

March 23 2014

Scripture Lessons ~Psalm 95:1-7a

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Matthew 16:24-28

Sermon *Gain and Loss*

Well as you heard Paul mention from the gospel today, Jesus said that if anyone would come after me let that person deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. When I think of Jesus words in that passage let that person deny himself, I think of a personal example and the first thing that comes to mind is my grandmother that lived to be 89 years old and passed on a couple of years ago. Because if there was ever a person who put other people before herself, my grandma was that person. I was amazed to find out she was only 16 when got married to my grandfather. A year or so later my mother was born, and her pregnancy was so difficult as a result, grandma was never able to have children again. Which had to be totally devastating to her as a person who loved children so much, but she did not stop her from sharing her love with others. After that difficult time she lavished her love on any child who was within hugging distance of herself, starting with mom and all the cousins, brothers and sisters, moving right on down the line to my sister and myself and of course our children and eventually my sisters grandchildren. For my grandmother, the welfare of the kids in the family, or even the kids in the whole neighborhood around us came first. Whatever it took to keep us healthy, fed, housed, educated, and happy, those were the things that came first for grandma in life, even ahead of her own personal wishes and her personal desires.

In twelfth century England as the story goes, there lived a holy man that sacrificed everything in his life for the sake of Jesus. He forsook his mother, forsook his sister, he forsook all the creature comforts of home and the joys of friendship, and sort of hermit like he retreated to a lonely place by the river and he willingly endured

the severities of cold and heat and nourishment, and very little contact with his fellow human beings, and why such drastic measures? Well so by denying himself he might be able to remember God better. By putting self and self wants aside he thought he might enthrone Jesus even more as Lord of his life. This holy man did die a saint, venerated by the church, he was praised by his fellow clerics and by the lay people alike, but he also died a very troubled man. He was bothered by doubt, he was depressed, he was preoccupied to the point of obsession, with the miserable state of his condition. His every thought and even his dreams centered on his own pain, and his sense of loneliness in life. And thus was the irony of this man's life. A man committed to self-denial became a man self-possessed.

I wonder if that is what Jesus really meant by self-denial? Is the way of this holy man demeaned by which we deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow Jesus Christ. Well certainly for many of us as Christians denial of the self is construed to mean that the denial of something that the self really wants. That old question, "What are you giving up for Lent" is common during this season of the year, "what are you giving up for Lent?, is it meat, or desserts, or alcohol, or smoking or television?" They are all pretty popular answers we give, I have a friend that likes the occasional martini and gives the martini up in favor of red wine during Lent. Not a whole lot of a sacrifice! Giving up something for Lent, or any other time, can be a worthy discipline when practiced as a reminder of Jesus sacrifice for us. And even Jesus himself required that rich young ruler in the story to give up his personal possessions, when they became more important than God became in his life. Is that really the kind of discipline we want when we talk about denying oneself? I am not really so sure about that, or maybe self-denial means to denigrate the self, to put the self-down. I used to have a chiropractor back in the east that always answered the question, how are you doing today, with a response that used to drive me crazy. I am doing better than I deserve to be doing. I think there is a radio commentator that does that too. Whether or not that was

his way of expressing his self-denial I am not really sure, but I think it can be a sign of someone who thinks badly of himself as well. Such a person might be quick to point out his own faults or quick to blame himself for mistakes that are made, almost eager to seek out reasons for lowering his self-esteem. Surely a poor self-image is not the same as denying oneself in order to follow Jesus. To the contrary, if we look at the gospels, Jesus affirmed people in their faith pilgrimage, his message was often directed specifically towards lifting up those that were seen as weak or lowly by the standards of the society around them. Low self-esteem is not the same as self-denial that takes up a cross and follows after Jesus. After all God did not make us, as one of my professors at Whitworth used to tell me, to be the world's doormat. Instead we were created with a whole lot of gifts, really good gifts, that we were meant to use in the service of others, and I can look over this congregation and see how all of you use those gifts. So we have eliminated a couple of things, self-denial in the gospel is not the same as denying the self-something the self wants or if it is not putting yourself down, what in the world is it? Cut to the chase, Pastor Russ – what is it? Well I think simply put it is this. Denying yourself in order to follow Jesus is placing your life, placing your desires, placing your values, placing your priorities into a context, a context of Jesus' two great commandments – love God, and love others with everything you have and the purpose for that is that we can look within ourselves for any positive change that might need to take place during the course of our lives. It means subjecting all aspects of our self-identity to God's justice on the one hand and God's grace on the other hand. If I ask you to describe yourself to somebody else, think how you might begin. You might start with your name, your occupation, or what you did before you retired, you might go onto your age or you might talk about your family or your nationality or your race, you might even go on to talk about your ideals, your hopes, dreams and a little about your politics, something about your religious convictions. All of these are aspects of yourselves identity. They are what make us who we are and not

somebody else in life. Self-denial then in a sense of Jesus means understanding all of these aspects of our self-identity as a part of our ongoing mission to share the love of Jesus with others by the power of the Holy Spirit. All aspects of who we are as people are seen within the context of our identity as followers of Jesus on this journey that we call faith. Let me give you an example, another one that Paul shared with us a little earlier today. Our Old Testament lesson for today was about Abraham, who was a man who was remarkably able to see his self-identity in the context of being a follower of God. When he was well up in years, God called for him to move from his native land to Palestine to Egypt to back again, and can you imagine all that moving at almost 100 years old? God told Abraham that he would make a great nation of his descendants and it took a lot of faith for him and his wife Sara who again were near the century mark to believe that they could have a little child. Abraham, the passage says fell on his face at God's suggestion, but it was not long before Sara gave birth to Isaac, according to God's promises and despite God's promises this shocked Abraham as he had been faithful to God will for his life and God's promises proved again to be true. Lest the life like Abraham sound too overwhelming that holy man that we spoke of earlier, I have to go on to say that self-denial also implies a pro-active and positive act of opening ourselves to the power of God's love and God's grace on this journey of faith as well. St. Paul said in Galatians 2, it's no longer I who live but Jesus Christ who lives in me. The command to deny ourselves ends with the positive instruction to follow after Jesus. Through the power of Jesus we become the people that God meant us to be, people whose self-image and self-esteem are not pawns of society's pressures and prejudices but new selves created after the example of Jesus. That is what it means to deny yourselves I think in a healthy way to take up your cross and to follow the one whose own life is the ultimate example of true self-denial. And so Jesus asked this question, "What does it profit us if we gain the full world, but lose our souls and ourselves in the process?" I don't think our holy man that we talked about earlier profited much at all from the

loss of his humanity and the way that he denied himself, and neither do we when we put ourselves or other people around us down in the process of faith. Perhaps the life of Abraham can be a guide in our striving to follow Jesus and in the face of things that didn't make a whole lot of sense when God called him to do them to those around him and with a very good sense of humor between himself and Sara, Abraham realized that God's promises were true, and those promises are where our true profit in this life lies. Together we say, Amen.