**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16**

**Romans 4:13-25**

**Mark 8:31-38**

I came across a cartoon this week. It pictures Jesus sitting on a park bench talking to a young Millennial – these are people under the age of 35. Jesus says to him, “No, I’m not talking about Twitter. I want you to literally *follow me*.”

Following someone’s Twitter account is obviously not what is meant by today’s gospel. When Jesus invites those to follow along who have come to admire him; who wish they could be like him, and who have decided they love him, he has two stipulations. He says deny yourself and pick up a cross. Only after those two items does he say, “And then follow me.”

Picking up one’s cross is a topic for another time so let’s look at what’s involved in denying one’s self. There’s more to it than not eating chocolate. In fact, there are a number of ways to deny one’s self that are not at all healthy or at a minimum are not what Jesus has in mind.

For example, self-denial is – without a doubt – a sure path to self-improvement. Who among us hasn’t picked up one or two bad habits along our life’s journey? Want to weigh less? Eat less. Want to know more? Study more. Both dieting and learning are hard work. They involve self-denial. Sacrifice. However noble this kind of self-denial is, it isn’t what Jesus is talking about. He isn’t worried about the girth of our hips or how many books we’ve read.

Self-denial is also *not* self-annihilation. The creation of a healthy, autonomous self with good boundaries and what the experts call “self-differentiation” – is a life’s work. Self-differentiation is knowing where I end and you begin. Here’s the best story I ever heard about self-differentiation.

A female priest, in Virginia, was asked by her bishop to take on a parish riddled with conflict. Being in Virginia, just outside our nation’s capital, the parish was filled with retired military of many stars and bars. Generals, majors, admirals – you get the idea. There was a constant tug-of-war among these very bright, very opinionated, and very accomplished people about what was best for the parish.

She took the assignment as a well-educated woman – she had a Ph.D. from Oxford – who was also very petite. She was maybe five-foot-two. One Sunday, as parish members were filing out the door after church, one of these high-ranking retired military men began a verbal dispute with Reverend Short-of-Statue. The dispute became so heated that in a moment of thoughtlessness, he shoved her. Put both hands on her upper chest and shoved her. After stumbling back a few paces, she immediately stepped forward, almost to his face and said, very softly, “Do that again.”

It was enough of a calm confrontation to bring the gentleman back to his senses – after all, he knew better; his emotions had momentarily gotten the best of him – and he backed off. He apologized – probably felt ashamed of himself. She was self-differentiated enough to know that her physical boundaries had been violated and wasn’t willing to let that violation go unchallenged.

That kind of self-knowledge and confidence in the self – *self-confidence* – is soul making. We don’t get there through self-annihilation. Self-annihilation denies any claim about our value as persons. This text about self-denial does not condone abuse; it does not condone being victimized in the crazy belief that abuse is redemptive, whether that’s abuse by society, interpersonal relationship, or by one’s own self-destructive tendencies.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the contrary, we are made in the image of God and that image is meant to flourish!

Neither is self-denial a call to asceticism. That word comes from the Greek *askēsis*, which means “training.” This concept was applied to athletes. They were to achieve the ideal of bodily fitness, excellence, and performance by denying physical limits or psychological desires.[[2]](#footnote-2) Asceticism.

To be sure, just about every religion has its ascetics. John the Baptist was one. But this is a calling, or special vocation, for a select few. When Jesus talks about self-denial, he is not talking to a select few. He is talking to all of us.

So if self-denial is not self-improvement, self-annihilation, or asceticism, what is it?

It is total surrender of the will. We see that beautifully modeled by Jesus himself when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will, Father, but yours be done.” Does this remarkable instance of self-surrender indicate that God willed the death of Jesus? No, I don’t think so. What I think is that Jesus had so fully followed the path of peace and love, that to do anything else – like hide, or run away – would have betrayed his purpose in life. And his purpose in life – to be a man of peace, forgiveness and healing – was God’s will.

This is what happens all too often to people of peace. Gandhi was murdered by one of his own followers. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated by one who disagreed with him. Archbishop Oscar Romero challenged the murderous regime of El Salvador and was killed by one of its agents. None of these deaths, including that of Jesus, was the will of God.

There was never so much self-denial as in the Garden of Gethsemane. For us on less lofty grounds, Christian scholar Matthew Skinner suggests that self-denial is the disowning of one’s own person.[[3]](#footnote-3) That means disowning one’s own desires and, in certain times, one’s own rights.

If you know someone who has had some rough knocks in life through no fault of his or her own, and that person is angry – that’s OK. That one is entitled to anger. It is his or her right to be angry. But as long as that right is clutched and held tightly to the chest, that one will never move on. Healing comes with self-denial. Healing floods into us when we give up our rights, our desires, even our own strong-minded will.

The focus of Lent is on losing one’s life as a form of self-denial. We can engage in self-denial because it is grounded in the limitless love of God. We don’t deny the self for just any reason but because we have embraced Jesus and the gospel.[[4]](#footnote-4)

How much will you gain when you lose? Our apparent loss of self will is the path to spiritual gain. The self we lose is the inauthentic, self-interested, narrow, and defensive self. Lent is the time to become more open, more vulnerable to God – to die to self-absorption and follow Jesus, closely and lovingly.

1. Matthew L. Skinner, “Unpacking the Imperatives of Mark 8:34,” https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/23-3\_Icons\_of\_Culture/23-3\_Skinner.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.britannica.com/topic/asceticism [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Skinner, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, Skinner. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)