

Sunday, February 21, 2016 - The Desert: Self-Denial

Luke 9:18-27 CEB

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

On Tuesday afternoon, I asked my 4 year old if she wanted to color with me. She quickly said yes. So we got out our coloring books, markers, turned on our “coloring music” and set to work. She asked me to teach her how to color inside the lines. A couple minutes later she started to tell me that a friend in her preschool likes to be Elsa when they play and doesn’t let her take a turn being Elsa. We talked about taking turns and what to do when the friend doesn’t want to do that. I said, “it’s okay if you just want to be Elsa. Just be Elsa. You don’t have to listen to your friend all the time.” She quietly kept coloring and then said, “but if my teacher asks me to do something, then I try to listen to her.” “Definitely. And who else do you try to listen to?” “You and Dad.” “Yes, and we try to listen to what God thinks about us. Everyone else doesn’t matter as much as what those people ask you to do.”

In that seemingly ordinary rainy afternoon coloring moment, my daughter was continuing to learn her identity and whose voice had power for her in her life. Which voices would she listen to? Which ones would take lesser importance?

Jesus asked his disciples similar questions. “What does the crowd think of me?” His friends gave some answers. Jesus turned it back to them in a question, as he so often does: “Who do **you** say that I am?”

This question should stop us all dead in our tracks. Including me as your pastor. Who do **we** say that Jesus is to us? Was he someone who walked the earth and showed us a new way to love people? What happened on the cross? Was my sin really taken up with all of humanity and am I really forgiven? Did Jesus really come back to life, therefore showing that it’s possible for me to come back to life too?

By the way, in one sense, we can answer those questions once and for all. And in another sense, we spend our entire lives answering those questions again and again. We’ve got a great group getting together on Monday nights during Lent to talk through a lot of our doubts about faith. We don’t decide once and call it good. We’re on a lifelong journey of belief, doubt, questioning and acceptance. So if you meet someone who’s never doubted who Jesus was, I would have some serious questions about how much they’ve explored what Jesus asks us to do.

Once we start to get a handle on who Christ is to us, everything else can fall away. We don’t need to defend, manipulate or prove anything. We know the one voice worth listening to. Will we listen to the crowd or to Jesus? The better question for us all is this: Who does God say I am? When we can claim the answers to that question (which happens in baptism), then we have strength and clarity for what’s ahead.

Because Jesus launches next into a very confusing statement.

*Jesus said to everyone, “**All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.**”*

When I first came across this passage, I took it very literally. I surveyed my life and thought I had to get rid of just about all of it, because Jesus said to “lose my life.” But then I would ask, “why would I deny myself? Didn’t God create me? Was I supposed to deny the goodness in me? Was everything I wanted a bad thing? How did I know which parts of me I should deny and what parts are from God?” So many questions.

The more I studied this passage, here’s where I started to get clarity about self-denial. What exactly is Jesus asking us to get rid of or to deny? **The parts of us that are not him.**

When Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, he's telling us to listen to the better voice. Not the crowds, the stereotypes, the critics. Jesus says, "listen to ME. Don't get distracted by the others. My voice is the one that matters. Let the parts of you that aren't from me fall away."

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a popular Lutheran priest and says this: "If you are faced with your own limitedness in your life right now...you can't manage to stop drinking on your own, or stop shopping compulsively or stop hating yourself or stop loving someone who is hurting you...If you are filled with false pride or filled with fear and unable to find motivation to do what you know should be done. Know that there is no shame in that. Because as Paul said, God's strength is perfected in your weakness. Denying yourself might just look like letting yourself off the hook for having to be God."

Jesus goes from denying ourselves and picking up our cross to the second part of this passage that, at first, is just as confusing as denying ourselves.

v24: All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them.

How is this possible? Why would Jesus ask us to lose our lives? To give up everything we've created? We have clear ideas of what saving life means; it does not mean losing it.

Unless...

When we lose the parts of our life that aren't from God, we get **real life**. Because it's exhausting trying to be God. To prop things up, make it happen on our own energy, take the credit and then scramble like mad to keep it up. Some people say it's a sign of weakness to believe in God, in something outside of ourselves. I actually think it's more a sign of weakness to try to do it on our own.

What if the unknown of the new life is far better than the known of my current life?

Here's my confession. I still struggle with trusting God that the unknown of the new life offered to me is better than what I can see and touch now. **Which is ridiculous because every single time, the new life God calls me to has been far better than I could have ever imagined.**

And yet, I still doubt and question it. It's hard to trust what we can't see. But all I can do is stand before you and say, the unknown is scary but when it's God calling me forward into it, it's exactly where I want to be.

So if you're tired of being God in your world, of being the one who's keeping all the plates spinning, making everything happen....I invite you to pause on your desert journey, sit down on a nearby rock and spend some time reflecting on the parts of your life that aren't giving you life -- the parts that most likely are not from Jesus - - the parts where you're doing it your own way -- and consider which voices you're listening to.

Sometimes people ask me how to hear the voice of God. It's different for everybody. For me, it's usually a quiet nudge. I look down a potential path, I'm curious, but then all the voices of fear, change and laziness get louder, so I listen to them for a while. Then I get another quiet nudge....**and the more I practice who I listen to, the stronger I get at listening to God's whisper**...it gets a little easier to follow. I'm learning to trust who's on the other side, calling me forward.

End with video: <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/lent-and-dying-to-yourself>