they want when they grow up. Take the world by the horns” Friends, don’t let the world deceive you, we are never free from the dangers of sin and the devil until we are in the ground. Jesus says today that a person can forfeit his soul. A person can forfeit his Baptism, and that’s not Baptism’s fault, it’s the person who would trade his life in Christ, his baptismal garment for the pittance of worldly ice cream.

Today Jesus tells us that you can forfeit your soul, and you do that by "keeping your life." But when we are called to baptism we are called to die to ourselves. And Jesus explains what that means.

First, he says you are to deny yourself. Ladies and Gentlemen, I want you to think about where in the world you would hear this message today. Nowhere. Frankly, not in most churches either. In fact you hear the opposite. Your children are told in the schools and on the TV that they are special. That they should follow their dreams. That they shouldn’t judge. That they can make a difference in the world if they put their mind to it. That they shouldn’t listen to negative people who tell them they are wrong. That they should believe in themselves! And these teachings are taken as the gospel truth by our world.

Listen closely friends not to my words, but to Jesus’. He says, if you wish to come after him you must deny yourself. You cannot deny yourself and believe in yourself. You cannot deny yourself and affirm yourself. You can only Deny Yourself and Affirm Christ; or affirm yourself and deny him. But the world is set on sin and from youth is inoculating us against the gospel, by affirming the old self of sin, until we're so used to it we can't tell the difference between what God says and what our heart says.

And so we are to remember our baptism every day. That Jesus has called us out of the world, He's washed us clean, drowned our sin and risen us up to a new life in Him. The Small Catechism says that we are to live in our baptism by drowning the “Old Adam” daily by contrition and repentance, so that all of our sins and evil desires are put to death, and that a new self should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. That new self that rises in us daily is Christ.

This is not an easy job, to deny yourself. We are always getting drunk on our sin, and much like an Alcoholic, we can't imagine life without it. **Worse, an alcoholic can’t imagine existence without his addiction, that's how much it penetrates his very self. The world telling us to affirm ourselves is like telling an alcoholic to keep drinking.** But Christ promises that if you deny yourself, you will be given new life in him. He promises. That’s why we fast during Lent…self-denial. That’s why good parenting doesn’t give the child whatever he wants. In fact, it’s good to deny your child what he wants, give him practice in not getting what he wants.

Second, Christ instructs his disciples to “Take up your cross.” Martin Luther used to comment on the danger of “self-chosen crosses.” That we would go out into the world and cherry pick and choose the good works we want to do, and avoid the ones that God would send our way. That's a very easy temptation. But, the truth is, that when we follow Christ, God will send the cross our way. But take up your cross means, confess Christ and be ready to suffer for it.

You know, my response, if someone tells me “I chose to follow Jesus”, is this…”Why would you *choose* to suffer?” You see, when you were baptized, you were garmented with the righteousness of Christ and marked by the new birth of water and spirit. **At that moment you were elected, chosen to share in his sufferings by living a cross-shaped life.** And while you have every reason to rejoice in your heavenly birthright, the Devil and the World see your new birth as a big fat bull’s-eye for their flaming arrows. Bummer of a birthmark, Hal!

Why would you choose to be baptized? Why would anyone? Why would you choose a birthmark that reveals to the world that you are an illegal immigrant here and should be treated as such? **Why would you choose to mark yourself with Christ and give Satan a new target, and a new conquest?**

Why would you choose to suffer? You wouldn’t. Instead Christ chooses you. He says, “**You are mine, but I am a magnet for suffering in a world that hates righteousness, so be ready**.” Satan’s going to attack, to get you to deny me, to send flaming arrows at Christ in his body, the church, in the hopes that he can get some to jump ship, deny Christ and his church, and have peace and security here and now; not cognizant of the fact that you are forfeiting your soul in the process.

Finally, Christ says “**Follow me**.” I’ve mentioned before he doesn’t ask you to follow him; he tells you. He wants you. He wants you to follow him into joy in the resurrection, but also into ridicule and shame and into being one of those "religious people." Jesus says, “**Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the Holy angels**.” None of us want Jesus to be ashamed of us, especially when we see him coming in clouds of glory.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. Jesus commands this. But he also gives you the power to do it, when he sends His Holy Spirit to create in you faith in his words. Friends, there’s nothing more futile than simply telling a Christian to follow Jesus, nobody has the power to do that. To tell a Christian to follow Jesus is like expecting a car to move without any gas in it. The Christian does not follow Jesus because he decides to; he follows Jesus because he has no choice. Does a starving man have a choice whether or not to eat, when the meal is placed in front of him and he sees it. Jesus gives you the power to follow him when he gives you his Holy Spirit, whom you receive when you abide in his Word, which gives you power...sanctifies you and makes you holy. For he has raised you to new life in Him already. For you have died already, and your life is hidden with christ.

And as for your soul it is safe, not out in the world, but as our baptismal rite says, "In the ark of the holy Christian and apostolic church." Which is not a building, but it is the words of Jesus Christ preached, and heard and believed. It is baptism and the Lords Supper taken and received in faith. That is how Jesus gives you His Spirit, keeps you in Him until the day he comes again in glory. Until the day he recognizes you and says, in you I am not ashamed...in you I am well pleased; you did not deny me, and now I affirm you, your new self, before my Father in heaven.

Until that day comes, know we need not be afraid, for you have the courage to remain in Jesus.