

Deny Thyself

Tests: Romans 4:13-25, Mark 8:31-38

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Rev. Michael F. Atzert

We hear stories every day of people who were forced to make a choice between their own safety and the safety and security of someone else. Consider the choice that Wesley Autrey had to make in a split second. “On January 2, 2007, Autrey was waiting for a train at the 137th Street – City College subway station in Manhattan with his two young daughters. At around 12:45 p.m., he and two women noticed a young man, Cameron Hollopeter, having a seizure. Autrey borrowed a pen and used it to keep Hollopeter's jaw open. Following the seizure, Hollopeter stumbled from the platform, falling onto the tracks.

As Hollopeter lay on the tracks, Autrey saw the lights of an oncoming train. As one of the women held Autrey's daughters back away from the edge of the platform, Autrey dove onto the tracks. He thought he would be able to take Hollopeter off the tracks, but he realized there was not enough time to drag Hollopeter away. Instead, he protected Hollopeter by throwing himself over Hollopeter's body in a drainage trench between the tracks, where he held him down. Though the operator of the train applied the brakes, all but two cars still passed over them, close enough to leave grease on his cap” (from Internet. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesley_Autrey. 02/23/21). He was an immediate hero, invited on the talk show circuit, and was even a guest at the State of the Union address given by President Bush. In December 2007, he was awarded the “Everyday Hero” award by CNN.

In our text for this morning, Jesus is giving the disciples the first of three predictions of His suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus spoke about this, according to

the text, quite openly. And then, Peter springs into action. Just three verses after Peter professed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, the anointed One by God, he then rebukes Jesus for predicting His future, which included all these horrific things – suffering, rejection, and death.

However, Peter missed a very important point in what Jesus was saying. Jesus' prediction included that He would rise again from the dead. Jesus predicted His resurrection. Although there would be terrible things happening to Jesus, that was not the end of the story, and yet, Peter rebukes Jesus anyway.

Reading the passage this week got me thinking about what Peter might have said to Jesus in his rebuke. Was it, "Jesus, stop talking like that! It is pure nonsense!"? Or, "Did you not hear me tell You that You were the Messiah? For crying out loud, You are stronger than they are! You are more powerful – mightier! You can take them!" Or, in true Peter fashion, did he say, "Jesus, do not worry about anything! Do not even think like this. You have us! What could go wrong?"

Perhaps that was the real problem. Peter was more concerned – more focused – on his position in Jesus' posse and the social importance of the disciples than he was on God's plan for Jesus and all of humanity. I think that may be why Jesus rebukes Peter – and harshly. "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Peter's mind was on the things of the world – and not on God's purpose.

What is our focus? Whose purpose do we have at the forefronts of our thoughts and minds? Do we concentrate on the things of God in our lives or on ourselves? Do we

put more emphasis on how an event or a person or a situation will affect our lives, our situation, our personhood instead of setting our mind on the Divine?

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’”

How would Peter and the disciples and the crowd have heard that phrase from Jesus?

They would certainly have had different emotions than we do today. The crowd and the disciples knew all about crucifixion and the cross. They knew how horrible it was. The disciples had to have figured that this was no way for a Messiah to speak.

Choosing the cross meant to choose the most horrific and disgusting way to die. All in order to follow Jesus. It meant to choose other than to choose themselves. I am confident that the disciples really had no idea what Jesus meant. And they proved that in the very next chapter of Mark when they argued – yes, actually argued amongst themselves as to who was the greatest. And so, did they really get what Jesus meant about denying themselves and carrying their cross?

Do we? Do we know what it is to deny ourselves – to carry our greatest burden – in order to follow Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives? What are we willing to risk for the sake of our faith? Are we willing to give up something in our life for the sake of the Gospel – in order to follow Jesus Christ more fully? And are we willing to give it up for longer than this season of Lent?

In the past year, we have certainly come to understand denying ourselves in a new and different way. We have had to deny ourselves from going out to eat in a restaurant, to be with one another, to change how we view the world around us during this time of pandemic. And I know that I have not done that as willingly as I probably should. For

we want what we want when we want it, right? And yet, Jesus says, “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” Are we willing to risk even more control of our lives so that Jesus Christ is glorified and the Gospel is proclaimed?

For you see, Jesus’ message is indeed about love and grace and mercy and salvation, but it also addresses repentance and obedience and self-giving. The first part is easy – communicating the love and grace of our Lord. But talking about repentance and obedience and giving of oneself – that is much more difficult. Is that not what Jesus calls us to do? To deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and follow Him? True discipleship costs. A lot. It cost Jesus His life.

It cost Christ His life. Are we willing to risk the cost – to share the Good News of Christ? “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.” If we are ashamed to share and to believe, then Jesus tells us that He will be ashamed too. For you see, we were bought with a price, and Jesus requires and expects much of us – to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow Him. Are you up for the challenge of discipleship? Let us pray...

Loving and merciful God, there are times when we are asked to carry our cross that we do not want to - that it is too difficult - that it requires too much. Help us, we pray, to keep our focus on Jesus Christ so that we choose - intentionally and willingly - grace that is costly, grace that is genuine. Keep our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith. For it is in His name that we pray, Amen.